

INTRODUCTION

From “¡Patria o Muerte!” to “¡Patria y Vida!”

*Excavating the Nation from the State,
Explaining Cuba’s Internal Cold War*

On 11 July 2021, dozens of towns and cities across Cuba erupted in a series of spontaneous mass protests. The world had seen nothing like them in the more than sixty years since Fidel Castro transformed the popular revolutionary government of 1959 into a communist state. From the historic plazas of Havana to forgotten streets in eastern provinces like Holguín and Oriente, nearly two hundred thousand Cubans of all generations, colors, and backgrounds defied laws prohibiting freedom of expression and assembly.¹ They condemned not only the Communist Party’s monopoly on rule but, perhaps more important, the absence of any legal right to contest it. Shouting “¡Patria y Vida! [Fatherland and life!],” they rebuked the state’s sixty-one-year-old slogan “¡Patria o Muerte! [Fatherland or death!]” and embodied the title and lyrics of a song that had been released on Youtube by a group of rappers six months earlier, and viewed or downloaded by nearly five million Cubans (half the island’s population) in less than a month. The song’s lyrics and collective authorship assaulted communist leaders’ claims to power and legitimacy on historic, political, economic, and moral grounds.²

Communist leaders and the state media responded by trashing the song as “annexationist vomit” and criminalizing the artists in a scarcely veiled racial code, declaring them traitors of nineteenth-century nationalist José

Martí, Fidel Castro, and the entirety of Cuban history.³ And yet the words of the song *Patria y Vida* continued to inspire. “We are humans even if we don’t think alike . . . / This is my way of telling you / My people cry and I hear their voice / . . . Your vision is [19]59 and mine is twenty-twenty / [We are] the true history, not the mis-told [*malcontada*]. / We are the dignity of an entire people trampled / at the point of a gun and of words that as yet have no meaning,” charged the Grammy-Award-winning Descemer Bueno, Gente de Zona, and Yotuel, along with Maykel Osorbo and El Funky. Musicians raised in state schools and brought up in the predominantly Black and poor barrios of Havana, they cried: “No more lies! The people ask for freedom, not more indoctrination. / We shall not shout ‘Fatherland or Death!’ but ‘Fatherland and Life!’ . . . / Stop spilling the blood of those who want to think differently. / Who told you Cuba was yours? / Because Cuba belongs to all my people. / Your time is up, the silence is broken. / It’s over and we have lost our fear, the deceit has ended.”⁴

As cries of “*Patria y Vida*” resounded through the streets on 11 July 2021, Cuba’s leaders unleashed hundreds of armed police, ununiformed agents, and special brigades of “black berets.” Outfitted with the latest repressive equipment, technology, and attack dogs, state security forces beat, jailed, intimidated, and even shot protesters as they audaciously filmed, live-streamed, and demanded their right to demonstrate peacefully. By the evening of 11 July, the recently installed chairman of the Communist Party and successor to Raúl Castro, President Miguel Díaz-Canel, called on “all the revolutionaries in the country, all the Communists, to go out on the streets and to the places where these provocations have occurred today, at this very moment and every day,” concluding, “The order for battle is given: revolutionaries to the street.”⁵

Echoing a decades-old tactic, Cuban officials, pro-government activists, and foreign supporters of the regime condemned these and all future protests as financed, inspired, or organized by the United States. In this way, the Communist Party continues to leave no room for citizen agency and blames US foreign policy, rather than its own policies and its monopoly on rule and the distribution of resources, for popular outrage or the absence of democracy. Yet no observer of Cuba could deny that the thousands of citizens who marched across the island had lost what many of them openly called their “fear.” In the words of an elderly Black woman who shouted to the cell phone camera of a fellow protestor before Havana’s Capitol Building:

“It’s sixty-one years! It’s sixty-one years! We spent more than sixty years amidst lies and deceptions! We have taken off the rags of silence [*el ropaje del silencio*!] We have taken off the rags of silence!”⁶ Citizens like her reconstituted the meaning and relevance of *la patria* in real time and took it back from Communist leaders who have long held it hostage to their own political survival. In rejecting official criteria for inclusion in the nation, this woman and other protestors disavowed the passive realm of complicity to which the state has long subjected citizens’ power.

In this book I plot the origins of that realm of citizen complicity on which Cuba’s Communist Party relied to build political institutions, a massive security apparatus, and a state-directed popular culture and economy between 1961 and 1981. I also explain the rise, nature, and stability of citizen complicity with autocratic and increasingly totalitarian forms of Communist rule, despite the continual emergence of evidence that the surrendering of citizens’ rights, especially the right to protest and free expression, was born of fear. Agents of the state cultivated such fear by coordinating rituals and narratives of social and political rejection from neighbors, family, and friends. Their rebuke justified expulsion from the Revolution and therefore *la patria*. The moral compass of the self on which so much of Cuban identity was founded prior to 1959 came to contain and even constrain the self in the process of transforming the project of nationalist revolution into state communism.

Yet, just as the lyrics of the song “Patria y Vida” and its popularity in 2021 reveal the survival of another, organic, and autonomous citizenry willing to defy the Cuban state’s version of history and reality, so its predecessors in the Communist-ruled Cuba of the 1960s and 1970s represented a bold aberration from the “norm.” Serving as the primary lens for interpreting day-to-day local realities, that norm was the state-directed paradigm that pitted “patriots” against “traitors” as the conditions and terms for one’s inclusion in society and socialist programs since at least 1961. That paradigm was not simply a product of the United States’ isolation of Cuba or its indisputable twentieth-century imperial history of military and political intervention in Latin America meant to stop democratization in favor of its own economic interests. Rather, in Cuba, the paradigm of total support or total betrayal of a new, better, morally pure revolutionary age was constructed and institutionalized as the foundation for a communist system under the leadership of Fidel Castro, beginning in 1961. In other words, the binary

of “with us or against us,” “patriots versus traitors” that shaped everyday life, consciousness, and identity in Cuba was conceived and deliberately elaborated *from within*.

Over the course of the Revolution’s first decade in the 1960s, leaders redefined the term *citizen* according to evolving, often self-serving revolutionary criteria. In the 1970s, this process intensified under Soviet patronage and Cuban leaders’ campaign to assert greater sovereignty vis à vis not only the United States but their own economic and military dependence on the Soviet Union. In the “Red Years” of the 1970s, each Cuban individual was supposed to become an extension of the communist state’s political will and ideological conscience based on a new body of laws and a new series of all-or-nothing discourses that emerged after 1972, when Cuba formally entered the Soviet bloc. In the early 1980s, however, a lifetime of socialism and revolutionary schooling unexpectedly produced a mass exodus of mostly young “should-be” revolutionaries. By then, political exhaustion and alienation from the state rather than collective obedience and personal happiness characterized *la patria*, the Cuban nation.

Fidel Castro’s own discourse mirrored this distinct ideological and strategic shift in the state’s approach to citizen agency over the course of the first two decades of Communist rule. In the 1960s, Fidel argued consistently that a moral premise lay behind every state policy and that a desire to side with moral goals such as radical class equality formed an irresistible logic that propelled any citizen’s loyalty and conviction. Thus, “the Revolution” was allegedly the leaders’ roadmap for the state and the embodied will of the nation. Citizens were always to rise to its defense by asking, *who could possibly be opposed?* Or in the lexicon of the time, *¿Quién se opone?* Who could oppose the right of all to eat well? Who could oppose the right of every citizen to learn to read?

However, in the 1970s and beyond, Fidel no longer justified single-party rule or his own limitless command in terms of morality or the illogic of supporting anything but state policies, allegedly conducive to total equality. Rather, loyalty to the regime was posited in terms of the *unthinkability* of an alternative. Instead of asking who could *oppose* the Revolution’s intrinsic morality, defenders asked: *who could possibly doubt its success?* Citizens were supposed to believe that everywhere, Soviet-Cuban communism was not only marching toward completion in Cuba and the Soviet Union but would in the near future take over the world. As Fidel himself contended on the

occasion of Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev’s 1973 visit to Cuba, “Who doubts that one day the bonds of all the true revolutionaries and all the liberated peoples of the world will be as fraternal as those that unite today Cuba and the Soviet Union?”⁷

In part, the unthinkability of protest, opposition, or the state’s failure did not suddenly become intrinsic to leaders’ new self-justifications for rule in the Revolution’s second decade; the unthinkability of these things cohered in a deeply rooted Communist-led culture that became *uncontested* precisely because policies of overt and covert repression made it *uncontestable*. While surely created by the absence of political transparency and by leaders’ reliance on what they called “self-censorship,” citizens contributed to that culture through the acceptance of an openly politicized system of education and the demonization of autonomous or simply alternative sources of information as potentially treasonous to a revolutionary identity and socialist way of life. In this book I excavate those dimensions of Cuba’s history. I reveal how the nation, defined as the sovereign community that citizens imagined differently but considered an all-inclusive *patria*, became engulfed and overshadowed by the structures and discourses of a communist state. Reifying divides between patriots and traitors in everyday life, official positions were reflected in schools, workplaces, opportunities for leisure, and even musical tastes. To be Cuban did not just mean supporting state policies or “the Revolution” in a general way. In the 1970s and early 1980s, forging *patria* meant thinking alike; it meant internalizing the state’s gaze and needs in a self-conscious, persistent condition of social awareness that checked personal power and undercut one’s will to dissent rather than concede.

The process was, in many ways, as coercive as it was voluntary. The Communist Party directed the reification of a sharp divide between patriots and traitors through pedagogical campaigns in which children would acquire “communist personalities” and teenagers would “perfect” themselves to the point of complete compliance with Party-determined rules, goals, and mandates. The result was by the 1980s, on the one hand, what might be best described as “a total state,” a government that aspired to exist virtually everywhere, always in relational dialogue with citizens’ minds. On the other hand, the result was also sublimation of pluralistic, multiple visions of a liberating and liberated nation by way of the creation and institutionalization of Communist law and structures. Eclipsing historic, aspirational ideas of an all-inclusive *patria*, “the Revolution” became a singular scrutinizing

surrogate, the essential extension of leaders' will, whims, and promises. As the ultimate authority over Cubans' lives and desires, the Revolution consumed far more of their power, idealism, and energy than it generated, particularly over time. Indeed, average citizens, the vast majority of whom would never be Party members, remained perennial "heroes-in-training," never ideologically trustworthy in their leaders' eyes. While inherent entrepreneurialism led some to make and market illegal goods such as cheese, hams, and agricultural products that collective farms did not provide, others maintained close ties with relatives—that is, "traitors"—abroad. Young people enjoyed foreign music not approved for consumption by specific ideological organs of the state. Children asked teachers why Cuba, an island ostensibly rich in available seafood and native fruits, exported virtually all the fish harvested and why onetime staples such as mangoes, guavas, and tomatoes had become (and remain) so rare. From the perspective of leaders, such citizens—perhaps a plurality at times if not a majority—needed to "prove" themselves worthy of the Revolution's embrace, or simply *get out*.

Thus, through the rendering of free labor and the combination of study and fieldwork in the schools, citizens strived to match the selfless examples of historic victories achieved by Fidel Castro and other top officials in the fight against Fulgencio Batista, or in defeating the Yankee mercenaries at Playa Girón. They also had to put national sovereignty before liberty, *Patria o Muerte*. Accordingly, the history of *Patria o Muerte*, as a slogan and a culture, serves as a parable for the internal Cold War that Cubans endured and fought in public and private spaces as well as in the inner realm of their own fears, aspirations, and emotions, which, by the 1970s, new state campaigns of indoctrination openly attempted to occupy. This parable called on citizens to "give all to the Fatherland" and to leave any hope for freedom of expression and other liberties behind for the sake of a collective good. The lessons of that parable encompass the multiple arguments of this book. In order to better specify those arguments, let me begin with the visual frameworks of the binary I hope to explore.

Confronting the Reality, Archive, and Challenge of Cuban Polarities

In the summer of 2006, I was in Havana when a friend and colleague unexpectedly told me to bring my "Super-Nikon" digital camera to the Archivo Nacional de Cuba early the next day. Although I was technically

not interested in sources beyond those of the early 1970s at that point, I immediately became fascinated by a collection of large-size pristine posters once used in Cuba’s revolutionary schools that was hidden under a pile of ancient maps. Jorge Macle, curator of the maps collection, had saved the posters from the director’s order to send them to *materia prima* (recycling). Growing up surrounded by these posters in classrooms and school hallways at the Camilo Cienfuegos Military School in the late 1960s and 1970s, Macle later became a teacher himself—though never “a convinced revolutionary,” let alone a recruit for the Communist Party. *Son una microhistoria en sí* (They are a microhistory in and of themselves), he told me. Probably produced in 1961, one poster caught my eye. Featuring a Black boy and a white boy who stood shoulder to shoulder against the colored backdrop of a Cuban flag, the poster warned: “These children will be patriots or traitors. That depends on you. Teach them the work of the Revolution.”⁸

Supposedly printed and distributed by the National Ranchers’ Association, the poster purported to be the collective expression of a once counterrevolutionary and now allegedly loyal rural sector. This detail alone implied the need for the state to make the framework of patriots versus traitors a product of citizens’ consciousness; *they* and not the United States represented the greatest potential threat.⁹ Yet the broader implications of the poster’s message could not be easily dismissed. For children as for adults, an individual’s political state of being—that is, one’s will to belong and not dissent—overwhelmed all others and defined all else. One could be either a patriot or a traitor in Fidel Castro’s New Cuba. Additional dimensions of the individual self seemed either inconsequential or mere extensions of this primary condition. There was no in-between. Or was there?

This book shows that there was. Cuba was a society of patriots *and* traitors, not patriots *or* traitors, because most Cubans lived within the binary, not exclusively on either side of it. Ironically, the condition of perennial heroes-in-training, assigned to them by the revolutionary vanguard at the helm state, enabled this in-between form of political habitation.

Publicly, a vast majority of Cubans had to choose the state’s “side” in the name of defending the Revolution, even if their personal understanding of it no longer aligned with that of the state as Communist policies advanced with the passage of time. As we will see, the state’s control over citizens’ access to alternative (or simply autonomous) information was both the greatest source of strength as well as its Achilles’s heel from the early 1960s

through the 1980s. Despite the fact that Cuban state schools and campaigns of indoctrination shaped every generation that came of age after 1959, large swaths of each generation found themselves at odds, in conflict or immersed in a deepening sense of betrayal after discovering how shallow or simply how *wrong* their government's versions of the outside world, Cuban history, or present realities were.

With their faith and trust shattered, many citizens nonetheless held onto the socialist, egalitarian, and sovereign values that they identified with “the Revolution” and defined it separately from the Communist Party that ruled them—however heretical such a view was at the time to the Communist Party. Others fought back, in the name of pluralism or, more often, in the name of an aspirational identification with the just promises of socialism and a desire to see reform; they voiced and acted on those beliefs mostly to their own detriment and personal political demise. Some paid dearly at the hands of state security and Cuba's penal system for voicing unbridled opposition, if not precisely “counterrevolution.” And finally, many hundreds of thousands of citizens simply left Cuba, were executed, spent decades in jail, or lived a form of internal exile, at the edges of political tranquility and at the margins of society. The fact that state policies and citizens' inability to challenge them created ever greater degrees of diversity, pluralism, and noncompliance—rather than ideological homogeneity and unanimous support—surely explains why the Communist Party's mechanisms for enforcing the binary of “patriot or traitor” under the flag of “Fatherland or Death”—proved so constant over time, and often, so relentless.

To be clear, I do not contend that Cubans' support for the state was simply the product of coercion or basic material security in return for loyalty. Rather, I contend that the adoption of communism and its gradual imbrication in daily activities required actions, public discourse, options for leisure, and institutions of society that *conditioned* Cubans' support for the state. This occurred to such a degree that, over time, it became far easier to judge the visibility of Cubans' support than to evaluate its organic sincerity. One of the unexpected results of my research is that this principle seemed to hold true as much among average Cubans as among their officially empowered “scrutinizers.”

Undoubtedly, judging the authenticity of citizens' political beliefs proves challenging in a historical context in which everyone's economic survival, professional life, and personal reputation depended on constant political judgment by agencies of the state, whether they be teachers, coworkers,

or one's local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (Comité de Defensa de la Revolución, or CDR). Sources produced by revolutionary institutions were unavoidably implicated in the process of fortifying a binary between patriot versus traitor and are therefore products of the binary itself, a characteristic that makes some of them unreliable. This problem is further complicated by the Cuban government's policies of keeping most of its own records (historic or contemporary) secret, classified, or hidden from public view. Jorge Macle, the twenty-year veteran archivist at Cuba's Archivo Nacional who defied orders to destroy a collection of Communist Party posters targeting elementary school students, offers perhaps the best summary of the obstacles facing any scholar of the Cuban Revolution: “To this day, historians remain unable to consult information, documents or correspondence from within official Cuban institutions.” Ignored and unenforced legal mandates work together with the institutionalization of a political culture that prioritizes state security and rewards the absence of transparency.¹⁰

Little wonder that much of the past historiography of the Revolution focused on its leaders' claims to unprecedented social achievements in the areas of health care, housing, and education. Authors often treated the means and sources for their inquiries as if they were “objective,” not ideologically charged and deliberately guided by representatives, minders, and academic “fixers” assigned to researchers by the state.

In this book, by contrast, I reach beyond the old debates about the impact of the Cuban Revolution on areas such as gender, racial inequality, the accessibility of social services, and the tabulation of the Communist Party's ability to liberate citizens through measures such as health. I flesh out previously understudied experiences, problems, and processes. In doing so, I violate many unspoken yet standard taboos in writing about the Cuban Revolution. These taboos arguably limit and even silence progressive scholars like myself who seek knowledge and layers of hidden truths, even if those truths prove uncomfortable for readers who once unconditionally supported the Revolution and even if they allegedly undermine the legitimacy of socialism as a model for other countries or the United States. Thus, I examine the curriculum of Cuba's unabashedly ideological campaign for literacy and “reeducation” in economic values and behaviors prescribed by the state.

I also look at the experiences of political prisoners, which serve as a window onto an otherwise hidden history of trauma, absorbed both by

intended counterrevolutionary subjects and by the rest of society as loyal and discordant Cubans together endured the normalization of executions, militarism, and the construction of an ubiquitous security state. I explore the experiences of young people and children whose letters, memoirs, and testimonies document the impact of the state's revamped curriculum and celebration of communist dogma in the late 1960s and 1970s as vehicles for creating homogeneous, "patriotic" thinking. I turn to the role of foreign "defenders" of the Revolution, investigating how the Communist Party assigned this function and how their legacy endures today. Finally, we look at *El Mariel*, the exodus through Havana's largest port of nearly 125,000 mostly young Cubans raised under socialism over the course of five months in 1980 as the crisis and mass political protest that it was.

Virtually all the sources I refer to in this book were themselves the products of polarizing events and polarizing states. In this respect, the United States had much in common with Soviet-backed Cuba: they were two great polarizers and key protagonists of the Latin American Cold War. However, if Cuba's leaders only gradually came to endorse political and ideological homogeneity as an essential goal, that did not necessarily imply that they did not pursue such values from the very moments that leaders adopted Communist Party rule between 1960 and 1961. For this reason, briefly charting the evolution of *Patria o Muerte* serves as a useful shortcut for explaining the rise of Fidel Castro's communist state from the ashes of an original, anti-imperialist nationalist revolutionary vision.

From Grassroots Dictatorship to Total State: "The *Patria* is a people who all think exactly alike"

Like the slogan *Patria y Vida* appeared to do in 2021, the state's ubiquitous and formerly unrivaled slogan of *Patria o Muerte* once augured an initial, newly radicalizing age. As *Granma*, the Communist Party's national newspaper, acknowledged in its campaign to discredit *Patria y Vida*, Fidel Castro had authored the phrase *Patria o Muerte* on 5 March 1960, abandoning his own 26th of July Movement's slogan of *Patria y Libertad* from that point on.¹¹ This March 1960 speech launched the ideological paradigm of patriots versus traitors, which came to define Cuba for the next six decades and continues to define it today, according to current leaders.¹² Fidel gave that speech after *La Coubre*, a French cargo ship loaded with tons

of ammunition purchased for Cuba’s defense exploded in Havana harbor. Fidel’s announcement, in the absence of evidence, that the United States was to blame strengthened the hand of Washington’s hardliners and prompted Eisenhower to green-light an invasion plan at the CIA, according to then US ambassador to Cuba, Philip Bonsal. Nonetheless, in the wake of Fidel’s “Patria o Muerte” speech the day after *La Coubre*’s explosion, at least two thousand students protested at the University of Havana against the covert elevation of Communist militants to power and the creeping state ownership of the press as a prelude to ending all constitutional freedoms.¹³ In size and in the nature of its demands, until recently, that protest would be revolutionary Cuba’s last.

But as I show in this book, the Cold War binary premised on US imperial aggression was not easily set. Cuba’s leadership relied on this binary to justify the criminalization of any opposition, their own control over policy, and the absence of democracy from that moment on. Harbingers of its consolidation arose early but gradually. In January 1960, Fidel and Raúl Castro urged supporters to burn and nationalize all newspapers that reported (accurately, as it turned out) on the secret rise of militants of the Partido Socialista Popular (PSP), Cuba’s Communist Party, to top positions in the military and state at a time when Fidel and Raúl Castro vociferously denied any such inclusion. Five months later, shortly after Fidel had declared citizens’ adherence to his vision of fatherland or death, all of Cuba’s media—print, radio, and television—had moved into government hands. Organized by PSP activists, thousands of Cubans celebrated the disappearance of their own rights to a free press and critical expression with mock funerals for shuttered national newspapers and oath-taking ceremonies that validated Fidel Castro’s demands for unconditional, unanimous support.¹⁴ Until that point, he had characterized the revolutionary government as “humanist” and non-Communist but open to all anti-imperialist tendencies, including the Left.

Evidencing this over the course of 1959, Cuba’s first revolutionary government of 26th of July Movement members had implemented a program that regulated capitalism by reining in foreign investors’ unbridled exploitation and weaving a social safety net for the millions who were left out of Cuba’s sugar-fueled “development.” Laws and agencies also outlawed corruption, as reforms dropped rents, utilities, and the size of landholdings. A majority of Cuban political parties had promised these goals for years prior to Fulgencio

Batista's military coup of 1952, but none had carried them out.¹⁵ While Fidel may not have single-handedly replaced reformist government with Communist Party rule, he was centrally responsible for making anticommunism synonymous with counterrevolution by the fall of 1959. The shift marked a watershed of inclusivity for Cuba's Communists that few besides Fidel's once closest, non-Communist allies noticed—and many of them publicly protested. He and a tiny circle of collaborators such as Ernesto "Che" Guevara, Raúl Castro, and Vilma Espín were also responsible for justifying the state's radical transition toward an open Soviet alliance between 1960 and 1961.¹⁶

Thus, long before the widespread nationalizations of private property and US corporations in the fall of 1960 prompted the United States to break relations with Cuba and long after revolutionary supporters defeated a CIA-directed invasion at the Bay of Pigs in 1961, the road was being laid to a one-party state. Its success would depend on the ability of Fidel Castro, his small inner circle, and a group of Communist activists to create the conditions for a majority of Cubans to willingly surrender their individual and collective rights in the name of cementing national sovereignty. As I show in my previous work *Visions of Power in Cuba*, they achieved these conditions in several ways: first, by discrediting the independent media, regardless of its political leanings; second, by undermining the autonomy of unions and educational institutions through the elevation of covert Communists and the manipulation of internal elections; and third, by marginalizing or outright jailing of anticommunist revolutionaries, regardless of their heroic credentials in fighting the war against Batista and regardless of their astonishing success in implementing the early nationalist reforms of 1959.¹⁷

Through such means, Fidel Castro silenced all opposition and eliminated traditional means for voicing dissent through an autonomous economy and civil society. Thus, the binary between the fight of the United States and the Soviet Union to establish the global dominance of each country's economic and political model did not simply find a new home in Fidel Castro's Cuba after 1960. Rather, it gained an entirely distinct life.

Although they were defined externally and internally by an all-or-nothing paradigm in the context of Cuba's Cold War, most Cubans saw themselves as patriots over the course of their lives, even when the state or their peers labeled them traitors. In the 1960s, an embattled economy, continuing CIA-led aggression and the desire to contribute to the leveling of societal inequalities produced by centuries of colonialism and slavery

meant that a majority of citizens identified with the story of “the Revolution”—that is, they supported it even if they did not agree with or wholly support the policies of the state. For this reason alone, government officials often scrambled to control the narrative of the Revolution and to invoke it as if it were a separate phenomenon with a life and inevitability of its own. Consequently, for leaders at the helm, citizens were never entirely patriotic, never entirely worthy of trust, never the truly selfless heroes that leaders portrayed themselves as being. By the 1970s, the internal rhythms of daily political life and the increasing elimination of personal choice as a basic, fundamental right were not shaped by pressures from without as much as by forces from within. In this work, the diminishing right to choose—whether about what to wear, who to love, how to contribute to the social good, how to raise one’s kids, or how to spend one’s leisure time—became a barometer of the state’s reach into citizens’ personal lives.

Eventually, the paradigm of patriots versus traitors became so salient a presence in Cubans’ lives, from cradle to grave, that virtually every aspect of the educational system, the state media, cultural theaters, and the political topography of billboards, posters, and wall signs reflected its values. Citizens could absorb its essence emotionally and visibly. By the middle of the revolutionary government’s first decade, those who criticized or openly opposed socialist policies were as much the enemy as neutrality and autonomous action were forms of treason.

With time and Soviet aid in the 1970s, Marxist-Leninism expanded beyond the structures and foundations of the political system to forge an inescapable internal landscape of ideological tenets that were meant to permeate the personality of every individual. Identical formulaic messages and appeals to repay leaders’ inimitable historic heroism through daily sacrifice of one’s labor and desires for the sake of state goals saturated every dimension of public existence. Citizens had to believe that anticommunism and resistance to socialism were not simply anathema to being Cuban but toxic to the mental health, spiritual unity, and cultural coherence of an exemplary nation. That nation was awash in a sea of ideological dangers to its and others’ anticolonial liberation.

In these “Red Years,” Cuba’s citizens themselves, rather than Fidel Castro, often expressed the best evidence of the Communist Party’s success in reshaping attitudes and political values when they defined the *patria* (fatherland) for which countless generations of Cubans had fought. “For me the

patria is not only an abstraction, nor a piece of land we occupy. It is a group of people who all share the same ideals. Our *patria* is the entire socialist bloc with the proletariat in power. Our *patria* is limitless, it's the one that conforms today to the ideals of Marxist-Leninism," said fifteen-year-old high schooler Gilda Pérez Pérez in 1976. "[T]he *patria* is a people who all think exactly alike," echoed twenty-three-year-old Guillermina Tellez García, a worker in a textile factory. "*Patria* is for Cuban revolutionaries, humanity itself," added twenty-five-year-old Alicia Romero, a biochemist.¹⁸ Indeed, the term *patria* itself encoded the unthinkability of dissent and the surrender of individual will and consciousness to parameters set by the Marxist-Leninist ideology and discourses of the state. It was a community in which all people thought alike and therefore agreed with the state. This was the view of Communist officials. To the extent that officials control the space for such articulations, it still is.

However, appearances always mattered to the construction of popular support in revolutionary Cuba. For example, the 2016 memoir of Cuban cinematic art director and historic PSP militant Pedro García Espinosa recounts the backstory of his 1964 documentary *En días como estos* (In days like these), a film about the heroic self-sacrifice of voluntary teachers. García Espinosa describes how he convinced the director Jorge Fraga to stage much of the movie in Havana's seventeen-hundred-acre urban park known as el Bosque de la Habana rather than wait out the perpetually torrential rains of Minas del Frío, a Marxist training school for voluntary teachers, over four hundred miles away. Ensnared in the Sierra Maestra mountains, Minas del Frío, could be anywhere, he argued, since their film was more about the ideal it represented than its reality. "Something I'd like to point out about the film," writes García Espinosa, "is that re-creating reality can be more *real* than reality itself."¹⁹ Real-life people in real-life places apparently did not matter to the new principles of revolutionary journalism. Much as Cuba's cultural and educational spheres would later reflect, Communist Party logic dictated that the primary "responsibility" of films, media, and other creative forms of production was the construction of socialism, not an accurate presentation of facts for independent interpretation.

This philosophy proved emblematic of the government's approach to garnering power by limiting citizens' access to alternative sources of knowledge and, at a very basic level, ungarnished facts. Deliberately crafted versions of reality, gleaned from ideological intention and the human imagination,

could evoke greater “truth” than reality itself. Over the course of the 1960s, crafting versions of reality that citizens experienced as powerfully authentic and thus personally empowering proved an essential strategy of the emerging Cuban Communist state for consolidating and then policing control. The key to this was participation: actions that made the state’s positions and public acceptance of them a self-referential face-to-face reality.

Certainly, inculcating the “correct” image of the Revolution—that is, leaders’ evolving version of the story of citizens’ experience—in hearts and minds had been central to the moral triumph of revolutionary forces over Batista in lieu of a tactical military victory from 1952 to 1958. Imposing and sustaining a particular image of the Revolution was also central to the radicalization process that made a majority of Cubans complicit in leaders’ adoption of communism from 1959 to 1961. The result was a grassroots dictatorship—that is, a hegemonic state that was built as much from the top as from below on the ashes of historically valued political freedoms by the mid-1960s. Put simply, the same principle that García Espinoza applied to documentary filmmaking guided a startling array of state policy directives from 1960 to 1971: an ideal political image could not only be more real than reality itself but could aid in the making of an ideal reality.²⁰ Politically ideal images did so by convincing citizens that there was no alternative view to that of leaders, and if there was, virtually no one agreed with it. This principle governed nearly all official discourse and state media coverage of events and policy outcomes from the late 1960s to the 1980s.

And yet in 1980, Cuba exploded in a vast exodus of more than 120,000 refugees, mostly young men educated in Cuba’s communist schools and raised in its officially curated anti-imperialist culture. Their actions shocked the world almost as much as they shocked Cuba’s leaders themselves, in large part because the leaders’ efforts to ensure that nobody could openly disagree led them to believe nobody actually did. The absence of collective scenes of protest had become evidence of near universal citizen support, rather than evidence of what it truly was: a consequence of the lack of democracy in Cuba and an effect of the laws that made opposition to the Communist Party and state socialism a crime.

What was it like to grow up in Cuba from 1961, when Fidel Castro formally adopted Marxist-Leninism as the ideology of state, to 1981, the aftermath of the Mariel boatlift? How did Cubans engage, reproduce, defy, navigate, manage, or simply survive the paradigm of patriots versus traitors

and the state-directed popular culture of siege that the state actively cultivated? This book excavates this process by looking specifically at the realms of state intervention into citizens' lives that were the most inescapable, visible, deliberate, and transformative. This intervention includes the re-creation of Cuba as one giant classroom for the political reeducation of all citizens, regardless of age, class, or prior scholastic attainments. Literacy and reeducation acquired singular importance because Fidel Castro's paradigm of permanent siege drew its power from citizens' willingness to dismiss, reject, or discount independent sources of knowledge—beliefs and ideas not authorized by the state—as detrimental to national security and citizens' own ability to survive.

Thus, as we shall see, the nature of Cuba's revolutionary education evolved from one that encouraged an anti-imperialist consensus to one that inculcated compliance and conformity with simplistic, increasingly homogeneous, and antipluralistic beliefs about power, equality, and prosperity. As Cubans struggled to exert authority over rapidly changing policies and international circumstances in the first three years of the Revolution, competing cultures of conviction and compliance did not just clash; they commonly overlapped. Boundaries between revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries blurred as key heroic contributors to the Revolution's triumph over Batista, both famous and lesser known, contested the monopoly on power that Fidel increasingly enjoyed. Or sometimes, revolutionaries simply opposed the annihilation of an autonomous civil society, accusing top leaders of sacrificing the goal of social justice in favor of communist indoctrination and centralization of control. Saying this, however, made one a traitor, not just in the eyes of Cuban state security agents, but often in one's own.

The will to self-censor and serve as one's own conscience police was intrinsic to Communism's triumph. Internationalization of security concerns formed the protocols of collective social control. However, as much as top leaders might have insisted that such choices were morally simple and politically black or white, internalizing the binary that separated patriots from traitors did not come easily for large numbers of Cubans.

Thus, despite efforts to shore up images of Cuba as an apparently opposition-free society, Cuba's jails were filled with tens of thousands of political prisoners, both male and female, most of them fresh from the ranks of resistance and armed rebellion in the pre-1959 war against the dictator Batista. We will also consider the mechanisms and experience of "reeducation"

programs themselves, targeting the many groups and individuals who, officials considered, should have supported the state, either because of their lower-class background or because of an earlier revolutionary track record. In looking at how the state portrayed its prisoners and how it rehabilitated so-called recalcitrants from all walks of life, including populations of poor peasants and former slum dwellers who should have been “grateful” to the state, we collapse the binary of patriots versus traitors, distilling it down to its most rudimentary functions and emotionally engineered component parts. We also discover another, alternative Cuba, one that might have been and still *was*, despite the vast resources mobilized to cover up its existence and deny its authenticity.

In our exploration of the period between 1971 to 1981, we consider how citizens received daily instruction on how to become “communists,” not just loyal revolutionaries, through constant mental interaction with the ideas of the state and through mandatory membership in mass organizations, such as one’s local CDR, founded by the PSP in September 1960. Through direct experience that did not entail elevation to the ranks of the Party itself, officials hoped for the voluntary internalization of government goals, “Marxist-Leninist morality,” cultural tastes, allegedly socialist aesthetics, etiquette, and policy goals. The normalization of citizen-on-citizen surveillance as a positive good and the often invisible construction of Cuba’s vast security apparatus in workplaces, the tourist industry, agencies for generating popular culture, and academic settings also serve as an important focus of latter chapters of this book. These chapters examine how rising Soviet aid dramatically improved Cubans’ quality of life after a decade of crisis, austerity, and government mismanagement. In the Red Years of the 1970s, we explore the Cuban regime’s ascent as a global leader of decolonization, sponsoring its own soldiers’ interventions in Africa and cheering ideologies of Black liberation whose local variants it systematically repressed at home.

Ultimately, the idea that Fidel Castro served as a surrogate for citizens’ control over and representation in the state emerges not as the product of collective will but as the result of a long-term political and cultural process that narrowed, controlled, and ultimately discredited access to unmediated knowledge that was independent of the post-1959 revolutionary state. Yet the principle of controlling citizens’ agency by inculcating belief in the expendability of such agency proved critical to Cuba’s ideological transformation. From a society shaped by protest, strikes, and occasional armed rebellions

against an unrepresentative, neo-imperial state, Cuba morphed in the matter of just a few years into a society where all such acts were not only illegal but inconceivable. How did this happen? What enabled the loss of democracy at the hands of a revolutionary state popularly created to ensure its inception? How did achieving national freedom come to rest on its voluntary personal denial? And, perhaps most important, how did the Cuban Revolution reflect an internal Cold War in society and within individuals themselves?

Although these questions are far from new, the fact that historians have found thoughtful, more highly nuanced answers to them is. In the following section I revisit recently proposed answers to these questions for readers less familiar with the history of the Cuban Revolution's communist turn and the ways in which the history of US–Cuba relations enabled leaders such as Fidel Castro to capitalize on long-held dreams of finally achieving national sovereignty.

The History of Cuba's Communist Turn and Why it Matters

Critical to the transformation of the revolutionary government established in 1959 into a communist state was the deliberate demolition of civil society over the course of the year 1960, long before the nationalization of the economy and a government takeover of all major businesses began peeking over the horizon. Operating under the guise of anti-imperialist mass mobilizations, activists of the 26th of July Movement organized rallies of up to a million Cubans to support the state before the watchful eyes of a hostile US government in defense of a noncommunist, “humanist” Revolution. However, the million-person mobilizations that began in January 1959 to ensure the implementation of a long-awaited program of political and economic reforms ended a year later, in 1960, with rallies of a different kind: one whose primary audience was often no longer the United States but, rather, the participants and the Cuban people themselves.

The specific goals of rallies and other gatherings such as marches and oath-taking ceremonies also changed—from expressing support for specific policies such as 1959's targeted agrarian reform to demanding an end to vocal opposition. This shift can be directly attributed to the covert rise of Cuba's historic Communist Party, the PSP, into key appointed positions of civilian and military authority. Consequently, citizens cheered when PSP-backed militias began to seize one independent newspaper after another.

They celebrated the surrender of universities’ long-fought historic autonomy from politicization and government control. They applauded the closure of *all* social clubs, including more than a thousand Black mutual aid societies (the only Black-controlled advocacy organizations in Cuba), not just the yacht and tennis clubs of lilywhite aristocratic elites. These actions enabled the Communist Party’s strategy of controlling public discourse and monopolizing spaces for political action to reflect only the most radical terms. The same actions also deliberately intimidated anyone concerned with the long-term loss of freedom who might assemble and protest while discouraging them from saying so. Perhaps most surprising was the fact that Cubans who willingly handed control over social and political spaces to the government did so, at least until 1961, in the name of *defending* the Revolution from charges of communism and as a means for *preventing* its rise, not ensuring it. The evidence of this makes the success of the PSP’s strategies as tragic as it is ironic.²¹

The PSP’s successful radicalization campaign and the undermining of formerly influential swaths of civil society would not have come about without the United States’ hostile positions: officials’ fearmongering over the possibility that *any* Cuban regime might regulate capitalism before 1959; the US State Department’s subsequent outrage over the revolutionary government’s efforts to subject US companies to Cuban law; and the ultimate success of the May 1959 Agrarian Reform in breaking up Cuba’s massive plantations for the benefit of small farmers.²² None of these condemnations and tactics was new: indeed, the American government’s commitment to turning back the tide of sovereign economic and political reform in Latin America had been recently renewed in the CIA’s 1954 coup against Guatemala’s first democratically elected government, for the sake of protecting the United Fruit Company, Guatemala’s largest landowner.²³

But if Cubans should not have been surprised at the virulence of US officials’ attacks and their echo in the American media, neither US officials nor the media should have been surprised at events in Cuba. As historian Greg Grandin points out, millionaire capitalist and aspiring politician Nelson Rockefeller concluded his 1937 tour of Latin America by lecturing peers that corporations needed to “recognize the social responsibilities of corporations” and to use some of their massive assets for the benefit of the people in the countries whose land and labor they exploited. “If we don’t,” concluded Rockefeller simply, “they will take away our ownership.”²⁴

Truer words had never been spoken by the summer of 1959. Then expropriations of massive foreign-owned estates began apace. Ownership was so concentrated in the hands of a few, that Cuba's first Agrarian Reform affected only 3 percent of all landowners, foreign and domestic, and 10 percent of all farms.²⁵

Eager to silence naysayers of revolutionary change, Cubans (egged on by Fidel Castro) lent themselves to ending the practice of naysaying altogether, a decision that repeatedly left the door open for expanding authoritarian controls. This explains the collapse of university autonomy shortly after the demise of the press as well as the subsequent PSP takeover of leadership roles in the country's massive network of powerful, historically noncommunist labor unions.²⁶ In eliminating all three sources for contesting the power and will of the state, Fidel Castro and his Stalinist allies in the PSP assured that, although complaints and critiques might remain, there would be no place to air them and little need for negotiation. Fidel extended his policy of nonnegotiation from confrontations with the United States to the ranks of his own 26th of July Movement as well as the diverse armed organizations like the student-led *Directorio Revolucionario* and the *Triple A*, an armed branch of the *Auténtico Party* that Batista's 1952 coup had overthrown. Between 1961 and 1966, as we shall see, thousands of these activists, more loyal to the cause than the man, eventually conspired against the Communist Party regime, were jailed (whether or not they conspired), and were often executed.

Other scholars have shown how strong public traditions of antiracism and a decades-long drive for racial equality among Black Cubans also contributed to the consolidation of a socialist state, despite its staunch limitations on the need to address the ideological sources of anti-Black racism and the government's own reproduction of racism in a context of total denial.²⁷ Strategically, between 1959 and 1961, Cuban officials relied on communist principles in order to end Cuba's de facto system of racial segregation overnight without systematically confronting racial bigotry and calling out continuing evidence of a belief in Black inferiority. That is, the government nationalized schools, beaches, public parks, and social clubs while avoiding the need to confront either the racists themselves or the noninstitutional, non-class-based roots of racism. Indeed, leaders feared inciting outrage toward the revolutionary government among white working-class and rural constituents whose identities were steeped in the cultural denial of Black

equality and social supremacy of all white people. By silencing those who demanded public recognition of continuing forms of racism and the cultural pervasiveness of beliefs about Black inferiority among the lower classes, the revolutionary state proved its pragmatism: it was willing to negotiate and soften socially radical positions, but only when doing so reinforced the power of a new, virtually all-white vanguard class of leaders. It was not willing to negotiate when the price was greater pluralism or the possibility of redistributing their own power. Ironically, in the same period when the Communist Party’s repression of Black cultural expression and grievance peaked—that is, in the 1970s and early 1980s—Soviet subsidies ensured full employment, relatively minor income disparities, and apparently equal access to health care and schools.²⁸ This made it easier for government spokesmen to claim an official triumph over racism and convince foreign supporters that Black people in Cuba had little or nothing to complain about.

At the same time, the visibility of Cuba’s egalitarianism and the international solidarity that socialist Cuba sparked among anticolonial Black movements abroad ignited outrage among many white islanders who ultimately decided to leave. Although such exiles may never have admitted or even realized that their own anti-Black racism played a role in their oppositional consciousness, it was clear to scholar Geoffrey Fox, who interviewed dozens of white working-class exiles who had recently settled in Chicago in 1970. For them, the state’s empowerment of Black citizens was equivalent to “discrimination against whites.” Indeed, any racial consciousness among Black people, Fox’s subjects saw as “discriminatory” toward themselves, despite the fact that expressions of Black racial pride or comparisons between racism in Cuba and elsewhere constituted attitudes deeply repressed by the communist state.²⁹

Evidence of Black revolutionaries’ defiance and rebellion surged dramatically by the late 1960s and early 1970s when the US civil rights struggle and Black Power Movement also gained international traction. However, the most visible proponents of furthering a national dialogue on continuing racism in Cuba were effectively and, in some cases, violently silenced for allegedly advocating counterrevolution.³⁰ The fact that the most vocal activists were members of the Communist Party themselves only lent credence to the idea that *any* public defiance of top leaders’ conception of society and identity, no matter its source, was simply not allowed. Instead, new laws and the Communist Party’s elaboration of discriminatory ideological

policies attacked Afro-Cuban cultural expressions and popular practices, such as Santería, deeming them “socially dangerous” and obstacles to socialist development. The reproduction of Eurocentrism and values reinforced traditions of white supremacy, including belief in African inferiority and Black criminality.³¹ The state increased its commitment to this approach over time, a fact borne out by the virtually unchanged whiteness of its leadership up to the present and the resilience of traditional narratives about Black and mixed-race people’s role as grateful recipients of the Revolution. Indeed, Fidel Castro’s public declaration of the Revolution’s elimination of racism in February 1962 had made any future contestation of that position oppositional and therefore potentially treasonous for the state. Ten years later, an official course of political orientation offered to Party militants by the the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC, the Cuban Women’s Federation) in 1973 taught that Black men had achieved total liberation while women had not.³²

Thereafter, as scholar Danielle Pilar Cleland puts it, “Race [was] not only absent from public discourse; its absence was institutionalized. Organizing, writing and discussing race in Cuba in a formal or public manner were prohibited. Consequently, the way that race was lived changed completely. It was no longer acceptable to affirm one’s race, engage in Afro-Cuban cultural and religious practices or perceive race to have any connection to relationships, opportunities, or lived experience.”³³ At best, the position of the state after 1959 remained as unchanged and uncontested on the “colorblindness” of *cubanidad* as it had been prior to 1959. In the words of the magazine *Cuba Nueva*, the issue was simple: “There are no races. . . . The Revolution does not admit differences between blacks and whites. Above any color is the condition of being a man and Cuban.” The fact that it was socially unacceptable to be openly racist in Cuba did not lessen racism or tear at its cultural fabric; it did, however, replicate the private standards of behavior and antiracist “courtesy” typical of the pre-1959 Republic. The continuation of these customs and invisible, untracked biases enabled racism in the guise of “color blindness” and “unity” to survive.³⁴

Since the nineteenth century when thousands of Cubans united to fight the Spanish in the name of independence and the abolition of slavery, race had always formed a critical crucible in the making and breaking of all previous revolutionary projects for democratization. Despite its formal suppression, the continued existence of race and of Blackness as sites for

citizen resistance and autonomous identification in the two decades examined in this book reveals the limitations of the Communist Party’s efforts to build an all-encompassing state on the corpus of a *patria* where all Cubans “think exactly alike.” Nonetheless, rather than conceive the character of the state that leaders eventually achieved by 1981 as “totalitarian,” I prefer to call Cuba’s government a “total state.” Surely, the Soviet Union acted as a model for Cuba to emulate, and tens of thousands of Soviet bloc advisors descended on the island in the 1970s to correct the ostensible mistakes of the revolutionary state’s first decade. However, the history of the Soviet Union demonstrates how the collapse of imperial Russia in 1917 and the creation of a Leninist-Stalinist “workers’ state” thereafter lacked the key features of a shared, anticolonial, egalitarian nationalism on which Cubans staked their identity and future long before 1959.³⁵ This does not diminish Cuba’s economic and institutional “sovietization” as revealed in later chapters, but it does mean that the causalities for Cuba’s de-democratization and Russia’s descent into terror are less shared.

The difference between totalitarianism and Cuba’s quest for “a total state”—although perhaps insignificant to some readers who see Cuba’s resemblance to Soviet bloc models—can be useful: this book is fundamentally about state formation and the evolution of a grassroots dictatorship toward an all-encompassing state that claimed the right to infuse citizens’ consciousness with a commitment to “the Revolution” before self, family, friends, dreams, or desires. By the 1980s, any hegemonic features of Cuba’s regime were largely cosmetic. Calling the Cuban case a “total state” rather than a totalitarian one by 1981, the bookend of our historical examination, reveals how the ghosts of citizens’ lost aspirations to a kind of democracy Cuba never achieved prior to 1959 continued to haunt revolutionary leaders long after they dropped their guise as “humanists” and declared themselves communists in 1961.

Totalitarianism failed to take full root for many years, even at the height of Soviet aid and support in the 1970s, in part because of the need of the government to live up to the expectations it had built not only among citizens but among fighters for national liberation in Latin America, Vietnam, and Africa as well as in the anti-imperialist “New Left” abroad. As historian Van Gosse contends, the New Left was a “movement of movements” that championed multiple, sometimes parallel, sometimes overlapping causes, from racial equality to minority rights to feminism and anticolonialism.³⁶

The New Left proved powerful and influential as well in its class diversity and subsequent reach into the realm of public opinion, particularly within “the West”—that is, the United States, Canada, and western Europe in general. As a result, leaders made certain concessions to their constituencies abroad that periodically favored degrees of flexibility at home, even if they held to an increasingly rigid party line and even if such concessions were temporary or only skin-deep.

These concessions glossed the state’s exclusion of doubting, rebellious, or violently opposed citizens in terms of *inclusion*; they evinced love for the Revolution and defense of its principles of equality within discourses that glorified violence, executions, and hate. While the objects of the state’s attention—opponents, dissidents, and social misfits—may not have benefited, such concessions made policies of reeducation, internment in labor camps, and politically sanctioned shunning more acceptable to the average citizen and therefore more effective. On occasion, Fidel himself seemed to recognize as well that characterizing the Soviet Union’s “heroism” in terms of the kind of society it had created did not lend it credibility. After all, Stalin’s terror and his gulags were infamous. Instead, as we shall see, Fidel emphasized the positive, often thanking the Soviets for their indispensable protection from the United States and readily hosting national celebrations for Cubans of a Soviet history that was not theirs. He also credited the Soviets, rather than the Allied Powers, with the defeat of fascism in World War II.³⁷ By 1980, he implied the Cuban people led the world as a vanguard of communists, saying that even the physical destruction of Cuba through nuclear war would never erase its shining example. In short, Cuban officials implied that communism had built Cuba’s national freedom on foundations of paradox, but they also insisted that inconsistent or conditional freedom was freedom nonetheless.³⁸

Agencies of the state got away with making citizens’ freedom contingent on their complicity because the mechanisms for ensuring it, such as inviting participation in projects like the Literacy Campaign of 1961 or demanding regular quotas of voluntary labor in the years after, took root in deeply held, historically sacred tenets of Cuban nationalism.

The Birth of Citizen Complicity in Cuban Nationalism

In the first years after the flight of Batista and the consolidation of Fidel Castro’s power over an increasingly socialist and then avowedly communist

state, Cuba’s revolutionary government began championing the expendability of citizen agency and independently acquired sources of knowledge through its apparent endorsement: direct citizen participation. As Fidel contended in a speech at a Havana gathering of the international press in March 1961, a month before the US-directed military invasion at the Bay of Pigs:

All Cubans without exception were invited to participate in this revolutionary process, every one of them. Those who did not join us . . . chose not to cooperate of their own volition: they just did not want to, did not have faith in us, because they believed themselves wiser or mightier than everybody else, . . . and because they thought, and some still think, that our revolution was unfeasible. . . . [I]f they chose the road leading to dishonor and treason, if they preferred to become mercenary lackeys of foreign interests, they have only themselves to blame for it! They had plenty of chances to choose the other way, the right path, and those who preferred the wrong one must bear the consequences, that’s all. Yet, nobody can truthfully say that the Revolution was not generous, that it did not issue a public invitation to all Cubans, friends and foes. The proofs of this truth can be found galore.³⁹

Of course, by the time Fidel gave this speech in 1961, the terms for inclusion were already being set. One was free to agree and “fight for the Revolution” that in other moments of the same speech, Fidel declared was unstoppable.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, this idea of openness, generosity for all, opportunities to participate for all, and nondiscrimination by class or creed for the uplift of all held extraordinary appeal. It was the pledge of nineteenth-century nationalist José Martí to build a “nation with all and for the good of all” in motion.

The appeal of Martí’s message in the words of Fidel ran especially deep among the youth. In the lead-up to the state’s adoption of communist rule, they participated in a series of unprecedented mass projects promising to produce greater prosperity, choice, and social equality. None was more transcendent than the nationwide Literacy Campaign launched in January 1961. As we shall discover, the Literacy Campaign and a greatly expanding system of education for all ages originally envisioned state rule through consensus: Cuba’s leaders invited participation in a face-to-face revolution in which citizens spoke directly as delegates of the state and often lived side-by-side with politically lukewarm or comparatively indifferent citizens.

In the spring of 1961 and at the height of the Literacy Campaign, US efforts to topple the revolutionary regime in Cuba reached a high-water mark when the CIA recruited, trained, and directed a military invasion of nearly fourteen hundred exiles at the Bay of Pigs, most of them ex-supporters of the Batista dictatorship. In April 1961, four hundred thousand armed militias almost immediately repelled the invasion. Millions more cheered as the *milicianos* took captive over twelve hundred exiled members of the CIA's "Brigade 2506" and subjected them to a nationally televised trial.⁴¹

While support for the government surged on the heels of this historic nationalist triumph, the full meaning of Fidel's decision to finally reveal his already existing military alliance with the Soviet Union and to formally endorse communist rule had not yet set in among a majority of citizens.⁴² For this very reason, the first several years immediately following Cuba's victory at Playa Girón (as islanders called the Bay of Pigs) did not represent a period of relative stability and consolidation but of near constant turmoil, even if evidence of such turbulence appeared hard to find. In the lead-up to the April 1961 US invasion at Playa Girón, Cubans not only witnessed the mass temporary detention of tens of thousands of fellow citizens, most on the mere suspicion of harboring counterrevolutionary sympathies. They also endured a normalization of executions. State reliance on *el paredón* (the executioner's wall) was not isolated to the 1959 trials of Batista's war criminals but increased dramatically between 1961 and 1965 in tandem with CIA-financed incursions of Cuban exiles who carried out thousands of hit-and-run acts of sabotage, often causing civilian casualties and loss of life. At the same time, peasant uprisings surged in the highlands of El Escambray, Pinar del Río, and Matanzas until 1966, long after coordinated CIA support for the rebels ceased and even as Cuba's mass Literacy Campaign gave way to the semi-permanent installation of *maestros voluntarios* (volunteer teachers) among the poor rural class. Then, in 1965, Fidel Castro opened the port of Camarioca to the exodus of discontented Cubans, grossly miscalculating the number of "traitors" who wanted to leave. What should have been a month-long process of emigration to the United States morphed into a seven-year-long program of tolerating "freedom flights" of over half a million citizens. Cuba's reliance on the departure of nonconformists, discontents, dissenters, and potential counterrevolutionaries might have shored up the state's reliance on a Cold War binary, but it also saved the state from having to prosecute, control, and potentially execute hundreds of thousands of "traitors." Exodus amounted to exporting dissent, then like today.

How did Cubans navigate and experience the whiplash, tensions, and contradictions that were endemic to the revolutionary state’s tumultuous first two decades? At first, citizens enthusiastically embraced the new version of civil society offered under communism. In ever-increasing numbers, women joined the FMC; workers joined the Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba (CTC), the national labor union; peasants joined local branches of the Asociación Nacional de Agricultores Pequeños (ANAP), the national small farmers’ league. At schools, children donned scarlet-red uniforms nearly identical to those worn by kids in the Soviet Union and joined the Communist Pioneers. On every city block and in every rural village, citizens joined local CDRs. It is easy to see why. From 1961 to 1968 commerce, ration distribution, public services, land management, rural resources for farmers, and health care were increasingly restructured into government agencies linked to these mass organizations. The state also purveyed unprecedented opportunities for socioeconomic and educational advancement so long as one’s politics and attitudes publicly matched those of the state. Quite aside from enthusiasm for the cause that government boosters claimed or the fear of political retribution that critics argued might explain the rise in numbers, necessity dictated that membership rolls in mass organizations would soar. As Jorge Domínguez has argued, the phenomenon of ever-increasing participation in state agencies undoubtedly changed their nature, even if their internal governance and actions remained entirely within the top-down *fidelista* mold.⁴³

However, citizen adhesion to the largely unified discourse and overtly coordinated activities of mass organizations and state agencies did more than make Cuba’s government more participatory. The system of mass membership in state organs became metaphoric of the principle that had previously redefined education as “political education.”⁴⁴ Participation itself became a signifier of both popular conviction and conviction itself. Technically, there was no third way.

No other organization held greater sway over the construction of a popular culture of conviction than the CDR, Cuba’s largest mass organization. After 1962, it was open to all citizens. In many ways, the CDR put the narrative of national security, ostensibly authored by Fidel, into action and invited, through participation and local leadership, personal identification with and responsibility for its practices. In the CDRs, the story of the Revolution as the leadership perceived it was born.

Interpreted by CDRs as “instructions” to the people, Fidel’s speeches produced concrete messages of emotional and political urgency as well as manuals for understanding Marxist-Leninism.⁴⁵ Because the revolutionary government had not been ideologically or politically led by the PSP, Cuba’s pre-1959 tiny Communist Party, the work of “spreading and explaining Marxist-Leninist theory, Marxist-Leninist principles and the Marxist-Leninist method” suddenly became the state’s priority. “Today, thousands of new Communists are being fashioned in the practice of revolutionary struggle,” contended historic PSP ideologue Blas Roca in 1961. “These newcomers have to be helped. They have to be aided in attaining full awareness of their orientation and actions.”⁴⁶ Although the fusion of the PSP with the 26th of July Movement’s remaining members had more than doubled the ranks of militants, the Communist Party would remain “Leninist” in structure, creating a vanguard of only a few thousand leaders in 1965 and officially dropping any pretense that an internal, noncommunist wing of former 26th of July leaders continued to exist. Throughout this period of transition, however, it was clear to all PSP leaders that despite their greater acceptability vis-à-vis the Soviet bloc, the legitimacy of communist-directed policies rested almost entirely on the word and person of Fidel Castro.

Curated and coordinated by national directorates that published discussion guides, selected slogans, and crafted political manuals to help revolutionaries explain away unpopular policies, the messages derived from Fidel’s speeches echoed one another across political study circles in various locations. The study circles were led by CTC-appointed instructors at workplaces, by elected officers at local CDRs, and by freshly minted revolutionary teachers or Communist Youth militants at schools. Meanwhile, a visual and auditory landscape of billboards, wall murals, radio broadcasts, television programs, and news reels simultaneously acted as mirrors, reflecting in the external world what national leaders hoped would become an affective, singular sense of revolutionary reality in each Cuban’s internal world.⁴⁷ CDRs organized the confectioning of handmade propaganda signs and banners, ensured attendance at mass rallies and public acts, and in all ways “channel[ed] the desire of the masses to support the Socialist Revolution.”⁴⁸

CDRs held, distributed, and managed the power of surveillance, so they were essential to recruiting Cubans as protagonists and participants in the national security narrative of separating “patriots” from “traitors,” which underlay nearly every dimension of the Cuban state’s policy agenda.

To do this, CDRs publicized and policed the definition of what precisely a “revolutionary” was, often portraying this condition as an aspirational identity, despite the fact that most Cubans already saw themselves in such terms. Achieving a communist Cuba devoid of all threats required multi-generational vigilance. Thus, CDRs partnered with schools to police truancy through direct chats with parents whose kids skipped class; they also awarded prizes to “vanguard” families, among other tasks.

Documenting this, the CDR magazine *Con la Guardia en Alto* reported on model schools with model *cederistas* in order to promote positive revolutionary behavior through example. At the Dionisio San Román Elementary School near Nipe, for example, where children chanted “*Ser hoy mejor que ayer* [Today we will be better than yesterday]” and “*Aprendemos a leer, Cuba nos necesita*” [We will learn to read, Cuba needs us],” the principal credited the vigilance of its CDR for her school’s success.⁴⁹ The same edition, commemorating the anniversary of Fidel and his followers’ seminal assault on the Moncada Barracks in 1953, also specifically defined what it meant to be a revolutionary. The magazine described Fidel’s men when they faced trial in 1953 as “child-heroes, giants of the Patria [*niños-héroes, gigantes de la patria*],” and Fidel delivered his legendary defense address, later published as “History Will Absolve Me.” Fidel himself incarnated multiple heroes at once: “[José] Martí was alive in that man, the words he spoke were those of Marx and Engels, stated in a simple way so that they could reach everyone.”⁵⁰ Given that no Cuban could return to the past and become the “child-heroes” who, together with Fidel, allegedly founded the Revolution during their failed assault on the Moncada Barracks in 1953, *Con la Guardia en Alto* reminded readers that all active *cederistas* were contemporary heroes-in-training.

Ostensibly, citizens remained in the role of heroes-in-training for nearly sixty years. And yet this massive array of “opportunities” for participation, agreement, and deputization were—from the perspective of Fidel Castro and the communist state—evidence of hegemony, not manipulation, let alone intimidation, fear, or repression. Hegemonic visions of Cuba’s “revolutionary process” as the state’s institutionalization of one-man, one-party rule came to be called by communist militants and understood in supportive circles abroad was, by the 1970s, increasingly reduced to *El Sistema* (The system) in the private and sometimes public parlance of islanders. Yet the impulse to seek and find evidence of hegemony derived from an intense belief in the patriotic dream of a democratic, sovereign future that would

reverse historic injustices suffered at the hands of an arrogant United States. So fervently did many Cubans believe in the moral rightness of their revolutionary state that they appointed themselves lead publicity agents, and they recruited foreigners, especially Americans, as imperial witnesses. While this phenomenon forms a through line for much of this book, its origins can be found as early as 1959–1961.

Some of the best examples come from letters that Cubans sent to Senator George Smathers of Florida, a self-proclaimed crusader against communism and advisor to the Kennedy administration. Dora Muñoz Potestad wrote in April 1959:

I am a simple Cuban citizen who is outraged and tired of reading calumnies against Cuba like those you yourself spout . . . and other Americans who say they are democratic and accuse unjustly the directors of our Revolutionary Government and our maximum leader, Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz, who is precisely the man who saved us from a COMMUNIST and bloody dictatorship under the tyrant Batista, with his band of thugs and thieves, assassins and torturers who don't respect women, children or old people, just as you all say they are in MOSCOW in the magazine *Selecciones*, that I always read.

Come to Cuba, Señora Muñoz challenged Smathers: “Because a certain Cuban woman is going to show the democracy we have here, the joy, the hope, the honorable government that respects the law and doesn't believe in the rumors of *batistianos*.”⁵¹

Like her letter, one finds that of sixty-year-old businessman of trade and ship consignments, Reñe Guitart. One of Guitart's sons had lost his life in Fidel Castro's assault on the Moncada Barracks in 1953. Another had joined Fidel's guerrillas in the Sierra Maestra only to be similarly killed. “A patriotic family is not a Communist family,” Guitart wrote Senator Smathers in February 1960:

You call what we are doing communism and are committing a very painful injustice because we the Cubans are defending our profoundly Cuban NATIONALITY. We, for the first time in our history, are carrying out a NATIONALIST work. If defending our NATIONALITY affects American interests vested in this country, interests that have always been ruthless exploiters of the Cuban people, we cannot be called communists. We are defending a legitimate right to eliminate what

has kept this country in shameful slavery to the wills and interests of Americans, always so close to the bad governments that previously dominated this country.

The greatest problem he faced, Guitart explained over the course of three densely typed pages, was simple: “You, Mr. Smathers, don’t know our country.” For this reason, he wanted to invite him with all expenses paid. “I will meet you in Havana . . . I will accompany you anywhere you want to go. That way you can know our country, our Nationalist and CUBAN government. . . . We don’t need your defense, Mr. Smathers, we need only your friendship and understanding.”⁵²

These letters precede Cuba’s formal adoption of communism in 1961. Yet they reveal how Cuban nationalists became early vectors and instruments of the government’s narrative of anti-imperialist self-defense. Evidence of many citizens’ faith in this narrative can be found in the continuing use of an English-language stamp to be placed on the seals of envelopes long after its message had become moot. Originally sold by the Cuban postal service in 1959, the stamp could still be found on mail sent to the United States well into the mid-1960s. “Our Revolution is NOT COMMUNIST,” it read. “Our Revolution is HUMANIST. The Cubans only want the right to an education, the right to work, the right to eat without fear, the right to PEACE, JUSTICE AND FREEDOM.”⁵³

Even as Cuba entered fully the embrace of the Russian bear after 1972, anti-imperialism enervated and infused support for the state as much among Cuban nationalists who kept it at the fore of their personal ideology as among foreign visitors who flooded Cuba as tourists. These included race activists, anticolonial fighters, refugees of Cold War combat zones like Central America, members of the Communist Party of the United States and self-described American “revolutionaries” opposed to the Vietnam War. Some enjoyed government-subsidized or all-expenses-paid trips. The experience was effective among foreign progressives for the same reason that individual citizens wanted to convince Senator Smathers to come to Cuba and see it for himself: they, like their foreign counterparts, were all too eager to see Cuba succeed, to pioneer hemispheric social justice, and overturn the colonial and neocolonial hierarchy to which the United States and corporate monopoly capitalists had relegated much of the world.⁵⁴ Although, for historical reasons, Cuban officials stood by nonnegotiation with the United States in the name of national sovereignty, they also appealed directly to

US democratic sensibilities and “fairness,” regularly relying on Americans themselves as spokesmen.⁵⁵ In the 1960s, government tourist agencies provided all arriving visitors with the pamphlet *Welcome to Our Revolution* in order to allay any concerns over executions ordered by revolutionary courts, economic policies, or the support of the people. Cries of “Communist!,” asserted the pamphlet, like cries of “Wolf!” told “more about the man who shouts it than what he has seen.” Labels like “communist” clouded the tourist’s ability “to see that [Cubans] are happy and having a good revolution.”⁵⁶

Thus, even as Cuban officials inculcated the values of “intransigence” through heroic warrior figures like Che Guevara and institutionalized a one-party state, they regularly returned to similarly “soft” discourses of humanism, universal rights, and fairness in their appeals to foreign visitors and solidarity networks, rather than the language of Marxist-Leninism that was common in domestic life. For example, the famed fashion photographer of the 1950s turned portrait-maker of the Revolution, Korda created *Faces of Cuba*, a pamphlet for tourists that relied on visual aesthetics and lyrical passages. To understand the Cuban Revolution, said Korda’s camera lens and captions, one did not need to talk so much as simply read the pride, joy, and hope you could see in every citizen’s face. Indeed, with the possible exception of the Tropicana nightclub, *Faces of Cuba* did not recommend any tourist sites across its twenty-odd pages; rather, it featured Cubans themselves as politically exotic objects of curiosity and display.⁵⁷ This pamphlet replicated the idea that Cuba’s Revolution was a personal narrative of redemption and identification with a new, cleansed, anticolonial nation. If there was a lesson to learn from the patriot-versus-traitor paradigm and official constructions of the Revolution as a parable of the Cold War, it could not be found. For foreign tourists’ consumption, *there was no total state*. Rather, Cuba enjoyed a flexible, soft system of communism that could not be compared to Soviet models because it arose from the people themselves.

As we will see, the authors of this narrative were the authors of the Revolution *as a narrative* (citizens themselves), but its exploiters and beneficiaries resided in the upper echelons of the state. They did so because the framework of patriots versus traitors, the binary of a siege culture, however invisible to many outsiders, remained intrinsic to life in Cuba and a constant reference point for the Communist Party’s perpetual effort to defeat its greatest internal enemy: the open exchange and debate of diverse ideas.