

Review: Voices of the Victims – Cuba and the Other Terrorist State

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Keith Bolender (Introduction by Noam Chomsky). *Voices from the Other Side: An Oral History of Terrorism Against Cuba*. New York: Pluto Press, 2010. 240 pp. ISBN 978-0-7453-3040-2.

Few issues are as emotionally charged in American foreign policy as those relating to Cuba. Under Secretary of State David Newsom (1987)¹

“Basically, the [covert] operation is to bring about the revolt of the Cuban people. The revolt will overthrow the Communist regime and institute a new government with which the United States can live in peace . . . The political actions will be assisted by economic warfare to induce failure of the Communist regime to supply Cuba’s economic needs, [and] psychological operations to turn the people’s resentment against the regime.”²

This statement, made in 1962 by United States General Edward Lansdale, ordered by the Kennedy administration to overthrow the Cuban government, succinctly summarizes what became the primary objective of US Cuba policy for the next half-century: to employ whatever means necessary – military, political, economic, psychological – in order to create enough hardship, and, therefore, incentive, for eleven million Cubans in order to ultimately bring about the overthrow of the government and, logically, the Cuban revolution.

As Louis Pérez and other Cuba scholars have made clear, throughout the decades after 1959 covert operations continued to play a central role in US policy toward Cuba. As former Secretary of State Alexander Haig wrote in the 1990s, “The targets were always [though not exclusively] economic.”³ While the emphasis may have been on economic sabotage, beginning with the economic embargo, the many well-documented actions including assassination attempts, destruction of infrastructure, and human lives lost, resemble acts that, by the US government’s own definition, would be categorized as terrorism.

This context is essential for understanding the contemporary historical dynamic of Cuba’s fifty-year struggle to make a revolution. It is also the

¹ Quoted in Louis A. Pérez, Jr., “Fear and Loathing of Fidel Castro: Sources of US Policy Toward Cuba,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* (2002) 34, 227.

² Pérez, 242.

³ *Ibid.*, 244.

background for journalist Keith Bolender's rare and important work, *Voices From the Other Side*. In the foreground, the author draws from those who, to date, remained unknown and, at best, vaguely acknowledged in the growing historiography on US hostilities toward Cuba.⁴ Bolender's principal sources are the many Cuban victims of anti-Castro US and Cuban-American operations like those perpetrated by Alpha 66 over several decades in Cuba. The author documents several thousand Cuban lives lost as a result of these actions, while hundreds, perhaps thousands more, were directly and indirectly affected by the acts.

Bolender focuses on the testimonies of numerous of these surviving Cuban victims through interviews conducted in various regions of the country. The interviews are contextualized and organized in roughly reverse chronology and according to distinctive events in the history of terrorism in Cuba. These range from the relatively more recent bombing of Cubana Airlines flight 455 in 1976 and the hotel bombings of the 1990s, all the way back to the acts of military, economic, and psychological warfare waged against the country in the 1960s. Among the latter are the attacks against students during the National Literacy Campaign, the bombing of the cargo ship *La Coubre* in Havana harbour, and the myriad assaults on Cubans in theatres and department stores, in urban and rural regions. Bolender's objective is to insert and assert the crucial human dimensions of this history and the human legacy of the decades-long siege against Cuba.

The interviewees represent all walks of life; the interviews manifest a variety of perspectives, from the testimonies of biologists, through the hesitant remembrances of a magazine editor, to the recollections of a courageous fisherman. The Cubans interviewed and the stories related vividly illustrate the magnitude and pervasiveness of what amounted to a protracted covert or "low intensity" war (a term later adopted by the Pentagon) against the Cuban people. Put another way, these oral histories reaffirm the extent to which attacks against Cuba affected so many areas and levels not merely of the economy, but of Cuban society in general. This certainly corroborates the scholarship on the subject to date. The victimization of Cubans, not just the Cuban government, was also the stated intention of US policy from the very beginning of hostilities against Cuba and ever since.⁵

⁴ See, for example, Warren Hinckle and William Turner, *Deadly Secrets: The CIA-Mafia War Against Castro and the Assassination of JFK* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1992); Fabian Escalante, *The Secret War: CIA Covert Operations Against Cuba* (Melbourne, Australia: Ocean Press, 1995); Jon Elliston, *Psywar on Cuba: The Declassified History of US Anti-Castro Propaganda* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1999); Lars Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: the United States and the Cuban Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 240-241.

More than this, however, the methodology inherent in oral history, in addition to drawing out and giving voice to the “people without history,” presents the opportunity for the evocation of very powerful human emotions that are integrative and potentially lend balance to and reinforce the macro-history. The author set out to examine, as he puts it, “the treatment of terrorism from the personal perspective” (vi). This is most certainly where Bolender has also succeeded: the stories related by Cuban civilians as victims of a decades-long history of violence – armed mercenary attacks, bombings, the widespread introduction of harmful chemical and biological agents, the spiriting away and then effective abandonment of thousands of Cuban children in the US through Operation Peter Pan – speak powerfully to the human toll of policies of sabotage and violence. At the same time, this book has accomplished considerably more.

While Bolender’s book is not the first collection of interviews of Cubans, it is the first to address a particularly crucial and sensitive issue. These case studies in the oral history of terrorism against Cuba provide an important resource, both intrinsically and as an essential complement to the textual record. Each account provides powerful testimony to, and is a manifestation of, the individual human expressions of the “siege mentality” as it originated and evolved in Cuba. These events, whether distant or recent, remain powerful, enduring memories for Cubans, in many cases with physically and psychologically or emotionally debilitating consequences.

At the same time, as Bolender’s Cuban subjects also importantly point out in a chapter entitled “The Cuban National Identity,” the aggression against the Cuban revolution that has caused so much human and material damage “has tested the strength of the Cuban character to its core” (211). Based on the author’s sample (and on anecdotal evidence collected by this reviewer), there seems to be a relative Cuban consensus both on the damage done and on the ways in which this historic hostility has, as one individual put it, “heightened appreciation” of *lo cubano*, “of being Cuban”(206-213). These are essential sources toward understanding the endurance, and malleability, of the Cuban revolution, Cuban revolutionary nationalism, and capacity of Cubans for resistance and solidarity in the face of immense odds, whether internally or externally induced. *Voices From the Other Side* is an important contribution to oral history, to the history of Cuba, and US-Cuban relations, and to the study of terrorism.