

CUBA AND THE RECENTERING OF AFRICAN HISTORY

Victor Dreke. *From the Escambray to the Congo: In the Whirlwind of the Cuban Revolution.* New York: Pathfinder Press, 2002. 182 pp. Photographs. Maps. Notes. Glossary. Index. \$17.00. Paper.

Armando Choy, Gustavo Chui, and Moisés Sío Wong. *Our History Is Still Being Written: The Story of Three Chinese-Cuban Generals in the Cuban Revolution.* New York: Pathfinder Press, 2005. 216 pp. Photographs. Maps. Charts. Notes. Glossary. Index. \$20.00. Paper.

These books are the kinds of books historians are always hoping for, but that very rarely see the light of day. Their value for average readers and for scholars cannot be overstressed, for several reasons, the most important being the historical process of reconnecting Cuba and Africa at a time when such reconnecting continues to be fiercely discouraged by the powers-that-be. It is plausible that potential readers might dismiss the books as mere Cuban propaganda; such readers might even, to their own detriment, find in the books confirmation of their own ideological blinders. However, anyone making a sober assessment of what Cuba has had to go through since the overthrow of Battista (1959) would find it difficult not to be impressed not just by Cuba's survival, but by its having thrived following the collapse of the Soviet Union (1989). The relentless destabilization schemes from various U.S. administrations seems to have had the exact opposite effect on the Cuban political leadership: it never stopped learning from its successes and its failures, from its enemies and its alleged allies. In retrospect, Cuba's survival can be seen as one of the greatest feats of the generic resisters to capitalism since the overthrow of slavery in Haiti 1804. As in Haiti, the costs of contesting the written and unwritten rules of capitalism have been extremely high, inside and outside of Cuba. One has to remember the pressures on Nelson Mandela *not* to visit Cuba after he was released from jail to understand the extent to which the United States in particular (and any willing associate) will go to prevent the reconstruction of African societies on the basis of self-reliance and solidarity.¹

In the aftermath of the Cold War, it would be too easy to dismiss these witnesses as ideological proxies eager to say what the Cuban leaders want to hear. Others will not like the advocacy approach of Mary-Alice Waters—the introducer, interviewer, editor, and president of Pathfinder Press, publisher of these texts—while minimizing the fact that such questioning is rarely raised when the opposite line, nay, the demonization of anything Cuban, is pushed.

Victor Dreke, the author/interviewee of *From the Escambray to the Congo*, was the number-two person in the Cuban group sent to the Congo in 1965 to fight on the side of the rebels in Eastern Congo (the group then led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila). The episode is well known and extensively docu-

mented, but with Dreke's story we are finally offered a first-hand account by Che's most trusted aide during their seven months in the Congo between April and November 1965. In addition to the details of Dreke's role in assembling the right kind of persons for a mission then understood to be the most important Cuban mission since 1959, the reader gets a clear glimpse of some of the principles that allowed Cuba to do so much in the face of such constant threats to its own survival.

Dreke's admiration for the Cuban leadership is evident, and reminiscent of Che's own sentiments expressed in his farewell letter to Fidel just before leaving for the Congo. At times Dreke is aware that readers will not believe him—as when he lists the shortcomings that afflicted the mission on its way to the Congo and during its mission. For a mission considered a high priority by both Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, it is astounding, even from hindsight, to find out that it was based on almost nonexistent intelligence and very little advanced preparation: in retrospect, Che's vision of what was to be accomplished was based largely on wishful thinking (namely, Che's *foco* theory of voluntarism: start something and, by osmosis, a revolution will follow).

These men entered a situation that was far from ideal for the Cubans' objectives of confronting their enemy in as many places as possible so that the pressure on Cuba itself would be lessened. Instead, they came to find out that the leaders (in particular Kabila and Soumialot) had described a situation that was not reflected in the reality they found on the ground. At the beginning Che was convinced that with time and hard work the discrepancy between expectations and reality could be reduced. But it only got worse; indeed, given how bad it got, one wonders how the whole operation did not end more disastrously than it did. Yet to the very end Che tried not to retreat, an outcome Fidel guessed at by dispatching emissaries to convince Che, as diplomatically as possible, to leave the Congo. Fortunately for them, Che finally resigned himself to the only possible avenue: retreat with honor, with their weapons. Indeed, Che himself prefaced his highly critical assessment by saying he was reporting on a disaster, but he added that he hoped that it would help avoid future disasters. How much the average Cubans and the leadership learned from the Congo's disastrous mission can be guessed from what they accomplished on so many other fronts in Africa (especially in Angola), as so eloquently stressed by Armando Entralgo, the dean of Asia and African studies in Cuba, in his foreword to the volume focused on Victor Dreke.

Dreke's account starts from his experience prior to the overthrow of Batista. "From Escambray to the Congo" provides internal details often ignored in analyses of the durability and depth of the Cuban victory over the U.S. military, financial, and political arsenal directed against Cuba. The key of Cuban successes from the Escambray to the Congo and beyond could be summarized as unity, discipline, and self-reliance: "patria o muerte: venceremos." In the global North it continues to be an article of faith that the only way out of underdevelopment is the Western Way. The idea that underde-

veloped people could be successful in a different way was considered impossible; yet Cubans have demonstrated the fallacy of such an affirmation.

From 1959 through the Sierra Maestra campaign—mopping up operations in the Escambray against the bandits being supported by the United States, the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Missile Crisis in October 1962—Che, Fidel, and their comrades managed to do something comparable to what the slaves did in Haiti between 1791 and 1804, with one big difference: so far, the winners of the battle against Battista and his allies have managed to preserve what they won, whereas the descendants of the former slaves are still battling the descendants of the enslavers to make Haiti what it was supposed to be rather than the so-called poorest country of the Western Hemisphere. What happened in Escambray proved to be one of the best training grounds of the Cuban Revolution. It is in Escambray that people like Dreke were tempered for the kinds of missions they performed in Africa. It was in Escambray, as Armando Entralgo eloquently writes in the foreword, that the Cubans saw themselves engaged in a long and bloody class warfare: the battle lines between revolution and counterrevolution were fought over daily; in these contexts, unity, discipline, creativity were not mere theoretical concepts. Entralgo's foreword aptly synthesizes Dreke's account: as a counter to the divisions imposed by the dominant system, unity could be singled out as the essential contribution of the Cubans to the emancipation of Africa and the diaspora.

With regard to the Congolese rebels' leadership, the assessment is mixed. There is obvious reluctance to stress the negative aspects, as can be seen in almost all accounts of the episode (in particular, Gleijeses 2002). Instead, Dreke prefers to focus on the unity within Cuba between its people and the leadership, without which Cuba would not have been able to survive not only the onslaught of the U.S. destabilizing campaigns, but also—and this cannot be overstressed—the lack of reliability of the Soviet Union. It was that combination of a lethal enemy and an ally reluctant to treat its ally as an equal that led the Cuban leadership to stress self-reliance above all, especially with regard to the relationship with other liberation movements in Africa.

Whereas almost from the moment Che and his companions set foot on the shores of Lake Tanganyika the Congo mission was seen as a failure, the experience in the Escambray was the kind of success that explains why the Cubans felt that they could reproduce their successes anywhere in the world. It was the victory in the Escambray, against the internal opponents of the socialist transformation in Cuba, that provided the kind of self-confidence without which someone like Dreke and his companions would not have been able to think that anything they undertook was possible.

Through the words of Armando Choy, Gustavo Chui, and Mosês Sío Wong, *Our History Is Still Being Written* shifts the focus to Angola (1975–91), but not exclusively, as it follows each of the contributors in their various assign-

ments inside and outside Cuba. Though of different backgrounds (General Sío Wong was head of strategic reserves, General Choy directed the cleaning up of Havana harbor, and General Chui almost died in Angola following a severe injury), they all served in Angola. Again, it is difficult not to see the connection between the successes in Angola and the earlier (internal and external) battles that prepared the Cubans for their victory over the armed forces of apartheid. In a subdued, almost humble, way, these two books can be seen as collective praise for what Cuba has been able to do, not just for specific African countries, but for the majority of humanity resisting the unrelenting assaults of the capitalist system. In the struggle for this goal, the internal and external successes were extraordinary, given the intensity and extension of hostility coming from the United States: on his visit to Cuba in July 1991, Nelson Mandela praised and thanked the Cubans for what he described as their “unparalleled contribution to African Freedom” (the speech is excerpted in an appendix mostly devoted to the battle of Cuito Cuanavale).

Choy, Chui, and Wong are all of Chinese origin—members of a group that, like all nonwhite members of Cuban society under the Battista regime, was the target of societal, political, and financial discrimination. However, unlike Dreke’s volume, this book also covers the period coinciding with the collapse of the Soviet Union. To me, the most fascinating sections are part 2 (“Strengthening the Revolution”) and part 3 (“The Special Period and Beyond”), in which the authors show how the Cuban people (and their leaders) managed to figure a way out of the crisis. With their backs to the wall, no retreat was possible; it is a story of ingenuity and sacrifice. At least in terms of the dominant mindset, Cuba is still perceived as being on the side of the losers; but such a mindset must continue to prescribe that Cuba remain on the losing side, for fear of attracting those who are eager to put an end to the systemic and systematic injustice that goes hand in hand with the dominant system.

It is difficult to assess precisely the internal political impact of the internationalist military missions, but it would also be difficult to claim that three hundred and seventy-five thousand Cubans, from foot soldiers to generals, fighting for a cause that each of them identified with, did not have a positive impact. For example, reading about backwardness in the midst of real or potential wealth was different from the shock many got when they saw with their own eyes “a country like Angola with great natural wealth . . . yet with a population facing needs of the most basic type” (101). It is clear from these books, but also from more scholarly works like that of Gleijeses mentioned above, that for the Cuban internationalists, the ideological fight was literally about *Patria o muerte*. The objectives that Chui, Choy, and Wong fought for overseas were identical to those that continue to be fought for in Cuba today.

I have never visited Cuba, but I have followed the trials and tribulations of people who were determined not to rest until they gave the best of them-

selves in order to eradicate as much as possible the depredations of a dehumanizing system. Ideological foes tend to downplay their achievements by citing the outside support Cuba received from the Soviet Union, or the fact that it is an island, or its repressive policies. But even with all of these elements factored in, the explanations for Cuba's resilience still fall short. Until, of course, reference is made to individual liberties.

What is the point, however, of defending or having individual liberties if, at the same time, such liberties would lead to accepting the inequalities that make hunger and ignorance acceptable while those who have the means end up using them to entrench injustices. As long as the global situation makes it a crime to think that capitalism can only reproduce itself through genocidal sequences, Cuba's achievements will be difficult to assess in a serene fashion; suffice it to say that in the realm of education and health, few countries can match their record, given the resources at their disposal and given the hostility from the United States.

If Cuba had collapsed like the Soviet Union (or China), would these two books have been written? Asking this question bears on the context in which histories tend to be produced, regardless of the focus. As many African countries approach the fiftieth anniversaries of their independence, how will decolonization be framed? It is a cliché to say that histories are written by the victors: in a continent that has often been on the losing side, should one be surprised if the assessments are presented from the angle of those eager to be on the side of the winners? More important, the question bears on issues that, because of Cold War framing, were either hidden or deliberately downplayed because opening them up would have forced a discussion of what really was at stake during the Cold War. Throughout the period, President Nyerere's vision of an Africa rooted in solidarity (*ujamaa*) did lead to mistakes, but they were mistakes made on the basis of a conviction that the values promoted by capitalist development would continue the destruction of the continent as surely as it had been started under colonial rule.

Yet nurturing a system based on South-South solidarity relationships is slowly becoming an alternative, a viable solution to relations dictated solely by considerations determined by the rules and regulations of a predatory socioeconomic system. Whatever errors and abuses may have been committed by Cuba, there is no doubt that its survival, so far, can be attributed largely to the fact that its leaders ensured that the gap between their own lifestyle and that of the average Cuban was kept as narrow as possible. Solidarity with those at the bottom of society is always bound to slow those who would use the ideology of freedom and the market to give themselves the right to enrich themselves at the cost of the majority and, at the same time, assuage their conscience through charity. Such a vision for which Cubans fought—in Africa—has been denied to Africans.

References

- Anderson, Jon Lee. 1997. *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life*. New York: Grove Press.
- Gleijeses, Piero. 2002. *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington and Africa, 1959–1976*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Kalfon, Pierre. 1997. *Che: Ernesto Guevara, une légende du siècle*. Paris: Seuil.
- Taibo, Paco Ignacio, II. 1995. *El año que estuvimos en ninguna parte*. Tafalla: Txalaparta.

Note

1. For skeptical readers unconvinced by this reviewer's approach, we can only suggest the following works of well-credentialed scholars: Gleijeses (2002); Kalfon (1997); Anderson (1997); Taibo (1995).

Jacques Depelchin
Ota Benga Alliance for Peace, Healing and Dignity
Berkeley, California