

Book Reviews

Skierka, Volker (2004) *Fidel Castro: A Biography*, Polity Press (Cambridge), xxiv + 440 pp. £25.00 hbk [Translated from the German by Patrick Camiller].

'One thing is certain ... Fidel Castro is there to win ... he does not have a moment's peace until he manages to invert the terms and turn it into victory'. Chapter 1 'The Heroic Myth' (p. 1).

'The man who serves a revolution ploughs a sea ...' Chapter 10 'Don Quixote and History' (pp. 378–379).

Volker Skierka opens and closes his biography of Fidel Castro with the words of Gabriel (Gabo) García Márquez. The opening quote, taken from Gabo's 1998 *A Personal Portrait of Fidel*, is prelude to declaring Castro one of the greatest idealists of our time, perhaps his greatest virtue, though also his greatest danger. It is a statement to which Skierka clearly adheres (referring also to Castro himself having said his favourite literary hero is Don Quixote, jousting at windmills until the bitter end). The closing quote is from Gabo's 1991 novel, *The General in his Labyrinth*, on the Liberator Bolívar. The parallels are there to be drawn.

Framing his biography thus, Skierka provides the key to understanding how the youthful Castro led the 1959 Cuban Revolution to power and how the aging Castro, now nearing 80, has held onto power to this day. Castro's idealism led Cuba down exhilarating and perilous paths, garnering the support of peoples and incurring the wrath of its powerful nation to the north, punctuated by pragmatic twists and turns. How could Castro, in 1989, abandon power at the precise moment the Cuban Revolution augured to be most at peril? As Cubans say, a captain does not jump a sinking ship, and Castro would not want to go down in history as having led a failed revolution. He set out to buck the domino theory of the end of socialism, guiding Cuba through the crisis of the post-Soviet globalised world, as if in a war zone (this was one reason why the Castro leadership studied Churchill's World War II steering of Britain).

It is by no means gratuitous that Skierka should draw on Gabo, who has spent much time in Cuba and with Castro. Skierka, a German journalist who has had assignments in Latin America, including Cuba, requested but was never given an interview with his subject – his only encounter being at the German Embassy in Cuba in 2002, a year after its German publication.

Skierka succeeds in steering a middle ground on Castro and his legacy. Like previous accounts, his is political rather than personal, as there is little beyond rumour and hearsay about Castro's private life after coming to power. Readers familiar with other Castro biographies will find well-trodden ground in Skierka's account, especially in the early chapters, which draw almost exclusively on those biographies – some by British authors, giving the lie to the claim that this is the first to give a European perspective (unless the UK is not to be considered part of Europe).

Book Reviews

the President. The materials are presented chronologically, as one administration succeeds another, and as the Congress periodically asserts itself.

Someone seeking a detailed analysis or critique of the US embargo will not find it in this book, but the arguments presented surely amount to an antidote for anyone who sees the policy as a clear-cut mistake, produced entirely by the ability of a Cuban-American community to manipulate the influence of Florida in the Electoral College. In demonstrating that the policy *process* is much more complicated, the book would support those of us who see the policy *choices* as much more complicated.

The authors endorse the view widely voiced among academics, that the trend in the Cuban-American community may be to become less vehement about Castro, and less supportive of the embargo. But they concede that this community today remains overwhelmingly (at least 90 per cent) in favour of maintaining the embargo, in the hope that, sooner or later, it will force an end to Castro's regime. As in any endurance-contest, it is easy to be sceptical about the sacrifices that are imposed on both sides by stubbornly sticking to the policy. But the success of the stubborn approach for either side comes when the other ceases to be stubborn.

The authors note on page 3 that more than one billion dollars of Cuba's annual economy is derived from remittances from the USA, remittances almost entirely from the same Cuban-American community that also supports the embargo. This may be less hypocritical or inconsistent than it first seems and more sophisticated, as Miami wishes to moderate the suffering of its cousins, while at the same time hoping that the Castro regime will collapse, or that it will at least have to submit to the same economic and political reforms that have taken hold in Vietnam and China.

No one interested in the actual US policies facing the Castro regime can ignore the domestic processes determining such decisions. This book will, thus, be important reading for anyone interested in Cuba, as well as for students of US foreign policy more generally. Indeed, the book would make fascinating reading even for someone who did not care much at all about policy toward Cuba, but simply wanted a detailed examination of how complicated the US foreign policy process can be.

George H. Quester
University of Maryland

Choy, Armando, Chui, Gustavo, Wong, Moisés Sío and Waters, Mary-Alice (2005) *Our History is Still Being Written: The Story of Three Chinese-Cuban Generals in the Cuban Revolution*, Pathfinder Press (New York), 216 pp. £14.00 pbk.

Chinese Cubans played a major role in Cuba's independence struggle, but relatively little is known about them. In Spanish, Juan Jiménez Pastrana's *Los chinos en las luchas por la liberación de Cuba, 1847-1930* (Havana 1963, 1983) and Juan Pérez de la Riva's *El barracón: Esclavitud y capitalismo en Cuba* (Barcelona 1978) tell some of the story, but not much. In Chinese, Song Xiren's *Guba Huaqiao shihua* (Narrative history of Cuba's Chinese) (Taipei 1957) is a mere pamphlet. Duvon Clough Corbitt's *Study of the Chinese in Cuba, 1847-1947* (Wilmore 1971) is sound

Book Reviews

but generally unavailable. Barry Carr's article on Cuba and the Comintern in Rees and Thorpe's *International Communism and the Communist International* (Manchester 1998) briefly notes the Chinese role in the Partido Comunista Cubano (PCC), but only in the early years. So this book of interviews with three Chinese-Cuban generals, published by New York's pro-Castro Pathfinder Press, helps to fill a big gap in the literature.

Chinese immigrants and their descendants in colonised countries are often entrepreneurial, but in Cuba they repeatedly joined local rebels in anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist alliances. The three generals represent the perpetuation of that tradition into the 1950s and beyond. Cuba under Spanish rule imported Chinese migrants as plantation workers. In other Caribbean countries, Chinese labour replaced slave labour, but in Cuba, where slavery remained until 1886, they supplemented it. Their numbers soared and eventually, Chinese plantation workers outnumbered slaves by three to two.

The Chinese experience in Cuba confounds the stereotypical view of Chinese abroad as clannish, docile, and xenophobic. Their resistance to impressment began in China, where they killed crimps, and continued at sea. More than fifteen per cent died en-route, if murders by crimps and deaths in barracoons are included.

The longevity of Cuban slavery blighted even the non-slaves' lives. Conditions on the estates were harsher than in other Caribbean colonies. The suicide rate reflected the misery – half of Cuba's suicides were Chinese. Many Chinese fled the estates to join the independence struggle. At one point, twenty per cent were on the run. The Chinese *mambises* were known as fearless. Their role is celebrated on a Chinatown monument inscribed with the words '*No hubo chino cubano desertor, no hubo chino cubano traidor*'. In 1895, Chinese mambises joined the Independence War. Some achieved high rank.

In the 1920s, immigrants radicalised in China brought the Chinese in Cuba up to date with new ideas. Sun Yat-sen's alliance with Moscow led to the Guomindang's reorganisation along Leninist lines in China and the reform of its chapters overseas. In Cuba, leftists sidelined the old leaders and recruited a thousand members, paving the way to a new alliance with the Cuban left.

The main leftwing force on the island was the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC), a party principally of immigrants. Politically educated Chinese newcomers acted as its leaven. Colonial liberation and pro-immigrant policies formed the PCC's platform, just as they did of the Comintern's Anti-Imperialist League (AIL), which made supporting the Chinese Revolution a priority. An 'ethnic turn' suited the PCC well: blacks, mulattos and Chinese offered a path into the plantations, where the communists lacked influence. The PCC's international ties were thin, but the Chinese had close links with the Guomindang left, dominated by communists. They brought a Comintern perspective to the PCC and helped to prime its tactics.

After 1927, when Chiang Kai-shek turned against the communists in China, Chinese in Cuba founded the Alianza Protectora de los Obreros y Campesinos, modelled on the Chinese precedent, and its leaders joined the PCC. The Machado dictatorship drove the Alianza underground and deported three of its leaders. In 1930, it joined Cuba's first general strike and formed branches throughout the island. In May, its leader José Wong was arrested with leaders of the PCC and strangled in his cell. The

Book Reviews

generals tell his story. The Alianza survived long enough to support the workers' rising that toppled Machado.

Thereafter, Chinese politics in Cuba were inspired for a while more by nationalism than by transethnic solidarity. Demagogues scapegoated Cuba's 'foreign' workers as gringo tools and passed laws that drove them into petty enterprise. This move coincided with a reinforced emphasis among Chinese on 'homeland' politics. Chinese Cubans formed a National Salvation Alliance that helped to fund China's anti-Japanese resistance. At the war's end, they founded an Alliance of Overseas Chinese Protecting Democracy and were banned as 'leftist'. They and the future generals joined Castro's clandestine struggle against Batista. After 1959, they changed their name to Chinese Socialist Alliance and set up a José Wong Brigade of the revolutionary militia, named after the man martyred in 1930. The Brigade helped carry out nationalisations and campaigned to eliminate drugs, prostitution, and gambling from Chinatown. In 1961, it helped throw back the invasion of Playa Girón.

Pathfinder must be congratulated for uncovering this remarkable but little-known dimension of the Cuban Revolution. The book brings the tradition of Chinese-Cuban radicalism up to the present. The generals tell the story of its passage into power (and uniform) under Castro. They describe the history of Chinese immigration; the Chinese role in Batista's overthrow; their own military aid missions to Angola and elsewhere; the Special Period after the Soviet collapse and Cuba's contemporary role in Venezuela and Latin America. The volume opens with a preface by Mary-Alice Waters, the veteran Marxist commentator, and ends with a glossary that includes a comprehensive list of Chinese-Cuban individuals and organisations.

Gregor Benton
Cardiff University

Young, Elliott (2004) *Catarino Garza's Revolution on the Texas-Mexico Border*, Duke University Press (Durham), xv + 407 pp. £69.00 hbk, £16.95 pbk.

Catarino Garza's Revolution on the Texas-Mexican Border is not a traditional biography. Elliott Young uses his dissertation subject, the life of a crusading binational border journalist, to build an analysis of regional events and circumstances in terms of a transnational ideological battle. The South Texas-Mexican greater border region as the nineteenth century drew to an end provides an excellent location to make such an analysis, and Catarino Garza's eyes provide an excellent lens through which to view the landscape.

This view begins in 1859 with Garza's birth on a small farm outside the Mexican border town of Matamoros, Tamaulipas during the great liberal reforms of Benito Juárez and just before the French invaded and installed an emperor from 1862 to 1867. Garza matured during the rise of Porfirio Díaz from winner of the ensuing liberal power struggle to a position of perpetual dictator. Combine this with the encroaching economic and cultural dominance of the 'colossus of the north' on both sides of the border and one has the perfect stage for a crusading journalist and political