

Book Reviews

Zayas, Luis A. (2011) *Soldier of the Cuban Revolution: From the Cane Fields of Oriente to General of the Revolutionary Armed Forces*, Pathfinder Press (New York, NY), 202 pp. \$18.00 pbk.

Luis Alfonso Zayas's book on the Cuban Revolution follows a now well-established format based on the personal testimonies of leading figures within Cuba's revolutionary movement. Through extended interview material collected by Mary-Alice Waters and Martín Koppel, Zayas recollects his experiences of the Cuban Revolution, from a young recruit in Fidel Castro's 26 July Movement, to his involvement in Operation Carlota, Cuba's military and civilian mission to defend Angola's new found independence from attacks by apartheid South Africa.

The events and figures that have played a major part in the Cuban revolutionary movement have been well documented over the last 52 years and, in this respect, Zayas does not add significantly to the existing body of literature on the Revolution. The book's strength rests instead on Zayas's ability to present an account of the revolution through the eyes of someone who played a significant role in its initiation and consolidation. The nature of Cuba's sugar industry and the conditions of its peasantry during the regime of Fulgencio Batista, Cuba's military strongman and close US ally, are recounted through Zayas's recollections as a youth who worked the cane fields of Oriente during this period. The crushing poverty and arbitrary actions of Batista's police and the Cuban-US owned sugar companies, provided the background that eventually transformed the son of a sugarcane farmer into a general in the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) of Cuba. His involvement in the struggle against the Batista dictatorship got off to a faltering start, when his first action to requisition explosives from the Cuban American Sugar Company stores in Puerto Padre went badly wrong. His subsequent participation in Castro's Rebel Army, and its gradual progression from the Sierra Maestra towards Santa Clara and eventually Havana, provides a fascinating and humble image of the day-to-day physical and mental hardships faced by its members. It is this participation that Zayas draws upon to give the reader insight to the personalities of many combatants who have tended to be overshadowed by the focus within existing literature on Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, both of whom also feature prominently in Zayas's recollections.

Although Zayas discusses his involvement in numerous projects, through which he explains his own journey from combatant to government administrator, two events stand out in his work: the 10-million-ton sugar harvest in 1970 and Operation Carlota. In a frank admission, Zayas details the strains and dislocations forced on Cuba's economy and infrastructure wrought by the campaign championed by Fidel Castro to achieve a 10-million-ton sugar harvest that began in 1968 and culminated in 1970. The subsequent failure to meet this quota was compounded by the wider economic costs incurred by diverting so many of Cuba's human and material resources to meet

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this target; costs that would not have been outweighed even if the quota had been reached.

However, it is Operation Carlota that appears to have had the most profound impact on Zayas. His reflections on the Cuban mission in Angola disclose a deep commitment to the Angolan struggle for independence, and an undisguised sense of pride at the role played by Cubans in defeating apartheid South African forces in Angola. Zayas reminds us all of the incredible feat achieved by the Cuban mission, from the logistical task of transporting troops and equipment from the Caribbean to Africa, to maintaining supply lines under conditions of war in a country that had very little in terms of infrastructure or trained personnel. These conditions made the civil efforts organised by Zayas to maintain supplies to Angolan and Cuban armed forces a critical but often forgotten part of Operation Carlota. He also makes extensive comments on the tribal and regional divisions that fractured post-independence Angolan society, posing a major unanticipated obstacle to the success of the operation. Most of all, however, Zayas attempts to use the longer-term consequences of Operation Carlota in undermining the apartheid system in South Africa to demonstrate the unique impact that Cuba's overseas missions have had on the consciousness of those who participate in them. Such missions are portrayed as empowering participants by giving them a sense of their collective ability to challenge injustice.

Zayas's work is an uncritical recollection of the Cuban Revolution and Fidel Castro. In this respect, it shares much in common with many academic and non-academic accounts of the revolutionary process in Cuba. Its strength lies very much in the oral history approach used to convey the challenges and experiences on a micro, everyday level, of those who initiated the revolutionary process and whose efforts have sustained it throughout the 52 years of its existence.

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