



**Howard Jones.** *The Bay of Pigs.* Pivotal Moments in American History Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Illustrations. xvi + 237 pp. \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-975425-0.

**Juan Carlos Rodríguez.** *Inevitable Battle: From the Bay of Pigs to Playa Girón.* Translated by Rose Ana Berbeo. Havana: Editorial Capitán San Luis, 2009. Illustrations. 359 pp. \$20.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-959-211-337-4.

Reviewed by Matilde Zimmermann (Sarah Lawrence College)

Published on H-LatAm (April, 2011)

Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo

## Bay of Pigs or Playa Girón? The Debate at Fifty

April 2011 marks the fiftieth anniversary of what Cubans often refer to as the “victory of Girón” and Americans as the “Bay of Pigs fiasco.” On April 17, 1961, Brigade 2506, a force of 1,500 Cuban exiles organized and trained by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), landed on the beach at Playa Girón, which is located on Cochinol [Pigs] Bay in southern Cuba. The day before, Fidel Castro had for the first time referred to the socialist character of the revolution, at a funeral for Cubans killed by the air strikes that preceded the invasion. Less than three days after the landing, all the invaders who had not managed to flee to waiting ships had been captured or killed.

Much about the event has been known for decades, particularly the extent of U.S. involvement. The Cuban and U.S. governments have declassified many documents, and military and political leaders on both sides have published memoirs. Members of the Kennedy administration and Brigade 2506 attended a fortieth-anniversary conference in Havana in 2001. As the controversy approaches its half-century mark, these new meticulously researched books by Howard Jones and Juan Carlos Rodríguez add important details. Both authors make compelling arguments about the importance of the event: for Jones in what it foretold about future U.S. foreign policy decisions, and for Rodríguez what it registered in terms of the accomplishments of the Cuban revolution in its first two years. Their explanations for the victory/defeat are quite different, but both historians have a fascinating story to tell and they tell it well, with respect for the facts at their disposal and, when appropriate, a fine sense of the absurd.

Jones is the author of a number of other books on U.S. diplomatic and military history. His extensive bib-

liography includes presidential and congressional documents and archives, memoirs of participants, and secondary sources by American scholars, and he did his own interviews of surviving policymakers for this book. His research clarifies some aspects of President John F. Kennedy’s role, showing, for example, that Kennedy had been briefed about the invasion plans soon after his election in November 1960, and that only a day after the defeat, on April 21, 1961, Kennedy ordered the Joint Chiefs of Staff to draw up a plan to invade Cuba with U.S. troops (pp. 44, 134-135).

Jones consulted virtually no Cuban sources. Developments inside Cuba enter his story only in terms of how decision makers in Washington and Virginia were affected by their *perceptions* of what was happening on the island. It is not that Jones agrees with U.S. policy toward Cuba—he thinks the invasion was misguided and the plots to assassinate Castro immoral. But since he is looking at the Bay of Pigs only as a “pivotal moment in American history” (Oxford’s series title), he comes up with quite traditional explanations for the defeat: strategic errors, bad intelligence, cancellation of the D-Day air strikes, confusion on geography, an impossible desire to keep the U.S. role secret, and the assignment of responsibility for a military campaign to the CIA instead of the Pentagon. In other words, Washington defeated itself.

This U.S. focus comes out even in the language. The adjective “Cuban” is reserved exclusively for the invaders, as are the terms “rebel” and “revolutionary”; the only two terms used to identify the men and women and institutions of the island are “Castro’s” and “enemy.” The American commander of the first frogman team to make shore machine-gunned a jeep, wounding a thirteen-year-old literacy teacher. One paragraph and fifteen minutes

later a member of Brigade 2506 was injured, “making him the first casualty of the invasion” (pp. 100-101). Jones claims that Castro waited until he sensed the imminent collapse of the invasion and then “rushed down from Havana to the battlefield, accompanied by a photographer to record his victory while he sat with his head protruding out of a tank” (p. 114). This is the language of Jones’s sources, but he is not quoting them here, and it seems jarring in the voice of the historian himself.

In *The Bay of Pigs*, Jones says that the reasons for Kennedy’s 1961 decision to invade Cuba “remain perplexing” and suggests that the American president had been drawn into “irrational actions” by a “nearly personal conflict” with Castro (pp. 6-7). “Whether too frightened to break with Castro or simply loyal to the regime,” Jones says, “most Cubans stayed out of the battle” (p. 111). Cuban historian Rodríguez, who argues that both the decision to invade and the rout of the U.S.-organized forces were inevitable, offers a different explanation. Rodríguez argues that the Cuban government had broad popular support in the spring of 1961 and that there was an uprising of sorts—*against* the invaders. The theme of his book is that Washington was not defeated by its own mistakes or lack of follow-through, but by the military response of the Cubans, which in turn was based on the voluntary mobilization of tens of thousands of ordinary workers and farmers against the counterrevolutionary bands in the Escambray Mountains, against bombings and other types of sabotage in Havana, and then against the invasion itself.

Rodríguez was a young literacy teacher in the area in April 1961. His book has a prologue by a commander of Cuban forces at Playa Girón and current vice president of the Council of Ministers, José Ramón Fernández, and an epilogue by Castro; the book’s publishing house is associated with the Cuban army. The author’s praise for Castro’s leadership may be off-putting to some readers, but the book is carefully documented with references to both U.S. and Cuban sources. It includes previously unknown material from the archives of the Cuban Ministry of the Interior and from the author’s interviews. Its careful footnotes may satisfy the historian, but the general reader would benefit from a map or two, a bibliography, and an index, none of which are present. (Jones’s book is much better in this respect.)

In this excellent translation by Rose Ana Berbeo, *Inevitable Battle* reads like an adventure story, with plenty of human interest. Militia volunteers, charcoal burners, and crocodile hunters in Zapata Swamp; farmers in the

Escambray; secret agents of State Security—they all become real people with names, stories, and motivations. Using archives of interviews with captured prisoners, Rodríguez even paints us a picture of some individual members of the exile brigade, here a devoutly Catholic do-gooder, there a brutal thug. Especially dramatic are the stories of Cuban agents of State Security who infiltrated the counterrevolutionary bands and opposition groups, including one, Tony Santiago, who was named commander of the U.S.-backed Escambray Front. The CIA unknowingly dropped tons of military equipment and supplies into the arms of underground Cuban government agents in the Escambray. After the air strikes of April 15, the State Security rapidly arrested thousands of known and suspected counterrevolutionaries (Jones says one hundred thousand [p. 110], Rodríguez says twenty thousand [p. 181]), effectively blocking any coordinated actions in the capital at the time of the landing.

As both Jones and Rodríguez show, the CIA could have been misled by its own propaganda machine, which churned out fantastic stories about the Cuban opposition’s strength and mass defections from the army and militias. Triumphant news releases (some of which were published) announced the “liberators” rapid advance on Havana at a time when they were actually being clobbered on the beach. Jones quotes CIA planners who did not know “that the militia could run tanks” or that Cubans could convert their little T-33s into combat planes (p. 124). Rodríguez says that U.S. intelligence was quite accurate on the number and condition of Cuban aircraft and the shortage of trained pilots. What the CIA analysts left out, he says, was “the human factor.” Cuba’s ten pilots, one-sixth the number in the brigade’s air force, flew their eleven antiquated planes on seventy combat missions in three days, sinking one support ship and crippling another and denying Brigade 2506 and its aircraft the “clear skies” they wanted (p. 204).

These two volumes deal with the preparation, course, and immediate aftermath of one sixty-six-hour battle that happened fifty years ago. Each also opens up a larger picture to the interested reader. Jones gives us a view of the Kennedy White House and of the relationship between the president, State Department, CIA, and Joint Chiefs of Staff in the years just before the Vietnam War. Rodríguez helps us understand the rapid and radical changes occurring inside Cuba in 1959 and 1960, introducing us to real people who lived through this process, including some who hated it and a good deal more who defended it.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

**Citation:** Matilde Zimmermann. Review of Jones, Howard, *The Bay of Pigs* and Juan Carlos Rodríguez, *Inevitable Battle: From the Bay of Pigs to Playa Girón*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. April, 2011.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31785>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.