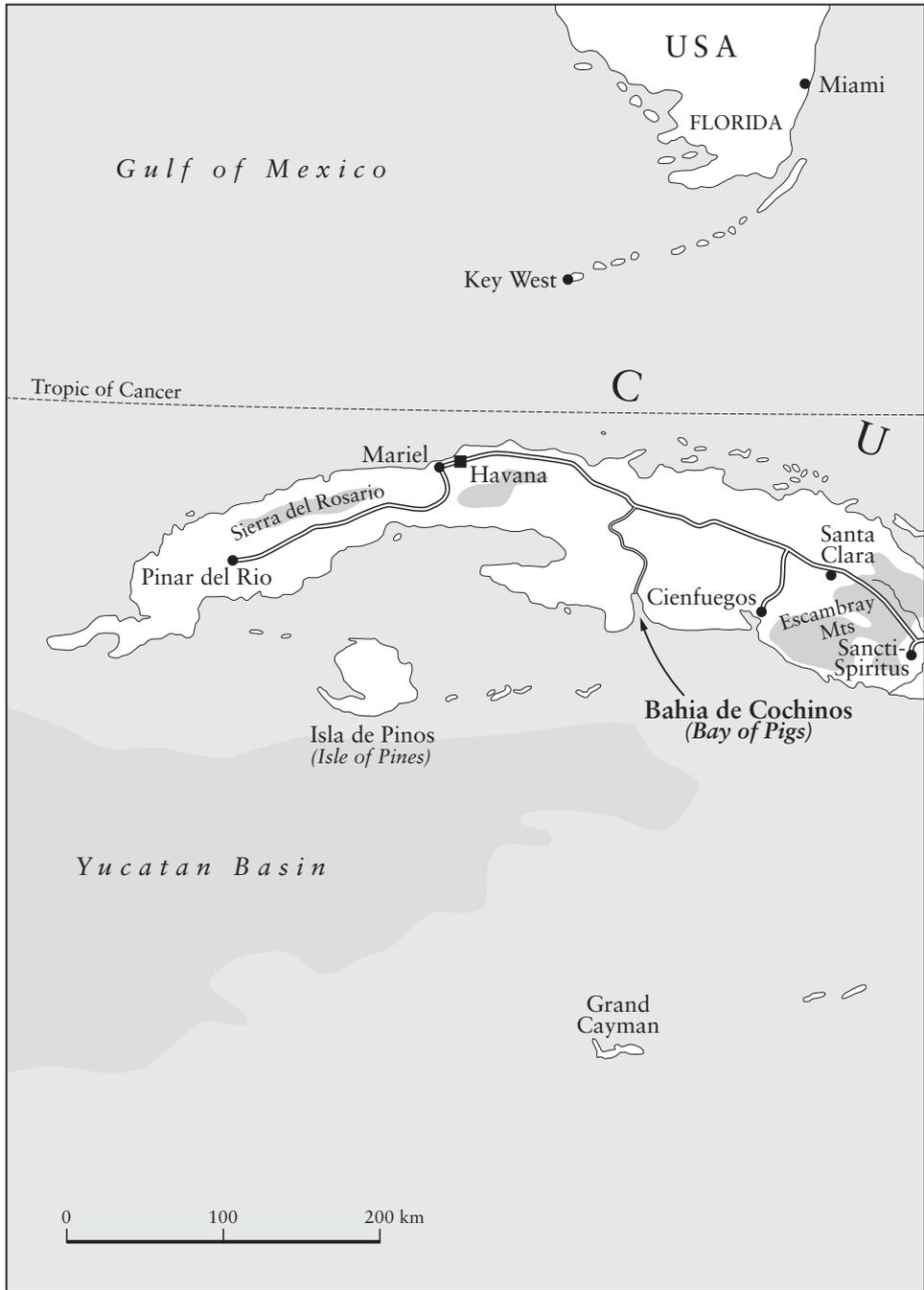


Volker Skierka
FIDEL CASTRO
A Biography

Fidel Castro







For Annette

Fidel Castro



A Biography

Volker Skierka

Translated by Patrick Camiller

polity

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A Note of Thanks



My interest in Fidel Castro, one of the most fascinating of all twentieth-century personalities, was first awakened in 1990, when I traveled from Havana to Santiago de Cuba and visited his remote and idyllic birthplace near Birán in eastern Cuba, only to be cordially but firmly sent on my way by men in uniform. The idea of this book eventually began to emerge after another trip to Cuba, for the weekly *Die Zeit* and the Berlin Deutschlandradio station, in connection with the papal visit in early 1998. It occurred to me then that there was virtually a US monopoly on reference material concerning Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution. Since much of the existing literature betrayed all manner of prejudices, and since there was growing interest in the subject in Europe, I therefore thought that the time had come to investigate the character and life of Fidel Castro within a European perspective.

Uwe Naumann enthused himself and myself for what was initially conceived as quite a small volume. It has since grown larger, and this too is thanks to Uwe Naumann. In his role as editor, he proved a patient yet demanding adviser and companion, one I could scarcely value more highly.

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Volker Skierka

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Preface to the English Edition



It is not easy to write the biography of a still living figure from contemporary history, especially when, like Fidel Castro, he still guides the fate of his country with unbroken authority. No cooperation was received, nor indeed to be expected, from the Cuban revolutionary leader. But that also had its advantages, since it meant that he did not make the slightest attempt to influence the content or even express any wish to give it the kind of imprimatur that usually harms a book's credibility. The author's first close personal encounter with his subject occurred only in February 2002 in Havana, a year after publication of the first German edition.

It looks today as if 2003 will be an important year in Cuban history, marking as it does two anniversaries that play a significant role in Cuban national consciousness: the birth 150 years ago, on January 28, 1853, of the national hero José Martí, who led the island into its victorious struggle for liberation from Spain; and the attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba, a hundred years later on July 26, 1953, when a hundred offspring of the middle classes signaled the birth of the second Cuban Revolution which, less than six years later, would lead the island out of its dependence on the power that took over from the Spanish almost immediately after their defeat in 1898, the United States of America.

Although Fidel Castro, 77 in 2003, has aged together with his revolution, he continues in the new millennium to claim a role for himself not only as initiator of the revolution, spiritual heir of Martí and therefore savior and protector of national independence,

but also as a steadfast guide for the socialist future of Cuba after his death. Thus in 2002, when an opposition group took the bold initiative of collecting signatures in favor of greater political openness, reforms, and free elections, he simply had the socialist form of state hammered into the Constitution as irreversible, at a time when three-quarters of the population of 11 million or more had been born since the victory of the revolution in 1959.

The highly individual, socialist-nationalist "*fidelista*" system, whose development was not at all to Moscow's liking, persisted into the new millennium as the most stable conception of anti-capitalism since World War II – even though it showed some cracks and was crumbling at the edges, and even though it was increasingly doubtful whether Castro's charisma and historical authority would long survive him. As it happened, Castro's Cuba also gained new popularity in 2003 from the seventy-fifth anniversary of the birth of Che Guevara, that eternal cult figure of the Cuban Revolution and trans-ideological pop hero, who was killed in the Bolivian jungle in 1967 and had once been his closest comrade and friend. For some time Castro has been the world's longest-serving head of government, and despite numerous assassination attempts he has outlasted nearly all his opponents, as well as their successors.

For all its exemplary achievements in social and educational policy and in speaking up for the interests of the Third World, Cuba's political system did not appear in the eyes of the First World to meet the standards of a pluralist society. Yet the European countries, which had become indispensable economic partners for Cuba, made considerable efforts to reach a *modus vivendi* with the regime. Whereas the USA since the early sixties pursued an absurd embargo and thereby strengthened Castro's system – the opposite of its intended result – most countries of the Old World plus Canada wagered on "gradual change through rapprochement," especially after the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet withdrawal from Cuba; this was supposed, even in a period of growing economic problems, to open a way out of the isolation inflicted on Cuba by itself and by others. The EU thereby showed a greater awareness of its responsibility to the Cuban people than did the successive

governments in Washington. In fact, after decades of fruitless debate, the United States still has no convincing idea for a post-Castro Cuba.

In May 2002 Nobel prizewinner Jimmy Carter finally attempted to break down the rigid US posture towards Cuba, becoming the first (former) US president since Calvin Coolidge in 1928 to make a trip of several days to the island. Hopes began to grow for an easing of internal and external tensions when Castro, as a kind of welcoming gift, ordered the release of prominent dissident Vladimiro Roca two months before the end of his five-year sentence. Moreover, like Pope John Paul II in 1998, Carter was able to criticize the lack of civil liberties and to argue for democratic reforms, in a Spanish-language speech at Havana University that was broadcast uncensored on Cuban state television. After the revolution of 1959, he complained, Cuba “adopted a socialist government where . . . people are not permitted to organize any opposition movements.” Its “constitution recognizes freedom of speech and association, but other laws deny these freedoms to those who disagree with the government.” While also criticizing the human rights situation in the United States, where the death penalty was applied much more harshly than in Cuba, Carter advised the Cuban government, as a gesture of good will, to accept the demand of the Geneva-based UN Commission on Human Rights for an observer to be allowed into the country.¹

In a discussion afterwards, the visitor even referred to the “Varela Project” (named after a Catholic priest from the nineteenth-century independence struggle), a petition for greater civil liberties that had been submitted to the National Assembly together with a list of 11,000 signatures, about which the Cuban media had maintained almost total silence. Carter praised Osvaldo Payá’s initiative in using a right granted to citizens under the Constitution to propose new legislation, which amounted to a demand for freedom of association, speech and publication, an amnesty for political prisoners, permission for private enterprise, free choice of occupation, and a new election law. In December 2002 Payá, a member of the oppositional Christian Liberation Movement, was awarded the EU Parliament’s Andrei Sakharov

Prize for Freedom of Thought at a ceremony in Strasbourg. The Cuban government naturally countered by organizing its own collection of signatures, in which 98.9 percent of people on the electoral register were officially reported to have declared that the country's economic, political, and social system was "inviolable." This laid the basis for a decision a few days later by the Cuban Parliament to make socialism an irreversible part of the Constitution. But, although this "neutralized" the main thrust of the "Varela Project" at the time of Carter's visit, the fact that the government had not prevented the collection of signatures raised hopes that greater tolerance would be shown towards critics of the regime. "When Cubans exercise this freedom to change laws peacefully by a direct vote," Carter suggested, "the world will see that Cubans, and not foreigners, will decide the future of this country."²

Like the Pope before him, Carter also criticized US policy towards Cuba and called on Washington to abandon an attitude that had borne no fruit for more than 40 years. "It is time for us to change our relationship. . . . Because the United States is the most powerful nation, we should take the first step. First, my hope is that Congress will soon act to permit unrestricted travel . . . and to repeal the embargo."³ But Carter's appeal was hardly likely to be taken up: the Bush family is traditionally linked to Castro's most violent opponents in the United States, and the president's brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush, has long had the closest of contacts with militant Cuban exile circles. In a move designed not least to take the wind out of Carter's sails, the White House immediately announced that it intended to step up the economic pressure on Cuba and to increase its political isolation. Already, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Cuba had been bracketed together with Taliban-style "rogue states" and Saddam Hussein's Iraq. And, before Carter left for Havana, a top State Department official had raised the stakes by spreading the rumor that Castro was developing biological weapons. No evidence, even fabricated or "sexed up," could be produced for such an allegation; Castro even invited Carter to have inspections carried out by experts on weapons for mass

destruction. In the end, both Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Colin Powell could do nothing other than dissociate themselves from the claim.

The extent to which Castro, with his lifelong consistency, can be a bearer of hope for people in Latin America and the Third World was once more demonstrated during his 48-hour visit to Buenos Aires in May 2002 to attend the inauguration of Argentina's newly elected president, Néstor Kirchner. The trip to the homeland of his old comrade-in-arms, Che Guevara, turned into a triumphal march. The media vied with one another in reporting the visit, so that behind the scenes the generals began to murmur about the new president and had to be called to order by him. Kirchner seemed as surprised as Castro. Thus, when the news spread that the *Máximo Líder* intended to give a speech to 800 invited guests in the great hall of the law faculty, tens of thousands of people hurried to turn up there, bringing the city center to a halt and almost making it impossible for Castro himself to get through. In the end, the event had to take place several hours late and in the open air, spontaneously broadcast live on radio and television. Castro temporarily put in the shade not only President Kirchner but also two other guests present in Buenos Aires: Brazil's new and popular president, Lula da Silva, and the despotic Venezuelan leader and friend of Castro's, Hugo Chávez. After several decades, and in an age when ticker-tape welcomes are a thing of the past because the streets can no longer be lined with enough people, Castro alone can still attract a large enough crowd even on a trip abroad. All he has to do is let himself be seen – his long, tiring speeches notwithstanding.

The trip to Argentina took place at a time when the world political situation and the battered international reputation of the Bush administration had to some extent made the climate in Latin America more friendly to Castro. At a time when security and familiar bearings were increasingly being taken away from people, especially in the Third World, Castro again suddenly came through as a man who had remained true to himself and whose astute analyses and criticisms somehow struck many as well-grounded – even if things were more complicated than he made them out to be. Has not the neoliberal economic policy

ordered by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which was supposed to bring Latin America higher growth and greater economic and political stability, ultimately had the effect of making the rich richer and the poor poorer? After the bacchanal of privatization, which often mainly enriched the privatizers and their cronies, are not Argentina and many other countries now left with empty coffers to pick up the pieces? Everywhere people are seething, because the clever prescriptions ordered by the First World are having no effect. For a long time there has been a new leftward tendency in these countries. The election of the left-wing workers' leader and friend of Castro's, Lula da Silva, to the Brazilian presidency is one expression of this trend, as was that of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. In Peru the supposedly defeated terrorist organization, Sendero Luminoso, is stirring once again. The US-backed "Plan Colombia," with its large dollar resources to stem the drugs trade and the limitless violence in that country, has all but broken down. Central America is facing complete economic bankruptcy. Many grand promises and hopes that Washington offered these countries through long years of civil war to keep them politically compliant have come to nothing. Even well-disposed Latin Americans therefore thought it simply grotesque when the government of Bush, Jr, asked for trouble by appointing as its top official on Latin America the militant Cuban exile Otto Reich, a man infamous from the days of Bush, Sr, in connection with the US-funded contra mercenaries in Central America. Sure enough, these premonitions were confirmed when it became clear that the US embassy in Caracas had been mixed up in an attempted putsch by pro-US economic circles against the undoubtedly autocratic and, even inside Venezuela, rather unappealing President Chávez – an adventure that failed because of the amateurish way in which it had been prepared.

Relations with the European Union, culminating after long negotiations in the opening of an EU mission in Havana, could not have worked out better at the start of Castro's historic year 2003. But perhaps everything went too well, perhaps everything was too friendly and free of conflict. In a pattern familiar from Moscow, any political spring in Cuba has been followed in the past by a sudden return of the ice – in order to maintain an

ideological distance and to prevent a flagging of principles. And, this time too, there was a startling change of direction, at once disturbing and difficult to understand. In March, no sooner had the world's attention been diverted by the first American air raids on Baghdad than it was reported in the press that 75 oppositional journalists, writers, librarians, and other intellectuals had been arrested in Cuba. Within little more than two weeks, they were convicted as "mercenaries in the service of the Empire" (that is, the United States) and sentenced to terms of 10 to 26 years in prison, which were immediately confirmed by the relevant courts of appeal. A total of 1,454 years imprisonment, as the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* pointed out. A few days later, death sentences were carried out on three men who, in another brief trial, had been convicted of attempting to divert a ferry with 50 passengers from Havana to Miami. (A unit of Cuban special forces had intervened to end the hijacking.)

The execution of these draconian sentences was a source of consternation, especially for those in the international community and human rights organizations, who for some time had thought that the Cuban state was willing to deal more leniently with critics and to forego applying the death penalty. Recent condemnations of Cuba by these institutions have turned out to be correspondingly moderate. The European Union, in particular, was largely agreed that Havana did not actually need to resort to such measures, because the people in question did not pose any real danger to the system and the government. There was also the unsavory detail that the groups in which the dissidents circulated had without exception been infiltrated by state security agents working in the respective professions, who had pretended to be dissidents, or even published material as "journalists" on the Internet, and were now fêted as heroes by the government. Criticism poured in from all sides, including from people friendly or generally well-disposed to the regime. Many deplored what had been done, seeing it as an expression not of strength but of weakness and lack of confidence. Those who, against strong resistance, had managed to break down aversions abroad and to promote a rapprochement with Cuba now saw themselves

as having been duped and robbed of the fruits of their patient, well-meaning labor.

Castro could not have given the United States a better present. The Bush administration immediately announced a further intensification of sanctions, and the EU scarcely had any choice but to react accordingly. In a statement categorically demanding the release of the prisoners, Brussels announced that no more ministers or high government officials from the EU should travel to Cuba until the human rights situation had improved. Cultural exchanges were also to be frozen, and in future dissidents would be included on the guest list for embassy functions. Economic sanctions, on the other hand, were explicitly ruled out. These altogether moderate sanctions, necessary for the EU to save face, sparked a furious reaction in Havana. A crowd of hundreds of thousands, headed by Castro himself, marched to protest against the measures in front of the embassies of EU countries (most notably, Spain and Italy). The EU's decision to include dissidents on embassy guest lists so infuriated the Cuban leadership that it announced for its part that it would not send government representatives to any official event to which critics of the regime had also been invited.

The disproportionate Cuban response during this period, against internal opponents as well as criticism from outside, started a guessing-game as to whether something more might lie behind it. There was even hushed speculation that dramatic events might be in the offing, and that the Cuban leadership was trying to intimidate or lock away critics of the regime as a precautionary measure. Again and again there have been rumors of this kind. But in 2003 crystal-ball gazers were even whispering that Castro might soon hand over his official duties to a successor and retire into old age as the superintendent father of the revolution.

It is possible that more was involved than one was initially prepared to believe. After all, Cuba could not afford the conflict with the European Union, either politically or economically; and closure of the EU mission in Havana, which was also within the realm of possibility, would have caused almost irreparable long-term damage. Or was the Cuban behavior simply provoked by

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covert action on the part of the “arch-enemy,” going beyond the bounds of the acceptable? Already in January 2003 there was much evidence of such activity: diplomatic and journalistic circles were increasingly speaking of provocations by the US mission in Havana, which had gone far beyond what was customary in international diplomacy, with the intention of sooner or later forcing the Cubans to respond. Journalists did not even exclude the possibility that James Cason, head of the United States Interests Section, would be expelled from Havana, since he had the appearance of being not so much a diplomat as a representative of the hardline anti-Castro Mafia in Miami.

Wayne Smith, a Cuba expert who had himself been head of the Interests Section in Havana during the Carter era, seemed to share this view. Although he too deplored the Cuban reaction and evidently considered it overdone, he wrote in an article that appeared in *The Nation* on May 12, 2003:

Why the crackdown? In part, it was a reaction to growing provocations on the part of the Bush Administration, which had ordered the new chief of the US Interests Section, James Cason, to hold a series of high-profile meetings with dissidents, even including seminars in his own residence in Havana. Given that Cason’s announced purpose was to promote “transition to a participatory form of government,” the Cubans came to see the meetings as subversive in nature and as highly provocative. And, in fairness, let us imagine the reaction of the Attorney General and the Director of Homeland Security if the chief of the Cuban Interests Section in Washington was holding meetings with disgruntled Americans and announcing that the purpose was to bring about a form of government – a socialist government – in the United States. He would have been asked to leave the country.

Smith also referred to the character of US propaganda over the previous months, in which Cuba, without any supporting evidence, had been labeled part of the “axis of evil.” Equally unproven was the claim that Cuba had been producing biological weapons and was therefore a potential threat to the United States. All this, Smith argued, following the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, naturally raised the question: “Who knows? We may be next.”

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Nevertheless, Cuba's harsh response landed it in the same dead-end as in previous decades. Familiar low-level provocations were met with knee-jerk reactions that betrayed a lack of self-confidence and command of the situation, as well as threatening to forfeit the sympathy of well-wishers. It is striking, however, that the UN Commission on Human Rights has avoided outright condemnation of recent Cuban policies and remained content, as in 2002, to demand that Cuba allow a human rights representative to visit the country. In any event, it would harm the cause of dissidents to allow oneself unthinkingly to be used for the aims of a US government which, not for the first time, has played a cynical game with innocently trusting critics of the regime and, together with the Cuban state apparatus, turned them into martyrs. In this connection Osvaldo Payá, who has been left untouched by the Cuban authorities, stressed in his criticism of the arrests and jail sentences that he rejected any US financial support for Cuban dissidents.

It was thought that Castro had for some time been above such games, that he was prepared to give up his pathological fixation on the United States and to turn his gaze towards Europe, the homeland of his ancestors. Thus, when the Americans decided to intern more than 600 Taliban fighters from Afghanistan at Guantánamo in eastern Cuba (where the US has run a Marine base for the past 100 years under an agreement with Cuba that is extremely questionable in international law and has never been recognized by the Castro regime), everyone expected loud protests from Havana. But, instead, the Cubans reacted in an unusually calm and quick-witted manner, asking Washington to allow their famously well-trained doctors to provide the prisoners with medical care under the law.

And so, the wheel turned full circle in the anniversary year of 2003, insofar as things were the same as before. David against Goliath. While the Europeans to a large extent (including on the issue of dissidents) hoped for "change through rapprochement," and while the Americans fine-tuned an embargo that could hardly be tuned any further, Castro soldiered on largely unimpressed by all the hostility shown towards him, in the hope that posterity would reward him for an ascetic life devoted to the revolution.

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“History will absolve me,” he confidently asserted in October 1953, when he was sentenced for the attack on the Moncada Barracks. It remains to be seen whether it will absolve him. But, with or without absolution, one thing is certain: he will go down in history as one of the few revolutionaries who remained true to his principles.

Volker Skierka

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