

The political legacy of Fidel Castro

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The announcement Friday night of the death of Fidel Castro, one of the major figures of the 20th century, has provoked a broad range of public reactions reflecting the bitter controversies over his contradictory historical legacy.

His death at 90 came nearly a decade after he surrendered the reins of unchallenged power he exercised over Cuba's political life. For nearly half a century he was "president for life," first secretary of the ruling Communist Party and commander-in-chief of the Cuban military, with much of this authority passing dynastically into the hands of his younger brother, Raul, who is now 85.

His rule outlasted that of ten US presidents, from Eisenhower to George W. Bush, all of whom were committed to the overthrow of his regime, including by means of the abortive CIA-organized Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961, literally hundreds of assassination attempts, and the longest economic blockade in world history.

The longevity of his political career is in many ways astonishing. No doubt, there were elements of the Latin American *caudillo* in his rule and he could be ruthless in relation to those seen as political rivals and opponents. At the same time, he possessed an undeniable personal charisma and a degree of humanism that attracted support from both the oppressed masses of Cuba and wider layers of intellectuals and radicalized youth internationally.

The reaction of the US media to Castro's death has been predictable. Editorial denunciations of the "brutal dictator" have been accompanied by revolting coverage giving greater air time to a few hundred right-wing Cuban exiles dancing in the streets of Miami's Little Havana than to the somber and very real mourning among broad layers of the population in Cuba itself.

On the island, ten years after relinquishing power, Castro has maintained a significant, albeit diminished, popular base, reflecting support for the undeniable improvements in social conditions for the country's most impoverished layers that were wrought by the revolution he led in 1959.

The indices of these changes come into clear focus when one compares conditions in Cuba to those prevailing in the neighboring Dominican Republic, which has roughly the same size population and gross domestic product. The murder rate in Cuba is less than one quarter that in the Dominican Republic; life expectancy is six years higher (79 vs. 73), and the Cuban infant mortality rate is roughly one-sixth the Dominican. Cuba's literacy levels and infant mortality rates, it should be added, are also superior to those in the United States.

The commentary in the US media centering on denunciations of Castro for political repression deserves to be placed in historical context. After all, the United States has over the course of a century supported countless dictatorships responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people in Latin America alone. Castro and Castroism were ultimately the product of this bitter and bloody history.

Castro's own political evolution was shaped by US imperialism's decades-long plunder and oppression following the island's transformation as a result of the 1898 Spanish-American war from a colony of Spain into a semi-colony of Washington. Under the so-called Platt Amendment, the United States guaranteed itself the "right" to

intervene in Cuban affairs as it saw fit, and seized Guantanamo Bay to serve as its military base.

The US-backed Batista dictatorship

Before the revolution, Washington's man in Havana was Fulgencio Batista, who headed a ferocious dictatorship that ruled in the interests of foreign corporations, the country's native oligarchy and the mafia, which turned the country into a center of gambling and prostitution. Torture was routine and John F. Kennedy himself commented that the regime was responsible for the political murders of at least 20,000 Cubans.

As vicious as this regime was, it was by no means unique in the region. During the same period, Washington supported similar mass crimes carried out by Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, Duvalier in Haiti and Somoza in Nicaragua.

Those who attempted to alter the existing order by democratic means were disposed of with violence, as seen in the CIA-organized overthrow of the Arbenz government in Guatemala in 1954. The result was a growth of seething popular hatred for the United States throughout the hemisphere.

Born into a Spanish landowning family, Castro developed politically within the hothouse environment of student nationalist politics at Havana University. Reportedly, as a youth he was an admirer of Spanish fascist Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera and the Italian duce Benito Mussolini.

Among his politically formative experiences was a 1948 trip as a student to Bogota, Colombia, where the US had convened an inter-American congress that was to found the Organization of American States to assert US hegemony over the region. During the visit, the assassination of Liberal Party candidate Jorge Gaitan led to the mass uprising known as the *Bogatazo*, in which much of the Colombian capital was destroyed and up to 3,000 were killed.

Castro himself acknowledged that he was also significantly influenced by the politics of Juan Peron, the military officer who came to power in Argentina, admiring him for his populism, anti-Americanism and social assistance programs for the poor.

Still in his twenties, Castro began his struggle against the US-backed dictatorship of Batista as a member of the Ortodoxo Party, a nationalist and anti-communist political tendency rooted in the Cuban petty-bourgeoisie. After running as an Ortodoxo candidate for the Cuban legislature in 1952, Castro turned to armed action a year later, leading an ill-fated assault on the Moncada army barracks in which all 200 insurgents were either killed or captured.

Following a brief jail sentence and exile, he returned to Cuba at the end of 1956 with a relative handful of armed supporters who suffered overwhelming losses in initial engagements with government troops. Yet within barely two years, power fell into the hands of his guerrilla July 26 Movement, under conditions where both the Cuban bourgeoisie and Washington had lost confidence in Batista's ability to rule the country.

There existed broad international sympathy for Castro, whose uprising was seen as a struggle for democracy. Among those expressing support for the new regime was American author Ernest Hemingway, who described himself as "delighted" with the overthrow of Batista.

Initially, Castro denied he had any sympathy for communism, insisted

that his government would protect foreign capital and welcome new private investment, and sought to reach an accommodation with US imperialism.

However, as the masses of Cuban workers and peasants were demanding results from the Castro revolution, Washington made it clear that it would tolerate not even the most modest social reforms in the territory 90 miles from US shores. The expectations within US ruling circles was that after brief celebrations of the fall of Batista, the new government would get back to business as usual. They were horrified that Castro was actually serious about changing social conditions on the island and raising the living standard of its impoverished masses. They met any attempt at altering the existing order with intransigence.

In response to limited land reform, Washington sought to strangle the Cuban economy, cutting Cuba's sugar export quota and then denying the island nation oil.

Castro responded with nationalizations, first of US property, then of Cuban-owned enterprises, and turned to the Soviet bureaucracy for assistance. He simultaneously turned to the discredited Cuban Stalinist Popular Socialist Party, which had supported Batista and opposed Castro's guerrilla movement. The Stalinists provided him with the political apparatus that he lacked.

Castro was representative of a broader bourgeois-nationalist and anti-imperialist movement that swept the colonial and oppressed countries in the post-World War II period, giving rise to figures like Ben Bella in Algeria, Nasser in Egypt, Nkrumah in Ghana and Lumumba in the Congo, among others. Like Castro, many of them attempted to exploit the Cold War conflict between Washington and Moscow to secure their own interests.

No doubt, there was an opportunistic element in Castro's self-proclamation as a "Marxist-Leninist" and his turn to the Soviet Union. However, it is also the case that in 1960, the October Revolution that had transformed Russia 43 years earlier exerted a massive influence internationally, even though the Soviet bureaucracy had long since exterminated the revolution's leaders and severed all ties to genuine Marxism.

While the rising expectations of the Cuban masses and the obstinate reaction of US imperialism served to push Castro to the left, he was in no sense a Marxist. While sincere in his original intentions to implement significant reforms of Cuban society, his political orientation was always of a pragmatic character.

Ultimately, Castro went the furthest in striking a Faustian bargain with Soviet Stalinism, which provided massive aid and subsidized trade in return for exploiting Cuba as a bargaining chip in its quest for "peaceful coexistence" with US imperialism.

With the Stalinist bureaucracy's final betrayal, the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, Cuba was thrown into a desperate economic and social crisis which the Castro government was able to offset only through an ever-widening opening to foreign capitalist investment, as well as major subsidies from Venezuela, whose own economic crisis is now closing off that source of aid as well.

Rapprochement with Washington

These are the conditions that laid the groundwork for a rapprochement between Washington and Cuba, with the reopening of the US embassy in Havana and Obama's visit to the country last March. For its part, US capitalism is determined to exploit Cuban cheap labor and potentially lucrative markets and ward off the growing influence in the country of its Chinese and European rivals.

The ruling strata in Cuba see the influx of US capital as a means of salvaging their rule while pursuing a course similar to that of China. The Cuban elite hopes to secure its own privileges and power at the expense of the Cuban working class under conditions where social inequality on the

island is rapidly deepening.

No doubt all of this troubled Castro in the last decade of his life. During this period, he continued to comment regularly in the Cuban media through a column known as "Reflections." These writings provided little in the way of theoretical insight and reflected the thinking of a sincere petty-bourgeois radical.

To his credit, until his death he continued to despise everything that US imperialism stood for. He vigorously attacked the hypocrisy of Barack Obama and his combination of "human rights" rhetoric and imperialist wars and drone assassination programs.

In the aftermath of Obama's visit to Cuba, Castro wrote one of his last columns, bitterly denouncing the US president's speech in Havana. He declared: "... we are capable of producing the food and material riches we need with the efforts and intelligence of our people. We do not need the empire to give us anything."

The reality, however, is that the Obama visit and the move to "normalize" relations with US imperialism signaled that Castro's revolution, like every other bourgeois nationalist movement and national liberation struggle led by middle-class forces, had reached its ultimate dead end, having failed to resolve the historic problems stemming from imperialist oppression of Cuba and moving toward a restoration of the neocolonialist relations that it had previously opposed.

Only a cynic could deny the elements of heroism and tragedy in the life of Castro and, above all, the protracted struggle of the Cuban people.

However, Castro's legacy cannot be evaluated solely through the prism of Cuba, but must take into account the impact of his politics internationally and, above all, in Latin America.

Here, the most catastrophic role was played by left nationalists in Latin America as well as petty-bourgeois radicals in Europe and North America in promoting Castro's coming to power at the head of a small guerrilla army as the opening of a new path to socialism, requiring neither the conscious and independent political intervention of the working class nor the building of revolutionary Marxist parties. The myths surrounding Castro's revolution, and, in particular, the retrograde theories of guerrillaism propagated by his erstwhile political ally Che Guevara, were promoted as the model for revolutions throughout the hemisphere.

The role of Pabloite revisionism

Among the most prominent proponents of this false perspective was the Pabloite revisionist tendency that emerged within the Fourth International under the leadership of Ernest Mandel in Europe and Joseph Hansen in the US, subsequently joined by Nahuel Moreno in Argentina. They insisted that Castro's coming to power had proven that armed guerrillas led by the petty-bourgeoisie and based on the peasantry could become "natural Marxists," compelled by objective events to carry out the socialist revolution, with the working class reduced to the role of a passive bystander.

They further concluded that Castro's nationalizations created a "workers state" in Cuba, despite the absence of any organs of workers' power.

Long before the Cuban Revolution, Leon Trotsky had explicitly rejected the facile identification of nationalizations undertaken by petty-bourgeois forces with the socialist revolution. The *Transitional Program*, the founding document of the Fourth International, written in 1938, declared that "one cannot categorically deny in advance the theoretical possibility that, under the influence of completely exceptional circumstances (war, defeat, financial crash, mass revolutionary pressure, etc.) the petty-bourgeois parties including the Stalinists may go further than they themselves wish along the road to a break with the bourgeoisie." It distinguished such an episode, however, from a genuine dictatorship of the proletariat.

In response to the expropriations carried out by the Kremlin regime in

the course of its invasion of Poland (in alliance with Hitler) in 1939, Trotsky wrote: “The primary political criterion for us is not the transformation of property in this or another area, however important these may be in themselves, but rather the change in the consciousness and organization of the world proletariat, the raising of their capacity for defending former conquests and accomplishing new ones.”

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) fought intransigently against the Pabloite perspective, insisting that Castroism represented not some new road to socialism, but rather only one of the more radical variants of the bourgeois nationalist movements that had come to power through much of the former colonial world. It warned that the Pabloite glorification of Castroism represented a repudiation of the entire historical and theoretical conception of the socialist revolution going back to Marx, and laid the basis for the liquidation of the revolutionary cadre assembled by the Trotskyist movement internationally into the camp of bourgeois nationalism and Stalinism.

While waging a principled defense of Cuba against imperialist aggression, the ICFI rooted its analysis of Castroism within a broader assessment on the role of bourgeois nationalism in the epoch of imperialism.

Defending Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, it wrote in 1961: “It is not the job of Trotskyists to boost the role of such nationalist leaders. They can command the support of the masses only because of the betrayal of leadership by Social-Democracy and particularly Stalinism, and in this way they become buffers between imperialism and the mass of workers and peasants. The possibility of economic aid from the Soviet Union often enables them to strike a harder bargain with the imperialists, even enables more radical elements among the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois leaders to attack imperialist holdings and gain further support from the masses. But, for us, in every case the vital question is one of the working class in these countries gaining political independence through a Marxist party, leading the poor peasantry to the building of Soviets, and recognizing the necessary connections with the international socialist revolution. In no case, in our opinion, should Trotskyists substitute for that the hope that the nationalist leadership should become socialists. The emancipation of the working class is the task of the workers themselves.”

These warnings were tragically vindicated in Latin America where the theories promoted by the Pabloites helped divert a whole layer of radicalized youth and young workers away from the struggle to mobilize the working class against capitalism and into suicidal armed struggles that claimed thousands of lives, served to disorient the workers’ movement and helped pave the way to fascist-military dictatorships.

In the first instance, these theories claimed the life of Guevara himself in Bolivia. Ignoring the militant struggles of the miners and the rest of the Bolivian working class, he vainly sought to recruit a guerrilla army from among the most backward and oppressed sections of the peasantry, ending up isolated and starving before being hunted down and executed by the CIA and the Bolivian military in October 1967.

Guevara’s fate was a tragic anticipation of the disastrous consequences Castroism and Pabloite revisionism would have throughout the hemisphere. Similarly, in Argentina, the cult of guerrillism served to blunt and disorient the revolutionary working class movement that had erupted with the mass strikes of the *Cordobazo* of 1969.

Castro himself, acting both as a client of the Soviet bloc and a practitioner of realpolitik in the attempt to secure the stability of his own regime, sought to forge ties to the same Latin American bourgeois governments that those who emulated him were attempting to overthrow. Thus, in 1971 he toured Chile, extolling the “parliamentary road to socialism” in that country, even as the fascists and the military were preparing to crush the working class. He hailed military regimes in Peru and Ecuador as anti-imperialist and even embraced the corrupt apparatus

of the ruling PRI in Mexico after it had overseen the massacre of students in 1968.

The overall impact of Castro’s policies as well as those of the political tendencies who glorified him was to hold back the socialist revolution throughout the hemisphere.

Now, the imperialist powers in general, and the US in particular, are evaluating to what extent the death of Castro can be used to advance their interests in Cuba and beyond.

President Barack Obama issued a hypocritical statement declaring, “History will record and judge the enormous impact of this singular figure on the people and world around him,” and assuring that “the Cuban people must know that they have a friend and partner in the United States of America.”

For his part, President-elect Trump issued a statement celebrating “the passing of a brutal dictator who oppressed his own people for nearly six decades.” There is growing speculation over whether Trump will carry through on his threats to rescind measures enacted by Obama meant to facilitate the penetration of Cuba by US banks and corporations.

While the representatives of imperialism seek to exploit Castro’s death to advance the cause of reaction, for a new generation of workers and youth the study of the historical experience of Castroism and the far-sighted critique developed by the International Committee of the Fourth International remains a vital task in preparing the working class for coming mass revolutionary struggles and building the parties that will lead them.

Bill Van Auken

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