

The First Generation of Cuban Students in the Soviet Union: Shaping a Revolutionary “Culture of Militancy” (1960s)

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With the 1959 revolution and its subsequent alliance with the Soviet Union (USSR), Cuba became the first Latin American country to pierce the “Iron Curtain”, allowing a new generation of students to discover the socialist orbit. As relations between the Fidel Castro administration and the United States (U.S.) deteriorated shortly after Batista’s fall, it became soon clear that the revolutionary regime would have no choice but to turn to the the USSR, whose leaders have openly expressed their willingness to assist the island¹. In December 1960, the President of the Central Bank, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, travelled to Moscow and signed the first of many cultural agreements that would swiftly strengthen Cuban-Soviet interactions. Among the areas included in this seminal deal, educational exchanges were given priority, which led to the granting of several scholarships for Cubans wishing to pursue studies in Soviet institutions².

This first step activated a staggering dynamic that would eventually shape the professional careers and life experiences of a sizable community of Cuban students³. From the early 1960s, they increasingly headed toward the USSR to pursue technical trainings and postgraduate studies, crucially contributing to the reinforcement of a still fragile revolution. This article’s primary aim is to look into this first wave of Cuban students who temporarily moved to the USSR, where they were expected to acquire a key knowledge and assimilate modern techniques for the further advancement of the Caribbean revolution. But, beyond the professional dimension

¹ After the U.S. announced the reduction of the sugar quota they used to buy to Cuba, Nikita Khrushchev step in and warned the White House: “Figuratively speaking, if need be, Soviet artillerymen can support the Cuban people with their rocket fire, should the aggressive forces in the Pentagon dare to start intervention against Cuba. And the Pentagon would be well advised not to forget that”.

² Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, *Tratados Bilaterales de Cuba*, La Habana, Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 1963, U. 1, p. 6.

³ As it is noted by the Soviet diplomat and journalist, Alexander Moiseev, no official data is available to determine how many Cuban students were trained in the USSR. Alexander Moiseev, Olga Egorova, *Los rusos en Cuba. Crónicas históricas: juicios y testimonios*, La Habana, Editora Abril, 2010, p. 119. Bárbara Saravia, a Cuban official currently working at the Cuban Institute of Friendship with the People (ICAP), has unofficially told us that nearly 22,000 Cubans studied in the USSR throughout the Cold War period.

of the exchanges, Cuban officials also tasked their young representatives to become faithful, exemplary ambassador of the Castro revolution before the island's most vital political ally. To ensure the students' unwavering commitment to the government, the diplomatic staff in Moscow constantly monitored them and established a fluid communication channel intended to convey proper orientation to the Cubans. The Embassy's acute supervision and political constraints eventually paid off. Most students developed a sense of having to fulfil an important mission for Cuba's success, nurturing a vigorous "culture of militancy" on Soviet soil. Indeed, spurred by both a self-acquired political consciousness and the guidelines transmitted by the authorities, this first generation of grant holders in the USSR came to embody Cuba's "New Man", while simultaneously cementing the island's technical and scientific progress.

To achieve these goals, this mostly unexperienced community of Cubans had to face numerous hurdles and their journeys were challenged by daunting difficulties. Other than the climate radical disparity and the language barrier, many students lacked sufficient preparation at home and had troubles coping with the requirements of the Soviet educational system. We will first show that, among the first students, many of them were poorly educated and were sent to the USSR without meeting the necessary criteria to enroll in a Soviet institution, which engendered concerns from Cuban and local officials alike. As we will point out in the second part of this article, Cuban rulers were aware of their fellow citizens' limitations, which led them to implement a stringent follow-up designed to enhance the students' level and guarantee their commitment with the political evolution followed by Cuba and its chief political partner, the USSR. To stimulate the right behavior, Cuban officials provided incentives and applied dissuasive sanctions. While the most exemplary delegates were rewarded with moral stimulus, "unfit" students were subjected to severe penalties, including potential expulsion back to Cuba. Following the government's designs, all students were incorporated in *colectivos*, from where they developed an effectively assimilated dynamic of self-control and "socialist emulation", ultimately contributing to the reinforcement of their educational level and political faithfulness.

After demonstrating that ideological and educational enhancement played out as two mutually reinforcing and indivisible processes, we will finally broach the

political role that the Cuban community adopted in the territory of a sometimes problematic ally. In fact, as Cuban-Soviet political relations got strained and Fidel Castro increasingly challenged the Kremlin's doctrine of "Peaceful Coexistence", the students were expected to act as mouthpieces of Cuban socialism, being tasked with a delicate mission: to defend Havana's belligerent revolutionary tenets in the face of mounting pressures from Soviet and Latin American communists alike. As they were urged to embrace the Cuban Revolution's principles, the students got increasingly entangled in the political tensions faced by the global left in the 1960s. Driven by a sense of political responsibility, most students shared a common awareness of going through a critical phase for both the Cuban Revolution and the future of socialism. Standing at the crossroad of a crucial point in the Cold War, they adopted a particular "culture of militancy", a term that is understood in this article as set of shared values, meanings, and practices that shaped militant action and conviviality within a specific group. I will wonder to which extent this "culture of militancy" was voluntarily produced or if it was rather induced "from above" by Cuban officials, Embassy members, classmate leaders, and Soviet academic decision-makers. As a result of a particularity loaded Cold War political climate, this first generation of Cubans in the USSR became a testing community to assess the capacity of rightfully instilling the revolution's principles within a group, which was particularly important since they were simultaneously acquiring the technical competence that the government needed to consolidate its revolutionary project.

The students' role was essential for the revolution. They were expected to exemplify Cuba's "New Man" and the authorities called them on assuming key positions once they come back to their land. It seems thus surprising that, despite their strategic relevance, little has been said about these forgotten actors of the Cuban Revolution. Most books dealing with Cuba-Soviet relations delve into economic and political interactions or look at the ideological controversies between both countries, while conspicuously overlooking educational exchanges⁴. This could

⁴ See, for instance: James Blight, Philip Brenner, *Sad and Luminous Days: Cuba's Struggle with the Superpowers after the Missile Crisis*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2002; Aleksandr Fursenko, Timothy Naftali, *"One Hell of a Gamble": Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964*, New York, London, Norton & Company, 1997; Ángel García, Piotr Mironchuk, *Esbozo histórico de las relaciones entre Cuba- Rusia y Cuba-URSS*, La Habana, Academia de Ciencias de Cuba, 1976; Anne Gorsuch, "Cuba, My Love: The Romance of Revolutionary Cuba in the Soviet Sixties", in *American Historical Review*, vol. 120, n°2, pp. 497-526; Bruce Jackson, *Castro, the Kremlin, and communism in Latin America*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1969; Leila Latrèche, *Cuba et l'URSS. 30 ans d'une relation improbable*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2011; Jacques Lévesque, *L'URSS et la révolution cubaine*, Paris, Presse de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1976; Yuri Pavlov, *Soviet-*

be understandable given the limited and hazardous access to Cuban and Russian primary sources. I am able now to partially offset these historiographical shortcomings owing to the compilation of a wide array of sources, notably a series of diplomatic files that I have consulted in 2018-2019 at the Archives of the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MINREX). I have also conducted several interviews with former Cuban students, whose recollections of their lengthy stays in the USSR have been key in reconstructing the still uncharted life experiences and revolutionary “culture of militancy” that they developed beyond the “Iron Curtain”.