

THE BLACK BOOK OF COMMUNISM

Section Cuba: Interminable Totalitarianism in the Tropics

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COMMUNISM

CRIMES
TERROR
REPRESSION

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Castro effectively muzzled society through the use of Committees for Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) established throughout the country. They were essentially designed to keep watch over families. The other major element in the Cuban repressive apparatus is the popular tribunal, usually held in CDR headquarters. © L'illustration/Sygma



Long before the boat people fled Vietnam, tens of thousands of *balseros* were leaving Cuba on makeshift rafts like the one pictured here. Thousands died at sea. © Viviane Rivière/Sipa Press

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Communism in Latin America

Pascal Fontaine

Cuba: Interminable Totalitarianism in the Tropics

Since the beginning of the century, the biggest island in the Caribbean has had a turbulent political history. In 1931–1933 an army clerk named Fulgencio Batista took part in a revolt against the dictator Gerardo Machado. In 1933 Batista led a military coup against Cuba's provisional president, Carlos Céspedes. Thereafter, as head of the army, Batista was the major powerbroker for a succession of provisional and de facto governments. Throughout this period and afterward, he remained fiercely opposed to the United States. In 1940, after Batista was elected president, he enacted a liberal constitution. In 1952 he returned to power through a military coup, disrupting the prospects of democratization symbolized by the elections scheduled for the following year. Batista continued to govern with the support of various political parties, including the local Communist Party, which at that time was called the People's Socialist Party (PSP).

The Cuban economy began to grow rapidly under Batista, but wealth remained unevenly distributed, with a particularly marked contrast between the countryside and the cities, with their impressive infrastructure.¹ The cities also benefited from money brought in by the Italian-American mafia. In 1958 there were 11,500 prostitutes in Havana alone. The Batista era was notable for

corruption and an obsession with short-term gain, and the middle classes gradually distanced themselves from the regime.²

On 26 July 1953 a group of students attacked the Moncada barracks in Santiago de Cuba. Several of them were killed, and one of the leaders, Fidel Castro, was arrested. Though initially sentenced to fifteen years in prison, he was soon freed and fled to Mexico, where he set up a guerrilla group called the 26 July Movement (M-26), made up for the most part of young liberals. In 1957 this group entered Cuba and began a twenty-five-month armed conflict with Batista's forces in the Sierra Maestra. At the same time, urban students led by José Antonio Echevarria formed the Student Revolutionary Directorate, whose armed wing attacked the presidential palace in March of that year. The operation was a total failure: Echevarria was killed, leaving the student movement without impetus and Castro's group as the only viable opposition to Batista. During the ensuing conflict, violent repression by the regime claimed thousands of victims.³ The urban guerrilla network was especially heavily affected, losing 80 percent of its members; the rural guerrilla groups in the Sierra lost only 20 percent.

On 7 November 1958, at the head of a column of guerrillas, Ernesto Guevara began a march on Havana. On 1 January 1959, Batista and the other leading figures in the dictatorship fled. Rolando Masferrer, the head of the sinister police apparatus known as "the Tigers," and Esteban Ventura, chief of the secret police, both of whom had a penchant for torture, fled to Miami. The leader of the Confederation of Cuban Workers (CTC), Eusebio Mujal, who had signed a number of agreements with Batista, took refuge in the Argentine embassy. The guerrillas' easy victory overshadowed the role played by other movements in Batista's downfall. In fact the guerrillas were involved in only a few minor actions, and Batista was defeated mainly because he had lost control of Havana to urban terrorism. The current U.S. arms embargo also worked against him.

On 8 January 1959 Castro, Guevara, and their forces made a triumphant entry into the capital. As soon as they had seized power, they began to conduct mass executions inside the two main prisons, La Cabaña and Santa Clara. According to reports in the foreign press, 600 of Batista's supporters were summarily executed during a five-month period. Extraordinary courts were established for the sole purpose of sentencing these opponents of the new regime. In the words of Jeannine Verdès-Laroux, "The form of the trials, and the procedures by which they were conducted, were highly significant. The totalitarian nature of the regime was inscribed there from the very beginning."⁴ These travesties took place in a carnival-like atmosphere; a crowd of 18,000 people gathered at the Palace of Sports to "judge" the Batistan commandant

Jesús Sosa Blanco, who was accused of carrying out assassinations, by giving him the thumbs-down sign. As Sosa Blanco remarked before he was shot, the scenes were “worthy of ancient Rome.”

In 1957, while still in the Sierra, Castro gave an interview to Herbert Matthews, a journalist from the *New York Times*, in which he declared: “Power does not interest me. After victory I want to go back to my village and just be a lawyer again.” This statement was immediately contradicted by his policies. After seizing power, the new revolutionary government immediately fell victim to serious in-fighting, leading to the resignation of Prime Minister José Miró Cardona on 15 February 1959. Castro, who was already commander in chief of the army, replaced him. Although he initially promised to hold free elections within eighteen months, by June he had decided to postpone the elections indefinitely. Castro justified his decision in an address to the inhabitants of Havana, saying: “Elections? What for?” thus renouncing one of the fundamental points of the anti-Batista guerrilla program. In effect, he took over the position vacated by the fallen dictator. He also suspended the 1940 constitution and its guarantees of fundamental rights, governing by decree until 1976, when he imposed a constitution modeled on that of the U.S.S.R. The new laws 53 and 54 (relating to freedom of association) were particularly important in abrogating civil liberties by limiting the rights of citizens to meet in groups.

In the spring of 1959 Castro, who until then had collaborated closely with his associates, changed course and began removing democrats from the government. He relied increasingly on his brother Raúl (who was a member of the People’s Socialist Party) and on Guevara, who was a convinced supporter of the Soviet Union. Agricultural reform was launched on 17 May 1959; by June the opposition between liberals and radicals had begun to crystalize. The initial plan, proposed by Agriculture Minister Humberto Sori Marin, had aimed at establishing a program to reallocate land that belonged to bourgeois landowners. Castro, however, was supportive of the radical policies proposed by the Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria (National Institute for Agricultural Reform), or INRA, which he had placed under the control of a group of orthodox Marxists, and of which he was the head. With a stroke of the pen he annulled the agriculture minister’s program. In June 1959 Castro sought to radicalize the agrarian reform by ordering the army to take control of 100 estates in Camagüey Province.

The gathering storm finally broke in July 1959 when President Manuel Urrutia, a former magistrate who had courageously defended the rebels in 1956, resigned. Soon the minister of foreign affairs, Roberto Agramonte, was replaced by Raúl Roa, a staunch Castro supporter. Shortly afterward the minister of social affairs also resigned to protest a verdict against several pilots

accused of crimes against civilians.⁵ This pattern continued throughout 1960. Rupo Lopez Fresquet, the finance minister since January 1959, broke with Castro in March, joined the opposition, and then went into exile; Anres Suarez, another member of the government, also left the country that year. The last independent newspapers disappeared, and the rest were muzzled. On 20 January 1960 Jorge Zayas, who had been the editor of an anti-Batista newspaper called *Avance*, also went into exile; Miguel Angel Quevedo, the editor of *Bohemia*, the weekly that in 1959 had published Castro's testimony from his 1953 trial for the attack on the Moncada barracks, left in July. The only newspapers left were the Communist *Granma* (Grandma, named after a ship) and *Hoy* (Today). In the fall of 1960 the last remaining political and military opposition leaders, including William Morgan and Humberto Sori Marin, were arrested. Morgan, a guerrilla leader in the Sierra, was shot the following year.

Soon thereafter the last democrats, including Manolo Ray, the minister for public works, and Enrique Oltusky, the communications minister, were removed from the government.⁶ The first great wave of departures now began. Nearly 50,000 people from the middle classes, many of whom had originally supported the revolution, all took the road to exile. This exodus of doctors, teachers, and lawyers did irreparable harm to Cuban society.

The workers were the next group to suffer repression. The labor unions had resisted the new regime from its earliest days. One of the principal leaders was the head of the Sugar Union, David Salvador. As a man of the left, he had broken with the PSP over its refusal to take a stand against Batista. He had organized strikes at the big sugar plants in 1955, had been arrested and tortured, and had supported the April 1958 strike, which was masterminded by Castro's 26 July Movement. After being democratically elected as secretary general of the CTC in 1959, Salvador was made to work with two assistants who were orthodox Communists appointed without a democratic mandate. He tried to resist their influence and to put a brake on their activities, but after the spring of 1960 he became increasingly marginalized. In June Salvador went into hiding, but in August 1962 he was arrested and spent the next twelve years in prison. Thus Castro forced off the stage another major figure in the anti-Batista movement. As a final blow against the workers, Castro forbade their sole remaining union, the CTC, to stage strikes. As a Party spokesman noted: "The union must not be used for the wrong purposes."

After being arrested in 1953, Castro had been saved mainly through the intervention of the archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, Monsignor Perez Serantes. The clergy were happy to see Batista's departure; several priests had even participated in the guerrilla organizations in the Sierra. Nevertheless, the church protested the overhasty condemnation of Batista's supporters in the

same way that it had protested the actions of Masferrer's Tigers. In 1959 the church denounced Communist infiltration of parishes. Castro used the 1961 Bay of Pigs affair as a pretext to ban the periodical *La quincena*.⁷ In May all religious colleges were closed and their buildings confiscated by the government, including the Bethlehem Jesuit College, where Castro himself had been educated. In full military dress, the "Lider Maximo" (Supreme Chief) declared: "Let the Falangist priests start packing their bags!" This warning was serious; on 17 September 131 priests were forced to leave the country. To survive, the church had to scale back its operations considerably. The regime continued to marginalize religious institutions and believers; though claiming that it would allow all Cubans to profess their faith freely, it subjected those who did to repressive measures, such as forbidding them access to university education or to jobs in the civil service.

Repression was also felt in the world of the arts. In 1961 Castro had stated that the position of the artist was at the very center of society. But a slogan perfectly encapsulated his real views: "The revolution is all; everything else is nothing." Heberto Padilla, a distinguished poet, finally left Cuba in 1980 after many years of persecution. Similarly, Reinaldo Arenas, after ten years of ostracism, left the country in the Mariel exodus.

Like other Communist leaders, Fidel Castro loves comparisons to the French Revolution; and just as Jacobin Paris had Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, revolutionary Havana had Che Guevara, a Latin American version of Nechaev, the nineteenth-century nihilist terrorist who inspired Dostoevsky's *The Devils*.

Ernesto Guevara was born into a well-off family in Buenos Aires in 1928, and as a young man he traveled throughout South America. Because of chronic asthma, his health was always fragile, but this did not prevent him from riding a motorbike all the way from the pampas to the jungles of Central America after finishing his medical studies. He came to hate the United States in the early 1950s, when he encountered the misery that ensued in Guatemala after the leftist regime of Jacobo Arbenz had been overthrown in a coup supported by the Americans. As Guevara wrote to a friend in 1957: "My ideological training means that I am one of those people who believe that the solution to the world's problems is to be found behind the Iron Curtain." One night in 1955 in Mexico he met a young Cuban lawyer in exile named Fidel Castro, who was preparing to return to Cuba. Guevara decided to accompany Castro, and they landed on the island in December 1956. In the resistance, Guevara soon became commander of a detachment, quickly gaining a reputation for ruthlessness; a child in his guerrilla unit who had stolen a little food was immediately shot without trial. Régis Debray, who was his companion in Bolivia, described

him as “an authoritarian through and through” who wanted to impose a revolution of total Communism and sometimes found himself opposed to more democratic Cuban guerrilla commanders.⁸

In the autumn of 1958 Guevara opened a second front on the plains in Las Villas Province, in the center of the island. He carried out a highly successful action in Santa Clara, attacking a train of reinforcements sent there by Batista. The soldiers fled, refusing to fight. After the rebel victory, Guevara was assigned the post of state prosecutor, which gave him authority over pardons. He worked in La Cabaña prison, where a great number of people were executed, including some of his former comrades-in-arms who refused to abandon their democratic beliefs. “I can’t be the friend of anyone who doesn’t share my ideas,” he once said.

As minister of industry and head of the Central Bank, Guevara found occasion to apply his own political beliefs, imposing the “Soviet model” on Cuba. He was an avid disciple of Lenin, in whose honor he named his son Vladimir. Though claiming to despise money, he lived in one of the rich, private areas of Havana. Despite later serving as minister of the economy, he had no notion of the most basic ideas of economics and ended up ruining the Central Bank. Social issues were more his forte, and he introduced “voluntary work Sundays” in emulation of the U.S.S.R. and China. He was a great admirer of the Cultural Revolution. According to Régis Debray, “It was he and not Fidel who in 1960 invented Cuba’s first ‘corrective work camp’ (we would say ‘forced labor camp’).”⁹

In his will, this graduate of the school of terror praised the “extremely useful hatred that turns men into effective, violent, merciless, and cold killing machines.”¹⁰ He was dogmatic, cold, and intolerant, and there was almost nothing in him of the traditionally open and warm Cuban temperament. He was the architect of the militarization of Cuban youth, sacrificing them to the cult of the New Man.

His strongest desire was to spread the Cuban experiment far and wide. In 1963 he was in Algeria, and then in Dar es Salaam, then in the Congo, where he crossed paths with the Marxist Laurent Kabila, who is now the president of the Democratic Republic of Congo and who never hesitated to massacre civilians. Filled with passionate hatred for the United States, in 1966 he took his guerrilla forces on a crusade through South America, with a slogan encouraging the creation of “two, three, many Vietnams!”

Castro used Guevara for tactical purposes. Once their rupture was complete, Guevara went to Bolivia. There he tried to apply his theory of the guerrilla *foco* (cell), taking no notice of the policies of the Bolivian Communist Party. Not a single peasant joined his group there. Increasingly isolated and

hunted by government forces, he was captured on 8 October 1967 and executed the following day.

Castro even modified his rebel army. In July 1959 one of Castro's closest advisers, the air force commander Diaz Lanz, resigned and fled to the United States. The following month, a wave of arrests was organized on the pretext that a coup was being planned.

Since 1956, Hubert Matos had helped the rebels in the Sierra, getting support from Costa Rica, supplying them with arms and munitions in a private plane, and liberating Santiago de Cuba, the country's second-largest city, at the head of the 9th detachment, named after Antonio Guiteras. Soon after being made governor of Camagüey Province, he found himself in profound disagreement with the "Communization" of the regime and resigned from his post. Castro believed that he was part of a conspiracy and had him arrested by Camilo Cienfuegos, another guerrilla hero, on the grounds that he had displayed "anti-Communist" tendencies. With scant regard for Matos' previous exemplary conduct as a freedom fighter, Castro subjected him to a Moscow-style show-trial in Havana and intervened personally against his former ally. Castro stood up in court and brought tremendous pressure to bear on the judges, saying: "I'm telling you that you must choose: it's Matos or me!" He also prevented witnesses for the defense from testifying. Matos received a twenty-year sentence, which he served to the last day. Several people close to him were also sent to prison.

Deprived of the means of expressing themselves, many of Castro's opponents went into hiding, where they were joined by people who had fought in the anti-Batista urban guerrilla groups. In the early 1960s this underground movement grew into a revolt based in the Escambray Mountains, the movement rejected forced collectivization and dictatorship. Raúl Castro sent in all the military forces at his disposal, including armored vehicles, artillery, and hundreds of infantry militia, to put down the rebellion. The families of rebel peasants were moved out of the area to eliminate popular support. Hundreds of people were forcibly moved to the tobacco plantations in Pinar del Río Province, hundreds of kilometers away in the west of the island. This was the only occasion when Castro actually deported parts of the population.

Despite these measures, the fighting continued for five years. Over time, however, as the rebels became increasingly isolated, they began to be captured. Justice was harsh for them. Guevara took the opportunity to liquidate Jesús Carreras, one of the leaders of the anti-Batista rebellion as a young man, who had opposed Guevara's policies since 1958. Wounded in combat, Carreras was dragged before a firing squad, where Guevara refused to grant him a stay of

execution. Some 381 “bandits” were judged in similar fashion in the Santa Clara prison. In La Loma de los Coches prison more than 1,000 “counterrevolutionaries” were shot in the years between the triumph of 1959 and the final liquidation of the Escambray protest movement.

After resigning from the Ministry of Agriculture, Humberto Sori Marin tried to establish a *foco* in Cuba. He was soon arrested, court-martialed, and sentenced to death. His mother begged Castro for mercy, reminding him that he and Sori Marin had known each other since the 1950s. Castro promised that his life would be spared, but Sori Marin was shot a few days later.

The revolt in the Escambray Mountains was followed by periodic attempts to land armed commando groups on Cuban soil. Many belonged to the Liberación group, headed by Tony Cuesta, and to the Alpha 66 group, both formed in the early 1960s. Most of these efforts, modeled on Castro’s own return, resulted in failure.

In 1960, in a move typical of all dictatorships, the judiciary was forced to surrender its independence and was placed under the control of the central government.

The universities were also affected. Pedro Luis Boitel was a young student in civil engineering who put himself forward as a candidate for the presidency of the Federation of University Students. He had previously opposed Batista but was also a determined opponent of Fidel Castro. Another student named Rolando Cubella was the preferred candidate of the regime, and it was he who was elected with the help of the Castro brothers. Boitel was arrested soon afterward and sentenced to ten years in Boniato, a particularly harsh prison. Boitel went on hunger strike several times to protest the inhuman conditions there. On 3 April 1972, as he began yet another, he said to one of the prison governors: “I’m going on strike for the same rights as other political prisoners—rights that you are happy to demand for prisoners in other South American dictatorships, but that you won’t allow here!” Nothing came of his protests, however. Boitel received no medical assistance and suffered terribly. After forty-five days his condition became critical; after forty-nine he slipped into a coma. The authorities continued to refuse to intervene. At three in the morning on 23 May 1972, 53 days after beginning his hunger strike, Boitel died. The authorities refused to allow his mother to see the body.

Soon after taking power, Castro began to organize an extensive security and intelligence service. As minister of defense, Raúl Castro reinstated military tribunals, and soon the firing squad again became a judicial weapon. The first formal security organization was called the Dirección General de Contra-Inteligencia (State Security Department; DGCI). Popularly known as the Red Gestapo, the DGCI began to evolve in 1959–1962, when its task was to infil-

trate and destroy the various groups opposed to Castro. The DGCI violently liquidated the Escambray guerrilla movement and oversaw the creation of forced-labor camps. It was also the department that ran the prison system.

Inspired by the Soviet model, the DGCI was initially directed by Ramiro Valdés, who had been one of Castro's closest advisers since their days in the Sierra. As the years passed, the department played an ever-larger role and gained a certain amount of autonomy. Information on its organizational structure comes from air force general Rafael Del Pino, who defected to Miami in 1987. In theory the DGCI is accountable to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Minit) and is divided into various sections. Certain sections are charged with surveillance of officials in all other government departments. The Third Section observes everyone who works in culture, sports, and artistic fields, including writers and film directors. The Fourth Section oversees everyone who works in economic organizations and the ministries of transport and communication. The Sixth Section, which has more than 1,000 agents, is in charge of telephone wiretaps. The Eighth Section oversees the postal service; that is, it screens mail. Other sections watch over the diplomatic corps and keep tabs on visiting foreigners. The DGCI promotes the Castro regime's survival economically by using thousands of detainees as forced labor. Thus the department constitutes a world of privilege, whose staff have almost unlimited powers and a broad range of perquisites.

To control the population, the Dirección Special del Ministerio del Interior (DSMI) recruits *chivatos* (informers) by the thousand. The DSMI works in three different fields: one section keeps a file on every Cuban citizen; another keeps track of public opinion; the third, in charge of the "ideological line," keeps an eye on the church and its various congregations through infiltration.

Since 1967, Minit has had its own means of intervention, the Fuerzas Especiales, which in 1995 consisted of 50,000 soldiers. These special shock troops work quite closely with Dirección 5 and the Dirección de Seguridad Personal (DSP), Castro's praetorian guard. The DSP is made up of three escort units of approximately 100 men each, as well as a naval detachment consisting of sailors and frogmen. According to a 1995 estimate, the DSP numbers several thousand men. Its experts are constantly studying possible assassination scenarios; food tasters test Castro's food before he eats it, and a special medical team is on alert around the clock.

Dirección 5 specializes in the elimination of opponents. Two famous opponents of Batista who subsequently clashed with Castro fell victim to this section: Elias de la Torriente was killed in Miami, and Aldo Vera, one of the chiefs of the urban guerrilla group that fought against Batista, was killed in Puerto Rico. Hubert Matos, who now lives in exile in Miami, is forced to protect himself with armed bodyguards. Dirección 5 carries out its detentions

and interrogations at a detention center in Villa Marista in Havana, a building that previously belonged to a congregation of Marist monks. Far from prying eyes and in conditions of extreme isolation, prisoners there are often subjected to psychological and physical torture.

Another component of the secret police is the Dirección General de la Inteligencia, which is in many ways a typical state intelligence-gathering service. It works above all in espionage, counterespionage, and the infiltration of foreign governments and organizations of Cuban exiles.

During the repressions of the 1960s, between 7,000 and 10,000 people were killed and 30,000 people imprisoned for political reasons. Thus the Castro government quickly faced the problem of what to do with a large number of prisoners, especially those from the Escambray rebellion and the failed Bay of Pigs invasion.

The Military Unit of Production Assistance (MUPA), which existed from 1964 to 1967, was the first attempt to use prisoners as a labor force. Beginning in November 1965, the MUPA organized concentration camps in which everyone who was considered a "potential danger to society," including religious prisoners (Catholics, notably Monsignor Jaime Ortega, the bishop of Havana; Protestants; and Jehovah's Witnesses), pimps, and homosexuals, was incarcerated. The prisoners were forced to build their own shelters, particularly in camps located in the Camagüey region. "Socially deviant people" were subjected to military discipline, which quickly degenerated into poor treatment, undernourishment, and isolation. Many detainees mutilated themselves to escape this hell; others emerged psychologically destroyed by their experiences. One of the MUPA's functions was the "reeducation" of homosexuals. Even before these camps were established, many homosexuals, and especially those employed in the cultural sphere, had lost their jobs. The University of Havana was the subject of antihomosexual purges, and it was common practice to "judge" homosexuals in public at their place of work. They were forced to admit their "vice," and had to vow to give it up or face dismissal and imprisonment. Two years after their establishment, the MUPA camps were closed as a result of widespread international protest. Nevertheless many sorts of harsh treatment continue to be reserved for homosexuals. Sometimes they are kept in a particular section of the prison, as is the case in East Havana's Nueva Carceral.

After the MUPA was dissolved, the regime forcibly conscripted prisoners into the military. First organized in 1967, the Centenary Youth Column (commemorating the 1868 revolt against the Spanish) became El Ejército Juvenil de Trabajo (the Young People's Work Army) in 1973. In this a paramilitary organization young people did agricultural and construction work, often under

terrible conditions with hours that were almost intolerable, for a derisory wage of 7 pesos, equivalent to 30 cents in 1997 dollars.

In 1964 a forced labor program known as the Camilo-Cienfuegos plan was established on the Isle of Pines. The penal population was organized into brigades divided into groups of forty, known as *cuadrillas*. Each group was commanded by a sergeant or lieutenant and was assigned to agricultural and mining work. Working conditions were extremely harsh, and prisoners worked almost naked, wearing little more than undergarments. As a punishment, “troublemakers” were forced to cut grass with their teeth or to sit in latrine trenches for hours at a time.

The violence of the prison regime affected both political prisoners and common criminals. Violence began with the interrogations conducted by the Departamento Técnico de Investigaciones (DTI). The DTI used solitary confinement and played on the phobias of the detainees: one woman who was afraid of insects was locked in a cell infested with cockroaches. The DTI also used physical violence. Prisoners were forced to climb a staircase wearing shoes filled with lead and were then thrown back down the stairs. Psychological torture was also used, often observed by a medical team. The guards used sodium pentathol and other drugs to keep prisoners awake. In the Mazzora hospital, electric shock treatment was routinely used as a punishment without any form of medical observation. The guards also used attack dogs and mock executions; disciplinary cells had neither water nor electricity; and some detainees were kept in total isolation.

Because responsibility in Cuba was generally considered to be collective, punishment was also frequently collective. The regime exerted pressure on its opponents by forcing their relatives to pay a social cost; the children of detainees were banned from higher education, and spouses were often fired from their jobs.

Sentences are often lengthened by the prison authorities. Anyone who rebels has another stretch added. Similar penalties apply to prisoners who refuse to wear the uniform of common criminals, who refuse to take part in “rehabilitation plans,” or who take part in a hunger strike. The courts view such actions as attacks on the state and add another one or two years of incarceration in a labor camp. Prisoners commonly serve an additional third or half of their original sentence. Boitel, who was initially sentenced to ten years in prison, ultimately served forty-two.

A distinction should be made between “normal” prisons and the high-security prisons of the G-2, the secret police. Prison Kilo 5.5 is a high-security prison situated 3.5 miles from the Pinar del Río freeway. For a time, under the authority of Captain Jorge González, known as “El Nato,” common criminals and

political prisoners were routinely kept together. Cells originally intended for two often contained as many as seven or eight prisoners, most of whom were thus forced to sleep on the floor. The disciplinary cells were dubbed *tostadoras* (toasters), because of their terrible heat in both winter and summer. A separate section exists for women. Pinar del Río, another high-security prison, contains underground cells and interrogation rooms. Over the last few years, psychological torture has largely replaced physical torture; sleep deprivation, adopted from the U.S.S.R., is a particularly common technique. Once the sleep pattern is broken, the notion of time is lost. Prisoners are also told that their families are under threat and that they will no longer be allowed family visits. The Kilo 7 prison, in Camagüey, is especially violent. In 1974, forty prisoners died in a rebellion there.

The G-2 center in Santiago de Cuba, built in 1980, possesses cells with extreme temperatures (both high and low). Prisoners are awakened every twenty or thirty minutes. This sort of treatment may continue several months. Kept naked and totally cut off from the outside world, many of the prisoners who have undergone the terrible psychological tortures here emerge with irreparably damaged psyches.

For many years La Cabaña was the most infamous prison in Cuba, known as the place where Sori Marin and Carreras were executed. As late as 1982, nearly 100 prisoners were shot there. La Cabaña specialized in holding its prisoners in tiny cells known as *ratoneras*, or rat holes. It was finally closed in 1985. Elsewhere, however, executions have continued, including at Boniato, a high-security prison known for extreme violence. Some political prisoners held at Boniato have been known to smear themselves with excrement to avoid being raped by other prisoners. Boniato houses all prisoners sentenced to death, regardless of the category of their crime. It is known for its grillwork cells or *tapiadas*. Several writers—including the poets Jorge Valls, who was there for 7,340 days, and Ernesto Diaz Rodriguez, as well as a commanding officer, Eloy Guttierrez Menoyo—have described the terrible conditions there. The food is contaminated, and infectious diseases such as typhus and leptospirosis are common. As a result, hundreds of prisoners have died from hunger and lack of medical care. In August 1995 a hunger strike was launched jointly by the political and common prisoners seeking to draw attention to the deplorable conditions. The strike continued for almost a month but achieved no improvement.

Iron cages are still used in some prisons. In the late 1960s the Tres Macios del Oriente prison used cages originally intended for common criminals for political prisoners as well. The cages were 1 meter wide, 1.8 meters high, and about 10 meters long. Such closed quarters are extremely hard to bear, especially with no water or sanitation; yet prisoners of both types were kept here for weeks or even months at a time.

The 1960s also saw the invention of *requisas* (requisitionings) as a form of repression. In the middle of the night, detainees would be awakened and violently removed from their cells. They were then beaten, often while naked, and forced to wait until the end of the inspection before being allowed to return to their cells. *Requisas* might be carried out several times a month.

Visits by relatives provide another opportunity to humiliate prisoners. In La Cabaña prisoners were made to appear naked before their family, and imprisoned husbands were forced to watch intimate body searches carried out on their wives.

Female inmates in Cuban prisons are especially vulnerable to acts of sadism by guards. More than 1,100 women have been sentenced as political prisoners since 1959. In 1963 they were housed in the Guanajay prison. Numerous eyewitness statements attest to beatings and other humiliations. For instance, before showering, detainees were forced to undress in full view of the guards, who then beat them. Havana's Nuevo Amanecer (New Dawn) prison is the largest in the country. Dr. Martha Frayde, a long-standing friend of Castro, who was the Cuban representative at UNESCO in the 1960s, described this prison and its exceptionally harsh conditions:

My cell was six meters by five. There were twenty-two of us sleeping there in bunk beds of two or three layers. Sometimes there were as many as forty-two of us. Sanitation was dreadful. The basins we had to wash in were filthy, and it became impossible to wash at all . . . We were often short of water. It became impossible to empty the toilets, which filled up and overflowed. A layer of excrement formed, invading our cells. Like an irresistible wave it reached the corridor, then flowed down the stairs and into the garden . . . The political prisoners . . . made such a fuss that the prison authorities brought in a water truck . . . We managed to sweep away some of the excrement with the pressure hoses, but there still wasn't enough water, and we had to live with this vile layer for another few days."¹¹

One of Cuba's largest concentration camps, El Manbu, in the Camagüey region, contained more than 3,000 people in the 1980s. At the camp at Siboney, where living conditions and food are execrable, German shepherd dogs are used to track escaped prisoners. Those who are caught are judged by a popular tribunal inside the camp and sent on to a forced-labor camp, where a "severe regime" operates. At these camps, *consejos de trabajo de los presos* (prisoner work councils) judge and punish their own companions.

In 1986 some 3,000 women were incarcerated in the Potosí camp, in Victoria de las Tunas, mostly for juvenile delinquency, prostitution, and political crimes. There are also special camps for children and adolescents. Situated

near Santiago de las Vegas, the Arco Iris (Rainbow) camp was designed to hold 1,500 adolescents. The Nueva Vida (New Life) camp is in the southwestern region. In the Palos zone is the Capitiolo, a special internment camp for children up to age ten. The adolescents cut cane or make simple objects by hand, which can then be sold by the government.

Although prisoners have no rights, they are subject to a rehabilitation program, which is intended to prepare them for reintegration into the socialist society. The program has three stages: the first, called the "period of maximal security," takes place in prison; the second, called "medium security," takes place on a *granja* (farm); the third, called "minimal security," is considered an "open regime."

Detainees who are included in the program wear the blue uniform (*azul*) of common criminals, as part of the regime's effort to blur the distinction between the two types of prisoner. For a while, anyone who refused to follow the program was forced to wear the yellow uniform (*amarillo*) of Batista's army—a harsh punishment for those prisoners who had previously belonged to guerrilla groups that fought against Batista. Prisoners who refused to wear either uniform were forced by the authorities to wear nothing but their underwear for years on end and were banned from receiving visits. Hubert Matos was one such prisoner. He later reported: "I lived for several months with no uniform and no visits. I was cut off from the outside world simply because I had refused to conform to the whims of the authorities . . . I preferred being naked, among other naked prisoners, even in those badly overcrowded conditions."

The transition from one stage of the program to the next depended upon the decision of a "reeducation officer." On the whole, the officer's intention was to impose acceptance through physical and mental exhaustion. Carlos Franqui, a former official in the regime, described the spirit of the system: "The opponent of the regime is a patient, and the guard is a doctor. The prisoners will be set free when the guard decides that the cure has been effective. Time is of no account until the patient is cured."

The longest sentences were served out in the prisons. In 1974 La Cabaña had a special section (zone 2) reserved for civilian offenders and another for military prisoners (zone 1). More than 1,000 men were housed in zone 2 in galleries thirty meters long and six meters wide. Other prisons are run by the G-2, the secret police.

People who receive relatively light sentences, between three and seven years, are sent to *granjas*, an invention of the Castro era very similar to the Soviet corrective labor camps. These "farms" consist of barracks surrounded by rows of barbed-wire fences and several observation towers, manned by

guards from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, who are allowed to open fire on anyone they believe is attempting to escape.¹² Each camp generally contains between 500 and 700 prisoners, who are required to work for twelve to fifteen hours a day. The guards are permitted to use any tactics, including clubbing prisoners with their guns, to make them work faster.

The "open regime" is generally a construction site where prisoners live, usually under the control of the military. The number of prisoners at each site ranges from 50 to 200, depending on the size of the project. Detainees on the *granjas* make the prefabricated elements that are assembled at the open-regime sites. Here detainees are granted three-day furloughs at the end of each month. Evidently, the food is not as bad at these sites as it is in the camps. Each site is maintained as an independent entity; this strategy makes it easier to manage the detainees, ensuring that not too many are ever together at the same time to present united resistance. Some of the open-regime sites are in urban settings; there were six operating in Havana during the late 1980s.

This type of system affords a clear economic benefit.¹³ For example, all detainees are mobilized to harvest the sugar crop, the *zafra*. The head of the prisons in Oriente Province, Papito Struch, declared in 1974: "Detainees are the island's main workforce." In 1974 the work they carried out was worth 348 million dollars. Many government departments make use of the prisoners. About 60 percent of the labor force of the Department for Development of Social and Agricultural Works is made up of detainees. The prisoners work on dozens of farms in the Picadura valleys, which constitute the main showplace for the work reeducation program. Among the many heads of state who have been given tours of these sites are Leonid Brezhnev, Houari Boumediene, and François Mitterrand.

All the provincial secondary schools were built by political prisoners with minimal input from civilian society, usually consisting of no more than a handful of civil engineers. In Oriente and Camagüey, detainees have built more than twenty polytechnic schools. They have also built numerous sugar stores throughout the island. A list in *Bohemia* of other projects built by penal labor included dairies and livestock centers in Havana Province; carpentry workshops and secondary schools in Pinar del Río; a sty, dairy, and woodworking center in Matanzas; and two secondary schools and ten dairies in Las Villas. The work plans become more complex every year, requiring an ever larger prison workforce.

In September 1960 Castro formed the Committees for Defense of the Revolution (CDRs), small neighborhood committees based around the *cuadra* (block). The leader is charged with surveillance of "counterrevolutionary" activities. The resulting social control is extremely tight. Members of the committees attend all CDR meetings and patrol constantly to root out "enemy

infiltration.” The surveillance and denunciation system is so rigorous that family intimacy is almost nonexistent.

The purpose of the CDRs became all too apparent in March 1961 when, at the instigation of Ramiro Valdés, the chief of the security forces, a huge raid was organized and carried out in the space of a single weekend. On the basis of lists drawn up by the CDRs, more than 100,000 people were questioned, and several thousand were taken away to detention centers scattered across the country.

The CDRs are responsible for organizing *actos de repudio* (acts of repudiation) designed to marginalize and break the resistance of opponents—labeled *gusanos* (worms)—and their families. A crowd gathers in front of the opponent’s house to throw stones and attack the inhabitants. Castroist slogans and insults are written on the walls. The police intervene only when they decide that the “mass revolutionary action” is becoming physically dangerous for the victims. This quasi-lynching is designed to encourage reciprocal hatred between inhabitants of the small island. *Actos de repudio* destroy the links between neighbors and damage the fabric of society to bolster the omnipotence of the socialist state. The victim has no means of defending himself. Ricardo Bofill, the president of the Cuban Human Rights Committee, was forced to undergo one such act of repudiation in 1988. The liberation theologian Oswaldo Payas Sardinas underwent the same treatment in 1991. But because Cubans by the end of the 1980s were beginning to tire of this avalanche of social hatred, in both of these cases the authorities were forced to bring in assailants from elsewhere.

According to Article 16 of Cuba’s constitution, the state “organizes, directs, and controls all economic activity in accordance with the directives of the single plan for social and economic development.” This collectivist phrasology hides a simple truth: inside their own country, Cubans are not free to work where they want or to spend their money as they wish. In 1980 the country experienced a wave of discontent and unrest, with factories and warehouses being attacked and burned. The DGCI arrested 500 opponents of the regime during a seventy-two-hour period. The security services then intervened in the provinces to close the free peasant markets. Finally, a major campaign was launched against the black market across the whole country.

Law 32, against absenteeism in the workplace, was passed in March 1971. In 1978 a law was adopted to prevent criminality before it actually happened. What this meant in practice was that any Cuban could be arrested on any pretext if the authorities believed that he presented a danger to state security, even if he had not committed any illegal act. In effect the law criminalized any

thought that did not accord with the ideas of the regime, turning every Cuban into a potential suspect.

In the 1960s Cubans began to “vote with their oars.” The first large group to leave were the fishermen, in 1961. The *balseros* were the Cuban equivalent of the Southeast Asian boat people and were as much a part of the human landscape of the island as the cane cutters. Exile was subtly used by Castro as a means of regulating internal tensions. The phenomenon dates from the earliest days of the regime and was used constantly until the mid 1970s. Many of the exiled fled to Florida or the American base at Guantánamo.

The phenomenon first came to the world’s attention in April 1980 with the Mariel crisis. Thousands of Cubans mobbed the Peruvian embassy in Havana, demanding exit visas to escape from an intolerable daily life. After several weeks the authorities allowed 125,000—out of a population of 10 million—to leave the country from the port of Mariel. Castro also took this opportunity to get rid of a number of criminals and people who were mentally ill. The massive exodus was a demonstration of the regime’s failure, for many of the *Marielitos* came from the poorest segments of society, for whom the regime had always claimed to care above all others. People of every race and age were fleeing Cuban socialism. After the Mariel episode numerous other Cubans registered on lists of people seeking permission to leave the country. Nearly twenty years later, most of them are still waiting.

In the summer of 1994, violent riots occurred in Havana for the first time since 1959. A number of people who wanted to leave the country on the makeshift rafts called *balsas* were prevented from doing so by the police. They reacted by sacking and looting the Colombo quarter on the Malecón seafront. By the time calm was restored, dozens of people had been arrested, and Castro was again forced to authorize the departure of 25,000 people. Departures have been constant ever since, and the American bases at Guantánamo and in Panama are full of voluntary exiles. Castro has tried to prevent people from leaving by sending helicopters to drop sandbags onto the *balsas* when they are at sea. In the summer of 1994, 7,000 people lost their lives while attempting to flee. It is estimated that approximately one-third of all *balseros* have died while at sea. Over thirty years, approximately 100,000 have attempted the journey. The result of this exodus is that out of 11 million inhabitants, 2 million now live in exile. Exile has scattered many families among Havana, Miami, Spain, and Puerto Rico.

From 1975 to 1989 Cuba was the major supporter of the Marxist-Leninist regime of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA; see

Chapter 26), which was engaged in a civil war with UNITA forces led by Jonas Savimbi. In addition to sending innumerable “cooperators” and dozens of technical advisers, Cuba sent an expeditionary force of 50,000 men.¹⁴ The Cuban army behaved in Africa as though it was a conquered territory, engaging in systematic corruption and smuggling (of silver, ivory, and diamonds). When an agreement signed in 1989 put an end to the conflict, the Cuban troops, most of whom were black, were repatriated. Cuban fatalities in the war were estimated at between 7,000 and 11,000.

This experience shook the convictions of many officers. General Arnaldo Ochoa, the head of the expeditionary force in Angola and a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, organized a plot to overthrow Castro. He was arrested and brought before a military court on corruption charges, together with a number of other high-ranking officers from the army and the security services, including the de la Guardia brothers, António and Patricio. The de la Guardias had also been smuggling drugs for the MC (Moneda Convertible) service, popularly known as the “marijuana and cocaine” service. Ochoa’s involvement in smuggling was in fact quite limited; he had returned from Angola with only a little ivory and a few diamonds. But Castro used corruption as an excuse to rid himself of a potential rival, who, by virtue of his prestige and high political office, could easily have channeled disaffection into an anti-Castro movement. Ochoa’s sentencing and execution were followed by a purge in the army, causing further destabilization and trauma. Conscious of the strong resentment that many officers felt toward the regime, Castro appointed a trusted general minister of internal affairs. Henceforth the regime could count on only the special forces for certain blind devotion.

In 1978 there were between 15,000 and 20,000 prisoners of conscience in Cuba. Many came from M-26 or the student anti-Batista movements, or were still in prison from the days of the Escambray resistance and the Bay of Pigs.¹⁵ In 1986 some 12,000–15,000 political prisoners were kept in fifty regional prisons throughout the island. Others were still at the many open-regime sites, with their brigades of 50, 100, or 200 prisoners. Today the government admits to holding between 400 and 500 political prisoners. In the spring of 1997 there was another wave of arrests. According to Cuban human rights representatives, many of whom are themselves former detainees, physical torture no longer occurs in Cuban prisons. These sources, together with Amnesty International, put the number of political prisoners in Cuba in 1997 at between 980 and 2,500 (including men, women, and children).

From 1959 through the late 1990s more than 100,000 Cubans experienced life in one of the camps, prisons, or open-regime sites. Between 15,000 and 17,000 people were shot. “No bread without freedom, no freedom without

bread,” said the young lawyer Fidel Castro in 1959. But as one dissident said before the start of the “special regime,” when Soviet aid had come to an end: “A prison where you eat well is still a prison.”

Like a tyrant from a different age, faced with the failures of his regime and the difficulties plaguing Cuba, Castro announced in 1994 that he “would rather die than abandon the revolution.” What price must the Cuban people pay to satisfy his pride?