“Cuba’s Revolutionary Armed Forces: How Revolutionary Have They Been? How Revolutionary Are They Now?”

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Introduction

This paper will argue that Cuba’s *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias* (FAR) have been, and to a great degree still are, ‘revolutionary’ in the contexts of what the armed forces of that country were before 1959, of what Latin American armed forces are *and do* traditionally, of what those forces normally think about themselves, and of those armed forces in regard to Cuba’s role in international affairs since the Revolution. These four elements will provide the threads for the argument to be made.

Thus one will first address what these forces were and how they saw themselves in the years of the revolutionary struggle for power, and the structuring of them after 1959. We will then look at how their roles, structures and ways of seeing themselves changed over the years after their taking of Havana and installing the government of Fidel Castro in power. And finally we will assess their revolutionary credentials since the shattering experience of the Special Period and the subsequent major leadership changes the island has known in recent months.

*El Ejército Rebelde*

The army of Fidel Castro’s struggle in the mountains of Cuba’s then easternmost Oriente province, the *Ejército Rebelde* of now epic memory, takes for the date of its founding the day in November 1956 when the tiny force of 82 men on board the small yacht *Granma* disembarked to begin the long fight to rid the country of the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista Zaldivar and bring about deep reform of the island’s political, economic and social system. However, in the FAR’s collective memory and mythology they are also the direct successors of a far older force, that of the *mambises* or rebels who rose against Spain in the two major wars for independence, *La Guerra Grande* of 1868-1898 and the
Independence War of 1895-1898, and the less dramatic fighting of the short attempt at further rebellion represented by *La Guerra Chiquita*.¹

The key figure in this line of argument is of course Fidel Castro who sees himself as the direct inheritor of the mantle of legitimacy of José Martí, the country’s ‘apostle,’ key hero, and moral guide to this day, and the philosopher, teacher, poet, and leader of unquestioned authority to all Cubans. When asked at his trial after the dismal failure of his first attack to oust the dictator in July 1953, who was the intellectual author of the assault on the Moncada Barracks, the target of that attack, he replied without question that it was Jose Martí. And the history of the Revolution, in and out of power, over the subsequent 56 years, has seen this view echoed over and over again by Fidel and his followers. And in the written press, radio, television, and education on the island Cubans are bombarded with assertions as to the authenticity of the link.

Fidel’s undoubted admiration for Martí, and his passion for history, ensure that he has proven well suited to keep the link present in his own speeches, writings, and way of looking at things in general.² And in the armed forces the importance of history, and not just military history, is a given. Even when the worst days of the Special Period overtook the country and the FAR it was extraordinary to see paper and other resources still made available for works of military history when even key FAR magazines such as the house journal of the forces, *Verde Olivo*, were forced effectively to cease regular publication.

The officers of the FAR are thus imbued with the lore of being part of a national struggle for change against Spain, the United States, and the enemies of the revolutionary project at home that stretches back to at least 1868 and for some even further to the first projects for rebellion in the early decades of the 19th

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² See Tad Szulc, *Fidel: a Critical Portrait*, New York, William Morrow, 1986, for what is probably still the best biography of Cuba’s máximo líder and where his love of history and of Martí become clear as well as his determination to carry on the work of the ‘apostle.’
The fact that this is far from reality is really neither here nor there for those who take the assertion as self-evident. Of course the legitimacy that the government, Revolution, security forces, and even the Party take from these linkages with the past is not lost on anyone.

These linkages are in fact stretched to a considerable degree. The risings against Spain of the nineteenth century only rarely had much to do with social change and even less often were about real independence. And while there were certainly revolutionary elements in some of those who lead the movement for independence in the Guerra de los Diez Años, the Guerra Grande, they were really rather few and far between, and certainly not shared by all the leadership or even the rank and file of the rebel army of that war. And although it is true that slaves were eventually freed during that struggle in the territory liberated by the insurgents, Cuba Libre as it was called, the conditions of that freedom left much to be desired. Other social and economic reforms were often even less generally held by the rebels.

With leadership of the independence movement after 1892 firmly in Martí’s hands, his own radical reformist stamp could be placed, although not with ease, on the revolution’s goals. And this he did in a series of articles and speeches explaining his goals which, while not by any means universally held by the other members of the new Partido Revolucionario Cubano, were accepted in line with the need for unity in the struggle against Spanish domination. Despite these misgivings on the part of many rebels, the movement which launched the new war in 1895 appeared to have many marks of a truly revolutionary force with many more black and mulatto officers in the rebel ranks, and advancement at least in the early days based on merit, although the degree to which this applied

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3 See for example the interviews with Major-generals Néstor López Cuba and Enrique Carreras in Mary Alice Waters, Haciendo historia: entrevistas con cuatro generales de las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Cuba, New York, Pathfinder, 2001, p.86.

4 See Gloria García, Conspiraciones y revueltas, Santiago, Editorial Oriente, 2003 for an analysis of these movements.

5 See the two classic works on this war, Ramón Guerra, La Guerra de los Diez Años, (2 vols.), Havana, Ciencias Sociales, 1972; and Fernando Figueroa Socarrás, La Revolución de Yara, 1868-1878, Havana, Ciencias Sociales, 2000.

after Martí’s early and certainly untimely death in his first battle in May 1895 is debatable.

The army that Máximo Gómez led in the three years contest with Spain was much more revolutionary in Cuban terms than was its predecessor of two decades before. Although the abolition issue had been settled when the mother country itself abolished the scourge on the island in 1886, the place of blacks and mulattos in society was far from advanced. Racial issues, while not as present as in the mambises ranks in the first war, were still there as even Gómez’s second in command, the excellent and adored ‘Titan of Bronze’ Antonio Maceo was to discover when white generals serving under mulattos became an issue. Nonetheless, whites did commonly serve under blacks and elements of the army than had been the case in the Guerra Grande and many fewer serving as support personnel in jobs such as cooks, baggage carriers, horse handlers and the like.

This war was carried out with full revolutionary fervour in terms of its strategy and tactics. This time the sugar interests that ensured Spanish rule through their production and taxes were the targets of the ‘tea,’ the ‘strategy of the torch,’ a campaign of setting alight and destroying everything the Spanish could use and sell. The composition of the army, and the invasion of the West, also proved shocking. Western whites learned that the rebel army was not just a gang of black marauders as they had been painted in both wars by the colonial government.7 Whites and blacks serving together, and the greater number of whites in all ranks compared to the first conflict, proved to moderates that change was possible and even to be encouraged. Martí’s ideas on social reform, women’s rights, the dignity of man, education for all, racial equality, trade unionism, spread rapidly among recruits and the general public.8 Independence and reform were in the air although it must be said that only United States

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intervention in April 1898, and the deployment of a large US expeditionary force, was able to finish off Spain’s nearly four centuries of rule on the island.9

Instead of a political system marked by deep reform most elements of the old colonial system were retained after 1898. Social and economic changes were virtually forbidden and the ‘pseudo-republic,’ as it is called in Cuba, retained few indeed of Martí’s goals. Political independence was a sham, social conditions for blacks and mulattos changes little and sometimes for the worse, the trade unions flourished but under conditions far from those felt worthwhile by reformers, and the place of women evolved at a snail’s pace. The frustrations of the mambises were great but little could be done since the US would not grant independence unless its own indirect rule was retained and unless its own administrative and governmental reforms were kept in place.

The seasoned if irregular army of the Republic in Arms was therefore obliged to disband even though Gómez, as commander in chief, threatened directly and indirectly that it could be used against the United States if Washington did not honour its commitments to free Cuba. And the revolutionary project aiming at real independence was once again frustrated and its armed branch done away with, just as with the Peace of Zanjón in 1878 at the end of the first independence war.10

In its stead the US authorities created a Rural Guard, first in various provinces more or less independently and then united into the main armed instrument of the occupation authorities and then of the republican government that followed them in power. Recruitment showed the real face of the new regime. Blacks and mulattoes were to all intents and purposes excluded from the new force by the

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9 The battle among historians still rages as to whether the US intervention was necessary in order to achieve independence. It is certainly true that the Spanish were close to exhaustion by the spring of 1898. But it is equally true that the rebels had proven painfully unable to profit from this state of affairs in the Spanish ranks and treasury. Indeed, many authors have suggested that the insurgents were at least as close to defeat as the Spanish. For the Cuban accepted view see Roig de Leuchsenring, Cuba no debe su independencia a los Estados Unidos, Havana, Editorial La Tertulia, 1960. For a Spanish view of this issue and on both these wars see Luis Navarro, Las Guerras de España en Cuba, Madrid, Ediciones Encuentro, 1998.

10 For the earlier setback for the goal of independence see María del Carmen Barcia, La Turbulencia del reposo, Cuba 1878-1895, Havana, Ciencias Sociales, 1998; and for the latter case see the highly interesting work of the time by Enrique Collazo, Cuba independiente, Santiago de Cuba, Editorial Oriente, 1981
requirement that recruits purchase their own horse and equipment. The tasks
given to the Rural Guard had little of a national army to them emphasising
instead the defence of property and the smashing of banditry in the
countryside, jobs that the avalanche of arriving US investors, taking advantages
of the ravages and ruin of the war, needed done and which the US occupation
forces had little stomach to undertake.  

Cuba’s first independent armed force was thus anything else and rather than
being a continuation of *mambi* traditions it was meant to be just the opposite.
US officers handled both recruitment and training and ensured that officers
eschewed nationalist sentiments despite their often having served in the *mambi*
army before. When some years later the need was felt for an actual army,
better armed and trained than the Rural Guard, it too was placed under US
tutelage and given largely domestic order responsibilities.

It was this army, and this Rural Guard, that played such a key role in Cuba’s
domestic politics in the years between 1902 and 1959. Shifting political alliances
among the elite factions searched almost constantly for army support in their
drive for power and access to its fruits.  

And although revolutionary tendencies
could not be eliminated altogether, as witnessed in the army’s role in the
tumultuous days of the fall of Machado and the 1930s experiment with radical
rule, the officer corps remained corrupt and malleable serving the interests of
the domestic elite and those of foreign, usually United States firms, already in
massive control of the Cuban economy’s most dynamic sectors.

Thus the ‘independent’ government of the island was anything but and the
frustrations of the revolutionary forces remained like festering wounds in the
body politic. And when Fulgencio Batista, a former NCO in the regular army,
staged a military coup in March 1952 to restore himself to personal power, Fidel

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11 See Marilú Uralde Cancio, “La Guardia Rural: un instrumento de dominación neocolonial (1898-1902),” in
Mildred de la Torre et al, *La Sociedad cubana en los albores de la independencia*, Havana, Ciencias Sociales, 2003,
pp.255-279, especially p.257; and José M. Hernández, *Cuba and the United States: Intervention and Militarism, 1868-1933*,

12 For a good overview of the history of this army see Rafael Fermoselle, *The Evolution of the Cuban Military, 1492-
Castro and other radicals began to organise to defend the 1940 formal Constitution, which for all its flaws did at least represent the hopes of liberal Cubans of the time. When his first raid on a military barracks failed in July 1953 he issued his programme of radical reform entitled ‘La Historia me absolverá’ which defended his actions and called for the complete overhaul of Cuba’s political, social and economic system along lines contemplated by Martí. In exile shortly afterwards in Mexico he worked with those of similar views to form a movement which would aim to overthrow Batista and return to the principles and objectives of the mambises and of Martí himself.

With the landing of late November 1956, then, Cubans feel that they return to the traditions of the revolutionaries of yore and take up anew the torch of independence and radical reform. It is for that reason that this date is taken for the anniversary of the Ejército Rebelde and the Revolutionary Armed Forces as a whole. Almost sixty years after the disbandment of the Ejército Libertador of 1898 there was a new army but in its own view only the continuation of that prior force whose future had been so tragically cut short by US intervention.

That ‘army,’ shattered in its first fighting with Batista’s, was to regroup, reform, train and become disciplined, in ways that were to make it able to best the large and professional army of the dictatorship in just over two years of fighting in the mountains, always supported by urban fighters whose assistance was a sine qua non for victory. In classic successful insurgency style Fidel used his small force in minor operations first, with highly limited objectives, in order for his men to become better trained and disciplined, and especially for them to become more self-confident through constant and growing victories over the regulars.

During this long period in the Sierra Maestra, Cuba’s highest and most isolated mountain range, his troops took on much of the lore of the mambises of old.

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13 See Fidel Castro Ruz, La Historia me absolverá, Havana, Radio Habana Cuba Publicaciones (s.d.)
14 For details on Batista’s army in the years before the rebellion, see Marilú Uralde Cancio and Luis Rosado Eiró, El Ejército soy yo, Havana, Ciencias Sociales, 2006, pp.168-204. And for an excellent treatment of why Fidel’s small but motivated force was able to beat a regular army several times its size, backed by the United States, see Roberto Pérez Rivero, Desventura de un ejército, Santiago, Editorial Oriente, 2003, especially pp.91-92.
They called the territory over which they had control ‘Cuba Libre,’ opened schools and clinics, as well as small workshops, in these zones as had done their predecessors in these same and other mountains in both 19th century rebellions. They also recruited from the local population and politicised them. Fidel, already enjoying something of a Robin Hood reputation after he defended poor clients without pay during his years as a young lawyer in Havana, now reinforced that legend with acts of retribution against local police and military officers who had abused the peasantry. This was all good revolutionary stuff and along with the steady political indoctrination of his recruits, and a policy of releasing captured soldiers after giving them a dose of revolutionary political propaganda, and treating them well when under rebel control, Fidel founded a radio, Radio Rebelde, which repeated the message that this revolution was merely the continuation of that of 1868 and 1895 and with victory Cuba would finally be able to build the independent and just society for which Martí and his soldiers had fought.

Even the strategy chosen was modelled on the 1895 war. As soon as the rebels had defeated the infamous ‘final offensive’ that the regular army launched against them in the spring of 1958, an extraordinary victory in itself against seemingly hopeless odds, Fidel launched two columns, one under the gregarious Camilo Cienfuegos and the other under Ché Guevara, to ‘invade’ the West just as Gómez and Maceo had done 61 years earlier. They in many cases went out of their way to follow paths westward that had been used by the mambises and no Cuban could be unaware or unmoved by the symbolism of all this.

This time when Havana and Santiago fell on the 1st of January, the Cuban revolutionaries would not be denied a presence in their own capital as had happened when the US Army, with major assistance from the rebels, took those same cities in 1898. And when Fidel moved himself towards the capital with the bulk of his forces, now blossoming in strength with the arrival of masses of new recruits anxious to take their part in what was now a popular insurrection, he did so in a week long ‘Cavalcada de la Libertad,’ stopping in the main centres along the way to speak to the multitudes of cheering people about the reforms
that he would now implement and fulfil Martí’s dreams. This was revolutionary stuff indeed.

The New Army

The rag-tag affair that entered Havana and other Cuban cities in January 1959 was a mixed force, in itself revolutionary in more than just name. For it had its own female platoon, the Maria Grajales Platoon, and was a truly popular force drawn almost entirely from the countryside. In addition its rank system of comandantes of columns had no relation to previous fighting forces organised in general into units and structures similar to the regular forces against which they were struggling. Needless to say in true irregular form it had all manner of equipment and weapons. However, its most revolutionary characteristic was its absolute loyalty, as it was soon to prove, to its leader who was to show that his programme was truly radical, and would be radicalized even further as the marking events of the revolutionary process accumulated.

At first the new government proposed a much reduced army than that of the ‘tyranny,’ as the former regime was now called. Feeling firmly in power Fidel felt no need for a large military force and he quickly purged the old army of all those who could not show unquestionably ‘popular’ origins, a move which ensured that combined with his own rebels he had a small force if a devoted one.

This optimism proved ill placed, however and in the wake of the implementation of the first reforms of the new government, in particular those on housing, electricity prices and above all the agrarian reform programme, opposition to the new government surfaced in not only the oligarchy but also in the middle class and the all important United States embassy. It became clear as 1959 wore on that these forces were not going to lie down and do nothing in

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15 For the story of this female sub-unit see Mary Alice Waters, Marianas in Combat: Teté Puebla and the Mariana Grajales Platoon in Cuba’s Revolutionary War, 1956-58, New York, Pathfinder, 2003.
16 The size of the Ejército Rebelde of the time will probably never be known accurately and the debate on that subject goes on. At present there is a project underway with military historian Marilù Uralde Cancio doing the main research to obtain something of a clearer idea. See also Neil Macaulay, “The Cuban Rebel Army: a Numerical Study,” in Hispanic American Historical Review, May 1978, p.284-295.
the face of Fidel’s remaking of the political, economic and social system of the nation even though at this point such a remaking could be easily exaggerated. As the move to the left coalesced these forces prepared to overthrow the government and within a year they were offering armed resistance to it.

Under these circumstances the government moved in December of that year to form the first popular militias (the Milicias Nacionales Revolucionarias) to supplement a rebel army that was not only over tasked but also reduced in effective size by events. For with a bureaucracy and middle class opting increasingly for self-imposed exile (and waiting for the US to overthrow the revolutionaries at any moment) the new government had been obliged to use the army to administer many of its reform programmes. While the officers and senior NCOs of the Ejército Rebelde were far from ideal for these management and bureaucratic roles they were loyal to Fidel and to his programme and were thus the only real option for the leadership in its attempts to go forward with reform.17 This meant that the new army was shorn of much of its best talent not to mention a considerable portion of its total strength. However the breadth and nature of those roles proved the point that the army was indeed carrying forward with the revolutionary tradition since it was soon in all manner of social roles such as alphabetization, running the agrarian reform, helping in agriculture, and administering the new urban electricity organisation.18

Thus the new milicias were to have precious little regular staff to both stiffen and instruct them. But they also, as was to be shown, had spirit and revolutionary fervour and this seemed as much as could be asked at the time. The FAR began to change from a full-time army into a central organisation around which national defence would be based but in which it would be only a part of a much wider whole. This was to be perhaps its most revolutionary feature as time went on. Raúl, already minister of defence in all but name, was named Minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces in September of that year.

17 For Fidel’s own thinking on these difficult decisions see Fidel Castro Ruz, Sobre temas militares, Havana, Imprenta Central de las FAR, 1990.
18 Cubans are now, with the 50th anniversary of the revolution, being reminded of these roles in a series of articles in Granma. See, for example, “Toma el Ejército Rebelde en sus manos las revindicaciones del campesinado y decide aplicar la Ley Agraria,” in Granma, 28 January 2009, p.3.
At the same time the names of the two new armed services were changed to include the title ‘Revolucionaria.’\textsuperscript{19}

With a majority of the population clearly behind their charismatic leader, recruitment into the new militias was not difficult. This was particularly the case as a result of the enrolment of women, extraordinary in Latin America even in wartime but revolutionary indeed in time of peace, and the significant numbers of them who were to be part of the new force. What was much more difficult was arming the new force. For the United States moved quickly not only to cut off all access to its arms by the Cuban government but also to cajole other NATO and allied governments to do the same.\textsuperscript{20}

This situation arguably forced Fidel to take the most decisive decision he had ever taken when he began negotiations with the Soviet Union for the supply of weapons that the US and its allies had not been willing to provide.\textsuperscript{21} In late 1960 and early 1961 those weapons began to arrive and some were usable during the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion of April of the latter year. This event signalled the end of the priority for the FAR of assistance in other, more non-traditional roles. While at no time in the subsequent 48 years were such tasks to be forgotten, traditional defence roles were now to take precedence as the United States showed that ridding itself of the Cuban revolutionary experiment was to be a

\textsuperscript{19} The Ejército Rebelde, which kept its historic name, had of course never had a navy or air force until it took power and inherited those of Batista. The navy had, however, something of a revolutionary tradition as had been seen in the aborted revolution of 1930 and even more dramatically in the famous Cienfuegos mutiny against the dictator in September 1957, quickly put down but not without showing that the fleet had major disaffected elements within its ranks. See Luis Rosado Eiró, Cienfuegos: Sublevación de todo un pueblo, Havana, Editora Política, 1997.


\textsuperscript{21} If any debate about the Revolution continues to rage it is surely this one. Whether Fidel was only waiting for the chance to move Cuba into the Soviet orbit or whether US pressure forced him to do so is a question of great importance but alas one where there is much more heat than light available. Whatever the truth here the result of the lack of arms at least put enormously greater pressure on the authorities in Havana to make radical decisions as to how the army, and its now growing reserves, were to be armed in the context of a greatly heightened internal and external threat. See this whole debate reflected in the analyses of Wayne Smith, The Closest of Enemies, New York, Norton, 1987; Jorge Dominguez, To Make the World Safe for Revolution: Cuba’s Foreign Policy, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1898; and even Stephen G. Rabe, Eisenhower and Latin America: The Foreign Policy of anticommunism, Raleigh, University of North Carolina Press, 1988.
fixed element of its foreign policy. And the FAR, regular and militia, went from a strength of 49,000 in mid-1960 to 138,000 a year and a half later.\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{External Defence the Priority}

When the militia and later on the regular FAR met the invasion on the beach of the Bay of Pigs and in the air over the island it marked the first major success in the military life of the revolutionary government. In what government propagandists have since referred to as ‘imperialism’s first defeat in the Americas’ the FAR could take their greatest defence achievement since gaining power. But the event marked the clear importance getting rid of Castro had reached as a military (and CIA) priority in Washington.\textsuperscript{23} On the island planners had to assume that now that an indirect invasion, although one supported by the US to what was still a considerable degree, had failed, the United States would have to opt for a more direct attack to unseat the regime.

Thus planning in the future would have to aim at deterring such an attack and in the case of such deterrence failing, attempting to defeat it. Such a posture seems absurd given the asymmetries between the two countries with the US being some 25 times more populous than Cuba, with an economy hundreds of times as large, and armed forces simply incomparably larger, by some 60 times as much in 1960 and 80 times today. Yet Havana had little choice but to work along lines that would at least deter attack and it did so by two means. First, it would attempt to support leftist revolution in the Americas within those countries which were most actively backing the US drive to isolate and destroy the Revolution.\textsuperscript{24} Second, it would expand its militia and regular force in

\textsuperscript{24} Cuba of course denies this policy saying that it never existed. It says it merely acted defensively and that in any case revolution, like democracy, cannot be exported. Even Che argues that his writings on guerrilla warfare were about defensive operations against a US invasion and not about overthrowing other governments. See Paul Dosal, \textit{Comandante Che: Guerilla Soldier, Commander and Strategist 1956-1967}, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003, pp.20-22. In the Second Declaration of Havana, Cuba explained its position in the usual cold war style. “In the face of the accusation that Cuba wishes to export its revolution we answer that one cannot export evolutions. People make them. What Cuba does is give people an example…” Quoted in Miguel D’Estefano Pisani, \textit{Política exterior de la Revolución cubana}, Havana, Ciencias Sociales, 2002, p.301.
numerical terms and improve them in the context of their equipment, armament, training, organisation, intelligence, mobility and tactics.

To do this it would need the serious help of the Soviet Union and not merely the minor assistance provided earlier. But Cuba’s two angles of approach to its strategic problem were problematical for the acquisition of such aid. For Moscow was far from certain it wished to back Havana in its activities in support of revolution in Washington’s backyard. The FAR were increasingly involved over this period, and up to the legendary revolutionary Ché Guevara’s death in 1967, in the provision of training and other assistance to Latin American and other leftist revolutionary movements with which the Soviets were far from always having good relations. This made them nervous of US reactions and the prospect of much worsened relations with the other superpower, in the context of the nuclear balance of terror, made them more than uneasy. They therefore tried often to rein Cuba in where its support of insurgency in the region was concerned. While the FAR were proving themselves more revolutionary than ever this was not sitting overly well with the supposed mother country of world revolution.

This meant that while Soviet support in this area improved after 1961 it was hardly without strings. But Cuba and the FAR refused steadfastly to abandon their support for revolutionaries abroad despite the strains this policy put on the Cuban-Soviet relationship. Then came the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Nothing had prepared the FAR for the shock of this crisis. In the first place neither Fidel nor his military advisers, according at least to their own version of events, could understand the USSR’s approach to the idea of placing offensive missiles on the island. While Cuba was understandably delighted with the degree to which this made the country less likely to be invaded, it felt that the deterrence value of the deployment was lost by placing the missiles without advising Washington of their arrival not to mention its fear that such a deployment would inevitably be discovered by US intelligence and lead to a

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crisis of great magnitude which far from improving Cuba’s security, would worsen it considerably.\textsuperscript{26}

Indeed, this is how it turned out. The United States, furious at the move which threatened, according to some, to overturn the strategic nuclear balance, reacted with a firm policy which lead to the closest moment to nuclear war breaking out in all the long years of the cold war. From Cuba’s perspective even worse was that the settlement of the dispute lead to the dismantling of the missiles, future nervousness as not seen before on the part of Moscow where Cuba was concerned, and an agreement made between the two superpowers where not the slightest attention was paid to Cuban views or desires. All of this brought on a freeze in Cuban-Soviet relations that lasted several years. From the forces perspective the need for combat-ready conventional forces available immediately became even clearer and the need for further professionalization of the old rebel army, already unrecognisable from its earlier days, became obvious to all.

Soviet aid continued to arrive and with the end of the ‘export of revolution’ policy in 1967, and Cuba’s support for the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia the next year, the way was opened to changing this general support to one of truly massive transfers of arms and equipment and the explosion of the training relationship between the two armed forces.\textsuperscript{27} Thousands of officers and senior NCOs of the FAR went to the Soviet Union over the following years and thousands more were trained at home by Soviet personnel although this is easily exaggerated as Havana much preferred the Soviets to ‘train the trainers’ and let Cubans carry the lessons to a wider audience and especially to lower ranks.\textsuperscript{28} The army would become ever more professional on an almost exclusive

\textsuperscript{26} Díez Acosta, op.cit., pp.127-137.
\textsuperscript{27} For the highly controversial decision to back the Soviet Union on the issue of the need for invading Czechoslovakia see the recent Manuel E. Yepe, “La Postura cubana ante la invasión soviética a Checoslovaquia en 1968: un reexamen critica,” Temas, July-September 2008, pp.82-90.
\textsuperscript{28} Pavlov, op.cit., pp.59-64.
Soviet model and would increasingly see itself as a full-time military institution first and foremost.\textsuperscript{29}

Even this seemingly irreversible trend was, however shaken and revolutionary credentials re-established by the massive deployment of the army into non-traditional roles in the work-up to the failed Ten Million Ton sugar harvest of 1970. As for the rest of the country so for the FAR, the priority given to this objective meant that even professionalization took a back seat to the need to have the harvest reach its goal. Once again it was shown that the FAR could and would be asked to undertake non-traditional roles no matter what the apparent priority of traditional national defence.

After the failure of this national initiative the armed forces returned to their priority role of national defence and the 1970s were marked by an increasing distance from local tasks of a non-traditional nature. The lie was given, however, over this decade, to the idea that the FAR were really leaving their revolutionary roots behind by their massive deployment into ‘internationalist’ roles in Africa and elsewhere and especially in the Horn of Africa and of course Angola. Never in the history of Latin America had a country been so involved in conflict outside the region and a country of the size of Cuba surprised the world with its determination and ability to conduct a war so far from home.\textsuperscript{30} This was a revolutionary role indeed and Fidel insisted on the link between the quality of the professionalism of the FAR at this time and their ability to conduct such operations. It must be said that the achievements of the FAR in Africa may well remain as their most impressive strictly military successes ever. It is worth noting in this regard that even at home, while the FAR seemed to be moving away from non-traditional roles, the revolutionary ethic remained. For in the

\textsuperscript{29} It should be said that all this Soviet assistance had in any case not lead to undue influence on Cuban decision-making. Even as anti-Castro an officer as self-exiled Brigadier-General Rafael del Pino, Cuba’s most senior defector, admitted that Cuban-Soviet military relations were “indifferent and at times antagonistic…. They (the Soviets) do not have the slightest influence on the decisions the Cubans make.” Quoted in Jay Mallin, History of the Cuban Armed Forces: from Colony to Castro, Reston (Virginia), Ancient Mariners Press, 2000, p.333.

\textsuperscript{30} For the story of the diplomatic and military elements of these deployments see Piero Gleijeses, Conflicting Ends: Havana and Washington in Africa, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001. For Cuban work on their fighting on that continent, see for example César Gómez Chacón, Cuito Cuanavale: viaje al centro de los héroes, Havana, Letras Cubanas, 1989.
wake of the harvest debacle of 1970 the forces were asked to form a new military force, but one with a permanent civilian role in support of agricultural and other economic objectives of the Revolution. Thus is 1973 was founded the Ejército Juvenil de Trabajo (EJT- Youth Labour Army) which used conscripts after their basic training for largely agricultural production roles. The wisdom of this move was to be proved during the Special Period when this ‘Fourth Army’ and its value was put to the test.\textsuperscript{31}

\textit{The Job Becomes Everyone’s}

Despite trends that appeared very favourable to Cuba such as the USSR’s growing ability to match the United States in military power, the launching by the new president, Ronald Reagan, of his plan to ‘roll back communism,’ was to have huge effects on Cuba and its powerful protector. The election of 1980 replaced the relatively moderate government of Jimmy Carter with that of a man of determined rightist convictions who at once went to work to confront leftist governments in and out of the Americas. In the region he worked hard to unseat the recently arrived Sandinista government in Nicaragua and invaded Grenada two years after coming to office in a successful bid to rid that nation of its leftist regime. Meanwhile his defence spending put the Soviets on the defensive in a serious way and his bellicose talk, backed by greatly increased military muscle, forced Moscow to revise its policies in much of the world.

For Cuba this translated into something that Fidel and Raúl had feared for some time; that with growing strains on the Soviet economy and priority in Moscow increasingly going to domestic issues, the island’s defence would become steadily less important for the USSR. While the informal guarantee not to invade Cuba that most observers feel had come out of the United States as a result of the 1962 crisis had never been airtight it had given Cuba at least some room for optimism. With a Reagan government in power in Washington this context changed. He assured anti-communists everywhere that no product of communist expansion was safe from the new pressures he was determined to place on them. And while his non-public diplomacy gave some room for hope

that a non-military solution to the stand-off between Washington and Havana was possible, the FAR had reason to believe that things were going from bad to worse.

Early on in the face of the newly shrill US rhetoric Fidel and Raúl had come to the conclusion that Cuba could not in reality count on much Soviet assistance in time of crisis. In the new context it would be necessary for the island to count only on its own resources to maintain the deterrence posture it needed to keep the US from being tempted to invade. Raúl set to work developing as a consequence a modified defence posture, based on the successful Vietnamese model, and called La Guerra de Todo el Pueblo (the War of All the People). While the objective remained the same as it had been since the early days of the US threat, that is one of deterring an invasion by making it so expensive for the attacker that the game would not be worth the candle, the emphasis was now going to be massively on the reserve forces. These would soon be raised to some 800,000 strong, this for a population of under ten million, and with a regular force acting essentially as a core of this defence scheme, and itself brought up to a staggering 200,000 personnel.\textsuperscript{32}

For the first time in the history of the reserve force in Cuba, a fascinating story in itself worthy of much more research and attention, regular officers with promising careers volunteered for service with reserve units and formations. A good annual personnel evaluation for such time with the reserves was henceforth considered equivalent to one with regular units. The \textit{Milicias de Tropas Territoriales} were given good equipment and frequent training and a regular stiffening which would be the envy of many Northern armed forces and their importance as the key to deterrence and defence was emphasised in speech after speech by the national leadership.\textsuperscript{33} Cuba would from now on depend only on itself to deter attack. In Latin American terms this reform of a reserve system, already unheard of south of the Rio Grande, was indeed

\textsuperscript{32} For Raúl’s own thinking on how this all fit together see his Santiago speech of 21 January 1981, “La Constitución de un batallón masculino y una compañía femenina en las Milicias de Tropas Territoriales,” in Raúl Castro, \textit{Selección de discursos y artículos}, Havana, Imprenta de las FAR, 1986, pp.161-180,
revolutionary. For the main jobs in defence, other than blocking the first major landings of an invasion force, were essentially in the MTT’s (and those of other reserve organisations) hands - deploying to form a second line of defence, slowing the enemy advance in order to permit regular units to reorganise and structure further defence in isolated areas, and the like.  

Given its turbulent history Latin American leaders had long heeded the advice of the great 19th century strategic thinker Antoine de Jomini who held that reserve forces should be well armed and trained but never more numerous than their regular counterparts because their loyalty could not be expected to be as firm, and they might well turn on their leaders at some stage, a hardly surprising view for a man who had just witnessed the quarter-century of upheaval in Europe following the French Revolution. No reserve force anywhere in the continent had been allowed to become close to such a situation and in most cases there was either no reserve system to speak of or one with little reality in the best of situations. Cuba had of course broken with this idea long before but it had now done so in spades.

Normal citizens would now in their hundreds of thousands carry weapons on a routine basis, and would do so in ways outnumbering the FAR’s regular cadres themselves by a factor of four to one. And while this would be done in a way far short of the Swiss system, with its famous tradition of letting reservists often carry their weapons home between training schemes, it was nonetheless revolutionary, and seen as such by the commanders of the FAR and the comandante en jefe himself. Fidel said with pride of this approach to a reserve force,

because our people is the army, it is the forces by itself and for itself, it is a people armed, and it is a people which exists because it has known how to defend itself... In

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our country not only do the people have a right to vote but also the people have the right to be armed: the farmers, the workers, the students, all in a people armed.\footnote{Fidel Castro Ruz, \textit{Un grano de maíz: conversación con Tomás Borge}, Havana, Oficina de Publicaciones del Consejo de Estado, 1992, p.127.}

This new defence posture stood the test of time and is still, at least in theory, applying today. For another near decade, however, the FAR continued to receive significant Soviet military assistance. If the Soviets would not defend Cuba they would make enormous efforts to help the island defend itself, and at no cost other than the obvious political ones to the Cuban state.

However, the strains of the relationship, felt for so long before the collapse of the Soviet system in Europe and then in the USSR itself, were by the end of the 1980s clearly growing to untenable levels. Fidel himself saw the way things were going and in his annual major speech on the 26\textsuperscript{th} July 1989, warned “we can no longer say with certainty if socialist camp supplies, which arrived with the precision of a clock for thirty years, will continue.”\footnote{Quoted in Raúl Marín, \textit{¿La Hora de Cuba?} Madrid, Editorial Revolución, 1991, p.10.} By the end of that year Eastern Europe was non-communist and two years later the Soviet Union itself would implode. The impact on Cuba was devastating with the end of its very favourable connection with the socialist division of labour. And nowhere was the blow heavier than on the armed forces which had come to depend on the Soviets for advanced and even some basic training, intelligence on an international scale, equipment, interesting postings, fuel, weaponry, tactics, and much more. Overnight, or so it seemed, this connection was severed.

If the forces were dealt a body blow they were not allowed to reflect greatly on it. Instead Fidel ordered them to expand their roles not reduce them. While at first the \textit{comandante en jefe} felt that, given even greater efforts by the US to defeat the revolution now that it was without friends, defence would have to be spared much of the savage national belt tightening declared by him in July 1990 as part of the ‘Special Period in Time of Peace,’ he soon had to change his mind.\footnote{He had originally said “the fortifying of defense is among the priority programs of the Special Period and it is one of those sacrifices that we will inexorably have to make.” Quoted in Castro, op.cit., \textit{Un grano...}, p.148.} In fact, instead of turning out to be the spoiled institution of a government on its last legs, as so many observers in the north had expected, it
was perhaps asked to do more than any other institution, yet again, to save the Revolution. It was also asked to do this with less not more resources. For Fidel soon directed the FAR to provide even more personnel trained in business management to the more vital sectors of the national economy, especially those capable of earning essential foreign exchange. The FAR had already been in the mid to late 1980s involved in pilot projects of improved management attempting to apply largely military approaches to Cuba’s ailing economy. These had generally proved positive so that when the Special Period struck Fidel could naturally turn to the forces to merely expand their assistance in this field rather than begin to operate in it.\footnote{For a very good overview of the FAR and these economic reform efforts, see Domingo Amuchástegui, “Las FAR: del poder absoluto al control de las reformas,” in Encuentro de la cultura cubana, XXVI/XXVII (autumn-winter) 2002-2003, pp.133-147.}

In addition to this heavy drain on the FAR’s principal resource, its trained officer corps, Fidel also asked it to expand the activities of the Ejército Juvenil de Trabajo to include larger elements of the armed forces in the campaign to address the chronic lack of food production in the nation. Virtually all units not necessary for the immediate defence of the nation against foreign attack and essential therefore for deterrence, were at least on a part-time basis asked to cooperate in providing manpower, transport, fuel, temporary housing and directing staff for the effort to address the food crisis. At the same time the FAR’s medical capacity was put to work to relieve the crisis in the hospitals of the nation.

All of this was against the backdrop of a growth in the external threat that could not be ignored either. For in 1992 the Torricelli, and in 1996 the Helms-Burton acts, put paid to any idea that the US would apply a magnanimous policy in Cuba and showed that instead Washington wished to close in for the kill on its troublesome neighbour. In these circumstances and with US forces being brought home and much closer to Cuba in the wake of the West’s victory in the cold war, the FAR could hardly afford to drop its guard on foreign or even internal defence. Thus the deterrence posture adopted would have to be
maintained despite the huge demands of other sectors and roles and if anything strengthened in the light of the growth of the potential threat.

With the 1989-90 Ochoa Affair, a shocking scandal resulting in the firing squad execution of one of Cuba’s most decorated generals, showing just how vulnerable the Revolution had become, the FAR were also given even more of a role in directing the national police (the Policía Nacional Revolucionaria), the Ministry of the Interior, and the rest of the state security apparatus. This was to be coordinated in the military-run Sistema Único de Vigilancia y Protección (Combined System of Surveillance and Protection) giving the Minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces an even greater direct role in the coordination of the whole effort of defence against external and internal enemies.  

With a degree of originality not uncommon with the Cuban revolutionary government, Havana likewise moved ever more forcefully into fields of endeavour that would please the United States and show that country that Cuba was a willing and efficient partner in areas of security interest to Washington. In this context the FAR were given even more responsibility to intercept narco-trafficking whenever it approached Cuba’s coast or air space or used the country’s territorial seas. Cuba showed true ‘zero tolerance’ over these years when the US still had, in the pre-2001 days, the ‘war against drugs’ as its official major security threat and one in which the Department of Defense had a major and growing role.  

Likewise the Cuban government began to take even more seriously the problem of illegal emigration out of the island going to the United States. The increase of this phenomenon, reaching crisis proportions in the mid-1990s with the

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40 The Ministry of the Interior had, in the view of some, been becoming increasingly independent of the FAR as the years went by and these moves ended any such drift. Raúl as Minister of the FAR had, of course, always been the key person in coordinating the national defence effort in all these areas. See for the workings of this system Josep Colomer, “Los militares ‘duros’ y la transición en Cuba,” Encuentros de la cultura cubana, XXVI/XXVII (autumn/winter) 2002-2003, pp. 148-167.

41 This has paid off. Repeated congratulations have come to Cuba from US and other foreign sources for its exceptional efforts in the field of anti-narcotics cooperation. Some of this has even been at official levels as with United States, Department of State International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2005, Washington, 2005. For the effort itself see Francisco Arias Hernández, Cuba contra el narcotráfico: de víctimas a centinelas, Havana, Editora Política, 2001.
‘balsero’ (rafter) exodus, induced the US government to negotiate with Cuba formally for the first time in decades.\textsuperscript{42} Those negotiations produced an extremely effective agreement wherein the two countries’ coast guards (and indirectly their armed forces) worked smoothly and in tandem to reduce such immigration into the northern country as well as the trafficking in persons which this often involved.

The Special Period also saw the FAR engaged in more, not less, of its perhaps most impressive domestic role, that dealing with the effects of natural disasters. The country has seen those disasters grow in number and intensity since 1989 and the FAR have almost always replied with alacrity and efficiency to the calls for their help in housing, evacuation, medical support, food supplies, security provision for evacuees’ effects, transport and the host of other services provided by what is generally seen as the most effective natural disaster relief system in the Americas.

Most dramatically of all, the FAR had to accept that these new, reinforced or continuing roles would have to be undertaken with a fraction of the manpower and resources available in the past. For the regular forces, at nearly a quarter of a million strength before 1990, saw their numbers reduced by half in the first two years of the Special Period and further cascade in subsequent years to their present figure of probably between 50 and 60 thousand personnel. Their budgets fell in equally dramatic fashion from a total national defence and internal order allotment in 1990 of some $1,149 million pesos steadily to a low of $496.7 million pesos five years later. It should be noted that the peso’s value had meanwhile been shattered in terms of its convertibility and purchasing power so that even this paltry figure did not tell the whole story of decline.\textsuperscript{43}

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\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{43}] On the other hand the government’s legitimacy was enhanced over this period by being surely one of the few authoritarian regimes which have ever lowered massively their defence and internal order budget at a time of deep crisis and threat to the regime. This has been little commented upon and deserves, in this author’s view, more attention than it has been given to date. For these figures see Cuba, \textit{Anuario Estadístico de Cuba} 1990 to 2006.
\end{itemize}
If what the FAR had been asked to do seemed enormous at other stages of its history the Special Period has shown a whole new order of things. The call for revolutionary fervour and holding the line has found a response from the military once again, and while it is true that to some limited extent the FAR have been cushioned from the worst effects of the last years it is easy to exaggerate the softness of that cushion. What is less certain, given the absolute absence of open auditing arrangements for FAR activities, is to what extent profits from FAR-run enterprises, of which there are so many (perhaps as much as 60% of dynamic and convertible currency-earning firms), end up assisting the defence budget in making do.

*Revolutionary Forces They Have Been, but Are They Now?*

One still awaits the formal announcement of the end of the Special Period, now in one sense or another nearly two decades old. While such a formal announcement has not been made as yet, Fidel appeared as early as 2001 to be signalling that it had ended when he said in public that while the impact of the terrorist bombings in New York would doubtless hurt Cuba, the island would not be returning to the Special Period. That is not much to go on but it is indicative of the ways things are and certainly Cubans regularly refer to the Special Period as something of the past even though they are quick to point out that many of its negative features remain to this day.

The FAR, however, have certainly not moved far from those days in terms of the revolutionary commitment they are still expected to show. While there have been some improvements to their lot of late they have been few and far between. At least three new naval vessels have been ordered for the navy and

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44 FAR officers do have access to some goods at unconvertible currency prices (moneda nacional, as it is called) on occasion, all personnel have three meals a day even if hardly impressive ones, all troops are housed if often badly, and there are usually some recreation facilities at defence installations available to all ranks. But this is not, cannot be the whole story as to why the institution has stayed loyal when the advantages to caving in and accepting US efforts to suborn senior officers would have been powerful even if not easy to profit from. On these and related matters see the excellent Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *Are Economic Reforms Propelling Cuba to the Market?*, Miami, North-South Center Press, 1994, p.70.

45 Accusations on this score are numerous but impossible to prove. See Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, *Y Dios entró en La Habana*, Madrid, Aguilar, 1998, p.130. My own interviews with senior foreign investors in Cuba would suggest that these accusations, as those of private corruption of senior officers, are exaggerated but time will probably tell if there is more to this than has so far met the eye.
in an example of clear priorities they are anti-narcotics and illegal immigration craft sure to be well seen in Washington security forces circles. Likewise soft-skinned vehicles in short supply before have been obtained in large numbers from China and some repair arrangements have proven helpful to keep scarce aircraft flying.

Certainly the conscript no longer serves the three-year term of service prevailing before March 1991 but rather only two and that is often shortened for good service with the Colours. He is now paid a princely ten pesos a month rather than the traditional seven but that still in effect is close to worthless (US 40 cents) in the present crisis conditions. His housing has improved somewhat in most units especially those in a direct deterrence role and so have his recreational conditions on most military bases. And there are a few more things available in shops to which he has access than in the worst days of the past. And of course more not fewer officers have been exposed to the advantages of business enterprise management as the years have worn on, including some who are accused of being a virtual separate caste now permanently, to all intents and purposes, separated from line units and enjoying civilian life but with military perks. This is also difficult to prove.

What is not difficult to assert is that the FAR still work extremely hard with very few resources to answer the Revolution’s call in the priority areas we have seen for recent years: continuing to provide effective deterrence despite reduced strength, doing more to show that Cuba is an effective and willing partner for the United States in security areas of concern of importance to that country, maintaining a high level of engagement in support of the economy (both in agricultural production and in business management), and in facing effectively the growing challenges of natural disaster relief. Needless to say the replies to those challenges are in defence of a revolutionary project that has not changed in half a century and which has always found the armed forces up to the job.

The Special Period added greatly to the demands on the FAR and depleted horrendously their potential to respond to them. It would appear though that these new and problematic, not to mention once again largely non-traditional
demands, have found armed forces able to answer them, not entirely of course but in a fashion sufficient to ensure the Revolution’s survival as well as those of its major logros (achievements).

The main arguments against the survival of the FAR’s revolutionary credentials revolve around the professionalization of the body in the years after the mid-1960s, the abandonment of the export of revolution phase of Cuban foreign policy at that time, the acceptance of a Soviet model for their structure and almost everything else about their organisation and way of doing things, and their entrance into the business world with a vengeance starting in the rectification process of the mid-1980s but accelerating markedly in the Special Period.

It is argued that the FAR are now merely another appendage of a geriatric and corrupt political system which is on its last legs but has not yet given its last gasp. In this line of reasoning the FAR is no longer able to fight, does not have any longer real revolutionary zeal, and is merely part of the sauve qui peut system that prevails in all Cuban daily life today. The argument continues that while young officers may enter the ranks from the ‘Camilitos’ schools or from the academy or other walks of life full of vim and vigour about the Revolution, they do not remain believers in the system but merely hope to get the most out of it while serving their time under conditions at least marginally better than those of the population at large.

It is of course impossible to disprove such assertions. People join any organisation hoping to do well in it and Cuba’s FAR are no exception to that rule. Cuba is still in frightful condition although by Latin American standards the poor have vast advantages compared to most of their counterparts in the rest of the region. There are doubtless potential conditions for corruption at high level among officers close to the international business community and even more for Senior NCOs and even Other Ranks with their privileged access to much-needed cement, animal feed, spare parts for all manner of equipment and vehicles, food, to some degree domestic appliances, and a host of other things people need.
The answer the FAR high command has found to date has been multi-pronged. First, the punishments for high-level corruption have been ferocious and swift and have been numerous especially in the 1990s.⁴⁶ Control mechanisms of many kinds have been put in place to supplement Cuba’s reputation for being the classic ‘pueblo chico, infierno grande,’ that is a place where gossip at unheard of levels helps ensure people behave. The purchase of many items carries with it a need to register the purchaser’s name that is unheard of in most other places. And senior leadership is under massive pressure to demonstrate that it is not privileged in ways like the old Soviet and Eastern European apparatchik.⁴⁷

There is little doubt that corruption has not been rooted out. But dozens of interviews with foreign businessmen have convinced most observers on the ground that the phenomenon has been kept under control, and not reached other Latin American standards, by the combination of measures mentioned. Where there has been less success has doubtless been at the lower level of corruption where the FAR can hardly expect to escape the pilfering of staggering scale with which the state is faced and which Cubans refer to as merely their legitimate actions to ‘resolver’ their needs.

Similar points can be made about ‘Sovietization’ and other institutional criticisms of the FAR. The armed forces of Cuba are of course an institution and have institutional interests. But that those interests come before the Revolution or the nation is an accusation never heard in Cuba, at least in the experience of this observer working closely on this theme. The institution will of course wish to survive and prosper but as has been seen in this paper this in no way is allowed to interfere with the performance of its duty. And while the export of revolution is a thing of the past and internationalist tasks likewise, the FAR’s personnel are proud of those traditions and equally proud of the fact that they

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⁴⁶ This is a far cry from what happens in most other countries in Latin America where the armed forces have a major role in the economy. See for Central America the work of Arnoldo Brenes and Kevin Casas, *Soldiers as Businessmen in Central America*, San José, Fundación Arias, 1998.

⁴⁷ For these matters and the FAR’s views on them, see the interviews with General Enrique Carreras in Waters, *Haciendo Historia…*, op.cit., pp.59-60; and with Vice-Admiral Pedro Pérez Betancourt in Luis Baez, *Secretos de generales*, Barcelona, Lozada, 1997, pp.139-140.
can be called upon by the State at any time to do those things which are needed and not just those which they feel are properly ‘military.’

CONCLUSION

It is the conclusion of this observer that the FAR have been and to a remarkable degree still are a revolutionary force. They remain loyal to a revolutionary project from which they have not strayed in the many years of difficulty they have faced. The number of deserters to the ‘enemy’ has remained small. While corruption exists in the terrible conditions of today it does not appear to have affected the FAR as much as other sectors. But more than anything else the FAR still respond to any demands from the leadership no matter how far they are from the teachings of the Soviet Union, the traditions of Latin American militaries, or what might be seen as their own institutional interests.

And what is clear to all close observers is that far from failing to do their best they have replied in a fashion very much in the tradition of the early years of combat in the Sierra Maestra, of the management of reform in the early 1960s, of the Bay of Pigs and the Missile Crisis, of the low-level but taxing domestic fighting of the mid-sixties, of the Ten Million Ton harvest, of ‘internationalist’ missions on small levels such as the 1960s and on massive ones in the seventies and eighties, of professionalization and ‘Sovietisation,’ of the expansion of the reserves of the 1980s, and of perhaps the most difficult thing of all to ask any organisation- to manage their own massive cuts of the 1990s.

The key point seems to be discipline and a firm belief in that revolutionary tradition which they are so proud to point out as going back, in their minds, to the great legitimating experiences of the 19th century- the wars for independence and the political, social and economic thinking of Marti. As in so much else in the complicated Cuban matrix of thought, if that link with the past holds firm, the glue it can provide can stand many tests.