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Guerrilla Warfare in Cuba

Defeating Terrorism

by MATEO PIMENTEL

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“We have found, then, that we wish for the end, and deliberate and decide about what promotes it; hence the actions concerned with what promotes the end will express a decision and will be voluntary.” – Aristotle

Guerrilla warfare may be categorically different from terrorism, but definition alone does not make the two mutually exclusive. This is vital to acknowledge, as actors may use guerrilla tactics and terrorism in tandem to determine their desired political outcome. For the Cuban Revolution, however, such was not the case. This revolutionary struggle for liberation, which ousted Cuba’s unconstitutional Batista dictatorship of the 1950s, did not resort to the terrorism that the illegal dictatorship deployed against innocent Cubans for political sway. No. By engaging in guerrilla warfare, the Cuban people and their revolutionary vanguard did much more than simply refusing to succumb to the terrorism that repressed the island under Batista. By way of guerrilla warfare and tactics, Cuba’s 1959 Revolution, and its Marxist revolutionaries, defeated terrorism in Cuba.

Momentum, Size, and Legitimacy

The prospect of legitimacy is key to understanding how the Cuban Revolution defeated state-sponsored terrorism in the late 1950s. Additionally, it is important to distinguish the desired end of the revolutionary guerrillas in their asymmetrical war with Batista’s army of conventional

size. Simon Reid-Henry notes in his book *Fidel and Che: A Revolutionary Friendship* that Fidel Castro specifically wanted to reinstate the Constitution of 1940. That is, he sought to reestablish constitutional authority in Cuba. But terrorism (and torture) had no place in the praxis of Castro's or Cuba's guerrilla vanguard.

Guerrilla tactics, in fact, are the response to an army that insurgents do not yet outmatch, or even rival in size. These tactics correspond to a desired momentum, and, as Ernesto "Che" Guevara disseminates in his book *Guerrilla Warfare*, this momentum was necessary to develop an army of conventional size. Such size would allow Cuba's revolutionary guerrillas to wage a complete war, one in which their effectiveness would no longer be determined by an unwavering prudence when dealing with Batista forces.

Momentum and legitimacy – two elemental aspects of the Cuban Revolution's guerrilla warfare – also come up in Merle Kling's article entitled "Cuba: A Case Study of a Successful Attempt to Seize Political Power by the Application of Unconventional Warfare". Kling observes,

"The form of violence resorted to by Fidel Castro and his followers was guerrilla warfare. In contrast with the traditional coup d'état of Latin-American politics, the Cuban revolution led by Castro involved protracted military warfare and sweeping social, economic, and political changes."

Deeming the success of the Cuban Revolution an "attempt" propelled by "unconventional warfare," Kling proposes a definition of war not specifically embodied or heeded by a conventional army, or a military of conventional size. Che adds that a conventional army (like Batista's) is also one of certain technological, sizeable, and formidable prowess substantiated specifically in arms. Furthermore, Batista's army was not on the side of "sweeping social economic, and political changes" in Cuba, but rather, anathema to it all.

Grass-Roots Insurrection

Other episodes of guerrilla warfare age Cuba's 1959 Revolution quite a bit. For instance, Ramón M. Barquín, in his book *Las Luchas Guerrilleras En Cuba: De La Colonia a La Sierra Maestra*, treats guerrilla warfare during the Spanish Civil War. In his book entitled *Insurgency & Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare*, Bard E. O'Neill recounts how terrorism accompanied guerrilla tactics to reach revolutionary ends in China's Maoist revolution. In all, guerrilla tactics and strategies differ as much as their political underpinnings do.

Although guerrilla warfare facilitated the demise of Batista's terrorism, it is nonetheless important to recall that Cuban revolutionaries did not fight for terrorism but against it all along. And the success of the Cuban Revolution rested in large part on the guerrilla vanguard's successful development of a protracted military campaign. Che himself observes that, so long as the end guides the means in guerrilla warfare, then fomenting a larger army captures the essence of guerrilla warfare. This was certainly the case in the Cuban Revolution, when the popular forces grew large enough to fight en masse against the Batista regime's conventional military powers.

John Pustay further contextualizes the guerrillas' approach to fomenting a successful protracted military in Cuba to reach their political end. He observes, "Castro, Guevara...were forced to form guerrilla insurgency units by drawing upon recruitment resources at the grass-roots level. They had to start essentially from nothing and build a revolutionary force to achieve victory..." Cuba's guerrilla forces depended on the growth of a "grass-roots" military recruitment to wage increasingly efficient guerrilla warfare against a US-backed Batista and his army. Electing to use terrorism for the sake of gaining political power would only work against the guerrillas and their objectives.

Batista, US-Backed Terrorism

Australian philosopher Jenny Teichman defines terrorism in her book *Pacifism and the Just War: A Study in Applied Philosophy*. She says it is "both a method of governing, or of fighting, and a means to a specific kind of end, namely, some political end or other." To qualify terrorism further, Teichman considers other definitive qualities of terrorism, such as "the use of force or threats as a means of enforcing a political policy," and "the use of terror-inspiring threats as a means of governing or as a way of coercing a government or community." Notwithstanding an apt definition, Batista and his underlings were unequivocally guilty of terrorism during their unconstitutional rule. The Batista regime employed terrorism to squelch the insurrectionary efforts of the guerrillas, and terrorism was Batista's "method of governing," which he liberally circulated to maintain political rule.

Lyman B. Kirkpatrick, Jr., a former inspector general and executive director America's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), writes,

"As the terrorism of the opposition increased, the brutality of the police and military intelligence people became more horrible. I was told that the *Bohemia*, then one of the most popular picture-news weeklies in Cuba and widely circulated in Latin America, had been trying secretly to keep a tally of those tortured to death or executed by the police, and now estimated that as many as ten a week were killed in Havana alone."

Kirkpatrick also admits in his book *The Real CIA* that the Batista government worked closely with the CIA, and that it received assistance from the US to help carry out its goals. Throughout this dictatorial and terroristic process of despotic oppression, Batista not only terrorized and tortured Cubans, but he also incarcerated his opponents and amassed a fortune for his cronies and himself.

Oddly enough, some observe that faulting Batista incurs problems, especially because of his unconstitutional illegitimacy as dictator. Does Batista's questionable legitimacy mystify his historic role as an occupying enemy force in Cuba? As Robert Whitney agrees in his article "The Architect of the Cuban State: Fulgencio Batista and Populism in Cuba, 1937-1940", Batista was indeed emboldened by both the suspension of Cuba's 1940 Constitution and his military control. He had Uncle Sam in his corner for a time. But despite issues of constitutionality, the dictatorship assumed a governmental status, and it is nonetheless culpable for the numerous acts of torture, terrorism, and murder that it committed.

Winning the War on Terror

In two articles – “Terror and Guerrilla Warfare in Latin America, 1956-1970” and “Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes since 1956” – Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley proffers that much of the Batista government’s terrorism “took place as the torture of urban...innocent victims, and peasants,” and that survivors “who lived to tell such tales can relate grisly stories.” Haydée Santamaría, a Cuban heroine, guerrilla and politician, was shown her brother’s plucked eyeball in an effort to make her inform. Whereas the Batista regime tortured for information, or terrorized for popular control, revolutionary guerrilla forces barred such despicable actions.

In his article “Che Guevara and Contemporary Revolutionary Movements”, James Petras notes, “[Che] forbade his comrades to use torture to secure information. He argued that the use of torture would defeat the purpose of the revolution, which was to abolish inhumane treatment, and would corrupt the revolutionaries practicing it...” Indeed, obviating terrorism in the war against Batista was as much an ethical choice as a practical one. Revolutionary forces sought to topple the terrorist regime, not to fashion a new one.

Che writes that a fundamental character of guerrilla warfare “is the treatment of the people in the zone.” He instructs that guerrilla conduct “toward the civil population should be governed by great respect for all the customs and traditions of the people of the zone, in order to demonstrate effectively, through deeds, the moral superiority of the guerrilla fighter over the oppressing soldier.” On a similar note, the “treatment of the enemy is similarly important,” and guerrillas must extend “the greatest clemency possible toward the enemy soldiers who go into battle performing...their military duty.” Not only abstention from terrorism and torture, it turns out, but also magnanimity would prove elemental to the revolutionary victory over terrorism in 1950s Cuba.

A Guerrilla Victory

Michael L. Gross states in his book *Moral Dilemmas of Modern War: Torture Assassination and Blackmail in an Age of Asymmetrical Conflict*, that “no justification of guerrilla warfare allows guerrillas to unnecessarily harm enemy combatants or intentionally harm innocent civilians.” For this reason, there are policies in place that protect the rights of guerrilla organizations, even as they engage in combat under international law. Terrorists, or terrorist regimes like Batista’s, do not enjoy this protection or legal recognition. Furthermore, Teichman claims that “it must be possible to draw lines in practice between different kinds of violence...” Thus, distinguishing the guerrilla warfare and tactics of Cuba’s revolutionaries from the state-sponsored (and US-backed) terrorism of the Batista regime proves something more. Wickham-Crowley agrees, the guerrillas’ military victory over Batista forces also shone light on the moral victory they achieved against terrorism on the island. The revolutionaries of Cuba utilized guerrilla warfare, rejected terrorism, fought against it, and the Cuban people emerged victorious.