

**Review / Reseña**

Guerra, Lillian. *Patriots and Traitors in Revolutionary Cuba: 1961-1981*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023. 480 pp.

**Andrés Sebastián Pertierra**

University of Wisconsin—Madison

On July 11, 2021, Cubans in the town of San Antonio de los Baños, near the capital of Havana, took to the streets to protest blackouts, shortages, and a political system whose chronic mismanagement had failed to protect them. In many ways, the protests echoed the 1994 “Maleconazo” riots, but this time, they turned into a nationwide protest wave against the government, the first since 1959.

The reader might ask why a review of a book about Cold War Cuba begins with a recounting of the current political crisis. The answer is that the book contributes to current discussions about Cuba’s political past and potential future. In *Patriots and Traitors in Revolutionary Cuba* [hereafter *P&T*], historian Lillian Guerra builds on the methods she deployed in her previous book, *Visions of Power in Cuba* [hereafter *VoP*],<sup>1</sup> to explore the rise and evolution of the patriots vs. traitors binary that the Cuban government still uses today to justify its monopoly of political power. As she explicitly admits, her book is intended as a contribution to contemporary political debates in addition to academic ones.<sup>2</sup> Those familiar with scholarship on the

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<sup>1</sup> Lillian Guerra, *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption, and Resistance, 1959-1971*.

<sup>2</sup> Lillian Guerra, *Patriots & Traitors in Revolutionary Cuba, 1961-1981*, 408.

USSR by both the Revisionist and Post-Revisionist Schools will find this approach reminiscent of the work of historians like Sheila Fitzpatrick and Stephen Kotkin.<sup>3</sup>

Guerra traces the ways the Cuban government since 1959 has used this binary to consolidate power and attempt to achieve hegemony in local society—in her view only achieving a partial success, a “total state” rather than a fully “totalitarian” one.<sup>4</sup> She does this while highlighting the limits of the government’s attempts at hegemony from the 1960s to the Mariel Crisis in 1980, when popular discontent exploded, resulting in the mass emigration of over 125,000 Cubans, many working-class and Afro-Cuban. While she does not frame it this way, the book explores a sort of “double movement” between the expansion of state power, which seems to be reaching its zenith by the late 1970s, and the simmering popular discontent that leads to the mass exodus of 1980. Her analysis builds on her interest in Cuba as a “grassroots dictatorship” dating back to *VoP*. Her core research questions revolve around how the post-1959 government was able to convince people to trade their freedoms for a promise of national sovereignty.<sup>5</sup> In other words, why are everyday Cubans the gravediggers of Cuban democracy, not just its victims?

*P&T* attempts to fill a gap in Cuba’s historiography. According to Guerra, a combination of the political sympathies of academics and the use of political criteria to determine archival access have led historians to neglect Cuba’s internal Cold War as a major causal factor in the island’s political evolution.<sup>6</sup> Guerra is responding to what she sees as a resulting distortion of Cuban history, which seeks the causal explanations for Cuba’s domestic political evolution in factors like U.S. foreign policy instead of the country’s “internal Cold War.” To be clear, she does not argue that U.S. foreign policy or the broader global Cold War were irrelevant, but instead proposes a shift from external causal factors to more internal ones. In response to someone claiming, as Eduardo Galeano once did, that Cuba’s political project was not merely what it wished to be but what it could be under the circumstances,<sup>7</sup> she offers the counterinterpretation where the Cuban state chooses to utilize these foreign threats to push through its policies and interests.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* and Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization*.

<sup>4</sup> Guerra, *Patriots & Traitors*, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Guerra, *Patriots & Traitors*, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Guerra, *Patriots & Traitors*, vii-x.

<sup>7</sup> Eduardo Galeano, *Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone*, 333.

<sup>8</sup> Guerra, *Patriots & Traitors*, 13-14.

This argument leaves me feeling of two minds. It is certainly fair to critique how U.S. foreign policy is used as a cheap way to explain Fidel Castro's successful grab for a total monopoly on political life in the country. On the other hand, Guerra's choice to reduce mentions of U.S. foreign policy to passing, though significant, recognitions, does a disservice to the real dynamic she points to in *Pe&T*. Missing are explorations of the impacts of contemporary events, such as: Salvador Allende's 1973 ouster and what it represented for proponents of a democratic path to socialism; the impact of the mass slaughter of Indonesian Communists after the 1965 coup; the numerous U.S. supported far-right juntas in the 1970s and 1980s that engaged in "dirty wars" against their populations; or the 1976 Cuban exile terror attack which blew up a Cuban Civilian airliner killing seventy-three civilians over Barbados. None of these events are meant as excuses or *tu quoque* arguments for Cuba's political evolution, but they would go a long way to help explain why Cuban civilians were so primed for the government's arguments that only by surrendering individual freedoms could their collective well-being and national sovereignty be preserved. Again, these reinforce Guerra's points, not detract from them.

The book is structured as a series of largely chronological case studies that fit into the broader narrative of the state crafting a patriots vs. traitors binary. The first chapter looks at the 1961 Cuban literacy campaign as a vector for official ideology and touchstone radicalizing experience for both literacy campaign volunteers and illiterate rural students. The second chapter analyzes the massive expansion of Cuba's surveillance state in the first half of the 1960s through both neighborhood-level institutions like *Comités de la Defensa de la Revolución* (CDRs) and the professional domestic intelligence service. The third chapter explores state programs of political rehabilitation in the 1960s as a mechanism for forcibly assimilating political opponents while simultaneously framing these coercive and self-interested policies as acts of government generosity. The fourth chapter examines how reeducation programs in the late 1960s against social groups hitherto reluctant or unable to join the Revolution were part of a broader hegemonic project crafted by the Cuban government. The fifth chapter focuses on Oscar and Ruth Lewis' work in a Cuban slum in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a window into how everyday people from marginalized backgrounds continued to prove resistant to official ideology while also exploring how their research was infiltrated by Cuban intelligence. The sixth chapter explores political indoctrination through children's education and its role in reifying the system, focusing on projects like *escuelas al campo*. The seventh chapter is squarely

focused on the institutionalization and Sovietization of the 1970s, arguing that it both stabilized the state and simultaneously made it less accountable while continuing to cultivate a popular “siege mentality” among the populace. The eighth chapter focuses on the “road to Mariel” in 1980, which both invalidates official claims of monolithic support for the Cuban government and underlines the failure to create true political and cultural hegemony over the previous two decades. The final chapter explores the hollowness of government hegemony and the intensification of the revolutionary “script” during and after Mariel. Guerra closes with her hope that the book serves to galvanize contemporary Cubans’ demands for pluralism, diversity, and debate, in addition to spurring renewed interest in Cuba’s “internal Cold War.”

While focused almost exclusively on Cuba and Cuban historiography, Guerra’s book should prove useful for Latin Americanists, other historians of authoritarian regimes, and political scientists. Over recent decades, a growing body of political science literature has focused on explaining the problem of regime durability in authoritarian systems and the particularly durable systems created by social revolutions, with Cuba as a relevant case study.<sup>9</sup> These broader theoretical debates are often deeply dependent on secondary literature and prove overly top-down without much space for how everyday people in these systems participate. *P&T* helpfully offers a look at politics from the bottom-up, which will prove a helpful perspective.

Guerra’s latest monograph builds on the growing consensus in Cuba scholarship over the centrality of nationalism to understanding the government’s stability and longevity in power in spite of the massive foreign and domestic challenges that would have toppled most other regimes by now. It convincingly shows how the Cuban state uses these foreign threats to convince everyday citizens to not just surrender their rights but aid in depriving others of theirs in order to build a hegemonic project that guarantees collective sovereignty at the cost of individual rights. At the same time, I can’t help but come away feeling that, in attempting to emphasize the “internal” Cold War over the global one, the book robs itself of important elements that help to explain how and why everyday Cubans were so

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<sup>9</sup> Recent examples of note include: Martin K. Dimitrov, ed., *Why Communism Did not Collapse: Understanding Authoritarian Regime resilience in Asia and Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Martin K. Dimitrov, *Dictatorship and Information: Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Communist Europe and China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023). Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Revolutions & Dictatorship: The Violent Origins of Durable Authoritarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

primed to make this trade. Telling these stories more evenly would do little to undermine Guerra's arguments overall and, in my view, would strengthen them.

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