

THE 26TH OF JULY MOVEMENT:
FOUNDATIONS OF THE CUBAN INSURRECTION

by

Jason M. Yaremko

A thesis
presented to the University of Manitoba
in fulfillment of the
thesis requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts
in
Department of History

Winnipeg, Manitoba

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ISBN 0-315-81800-X

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JASON M. YAREMKO

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

The revolution that came to power in Cuba in January 1959 was a popular enterprise. The literature on the Cuban revolution from this point is profuse and richly varied. The process that brought the revolution into being in 1959, however, has not been as thoroughly explored as the post-1959 period. The insurrection of 1952 to 1959 which culminated in the revolutionary victory remains a subject of much debate. The literature suffers from various gaps and anomalies. While piecemeal attempts have been made to explain the insurrectionary process, an holistic study of the social, economic, political and historical forces at work, their strengths and limitations, and finally, their implications, has yet to be realized. This thesis attempts to fill the gaps and explain some of the more significant anomalies of the Cuban insurrection, the first phase of the Cuban revolution. Thus the first goal is to critically analyze certain reductionist interpretations, the "peasant revolution" thesis being the most enduring of these. This critique provides the departure point for a narrative that attempts in comprehensive fashion to illustrate the multi-layered complexity both of the insurrectionary process itself and the galvanizing force that eventually dominated it, the 26th of July movement.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the various sources of support and inspiration active throughout the gestation process of this thesis. I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Timothy E. Anna, for his patient guidance and encouragement in the development and refinement of this thesis. I would also like to thank Professors T.E. Vadney and M.A. Gabbert for their perseverance in helping sharpen the final text. The technical assistance (including the loan of a computer) contributed by Roy and Tammy Hardie as well as by Chris and Darren Schultz was also greatly appreciated. I would especially like to thank my wife, friend and confidante, Cheryl, for her limitless patience and unconditional support during this entire process. Finally, I dedicate this thesis to the besieged but still indomitable spirit of Cuba's revolutionary peoples.

CUBA

Map 1

Gulf of Mexico



Map 2

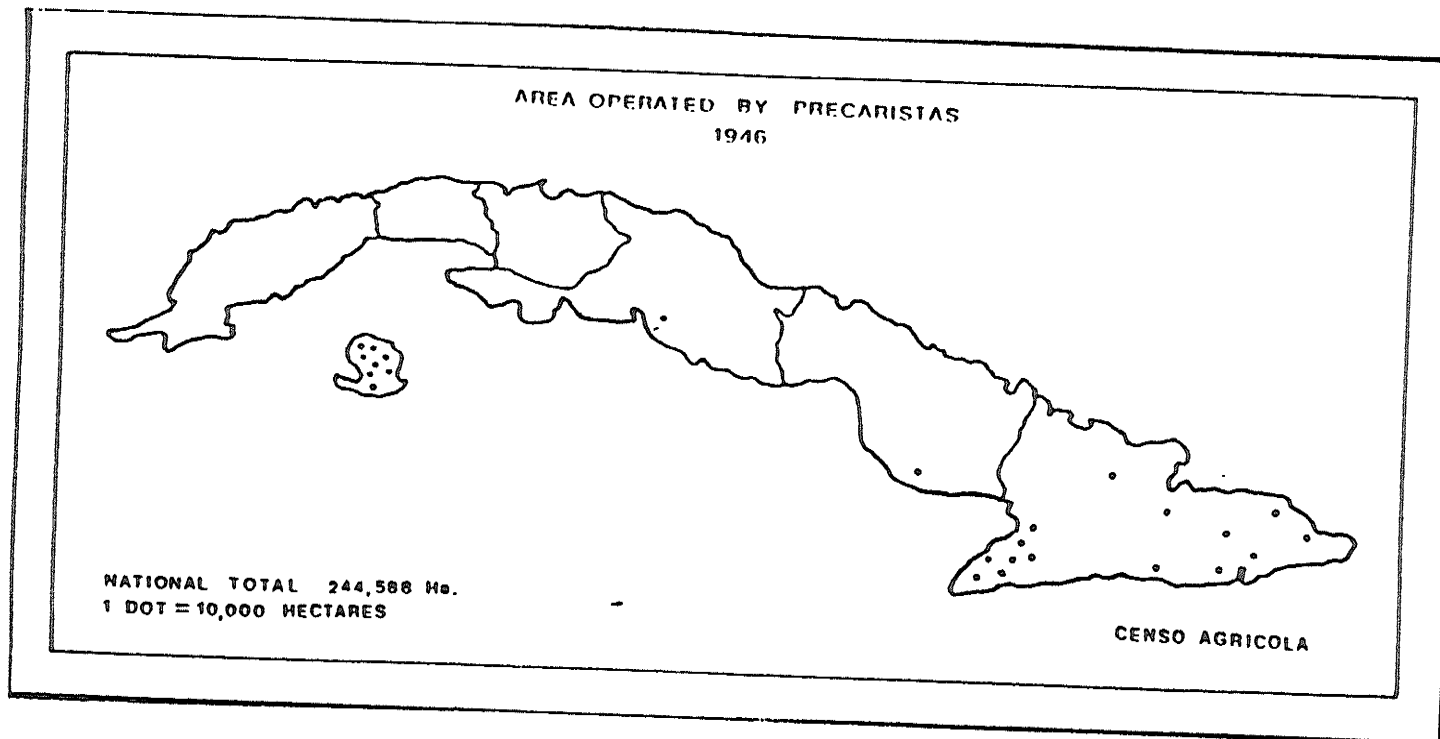


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Preface

In the following chapters I examine the role of the insurrectionists in the Cuban revolution. I argue that the movement that became the 26th of July was based not on a monolithic peasantry or industrial working class but on a much broader foundation. The introductory chapter outlines what other historians have written about the subject and paves the way for the narrative which follows. Chapters two, three and four take a chronological approach and trace the activities of the various historical actors who created and empowered the 26 July movement. Chapter two studies the origins of the anti-Batista resistance, specifically the revolutionaries who were initially based in the cities and towns of the plains--el llano as Guevara called them. Chapter three concentrates on the movement's evolving Sierra wing, the rebel army of the Sierra Maestra, and describes how it established a base of operations and began to win the confidence of the peasants. Yet the rural and urban movements did not evolve independently of each other, except perhaps at the very beginning. Accordingly, chapter four examines their relationship and how the Sierra emerged at the forefront of the struggle after the general strike of April 9, 1958. The chapter then traces

events to January 1959 and the popular consolidation of revolutionary victory. In the conclusion my findings are summarized and an indication made as to the implications for a more thorough study of this phase of the Cuban revolution for theories of revolutionary change in general and for the Cuban experience in particular.

Chapter One

Introduction: The "Peasant Revolution" Conundrum

Peasant participation in the insurrectionary period of the Cuban Revolution remains an often-discussed but seldom understood variable in historical and theoretical interpretation. The question of the rebel army's composition and the peasantry's role and function in it has yet to be satisfactorily delineated. Huberman and Sweezy, and more recently Huizer and Stavenhagen maintain that the peasantry of the Sierra played a decisive revolutionary role. Similarly, Kimmel characterizes the revolution in Cuba as a "peasant revolution" in the same category as the Chinese. On the opposite end of the continuum, Draper and others reject such interpretation outright as post-revolutionary ideology. As several scholars have commented, there has indeed been more heat than light generated on the subject. The role and significance of the peasantry in overthrowing the Batista regime cannot be delineated without first examining the movement through which organized peasant resistance to the state occurred. Since the 26 July guerrilla army was the only anti-Batista group in which peasants participated, a brief appreciation of the rebel army's significance to the success of the revolution is necessary.¹

Several interpretations minimize the significance of the

rural-based rebel forces, which de-emphasizes the role of the peasantry in the insurrectionary phase of the revolution. Alexander and others, for example, credit the working class for the victory. Draper concludes that "Castro's minute peasant army" could not have defeated a Batista military of 40,000. Bonachea and San Martín subordinate rebel army strategy and importance to the supposed "decisiveness" of the urban or llano insurrectionary strategy.²

The urban insurgency was eventually soundly defeated. Nevertheless, Draper, and to a lesser extent Bonachea and San Martín, contend that the primary contribution to Batista's demise came from a thoroughly llano, but especially, bourgeois-based rejection of government terror.³ Since the urban movement sustained the brunt of the regime's "murder, torture and brutalities," Draper concludes that it was the urban resistance that was responsible for the massive popular disaffection and downfall of Batista.⁴

Draper can be criticized for his overemphasis on Batista's state terror in the urban centers as compared to the rural regions, and for de-emphasizing the leadership function of Castro's rebel forces: "Even acknowledging [Draper's claim regarding] the struggle of the urban underground does not alter the fact that the small guerrilla band in the backlands of Oriente not only dominated the whole fight against Batista, but also captured its success."⁵ Excepting Alroy's and Useem's exaggeration of the rebel army's leadership role, especially at the dawn of the insurrection, historical evidence largely

opposes Draper's thesis. The earlier part of the insurrection was dominated by the anti-Batista resistance from movements such as the Revolutionary Directorate (DR) and the various tributaries of the incipient 26 July Movement (for example, the National Revolutionary Movement). With the failure of these groups to kill or overthrow Batista, setbacks that culminated in the abortive general strike of April 1958, the focus shifted to the guerrillas in the Sierra. In the last stages of the struggle, the Sierra Maestra became the nucleus toward which active urban support was directed, while the insurrectionary movement as a whole increased in terms of popular participation, momentum and unity.

Draper further theorizes that the popular revulsion at Batista's indiscriminate use of terror formed a decisive contribution to the regime's downfall. The corollary is that the urban insurrection could have overthrown Batista of its own accord without the leadership of the Sierra group. This is not only unconvincing but, as a closer examination of the insurrection demonstrates, historically inaccurate. Draper fails to elaborate on how the urban middle class and bourgeoisie, often fragmented, could have successfully overcome a dictatorship whose large military was entrenched in the urban centers. By mid-1958, particularly after the April strike fiasco, Batista was for all intents and purposes reconsolidating his rule, having largely eliminated any further likelihood of an urban-based coup d'etat. Only the rebel army of the Sierra remained to oppose Batista.⁶

Castro's guerrilla force was indeed small compared to government forces; the ratio at the point of Batista's 1958 summer offensive was 1 to 40.⁷ There was, however, a context within which the rebels gained first peasant, and later, more general popular support. The battleground was advantageous terrain to the guerrillas who had conditioned themselves to the mountainous, heavily-forested and often treacherous regions. Batista's police and military were trained for combatting urban insurrection by a US military which at that point believed the cities were the main cold war battlefield. Subsequently, Batista's soldiers proved illfit and unprepared to fight a guerrilla war where conventional tactics proved useless in the face of unconventional strategy.⁸ In addition, the rebels undermined Batista's commitment to protect foreign property by applying, in the second year, a scorched earth campaign. Batista had to disperse troops over a large territory in order to both combat rebels and protect property. The timing of Batista's summer offensive, during Cuba's rainy season, demobilized much of the regime's forces "in a sea of mud."⁹ The blow of the US arms embargo, the perceived withdrawal of US support, also had some effect on the soldiers' esprit de corps and confidence in Batista.¹⁰ Another factor that diminished the numerical advantage of the military was what Useem refers to as the shift in "public definition" of the guerrilla conflict. Before the suppression of the llano underground, Batista denounced the Sierra rebels as "insignificant." By the summer of 1958, however, the

dictator had yet to remove "the last vestiges of the insurrection" as proof of his ability to suppress revolution and maintain order.¹¹ Rebel discipline, skill, morale and morality also contributed to the defeat of an inefficient, outmaneuvered and demoralized enemy.

Useem asserts that the withdrawal of urban bourgeois support from the Batista regime contributed to its ouster. But if the forces of the Sierra had failed to endure and successfully resist the dictatorship's attack, Batista's regime could have weathered the crisis of llano disaffection.

But what was the role of the peasant in the guerrilla force? Several analysts (Huberman, Sweezy, Wolf, Kimmel) assume that peasant support for Castro's guerrillas was the decisive factor in the rebels' success. Wolf, for example, observes that the rebel army's strength in Oriente province contrasted with its apparent impotence in the plains.¹² He explains this difference with the conclusion that while the Sierra Maestra peasants supported the guerrillas, the plains peasants refused.

An equally plausible explanation which tempers the significance of peasant support includes consideration of the immense strategic advantage afforded the rebels by the Sierra Maestra's terrain. It was definitely this consideration that motivated the rebel leaders to land in southern Oriente in December 1956. At the same time, the guerrillas knew "virtually nothing about the Sierra Maestra peasantry before the voyage from Mexico."¹³

Such explanations are not mutually exclusive; historical evidence does in fact support both. Studies of guerrilla insurgency indicate that "in areas in which the terrain does not favor guerrilla warfare, as in the Cuban plains, insurgent groups have invariably been captured and killed." Many of the same studies, however, have also shown that guerrillas cannot survive unless, to use Mao's famous metaphor, they are like fish in the sea. The rural population must provide the guerrillas information, refuge, and food.¹⁴

At the end of the first year of armed struggle in the Sierra Maestra, the rebel army had largely consolidated a "fish in the sea" relationship with the peasants. Fidel Castro and his guerrillas by 1958 could "roam at will" over most of the Sierra Maestra region. In addition, an elaborate peasant-based communication and supply network (facilitated by a parallel urban support network) had been constructed. Sierra peasants acted as providers for the rebels, participating in a support system (which included local merchants, the urban network and even disaffected army personnel) that enabled the inexperienced guerrillas to survive the most difficult early stages. Upon regaining strength through this aid, the rebels returned the favour to the rural inhabitants by prosecuting the century-old battle with the local latifundistas and their cohort, the state.

It is often asserted that much of the rebels' peasant support was negative in quality, a logical reaction to the stepped-up repression of the Batista regime. This is true to

the extent that bombing, napalm attacks, peasant evacuation programs and other reprisals did have an impact. As Garcia noted, many of the peasants who joined the rebel group as fighters expressed a desire to "get Batista." Yet, while many peasants supported the rebels for reactive reasons, many also withheld support for similar reasons. Government reprisals, after the establishment of the guerrilla base in the Sierra, nevertheless did produce pro-rebel sentiment and action.¹⁵

There was more to peasant support than reaction against Batista. The positive actions of the guerrillas were crucial. Battles with the army and the rural guard were significant, but only when included with the revolutionary justice administered, the livestock confiscated and distributed, the schools built and the medical aid brought to the countryside. All these elements contributed to increasing peasant support.¹⁶ The campesino who eventually supported the rebel army no longer did so merely for self-defense, "but later as a means to conserve the gains that are already his own and which no one will ever be able to take away from him."¹⁷

Thus a symbiotic relationship emerged as increased rebel military and administrative action and success generated increased peasant support in return. Such symbiosis was by no means absolute nor would it approach this level until the last stages of the insurrection.

Establishing the importance of the peasantry's involvement in the rebel army, it does not follow that the peasants were the decisive element in the revolution.

Nonetheless, in attempting to render an accurate account of the Cuban revolution, numerous interpretations have surfaced. Among the most enduring is the categorization as "peasant revolution." Popularized by Huberman and Sweezy in Cuba: Anatomy of a Revolution, the label has found contemporary adherents through several works on theories of revolutionary change, the most typical of which is Kimmel's Revolution: A Sociological Interpretation.

Huberman and Sweezy explicate in a broad stroke what remains implicit in Kimmel, that:" (1) The rebel army was and remains essentially a peasant army.(2) The Cuban peasantry is a remarkably revolutionary force. (3) Fidel Castro is first and foremost the undisputed and absolutely trusted leader of the army and as such the embodiment of the revolutionary will and energy of the peasantry."¹⁸ In addition, the peasant revolution thesis identifies land hunger and agrarian reform as both "the motive and achievement" of the revolution. Finally, the role of the peasants in the actual making of the revolution, their military role above all else, is perceived as the most crucial element in achieving the ends of the Cuban insurrection.¹⁹

The primacy of the peasant revolution premise conflicts with historical evidence accessible since at least the 1950's. Polemics over theories of revolutionary change, however, are beyond the scope of this study.

The view that the rebel army was fundamentally peasant-based tends to ignore the participation of other

social groups. Urban recruits and support mechanisms were also significant features of the rebel army in its early phase. By late 1958, furthermore, rebel forces would expand to include virtually all classes of Cuban society. Kimmel, meanwhile, appears to concur with Huberman and Sweezy's assertion that "By far the most important class that joined the rebels was the peasants. At the beginning, the campesinos merely hid the rebels; before many months had passed, the campesinos as a class were backing the rebels. They changed from passive onlookers to active participants. They became one with the revolutionary army."²⁰

That "before many months" the campesinos "as a class" were actively backing the rebel army fails to stand up to careful scrutiny based on the available historical evidence. The difficulty in applying terms like "peasant army" and "class" to the Cuban insurrection is that the peasants did not initially join the rebels "as a class," nor did they exist as a singular, homogeneous class. The Sierra Maestra peasants differed in several respects from the majority of the peasants in Cuba. Oriente peasants were the poorest and the least educated: 60 percent of all incomes in the region, compared to 40 percent for the rest of the country, were below a subsistence income of 81 pesos a month, and despite a 1940 national compulsory education law, at least 60 percent of Oriente children did not attend school while over 50 percent were illiterate.²¹ Approximately half of the Sierra peasant population consisted of squatters or precaristas. Moreover, it

was out of this "class fraction" that the rebel army's first key supporters emerged.

The peasants did not respond "as a class" to the increasing expropriation and concentration of land by powerful latifundistas, nor to state repression, until the final few weeks of the Cuban insurrection. The Sierra precaristas, unlike the majority of the Cuban peasantry, possessed a history of open rebellion against landowners and the Rural Guard. Evictions alternated with violent responses as armed battles endured between landowner and squatter. The clashes between the two ultimately assumed "a quasi-systematic form in which each side utilized organized fighting bands with established leaders. Thus, when Castro arrived in the Sierra Maestra, he did not import the idea of armed struggle; in a localised form, it was already there."²² Arguably, it may be said that the rebels joined the Sierra peasants as much as the peasants joined the rebel army. The differentiation within the peasant class itself, and the recognition of chronologically-varied and regionally-determined responses to rebel activity dispels the implied monolithic role of the peasantry in the Cuban insurrection. As Che Guevara relates, as late as September 1958, peasant support outside the Sierra Maestra was precarious: "We did not find...support such as that given us by the population of Oriente, but nonetheless, there were always people to help us. Sometimes we were betrayed while passing through an estate. This by no means signified a concerted peasant action against us. Terrified at losing their

daily crust, they would inform the proprietor that we were passing through the estate property, and he had nothing better to do than warn the military authorities."²³

Bonachea and San Martín's comprehensive study The Cuban Insurrection also minimizes the distinction between the squatters and the majority of the Cuban peasant population which abstained from rebel support until the end was at hand. Bonachea and San Martín have no illusions, however, as to the composition of the "peasant army" under Fidel Castro. Castro had never intended nor did he command a peasant army. The essence of the rebel army's form is its broad composition. It was eminently an army for the peasants, and included peasants, but it certainly was not born solely of peasants.²⁴

Even among precaristas support for the rebels was not unanimous and there was no shortage of betrayals and desertions from the cause. In addition, the actual number of fighters in the rebel force remained small relative to the more than 12,000 squatters who resided in the Sierra Maestra (rebel estimates run from 300 for most of the struggle's duration, to between 1,000 and 3,000 by December 1958). But this should not be taken as evidence of low peasant commitment. Shortages of arms, which plagued the rebels until the very end of the struggle, meant that some recruits could not join in actual fighting. Moreover, the precaristas made their greatest contribution by providing guidance, information, supplies and other logistical support to the rebel forces. Such popular support is crucial to the success

of guerrilla warfare and it involves activities that are as dangerous as actual fighting. It appears that thousands of Sierra peasants aided the rebels in this way.²⁵

One measure in the categorization of an army is AlRoy's. He defines the character of an army "by its leadership and cadres, which remained almost exclusively middleclass throughout, and not by its common soldiers - or every army in the world would similarly be an army of the peasantry or proletariat."²⁶ A cursory glance at the rebel leadership and its principal column leaders lends some support to AlRoy's definition. Fidel Castro, Humberto Sori Marín, and Armando Hart Dávalos were lawyers, the latter from one of the most prestigious families in Havana. Raul Chibas and Huber Matos were teachers. Juan Almeida was a Havana bricklayer, while Efigenio Ameijeiras drove a taxi in Havana. Raul Castro, Ciro Redondo and Marcelo Fernandez were students along with Ramiro Valdés who was also a white collar worker. Ernesto Guevara and Faustino Pérez were medical doctors. Jose Ponce and Universo Sanchez were small businessmen. Camilo Cienfuegos, "one of the great heroes of the revolution," was a sales clerk.²⁷ Likewise, two of the most important and often-cited peasant leaders in the rebel force were not typical peasants: Guillermo García, promoted for his work in the rebel army, was a cattle merchant; Crescencio Pérez, the precarista chieftain and crucial peasant liaison, was a truck driver.²⁸

The author's definition aside, the common soldiers referred to by AlRoy reflected the rebel army's leadership in

its predominantly urban composition, which in turn reflected the Cuban socioeconomic reality. It was dominated by public service and sales clerks, students, teachers, doctors, journalists and other professionals, as well as small businessmen and various white collar workers.²⁹ It included those sectors which are neither capitalist nor wage-worker /producers, neither full-time peasants nor permanently employed wage-earners. The brunt of the insurrection was borne by a rebel force comprised partly of peasants, but mostly of fighters whose origins lay in the villages, towns and cities. Some were more involved in direct production, others in the service sector. These sectors emerged out of the process of uneven and dependent capitalist development which, according to Nunez, "increased daily with the masses of proletarians being created who are not organically integrated into the centers of productive capital. They are forced, consequently, to eke out a meager existence on the margins of circulation. This is the case in all these imperialized countries where commercial capital and the intermediary state dominate and reproduce capitalism through the creation of an enormous service sector."³⁰ These are "the people" Castro referred to as the ultimate elements of the movement.

Reinforcements from the cities of Santiago, Manzanillo, Guantánamo, and others tended to contribute to the predominance of urban recruits in the rebel army. Estimates are still disputed, but conservative estimates of urban composition of the rebel force run from 60 percent of all

guerrillas in the earlier stages to over 80 percent by the end of the struggle.³¹ Though, as will be demonstrated, peasant aid was significant in ensuring the guerrillas' survival, the urban-based support network was certainly no less significant.

Peasant support is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for success. Most movements that have gained peasant support have in fact failed; the extent of peasant support in the Cuban case was for the most part more qualitative than numerical.³² This does not detract from the precaristas' political importance. Nor, however, does it validate the notion that the Cuban peasantry was "a remarkably revolutionary force."³³ The "remarkably revolutionary" character of the Cuban peasant is a half-truth often inappropriately pursued. Huberman, Sweezy and others claim that within Cuba's unevenly developed capitalist economy the rural proletariat who "make up the bulk of the rural population" provided "a perfect formula for making revolutionaries."³⁴ Thus, they argue, it was this group, with Fidel Castro as the catalyst, that represented "one of the world's most deeply revolutionary classes."³⁵

While the premise of the revolutionary potential of the peasant is plausible, there is a failure to make a key distinction in the stratification and process of radicalization of the Cuban peasant class. In this case, it can only be repeated that, for most of the insurrectionary period, the only substantive support from the rural sector was derived from a stratum within the general peasant

population--the precaristas. Where the rural proletariat was not dominated by the pro-Batista Cuban Workers' Confederation (CTC), localism, passivity and suspicion predominated. Were this not the case, in Oriente alone where tens of thousands of rural workers and subsistence peasants resided, rebel numbers would surely have surpassed the three or four hundred that participated in most of the armed struggle.

The reality of peasant support for the guerrillas proves quite different from the peasant revolution thesis. As a key source of support, the squatters comprised 22 percent of all landholding peasants in Oriente province, but less than 3 percent in the rest of Cuba. Within Oriente, the precaristas' share in guerrilla-liberated zones was 30 percent, but only 9 percent outside Oriente.³⁶ Che Guevara reported at best "a lukewarm reception from the sugar proletariat" the guerrillas encountered when they initially descended into the plains, in contrast with squatter support in the Sierra Maestra.³⁷

Indeed, Cuba was no "land of jacqueries," there was no peasant unrest comparable to that which preceded and accompanied the revolutions in Mexico and Bolivia or later in northeastern Brazil and Peru. The majority of the Cuban peasants remained unresponsive to the rebels' struggle until the latter stages when the rebels' counter-offensive and agrarian reforms in late 1958 made Batista's fall more palpable, and the rebels' extinction less so. The minority of the peasant population who originally lent their support initially did so less out of revolutionary aspiration than

self-defense. As even Guevara conceded, the precaristas were not entirely representative of the Cuban rural population, nor were they naturally inclined towards abstract revolutionary solutions for Cuba:

The first territory occupied by the rebel army... was inhabited by a class of peasants different in its culture and social roots from those that dwell in the regions of extensive, semi-mechanized Cuban agriculture.... The soldiers who made up our first guerrilla army of country people came from that part of [the peasant] social class which shows its love for the possession of land most aggressively, which expresses most perfectly the spirit catalogued as petty-bourgeois...³⁸

The alliance that emerged between the squatters and the guerrillas was also in part the result of the coincidence of interest between the two groups.³⁹ The process of translating local discontent into anti-state action was more complex, and in the Cuban case, incomplete, than appears to be appreciated. Revolutionary peasantries do not emerge from agrarian structures alone, no matter how exploitive. The key to a radicalized peasantry also lies in specific types of agrarian change. Generally, attacks on the landed security of peasant-cultivators lead to peasant radicalism, such as in the case of the fallow land of estates long occupied by Cuban squatters. To specify further, "peasants embroiled in such changes are more likely to be revolutionary than those

peasants who remain (relatively) secure or those for whom this process is now largely an accomplished fact" (eg., the prerevolutionary rural proletariat of Cuba).⁴⁰

In Cuba, then, the precaristas of Oriente were not only structurally more likely to have revolutionary potential, but also were undergoing an assault on their landed existence, one that Oriente landowners increased in tempo after World War II.⁴¹ The majority of Cuban land-eviction court cases were centered in Oriente, and it was here that landlords most often won their cases.⁴²

Thus it appears that the "transitional peasantries," in this case the squatters, relative to the traditional peasantry, are the most likely supporters of incipient revolutionary movements. Yet this revolutionary consciousness does not develop from exploitation alone. Nor is it a function merely of some loosely-defined mystique built upon the moral and revolutionary conduct of the guerrilla.

The prerequisites for revolutionizing a peasantry engender an evolutionary, historically-grounded process. According to a useful model by Migdal, it includes the elements of material or economic need and also leadership. Probability of peasant participation in revolutionary movements is realistically based on three determinants. The first has already been noted: involvement (involuntarily, of course) in the transition toward increased market participation by peasants stemming from economic crises. In Cuba, the precaristas were an archetypal transitional

peasantry. Generations of squatters had been driven from previously-owned subsistence plots to lead precarious existences, caught between traditional systems of land tenure and rapidly-concentrating estates geared toward a surging export market. The second factor is a concomitant of the first. The transition "must be fraught with the dangers and unprofitability associated with corruption, monopoly, and structural incompleteness. Where the government has failed in creating viable, well-regulated institutions and where powerful landlords make peasant participation unprofitable, peasants are more likely to welcome other institutional arrangements."⁴³ Landowners seldom utilized legal means to oust precaristas. Frequently, the armed overseers or mayorales backed by the Guardia and the army, evicted the precaristas by force, usually by a scorched-earth approach.⁴⁴

A third factor affecting peasant participation relates to the level of organization exercised by the revolutionary leadership. As in most cases historically, this refers specifically to a leadership outside the peasant class; the impetus for revolutionary action often originates with these "outsiders." This is not to say that peasants are completely lacking in such potential; increasing experience and interaction with commercial entities provides some education which may be deemed conducive to radical thought. Still, organizational ability relative to other classes is weak, and many of the resources, lacking. Thus the peasant participation

in revolutionary organizations is crucially facilitated "by the development of an organizational superstructure by students, intellectuals and disaffected members of the middle class."⁴⁵

The question of revolutionary leadership in the sense of a single, charismatic leader, for example, must not be taken to extremes. The notion that "Fidel Castro is first and foremost the undisputed and absolutely trusted leader of the army and as such the embodiment of the revolutionary will and energy of the peasantry" is no more helpful nor accurate than Camilo Torres's claim that "the people are waiting for their leaders, who by their example and their presence will sound the call to arms."⁴⁶ If taken seriously, one may conclude from this that masses of peasants would accept with open arms virtually any outside revolutionary "leadership" that appeared.⁴⁷ Likewise, such a premise encourages the conclusion that, in the Cuban rebels' case, Fidel's attitude and aura were sufficient qualities for radicalizing the peasants. As Huberman and Sweezy imply: "Fidel spent time with them (the peasants), ate with them, talked with them, and continually explained, in terms they could understand, what the rebel program was."⁴⁸ Again, this is only partially accurate: The rebel leadership did eventually establish a cooperative relationship with the Sierra squatter peasantry, but not for the reasons (nor with the group) that Huberman and Sweezy suggest. The peasants were not radicalized solely because Castro "continually explained the rebel program" to

them. As recorded by numerous Cubanologists, Castro's economic and political programme was notoriously vague. Useem rightly remarks that one has to wonder what it was that Huberman and Sweezy think was "continually" explained to the peasants, as opposed to what was done for this group.⁴⁹ This does not negate the importance of Fidel Castro's leadership role. However, as important as Castro's leadership was to the success of the rebel army, notions of messianic charisma are not consistent with historical evidence. The rebel leader frequently relied on rural and urban liaisons. Precarista leader Crescencio Pérez, for example, was relied upon to mobilize the squatters.⁵⁰

The rebels' leadership ability represented merely one aspect, as did the peasants' response, of the total revolutionary effort. The revolutionary process is far more complex than peasant revolution theory allows. Migdal is merely paying homage to history when he asserts that the peasants' numerous encounters with outsiders of other classes had taught them more than simply to await "the call to arms." "Self-sacrificing action, action that offers no immediate return in benefits, is shunned by peasants. The revolutionary looks no different from all the other city folk who have taken advantage of the peasants' weaknesses."⁵¹

Realizing peasant support and radicalizing them, which the guerrillas attempted to do, entails a painstaking process of need satisfaction. The revolutionaries had to trade inducements to individual peasants in return for their

participation and support. It had to be demonstrated that the revolutionary organization could supply the peasants' needs better than the government could. For Castro's rebel army, this process was essentially reversed until the end of 1957 when, with the support of both the precaristas and the urban movement, a crude economic and justice system was realized in rebel-liberated zones.

Yet, notes Migdal, in delivering material inducements as a method of overcoming corruption, monopoly, and structural incompleteness, the revolutionary organization must prove more appealing than other forms of political organization due to the greater risks of involvement for the peasants. Oriente peasants were painfully aware of the costs involved in any form of political participation, ranging from loss of valuable time to incurring the wrath of landlords and the Guardia. Cooperation with revolutionary movements like the 26 July can bring severe reprisals, and revolutionaries had to overcome the peasants' fear of retaliation.⁵² Following the establishment of the first liberated territories after 1957, the increasing satisfaction of needs was beginning to be manifest in rebel policing and infrastructure in the form of revolutionary justice, schools and hospitals where there had been none, along with a butcher shop and several small factories.⁵³

Peasant revolution proponents duly acknowledge the shared hardships that gradually strengthened the bonds of comradeship in the Sierra among the guerrillas, and between them and the

peasant population. There had been no predetermined plan for this when the Granma landed. Instead, "the specific characteristics of Sierra life became the rebels' daily experience and the requisites of their survival and their relationship with the peasantry became a part of their revolutionary outlook."⁵⁴ Though certainly not in any literal sense, to a significant extent the rebels did "become peasants" in order that the peasants might eventually become rebels. Rebel fighters and recruits from the cities often donned machetes and took part in the field chores.⁵⁵

The peasant revolution thesis also oversimplifies the foundation for the rebel-peasant relationship by overemphasizing another element--land. Guevara's observation that their peasant supporters were of a social group "which shows most strongly love for the land and the possession of it," is reliable.⁵⁶ The rebel physician had tended to the needs of and communicated with the local inhabitants. The land tenure situation of the Sierra Maestra peasantry likewise suggests that Guevara's assessment is valid. Most of the Sierra peasants were landless; many were squatters, tenants and sharecroppers.⁵⁷ For many precaristas, land-grabbing by latifundistas in collusion with the Batista army and the Guardia was the constant enemy.

But land hunger was not the only motivation for peasant support. The peasants of the Sierra Maestra in general, and the precaristas in particular, were of a relatively more diverse occupational makeup than merely subsistence farmers.

It is possible the group that rebels came in contact with were not necessarily a representative sample or that Guevara overstated the land hunger question. Crescencio Pérez, for example, the chief precarista liaison to the rebel army and leader of a large anti-landowner paramilitary band of squatters, was a truck-driver by trade.⁵⁸ Furthermore, Nelson's survey in the late 1940's gathered data concerning rural inhabitants' perceptions of their chief needs. Peasants most frequently noted roads, irrigation, schools, improved housing and tools. Ownership of land was stated less frequently than any of these. Mesa-Lago cites a more recent survey of living conditions of rural inhabitants (1958) based on a sample of over 1000 families between 1956 and 1957. The results appear to support Nelson's earlier findings: When asked for the main determinant for alleviating the plight of the rural situation, 73.5 percent responded with the need for more employment opportunities. In response to the query "From where do you expect a solution to your problems?" almost 70 percent answered "the government."⁵⁹ While this data represents responses from rural areas throughout Cuba, Nelson and others have specifically referred to the Sierra Maestra peasantry as having low land aspiration in general.⁶⁰ Such studies do not negate the agrarian reform question. Peasant needs such as infrastructure and social support, however, appeared to play increasingly important roles. Furthermore, it was these basic needs that the Sierra guerrillas were gradually and increasingly proving capable of fulfilling.

Meeting peasant needs is only a part, though an essential part, of the revolutionary equation. Unlike traditional political representatives, revolutionaries do not aim merely to ameliorate individual and local conditions via the existing network of economic and political institutions in order to gain initial peasant support. Rather, they endeavour to supply an increasing number of components building toward the development of a new network, autonomous from the existing national system.⁶¹ In effect, what emerges, as exemplified in the Cuban case, was a dual policy. In the context of rebel army action, the rebel leadership sought to make the existing corrupt, monopolistic and structurally-lopsided political and economic institutions even more incomplete by disrupting their workings.⁶² Thus the 26 July guerrillas' revolutionary justice not only disciplined rebels but banished the middlemen who exploited the peasants. Increasingly successful assaults on troop and Guardia posts made army reprisals against the local peasants less of a pervasive threat than it had earlier been. Simultaneously, the rebels moved in to supply the missing and disrupted components of those institutions with their own network.⁶³ By the end of 1957, Castro could claim with some justification that, compared to the nation's capital, the Sierra Maestra was cultivating a superior and more democratic political and economic system.⁶⁴

Migdal acknowledges the leadership factor as an important variable, one that exercises a consolidating function and completes the equation for generating peasant support for

revolutionary movements. The question becomes one not only of the peasants' "revolutionary readiness," but also of the degree of revolutionary leadership to which local peasants are exposed combined with the provision of capable institutions and appealing inducements.⁶⁵ This point must be qualified, however:

The intensity of leadership must be greater than for other cases of political organizing because of the risks involved in peasant complicity with the revolutionaries. No peasants would accept merely a pack of cigarettes for some act of support as they might do in committing their vote. Once the risk factor is weighed, however, the greater the benefits offered the more support the peasants are willing to give both in frequency and intensity.⁶⁶

To succeed in the revolutionary process, revolutionary leadership had to be demonstrated by addressing the "very mundane grievances of each particular village and even each stratum within the village."⁶⁷ This task was no less arduous for the rebels in the Sierra Maestra, whose fighting numbers never surpassed 400 until the last two months of the struggle.⁶⁸ Though precarista support was realized sooner than from the rest of the peasantry and other classes, the process was a fairly gradual one. The interdependent relationship between the rebel leadership and their base developed progressively.

The social exchange that develops between rebel and

peasant in the radicalizing process is a complex one that provides a greater likelihood of eventual revolutionary conscientization than the mere fact of exploitation. This is no less true in the case of the struggle in the Sierra. Nonetheless, systemic exploitation provides the framework within which the revolutionary provides the opportunities to the peasant. Migdal's analytical model stresses four graduated levels of peasant-guerrilla interaction essential to consolidating active peasant support. The first entails peasant accommodation to evolving revolutionary institutions; the Sierra rebels took up to a year to effect such an apparatus. Secondly, individual material and social needs must be met in exchange for more significant peasant involvement. Rebels provided these upon establishing the first liberated territories after 1957. Upon meeting individual peasant needs, and after a long, successful process of social exchange, revolutionary action on the part of the peasantry becomes based on collective gains not as immediately achievable as previous individual demands. The rebel army was on the threshold of this phase by the end of the insurrectionary war. Finally, this evolutionary process culminates in a revolutionary peasantry which has internalized revolutionary goals, committed to self-sacrificing action, and voluntarily participates, all for the sake of the broader goals of the revolutionary movement.⁶⁹ This latter stage largely began after the Cuban insurrection had ended.

The building of positive relations with the Sierra

peasantry was a relatively gradual and often harsh process. Yet, once a degree of mutual confidence was established, benefits were manifold. Rebels' attitudes were significantly influenced by the experience. "The prolongation of the struggle and the special socioeconomic characteristics of the Sierra Maestra population forced the rebels to address the local problems.... To solidify peasant support, the rebels had to deal in the present."¹⁰ Guevara's comment to Masetti is exemplary: "We are not fighting for them in the future, we are fighting now and we consider that every meter of the Sierra that is ours...is more theirs than ours."¹¹ The precaristas responded with vigilance as well as with information, aid in communicating with the plains and cities, arms and labour power. Strangers approaching rebel camps in the Sierra were scrutinized by the peasants and led into "investigatory ambushes" if deemed untrustworthy.¹² Messengers carried out one of the most crucial tasks, acting as vital links between the rebel army units in particular, and between rural and urban movements.¹³ Llano militants, especially women, also frequently acted in this capacity. The components of Guevara's foco theory, that popular forces can defeat a regular army, that the revolutionary foco can expand to create total revolution, and that the countryside is the base of the revolution, are perhaps as helpful as other models if one keeps in mind the fact that Che was less a teacher of action than a philosopher of revolution.¹⁴ One of the basic tenets of foco theory, that the nucleus of the guerrilla army be made

up of peasants, is incongruent with the reality of the Cuban insurrection. More important is the conceptualization by Fidel Castro that the guerrilla foco or focus was less a military weapon than a social and political one, that conditions for revolution would be facilitated by a guerrilla foco. As early as 1957, Castro asserted that the guerrillas had no expectation of overthrowing the government singlehandedly but rather were planning to produce a "climate of collapse."¹⁵

My argument is that the Cuban insurrection was not merely a peasant revolution, nor solely a working class-based struggle as others have argued, but a much broader-based movement spearheaded by the 26 July movement. This is not to say that a substantive peasant revolution could not have materialized had the insurrection become more protracted.¹⁶ As it was, the rebels' actions can be said to have reached level three of Migdal's model, for when the fighting had ended, noted Guevara, "then came the time to educate and explain to the peasants the revolution for which they had struggled and died."¹⁷ One may conclude that the insurrection had ended too soon for the peasant to become appropriately conscientized. Nevertheless, the small rural-based movement that began as a precarista-urban alliance grew until its progressive social, political and military successes inspired a far broader, united popular insurrection against the Batista order. By no means a linear process, rebel army forces and their precarista supporters overcame a deluge of adversity emanating not merely from the regime's attacks but from

internecine conflict within the entire anti-Batista opposition itself. After Batista momentarily settled the dispute by temporarily crushing the movement in the towns and cities, Castro's forces in the Sierra Maestra dug in their heels, poised to engage the next Batista military onslaught. Rebel success in this endeavour would enable the Sierra forces to expand beyond the confines of Oriente and gather more massive, popular, and this time, unified, support. Precarista support was key in the earliest stages, but so too were the urban classes that sought enlistment in the Sierra Maestra.

Without initial peasant support, the rebel forces likely would have disintegrated, and Batista would have weathered the instability generated in the cities. Conversely, the precaristas would not have succeeded in defeating their local enemies without joining the urbanite rebel forces in the Sierra struggle. Support for the rebel force resulted from a complex meshing of a localized landlord-squatter conflict with a state-guerrilla conflict. The determinants are similar to what Hobsbawm identifies as preventing social bandits from winning unless they are absorbed into a "modern movement."¹⁸ Because they lacked the resources to operate beyond their own narrowly defined territory, and they attacked only the worst manifestations of exploitation rather than its causes, the squatters were not initially by themselves a revolutionary fighting force.¹⁹ The two groups came to share a common interest against the state. As the guerrilla war intensified, this bond was translated into an alliance between the two

forces.⁴⁰ Ultimately, this alliance would expand and massively overwhelm the old order. The insurrection in the mountains, however, was the logical extension of a struggle begun several years earlier in the cities.

Chapter Two: El Llano

Cuba's prerevolutionary circumstance paralleled those of other Latin American countries. Highly-developed Havana was the archetypal example of a "primate" city, accounting for over one fifth of the Cuban population. Yet by 1953, the year of the first reliable but last prerevolutionary census, over 57 percent of all Cubans resided in cities. Cuba's high rate of urbanization predated its independence. By 1900, 47 percent of the nation was urbanized while most Latin American countries reached this level only after 1950.¹ The extent, therefore, of urbanization and of proletarianization of the rural population by their involvement in the sugar industry bestowed on Cuba a social structure unlike that of the majority of Latin America.

Differentiation in living conditions and in development standards also existed over a wide spectrum of society. Except for the sugar industry, Havana monopolized industrial activities along with private and government administrative functions, social services and infrastructure. Facilities for healthcare and education, when they existed at all, were of poor quality in the rural regions as indicated by literacy and school achievement levels as well as by sanitation and health conditions. As of 1953, over 50 percent of all rural housing lacked human waste disposal facilities while 74 percent relied on streams and wells as a water source. By contrast, corresponding urban figures were 5 and 18 percent.²

Uneven development of Cuban capitalism resulted in an often-cited post-World War II prosperity relative to the rest of the region. By 1948 Cuban sugar production increased 40 percent, representing a record 90 percent of Cuba's total exports by value, which in turn accounted for a near 40 percent increase in national income for an eight year period ending in 1947.³ Record sugar exports and war-generated import scarcities resulted in an immense balance-of-payments surplus. This was further buttressed by increased commercial activity and government tax revenues.⁴

The costs of prosperity were just as notable, as food prices almost tripled from 1939 to 1948 while the cost of living more than doubled.⁵ Employment was likewise distorted; urbanization and a growing service sector industry promoted increased urban employment while rural unemployment exceeded 20 percent--53.5 percent during the tiempo muerto or dead season.⁶ By the 1950's, declining agricultural employment did not translate into the diversification of industry, which was negligible. Notably, employment in the service sector doubled by 1953.⁷ Overall, unemployment remained "a great and permanent curse" even during the "prosperous" period.

Class structure in Cuba in the 1950's exhibited several elements that parallel the late nineteenth century along with some notable differences. By 1953, Cuba's population of 5.8 million included 220,000 peasants, 575,000 rural workers, and 500,000 urban employees. Over 200,000 Cubans comprised the growing service industry, while the middle class sectors

numbered over 620,000 in occupations ranging from corporate executives to civil service and sales clerks.⁶

By the 1950's, the process of economic stagnation, momentarily obscured by the post-war boom, was creating economic dislocation. The downturn, the function of government mismanagement, graft and corruption, was the result of successive Cuban leaders' acceptance of Cuba's boom-bust cycle, therefore ignoring the need for structural change to remedy growing unemployment. Cuban investors typically hoarded, speculated, mismanaged at home and invested abroad.⁷

Cuba's apparent affluence also concealed the political and socioeconomic tensions of a foreign-dominated export economy. The economic and political decisions of the world's largest sugar exporter were ultimately made by the largest importer, the US. The annual Cuban sugar quota was determined solely by the US Congress. Preferential high sugar prices (above market price) were deemed a fair exchange for substantial tariff concessions to US exporters whose flood of commodities effectively negated a Cuban domestic industry. US hegemony over the Cuban economy was complete in both relative and absolute terms. After 1945, a growing global economy did enable the US to relinquish some interests to a rising Cuban capitalist class, but the former was hardly "expelled." Rather, by 1956 amidst the political turmoil of insurrection, a US Commerce Department study on Cuba reported:

The only foreign investments of importance are those of the United States. American participation exceeds

90 percent in the telephone and electric services, about 50 percent in public service railways, and roughly 40 percent in raw sugar production. The Cuban branches of the United States banks are entrusted with almost one-fourth of all bank deposits ...The outlook for additional investment is also good.¹⁰

A declining international sugar market reduced prices and generated the first of several recessions to hit the Cuban economy during the 1950's. Cuban per capita income levels dropped 20 percent by 1958 (reaching 1947 levels). Though these levels were twice as high as the Latin American average, what mattered more to Cubans was that they were five times below US levels.¹¹ Thus, the Cuban middle class was most affected by the mounting economic and political instability of the 1950's. Against this turbulent background, an insurrection took hold in the cities and towns against an imposed dictatorship. Described as the urban or llano movement, the resistance proved as politically heterogeneous as Cuba itself. This forced a dichotomization of insurrectionary efforts as the llano spawned a second, rural rampart. The Batista regime therefore confronted a two-pronged challenge, only one of which survived long enough to become a significant threat to the dictatorship.

On March 10, 1952 Batista's coup replaced the government of President Carlos Prío Socarrás. Fearing defeat in the upcoming spring elections, Batista chose force as the instrument through which to reenter office (having previously

served as president 1940-1944). Rebel armed forces rapidly seized control of the national capital, extending their hegemony throughout the provinces and systematically replacing the old army command with new powers.¹² The speed and surprise of the coup produced "a stupor in the citizenry" reminiscent of a "sensation of momentary paralysis."¹³ A "cold indifference" predominated among those who condemned the coup. The ousted Autentico party regime, meanwhile, lacked the moral credibility necessary to warrant national support or popular outrage. The Batista coup found a nation disgusted and disillusioned after eight years of corrupt and incompetent Autentico government.

The junta took advantage of this "national ambivalence" to simultaneously consolidate itself and exploit Autentico corruption, presenting itself as the desirable alternative to the past in the perception of national sectors most concerned with order and stability.¹⁴ The prestigious Economic Society of the Republic, along with several associations of landowners, industries and various other industrialists, bankers and businessmen all pledged to support the new government.¹⁵ Official US recognition arrived on March 27. Large sectors of the national bourgeoisie also drew near to the caudillo. Batista's past constitutionality encouraged the assumption that some democratic restoration was at hand thus generating cooperation and support from various sectors including organized labour, the Catholic Church and the communist party. Detractors within these sectors were in the

minority. Even former Prío backers or Cabinet members rallied around Batista.¹⁶

The coup, originally organized to rescue the republic, emerged as a self-serving movement proclaiming the salvation of the armed forces from corrupt civilian leadership. According to Colonel Pedro Barrera Pérez, junior officers had "expressed a collective revulsion against state corruption and gangsterism. The army ostensibly planned to impose order, convoke national elections, and return civilians to power." ¹⁷ Batista's involvement, however, provided the additive of personal ambition to a movement intended initially to restore order.

The new administration, seeking army endorsement of the de facto order, invested the coup with purely military objectives.¹⁸ Batista declared the necessity of reorganizing the military forces as a function of consolidating the new structure of state. Because power had been seized by military intervention and without active aid from any of the civilian sectors that had supported his earlier administration, Batista relied heavily on the "party strength" of the yellow, blue and white "parties" (the uniform colours of army, police and navy) that constituted the substructure of the new order. Much of the authority delegated to the military forces by the junta during the revolt became a permanent feature of the new government.¹⁹ While Cuba had not been free of military intervention in politics before 1952, the military's role had declined since the 1930's, especially during Batista's first

presidency, when he took measures to demilitarize the administration and subdued a serious attempt at a coup.²⁰

After 1952, martial control pervaded all levels of government. The new regime reinforced military loyalty by distributing material benefits such as improved salaries, housing, weapons and even government employment for the families of officers and enlisted men of all branches of the armed forces. The military responded to the administration's official patronage with a "new insolence," an exaggerated sense of importance that convinced the armed forces that they "lay above and beyond criticism and reproach. The subject of the armed forces became a theme forbidden to the anti-government press and opposition groups."²¹

Following the initial realignment of politicians and political parties, the flexibility and adaptability of the Cuban political system--the rotation of political patronage--became rigid and distorted. The coup became "a purely political cleavage that politicians and parties would find difficult to bridge."²² Opponents condemned the Batista regime on three grounds: it originated in a military coup, fraudulent elections, and constitutional violations; it bred more corruption; and it ultimately relied on repression to stay in power. For the followers of the ousted Autentico government and of the opposition Ortodoxos who pressed to overhaul an illegitimate political system, the Batista coup was an outrage.²³ These groups were concentrated in the progressive sectors of Cuba's middle and upper middle classes.

Numbed by continuous electoral processes since 1940, the Autenticos ignored the need to consolidate the armed forces into a constitutional force. The swift entrenchment of the Batista junta fragmented the leaderless party. Many sought exile with Prío, others initiated reformist or electoralist solutions through ineffectual bodies like the National Executive Committee (CEN).²⁴ The Autentico party remained a complacent traditionalist party loath to attract the new generation of Cubans eager to participate in politics.²⁵ The organization was unprepared for a prolonged period in opposition.²⁶ On March 17 Batista assumed the title of Chief of State, usurping all executive and legislative functions, and replaced the 1940 constitution with a self-serving "Statute of Government." All political parties were dissolved and elections postponed from 1952 to November 1953. The Autenticos' anti-Batista campaign, meanwhile, failed to move most Cubans, convinced that the party was more interested in restoration than reform. The attempt to regain flagging legitimacy by allying with the Ortodoxo Party also floundered.²⁷

The Partido del Pueblo Cubano-Ortodoxo, or Ortodoxo party, a left-wing offshoot of the Autenticos, was similarly traditionalist, leaderless (Eduardo Chibas shot himself in 1951), and in disarray as a result of the arrest and exile of its leadership. The party espoused a radical, national democratic program and possessed a dynamic youth section (Ortodoxo Youth) unlike the Autenticos. Still, as a cohesive

political institution, the Ortodoxo party had also become disorganized and disoriented by the coup. A young Ortodoxo lawyer, Fidel Castro, provided accurate insight into the generalized disillusionment with the party's would-be revolutionaries. In his "Critical Assessment of the Ortodoxo Party," he wrote:

Where are those who were running for office? Where are those who wanted to occupy the places of honor in the assemblies of executives? Where are those who visited political districts influencing people and demanding a place on the platform of large meetings? Why do they not go around today mobilizing the people or demanding places of honor in the front lines of combat?...

Politics is the consecration of the opportunism of those who have the means and resources.... A revolutionary party requires a revolutionary leadership, a young leadership originating from the people, that will save Cuba.²⁸

"The Ortodoxos were leaderless and the Autenticos could not lead;" Cuba's two major political parties became increasingly irrelevant to a solution of the political crisis.²⁹

The traditional parties limited responses to Batista's usurpation included the filing of suits in court. Only the Ortodoxo Youth and university students spoke out with urgency. The agendas pursued were varied and uncoordinated. Prío and his fellow exiles financed different invasion attempts; Rafael García Barcena attempted an army-oriented coup. Many Cubans,

including Castro, initially attempted non-violent forms of resistance through legal means. All suits were rejected by the army-dominated Court of Constitutional Guarantees while the Emergency Tribunal ignored the complaints completely.³⁰ Many conciliatory attempts like the "Civic Dialogue" persisted throughout the decade proving ineffectual against Batista's equally persistent rejections. Subsequent to all such attempts as well as to the dissolution of political parties and the suspension of constitutional guarantees, Cubans--especially the more militant youth--"started to consider (alternate means of) opposing Batista."³¹

Cuban university students represented the earliest and most vociferous opposition to Batista's coup. They represented the earliest organized manifestation of what were the birthpangs of an urban or llano movement. Students carried out numerous demonstrations and public protests from the first day of the coup.³² The majority of students came from the middle class and lower middle class and aspired to professional careers and therefore the ranks of the economic elite. Rising expectations were threatened by the growing possibility of a long term dictatorship. The generational aspect was also notable. Many students from the wealthier middle class sectors, like José Antonio Echeverría of the Revolutionary Directorate (DR), joined for idealistic reasons historically attributable to the significant role of students in Cuban politics.³³ Cuban students saw themselves as Marti-inspired representatives of the will of the "voiceless Cubans."

Emulating their nationalistic predecessors of the generation of 1930, they assumed the traditional and important function of students in national politics.³⁴

During the early years of the Batista regime, political parties like the Ortodoxos exerted considerable influence on the students in Havana. The Ortodoxos' impact was based in its more progressive and uncompromising stance toward Batista, the mystique of their martyred leader Eddy Chibas, and the popularity derived from those members who were professors at the University of Havana. The National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), an Ortodoxo splinter group, commanded strong student support. The MNR was also one of several opposition groups that solicited assistance from constitutionalist factions within the armed forces. These urban organizations "perceived army support vital to any enterprise plotting the overthrow of the Batista order."³⁵ By August 1952, Havana's security forces exposed a conspiracy by the clandestine AAA (Asociacion Amigos de Aureliano), an Autentico faction that included members of the armed forces. Several plots involved former high level officers. Despite this support, all such coup attempts collapsed; many like the MNR were eliminated by Batista's forces. Many became tributary movements which eventually entered into membership with the 26 July Movement, or what ultimately became Castroism.

Near Havana, in Artemisa and Guanajay of Pinar del Rio province, groups of young white collar workers and students published an anti-Batista manifesto and formed revolutionary

cells. The Artemisa group had Ortodoxo connections and many, friends of Fidel Castro, took part in the Moncada attack.³⁶

Throughout the rest of 1952 opposition to the Batista order gradually proliferated. By September, Fidel Castro, Abel Santamaria and other independent Ortodoxos met with various local groups to create a movement. With the electoral alternative closed indefinitely and the traditional opposition opposed to armed struggle, more Cubans moved to join "the movement" as the Castro-Santamaria group was then known.³⁷ They represented a broad sector of the great mass of younger and politically-conscious white collar workers, professionals, students and middle class intellectuals whose interests or ideals were contradicted by the Batista coup. By 1953 training had begun in various locations in and around Havana. Cells were coordinated and Castro's Ortodoxo associates were predominantly in command.³⁸ By mid-1953, 1,200 followers, the majority from the Ortodoxo Youth, were organized into 150 cells based largely in Havana and Pinar del Rio provinces. Of these supporters, some 170 were chosen for the attack on the Moncada barracks.

The movement's growth also reflected the failure of the traditional Autentico and Ortodoxo leadership to mobilize resistance to Batista. Pedro Miret, at that time a student and later one of the Rebel Army leaders, recalled the rapid loss of faith in the traditional parties experienced by students and working youth: "We were always being given a date for the armed insurrection by groups like AAA and by the Priistas

...but they came and went."³⁹ Youth frustration was manifest in numerous pamphlets distributed by an Artemisa student-worker group. In "Revolution Without Youth," poet Raúl Gómez García recalled historic Cuban heroes, appealing to el deber del Cubano, the duty of Cuban youth: "We are not going to theorize, we are going to fight. We are not going to talk, we are going to act."⁴⁰

The movement's leadership and the Moncada fighters were largely drawn from the middle and lower middle class. Lawyers, doctors and clerks made up much of the leadership. The rank and file consisted for the most part of clerks, teachers and other white-collar workers.⁴¹ The majority were not, as Hugh Thomas surmises, "campfollowers of industrialization," as much as they were members of the growing service industries.⁴² Most were under thirty years of age and were affiliated with the Ortodoxos.⁴³

Training of the militant youths was of a physical and political nature. Many joined the movement duly radicalized by experiences with the Batista regime's authoritarianism as well as that of previous regimes. The movement sought to channel and refine the militancy toward revolutionary ends, the program and action of which, though vaguely defined, were firmly rooted in the Cuban tradition of radical nationalism, whose revered martyrs included José Martí and Antonio Guiteras (who led an abortive attack on Moncada in 1931). The Moncada leadership, like the movement in general, "felt kinship with all heroic and frustrated attempts in Cuban history to bring

about the changes Martí deemed necessary".⁴⁴ Thomas is correct in observing therefore that, for the movement, Batista was more a symptom than a cause of Cuba's social problems. The plan to seize the Moncada barracks "derived from Cuban history not from the Russian Revolution."⁴⁵ Indeed, it was the desperate attempt of a "marginal social group" with scant links with organized workers. Cuba's heroes were also embraced and emulated as Cubans rather than merely as representatives of a specific ideology or party. Political preparation for the attack reflected images of nationalism, historical continuity and a redemptive generation prepared to sacrifice itself.⁴⁶ The "Manifesto of the Moncada Revolutionaries to the Nation," more a vague tribute to past heroes than a detailed program, represented the vision of vindicating Cuba's frustrated past struggles.⁴⁷

Inspired by historical precedent, the assault plan contrived to attack the Moncada barracks in Santiago, the capital of Oriente, inciting Cubans to revolt. Balfour remarks that, though rash, the plan was not altogether foolhardy. Oriente's history is one of rebellion, the first manifestations being anti-colonial independence movements against Spanish imperialists. The catalyst was the seizure of barracks and weapons. Cuba's east-west differentiation played a significant role and therefore deserves comment. For several centuries mountain ranges and ocean currents essentially isolated the eastern provinces from the west. Immigrants settled in the western provinces as the east assumed the

status of a frontier to which slaves and fugitives came for refuge. By the 20th century, Oriente became the poorest, most Cuban (1899 average: 96 percent born in Cuba) and most rebellious of the island's provinces. Numerous anti-colonial and slave revolts erupted, as did sugar workers' uprisings later.⁴⁸ By the 1950's, the eastern regions possessed the country's highest unemployment levels, 30 percent in Oriente alone. Living standards were much lower and political dissatisfaction higher than in the west.⁴⁹

The Moncada attack of July 26, 1953 was a military failure. The crucial element of surprise was lost for both the main attack group and the diversionary squad at Bayamo, leaving the poorly-armed and outnumbered rebels vulnerable to counterattack. Many fighters unfamiliar with Santiago became lost and never arrived. Retreat to the Sierra Maestra was futile. Much of the failure resided in the expectation of spontaneous rebellion by the people of Oriente when alerted, and in the lack of organization in Santiago.⁵⁰ Though no rebellion erupted, popular support manifested itself in the rescue and protection of retreating rebels by private citizens, members of the military and the Archbishop of Santiago.⁵¹ Castro interpreted this as an indication of the potential popular support his force could have mustered had the Moncada plan succeeded.⁵²

Judson reaffirms that nothing is more central to Cuban revolutionary ideology than a deep sense of history. The Moncada attack and aftermath reinforced the perceptions of the

rebels as historical actors, as beneficiaries of a legacy.⁵³ The manifestation was "History Will Absolve Me," the program of which approximated the 1940 Constitution. At the rebels' trial in September, Castro's defence included a list of general reforms (some of which included land reform, lowered rents, employment laws, diversification of industry and profit sharing) crafted to transform a semi-developed dependent society into a modern, progressive nation. The four-hour speech essentially contained the blueprint for most of the social and economic reforms that the new government attempted to institute following the victory of the revolution in 1959.⁵⁴

The Moncada attack and trial carried Castro and his twenty-nine surviving compatriots into full public view. Traditions of rebellion, and publicity of the brutal army reprisals generated widespread sympathy for the rebels, even from certain government officials.⁵⁵ The rebels' sentences on the Isle of Pines were cut short by a popular campaign and US pressure to liberalize Batista's image, resulting in an amnesty on May 13 1955. Nevertheless, twenty months in prison served to forge the foundations of the 26 July Movement, as the penitentiary gave birth to a school and training center for rebels. The official break with the Ortodoxo party came later. Castro, meanwhile, pursued by the special police SIM (military intelligence service), went into hiding in Havana, limiting his actions to rebel recruitment and anti-Batista editorials.⁵⁶ The next most consistently active opposition

group was the students.

Despite sporadic bans on public demonstrations, student protests intensified, often commemorating the anniversaries of historic events. These became "occasions for parading, depositing flowers on a monument, inflammatory speeches against Batista, and clashes with the police... January 28 was José Martí's birthday, and the students always marched to Havana's Central Park, seldom arriving without a violent clash with the police. February 24 and October 10 were remembered in relation to the wars of independence... Batista's name was connected with every demonstration."⁵⁷ Street battles also ensued in Santiago, where police fired on students, wounding and arresting many.⁵⁸ On March 28 1954, led by the new president of the Federation of University Students (FEU), José Antonio Echeverría, students gathered outside the capitol building to denounce the November elections scheduled by Batista. The demonstration ended in a clash with police.⁵⁹ When open demonstrations were not feasible, underground training took place.⁶⁰ Resistance became increasingly aggressive. By mid 1955, an insurrectionary apparatus, the Revolutionary Directorate, or DR, was created, "dedicating all its resources and energies toward overthrowing Batista."⁶¹ Demonstrations now engendered their own armed response to police force in the form of snipers and Molotov cocktails. Government shutdown of the university amplified the response. Massive violent demonstrations proliferated. Stepped-up police brutality engendered increasing popular support for the

demonstrators.

The student movement's attempts to broaden its forces by allying with the working class showed limited results. An appeal by Echeverría to the workers for a five-minute work stoppage in solidarity with student victims of police brutality was answered on December 14. Despite boycott attempts by the Cuban Workers' Confederation (CTC) and other labour sectors, the widespread stoppage became the first mass anti-Batista mobilization.⁶² The brevity of the stoppage, however, represented less of a commitment than the more concerted effort of the sugar workers revolt.

In December 1955, the DR helped organize striking sugar workers in Las Villas and Camaguey provinces in protest against the government's refusal to pay traditional differential or bonus payments.⁶³ Masses of workers and students rioted, clashing with the Rural Guard and devastating numerous sugarmills and cane fields. By month's end, the government announced that demands would be met. The strike's success rang hollow when the government later reneged.⁶⁴ The strike's momentum, however, was lost, the victory over Batista and the CTC shortlived. The striking workers were isolated. No other working sectors had joined in solidarity. The DR, meanwhile, became increasingly radicalized through its experiences with the Batista regime. Their quasi-revolutionary program aside, the assassination of Batista remained the central tenet of the DR's insurrection plan. Fidel Castro's star, meanwhile, continued to rise.

The Moncada assault propelled Castro and the movement to the forefront of national publicity. Upon his release from prison, his popularity increased with each scathing editorial he directed against the Batista regime. What further enhanced Castro's popular image was his refusal to take the path of previous revolutionary leaders to attain a comfortable position within the establishment (which he had been offered), and to profit monetarily from his rising popularity.⁶⁵

By mid-1955, long convinced of the futility of a peaceful solution in Cuba, Castro flew to Mexico to organize an invasion. In Cuba Castro left behind a skeleton crew of 26 July members led by Frank País to organize an urban insurrection. The political picture, meanwhile, was not yet polarized. Real divisiveness would materialize much later, with Batista on one side, insurrectionaries on the other. In the middle was an ineffectual "electoralist" opposition.⁶⁶

Arriving in Mexico in July, Castro began building an invasion force. He convinced Cuban Colonel Alberto Bayo to sell his small furniture factory and help train the recruits in the art of guerrilla warfare, and recruited Argentine Ernesto "Che" Guevara as the group's physician. The group endured a year and a half of military training, political education, disciplined austerity as well as dogged pursuit by both the Mexican and Batista police.

Like Marti, Fidel Castro toured exile communities in Florida and up the eastern coast of the US in order to raise funds for the expedition. He succeeded in raising funds and

organizing several Patriotic Clubs of the 26th of July. Constant conflicts erupted, however, among the various exile groups incapable of transcending old rivalries, forcing Castro to keep in frequent correspondence with them to keep the funds flowing.⁶⁷ Chief among the factionalists was former president Prio whose ill-gotten wealth and lack of popular political legitimacy left him only with the support of the dominant classes.⁶⁸ In addition to the exiles advocating Cuban self-liberation, and those who favored US intervention and restoration, there were the Brinca-cercas (fence-jumpers) who were "willing to accept anything, including US intervention, as long as they could obtain power or share in its spoils."⁶⁹

Fidel Castro's role as alliance-maker and independent enhanced his position among the exile communities in the US. The factional, self-interested and politically opportunistic nature of exiled political parties persuaded Castro to break with the Cuban past. At the same time, the moral appeal and incorruptibility of the 26 July, especially of Castro, enabled him to vigorously pursue and articulate the insurrectionary line.⁷⁰

In the summer of 1955, the SAR (Society for the Friends of the Republic) promoted a "civic dialogue" with Batista. By December, urban violence spread, culminating in the massacre of Moncada-like rebels at Goicuria barracks. The Ortodoxo party, meanwhile, had accepted the SAR's invitation to join the dialogue, effectively negating basic Ortodoxo principles of shunning collaborative coalitions with Batista. The 26

July, however, had always opposed the civic dialogue.¹¹ For Castro and the 26 July, the Ortodoxos' capitulation was the final straw. On March 19 1956, Castro announced the formal severing of ties with the Ortodoxo party. He declared that Ortodoxo's lost principles would be maintained by the 26 July which was, in essence, "the Ortodoxo movement without a leadership of landlords..., without sugar plantation owners... without stock market speculators, without commercial and industrial magnates, without lawyers for the big interests or provincial chieftains, without incompetent politicians of any kind. The 26 July Movement is the revolutionary organization of the humble, for the humble, by the humble."¹²

The 26 July was by no means the only group advocating armed struggle, only the most organized. No coordination between insurrectionist groups existed until September 1956. The Mexico Pact, a loose alliance signed by the 26 July and the DR, momentarily reunited politicized militant youth in opposition.¹³ The rampant disaffection, confusion, and factionalism that marred the period reinforced the 26 July leaders' convictions that their independent position was correct.¹⁴

The 26 July leadership back in Cuba, the National Directorate, had set to work constructing a movement. Led by school teacher Frank País, recruiting centered on Ortodoxo chapters throughout the country.¹⁵ Significant support existed among Ortodoxo militants for the 26 July line of armed resistance. At a congress of party members in August 1955,

Castro's advocacy of the revolutionary line received a standing ovation along with chants of "Revolution." The response was echoed at provincial party assemblies.¹⁶ This factor facilitated Castro's decision to sever Ortodoxo party ties and proclaim the emergence of the new movement.

The 26 July's campaign of agitation and recruitment was divided according to specific geographical and functional sectors. In the westernmost region of Oriente, the projected landing site of Castro's forces, there operated scattered groups of factory workers, agricultural labourers, peasants, fishermen and students. Manzanillo had a long tradition of labour protests among certain working class sectors.¹⁷ In 1956, local union elections brought militants sympathetic to the 26 July close to assuming control of the union branches but they were forced by threats from the military to withdraw. Numerous individual workers joining the 26th July Movement were young Ortodoxos disillusioned with the Ortodoxo leadership. Communist grassroots organizations also were avoided by many workers because of the PSP's (Popular Socialist Party) historic collaboration with Batista which had provoked strong anti-communist sentiment among many Cuban workers.¹⁸

Founded in 1925, the Cuban Communist Party--like its Latin American counterparts--devolved into unrevolutionary sterility, a doctrinally subalterned appendage of a self-proclaimed monolithic CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union).¹⁹ Its ideological submission to Stalinist dogmatism

endowed the party with a logic far removed from the complexities of Cuban reality, replacing it with an alienating, economistic labour communism coupled with popular front tactics.⁸⁰

The misdirected energies of the Cuban communists developed an unfortunate historical consistency. A highly disciplined organizational force in Cuban labour led by Blas Roca, the communists' popular front strategies repeatedly devolved into collaboration with the dictatorship of the day, from Gerardo Machado through successive regimes under Batista. The party may have been correct in its "assessment of the inadequacy of immediate revolt," but the alternative of full collaboration in the fraudulent electoral games under Batista was a questionable consolation.⁸¹ By 1950 the party had lost significant strength, unable to produce coalitions or votes and, against a background of increased government restrictions to its activities, unable to command substantive union support. The party became increasingly irrelevant in Cuban politics.

By March 1952, under the new name of Popular Socialist Party (PSP), the comfortably bourgeois communist leadership, though outlawed, lived in a state of "semi-retirement."⁸² Many members retained administrative positions in government agencies and the CTC. Uneven repression alternated with functional freedom. Persecution functioned more by way of the political purge than by police harassment. Euphemistically known as the "labour wing of the Batista party," several key

PSP leaders in the CTC were eventually replaced by Batista cronies and labour boss Eusebio Mujal, depriving the PSP of important influence except in the most isolated rural regions of Cuba.⁸³ The communist party's response was to wait expectantly for a rapprochement between the US and the USSR's post-Stalinist leadership.⁸⁴ The PSP leadership spent most of the decade waiting and hoping for "the possibility that a negotiated solution might be achieved."⁸⁵ Such a potentiality might then translate into a new deal between Batista and the party.

PSP inactivity frustrated many younger members, including the Socialist Youth, who contemplated support for the 26 July's insurrectionary program despite the PSP leadership's denunciation of the Moncada attack as "putschist" and "adventurist." Despite increasing popular opposition to the regime by the late 1950's, the PSP vacillated between moderate opposition to and political alliance with Batista. In 1958 several party members joined the 26 July guerrillas as individuals. The PSP never abandoned its time-worn popular front strategy.

The position of Cuban labour was infused with a similar mix of diverse influences. The complexity of the Cuban working class experience, intimately mingled with that of the Cuban Communist Party strategy, transcends any discussion based on labour homogeneity or unity and its quasi-linear historical evolution. Nor is it historical coincidence that both organized labour and the PSP experienced nagging

political factionalism and opportunism, localism, trade union economism and a generalized ambivalence in relation to the Cuban state. Such an experience would ultimately condition similarly ambivalent responses to the anti-Batista opposition in the 1950's.

The vagaries of the Cuban export economy, with its high prices, incessant inflation and short cycles due to fluctuation in sugar income, generated among labour a complex combination of job insecurity and organized militancy that drove unions in the direction either of bureaucratic collaboration with the state or of violent syndicalist conflicts increasingly political in nature. The violent activism of the 1920's culminated by 1930 in the effective elimination through assassination and deportation of the non-collaborating syndicalists. The void in the left wing of the labour movement was filled by a collaborationist Cuban communist party.⁶⁶

The revolutionary nationalism that militant sectors of Cuban labour had wielded since the late 19th century had lost most of its momentum by 1935 for several reasons. In the 1920's and early 1930's President Machado combined progressive labour legislation to depoliticize the moderate labour faction, cooptation to defuse a general strike and lull the collaborative PSP into legal status and government jobs, and overt repression against remaining labour militants. Labour became further split over support for the short-lived radical government of Ramon Grau San Martín in 1933-1934.

While labour had challenged the very survival of the political system in the early 1930's, its hopes were dashed in the frustrated revolution of 1933. The first military coup of Fulgencio Batista ushered in a year-long policy of repression effectively stifling any significant labour militancy after 1935. Notably, the 1934-1944 period also reflected the predominance of communist leadership of the now pacified unions.⁸⁷ All governments in this period (including the Autentico governments of 1944 and 1948) sought to control labour with combinations of repression, labour legislation, wage increases and other forms of government patronage. "Graft possibilities," ideological disputes and the Cold War motivated the Autentico purge of the PSP labour leadership.⁸⁸ The marked decline in the vitality of the labour movement paralleled the marginalization of the PSP as "many of the Autentico bosses failed to uphold the standards set by their PSP predecessors. Eventually, the effects of rampant corruption and the manipulation of unions for political ends during the Prio years (1948-1952) took their toll."⁸⁹

Unions no longer served as a force for reform. Several unions even grew wealthy of their own accord. The Havana Hilton Hotel, for example, was part-owned by a local Havana union. With the aid of past legislation and the domination of the labour ministry in labour disputes, the Autenticos consolidated in Cuba a system of managed unions.⁹⁰ Ultimately Autentico policy further undermined the position of organized labour, weakening the one cohesive force that could have

opposed Batista in 1952.⁹¹

The Autentico leadership of the now dominant CTC responded to the coup on March 10, 1952 with calls for a general strike. The call went unheeded partly due to Batista's rapid capture of all communications media. Although Batista supporters penetrated the CTC, "the labour movement continued during the next six years to be controlled essentially by the same people who had dominated it between 1947 and 1952."⁹² As the top labour leader in Cuba Eusebio Mujal pursued "bread and butter" trade unionism (much like the PSP) along with a self-interested political position bereft of principle. Those Autenticos in dominant positions within the CTC in the era of the second Batista regime became essentially "Mujalista"--opportunistic and adaptable to constantly changing political currents.⁹³ A rural-urban dichotomy was now added to the east-west regional division in the development of the Cuban labour movement. The communists maintained a significant level of control over numerous rural workers, representing 40 of 120 sugar mill locals.⁹⁴ The bulk of organized and commercial labour was concentrated in Havana, where Mujalistas in control of the CTC predominated. Organized labour in Cuba underwent significant structural change. The system that had allowed for some intimacy between the CTC and previous Batista and Autentico regimes no longer existed. The Autentico Mujalistas now representing the CTC "were loyal to no one but themselves."⁹⁵ Collaboration was based on convenience.

Unlike the rest of Latin America, years of political intervention in Cuban labour-management relations had left behind a series of unusually complex and unjust wage and salary norms. James O'Connor comments that the relatively high rates, the highest in Latin America, and the government policy of running small and inefficient sugar centrales generated a low ratio of labour productivity, especially in the sugar industry. The labour structure in prerevolutionary Cuba can be described as unduly rigid and unpracticable.⁹⁶ A labour market per se was no longer in effect due to the inflexible government regulation of work, seniority and job tenure practices.⁹⁷ The Ministry of Labour's incessant interference largely negated the function of collective bargaining. Protective labour legislation was unevenly enforced in rural and urban regions while racial discrimination compounded the irrationality of the system.⁹⁸ The pro-labour sections of the 1940 constitution were largely honored in the breach. Numerous significant wage increases were implemented when political crisis reared its head during Batista's first regime. Raises that the employer could not fulfil were picked up by the government. The second Batista regime's assumption of this function contributed to organized labour's lack of support for the 26 July Movement.⁹⁹ At the same time, "because of the nervous truce which existed between Batista and the Mujalista CTC, any rollback on wage increases was out of the question."¹⁰⁰

As opposition to Batista increased in the late 1950's,

several smaller but violent strikes occurred largely in the eastern regions. The 1955 abortive sugar workers strike, the largest action, was swiftly defused. Though Batista had not discounted potential militant labour support for the Sierra Maestra guerrillas, he was confidently aware of the character of the Autentico leadership of the CTC who consistently suppressed actions supportive of the revolution.¹⁰¹

If the working class struggle represented "the principle conflict within Cuban society" in the 1950's, the general strikes of August 1957 and April 1958 would surely have been more decisive in impact.¹⁰² Nonetheless, both strikes collapsed for several reasons, the most important one being the CTC's unflinching support for Batista. Individual members of the working class were "increasingly disposed to act outside the official party and trade union organizations."¹⁰³

Disaffected members of the communist PSP also acted individually and, like their labour counterparts, only in the final stages of the insurrection. Prior to late 1958, working class unity was virtually nonexistent. Nevertheless, grassroots discontent had emerged despite the restricted political space imposed by collaborationist trade union leaders and a repressive state. Batista could not relax entirely and police and military resources were tied up keeping labour under control. On the other hand, at no time before the final weeks of the insurrection could the proletariat be counted upon to act as a unified class.

Labour leaders maintained a tight grip on the Cuban

labour movement. They feared the implications of a radicalized movement: loss of formal control, violent Batista reprisals, even the possibility of Batista restoring the PSP to its formal stronghold. The CTC also consolidated its hold by centralizing collection of union dues, effectively controlling the operating budgets of individual unions. Organized labour was a non-entity in the opposition to the Batista order. This by no means denies the revolutionary aspirations of members of the working class. Individual workers' sentiments, however, must be differentiated from the "working class struggle" which was not a factor in the Batista era. Cuban labour on the whole supported Batista until the very end.¹⁰⁴

Anti-Batista opposition as a whole increased in the later 1950's due in part to the rising tide of corruption and repression. Batista was no stranger to authoritarian rule. The caudillo had effectively tamed the militancy of Cuban labour when he invoked a brutal martial law that lasted from March 1934 to the summer of 1935. Large scale deportation, executions and imprisonment had a stark effect on the revolutionary nationalism of the Cuban left. The integration of these previously rebellious groups into the corrupt Cuban democracy of the next two decades attests in large part to the success of that oppressive policy.

Like Machado, Batista wielded all available instruments to ensure order. Corruption and graft flourished with the new order. Batista found eager allies in the military and the Cabinet, dismissing the unfaithful and coopting others.¹⁰⁵ By

the end of 1952 he adopted a constitutional code under which all freedoms, parties and even Congress were suspended virtually at whim. The army and the police, meanwhile, were reorganized and fitted with abundant new weaponry.¹⁰⁶ Twenty percent of the regime's budget was "absorbed" by the military.¹⁰⁷

The regime's suspension of guarantees contrasted to its use of physical violence. Aside from the student and 26 July movements, Batista apparently managed, though perhaps not intentionally, to keep the opposition off balance by the manner in which he alternately suspended and reopened constitutional rights, allowing certain groups freedoms while forbidding them to others. Major Cuban publications like Bohemia and El Mundo persistently published scathing anti-government articles throughout the 1950's. Judson observes that "liberalization was followed by repression, relaxation by rigidity." No single group was capable of achieving political hegemony.¹⁰⁸ The dictator was more consistent in the exercise of his monopoly on violence. The mobilization of the army and police to put down the Moncada attack, the arbitrary and brutal torture and murder of survivors and suspects in the aftermath became widely characteristic reactions to the spreading anti-government protests, demonstrations, and coup attempts, eventually eliminating future Moncada-like attempts.¹⁰⁹ By the end of 1956, arbitrary police executions, arrests and torture of civilians became commonplace.¹¹⁰ The Batista military

competed with the police in the terror while pro-Batista paramilitary bands under the aegis of Batista's ally, Senator Rolando Masferrer, vied with both: "Terror ruled the country. Torture became an everyday event, corpses of young people appeared in the streets and in the plains bodies could be seen hanging from trees."¹¹¹

This atmosphere intensified in the failed November 1956 Santiago uprising which was to coincide with Fidel Castro's rebel force landing in Western Oriente province. As in Moncada almost four years earlier, the crucial element of surprise was quickly lost as key members were uncovered by police, killed in crossfire, or dispersed under attack (numerous llano 26 July members at this point escaped to the Sierra Maestra). In Holguin and elsewhere, the 26 July carried out little more than a few isolated acts of terrorism. In Havana, the 26 July remained inactive for lack of arms, unaware of the uprising until it was too late to respond.¹¹² The DR and other groups had also received word of the rebels' landing plans, but too late to take any effective action. The Autenticos refused to cooperate because they had received no such message from Prio, and because "they felt it was too late to risk their men in a useless action."¹¹³

Despite the near-chaotic involvement of hundreds of rebels in the uprising, casualties among the resistance and Batista forces were minimal until the government responded with indiscriminate reprisals. Civil liberties were suspended throughout Oriente province as squads of soldiers patrolled

the streets. Over one hundred students were held for trial in connection with the uprising. Suspects against whom evidence of involvement was lacking were simply shot in the streets.¹¹⁴ The Batista forces' "counter-terrorism" became increasingly indiscriminate and arbitrary.

The 26 July underground took action consistent with their limited ability. In Santiago, soldiers and police informers were shot. Canefield fires spread. In Havana, members of the 26 July and DR distributed pamphlets denouncing the regime while sporadic bombings also underscored the protests.¹¹⁵ Batista's police assumed that because the majority of the rebels were students or ex-students, all students were suspect.¹¹⁶ Batista had long characterized the University as an assembly ground for "criminals, terrorists and communists," and sought to remedy the protection the university provided.¹¹⁷ Police arrested students indiscriminately, and often in their zeal to uncover rebels "tortured them indescribably, hoping to turn up something."¹¹⁸ Heightened government terror generated a dual effect on the Cuban populace. On the one hand, it contributed significantly to suppressing sectors of opposition. At the same time, however, it also generated new rebel recruits from other sectors, notably the eastern provinces.

The agency through which the community provided support to both the urban underground and the fighting units in the mountains was the Civic Resistance. It was charged with fund raising, collection, storage and transportation of military

provisions, as well as similar logistical and economic activities. This formed a significant part of the rebel army's urban supply network. Such aid had hitherto been provided on an informal, individual basis. Now it became the responsibility of a broader organization.¹¹⁹ The clandestine Havana branch of the Civic Resistance also consisted of members from the banking and business classes.¹²⁰ The Civic Resistance was an urban support group for the 26 July, which its leaders took great pains to organize into cells.¹²¹ During this stage, observed Guevara, "the Llano comrades constituted the majority [of 26 July national leadership], and their political background, which had not been very much influenced by the process of revolutionary maturation, led them to favor a certain type of 'civil' action.... The divergencies were already apparent, but they were not yet strong enough to provoke the violent discussion which characterized the second year of the war."¹²²

It was precisely in the urban centers where Batista's repressive forces concentrated their control. Movements like the DR and the Havana 26 July were targets for incessant brutality in the cities, and to many llano cadres it became far more important to accumulate arms, men and resources there to fight the dictatorship.¹²³ The insurrectionary incapacity that developed in the llano quickly confirmed for the Sierra leadership that, on the contrary, the total direction of the movement should be theirs. Batista's repressive apparatus was too effective in the cities to enable clandestine activities

to involve little more than piecemeal attempts at revolt. Batista's police became very adept at infiltration, something much more difficult to achieve in the Sierra's developing free territory. A single military command, secured in the mountains, would more effectively avoid the dispersal of forces and resources, Castro theorized. He had written that "the city is a cemetery of revolutionaries and resources."¹²⁴ Castro campaigned throughout 1957 with the slogan "All guns, all bullets, and all resources to the Sierra."¹²⁵

On March 13, 1957, José Antonio Echeverría sought to pierce Batista's "aura of invincibility" by staging an attack on the Presidential Palace in Havana. A group of armed students attempted to penetrate the palace with the goal of assassinating Batista in his second floor office, seizing the communications office and inciting popular upheaval. The plan failed. The attackers failed to find Batista, in a private chamber on the third floor, and were defeated by troop reinforcements from various army and navy strongholds less than two miles away.¹²⁶ The palace attack took on the dimensions of a putsch. Many of the movement's members, including Echeverría, were killed in the firefight, others escaped to the countryside, while still others sought refuge in a local safehouse, only to be betrayed in April by a member of the communist youth. A massacre followed.¹²⁷ The Batista police all but eliminated the DR as a movement.

The masses were as yet far from being universally opposed to the dictatorship. Pro-government rallies condemning the

palace attack consisted of coerced and spontaneous demonstrations by numerous elements of Cuban society, from Church and employer organizations to rural labour and the peasantry. To many of the latter, the students were "terrorists" while Batista remained a respectable and charismatic caudillo.¹²⁸ The majority still envisioned no alternative. Had it been otherwise, the regime would have dissolved much sooner, or at least, the "total war" that ensued in 1958 would have erupted earlier. As it was, even the influential practitioners of Santeria or other Cuban sects continued to believe in the infallible "mission" of Batista, who still commanded the protection of the saints. At this point, only the confidence of pro-Batista groups had been momentarily shaken by the palace attack.

In June, the civic institutions comprising forty-five representative organizations of the country issued a call for a national compromise to help end the civil war, pleading that the government demonstrate "good faith by deeds" so that "the insurrectionists should accept a truce."¹²⁹ The statement predictably fell on deaf ears.

País, meanwhile, in addition to restructuring the 26 July and coordinating a general strike, began formulating an ideological focus for the movement of which he informed Castro.¹³⁰ The result was the Sierra Manifesto, discussed in the next chapter. País was convinced that the low level of urban organization and political consciousness in the working class concerning a general strike and armed insurrection had

been overcome. As Judson attests, País's conviction was proven true, but was limited mostly to Oriente.¹³¹ On July 30, 1957, Batista police tracked down and killed the llano leader in Santiago. In protest, demonstrations and a general strike erupted, largely spontaneous. Santiago was paralysed for almost a week, as shops and stores closed in protest. The largely US-owned Nicaro nickel mines were shut down. Stores in Guantanamo remained closed as did those in Holguin and other Oriente cities. By the first week of August, some strike activity had spread to Havana. But by the end of the first week, government censorship and repression ended the upheaval.¹³² Through an absence of prior planning (short of partial organization by País), the "spontaneous expression of repudiation" swiftly atrophied.¹³³

Many 26 July llano leaders, determined to foment insurrection, collaborated with sympathetic junior naval officers in another coup attempt coupled with a call for popular insurrection via general strike.¹³⁴ The planned surprise attack fell apart when several key naval officers in Havana, fearing infiltration, called off the attack--all centers but Cienfuegos were contacted. Rebels captured the port city after hours of gruelling firefights. Censorship and a "purchased press" concealed the uprising from the rest of the country.¹³⁵ Government forces bombarded the city from the air, while armoured columns surrounded the rebels. The bloody battle that followed, despite "almost all the 60,000 inhabitants of the city" being "sympathetic toward the

revolt," ended in the government's favour.¹³⁶ The revolt was crushed in particularly brutal fashion. Hundreds were buried alive, and more became victims of murder, torture, mutilation and other atrocities.¹³⁷

The year 1957 ended in pessimistic fashion for the urban insurrectionaries of the 26 July. For every incident of urban terrorism, local bombings, and personal attacks on government members, state terrorism increased. Public reaction toward the commonplace scattering of bodies along Cuban city streets also intensified in early 1958.¹³⁸ But no one had succeeded in delivering a decisive enough blow to the Batista order to shake its still massive foundations. Meanwhile, another general strike was planned for April 1958. This one would surely topple the dictator.

For the guerrillas of the Sierra Maestra, the tragedies of Goicuria, the palace attack, and Cienfuegos were all evidence of a fundamentally-flawed llano worldview. None of the leadership of the urban movement seriously considered the potential of guerrilla war to be greater than that of urban warfare.¹³⁹ Thus, their forces were retained in the city, vulnerably awaiting the army's decisive frontal assault, never considering the formation of a solid front in the mountains, often only a few minutes away.¹⁴⁰ Guevara's lesson for the future elaborates upon Castro's statement on the city as cemetery:

He who has the strength dictates the strategy...

Large-scale killing of civilians, repeated failures,

murders committed by the dictatorship in various aspects of the struggle we have analyzed, point to guerrilla actions on favorable terrain as the best expression of the technique of popular struggle against a despotic and still strong government... After the guerrilla force was set up, we could count our losses on our fingers - comrades of outstanding courage and tenacity in battle, to be sure. But in the cities it was not only the resolute ones who died, but many among their followers who were not total revolutionaries, many who were innocent of any involvement at all. This was due to greater vulnerability in the face of repressive action.¹⁴¹

Chapter Three: La Sierra

At dawn on Friday, November 30, 1956, Frank Pais ordered his small detachment of armed 26 July urban guerrillas to commence the military operations in Santiago in support of the planned landing of the 26 July expeditionaries off the coast of Oriente province. Llano leaders had no way of knowing that the lumbering vessel Granma was two days behind schedule. Deprived of the surprise element, the Santiago uprising lost its momentum. After a few initial forays, including the capture of weapons at a police installation, the urban insurrection quickly succumbed to numerically superior anti-guerrilla troops in Santiago. In Havana and elsewhere, the movement and its tributaries lacked the means to carry out a concerted armed response. The government, meanwhile, was alerted to the landing of Fidel Castro's group.

The 26 July forces had also situated themselves along the coast between Niquero and Pilon, awaiting in vain the landing of the Granma. Upon realizing that the expedition would not land as scheduled, and having received word of the Santiago disaster, the movement's coordinator for Manzanillo, Celia Sanchez Manduley, ordered a brisk retreat that Saturday night, December 1. The Granma force would be on its own.¹

Castro's group finally landed at dawn, December 2. As Guevara later remarked, it was more of a shipwreck than a militarily-coordinated landing of revolutionary forces. Having lost direction, the yacht stalled in lowtide over a mile south

of the projected landing point. Forced to abandon ship and much of their supplies, the group waded for hours through a torturous, mile-long mangrove swamp before finally reaching shore. Several men had gone missing, and the force retained only a fraction of its weapons and supplies. But Fidel Castro had nevertheless fulfilled his promise: He had returned to his homeland before the end of 1956, and was now prepared to wage war on Batista. Like Marti who, sixty years earlier, had landed at Playitas in darkness with a handful of compatriots, Castro stood on the coast of Oriente, "anxious to liberate Cuba" from her enemies.²

As the leader of the besieged 26 July invasion force, Fidel Castro's profound appreciation for history facilitated his decision to initiate a guerrilla war from Cuba's most traditionally rebellious province. Oriente reflected the profound contrast between the eastern and western regions of Cuba. Havana and Santiago, the western and eastern population centers of Cuba, "historically, might almost have been islands in themselves."³ Western Cuba, by the turn of the century, had long existed as a system forged by a capitalist export economy. The destruction of the independence war, the replacement of a war-torn and bankrupt Cuban planter class by a US sugar latifundia class, prompted a migration either to the cities or to the promise of the east. Like the west before 1880, the eastern provinces flourished until the 1910's as an independent region of subsistence agriculture. Unlike the west, in the east sugar remained one agricultural form out of

many.

Capitalism arrived later in Oriente and the eastern provinces and, initially at least, encountered greater resistance. Nevertheless, eastern Cuba soon overtook the west in exploitation of land for sugar production. The Cuban "dance of the millions" succumbed in the 1920's to dramatically falling sugar prices. Small mill bankruptcies fed the voracious appetite of the larger North American companies. By the 1930's, some 5.8 million acres were under sugar cultivation--over 64 percent of Oriente province.⁴ North American speculators rapidly overpowered communal properties through expropriation and monopolization. The few wealthy Cubans who gradually supplanted North Americans in control of Cuba's primary industry functioned no differently. The pattern of land concentration maintained an east-west distribution.⁵

By the 1950's, Oriente's smaller subdivisions had essentially given way to more concentrated holdings. Sugar latifundia expansion and the increasing stress on production for export combined to reduce land available for production for local consumption. Oriente's independent farmer and peasant class was uprooted and converted to wage labour.⁶ The overwhelming majority of the workforce was of the proletariat, most employed only during the sugar harvest or zafra. Over 50 percent of all workers were temporary rural wage earners averaging barely four months of employment annually, earning less than US\$1.50 per day.⁷ Of the poorest 40 percent of Cubans who received 6 percent of the national income, Oriente

bore the brunt of the burden, "Wages were low and unemployment was high. Much of the population was migratory, most were landless, and few had hopes of acquiring land. The lottery and the resurrection remained their only hopes for improvement."⁸ The small-to-large landholding ratio became decidedly disproportionate.⁹ By 1950 in Oriente, less than 25 percent of agriculturists ran a farm; many (1,596) farmers owned plots of land of less than one hectare, and many more (11,447) were without legitimate ownership--these latter were the squatters or precaristas.¹⁰

Precaristas derived their name from the typically precarious living they endured occupying plots often on unused company property or other estate land since large scale expropriation eliminated traditional forms of subsistence. The only peasants directly linked to Fidel Castro's insurrection at the outset, most were concentrated in Oriente along the Sierra Maestra range (see map 2).¹¹ The squatters and bandits who roamed the Sierra Maestra, a small fraction of the 3 percent of the population that was the traditional peasantry, were the progeny of the thousands first evicted from their lands by US companies after 1898.¹² The pattern of violence between the precaristas and the landowners and government forces endured well into the post-World War II period.¹³

As more rural communities were uprooted and displaced, many of the outcasts joined the swelling ranks of the rural proletariat as part-time itinerant workers on large estates or

as part-time indigent cultivators on marginal land.¹⁴ A small percentage of squatters, labourers and small farmers refused such dependency, striking out at the new order as bandits. Many dependent on peasant support for their survival, bandits rejected "the passive role of the submissive peasant... engaging on its own terms the coercive authority of the state. Their mere existence offered the possibility of remedy to oppression and redress of grievances. In this capacity bandits demonstrated that injustice was not irreversible and that the powerless were not helpless."¹⁵ As in the independence war of 1895-1898, bandits entered into the revolution as one aspect of a multiple mobilization.¹⁶ In this context, a coalition with bandits offered a relatively greater chance of enabling radical change. As late as 1968, the US government's "Survey of the Alliance for Progress" acknowledged

an ideologically unfocused quasi-insurgency of peasant uprisings as one aspect of political life in many Latin American countries. Usually these have sought a remedy for a specific grievance or have been the attempt of land squatters to protect their claims against the government forces. This shades into rural banditry. Peasant-connected incidents of this type are not insurgency but can develop into it. Guerrillas often utilize peasant unrest or incorporate rural bandits into their ranks.¹⁷

Though specific groups of peasants remained actively opposed to the regimen of corporate sugar latifundia, most

succumbed to it, its state supporters and its paramilitary protectors, the US-inspired Rural Guard. Abusive and arbitrary, the Rural Guard terrorized generations of farmers and peasants with the complete support of the state.¹⁸ Cuba's migratory, underemployed rural proletariat eventually lost the desire for land and were not "well-ripened by latifundismo" for converting their economic perceptions into political action.¹⁹ Though this group's participation was a significant condition for the success of the 1959 Revolution, "they had little to do with either its initiation or its execution."²⁰ The "politics of protest," popular rumblings of a self-respecting peasantry exemplified in the war of independence, had all but disappeared by the Revolution of 1933.²¹ The population of Oriente's expansive sugar regions had been effectively beaten into submission, rendered docile and apolitical. The disaffection that endured centered among the educated urban population. For a long period, the rural attitude became one of resignation. Impoverished rural conditions persisted for decades, but the bulk of the rural population refused to rise up against the new order until late 1958. Though general approval would be an inaccurate assessment, the overall situation before then was not politically volatile.²² The Cuban insurrection of the 1950's was not a peasant-led movement. Undoubtedly, peasants were involved. Significantly, however, the extent of that involvement was never widespread until substantial support arrived late in the insurrectionary process. Having stated

this, however, it must be emphasized that the only peasant group that had retained the rebellious "spirit of 1895" was the precaristas.

This "class fraction" of the Cuban peasantry was relentless in its struggle for survival. Several generations had fought off attempts by the armed forces or Rural Guard to evict them. Their mobility and intimate knowledge of the Sierra Maestra's terrain and its populace enabled the 26 July guerrillas to survive and progress. The Batista military's frequent abuse of peasants suspected of aiding the guerrillas converted many of the peasants into rebel recruits, though many more were terrorized into evacuating the area in the earliest stages.²³ In addition, the rebels' policy of paying for the food purchased from peasants (often dearly), of executing their infamous persecutors, and of putting the rebels to work in the coffee harvest in the spring of 1957 gradually converted cautious sympathy into more significant support. With the eventual establishment of liberated zones, the rebel army gradually absorbed small bands of poorly-armed fugitives and bandits who had fled to the remotest regions of Oriente.²⁴

When Castro and some sixteen survivors first arrived in the Sierra Maestra in December 1956, they had, as Perez eloquently asserts, "stepped into a tradition of rebellion, however vague and ill-defined. They came upon armed struggle, they did not introduce it."²⁵ The fidelistas encountered several pariah communities of peasants surviving at precarious

levels of subsistence. Pérez calculates that some 50 percent of the Sierra Maestra's population were squatters who "continued to exist at the margins of criminality, as outlaws and bandits, in the inhospitable mountains" in a more or less "permanent state of rebellion."²⁶

Fidel Castro's original intention had not been centered on waging war from a rural base. Faustino Pérez and Carlos Franqui confirm that the first phase was to be the takeover of Santiago de Cuba as the rebel army attacked military installations at Niquero and went on to capture Bayamo and Manzanillo. All this was to culminate in a general strike.²⁷ Waging guerrilla warfare in the Sierra Maestra mountains was designated "plan B." Yet this desperate alternative became the essence of the Revolution. As the campaign against the Batista order increasingly centered on the Sierra, a new mythology took hold about peasant revolution and rural virtue that was to underline the future legitimacy of the Cuban Revolution as well as influence the Left worldwide.²⁸

It would be inaccurate to categorize the war in the Sierra as a peasant war. There is more than a subtle distinction between a peasant army and an army with peasants. The guerrilla leadership was predominantly urban and middle class, although assuming the "emblematic guise of the land," and many of the rank and file were the result of the recruiting efforts of the urban 26 July. The llano underground did indeed carry out extensive agitation, sabotage and logistical support to help buttress the Sierra campaign.

Balfour quotes estimates of over 30,000 acts of sabotage.²⁹ Yet the movement in the cities, while succeeding in providing messengers, recruits and supplies to the rebel army, proved incapable of toppling the dictatorship on its own. Ultimately, the guerrilla campaign that culminated in the collapse of the Batista order manifested the eventual shift away from the original program of combined urban and rural efforts to become centered in the Sierra.

Doggedly pursued by the Batista military, Castro's rebel army should have been eliminated at the first disastrous battle at Alegría de Pio in early December 1956. A series of fatal errors led them into one disaster after another. Universo Sanchez, one of the few survivors, relates how their amateurishness and lowered guard in Alegria de Pio resulted in their exposing themselves to attack, allowing their first peasant guide, a charcoal worker, to leave them and betray them to Batista troops nearby.³⁰ The ensuing air and land attack caught the bewildered rebels by surprise. Batista's army, far more professional than the amateur rebel fighters, surrounded and almost annihilated them. The original group of eighty-one was reduced not to the apostolic Twelve as is often recorded, but to between sixteen and twenty men.³¹ The guerrillas would utilize such early and near-fatal mistakes as lessons for their later successes.³²

In the aftermath of Alegría de Pio, the surviving rebels wandered in scattered and confused fashion, making contact with some of the tenuous 26 July peasant network, and

eventually regrouping.³³ Despite momentary redemption with a victory at La Plata (a military post) in January 1957, the rebels remained largely isolated in this early period. Pervasive demoralization, the result of the loss of many comrades, along with cautious peasant assistance coupled with betrayal, preyed on rebel morale. In addition, the group was almost constantly bombarded by Batista's airforce especially in late January and early February. Peasant betrayals were accompanied by desertions, as Guevara recounts: "Our situation was not a happy one in those days. The column lacked cohesion. It had neither the spirit which comes from the experience of war nor a clear ideological consciousness. Now one comrade would leave us, now another; many requested assignments in the city which were sometimes much more dangerous but which meant an escape from the rugged conditions in the countryside".³⁴

Revolutionary justice and the rebel policy of humane treatment of wounded and captured were observed in this period. Barely two dozen men by mid-February, the guerrillas promulgated and enforced a code of justice binding rebel and peasant alike to laws against common crimes, crimes of informing or treason, and crimes including the abuse of Oriente peasants by local caciques. Offenders were often swiftly tried in summary courts martial and executed.³⁵ Against the background of harsh rebel laws thrived a policy of humane treatment for peasant families violated by Batista troops and for prisoners captured or wounded by the rebels.³⁶ Such treatment gradually became a powerful moral force for the

rebel army, as later events in the Sierra would confirm.³⁷ With time, the guerrillas constituted "the real and effective authority to whom peasants referred all problems."³⁸ Reprisals from Batista's troops or the Rural Guard occurred when they periodically penetrated the small settlements.³⁹ Every Sierra peasant was viewed as a potential enemy. Thus, at the beginning, the peasants, if not out of political conviction or love for the rebels, found themselves "forced to cooperate by the dictates of survival and self-interest."⁴⁰ In the absence of legitimate authority, the local authority consolidated by the rebel army soon constituted an alternative legitimacy.

In late December, Fidel Castro sent Faustino Pérez back to the cities to make contact with the llano 26 July, inform them of the rebels' activities, coordinate supply lines, and recruit more fighters. On February 1, a day of several desertions, Pérez returned with ten new recruits and supplies from the Manzanillo underground. Several of the new recruits were precaristas from the region. Now the rebel group assumed some of its peasant army aspect, though it could never be accurately described as a peasant army.⁴¹ The rebel army itself asserted that "it was an army for the peasants, and included peasants, but not that it was born of peasants."⁴²

February and March 1957 were ambiguous months for the small rebel army. They had not yet entrenched themselves in any liberated territory. Several rebels became lost, new recruits continued to abandon the group, and at least one Granma veteran deserted, all of which prompted the first of

several purges in the interests of maintaining unity.⁴³ By the end of February, after several recruits were expelled and those lost had regrouped, the "Reunified Revolutionary Army" consisted of barely twenty men.⁴⁴ Though a loose network of supplies, informers and pro-rebel settlements was maintained, constant rebel mobility was necessary at least until the end of 1957. The struggle to establish a more stable and supportive relationship with the peasant population often clashed with peasant betrayals.⁴⁵ The guerrillas did have some impact on national and international public opinion, and support from urban cadres began to increase. Rebel morale was still low "but an element of indomitability was also present."⁴⁶

The spirit of indomitability internalized by many of the rebels was not without foundation. The survivors of the Granma landing had eluded a force of over one thousand troops mobilized in December to vanquish the expedition. In January, the rebel force carried out four raids on military posts like the one at La Plata, accumulating limited amounts of arms and supplies with each assault. Peasant support systems, still rudimentary, provided enough security to enable the guerrillas to survive this crucial stage. Batista had, by March, committed three thousand troops to the Sierra Maestra, but his overconfidence (manifested in his public declarations of Castro's death) caused him to pull these troops back to their posts just when a more consistent commitment probably would have eliminated the rebel force in its most vulnerable moment.

Such inconsistency on the part of the Batista regime would ultimately prove costly.

Two events were of particular importance for the guerrilla force in this period for their contribution to the survival of the rebel army. Through Faustino Pérez, contact was made with the urban 26 July which conferred with the rebels in the Sierra in order to coordinate a network of communication and supply lines. In addition, arrangements previously made to inform public opinion as to the program and condition of the rebel forces culminated in the publicity given them by New York Times correspondent Herbert Matthews. The temporary lifting of censorship enabled Matthews's interview and photographs of Castro and his rebels to circulate nationally and internationally, making Cubans and the world aware of the guerrillas' survival and continued fighting, and of Batista's dubious claims of triumph over the rebel army.⁴⁷ They were made aware of the exemplary treatment given to peasants, and to the captured and wounded government soldiers by the guerrillas.⁴⁸

The Batista military's incessant abuses of Sierra inhabitants and Matthews's revelations of a defiant Castro gave new hope and inspiration to the 26 July underground opposition in the cities. This regenerative process was all the more vital during the months of rebel wandering in a largely unfamiliar and as yet unsecured territory.⁴⁹ Urban demonstrations increased and the Civic Resistance came into being, the coordination of which was dominated by 26 July

cadres but also aided by remnants of the Ortodoxo leadership and other activists from the professions and other middle class sectors engaged in collecting funds, printing pamphlets, coordinating supply lines, and moving arms and ammunition.⁵⁰

In March Frank País sent aid to the Sierra rebels in the form of some fifty-eight highly trained urban fighters and a quantity of arms and supplies. They were driven to the region in trucks by Huber Matos, a successful Oriente teacher and rice farmer.⁵¹ Arriving in mid-March, the new recruits from the cities brought the rebels' number to between seventy-five and eighty men.⁵² The recruits proved as ill-prepared for mountain struggle as the veterans had once been. Though victims of low morale themselves, the veteran rebels had become toughened: "We saw in the new troops all the defects which those who had landed on the Granma had: Lack of discipline, inability to adjust to major difficulties, lack of decision..."⁵³ The rebel leadership took on the task of inspiring discipline and morale in the new recruits.⁵⁴

Precarista support grew, but guerrilla ties to the general rural populace of the Sierra Maestra were not yet strong. By the late spring of 1957, only Crescencio Pérez's people along with Guillermo García and Ciro Frias, two early rural recruits, circulated through the range providing food and information. Precarista support remained divided partly through the efforts of the Batista army. Under the rural command of Major Pedro Barrera Pérez, government forces undertook a more effective strategy in the Sierra Maestra that

contrasted with more conventional tactics such as terrorism and relocation camps. Barrera's plan included a single command, the dismissal of naval officers responsible for terrorizing the peasantry, and a comprehensive set of reforms for the precaristas. Aided by three of Batista's ministers, the army's achievements included housing construction, medical services, plans for school construction and curriculum, a census of children, and even a free kitchen at which hundreds of people were reportedly fed daily.⁵⁵ Within a month, the regime had begun to "wean away the affections of the precaristas, suspicious as most of them were of both Castro and Batista."⁵⁶

By the end of March, enough inroads had been made by Barrera to initiate the remainder of his strategy. This included the construction of an impenetrable line through which the rebel army could neither be reinforced nor supplied.⁵⁷ This phase never saw fruition, however. Although, by early April, Barrera's campaign was gaining significant support from the precaristas (hundreds had rallied to the army's side), effectively isolating the guerrillas and discouraging new recruits, it nevertheless became ensnared and strangled by an "apparatus of intrigue and misrepresentation."⁵⁸ Batista's suspicious and corruptible Chief of Staff, General Carlos Tabernilla, circulated via his cronies innuendo tying Barrera's reforms to charges of fraternization with the enemy. By the end of April, a potentially fatal strategy for the rebels was replaced by the

common government campaign of unrestrained atrocities. Barrera was replaced, but the comprehensive regional network of informers and government agents established by him remained intact.⁵⁹

The guerrillas, meanwhile, had spent weeks of constant mobility simultaneously eluding the Batista army and gradually establishing lines of communication and supply with peasants deemed trustworthy. Increasing peasant-rebel contact after the collapse of the Barrera experiment affected the guerrillas' awareness "of the necessity for a definite change in the life of the people."⁶⁰ The largely urbanite rebel army had feared and distrusted the Sierra's inhabitants. Indeed, there were those who had betrayed the rebel force to Batista's troops, but there were others within the "class fraction" of the peasantry who gave generously to the rebels at great personal risk. The Alegrio de Pio aftermath, the example of Crescencio Pérez and his band of followers, along with the generally harsh life of the precarista in the Sierra, generated in the rebels a level of empathy previously absent. Despite the vicissitudes of their experiences with the Sierra's inhabitants, the guerrillas began to appreciate the plight of the peasantry there. It became comprehensible that "still many campesinos fled terrified at our presence, for fear of the reprisals the government took when it learned of even the most minimal contact between the inhabitants of the zone and our group." The rebels' increased awareness generated further revisions in their theories of social revolution in Cuba. The

perspectives of Castro and Guevara took on more consistent form, though actual application took somewhat longer, "The idea of agrarian reform appeared clear as the guerrilla group and the peasantry began to merge into one single mass, without our being able to say at which moment on the long revolutionary road this happened, nor at which moment the words became profoundly real and we became a part of the peasantry."⁶¹

Though such a judgment is somewhat romanticized, the course of the insurrection had taken on a cold logic for the rebel leadership. With small but increasingly successful actions by the guerrillas, the peasants could see that Batista's army was proving incapable of ending the guerrilla war, though it certainly could uproot the peasants, destroy their homes, and even kill them. Increasingly, the guerrillas represented "the only force which could resist and punish the abuses, and thus to take refuge amidst the guerrillas, where their lives could be protected, was a good solution."⁶² At the same time, precarista recruits were loath to focus on anything other than the immediate goal of "seeing Batista brought down:"

Some were with the guerrillas because of personal grievances against individual guards or soldiers, or because their families had been hurt by the repression after El Ubero. The troops carrying out evacuations acted ruthlessly. Guillermo García later recalled the early months of the struggle as too harsh to spend much

time on political ideology: 'Who had time for that? For all of us, there was only one thing on our minds--to beat Batista. We spent all our time worrying about that. How to get more guns, more men....'⁶³

As May progressed, the rebel column's position steadily improved. Regular supplies arrived from the cities and publicity increased.⁶⁴ Betrayals and troop incursions persisted as did desertions and expulsions. As Guevara lamented: "We had to double our precautions. Our struggle against the lack of physical, ideological and moral preparation among the men was a daily one; the results were not always encouraging."⁶⁵ In late May, the rebels overwhelmed the El Ubero army outpost as a means of diverting the Batista military's attention away from the landing of an expedition from Florida.⁶⁶ Unbeknownst to Castro, the Corinthia expedition was massacred by government troops on the same day.⁶⁷ The El Ubero assault, nevertheless, represented the rebel force's first frontal attack and a "coming of age" for Fidel Castro's army.

By the summer of 1957, the first fissures began to appear between the positions of the 26 July's Sierra and llano factions. An essential part of this conflict was the llano leadership's realization that Castro intended more than a simple restoration of democracy.⁶⁸

In mid-July, Guevara (promoted to commandante), his squad separated since El Ubero as a result of government counterattacks, rejoined the main guerrilla force at Pico

Turquino. By now, a qualitative change had occurred. The Sierra force, a mixture of some two hundred rural and urban recruits, were better armed, more disciplined and better known among the region's peasants. With the consolidation of the group's military position in the Sierra, Castro now confronted a struggle within revolutionary ranks. Frank País, the effective link between the Sierra and the llano, had written the rebel leader of the increasingly dire situation for the 26 July urban cadres and of the need to reorganize the entire movement and its programme. País and the llano leadership had initiated their plans before contacting Castro. The guerrilla leader, not having been consulted beforehand, was merely being informed of the changes. They included the division of power between the Sierra and the cities, with power concentrated in the hands of a few urban leaders.⁶⁹ The National Directorate would include six provincial delegates, the guerrilla army was to be represented by one.⁷⁰ Such a framework appeared reasonable to the llano leaders. It was the actions of urban 26 July cadres, after all, that constituted the war in the cities.

The subordination of the rebel army to the urban movement made little strategic sense to Castro. The force in the Sierra had made more progress in less than one year than the urban movement had made in several years. Though in August 1957 Guevara would assert that "Batistiano troops left the Sierra once and for all" and that a "truly liberated zone" was in the making, the year brought consecutive failures for the

resistance outside the Sierra Maestra.¹¹ The November Santiago uprising had collapsed; the March palace attack ended in massacre, as would the Cienfuegos naval revolt in September. Likewise, on April 9 1958, an attempted general strike was to prove a resounding failure for the urban resistance.¹² Despite the importance of the urban movement as a component of government destabilization, the concentration of Batista's military and intelligence forces in the cities practically ensured that the combatants there could achieve no better than a stalemate.

Further heated debate was preempted by catastrophe and compromise. The "compromise" was the signing of the Sierra Maestra Manifesto (July 12 1957). The agreement superseded País's Santiago manifesto though it went no further than previous programmes. It had the effect of temporarily bridging the political gap between the Sierra and llano wings by the invocation of "national unity."¹³ Further conflict was also sidetracked by the catastrophic end of the llano movement's chief, Frank País, shot and killed on July 30 by Batista police.

In the autumn of 1957, the guerrilla army continued consolidating its position in the Sierra Maestra, expanding its settled encampments farther east. Guevara and his column marched southeast, capturing garrisons and weapons at Bueycito and El Hombrito in August. The following month, Guevara's column constructed the first "industries" of a territorio libre, an armoury, bakery, and a rebel newspaper,

El Cubano Libre.¹⁴ Castro's column also stepped up military activity at the same time that urban support for the Sierra increased via both the Civic Resistance movement as well as urban recruits to the Sierra.¹⁵ The "barbudos" (bearded ones) began striking with greater frequency at the villages, towns, and outposts along the edge of the Sierra. Army counterattacks became rarer.¹⁶ Betrayals, desertions, and purges remained a facet of rebel army life, but the skill and discipline of those who remained became exceptional as well as necessary as Batista reinforced the number of troops stationed in the Sierra Maestra to over five thousand.¹⁷

Batista, meanwhile, reinforced his position both militarily and politically:

The army was being built up; the government was emptying the reformatories and jails in order to fill military uniforms. Money was poured into armaments... Batista was also seeking to provide political window-dressing, with the cooperation of the legal opposition parties... and reactionary splinters of the no longer legal Ortodoxo party. General elections had been called for June 1, 1958. Batista was willing to leave the presidential palace... on condition that it be surrendered to a custodian of his choice. His interest was in real rather than apparent power.¹⁸

In November 1957, by far the largest congregation of exiles and urban opposition leaders met in Miami to forge what amounted to a weak and vaguely-defined unity pact presided

over by a newly-formed Junta de Liberación (JL). The Miami Pact was the result of the seven opposition groups' efforts (without official 26 July representation). Other than calling for the incorporation of the Sierra force into the regular army and the endorsement from the US, the Pact's articles differed little from the Sierra Maestra manifesto. The guerrilla leadership, however, was only belatedly notified. This event fuelled Castro's fears of llano-military collusion toward the establishment of a Batistato sin Batista. The infant JL's Miami Pact and the omission of any effective participation by the guerrilla leadership marked the breaking point.⁷⁹ In the midst of consolidating the first effective free territory in the Sierra Maestra, and convinced that the 26 July was strong enough to declare political independence, Castro rejected and denounced the Miami Pact.⁸⁰ He wrote on December 14, 1957: "The news of a broad and intentionally publicized agreement, which binds the future conduct of the movement without even the consideration--not to mention the elemental obligation-- of having consulted its leaders and fighters, has to be highly offensive and irritating for all of us."⁸¹ Castro asserted the independence of the 26 July, repudiating the Junta leaders abroad for "carrying out an imaginary revolution," while the 26 July leadership in Cuba was "making a real revolution."⁸² Though he exaggerated the lack of material support the rebels were receiving from the opposition, Castro's objections to "the sacrifice of certain principles fundamental to our conception of the Cuban

Revolution" were accurate.⁸³ The Miami Pact kept open the option of foreign intervention, as in 1898, if the civil war persisted. The mention of an embargo against US arms shipments to the dictatorship proved weak. Nor did the Pact appear to object to the assumption of power by a provisional military junta even if it meant the Batista military.⁸⁴

Castro's criticisms of the JL reflected the guerrilla leadership's loss of confidence in any opposition outside the Sierra. He denounced the Junta's "urban putschism" and its virtual dismissal of the guerrillas' role in the Sierra and rural Oriente. Castro implied that the traditional politicians in Miami wanted only "a new division of the spoils of public office in Cuba , and stockpiled arms while the guerrillas desperately needed them" (On the latter charge, Castro was not far off the mark--tallies by Chapelle and other scholars estimate that by war's end, arms received from the llano accounted for only 15 percent of the total rebel stock. Batista's military represented the primary source).⁸⁵ The events of the past had accumulated to reinforce the rebel leadership's conviction that the guerrilla army should determine the national direction of the movement.⁸⁶

Rejecting the direction of the military struggle from outside the mountains, Castro called for support for 26 July actions by all opposition members.⁸⁷ He proceeded to plan a provisional government, a non-partisan entity with a reconstituted judicial system (headed by Oriente judge Dr. Manuel Urrutia Lleo). The right of selection was justified

because "only the 26 July" had been consistently active in the struggle and because the Civic Resistance was slow to name someone. If necessary, the 26 July would fight alone.⁸⁸ Castro's rejection of the Miami Pact meant the death of the JL. Without the rebel army, it was a largely meaningless organization. DR and Autentico party signatories castigated the guerrilla leaders for their "coup de grace against the revolutionary unity achieved in Miami."⁸⁹ Castro would clash with the DR and the urban 26 July the following year, but for the time being he and the rebel leadership appeared satisfied with their own progress.

Following an autumn of increasing combat, the end of a year in the guerrilla struggle was marked by "a state of armed truce with Batista; his men did not go up into the Sierra and ours hardly ever went down."⁹⁰ During this period of consolidation, Castro estimated the rebel force's victories to have surpassed twenty.⁹¹ Most of the winter of 1957-1958 was spent in a "sedentary, fixed encampment period" manifested by more settled camp life, radio broadcasts monitored in the morning (often followed by Castro's analytical monologues), meals consumed and day-long marches carried out.⁹² La Plata, high on the southern slopes of the Sierra, became Castro's permanent and constantly active headquarters.⁹³

New 26 July columns were coming to fruition, extending themselves beyond the Sierra Maestra and throughout Oriente. These smaller frentes, variously led by Che Guevara, Raúl Castro and Juan Almeida, spread toward eastern and northern

Oriente, also gradually advancing upon Santiago. One of the most impressive rebel-administered zones was consolidated by late 1958 in northern Oriente by the Segundo Frente "Frank País," led by Raúl Castro. With support from urban 26 July groups in Santiago, Guantánamo and Mayarí, this column eventually secured participation of peasants and agricultural workers by providing opportunities for self-help in developing services and by taking on recruits. Education, healthcare, justice and public works departments were established to facilitate the operation of schools, hospitals, factories and repair shops that were constructed. Peasant associations, functioning much like the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution after 1960, kept track of all the area's inhabitants and strangers, and brought crimes and infractions to the attention of the legal representatives (many professionals increasingly flocked to join the rebel effort in various capacities). Gains were especially impressive in healthcare. Doctors, nurses and medical students from the llano increasing flooded rebel ranks, providing manpower for the twelve hospitals and eight clinics that served the peasant population. By the fall of 1958, Nunez Jiménez notes that infant mortality in these areas dropped from 40 percent to 5 percent.⁹⁴

Reminiscent of late nineteenth and early twentieth century insurrections, the rebel army leadership sought to undermine Havana's international obligations by announcing in February the "definitive plan" of systematically decapitating

various sectors of the economy. The list included sugar mills, tobacco factories, public utilities, railroads and refineries. The central part of the guerrilla plan was the destruction of the sugar harvest.⁹⁵ "Either Batista without the zafra or the zafra without Batista" became the watchword of the 26 July. By March 1958, rebel army reports declared having applied the torch to every cane-producing province in Cuba, destroying an estimated two million tons of sugar.⁹⁶ Batista's army was increasingly strained to protect foreign (mostly US) lives and property while attempting to coordinate an offensive. At the beginning of the 1958 summer offensive, the military protection of the zafra, still only two-thirds completed, necessitated the assignment of numerous army units at sugar production facilities.⁹⁷

Successful guerrilla raids increased, several along the Manzanillo-Bayamo highway, on the Vequitas outpost, and at the last remaining Sierra army outpost by late February in Pino del Agua.⁹⁸ The rebel army was undergoing a stage of territorial expansion. At the same time, the establishment of Radio Rebelde and several rebel newspapers--El Cubano Libre, Patria, and Milicianos--served to buttress the psychological war against the Batista regime.⁹⁹

Batista's temporary suspension of censorship encouraged urban organizations to respond to publicized rebel successes and stepped-up government terrorism with renewed opposition. Members of the business community increasingly joined the Civic Resistance, lawyers filed suits for the release of

political prisoners, and the Catholic Church hierarchy issued a weak declaration on February 28 which Castro denounced the following month for its collaborative implications.¹⁰⁰ Civic opposition activity heightened in March, but with limited effect. The Episcopate's appeal for a conciliatory solution made no impact. Statements issued to the government by various civic institutions "requesting the termination of the regime" were met by police reprisals.¹⁰¹ The llano movement hoped that "to create an atmosphere of insurrection, to threaten the economy without actually damaging it to any great degree, to militate all segments of society against the dictator and so discredit him, would be sufficient to destroy the regime."¹⁰² The Batista order, however, held fast. The urban resistance only gradually came to acknowledge the determining role to be played by the Sierra guerrillas. The April 9 strike fiasco would force this reality upon them with decisive impact.

In mid-March 1958 a twenty-point proclamation was issued from the Sierra Maestra. "Total War Against the Tyranny" was a culmination not only of a 26 July meeting in the Sierra. It was also a rebel testimony to the events of the past sixteen months of survival and growing success in the armed struggle in the Sierra Maestra. It was a deeply nationalistic, bitter and determined commentary denouncing the dictatorship's re-imposed censorship, incessant atrocities and moral bankruptcy. It was an exhortation to all Cubans to grant no quarter to the allies of the Batista regime, and an advisory to those allies to reconsider their positions. The declaration

confirmed the strategy of a massive general strike supported by military action--"total war."¹⁰³

The call for unified action now came from that wing of the movement proving itself to be deserving of the position of leadership of the national resistance. While the urban 26 July found its actions increasingly restricted by the stepped-up brutality of Batista's security forces, in one year the rebel army grew and expanded beyond its mountain confines, increasingly limiting the movement of Batista's army. A significant shift in the balance of forces was occurring. As one rebel officer observed: "At the beginning of 1958 things changed. In 1957 we were not looking for them, but running from them."¹⁰⁴ The general strike was viewed strategically as the final coup de grace of the Batista regime. Intensified sabotage and assaults along highways and of communication facilities in Oriente, along with the actions of the newly-formed front in northern Oriente, would presumably provide support for the general strike and vanquish the dictatorship.

Chapter Four: Rise of the Sierra

By the spring of 1958, Batista confronted two choices, "to get out, or to fight desperately with all of the weapons of his arsenal--the army, the treasury, the timidity or indifference of investors who preferred the devil they knew to the unknown, the careful 'neutrality' of the major foreign power whose single word of condemnation would have been sufficient to bring the dictatorship crashing down."¹ Batista chose to fight. Conscription absorbed seven thousand new men, bringing the army's strength to some thirty thousand. The regime continued to suppress the actions of the urban opposition groups. Batista surmised that if the cumulative pressures of the opposition could not appreciably dent the armour of the dictatorship nor alienate his closest allies, there was little for him to fear. His agents also concluded that the llano opposition groups were as yet more of a nuisance than a serious threat to the regime, "however much they might harass him in the hinterland."²

Persistent factional strife within the anti-Batista resistance also contributed to llano inability to gain any ground in the civil war. The urban 26 July endured conflict on at least two fronts: against the dictatorship's security forces and with the remaining divisive opposition. The DR suffered such a two-pronged assault when a PSP Youth cadre betrayed its leaders to the Batista police, sealing their fate in the massacre at an apartment at Humboldt 7. The DR became

the first movement to lose all of its leaders within a period of one month. The llano was fast becoming , as Fidel Castro had prophesied, "a cemetery of revolutionaries."³

By March 10, 1958, the Sierra rebel army commemorated the sixth anniversary of the Batista coup by consolidating new fronts led by Raúl Castro and Juan Almeida in the north (Sierra Cristal) and northwest (near Santiago) of Oriente province. By mid-spring, 1958, the rebels occupied or controlled all of the mountain regions of Oriente.⁴ The rebel leadership was systematically fulfilling its strategy of prudently but progressively breaking out of its Sierra strongholds, and of denying the enemy more and more territory. Castro's discretion often moved him to recommend cancelling a planned attack if reinforcements were not available.⁵ By April the rebel army controlled enough territory to enable Castro to inspect various rebel strongholds within a ten to fifteen mile radius in a confiscated army jeep.⁶ Most of the mountain paths were passable by small vehicle, and several roads were now under rebel control. Nonetheless, Castro continued to exercise extreme caution in maintaining security by moving to new encampments every two or three days. Strategies were laid out and new fortifications built.

Tensions left smouldering within the ranks of the 26 July movement reached new levels of intensity in the spring of 1958. The dispute between the Sierra and llano wings over leadership of the movement had only momentarily been preempted by the exigencies of armed struggle. After several years of

extensive underground work, demonstrations, bombings and attempted uprisings, the urban 26 July, the most organized of all urban resistance movements, was far from exposing a chink in Batista's military and intelligence armour. New recruits were gradually won over to the struggle, and the escalation of government atrocities increased public sympathy toward the llano movement as a whole. But popular support became more substantial only after the defeat of Batista's offensive in the Sierra Maestra. The llano leadership, meanwhile, clung to the conviction that 26 July leadership should remain in the cities.

For their part, the Sierra rebels' successes reinforced their belief that the rebel army should exercise the leadership role, not the secondary role allotted them by the llano 26 July. Although the latter had expressed confidence in the rebel army leadership, Frank País had always been prepared to reorganize the movement without consulting Castro.⁷ Rebel army strategy, however, reflected the growing confidence in the primacy of the rural struggle.⁸ Urban insurrection played an important role, yet the chief function of the llano, according to rebel strategy, was to support the guerrillas, not vice versa.

The power struggle that developed within the movement came to a head with the question of a general strike. Preparations for a strike in April generated a confrontation among the leaders of the 26 July. This in turn had a critical impact on the course that the Cuban revolution would

ultimately take.⁹ A debate emerged both within the resistance and later among scholars over the position taken by the Sierra guerrillas on the feasibility of a general strike. Thomas remarks, for example, that "it is obscure whether Castro really wanted this strike, and it has been said... that Faustino Pérez, then effectively in control of 26 July outside the Sierra, brought pressure on him to do it."¹⁰ Karol's unsubstantiated footnote asserts that the strike was demanded by the Sierra rebel leaders and imposed upon a hesitant urban 26 July. Judson points out that the Sierra group did make numerous references to a general strike in El Cubano Libre, in the "Total War" document and several letters, such as the one to the Liberation Junta (JL).¹¹ Upon closer examination, however, one finds the premise flawed and the context lacking.

In July 1957, Frank País informed Castro that a National Workers' Front (FON) had been set up throughout Cuba reinforced by the creation of strike committees overseeing the success of the general strike.¹² In the December letter to the JL, Castro regarded the strike as one of the "concrete acts which may be considered useful in the overthrow of the tyranny."¹³ He was likely influenced by the 1933 general strike that deposed the Machado regime. More recently, Venezuelan dictator Marcos Pérez Jimenez suffered defeat at the hands of striking masses in January 1958. Fidel Castro, however, was not as amenable to "short-cut solutions" as the llano resistance was.

The rebel leaders endorsed a general strike as the

"final, decisive blow," the last phase of a longer insurrectionary process whereby actions would become gradually and "progressively intensified" until "they end in strike which will be ordered at the proper time."¹⁴ Castro's own appraisal of the resources of the revolution and those of the regime concluded that only the steady development of the process begun in the Sierra Maestra, the gradual extension of liberated territory, the daily expansion of the rebel fighting force, and the elimination, one by one, of army installations, could cut the lifelines of the dictatorship.¹⁵ By late March, though progress had been made, the rebel army had not yet broken out of Oriente's boundaries, nor were they sure of support in the plains. This did not deter urban 26 July leaders, sufficiently impressed by the rebels' gains to endorse the "total war" manifesto and quickly arrange strike action. Conversely, Castro did not believe the llano underground to be adequately prepared, despite assurances to the contrary. Guevara thought the political development of the llano 26 July "incomplete and their conception of the general strike too narrow."¹⁶ Castro had no illusions as to the allegiance of the workers in the llano, "firmly in the grip in which Batista held organized labour, under the domination of Mujal and his CTC, and he recalled all too vividly the fiasco of the August strike."¹⁷ Ultimately, Castro had little faith in Havana, and its "traditional disaffection from the struggles of the nation."¹⁸

The guerrillas never fully relied on a general strike to

be successful. The failure of past attempts at short-cut solutions--assassination attempts, localized uprisings, and poorly-coordinated strikes--impacted heavily upon the Sierra rebels. Experience taught them to prepare for a protracted, methodical struggle. The assertion that Fidel Castro "was responsible for the conception of the strike and its failure," disregards historical evidence.¹⁹ The llano and exile leadership's strategy prevailed, however. The April strike was "one of the few actions that the city was able to propose and impose."²⁰ Through a concern for unity (and for fear of being excluded from victory), the rebel army reluctantly agreed to the strike.²¹ Yet in a March 23 letter, Castro expressed both his doubts about the strike and his confidence in the guerrillas' resilience: "If he [Batista] succeeds in crushing the strike, nothing would be resolved. We would continue to struggle, and within six months his situation would be worse."²²

The strike thus offered the vague possibility of an early overthrow of the Batista regime, and provided for some coordination and unity of effort between the guerrillas and the urban resistance.²³ Though some doubt circulated among certain urban cadres as to the extent of preparedness and organization in the cities, expressed by País's successor, René Ramos Latour, Santiago and Oriente were deemed strike-ready. As it would turn out, Havana and other regions were less prepared than was the regime. Presumably, the guerrillas would compensate for such llano inadequacy.

The government wasted no time, effort or expense in preparing for the confrontation. Batista invoked martial law, police and paramilitary squads were effectively given carte blanche in their exercise of force, and seven thousand new troops were quickly recruited. The dictatorship issued decrees hastily removing judges who might inhibit Batista's unleashed forces. Workers were given authorization to kill to defend the right not to strike.²⁴ Arms were purchased, as were new patrol cars. Soldiers were placed under police command. Meanwhile, Batista announced the postponement of elections until November 3, 1958.²⁵

The US arms embargo of March 14 proved more of a token response to public opinion than a deterrent to further government terror.²⁶ Though an irritant to Batista, the regime suffered little from the token embargo, freely purchasing US arms from Nicaragua, Dominican arms from President Rafael Trujillo, and British arms from the United Kingdom.²⁷ Even without alternative sources, the US government had flooded the Batista regime with equipment and ammunition two years previously, doubling arms supplies in 1956-1957, providing ample compensation. The embargo convinced few Cubans that the US was genuinely distancing itself from the dictatorship.²⁸

Batista was confident of his position nationally and internationally. He viewed the urban insurgents as an irritation but certainly no threat; they had no real control over the unions.²⁹ Frank País died before his creation, the

FON, could develop from a mere propaganda instrument into an effective revolutionary organization of the working class.³⁰ Few cells had been organized. The CTC leadership rejected the call to strike, asserting in December 1957 that workers had no need to strike since Batista had increased wages.³¹ The communists, Cuba's traditional labour organizers, initially vacillated since they maintained only minority labour support. Yet, upon deciding to lend support, the PSP's potentially helpful influence among sugar workers was rejected outright by the urban organizers of the FON.³² This despite Castro's March 26 statement calling for a broad, unified opposition that "makes no exclusions of any kind. All Cuban workers, whatever their political or revolutionary allegiances, have the right to belong to strike committees. The National Workers' Front is not a sectarian organization. No worker can be severed from this patriotic effort."³³

The rebel leader's instructions were never publicized by the llano organizers, who, on the day of the strike, were denounced by the communists for their unilateral activities. On April 2, the party's underground publication, Carta Semanal, though calling for a general strike, lamented that "the forces of disunity remain present."³⁴

The April 9 general strike was a failure, more of a chaotic uprising than a work stoppage.³⁵ For various reasons--poor and overly secretive planning, particularly in Havana, a breakdown in coordination among numerous organizations, bad timing, and woefully inadequate response

and participation among the population--the potential for a precipitous revolution in the cities collapsed.³⁶ Batista's forces were well-prepared to occupy workplaces and assault insurgents and strikers. The strike was called one hour earlier than the agreed time, noon, when a two-hour break would free workers and close shops and banks. Urban guerrillas were in action in the streets well before workers had left their workplaces. Nor did the street violence encourage them to come out. Arms were lacking, and only a fraction of the two thousand 26 July militants were actually mobilized.³⁷ Meetings the night before had decided that despite the lack of organization, bravery and sacrifice should be demonstrated. The meetings ended "amidst promises of an effort that would show the batistianos that the youth were ready to die fighting face to face. Patriotism, idealism, emotional feelings and a dangerous share of machismo prevailed over reason and objectivity."³⁸

The actual reception of the strike call was stunted by communication lapses and a tight security that denied key information even to urban cadres. In numerous cities, banks and a few shops closed, workers in factories and public utilities left their workplaces, some gathering at appointed spots to receive arms and instructions. Few arms arrived and no one surfaced to direct the insurgents. Santiago was the only city where the strike was nearly complete. Elsewhere strikers and insurgents withdrew after the first few hours.³⁹ The strike, or uprising, was defeated swiftly and mercilessly.

Two thousand patrol cars and paramilitary- commandeered private vehicles roamed the streets shooting down insurgents and strikers. Orders were relayed to kill prisoners and summary executions occurred all day in Havana and other cities.⁴⁰ The strike was crushed in Havana, Matanzas, Santa Clara, Camaguey, Holguin and after five days, in Santiago. Lingering disorders in the eastern provinces ended in defeat and repression.⁴¹

The Sierra rebels never knew the exact date of the strike. The journalist Jorge Masetti, in the rebel base camp when news of the strike arrived, reported that there was jubilation as quick orders for attacks and ambushes were given. Others claim that Fidel Castro had promised large-scale assaults on cities outside the Sierra but that the majority of the rebels remained idle.⁴² Yet Guevara asserts that the April strike, "prepared and ordered by the llano," was agreed to by the Sierra leadership "which did not consider itself able to prevent it even though it had serious doubts concerning its outcome."⁴³ However futile, "the revolutionary commanders went to the llano to help out."⁴⁴ The unit under Camilo Cienfuegos made the first guerrilla incursions into the plains, assaulting outposts near Bayamo. Yet Raúl Castro in his campaign diary remarks that "faced with a general strike movement there was little we could do militarily except to offer moral support in a given zone."⁴⁵

Judson points out two main contrasting interpretations of the April 9 strike. One attributes the failure to Castro's

noted fear of military-llano collusion toward the usurpation of political power after Batista.⁴⁶ Accordingly, the guerrillas coldly promoted the foredoomed strike, allowing the near-destruction of llano organizations in order to ensure their control over the movement. Contradictions emerge, however, with the assumptions that all 26 July strategists including the urban organizers expected the strike, the rural actions and the urban uprising to produce a massive pro-rebel popular response.⁴⁷ Others, like Guevara, argue that the idea for the general strike originated in the llano movement, that the guerrillas approved through the error of "subjectivism," and that they collaborated in good faith though they were limited in their actions by lack of time to cultivate support in the plains beyond rebel strongholds, by army fortifications therein, and by a lack of arms and fighters.⁴⁸ Furthermore, since the guerrillas relied on urban support for money, arms and supplies, it would hardly have been to their advantage to have the urban 26 July suffer a fatal blow.⁴⁹

The repressive aftermath of the strike significantly weakened the urban 26 July. The divisiveness and incompetence that had plagued the llano movement fatally weakened the strike's impact, "Many of the leaders of the 26 July showed extreme cowardice. Jesus Soto, one of Faustino Pérez's closest aides, fled to safety. José Maria de la Aquilera also abandoned his men from the National Federation of Bank Employees, and was not seen again until Batista's downfall. Faustino Pérez hurriedly disappeared from view, escaping to

the Sierra Maestra, followed by cadre members who vowed to execute him for treason. Manuel Ray was accused of sheer irresponsibility."⁵⁰ Though not eliminated, the movement as a whole suffered a setback. Batista, meanwhile, confidently amassed forces in order to advance on the Sierra and vanquish the guerrilla foco. The initiative thus quickly shifted to Castro's rebel army at a time when the strike's collapse significantly limited the supplies to be transferred from the cities.⁵¹ The "day of liberation" devolved into an aftermath of pessimism and oppression.

On April 13 Faustino Pérez and his 26 July colleagues issued a statement to the committee in exile acknowledging the failure and errors committed by the llano leadership. The communique listed numerous errors that included keeping the date of the strike secret, and broadcasting a call to strike "at an hour when only housewives listen to the radio" rather than issuing the call forty-eight hours earlier.⁵² The sentiment of the rebel army leadership was much stronger.⁵³

The final confrontation within revolutionary ranks came in the May 3 meeting of the 26 July leadership. The meeting, at a farmhouse in the Mompie heights in the Sierra Maestra heartland, was accurately characterized by Guevara as the definitive end of llano leadership of the 26 July. Llano leaders were taken to task for underestimating the Batista forces' strength and overestimating their own. The leadership of the FON, the movement's labour wing, was criticized for refusing PSP support. Many communist members, upon being

openly rejected, informed on 26 July cadres for the Batista police.⁵⁴ The rebel leaders accused the llano leaders of putschism and subjectivism. The head of the FON, David Salvador, was indicted for the exclusion of other worker organizations from strike plans. Pérez and Ramos Latour were each castigated for unrealistically relying on the few, ill-equipped and inexperienced urban militia to take and control cities like Havana and Santiago.

After "an exhaustive and many times violent discussion" in which all llano representatives were denounced for their inability to go beyond the worn and narrow urban tactics as the method for overthrowing Batista, changes were made.⁵⁵ Faustino Pérez, Ramos Latour and Salvador were replaced by Marcelo Fernandez, who became the new movement coordinator under Castro, and Nico Torres, responsible for planning another general strike, this time with the aid of members of the PSP. After May, individual PSP militants increasingly received party sanction to join the guerrilla army.⁵⁶ Urban cadres, suspicious of the communists, persisted in protest. This was not an ideological rivalry. The PSP was considered "far more to the right than Batista," and was distrusted more for being batistianos than for being communists.⁵⁷

The National Directorate was effectively shifted to the Sierra Maestra under a new collective leadership headed by Fidel Castro. In "A Decisive Reunion," Guevara's concise appraisal of the critical May 3 meeting, the new political reality is best summarized:

The war would be conducted militarily and politically by Fidel in his double commission as Commander-in-Chief of all forces and as Secretary General of the Organization. The Sierra line would be followed, that of direct armed struggle, extending it to other regions and controlling the country by that means; ending some ingenuous illusions of pretended revolutionary general strikes, when the situation had not matured sufficiently to produce an explosion of that type and without preparatory work for an action of such magnitude. It was nothing more than the formalization of a reality, the political hegemony of the Sierra, a consequence of its correct position and interpretation of the facts.⁵⁸

Castro declared that "once again the task of saving the revolution in one of its most profound crises falls on our men."⁵⁹ Debray's conclusion was more pointed: "Thus it devolved on the Sierra to save the revolution which had been imperilled by the city. With the failure of the strike, after it was proven to all that only the Sierra could save the revolution, it was logical that the Sierra should assume the responsibility of leadership."⁶⁰ The urban insurrection was effectively suppressed by the government crackdown. Although sporadic bomb explosions periodically broke the silence and government atrocities intensified, public opinion perceived Batista to be the one in control. The catalyst for reversing that perception had yet to materialize.

The two months following the failed general strike were spent by government forces preparing the offensive. Some 10,000 to 12,000 Batista troops were committed to the summer offensive of 1958.⁶¹ Fourteen battalions were deployed in Operation FF (Fin de Fidel).⁶² Seven thousand new recruits, mostly peasants, answered Batista's summer recruitment campaign; several hundred came from Oriente province. The young peasants joined "because they were better off in the barracks than cutting cane three or four months a year and being unemployed the rest."⁶³ Still others joined in genuine support of the dictator. To counter such support the urban underground attempted a campaign to harass and terrorize the new recruits before they left the cities.⁶⁴ New military equipment was purchased. With three massive battle groups buttressed by artillery, air and naval support, the strategy consisted simply of surrounding the Sierra Maestra, closing the circle at La Plata, and then overwhelming the rebels with firepower.

The rebel army, some four hundred men by early May, intensified its training and preparation. Tactics were reviewed, food, arms and medicines stored. New field hospitals were constructed and several doctors joined the guerrillas following Radio Rebelde broadcast appeals.⁶⁵ Rebel leaders harboured no illusions as to the ease with which their position could become precarious if discipline lapsed. Castro was prepared to cede territory up to a certain line protecting the La Plata base, then hit back with ambushes and

fight to the death.⁶⁶ Quantitatively, Batista possessed "crushing superiority." Rebel efforts, however, were qualitatively substantial. Castro "turned the mountains into a fortress he could defend with a much smaller force, men, who knew every path in the forest, every turn of the road, and every peasant's house in the immensely complicated terrain. Both sides knew that this would be the decisive battle of the war."⁶⁷

On May 24 government forces initiated the summer offensive, a campaign that lasted some seventy-six days, one that has been thoroughly recounted in military-strategic detail by Bonachea and San Martín, among others.

In pincer fashion, the army advanced on the Sierra from the north, later reinforced by units moving in from the south, and gradually absorbing rebel territory until the latter was reduced to a tiny enclave of less than four square miles.⁶⁸ All rebel columns were brought together (some three hundred men) with the exception of Raúl Castro's "Frank País" Second Front which remained active in northern Oriente. Batista's army behaved predictably, and the guerrillas took full advantage, systematically withdrawing and advancing in minuet fashion, effectively ambushing army columns and inflicting as many casualties as possible.⁶⁹ The rebels launched an effective counter campaign throughout this period.⁷⁰ Army columns were repeatedly forced into confusion and retreat by the unceasing impact of mines and snipers that disabled and immobilized advancing platoons and armoured vehicles. The

rebels' constant mobility deceived Batista's forces into believing guerrilla forces to be larger than they were in reality, enabling rebels to avoid entrapment.¹¹ Every engagement but one (Las Mercedes) was fought on terrain and at a time selected by the guerrillas.¹² The first decisive rebel victory occurred one month into the offensive on June 28. In a series of ambushes and assaults an entire battalion was destroyed, generating numerous casualties and prisoners, as well as significant quantities of captured equipment and arms.¹³

The psychological impact of nightly broadcasts by Rebel Radio, Radio Caracas and shortwave transmitters in Mexico and Miami was significant.¹⁴ In addition to its influence on Batista's soldiers, the airwave campaign inspired remnants of the urban underground to attempt a reunification of the urban resistance. The result was the July 20 "Unity Manifesto of the Sierra Maestra" signed in Caracas with Castro's direct approval. It called for a renewed and broadly based front, and acknowledged the cooperation and contributions of resistance groups in the plains and the Sierra Maestra.¹⁵ Most importantly, the manifesto reinforced the defacto subordination of llano forces to the authority of the Sierra during the latter's most perilous time.

Frustrated in the north by rebel tenacity, the army landed a battalion on the south coast with orders to storm the rebel-secured Sierra heights. The ensuing battle at El Jigue proved to be one of the most decisive successes for rebel

psychological warfare. With the use of loudspeakers, Castro convinced the commander of the surrounded and exhausted battalion to surrender.¹⁶ The rebels' humane treatment toward the battalion amazed the soldiers who had been conditioned by the general staff's propaganda that prisoners were unequivocally "tortured, castrated, or killed...everything that they do at army and police headquarters, everything that they have seen done to the revolutionaries."¹⁷

Upon surrendering, the battalion's troops were given medical attention and delivered to the Red Cross. This action, along with Raúl Castro's desperate kidnapping of US nationals and Marines to protest the use of US arms by the regime, further damaged Batista's hold on the country.¹⁸ By the latter part of the offensive, money began to flow into the rebel treasury from the business community, industrialists and planters. With the army's increasing reluctance to fight, hacendado attitudes shifted toward greater cooperation in the payment of "revolutionary taxes."¹⁹

One battle, Las Mercedes, forced the rebel army into a precarious "touch and go" situation, as Castro recalled. The guerrillas suffered their heaviest losses and were nearly defeated when trapped by government forces between Las Mercedes and Sao Grande. Through the innovative efforts of Guevara, Cienfuegos and Castro, rebel disaster was converted into an effective retreat. Three-day truce talks became an effective means of averting Castro's capture and rebel defeat.²⁰

By August, the long-established rebel policy of humane treatment for wounded and captured soldiers was bearing fruit. Batista's general Eulogio Cantillo reported that the troops were aware that "there is no strong penalty against those who surrender or betray their unit, and that falling prisoner to the enemy ends all their problems, [this has] sapped the will to fight through the ranks.... The number of self-inflicted wounds is extraordinarily high. It is necessary to punish troops refusing to advance and to occupy their positions."⁸¹ With the increasing exposure of large numbers of soldiers to the realities of guerrilla warfare, better-armed and more determined rebels than was thought, humane treatment by and popular support for the guerrillas in the Sierra, the process of army demoralization quickened after the summer offensive.⁸²

By mid-August, the entire Batista military withdrew from the Sierra leaving behind an enormous stock of arms and material. Batista had lost the summer offensive along with over one thousand dead and wounded plus an estimated five hundred prisoners captured and returned by the guerrillas.⁸³ The regime's campaign was a disaster, though government censorship laboured to conceal its extent.

For the guerrillas of the 26 July, the defeat of the summer offensive was as much a moral and political as it was a military victory. Despite a vast advantage in numbers and arms, the government offensive collapsed under the pressure of a highly-disciplined but vastly smaller force. Government forces endured increasing defections, desertions and "a simple

unwillingness among large numbers of officers to continue supporting Havana in the field."⁸⁴ Many became less convinced of the cause for which they fought.⁸⁵ Already unpopular among large sectors of the populace for their role as a US proxy occupation force and defender of the dictatorship, increasing numbers of officers and troops abandoned the Batista regime.⁸⁶ The remaining command concentrated their forces in urban garrisons.⁸⁷ The combination of a US-trained army suited largely for the enforcement of internal order, along with generations of political corruption and division, ultimately eroded military morale and discipline when faced with the first concerted, decisive challenge to its hegemony.⁸⁸

Following the defeat of the summer offensive, the army all but ceased to resist the rebels' counteroffensive drive.⁸⁹ By September the rebel leadership was ready to make good on its plans, announced in late August on Radio Rebelde, to extend rebel columns "in all directions."⁹⁰ Rebel successes in the summer of 1958 culminated in the revitalization of the 26 July Movement as a whole. The guerrillas received numerous new recruits, both from the peasant population and from the urban resistance.⁹¹ In addition, rebel victories over the summer fostered a regeneration of the urban movements. Before the summer, the urban resistance numbered less than ten thousand. After the failed offensive, it grew by the end of 1958 to "thirty thousand who contributed cash on a regular basis."⁹² The number of active underground militants reportedly rose from some fifteen hundred in all organizations

to between 5,000 and 6,000.⁹³ Growing numbers of workers joined 26 July and DR cells.

Financial support from the bourgeois sectors of Cuban society increased as movement organizers canvassed wealthier circles. Taxes on Oriente's landowners and other business magnates were levied by the guerrillas. Increasingly, Cuban entrepreneurs offered little resistance, assuming that a change of regime might be beneficial for Cuba and for business interests. US-owned sugarmills, Cuban-American and United Fruit, for example, resisted (with US Embassy sanction) until the end of 1958.⁹⁴ The fall of 1958 represented the rising sentiment among big business in Cuba that "Castro could be no worse than Batista" and that the former was winning anyway.⁹⁵ The economic elite's support for the dictator began to wane. Castro reinforced this process through earlier reassurances to the business elite that they had nothing to fear from the revolution and much to gain: "I know revolution sounds like bitter medicine to many businessmen. But after the first shock, they will find it a boon--no more thieving tax collectors, no plundering army chieftains or bribe-hungry officials to bleed them white."⁹⁶

Organized religion stepped up direct support for the rebel army by actively joining guerrilla ranks. The few priests or pastors who had accompanied rebel columns were followed after the summer by enough ecclesiastical recruits to service every rebel unit including Castro's.⁹⁷ Churches increasingly held services for the martyrs of the struggle in

defiance of government repression. Even the Afro-Cuban religions joined the established churches in open resistance to the dictatorship. Batista was less represented among Santeria leaders as the status of Fidel Castro rose.

History and pragmatism molded the counteroffensive of 1958. In the war for independence, rebels systematically liberated Oriente, sending Maceo's column to do so in the west. Communications were eventually cut between east and west before taking Havana. The 26 July guerrillas attempted to repeat this strategy. Practically, these operations were announced by the rebels at summer's end. Furthermore, the timing of the invasion served a political function. The deterioration of the Batista army represented a wellspring of rebel support relative to the earlier months of 1958. Also, as Judson makes clear, there was no other means to extend guerrilla influence across the country. The rebel army was the only force to have successfully challenged the Batista regime's hegemony. The rebels possessed the means to extend and consolidate their own hegemony nationwide. To do so meant uniting all other organizations under the 26 July banner. As declared in the unity manifesto, the rebel army had to consolidate command of all movement focos and militia under a united guerrilla front and, like Martí, extend their hegemony over the disparate forces.⁹⁸

The guerrilla columns "Ciro Redondo" and "Antonio Maceo" led by Guevara and Cienfuegos respectively, expanded forces into the west. With 148 men, Guevara would establish a rebel

base in Las Villas, unify smaller organizations into a broader front and "intercept the enemy until it totally paralyses the movements of those troops throughout the island."⁹⁹ Cienfuegos, commanding 82 rebels, was to secure a guerrilla front in Pinar del Rio. Castro, however, decided not to overextend his small forces, enabling the "Antonio Maceo" column to join forces with Guevara in consolidating control and expanding their organizational work in Las Villas. The country would effectively be cut in half, with Guevara and Cienfuegos the de facto military governors, exercising civil and military administration on the pattern of the Sierra Maestra.

Unification of the diverse organizations of Las Villas and the west was of utmost importance. The necessity of unity against the dictatorship was reinforced by Castro's September 16 communique to the exile organizations. Castro declared that "the 26 July movement cannot accept the proliferation of collateral organizations which divides the effort, and creates confusion among the emigres and the people. Discipline is essential, without discipline, there can be no revolutionary organization."¹⁰⁰ The 26 July became the singular, unified authority.¹⁰¹

Despite the success and growing popularity of the guerrilla army, the rebel counteroffensive confronted immense odds. Government forces were well-armed and heavily concentrated throughout their strongholds in urban Cuba. The rebels had yet to take one city, and had only begun to

traverse the unpredictable plains. The "weapons windfall" of the previous summer was enough to arm some eight hundred fighters.¹⁰²

The invading rebels endured many of the natural ordeals of the rainy season, roads and paths made impassable by tropical storms, and dangerously swollen rivers and swamps. Air force bombardment accompanied army ambushes and peasant informers. Camaguey province had seen little guerrilla activity and government terror had been effective. Guevara scorned the peasant betrayal that remained a constant threat in this part of the llano: "The social conscience of the Camaguey campesinos is minimal and we had to face the consequences of numerous betrayals."¹⁰³ Guevara was able to leave "the basis of a union" at one rice plantation in southeast Camaguey. Though support was not as substantial as in Oriente, rebel sympathizers were gradually won over.

Camaguey's peasants were not the only obstacle to the rebel army's unification drive. Rebel morale also sustained blows from reticent urban 26 July groups. Guevara anguished over the fact that

the troops' morale was suffering the impact of hunger and the morass of mud. We could never rest since the enemy was following our path with the help of airplanes. In every campesino we saw a potential informer. We could not make contact with the 26 July [in Baragua, a Camaguey township] since a pair of supposed members refused us the necessary help when I

asked for it. We got money, supplies and guides from some PSP members, who told me they had asked for help from the 26 July for us, and were answered: 'If Che sends us a written message, we will help him; if not, screw him'.¹⁰⁴

Much of the success of both columns in arriving in Las Villas in mid-October and launching the last phase of the armed struggle was also attributable to the demoralized and increasingly incompetent army. Though closely pursued, the guerrilla columns traversed immense stretches of territory and evaded thousands of troops. By October, Guevara concluded that "the combative level which the soldiers of the dictatorship have displayed at every juncture, made them deaf to all suspicious noises."¹⁰⁵ Corruption also eroded discipline. Batista complained of the bribing of officers to aid the rebel invasion.¹⁰⁶ The army command structure was deteriorating. As rebel forces gained ground, the Batista army's only remedy for morale became stepped-up repression against the urban and rural population, followed by the announcement of "successful ambushes" of rebels.¹⁰⁷

The efforts of the guerrilla columns in spreading the struggle from Camaguey to Las Villas were paralleled by the Oriente columns' attacks. As Juan Almeida and two other columns carried out clean-up operations against remnant army and rural guard outposts, and extended the administrative territory, the Castro brothers prepared to take Santiago. One of the more significant actions took place at the end of

September in the battle of El Cerro. This action was the first by the rebel army women's platoon, engaged in combat for the first time.¹⁰⁸ The Mariana Grajales Platoon was named after the courageous mother of Antonio Maceo. By the end of the insurrection these guerrilla fighters had engaged in some twenty battles, later enlarging their ranks and carrying out peacetime military tasks.¹⁰⁹

The women who joined the struggle against the dictatorship played a substantial role. They organized demonstrations and worked in the underground, collecting and transporting supplies for the guerrillas, selling bonds to raise money, facilitating the construction of hospitals, sewing uniforms and harbouring revolutionaries in their houses. As Guevara observed, they operated as the best messengers and spies.¹¹⁰ As Fidel Castro later acknowledged, the women who joined the struggle had to contend not merely with the repression and torture of the Batista police but also with prevailing prejudice against women's involvement in politics.¹¹¹

By October 1958, there was no shortage of financial support for the rebels. Yet as Castro indicated, arms and ammunition were still a precious commodity.¹¹² He authorized Almeida to organize supporters to "pay up to one dollar for each 30.06 or M-1 caliber bullet. We can afford it. We should not care if we spend half a million dollars on half a million bullets."¹¹³

With the November 3 elections nearing, the rebel leaders

issued and enforced a "No-Election decree" in October which forbade candidates from collaborating with the dictatorship in the "farcical" endeavour.¹¹⁴ The second decree that set the tone for the Las Villas campaign was a moderate agrarian reform law. Its tactical objectives included campesino mobilization and incorporation into revolutionary ranks, and the neutralization of reactionary forces.¹¹⁵ The law conceded "land ownership to the tiller," but avoided the seizure of foreign-owned properties. It was vague about the fate reserved for the latifundios except to state that they would be forbidden, but without specifying any formal limits to the extension of privately-owned land.¹¹⁶ The results corresponded to rebel forecasts. From October 10, 1958, to the end of the insurrection in January, masses of peasants and rural proletariat rallied to the revolutionary cause. The forces of the 26 July's rebel army began to assume a much broader form. At the same time, the vagueness of the land reform law left many national and foreign latifundistas expectant that, consistent with an established political tradition in Cuba, the law would never be implemented. Consequently, numerous large landowners aided the rebel army in exchange for the security of their interests after the demise of the Batista regime, which they now saw as merely a matter of time.¹¹⁷

While Castro's Oriente columns had only the Batista army to contend with, Guevara confronted the difficult task of molding the disparate forces in Las Villas into some form of

revolutionary unity. The most independent of these were four guerrilla factions, each made up of llano fugitives. The first was a PSP foco in Yaguajay and Escambray whose members had fled government terror in the cities, and which cooperated fully with Guevara and Cienfuegos.¹¹⁸ The next two focos consisted of DR survivors of the 1957 palace attack. Despite the factional hostility between the two groups and toward the rebel army, Guevara was able to unite and incorporate the two DR forces under a common cause. Though the friction between them remained, a functional unity endured.

The most difficult of the four guerrilla groups was the Las Villas 26 July faction.¹¹⁹ Refugees of the April 1958 repression, this group proved the most disagreeable with regard to PSP collaboration, agrarian reform and offending foreign powers.¹²⁰ The dispute reached acrimonious levels until 26 July national coordinator Fernandez intervened and settled, or more accurately, sidetracked the dispute.¹²¹ Certain demands were dropped, short-term goals agreed to, and the faction's leader promised to cooperate with the rebels.¹²²

The Batista llano administration and remaining rural garrisons were being routed. Commercial traffic and troop transports were effectively immobilized and attendance at the polls reduced to a minimum (this did not stop the regime from proceeding with the electoral farce and declaring the government's candidate, Andrés Rivero Aguero, the winner). As Guevara observed, "symptoms of enemy disintegration were

multiplying everywhere."¹²³

Guerrilla actions were seeing the fruits of their insurrectionary labour. In northern Las Villas, Cienfuegos swiftly established separate units, the combination of which controlled the countryside. Each unit organized the rural population in its operative zone. Peasant militias, and reconnaissance and messenger services were established along with committees overseeing these and other tasks. Urban militants were also incorporated into the rebel forces and mobilized. The militias were instrumental in the capture of towns and cities in Las Villas and other provinces in December.¹²⁴

By November the forces under Cienfuegos controlled virtually all of northern Las Villas. The army was isolated, kept prisoner in their own barracks by a combined flurry of ambushes and infrastructural sabotage.¹²⁵ The 26 July force under Cienfuegos replaced and reorganized much of the Mujalista union leadership.¹²⁶ Unions elected new leaders, and rural workers and peasants met in local congresses.¹²⁷ Rebel control became pervasive.

By mid-December, Las Villas province had effectively become a rebel-liberated territory. Transport was paralysed, while small towns and villages were liberated. Abandoned batistiano civil administration was now run by rebel administrators. The army was sapped of the strength to resist as military barracks increasingly surrendered.¹²⁸

In Oriente the main rebel force advanced on the northern

rim of the Sierra. In one of the Sierra campaign's fiercest battles, Castro's rebels engaged 1800 government troops at Guisa, a ten day battle in which some two hundred and thirty guerrillas inflicted over two hundred casualties while sustaining eight of their own. Guisa became a free territory. By mid-November Santiago was surrounded by the rebel army.¹²⁹ Raúl Castro's column swept through the towns and cities of northern Oriente.¹³⁰ The rebels, before withdrawing from captured townships, formed local militias and delegated responsibility for order to the population. The people became "the chief preservers of order in each liberated city," responsibly preventing "pillaging, destruction of property, and bloodshed."¹³¹ Castro appealed to the Cuban sense of duty: "In the decisive moments which are approaching, the people must give the highest proof of civic sense, patriotism and a sense of order so that later no dishonorable accusation can be made against our revolution which, because it is the highest goal of the Cuban nation and the most extraordinary proof of the people's desire for peace and dignity, must suffer no blemish."¹³² This reliance on the people of Cuba, a faith the rebel leader carried for years and sought to inculcate in the rebel army, would be tested repeatedly in the struggle to survive after 1959.¹³³

By mid-December 1958 the 26 July-led insurrection was fast-becoming a genuinely popular effort. The myth of Batista's invincibility having been shattered the previous summer, successive guerrilla victories against a

disintegrating army in the llano, and an instrumental October agrarian reform culminated in the accelerated growth of rebel support. In the final two weeks of battles in Oriente and Las Villas provinces, guerrilla strength grew rapidly. By the end of the war Fidel Castro said there was a guerrilla force of three thousand.¹³⁴ The few cities wherein government forces fiercely resisted compensated for the lesser skirmishes and quick surrenders at other engagements. All eventually fell through attrition or upon receiving word of Batista's flight. Much like the Cienfuegos uprising in 1957, successfully this time, the populations of liberated cities and surrounding areas joined the rebel effort en masse. Thus the fall campaign developed into a popular insurrection that overwhelmed the Batista order. By this time the urban underground had improved its organization and preparedness and served a supportive function, supplying information and assistance to advancing rebel units.

The events of the last two weeks of December have been heralded as decisive preludes to the triumph of January 1959 and have been celebrated in revolutionary mythology. One of these was the battle at Yaguajay. Nearly ten days would pass before Cienfuegos would gain the surrender of a better equipped and effectively led battalion. Yaguajay, like many of the autumn campaigns, represented the increasing ability of the guerrillas to engage the regime's forces in conventional frontal attacks. At the battle of Santa Clara, the combined forces of the 26 July guerrillas and the DR's two fronts

rapidly absorbed the remaining government strongholds in Las Villas, isolating the six thousand government troops in the provincial capital. Led by Guevara and in possession of an immense stockpile of arms, urban and rural militias besieged the city on December 21.¹³⁵ Many soldiers eventually surrendered with news of their commanders' escape.¹³⁶ Santa Clara represented the final decisive conflict of the revolutionary war. By the end of December, the city fell.

In Oriente province Fidel Castro and the rebel army were in control. Having defeated the last two of the government's Oriente strongholds on December 28 and 30, the guerrillas advanced on Santiago. The offensive in Oriente had been a bloody one for the civilian population. In addition to the regime's brutality toward civilian "suspects," Batista's army and air force had systematically reduced towns and villages to rubble. Nevertheless the final victory at Santiago was secured "without firing a shot."¹³⁷ Castro's ultimatum to the Santiago commander was answered with a full surrender. The latter's response was no doubt influenced by word that the President had fled the country.

In the final days before the collapse of the ancien regime, plots and counterplots pervaded the army command. General Cantillo attempted to negotiate coups with both Castro and Batista. The general was involved in various plots to overthrow Batista, simultaneously working to "save the military as an institution while stopping the insurrection from reaching power."¹³⁸ The sentiment was shared by the

government in Washington. US Ambassador E.T. Smith and Washington emissary William Pauley attempted weeks earlier to convince Batista that a batistiano state could continue intact without him. The dictator refused asylum then. Similar attempts to block the 26 July from assuming power involved former Batista officials, the military and the CIA. The covert efforts of Justo Carrillo and the Montecristi group, for example, proved fruitless.

On New Years Day, with the flight of the dictator, Castro quickly called a general strike and ordered his forces in Las Villas to advance on Havana. Still wary of a military coup, he moved to prevent one.¹³⁹ The Cuban masses realized an old order in its final throes and responded decisively with a massive nationwide general strike on January 2 which supported continued rebel military operations. Compromised by Batista, most of the Mujalista union leadership had fled and been replaced by rebel organizers. A national process of union reform began. Castro also quickly moved to prevent any mob violence and bloodshed that might emerge as a result of the power vacuum. Vengeance killings reminiscent of the fall of Machado had to be curtailed. Over Radio Rebelde the rebel leader issued "an appeal to the people not to take justice into their own hands and to preserve order."¹⁴⁰ Few such killings occurred before rebel units combined with the militias to put a halt to any further carnage, arresting and imprisoning offenders.

Batista was gone and the national military command

disintegrated as a result of defeat, pervasive confusion and plotting from within.¹⁴¹ Cienfuegos and Guevara encountered no resistance from the commanders of Havana's military bases. Practically, the army no longer existed. The 26 July's guerrilla forces moved in to secure Havana. Fidel Castro embarked on a triumphant march across the island to the nation's capital amid mass jubilation.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The Cuban revolution came to fruition as a popular enterprise in January 1959. It was the culmination of a process of insurrection begun seven years earlier against a regime whose leader had illegitimately seized power on the eve of general elections that favoured another candidate. The Batista regime was not unlike its many US-supported predecessors since formal Cuban independence at the turn of the century. The second Batista order did however set new precedents in the levels of graft, nepotism and corruption practiced by the state. It also outdid itself in the level of repression it exercised upon the growing number of opponents to its rule. Seemingly oblivious to all this, the dictator remained occupied with the search for an elusive consensus of the kind he enjoyed in the 1940's.'

Batista fell because, as in 1934, in 1952 he came to power without representing any social class. The alliances with organized labour, business, sectors of the middle class, peasants and the communists were bonds of convenience. The tacit but superficial consensus among the sectors that initially buttressed Batista's regime deteriorated. Allegiances shifted as the direction of the insurrection became clear and as the dictatorship proved its unwillingness or inability to confront other dilemmas Cubans thought important. The graft and corruption that the new regime promised to eliminate merely increased in magnitude. Poverty

increased and unemployment doubled in 1958 to 18 percent. Working class support for the insurrection was offset by a loyalist union bureaucracy, the most durable ally of the "quasi-syndicalist" government.² The economic elite felt no compunction in abandoning him when the insurrection reached its apex. The regime abandoned its earlier promise to end the endemic violence and instead generated more. Batista's "total war" translated into a pervasive government terror that penetrated virtually all levels of Cuban society.

Combined with this political instability was the rising concern among the Cuban middle class for their material security. They possessed one of the highest living standards in Latin America, but real income dropped in the 1950's due to the reduction in the price of sugar on the international market along with a rising rate of inflation. By 1958 per capita income levels dropped to the 1947 level. By 1957, prices of basic food stuffs increased by 40 percent.³ The rebel army defeat of the regime's summer offensive paralleled a new economic downturn in the second half of 1958. The guerrillas' counteroffensive appeared to concentrate the generalized disaffection toward Batista. The general exacerbation generated by tightened economic competition and control from the US provided even stronger motivation for the Cuban bourgeoisie to throw in their lot with the 26 July. Like the guerrilla army itself, the climate of unrest spread from the east of the island where traditions of rebellion were strongest, until it engulfed the west.⁴

Finally, the Batista order fell because of its own illegitimacy. Batista imposed and maintained his rule on Cuban society by repression. The two fraudulent elections of 1954 and 1958 were little more than pretence. Of course, Batista was inconsistent in exercising an absolute dictatorship. His exercise of censorship was erratic. Castro managed to get no less than twenty-five denunciations of Batista published in the Cuban press.⁵ The dictator underestimated the forces arrayed against him, realizing their potency only when it was too late. The army, while proving brutally adept at crushing the urban resistance, lacked the counter-insurgency skills and motivation to defeat the well-disciplined guerrilla army in the Sierra.

Opportunism, careerism and corruption also pervaded and fragmented the political parties. The Autenticos were discredited as representatives of the Cuban polity. The Ortodoxos, on the other hand, commanded substantial electoral support but lacked a clear and cohesive program and a leader. The system failed to a large extent because of contradictions engendered by Cuba's uneven and dependent development.⁶ A more developed society relative to the rest of Latin America, the socioeconomic and political disparities within and between rural and urban Cuba were becoming unbridgeable while needed structural reforms were hindered by a sugar monoculture. Attempts to ameliorate such a systemic predicament, as the revolutionary government of 1933 had ventured, "threatened to incur the displeasure of the United States whose military or

merely diplomatic interventions had largely determined the course of Cuban politics in the past."¹

The 26 July movement, specifically the guerrilla leadership, sought to fill the power vacuum and change the course of Cuban history. One of several anti-Batista resistance groups, the 26 July proved the most resourceful, most organized and the most disciplined. All other challengers ultimately possessed very limited and varied agendas, becoming tributary movements subsumed into the 26 July either during or after the insurrection. The actions of the urban resistance only incurred the brutal and decisive wrath of a well-equipped Batista military whose power was concentrated in the urban centers of Cuba. Despite the claims of the urban 26 July leadership, and as the Batista regime brutally demonstrated time and again, there was little likelihood of victory by urban guerrilla warfare. It seems that Fidel Castro grasped this reality only when success in the Sierra became manifest. Then he concluded that "the city is a cemetery of revolutionaries and resources."

The llano 26 July endured several years of struggle defending a precarious stalemate against the Batista forces. Conversely, the rebel army, after a disastrous landing, displayed a resilience and perseverance that ultimately won them more successes against the regime in one year than the urban 26 July could muster in five. Various factors account for such an inverse relationship, several of which have already been alluded to. One of these is leadership. By July

1957 key leaders of the entire llano urban resistance had been eliminated through a war of attrition which Batista's forces were dominating. Conspiracies pervaded various levels of society in the llano but proved incapable of penetrating the government's seemingly impervious shell. Leadership was lacking, regime spies seemed omnipresent, and the populace as a whole reacted ambivalently.

The guerrillas of the Sierra Maestra never lacked for leadership. Nor did the rebel leadership ever falter in its revolutionary vision, however vague, beyond the stage of insurrection. The revolutionary recipe, however, entailed a decisive mixture of leadership and popular support. Of all the Sierra's commanders Fidel Castro proved the most adept at seizing the opportunities offered by a conjunction of historical conditions unique to Cuba. His success owed as much to his imaginative use of the mass media as to his and his officers' command of the guerrilla campaign.⁹ Utilizing the radio and the press, he attracted widespread admiration for the courage and patriotism demonstrated by his guerrillas and himself. The rebel leadership and their ranks were motivated by a loftier sense of historic mission that seized the imagination of much of Cuban society, void of heroic models among the politicians of the day. By 1959 Castro had become "the repository of many disparate hopes for Cuba's regeneration."¹⁰

The base of operations was also significant as a context. Llano combatants generally proved vulnerable in the face of an

increasingly efficient and brutal urban program of government terror. These are the common and lethal ordeals associated with urban guerrilla warfare whether in Cuba in the 1950's or in Uruguay in the early 1970's. The cities and towns of Cuba were also the power centers of the Batista military.

The brutal efficiency of Batista's forces in the llano contrasted with the incompetence of an army and rural guard untrained for unconventional warfare in the Sierra Maestra. This in no way demeans the substantial efforts of the rebel army. The latter underwent the gruelling ordeal of familiarizing themselves in a very short period with a people and region they knew little or nothing about while being pursued by thousands of soldiers and betrayed by informers. That they survived at all and then proceeded to systematically chip away at the dictatorship attests to a potent mixture of idealism, pragmatism and resourcefulness on the part of the Sierra guerrillas. It is also testimony to the ability of the rebel leadership to fully exploit the opportunities afforded them by one of the key historical conditions unique to Cuba's insurrectionary success. Rural Oriente had provided the Sierra 26 July with an ally whose support proved critical for the guerrillas' survival. The precaristas were not representative of the Cuban peasantry as a whole. Rather, they were more accurately a class fraction whose history of struggle with the large landowners had been a far more enduring, open and violent one than that of the majority of Cuba's peasant classes.¹¹

One of the enduring anomalies of the Cuban Revolution has been the insistence of theorists on the primacy of the peasant role within the guerrilla foco. Yet the principal role of Fidel Castro and the rebel army would appear to be more that of a nucleus or focal point, even catalyst, for the anti-Batista hostility that cut across increasingly broader sectors of Cuban society.

Urban intellectuals, students and rural workers and peasants found in the 26 July movement an effective means of manifesting their opposition to the Batista regime. This revolutionary alliance was facilitated by the guerrillas' demonstrated ability to survive and counter the efforts of the Batista military, thus weakening the regime's supporting coalition.¹² The majority of the working class threw in their lot with the revolutionaries only in the final, dying stages of the insurrection. Sectors including business, the professions and a booming service sector also provided large sums of money, supplies and recruits. Business typically responded to the rebel leaders' stated objective of resolving the many economic difficulties associated with the Batista regime. Pro-rebel support from the Catholic hierarchy and the urban middle classes increased after the summer offensive of 1958 and Batista's stepped-up reprisals.¹³ The Lions and Rotary clubs, the medical, dental, and legal societies, and even the exclusive sporting clubs also became politicized, registering Movement support before the regime collapsed in January 1959.¹⁴

There is a need to differentiate between peasant revolutions and revolutions that involved peasant support. Clearly, in the case of the Cuban insurrection it is more accurate to recognize, as AlRoy does, peasant support as one significant aspect of the victory of 1959. Several factors including the corruption and repression of the government, the ambiguity of Castro's program, and the disintegration of the military, enabled the core alliance of intellectuals, students, white collar workers and a small part of the Cuban peasantry to mobilize support from all major sectors of Cuban society, which in turn ensured the consolidation of a revolutionary victory.¹⁵ The precarista role was crucial, but it must be seen as one element in what was a multi-class insurrectionary movement.

The Cuban Revolution is merely one manifestation of the complexities of revolutionary change. If the foco model demonstrates anything it is that decisive popular support is contingent on the disintegration or defeat of the military. Nor is popular support alone sufficient. Though the urban opposition outnumbered the Sierra's few hundred guerrillas by thousands, their efforts at resistance proved impotent when confronted by a repressive government apparatus. The peasants played a major role in the insurrection but this was one among several major roles. One must not be quick to conclude as Latin American disciples of foquismo fatally did, that all the "tigers of imperialistic capitalism" would, like Batista, be vulnerable to the peasant-guerrilla.¹⁶ Indeed, the extent to

which Castro commanded a loose coalition of forces drawn from various sectors at the time of his victory, also suggests how important the further mobilization of popular support after January 1, 1959 would be to the eventual outcome of the revolution.

The social and political revolution that came to power in Cuba emerged from an insurrection that was neither solely peasant nor proletariat based. Revolution in Cuba has always had a foundation in history, pragmatism and idealism which interacted with elements of class conflict. Revolutions necessarily become different things to different people. If it is to succeed it must be a fluid, dynamic process. A rigid, mechanical approach to revolution is no more likely to survive than the applicability of a doctrinaire theory to the real world. Serious historical analysis will help to fashion more adequate, flexible models of revolutionary change.¹¹ Such analysis would provide an effective remedy to the students of revolutionary change who sacrifice crucial consideration of historical and political detail, effectively becoming converts to oversimplified theory. Several contemporary theorists continue to categorize the Cuban Revolution as "peasant" or "agrarian" when what they are actually internalizing was meant for the ideological consumption of revolutionary posterity. If one thing is certain, it is that revolutions are made by revolutionary movements. Such movements do not act within historical contexts they have themselves created, but within specifically national pre-existing social, economic and

political realities.¹⁸ In the Cuban case, socioeconomic reality and nationalist traditions combined explosively. Thus Fidel Castro and the rebel army did not simply mimic the bandit-peasant. They devised new forms of struggle from socioeconomic necessity and gave the movement political focus while identifying themselves with a specifically Cuban heritage of radical nationalism; so too other successful guerrillas have molded without using an alien die.¹⁹ The successful rebel often arrives in the seat of power by "standing on the shoulders" of his ancestors, as the 26 July movement partly did by identifying itself with earlier nationalist heroes and experiences.²⁰ Indeed, the 26 July rebel army utilized all of the available tools in order to survive and succeed in bringing the revolution to power in January 1959. As for the masses of what Castro identified as "the people," what began as nothing more than a vague commitment by a new generation of students, peasants and white collar workers to certain selective ideas and benefits, ultimately became a more revolutionary commitment analogous to patriotism.²¹

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