

Book Review

- *Cuba and Revolutionary Latin America, an Oral History*, by Dirk Kruijt.
Zed Books, 2017

Dirk Kruijt combines several disciplines unusually well, and he is devoid of the pretense at impartiality or arrogance that damages so much academic work. *Cuba and Revolutionary Latin America, an Oral History* is successful in many ways. Importantly, it is the first major work to look at the Cuban revolution's influence on a range of liberation movements that surged across the continent—and farther afield—through the 1960s, '70s and '80s. Its meticulous research and vibrant interviews make for a comprehensive picture. Kruijt not only gathered testimony from a range of Cuba's main players; he traveled to several other countries to speak with some of those who benefitted from the revolution's internationalism. The fact that he had earlier concerned himself with Velasco Alvarado's bloodless revolution in Peru (1968-1975), provided an interesting way in and allowed him a broader than usual palette. The fact that he took this project on before the last of Cuba's insurgent generation is gone, makes it a book written in the nick of time.

Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution changed history. It altered the balance of power worldwide, but was particularly influential in the Caribbean and across the Central and Latin American continent. Cuba lent military aid to liberation movements in Angola and Namibia, and hastened the downfall of apartheid in South Africa. Guerilla groups from Argentina, Chile and Uruguay to Venezuela, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic met, studied, trained, and took comfort on the Island. Some of these movements enjoyed brief success. Most ended in failure. The Cubans—who had shown it was possible to defeat the Empire—mediated and offered ongoing support to those with whose ideology they agreed and those with whom they differed. While they offered advice when asked, they did not interfere with internal decision-making processes.

For more than half a century, a succession of U.S. administrations accused Cuba of “exporting revolution,” and that accusation was used to justify all manner of overt and covert attack. The larger country cut its diplomatic relations, established an economic blockade that exists to this day, engaged in

brain drain, sponsored terrorist coastal incursions, made attempts on leaders' lives, launched animal and crop plagues, and operated a devious propaganda machine designed to bring the revolution to its knees. As a world power, for many years it was also able to induce other countries to break with the island nation. Cuba demonstrated that resistance and resilience were possible.

The implosion of the socialist bloc and end of the Cold War changed this landscape. But the story of Cuba's legitimate revolutionary export—its conviction that it had a duty to help other nations free themselves from imperialist domination—has never been told with this degree of scholarship and creativity. The right has penned diatribes, the left too often denials. Kruijt's book brings protagonists' voices and hard data together to tell a story whose time has come. His examination of the revolution's Americas Department, headed by legendary Manuel Piñeiro, is especially detailed. This was the office that coordinated aid to other revolutionary movements. Its brilliant mastermind and far-flung activities have too often been romanticized to the detriment of historical accuracy. Yet Kruijt's reading is neither idealistic nor a whitewash; he is respectful even as he asks the difficult questions.

Cuba and Revolutionary Latin America, an Oral History moves from historical context to—always engagingly told—protagonists' stories, and the wins and losses that changed the face of nations. Kruijt explains how Cuba's mid-twentieth century insurgents became socialists, and he divides the Cuban revolution into three well-defined historical periods: the revolutionary fervor of the 1960s, the mature years from the early 1970s to late 1980s, and what he calls the years of soft power, from the 1990s to the present. He also risks interrogating the legacy of a revolution that is currently struggling but still assumes enormous importance in the ongoing battle for values, and in defense of models capable of turning those values into improved living conditions for millions.

I lived in Cuba from 1969 through 1980. I myself have interviewed dozens of Cuban protagonists, over more than forty years, for a series of books about different aspects of the revolution. My own experience makes it possible for me to affirm that Kruijt worked diligently to find the testimonies that would help him tell his story, was able to establish the trust necessary for cooperation, and develop the patience so often needed to carry out research among people who have good reason to guard their secrets. He perused documentation at all the logical institutions. The fact that he extended his inquiry to other countries completes a compelling picture.

This book accomplishes something few others do. It tells a complex story in clear and accessible prose. Well-conceived notes, a vast bibliography and fine index extend its value. I noted only one important bibliographic absence, *Che Bustos' Che Wants to See You*, published by Verso in 2013. The Argentinian revolutionary's memoir, written after many years of silence, and without an iota of self-aggrandizement, might have provided a few new angles from which to write a history whose hidden corners may never be fully revealed. Still,

Kruijt comes closer than anyone to date. This is a riveting book for specialists and lay people alike.

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