
Reviewed by Steve Ludlam

Stephen Kimber is a Canadian Professor of Journalism who encountered the case of the Cuban Five in a holiday resort in the island in 2004, long after their arrests. He later asked a Cuban friend to explain the case, and was referred to a long speech by Fidel Castro. Shocked by the story and by the near total silence about it in the North American media, he wrote this book (instead of a planned Cuba-based novel). Kimber has scoured the source materials, interviewed the Five and many others directly or indirectly involved in Cuba and the US, and had his final draft reviewed by two of the Five. The result is a robustly-researched account of the complex worlds of US-hosted anti-Cuba terrorism and its respectable front-men, of US government complicity, and of the Cuban anti-terrorist agents who fought them, including the Five. It is written in ‘datelined’ passages that build up the compelling and accessible narrative of a complex reality – at times unreality, as the ambiguous title implies – of terrorist and counter-terrorist activities that have poisoned US-Cuba relations.

The book provides horrendous material on anti-Cuban terrorism: bombing hotels in Havana with fatal effect in the late 1990s, and attempting to massacre the performers and audience in the famous Tropicana nightclub. The plot was foiled only because the man employed to do it was a Cuban agent himself who gave evidence at the trial, and published his own account (Percy Alvarado, *Confessions of Fraile: a Real Story of Terrorism*, La Habana: Editorial Capitán San Luis, 2004). It sheds light on the fatal combination of US-based armed threats and provocations, and Cuba’s fears and consternation, that resulted in the Brothers to the Rescue shoot-down and the subsequent conspiracy to murder charge against Gerardo Hernandez. The book offers details of the participation not only of paramilitary terrorists, but also of the leaders of the apparently respectable Cuban American political lobby who moved unmolested between lobbying and paramilitary activities. They had little fear of official US interference, since as one puts it, for them the authorities were always on vacation. What Kimber’s detail suggests is that in the 1990s, far from being an obsolete sideshow in Miami, US-hosted anti-Cuba terrorists remained a plausibly deniable form of long-running, US-tolerated death-squad politics in Latin America, in this case arbitrarily targeting Cubans and tourists on the island, or in aircraft *en route* to its resorts.
The other strand to Kimber’s narrative relates the Cuban agents’ activities. And here the book reveals not only the bravery and commitment of the agents, but also about the difficult interaction of their personal lives and their professional duties, the tensions of the separation from families (many of whom believed their loved ones had betrayed Cuba), or of sustaining friendships and intimate partnerships in Miami without blowing their covers. The book deals not only with the Five, but also with the stories of other members of the Wasp network who either returned to Cuba before the arrests, or who were arrested and did deals with the US authorities, to avoid prison. Those more familiar with the story will be interested in Kimber’s account of the June 1998 briefing by the Cuban authorities of the FBI, in Havana, on Miami-based terrorists and their activities. The information passed on here has often been blamed for the arrests of the Five. But, as Kimber makes clear, the FBI had already been tailing Cuba’s agents for a couple of years.

Although Kimber read the entire 20,000 pages of the trial records, he does not attempt to cover the details of the trial, the overturning of the convictions on appeal, their re-imposition on appeal against the appeal, subsequent moves that culminated in the Supreme Court refusal to review the case, and ongoing action based on allegations that journalists on the government payroll were illegally reporting on the trial. These have, mostly, already been widely analysed in English-language publications. In analysing the background to the case, though, Kimber does a lot more than repackage existing accounts, and not just in terms of detail. He makes clear, for example, that some of the work of some of Cuba’s agents was not only aimed at terrorists, but also concerned to spot any build up of US forces that might be heading for an invasion of Cuba in the tense years of the early 1990s, something that has often been denied or fudged. However he makes it equally clear that these agents collected only information that was publicly available or, literally, observable from airport perimeters (something, on Kimber’s account, that seems to have frustrated their Havana controllers). Hence, despite the seriousness of the charges, the length of the trials, and the seniority of the US intelligence staff witnesses, the prosecution was unable to present evidence of espionage against the USA. He thus points to the reason for the Kafkaesque conspiracy charges that were used. Conspiracy laws are the last resort of a state determined to punish someone but unable to present evidence of wrongdoing, as British trade unionists, including, famously, Ricky Tomlinson (aka TV’s Jim Royle), discovered in the still-disputed case of the jailed building workers’ ‘Shrewsbury Pickets’ in 1973.

Kimber ends by reviewing the case of US ‘contractor’ Alan Gross, jailed in Cuba for smuggling communications equipment into the island as part of US initiatives funded under ‘Track 2’ embargo legislation devoted to regime change.
He speculates on the possibility of a prisoner swap. Alongside Brazilian writer Fernando Morais’s *Los Últimos Soldados de la Guerra Fría: la Historia de los Agentes Secretos Infiltrados por Cuba en Organizaciones de Extrema Derecha en los Estados Unidos* (La Habana, Cuba: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 2013), Kimber’s book opens a wide window on a largely unlit room in the sad mansion of US-Cuba relations in the post-Soviet era.

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