BOOK REVIEW

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Reviewed by Jorge I. Domínguez

This time-travel, mood-evoking, eye-enticing account of Cuba in 1962 brings together black-and-white photographs, diaries, and other texts from that era, enriched by selections from Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s masterful film, *Memorias del Subdesarrollo*, and color photographs taken in 2010. The “attempt to build a new society made me curious”, Richard Hollis writes in this book’s afterword, explaining why he went to Cuba in 1962 and took photographs; J.S. Tennant took more photos in 2010. Altogether, 50 photos appear in the book, nearly one on every other page.

Savor the photos – teenage women teaching adults how to read, truckloads of cane-cutting urbanites, imposing views of the City of Havana juxtaposed to decaying apartment buildings, posters, cartoons, headlines, soldiers, monuments from 1962 and from decades later, vibrant mass meetings highlighting Fidel Castro’s speaking to ready a nation for the looming threat of the 1962 missile crisis.

The photos, along with excerpts from Hollis’ 1962 letters and diary as well as selections from Juan Goytisolo’s contemporaneous diary, and the effective deployment of Gutiérrez Alea’s film protagonist, played admirably by Sergio Corrieri, convey well the feelings and fears of that year, including its food-rationing challenges, the hopes for a better future with revolutionary commitment, and altogether the dramatic experiences of that moment in Cuba’s history.

Some of the text is evocative of that era – Cubans complaining that the Soviets did not use deodorant (p. 14) or the requisitioning of air conditioners from local brothels in eastern Cuba to cool liquid fuel and Soviet nuclear warheads. Some is aptly informative, telling readers that Fidel Castro urged
Khrushchev “to launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike against any expeditionary force” (p. 93). And echoes of the 1962 missile crisis were heard again in 2022, the authors tell us, before and during Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

However, this is not a scholarly book, and it does not pretend to be. The Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) were not “created in the Soviet mold” (p. 12). The characterization of US decision-making during the crisis is excessively oversimplified. Brigade 2506 fighters who landed at Playa Girón, Bay of Pigs, were not “mercenaries” (p. 15). Khrushchev deserves far more credit for actually caring about the prospects of revolutionary rule in Cuba; he was not just focused on US Jupiter missiles in Turkey.

At its best, the book exhibits the zest and zeal of a people amidst a revolution, seeking to reinvent the economy, transform education, and mobilize politics, all under the spell of an extraordinary charismatic leader. The book falters in its analytical attempts and in its accounting for important details, but permits Cubans to shine, notwithstanding setbacks, in their attempts at reinventions.