

## Havana's Cold War

*By Don Bohning*

*Castro's Secrets: The CIA and Cuba's Intelligence Machine*

Brian Latell

Palgrave Macmillan. 272 pp. \$27

With a background as the former Cuba desk analyst for the Central Intelligence Agency; the National Intelligence Officer for Latin America; and (currently) a university lecturer, Brian Latell knows well of what he speaks and writes. That is apparent by his new book on Castro's intelligence apparatus. As Latell describes it, the book

is a penetrating look into the workings of one of the world's best and most aggressive intelligence services now known to have been personally led for nearly fifty years by Fidel Castro, acting as Cuba's supreme spymaster . . . so this is really a many layered story about him: his character, conspiratorial instincts, audacity, devious brilliance, and hatred of the United States. His many secrets exposed here for the first time reveal Fidel Castro in ways never before fully appreciated.

It's more than a book about Fidel Castro and his secrets, however. The focus is on the second half of the 20th century when Cuba, acting as proxy for the Soviet Union, was stirring up trouble throughout the hemisphere and as far away as Africa. And Lee Harvey Oswald was to become a household name with his November 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy in Dallas.

Latell argues persuasively that Washington woefully underestimated the Cuban intelligence service overseen by Castro, with predictable results for US aims. "From New Year's day in 1959, when Castro won power, until the summer of 1987," Latell writes, the Cubans "were viewed as bush-league amateurs, Latino lightweights in the conspiratorial sweepstakes of superpower espionage. It allowed them to work

clandestinely, in the shadows, largely beyond the sight and even cognizance of their American adversaries.”

Washington’s rude awakening, according to Latell, came on the first Saturday in June 1987. On that day Florentino Aspillaga Lombard, the most informed and highly-decorated officer ever to defect from Cuban intelligence, thrust himself into CIA hands via the US embassy in Vienna. The CIA “finally came to rue such self-defeating nonsense” as Cuba’s supposed intelligence deficit. The author interviewed Aspillaga Lombard for some fifteen hours for the purposes of the book.

While Latell makes no new blockbusting revelations, the book contains enough new information regarding Cuba/Castro and the United States to make it well worth the time of anyone interested in the subject. One of the most important of the many telling anecdotal incidents in the book concerns Fidel Castro’s “Armageddon Letter,” written to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev at the height of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. As Latell describes it,

Fidel recognized that the crisis was coming to a head, that Cuba was in acute peril. Thirty years later at an international conference in Havana on the missile crisis, he recalled his thinking on that last night of the nuclear showdown:

“On that night we saw . . . we saw no possible solution. We couldn’t see a solution. We couldn’t see a way out.” He went to the embassy determined to communicate securely with the Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev.

Angry and bellicose, Castro behaved as he always did when under pressure: He seized the initiative. Until then he had been on the sidelines of the crisis; now he thrust himself into its combustible center. Kennedy and Khrushchev were struggling to reach a peaceful solution, but Fidel remained intransigent, fearing his interests were being ignored. He was not being consulted and, worse yet, he suspected the Soviet leader was losing his nerve, that he might cave in to the Americans . . .

Latell also devotes considerable space and detail to Lee Harvey Oswald and the November 22 assassination of President Kennedy, writing that Castro had prior knowledge. He describes Aspillaga Lombard as being at work in Cuba on Friday morning, 22 November 1963, monitoring US electronic emissions when he got a message telling him to “redirect his antennas . . . to listen to communications from Texas” some three hours before Kennedy was shot at 12:30 PM Dallas time, or 1:30 PM Havana time. “Castro knew,” said Aspillaga. “They knew Kennedy would be killed.”

The book recounts various plots supported by the CIA against Castro, including the controversial one involving Rolando Cubela Secades, a Cuban revolutionary hero in the fight against the Batista regime who had supposedly turned against Castro. “Cubela,”

says Latell, “had been meeting secretly with CIA case officers in foreign capitals since 1961 and [was] recruited as a trusted agent in August 1962.” Until then, notes Latell, “the Agency had no high-level sources in the Cuban regime.” But contrary to the conventional wisdom, Latell argues that Cubela was a double-agent all along. Coming from Latell’s pen, this is a serious allegation because of the proximity of Cubela’s unsuccessful plot with the all-too-successful Kennedy assassination.

Unless and until the Cuban intelligence archives are opened, the answer to the question of Cubela’s true master won’t be settled—if then. In the meantime, Brian Latell has reminded us that several thorny and troubling questions remain outstanding.

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