

Seeing Red in the Caribbean

By Don Bohning

Brilliant Disaster: JFK, Castro, and America's Doomed Invasion of Cuba's Bay of Pigs

By Jim Rasenberger

Scribner. 480 pp. \$32

Red Heat: Conspiracy, Murder and the Cold War in the Caribbean

By Alex von Tunzelmann

Henry Holt and Company. 449 pp. \$30

Both these authors reach more than a half century back into American history to produce books that are as relevant today as they would have been in the late 1950s and 1960s, when the events they describe occurred.

The books are set against the backdrop of America's Cold War with the Soviet Union, which was at its zenith at the time. The memory of the late Joe McCarthy, the far right-wing senator from Wisconsin who saw a Communist under every tree, was fresh and very raw. His witch hunt for alleged Communists and Communist sympathizers during the early 1950s still had conservatives and liberals alike trembling that they might be the next target of McCarthy-style vitriol.

Rasenberger focuses exclusively on the Bay of Pigs, the ill-fated attempt to overthrow Cuba's Fidel Castro that originated under President Eisenhower, continued under President Kennedy, and ended in a disastrous failure. Von Tunzelmann, a British author, focuses her attention on the Caribbean and the impact the Soviet Communist threat—real or perceived—had on US policy vis-à-vis that region.

Unfortunately, von Tunzelmann's adds little to a new understanding of events. She relies heavily on earlier research by others (she cites more than 200 works in her bibliography), but does not exploit the vast amount of new information available at the National Archives since passage of the 1992 Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act. Nor does she cite more recent articles and books drawn from these primary documents. Of the two books, Rasenberger's is by far the more readable and well-researched, recounting events that led to the failed 1961 effort to overthrow the first Soviet satellite in the Western Hemisphere.

Rasenberger's problem was overcoming the plethora of books, articles, and inquiries the Bay of Pigs has generated over the past half century. As he observes in the introduction, "if what follows is not quite a story never told, it may be, even for those well-acquainted with the event—especially those perhaps—a different story than the one readers thought they knew. Because the Bay of Pigs was so cataclysmic and personally anguishing to so many involved, and because it raised questions about core American values, its post-mortems have tended to be of finger-pointing, ax-grinding, high-dudgeon variety." He generally succeeds in toeing this line, aided by new details that have become available in recent years with the release of once-classified documents, along with the recollections of key figures who declined to speak out initially—most notably the late Jake Esterline, the CIA's project director, and Marine Colonel Jack Hawkins, the project's paramilitary chief.

Rasenberger reveals a personal interest in the Bay of Pigs story, "albeit obliquely." In December of 1962, when he was two months old, his father was "briefly but significantly" involved in the episode's dramatic finale. A young lawyer who had done political advance work for JFK, Rasenberger senior was recruited to join Robert Kennedy's pre-Christmas effort to bring home more than a thousand men who had been taken prisoner by Fidel Castro during the debacle. "My father's role was small, and came only near the end. I mention him to point out that I grew up more attuned than most to the Bay of Pigs fiasco, and yet I can't say my understanding of it was at all clear. I suspect that to most people around my age, the Bay of Pigs is an incident of the dim, dark past, like a childhood memory of something not meant for children's eyes. Meanwhile, for older Americans—those of my father's generation—it's a memory that is fading."

While the Bay of Pigs may be an incident from the "dim, dark, past," it had lasting repercussions, the most serious of which occurred in the fall of 1962, when the Soviets installed nuclear missiles in Cuba to (ostensibly) protect the island from another US invasion. On the cusp of the nuclear showdown, Moscow agreed to remove its missiles in return for a guarantee by the Kennedy administration not to invade Cuba.

Rasenberger points out that "Other than the frozen state of relations between the United States and Cuba, virtually unchanged since 1961, we live in a world that is very different from the one that produced the Bay of Pigs. The Cold War is over; the War on Terror has now taken its place as our national *bête noire*. Fidel Castro, in retrospect, seems a benign threat next to the likes of Osama bin Laden."

Yet the author makes the case that the United States is “still driven by the same conflicting motives and urgencies that landed the country at the Bay of Pigs fifty years ago. On the one hand, we are a people convinced of our own righteousness, power, and genius—a conviction that compels us to cure what ails the world. On the other hand, we are stalked by deep insecurities: our way of life is in constant jeopardy; our enemies are implacable and closing in.”

The days of “the splendid little war,” as Ambassador John Hays famously called the United States military venture in Cuba in 1898 (during the Spanish-American War), are long gone now,” Rasenberger contends. “Instead, we get complicated, tormented affairs that never seem to end. In this respect, at least, the Kennedy administration earned this book’s oxymoronic title and without irony: their disaster was brilliantly brief. It could have been far worse, as a number of very smart people noted afterward.”

Rasenberger argues that “even if we forget the Bay of Pigs . . . it will not forget us. There among the mangrove swamps and the coral-jeweled waters, some part of the American story ended and a new one began. Like a well-crafted prologue, the Bay of Pigs sounded the themes, foreshadowed the conflicts, and laid the groundwork for the decades to follow.”

Still, says Rasenberger, it would be “facile to credit the 1960s to a single failed invasion—many currents combined to produce the tsunami—but the Bay of Pigs stalked it for years to come.” He then notes that “three of the major American cataclysms of the ’60s and ’70s—John Kennedy’s assassination, the Vietnam War, and Watergate—were related by concatenation to the Bay of Pigs. No fewer than four presidents were touched by it, from Dwight Eisenhower, who first approved the “Program of Covert Action” against Castro, to Richard Nixon and the six, infamous, justice-obstructing words he uttered in 1972: “the whole Bay of Pigs thing.”

As Rasenberger concludes, “the Bay of Pigs recedes into our past, but it is far from dead history. It is preserved, for instance, in the weirdly timeless relationship between the United States and Cuba, severed in the winter of 1961 and unrepaired since. Fidel Castro now is an old man in poor health and no longer officially in charge of Cuba, but his reign lasted through ten US presidents—eleven, if we included President Obama, which would bring the count to one quarter of all US presidents.”

As noted earlier, *Red Heat*, by Alex von Tunzelmann, falls short of the depth, readability, and research of Rasenberger’s work. Still, her book adds another piece of Cold War history by focusing on the disreputable individuals the United States found it necessary to deal with in its effort to contain the Communist threat within the Caribbean Basin. It meant US support of such unsavory, corrupt, and brutal dictators as François “Papa Doc” Duvalier in Haiti, Rafael Trujillo in the neighboring Dominican Republic, and Fulgencio Batista in Cuba. At points, her book also comes across, rightly or wrongly, deliberately or otherwise, as at least a veiled criticism of what von Tunzelmann sees as a period of US imperialism in the Caribbean region.

Before it was over, the United States intervened militarily in all three countries, albeit unsuccessfully in the case of Cuba. As von Tunzelmann puts it, here is a story of “how the United States and the Soviet Union acted out the world’s tensions in the theater of the Caribbean, attempting to use Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic as puppets.” She contends that “what neither superpower had bargained on was that their puppets would come to life. The result was tyranny, conspiracy, murder and black magic; it was poverty, violence, and a new model of global intervention that still dominates American policy.”

It is one of several, and not-so-subtle, examples of anti-imperialist overtones threaded throughout the book. It is followed by another when she observes that “this story is a prologue to later American-led interventions, over and over, all over the world, including those in Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Chile, El Salvador, Grenada, Honduras, Panama, Kuwait, Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan. The precedent is not merely figurative, but literal. The Small Wars Manual of the United States Marine Corps, used in many of these operations, was written on the strength of the Marines’ experience in the Caribbean.”

Von Tunzelmann then argues—with a bit of hyperbole—“what happened in Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic during the middle years of the twentieth century would not just change the Caribbean. It would change the world.” She fails to say how, other than its contribution to ending the Cold War.

There is no question but that the United States at times was the elephant in the room, as seen by other countries, as it intervened directly in their internal affairs, all in the name of anti-Communism. It began in 1954 with the ouster of Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz, followed by Cuba and the Bay of Pigs in 1961, then interventions or interference in British Guiana [now Guyana], in 1963, the Dominican Republic in 1965, Chile in 1970, Nicaragua in 1981, Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989.

Von Tunzelmann concludes, erroneously, it would seem, that “the secret war in the Caribbean destroyed any hope of freedom and democracy in Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. It toppled democracies. It set up death squads. It turned Cuba Communist, and kept it Communist for a half a century. It did massive damage to the international reputation of the United States. It nearly triggered a nuclear holocaust. The fact that this war began, and was undertaken, with good intentions is not a mere historical curiosity. It may be one of the most important lessons of our age”

Again, it would seem hyperbolic to say that “the secret war in the Caribbean destroyed any hope of freedom and democracy in Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic.” That may still be true in Cuba, but certainly not today in the Dominican Republic, and less so in Haiti. Nor, as she claims, does it seem to have done “massive and permanent damage to the international reputation of the United States.”

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