

In the guise of education, John Simkin's website delivers agitprop.

Indoctrination U

By Don Bohning

If newspapers write “a first rough draft” of history, as the publisher Philip Graham once put it, then the internet can be said to host a “worst draft” of history.

There are tens of thousands of reliable websites about historical topics, of course, and many provide the actual tools (instant access to primary documents) that enable readers to reach their own, independent conclusions. But many other sites are extraordinarily tendentious and shroud their advocacy behind a mask of false scholarship.

A case in point is a website, [Spartacus Educational](#), established in 1997 by John Simkin, a British historian.^[1] Spartacus is billed on Google as a “British online encyclopedia [that] focuses on historical topics . . . articles are geared toward students.” And the website, according to one description, is “one of the most established and popular history sites on the world wide web.”^[2] In the late 1990s, apparently, Simkin was one of the very first history teachers to recognize the potential of the internet and take advantage of the new digital medium. As for Simkin, he [presents himself](#) as a history teacher and prolific author of books about a diverse number of subjects—which he is, although his short books are mostly self-published.^[3]

An innocent student who stumbles onto Spartacus Educational would probably think the Google description is apt, and be impressed by Simkin's credentials. It takes a little digging to figure out Simkin is much more interested in indoctrination than education, in keeping with his unreconstructed left-wing views. Simkin exemplifies the kind of militant socialists, once peculiar to the Labour Party, who were all but run out of that party by former Prime Minister Tony Blair.

I first encountered Spartacus Educational three years ago, when Simkin contacted me after publication of my 2005 book, [The Castro Obsession](#). At first I was impressed with Simkin's diligence and outreach, and the portion of his website dedicated to US history, particularly intelligence history during the cold war. But it did not take long to learn that more often than not, the articles he featured were at variance with well-documented facts, including information I had gained directly from interviews and thousands of official

documents declassified in recent years. Worse still, Simkin proved impervious to the idea that falsehoods should be corrected rather than perpetuated.

Operation 40

One of the most egregious misrepresentations on the Spartacus site involves “[Operation 40](#).” The website describes it as a Central Intelligence Agency unit that was organized in the early 1960s to engage in sabotage operations against Cuba. Operation 40 then supposedly “evolved into a team of assassins.”^[4] No credible documentation is supplied to support either the sabotage or assassination claims, and for good reason: none exists.

To be sure, there was a CIA-organized group called Operation 40 involved in anti-Castro activities. And though it bears scant resemblance to the Simkin’s fictionalized version, the unit’s interesting history needs to be recounted before one can appreciate how much Simkin bends and distorts it.

As described by some of its members, as well as in official documents, Operation 40 was the name given to a special unit created to play a supporting role in the CIA-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961. The unit’s assigned but never-realized task was to follow on the heels of the Cuban-exile invasion force, purge pro-Castro officials, seize documents, and take over administration of “liberated” towns and villages. Scheduled to depart Nicaragua two days after the invasion force, Operation 40 never did land.

When the invasion failed miserably, the unit returned to Miami and morphed into a Cuban intelligence organization-in-exile, aka the Cuban CIA, or more commonly, Operation 40. Its CIA codename was AMOT, and for the next 13 years it operated under, but quasi-independently and at a separate location from, JMWAVE, codename for the large CIA station in Miami that waged the secret war against Castro. For many years, AMOT was headed by Joaquín Sanjenís, an official in the pre-Castro Cuban government of Carlos Prío. AMOT was disbanded in 1974 as JMWAVE operations were phased out.^[5]

That’s AMOT/Operation 40 in a nutshell, though like everything else in Cuban exile politics, there was more than a little controversy attached to this unit. Exile politics were extremely contentious and faction-ridden from the outset, and the innuendo about this unit fit that mold.

A telling glimpse can be found in a memorandum the late Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., an advisor to President Kennedy, wrote to White House aide Richard Goodwin on June 9, 1961, some eight weeks after the Bay of Pigs debacle. Schlesinger wrote, in part:

Sam Halper, who has been the *Times* [sic] correspondent in Habana and more recently in Miami, came to see me last week . . . I have been meaning to pass on the following story as told me by Halper. Halper says that CIA set up something called Operation 40 under the direction of a man named . . . Captain Luis Sanjenis [sic], who was also chief of

intelligence. It was called Operation 40 because originally only 40 men were involved; later the group was enlarged to 70. The ostensible purpose of Operation 40 was to administer liberated territories in Cuba. But the CIA agent in charge, a man known as Felix, trained the members of the group in methods of third degree interrogation, torture and general terrorism. The liberal Cuban exiles believe that the real purpose of Operation 40 was to “kill Communists” and, after eliminating hard-core Fidelistas, to go on to eliminate first the followers of [Manuel] Ray, then the followers of [Tony] Varona and finally to set up a right-wing dictatorship, presumably under [Manuel] Artime.[\[6\]](#)

These kinds of suspicions and allegations were typical within the fractious exile community, as its leaders jockeyed constantly for position and fought to be anointed by their patrons to the north. Thus, as a reflection of the exile community’s back-biting the memo was accurate; as a reflection of Operation 40’s true nature, it cannot be taken at face value.

In evaluating this document, moreover, the reputation of Sam Halper also has to be kept in mind. Halper, who died in 1989, worked for *Time* magazine, but was not highly regarded by his colleagues, among them Bernard Diederich and Jay Mallin. Both were *Time* correspondents covering Cuba and the Caribbean during the same period as Halper. Diederich was based in Haiti and Mallin in Havana, and both are still alive. When I asked Mallin about Halper, he wrote an email that said, “just mentioning his name gives me a nightmare.”[\[7\]](#) Diederich spoke in a similar disparaging way about Halper’s journalistic skills. “He was no reporter,” Diederich recalled, “although he liked to ‘big foot’ [intrude on] big stories.”[\[8\]](#)

A more realistic and first-hand appraisal of Operation 40’s role in 1961 was provided by Néstor Carbonell in his 1989 book, *And the Russians Stayed*. Carbonell had just finished his work for the CIA-created, five-member exile junta that was supposed to become Cuba’s provisional government after Castro’s ouster when some of his colleagues persuaded him to join the special unit. Operation 40, Carbonell wrote,

was to be integrated into the brigade and charged with occupation and temporary administration of liberated territories. (I later heard bizarre stories, echoed by noted reporters and historians, about the purported sinister task of this unit: that [it included] eliminating “leftist” leaders, including [José] Miró, who might stand in the way of “reactionary” plans!) This unit was composed of about eighty men, most of them young professionals known to me, and was headed by an amiable former colonel of the Cuban army, Vicente Leon, who had honored his uniform throughout his career.[\[9\]](#)

The controversy that swirled around Operation 40 did not abate much after 1961. As with any intelligence organization, especially one that functioned as a CIA with some J. Edgar Hoover-style functions added on for good measure, Operation 40 generated rumors and suspicion merely by existing. After the abortive invasion effort, when it operated as an intelligence-gathering unit under Joaquín Sanjenís in Miami, Operation 40 collected information not only on arriving Cubans and regime officials still in Cuba, but also

closely monitored Cuban organizations throughout South Florida. The unit even produced occasional studies on the Cuban economy, especially the sugar industry.[\[10\]](#)

More than three decades after its demise, in fact, Operation 40 remains a controversial topic within the South Florida Cuban exile community, many of whom it spied upon. As the late Rafael Quintero, a widely respected exile leader, told me during an April 2003 interview,

When the Bay of Pigs went kaput, they stayed [together] as a group and Sanjenís became a very, very dangerous and powerful guy in Miami because he had a file on everybody . . . whose wife was whose lover, how much money, etc. . . . Some people tried to use that for blackmail. Actually, nobody knows where those files are [to this day]. It's a big question mark.[\[11\]](#)

According to Simkin

This capsule history of an admittedly controversial organization bears scant resemblance to the version presented on John Simkin's popular website.

According to Simkin's version of history, Operation 40 does not have its roots in the Bay of Pigs invasion, but goes all the way back to December 11, 1959, when J.C. King, then chief of CIA's Western Hemisphere Division, sent a confidential memo to Allen W. Dulles, the CIA director. King's memo argued that Cuba had a "far left" dictatorship which, if permitted to stand, would encourage similar actions against US holdings in other Latin American countries.[\[12\]](#) Such a memo was written by King, but it is not true that "as a result . . . Dulles established Operation 40," which is what Simkin goes on to claim.[\[13\]](#)

Operation 40's first successful action, according to Simkin, supposedly occurred on March 4, 1960, "when *La Coubre*, a ship flying a Belgian flag, exploded in Havana Bay." No evidence has ever been presented to prove that explosion of the *La Coubre*—a French vessel laden with Belgian arms and ammunition for Castro—was anything but an accident. It should be noted, too, that the incident Simkin attributes to Operation 40 happened two weeks *before* President Eisenhower approved, on March 17, 1960, the CIA's first covert plan to rid Cuba of Castro.

At this point in Simkin's fictitious history, if not earlier, it becomes apparent where he prefers to get his history from. Not surprisingly perhaps, it turns out that Simkin's sole source for linking Operation 40 to the *La Coubre* explosion is Fabián Escalante, a former head of the Cuban state security apparatus (G-2), charged with carrying out counterintelligence operations.[\[14\]](#) There is no doubt, of course, that the secret war as seen from Havana will look different from the Washington-centric view that currently predominates. However, until and unless Havana's archives—including the records of the Cuban state security apparatus—are thrown open to an extent comparable to what Washington has done with CIA, State Department, and Pentagon records, Simkin's

reliance on Escalante is, at best, very naïve. Escalante is a purveyor of mis- and disinformation.

Without specifying a point in time, Simkin goes on to claim that Operation 40 was not only involved in sabotage, but “evolved into a team of assassins.” It is true, of course, that the CIA sanctioned plots to kill Fidel Castro and also initiated assassination plots. But did Operation 40 have anything to do with those efforts?

The 1975 Senate investigation headed by Frank Church (D-Idaho) published a report devoted entirely to the subject of *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, the bulk of which concerned Castro.^[15] The report made no mention of Operation 40. Nor did a 1967 internal report by the CIA’s inspector general, prepared at the direct order of then-President Lyndon B. Johnson, and declassified in 1993.^[16] If Operation 40 had been a CIA-sanctioned assassination unit, as Simkin claims, it is inconceivable that it would have escaped the attention of both the Church Committee and the CIA’s inspector general.^[17]

Sturgis, Hemmings, and Goss?

Simkin’s predisposition to take as gospel information from the most dubious sources is never more evident than when he relies on the late Frank Sturgis to describe Operation 40’s evolution into a “team of assassins.” Simkin quotes Sturgis as saying,

this assassination group [Operation 40], would, upon orders, naturally, assassinate either members of the military of the political parties of the foreign country that you were going to infiltrate, and if necessary some of our own members who were suspected of being foreign agents . . . [though] we were concentrating strictly on Cuba at that particular time.^[18]

There are two problems here. As a reporter for *The Miami Herald* during that period, I knew Sturgis—or Frank Fiorini, the name he then went by—quite well. He was one of many “soldiers of fortune” floating around Miami in the 1960s. Like other journalists, I would listen to his stories but I rarely, if ever, found him credible. The other, more significant problem is that while Sturgis invariably tried to create the impression that he worked for the CIA, in fact, he never did in any capacity. As the 1975 Rockefeller Commission [report](#) stated, “Frank Sturgis was not an employee or agent of the CIA either in 1963 or at any other time. He so testified under oath and a search of CIA records failed to discover any evidence that he had ever been employed by the CIA or had ever served it as an agent, informant or other operative.^[19]”

This finding means that even if one were to accept, for the sake of argument, that there was such a thing as Simkin’s version of Operation 40, then Sturgis was certainly not a part of it.

In addition to Sturgis, the Spartacus website provides a list of “CIA officials and freelance agents” who allegedly belonged to Operation 40. Among the other Americans

listed is the late Gerry Hemming, another “soldier of fortune” type who was even less believable than Sturgis—that is, if it’s possible to have less-than-zero credibility.^[20]

But not all the alleged members are as obviously phony as Sturgis and Hemming are. Simkin also fingers, without providing any documentation, Porter J. Goss as a member of Operation 40. The Spartacus website even features a [photograph](#), which it claims was “taken in a nightclub in Mexico City on 22 January 1963. It is believed that the men in the photograph are all members of Operation 40.”^[21] Among them, allegedly, is Goss (with glasses, at the bottom left-hand corner).



Goss, of course, actually was a CIA officer from 1962 to 1972, and worked for a 2-3 months in the Miami station during the Cuban missile crisis, primarily as a photo-interpreter. Several years after he left the agency he became a Republican congressman from Florida. He served eight terms before resigning from Congress, and his chairmanship of the House Intelligence Committee, to serve as CIA director from 2004 to 2006.

Goss was provided with a copy of the [photograph](#) featured on Simkin’s website. In a telephone interview, Goss not only said that he had “never heard of Operation 40,” but declared, with some vehemence, that the “Goss” identified in the photo is “categorically, decisively, and completely . . . not me.”^[22] Simkin’s website biography of Goss contains other errors, but to point them out would belabor the obvious.

Spartacus Educational is not dedicated to spreading accurate historical knowledge, but diffusing John Simkin's tired ideology.

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[1] Simkin is also a leading member of [The Education Forum](#), a woefully misnamed website, which purports to be a "forum for teachers and educators."

[2] [History Nexus](#), "Spartacus International."

[3] The vast majority of Simkin's books are published either by Tressell Publications, which he helped found in 1980, or Spartacus Educational Publishing, which he established in 1984. What Simkin calls a "book" is also open to interpretation, as most of his works appear to be extended essays or long pamphlets (e.g., his Spartacus-published books on the Vietnam war, US race relations, and the Cuban missile crisis are, respectively, 64 pages, 90 pages, and 32 pages long).

[4] Spartacus Educational, "[Operation 40](#)," accessed 11 June 2008.

[5] AMOT's CIA case officer for at least two years, beginning in 1970, was the late Frank Belsito, who published an account of his years managing the unit before his death in 2006. Frank J. Belsito, *CIA: Cuba and the Caribbean, CIA Officer's Memoir* (Kearney, NE: Morris Publishing, 2002).

[6] Cuban Information Archives, [Document 0355](#).

[7] Email to author from Jay Mallin, 17 April 2007.

[8] Email to author from Bernard Diederich, 17 May 2007.

[9] Néstor T. Carbonell, *And the Russians Stayed: The Sovietization of Cuba, a Personal Portrait* (New York: William Morrow, 1989), 141-143.

[10] Don Bohning, *The Castro Obsession: US Covert Operations Against Cuba, 1959-1965* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005), 144-145.

[11] *Ibid.*, 145. This same quote appears in my book, but at that time Quintero asked not to be identified.

[12] US Senate, Select Committee to Study Government Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders: An Interim Report* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, November 1975), 92.

[13] Spartacus Educational, "[Operation 40](#)," accessed 11 June 2008.

[14] In his retirement, Escalante has devoted himself to writing a number of what must be considered "authorized" books about Castro's resistance to North American aggression. It should be noted that while Escalante, in his written work, claimed that the *La Coubre* explosion was a "CIA operation," not even he was so sloppy as to attribute the blast to a plan/organization (Operation 40) that did not yet exist. See Fabián Escalante, *The Secret War: CIA Covert Operations Against Cuba, 1959-62* (Melbourne, Australia: Ocean Press, 1995), 44-45.

[15] US Senate, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, 71-180.

[16] J.S. Earman, (CIA) Inspector General, "[Reports on Plots to Assassinate Fidel Castro](#)," May 23, 1967.

[17] The only systematic CIA assassination program that is documented in US government records was code-named ZRRIFLE. It was created in 1960 by Richard Bissell, then the CIA's director of plans, as the Eisenhower administration contemplated the elimination of such troublesome Third World leaders as Patrice Lumumba and Fidel Castro. Following Bissell's resignation after the Bay of Pigs debacle, Bill Harvey took over the program in 1961 and directed it through the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, until Harvey, too, was demoted. ZRRIFLE never actually resulted in an assassination. For an excellent account of the program, see Bayard Stockton, *Flawed Patriot: The Rise and Fall of CIA Legend Bill Harvey* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2006).

[18] Spartacus Educational, "[Operation 40](#)," accessed 11 June 2008.

[19] Commission on CIA Activities within the United States, *Report to the President* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1975), 252.

[20] Hemming, who had a record of three arrests and one conviction for either drug or gun smuggling, died in February 2008 at his home in North Carolina. In an obituary, Robert K. Brown, editor of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine and Hemming's friend, described Hemming as a charismatic man, but "it was hard to tell where the fact ended and the fiction started." In the same article, I was accurately quoted as saying, "I never believed a word he had to say." John Dorschner, "Adventurer's Life Offers a Look at a Bygone Miami," *Miami Herald*, 6 February 2008.

[21] Spartacus Educational, "[Operation 40](#)," accessed 11 June 2008.

[22] Telephone interviews with Porter Goss, 29 February and 5 March 2008.