Operation Peter Pan and the Mariel Boatlift – Cuban emigration to the U.S. in a changing Cold War context

Mihanović, Karlo

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Kandidat: Karlo Mihanović

Mentori: dr.sc. Sven Cvek, dr.sc. Tvrtko Jakovina

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Contents

Introduction

The history of Cuban emigration to the United States of America during the Cold War is unique when compared to emigration from other Latin American states in the same period – this uniqueness is driven not only by the exceptional circumstances and turmoil during and after the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and the tectonic shift of Cuba's geopolitical alignment that followed but also by the singular geopolitical importance assigned to Cuba in the American imagination, dating back to the 19th century. The loss of Cuba to revolution and socialism and the rapidly expanding ties between Castro's Cuba and the USSR after initial ambiguity in the immediate post-revolutionary period represented a major blow to American interests in its geopolitical heartland which was supposed to be under firm U.S. control – the escalation of rhetoric and actions by Castro's fledgling government, the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations and Soviet leadership under Nikita Khrushchev in the early 1960s almost led to full-blown nuclear war between the superpowers during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, demonstrating the geopolitical and strategic importance of Cuba to the United States.

One widely-felt and far-reaching consequence of the social and political turmoil in the wake of the Cuban Revolution and Castro's ascent to power was the influx of emigrees from Cuba to the United States, which had extensive social and political consequences both for Cuba and the United States. This paper will examine and compare two particular episodes in the broader Cuban emigration to the United States in the post-revolutionary period, Operation Peter Pan and the Mariel Boatlift, through the lived experience of the participants, augmented by scholarly works and an in-depth examination of the historical background of the events that precipitated them amidst the broader historical context of the Cold War and Cuban-American

relations. These two waves of migration were chosen because they provide a valuable insight into the shifting social structures of Castro's Cuba and of the Cuban-American community as the differences in the racial and social stratification of the emigrants that arrived through Operation Peter Pan and the Mariel boatlift were reflected in the differing reception they received upon entry to the United States and the manner of their arrival – these changing characteristics of Cuban immigrants to the United States provide a fertile ground for comparison and analysis not only of the changes in the social class of the exiles leaving Cuba and the shifting perceptions of Cuban-Americans as a result of that shift but also help illustrate the developments and changes in Cuban-American relations within the framework of the Cold War.

1. Historical context of Cuban-American relations in the 20th century

1.1. U.S. views on Cuba in the 19th century, the struggle for Cuban independence and U.S. domination of Cuba (1868-1933)

Cuba, located some 150 km south from Key West, Florida, caught the attention of the U.S. political elite and became an object of singular desire for the United States, featuring prominently in the imagination and political discourse in 19th century America, owing to its geographic proximity, economic potential and strategic location in the Gulf of Mexico. John Quincy Adams, the 6th President of the United States (1825-1829), went as far as to say that "the annexation of Cuba to our federal republic will be indispensable to the continuance and integrity of the Union itself" (Perez, 2008, pg. 25). Adams poetically expanded on that core idea, framing Cuba's position in relation to the United States and the inevitability of its incorporation into the Union as an indisputable law of nature, stating in a letter in 1823:

> There are laws of political as well as of physical gravitation; and if an apple, severed by the tempest from its native tree, cannot choose but fall to the ground, Cuba, forcibly disjoined from its own unnatural connexion with Spain, and incapable of self-support, can gravitate only towards the North American Union, which, by the same law of nature, cannot cast her off from its bosom. (Perez, 2008, pg. 30)

Adams was far from the only public figure sharing those views, with celebrated poet Walt Whitman stating that "manifest destiny certainly points to the speedy annexation of Cuba by the United States" (Perez, 2008, pg. 28).

The U.S. obsession with Cuba forming a natural part of the United States and it being vital to U.S. interests and security was justified not only by equating the connection between the United States and Cuba with laws of nature but also with religious destiny, a prominent motif in

American national mythology in the 19th century. The Ostend Manifesto, written in 1854 by Pierre Souile, John Y. Mason and future president James Buchanan, combined the two in a singular argument for the purchase of Cuba from Spain, stating that "Cuba is as necessary to the North American republic as any of its present members" ("Wikisource", Ostend). The Ostend Manifesto also provides another rationale for the necessity of the incorporation of Cuba into the United States; the necessity of Cuba not falling to a slave revolt as had occurred in the French colony of Saint-Domingue during the successful Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) – the only successful slave uprising in the Americas. This betrayed the racial anxiety prominent in slaveholding states at the time amid growing tensions regarding the institution of slavery within the Union which exploded into the American Civil War a scant 7 years after the publishing of the manifesto.

The Monroe doctrine, as an aspirational idea guiding the foreign policy of the United States in the 19th and early 20th century, espoused the rejection of European colonialism in the Western hemisphere and reciprocal non-interference of the U.S. in European affairs, also played a role in the shaping of the U.S. policy towards Cuba. While the U.S. couldn't enforce the doctrine until the latter half of the 19th century, it still affected the geopolitical posture of the United States towards Cuba which throughout the 19th century mixed ideas of religious destiny, immutable laws of nature drawing the island towards the U.S., strategic and security concerns, inextricably tying Cuba to the imagination and self-actualization of American identity.

The first "tempest to sever the apple from its native tree", to paraphrase Adams, occurred in Cuba during the Ten Years' War (1868-1878) and the Little War (1879-1880) as Cuban rebels fought for the independence of the island from Spain, which had ruled the island since 1510. The devastating effects of these wars (especially the grueling Ten Years' War) were the catalysts for

change and further dissatisfaction on the island, as the 1880s brought turmoil in sugar markets as the sugar beet began being planted in Europe, significantly impacting the already devastated local plantations – the decade also saw the gradual phasing out of the institution of slavery in Cuba which, along with unfavorable treatment of certain creole elites in the aftermath of the wars by the Spanish crown removed the bonds of loyalty Cubans had with Spain (Staten, 2005, pg. 34). The United States seized the opportunity provided by the turmoil, with American investors buying up Cuban businesses and the U.S. becoming the largest market for Cuban sugar (Perez Jr., 2006, pg. 104).

The second tempest, and one that would set in motion events that would introduce American imperialism to the world stage in the aftermath of the forthcoming Spanish-American War of 1898, occurred in 1895 when Cuban revolutionaries and independence fighters under the leadership of Jose Marti, Maximo Gomez and Antonio Maceo started the Cuban War for Independence. While the Spanish troops under the command of General Weyler managed to defeat the rebels in open battle several times and cut the rebel leaders off from one another, they couldn't stomp them out for good, and several factors precipitated the intervention of the United States in Cuba - chief among which were the strengthening of imperialist sentiment in Congress, the protection of American assets and economic interests on the island which were vulnerable to wartime devastation and the sensationalist yellow journalism which ran stories of rampant Spanish atrocities thereby fueling interventionist sentiment among the population (Thomas, 2010, pg. 158).

The aforementioned mounting interventionist and imperialist sentiment, coupled with the wavering of the Spanish desire to prosecute the war further, as evidenced by the dismissal of General Weyler and the granting of limited autonomy to Cuba with the goal of finding a

diplomatic resolution, set the stage for American intervention – the rebels rejected autonomy, preferring independence even though they could not achieve victory on the field of battle and President McKinley, in order to safeguard U.S. economic interests on the island, sent the USS Maine to Havana (Staten, 2005, pg. 37-38).

The sinking of the USS Maine on February 15, 1898 with 260 casualties among the crew, as a result of an internal explosion most likely started by a coal fire, was the fuse that fully lit the fire of interventionism in the United States as yellow journalism exploded with anti-Spanish hysteria, blaming a Spanish mine for the incident, ratcheting up tensions with Spain significantly - the U.S. blockaded Cuba on April 21, 1898, thus starting the Spanish-American War. American naval superiority and the exhaustion and rampant disease among Spanish troops on Cuba ensured U.S. victory and a short conflict, though the Spanish inflicted significant casualties during the famous battle of San Juan Hill, where Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders (and Roosevelt himself) gained renown (Staten, 2005, pg. 39). The Spanish-American War also saw fighting in the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Guam and resulted in American victory after some 3 months of hostilities, with the signing of the Treaty of Paris in December finalizing the conflict and resulting in the loss of the last vestiges of the Spanish Empire in the Pacific and the Americas – Spain ceded the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico to the U.S. while Cuba would be under American occupation until the promulgation of the Cuban constitution and the election of Tomas Estrada Palma to the post of President whereby Cuba gained independence in 1902.

However, the independence that Cuban rebels desired for decades turned out to be somewhat hollow, as the United States stamped its will on Cuba, limiting the extent of Cuban independence through the Platt amendment and increasing economic dependence of Cuba on the United States. Jose Marti, who had died in the early days of the war for independence in 1895, as

the pre-eminent ideologue of the struggle for independence and of the idea of *Cuba libre* correctly foresaw the consequences of American intervention in the independence struggle, stating that:

> Every day now I am in danger of giving my life for my country and my duty… in order to prevent, by the timely independence of Cuba, the United States from extending its hold across the Antilles and falling with all the greater force on the lands of our America …. I lived in the monster, and I know its entrails—and my sling is the sling of David. (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 145)

Marti was accurate in his assessment that the U.S. had ulterior motives in supporting the Cuban independence movement, as evidence by the passage of the Platt amendment which, when signed as a treaty between the newly independent Cuba and the United States, formed the basic framework of Cuban-American relations for the next 30 years. The Platt amendment is worthy of further scrutiny as its unequal nature gave the United States effective dominance over Cuba's affairs and effectively turned Cuba into a client state dependent on the U.S. and gave the U.S. extensive influence over the nominally independent Cuban government.

Several articles of the amendment and subsequent treaty gave sizeable latitude to the U.S. at the expense of Cuban sovereignty, for example, Article I of the amendment states that the Cuban government can't enter treaties with any foreign power that would limit Cuban independence (Bevans (Ed.), 1971, pg. 1116). Article III in particular affirmed U.S. dominance over Cuban affairs, stating that the U.S. "may exercise the right to intervene for the preservation of Cuban independence" (Bevans (Ed.), 1971, pg. 1116). Article VI excluded the Isle of the Pines (today known as the Isla de Juventud, Cuba's second largest island) and Article VII ceded

lands in Guantanamo Bay to the U.S. for a naval base – the Guantanamo naval base is still under U.S. sovereignty today and is the site of the infamous Guantanamo Bay detention camp.

The Platt amendment, once analyzed in its totality, gave the United States the unilateral right to militarily intervene in Cuba whenever it saw fit, severely limited Cuba's diplomatic options, forced Cuba to cede certain territories to the U.S., prevented the Cuban government from taking on debt and legalized by default any legislation introduced during the military occupation of the island – while nominally independent, the stipulations of the treaty severely limited Cuba's diplomatic and economic outreach and entrenched American political, strategic and economic dominance over the island.

The thirty-odd years Cuba spent under the auspices of the Platt amendment sidelined Cuban interests in favor of American interests, with Perez (2011) summing up the intrinsic power dynamic in Cuban politics as follows: "the protection of foreign interests became an intrinsic and central character of the Plattist state, for it provided the means by which incumbents retained power against internal opposition and averted pressure from abroad" (pg. 159). The prioritization of U.S. interests over Cuban interests manifested itself quite clearly in the relationship American capital in Cuba had towards the burgeoning labor organizations, unions and strikes carried out by workers, a prime example being the U.S. response to a general strike in 1919 when 6,000 U.S. Marines were mobilized in the continental U.S. with another 1,000 reinforcing the garrison at Guantanamo – the Marines stationed on Cuba participated in the intimidation of labor organizations, as did the U.S. Navy, which was known to sail a warship to a port city if there was a need to constrain labor strikes (Perez, 2011, pg. 163).

The dominance of American interests and political subordination of Cuba did not mean that new social forces did not emerge, as the 1920s in Cuba brought about the political activation

of the fledgling Cuban bourgeoisie and an intensification in union activism, with the first organized labor organization in Cuba, the *Confederacion Nacional Obrera Cubana* (CNOC) being founded in 1929. This upswell of new socio-political forces coincided with the presidency of Gerardo Machado, originally an establishment candidate campaigning on a program of public works and stirring nationalist sentiment with his opposition to the Platt amendment. Machado's presidency took on an increasingly authoritarian bent, with the President controversially changing the constitution in 1928 in order to lengthen the presidential term to 6 years – this particular decision coincided with a significant downturn in the Cuban economy in 1926, as the price of sugar, the staple export upon which the Cuban economy had been dependent upon for centuries, fell nearly by half (Perez, 2011, pg. 180).

The Great Depression, which began in 1929, wreaked even more havoc on the fragile Cuban economy with the passing of the Smoot-Hawley Tarriff Act in Washington, which raised the duty on Cuban sugar, bringing about further chaos in the Cuban economy – Cuba's share in the U.S. sugar market fell from 49.4% in 1930 to just 25.3% in 1933 and the over 60% fall in sugar prices resulted in a catastrophe for domestic Cuban sugar production, which fell over 60%, and a sharp downturn in Cuban exports in general, which fell a staggering 80%. This massive economic shock, and increasing repression of political opposition by the Machado regime, were the catalysts behind the increasing social unrest and political violence in Cuba. Political violence by groups such as the ABC (*abecedarios)*, strikes and other labor actions with increasing involvement of the URC (*Union Revolucionaria Communista)* in the labor movement, and political assassinations and increasingly violent repressions carried out against opposition activists by the Machado regime, swelled continuously throughout Machado's second term in office – by the beginning of 1933, the army, which carried out repressions for Machado, was the

only institution backing the president with Cuba teetering on the edge of chaos (Staten, 2005, pg. 58). The U.S. intervened and proposed a mediation between Machado and opposition groups, including outlawed organizations like the CNOC, which Machado rejected even in the face of threats of military intervention – the situation on Cuba became critical when a bus drivers' strike in Havana snowballed into a general strike which by early August appeared to be on the verge of toppling the entire government structure (Perez Jr., 2006, pg. 198-199).

On August 12, 1933, after local commanders in Havana withdrew their support in light of a deal struck by the U.S. and the opposition which forewent any retribution against the military for their role in government repressions, President Gerardo Machado fled from Cuba to Nassau in the Bahamas. It needs to be pointed out, however, that it was the politically active public that played a pivotal role in the ouster of Machado, this being the reason why the events of 1933 in Cuba are known as the 1933 revolution, rather than a coup d'etat (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 235).

The flight of Machado to Nassau did not end the social upheaval, however, as the economic crisis, strikes and demonstrations continued and violent reprisals against the *machadistas* who supported the ousted president picked up pace – the newly installed government of Carlos Manuel de Cespedes, supported by the U.S., proved indecisive and had little legitimacy in the eyes of the protestors, as the new president heavily relied on the advice and direction of the U.S. ambassador to Cuba, Sumner Welles (Perez Jr., 2006, pg. 200). University students were particularly active in the demonstrations that continued under the Cespedes administration and they entered into an unexpected alliance with the sergeants of the Cuban army as the sergeants, on September 4, took over the largest military base, Cape Columbia, without firing a shot after their superiors disregarded their demands for an increase in pay, better opportunities for advancement in the army and the prosecution of *machadistas* in the

army – as the revolt spread across the Cuban army after the non-commissioned officers telephoned their colleagues on other military bases, on September 5, President Cespedes resigned and the unlikely alliance between army men and students took the reins of Cuba, proclaiming an "authentic revolution" (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 238).

An initial attempt at a five-man government, the Pentarchy, dissolved itself after five days and appointed Ramon Grau San Martin as provisional president – Grau, an anti-Machado activist and popular university professor, was proclaimed president on September 10 and was the first president of independent Cuba who came to power without the tacit or explicit approval of the United States, with one of his chief aims being the abolishment of the Platt amendment. The new government immediately went to work with enacting reforms such as granting women the right to vote, introducing a minimum wage, the nationalization of two of the largest sugar mills of the Cuban American Sugar Corporation after it refused to negotiate with striking workers and guaranteed autonomy for universities as well as a new course in foreign policy and the rejection of the Platt amendment and foreign intervention (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 240).

The government of President Grau was not stable, however, as the U.S. had withheld recognition due to concerns about the radical politics and demands set by the left wing of the new government, led by Antonio Guiteras, and the still very much active protestors and strikers. However, the U.S. found a willing ally in Fulgencio Batista, who emerged as the leader of the non-commissioned officers that toppled the Cespedes government, as he acted as a counterweight to the radical elements in the government (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 245)

The withholding of recognition of the Grau government by the U.S., as well as the increasingly adversarial divide between Guiteras and Batista, who now held the rank of colonel and acted as the commander of the army, and had begun to amass power around himself and

violently put down strikes at sugar mills – Batista had been cultivated by Ambassador Welles and his replacement, Ambassador Caffery, and was increasingly perceived by the U.S. as a potential source of security in Cuba (Thomas, 2010, pg. 290). Batista, sensing that he had support from the U.S., approached President Grau on January 13, 1934 and persuaded him to resign, with Grau acquiescing and accepting the inevitable – on January 18, Carlos Mendieta was inaugurated as president and the new government received recognition from the U.S. on January 23, ending the 1933 Cuban Revolution and the instability that had gripped the island. The new government and the Roosevelt administration officially abolished the Platt amendment in May, ending the era of overt U.S. domination and intervention in Cuban politics.

1.2. Post-Platt Cuba (1934-1952) – New constitution, return of democracy and Batista's coup

The abrogation of the Platt Amendment was followed by the signing of a new treaty on relations between the United States and Cuba – the treaty affirmed that all acts introduced during the U.S. occupation of Cuba until May 20 1902 "have been ratified and held as valid; and all the rights legally acquired by virtue of those acts shall be maintained and protected", continued the agreed-upon lease of Guantánamo Bay naval base, stating that "the stipulations of that agreement with regard to the naval station of Guantánamo shall continue in effect", further confirmed prior agreements on U.S. use of coaling stations and regulated the closure of ports in case of a public health emergency (Bevans (Ed.), 1971, pg. 1161-1162).

The new treaty stood in stark contrast to the Platt amendment, as it affirmed Cuban sovereignty and marked a contrast to U.S. foreign policy in the early 20th century – the treaty is a practical example of the "Good Neighbor" policy promulgated by Franklin Delano Roosevelt's

administration which eschewed intervention and interference in the affairs of Latin American states amid strong anti-interventionist and isolationist tendencies present in American politics, foreign policy and public opinion in the aftermath of World War I. However, the rejection of military intervention and overt political interference in the domestic affairs of Latin America in general and Cuba in particular did not mean that the U.S. lost interest and influence but rather that it was expressed through the growing economic dependence of the region to the United States.

In post-Platt Cuba's political landscape Fulgencio Batista emerged as the éminence grise of Cuban politics, sorting out disputes between different political factions and entrenching the military as the dominant institution in the country. The dominance of the military in various spheres of Cuban society in the immediate post-abrogation period was expressed by actions such as making government workers military reservists which placed them under the control of the military in case of strikes and revolts, soldiers acting as strikebreakers during strikes and the replacement of civilian authorities in rural Cuba by military personnel (Staten, 2005, pg. 63). Dissatisfaction with such a state of affairs boiled over into serious street violence after a teacher-led protest about poor working conditions in Cuban elementary schools snowballed into a national strike after national labor organizations and the Autentico party joined in the protest – work stopped on sugar mills in the countryside and transportation, health and utility workers in Havana went on strike, paralyzing the capital (Staten, 2005, pg. 63-64). President Carlos Mendieta, a figurehead interim president installed after Batista's coup, was unable to stop the strike and martial law was declared – the military brutally suppressed the strike, with firing squads killing many (the first time, in fact, firing squads made their appearance in Cuban history)

participants in the strike while a host of student and labor leaders were forced to go into exile (Staten, 2005, pg. 64).

Batista's, and the military's, dominance of Cuban politics was especially on show after the 1936 general election and Miguel Mariano Gomez's election to office. Gomez, the son of second Cuban president Jose Miguel Gomez, assumed office and began installing loyalists in government and military posts. This rankled Batista, who pressured the legislature into impeaching Gomez – the legislature buckled under the pressure and the vice-president, Federico Laredo Bru, assumed office on December 24, 1936 after Gomez's impeachment. Miguel Gomez's presidency lasted just over eight months, a clear sign of the dominant position the military, and Batista by proxy, held over Cuba in the post-Platt period.

Curiously, however, some positive changes were on the horizon for Cuba after Gomez's impeachment. Batista, seeing that the Cuban public had an appetite for reform, began adopting policy initiatives very similar to those of his political enemies who he had sidelined in the preceding years. Batista's new policy initiatives were designed to address long-standing issues in Cuban society and acted as a sort of election campaign for the 1940 general elections. Between 1936 and 1939, Batista encouraged educational programs in the countryside and the building of new schools, introduced health insurance, granted small parcels of state land to peasants, lowered mortgage rates, instituted national rent controls, and removed restrictions on labor organizing – this period is sometimes referred to as the "Pax Batistiana" and grew Batista's popularity (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 250).

Another one of Batista's initiatives was the promulgation of a new constitution and the election of a constitutional assembly tasked with devising the new document. Cuba was still

governed under the constitution of 1901 and while the Platt amendment was abrogated in the 1934 Treaty of Relations with the United States, it was still written into the constitution.

The elections to the constitutional assembly were held in November 1939 and resulted in a slim majority for the opposition bloc, led by erstwhile president Ramon Grau (who received more votes than any other individual candidate), over the Batista-aligned bloc. What is particularly interesting is the diversity among the elected delegates and the level of engagement and interest of the public regarding the drafting of the constitution. The 1901 constitution, while also drafted by a constitutional assembly, with the addition of the Platt amendment became a sort of symbol of American dominance over Cuba. This was not the case with the 1940 constitutional assembly, as the delegates were freely elected by the people of Cuba and came from all walks of life, representing every strata of Cuban society (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 252).

The drafting of a new constitution elicited great enthusiasm and mobilized Cuban society, which followed the constitutional assembly's work with great interest. Cubans, who had one of the highest rates of radio ownership in Latin America, eagerly followed the news out of the capital (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 253). This level of public enthusiasm for the drafting of the new constitution shows how popular the idea of reform and the ideals pioneered by the failed revolution of 1933 were among the Cuban public. After months of deliberations and heated debate among the delegates, the new constitution was signed by the delegates on July 1, 1940 and promulgated from the Capitol in Havana several days later.

The new document was as extensive as it was progressive, consisting of 286 articles in 19 sections. The new constitution not only guaranteed the traditional individual rights like the right to vote, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and the right to private property but also went much further, with many labor rights being enshrined in the constitution – it established a

national minimum wage, banned paying workers in tokens and scrips, established an 8-hour working day, introduced social insurance, paid vacations, paid maternity leave, guaranteed the right to unionization and to strike and limited the maximum size of rural private properties, effectively banning the traditional latifundio estates (Perez Jr., 2006, pg. 214). However, on its own it was unenforceable and complementary laws needed to be passed to fully implement the articles of the constitution which proved challenging – one effect of this, though, is that the promise of its full implementation was invoked by every Cuban politician going forward, including a young Fidel Castro in 1952 (Bethell, 1993, pg.77).

The first general elections after the promulgation of the constitution were held in 1940 and Fulgencio Batista, supported by the elites of the country and a coalition which included the PSP, defeated Ramon Grau by 231,599 votes and finally formalized his position at the pinnacle of Cuban politics (Nohlen (Ed.), 2005, pg. 216). It was during Batista's presidency that Cuba entered World War II, declaring war on Japan just one day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, on December 8, 1941 and on Germany and Italy on December 11 – while a token player in the war due to its geographic location, Cuba signed a number of agreements with the U.S. allowing the use of military bases and airfields on its territory and was characterized as "the most helpful and cooperative of all the Caribbean states" (Polmar & Allen, 1991, pg. 230) to the U.S. war effort. World War II proved to be a boon to the Cuban economy – world sugar shortages and increased U.S. demand for manganese boosted Cuba's economy during this period (Staten, 2005, pg. 65).

Between 1940 and 1952, Cuba was not just a democracy on paper, as was the case before the promulgation and adoption of the new constitution, but a full-fledged democracy with free and fair elections, freedom of expression and freedom of political organization. However, the presidencies of Fulgencio Batista (1940-1944) and his successors, Ramon Grau (1944-1948) and

Carlos Prio (1948-1952) can be summed up in two words – corruption and *gangsterismo* (Perez-Stable, 1998, pg. 50). A particularly illustrative example of the extent of corruption in Cuba during this time is the case of Jose Miguel Aleman, the outgoing education minister in Grau's government who, on president Prio's inauguration day on October 10, 1948, walked into the Cuban treasury, stole $19 million dollars and left for the United States with his loot (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 259-260

Political violence also became an increasing problem on the island in this period with assassinations, kidnapping and gunfights becoming an ever more common occurrence. The epicenter of violence was the campus of the University of Havana, as various political movements and officials used armed groups to further their own goals – this was especially evident in the struggle between these armed groups for control over the student union of the university, acting as a sort of microcosm of the volatile and violent political maneuvering that had gripped the island (Staten, 2005, pg. 67).

However, civic activism also became more prominent in this period, best exhibited by the meteoric rise in popularity of anti-corruption activist and radio host, Eduardo Chibas. Chibas founded the *Partido del Pueblo Cubano*, better known as the Ortodoxo Party, and ran for president in 1948 – Chibas finished in third place, an impressive showing for a new party which eschewed the traditional methods of buying votes and backdoor deals in exchange for political support and ran on an anti-corruption paltfom (Perez-Stable, 1998, pg. 50). Chibas continued his political activism in the coming years, until his death by a self-inflicted gunshot wound live on air in 1951, a year before the next presidential elections. Chibas and the Ortodoxo Party were also notable because a young Fidel Castro began his political activism as a follower of Chibas

and member of the Ortodoxos and Chibas' fiery style resonated not just with Castro but with a large section of the Cuban public.

The period of Cuban democracy ushered in by the 1940 constitution was approaching its end as the 1952 presidential elections were approaching. The three leading candidates were Carlos Hevia for the Autenticos, Roberto Agramonte for the Ortodoxos and Fulgencio Batista, who was looking to secure a second term as president. Batista, whose odds of victory in the elections were slim, began planning a coup d'etat in December 1951 with the support of a number of his loyalists among junior military officers who had concerns that a new government might purge them from their posts – Batista initiated the coup late in the evening on March 9th, 1952 and by the early morning hours of March 10th after they had seized key points all over the country, president Prio fled into exile (Perez-Stable, 1998, pg. 52). Batista's coup, unknown at the time, of course, would set the stage for the Cuban Revolution.

1.3. Batista's dictatorship and the Cuban Revolution (1952-1959)

Batista's coup was met with little resistance by the Prio government and only sporadic protests by the Cuban public as the deposed Autentico government had lost support and credibility with the public due to massive corruption and *gangsterismo* that had plagued the island while the Ortodoxo party lacked strong leadership after the death of Eduardo Chibas. Batista moved quickly to consolidate power – he installed loyalists in the military rank, increased soldiers' salaries, hired 2000 new policemen, suspended constitutional guarantees including the right to strike, dissolved the Cuban Congress, withdrew official recognition of political parties, jailed or forced his political opponents into exile and began censoring newspapers (Staten, 2005, pg. 72). Batista also moved quickly to ensure the support of local elites, such as landowners, sugar mill owners and domestic and foreign business leaders, especially those from the U.S. – president Harry Truman's administration officially recognized Batista's government on March 27th and the U.S. signaled increased investment in the mining sector (Staten, 2005, pg. 72).

However, pockets of discontent and opposition to the coup sprang up in the immediate aftermath, especially among students, including one Fidel Castro. A week after the coup, a group of students gathered around the tomb of Eduardo Chibas and Castro exhorted the gathered group to overthrow Batista by force – this call didn't lead anywhere and Castro switched tack, bringing a lawsuit against Batista for breaking the 1940 constitution, demanding the maximum sentence for every breach, totaling more than 100 years in prison for Batista were he to be convicted (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 271). Unsurprisingly, the case went nowhere and had no impact on Batista's reign.

What this episode shows, however, is that Fidel Castro had begun protesting and organizing against the Batista regime from the very beginning. Soon, Castro and his associates

began plotting a much more radical course of action, planning an attack on the Moncada barracks in Santiago de Cuba, Cuba's second largest city. Along with his brother, Raul Castro, Fidel recruited 135 insurgents and began planning the attack, scheduled for the 26th of July, 1953 – though they were severely outnumbered, the attack was planned to coincide with the carnival in Santiago which would help mask the insurgents' movements (who wore army uniforms) and meant that many soldiers and police officers would be participating in the festivities.

The attack, however, was an unmitigated disaster for Castro's group as the very first group of assailants that were to infiltrate the barracks were recognized by the soldiers as outsiders and they were fired upon – many of the rest had gotten lost and scattered in the confusion of the carnival, Fidel himself never made it to the barracks and fled from Santiago until he was arrested several days later (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 279). After the failure of the Moncada attack the Batista government's repressive apparatus, led by the Military Intelligence Service (SIM) and the Bureau of Repression of Communist Activities (BRAC) cracked down on clandestine armed groups, with all major armed rebel groups being neutralized by the end of 1954 (Martinez-Fernandez, 2011, pg. 365). Castro was convicted to 15 years in prison, serving his sentence in the Presidio Modelo prison on the Isle of Pines. Later, Castro's revolutionary movement took its name from the date of the failed attack, being known as the 26th of July Movement or M-26-7.

Although the Moncada attack had been a failure, it had some broader effects that would reverberate in later years – firstly, it propelled Castro to fame among the Cuban opposition and affirmed armed struggle as an important means of opposition to Batista's regime (Perez Jr., 2006, pg. 221). Secondly, Fidel Castro's trial would provide him with a public platform which further raised his profile within the opposition and with the Cuban public – Castro, who decided

to defend himself in the trial, ended his lengthy speech with the famous words “history will absolve me”, with the speech itself later being rewritten and widely reproduced (Martinez-Fernandez, 2011, pg. 366).

Although sentenced to 15 years in prison, Castro would serve under 20 months in prison before being released as part of a general amnesty of political prisoners in 1955. Batista, having defeated all major rebel groups through 1954, perhaps wishing to mollify the Cuban public, called for elections in November – the elections, however, were a sham and former president Ramon Grau, who decided to run against Batista, withdrew from the elections and Batista was elected unopposed (Bethell, 1993, pg. 84).

Immediately after his release from prison, Fidel Castro began railing against Batista, being censored by the government. Castro, along with his closest associates, decided to emigrate to Mexico to begin planning an invasion of Cuba to topple Batista’s regime – it would be in Mexico that Castro would first meet Argentinian doctor Ernesto Che Guevara, who would go on to become one his key allies and a symbol of the Cuban Revolution. Castro began organizing his uprising and collecting funds, weapons and supplies, including from an unlikely source in the former Cuban president Carlos Prio – Castro would also strike an agreement with Frank Pais, leader of another clandestine group, who would agree to join forces with Castro (and would run M-26-7’s urban wing) and organize an uprising in Santiago de Cub and Havana that would coincide with Castro’s landing (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 295).

Castro’s forces, totaling 82 men, would set sail from Mexico on November 25, 1956 on the yacht *Granma*, with poor weather delaying their arrival by 2 days – Castro’s would-be revolution got off to a poor start, as the expected urban uprisings never materialized, they landed in the wrong place and were soon ambushed by Batista’s forces and their forces were dispersed

(Perez Jr., 2006, pg. 222). Batista soon declared Castro to be among the dead, although Fidel, his brother Raul and 15 men managed to escape the ambush and would form the nucleus of the revolutionary movement that would come to plague Batista in the coming years from their base in the Sierra Maestra mountains.

Castro's forces weren't the only armed group fighting against Batista's government. One core of resistance against Batista was the student body of the University of Havana and it would be the students who would form the core of Jose Echeverria's Revolutionary Directorate – the RD would be created by the end of 1955 and would lead a nationwide student strike against Batista (Staten, 2005, pg. 76). Echeverria's RD would take a different approach compared to Castro's forces, eschewing guerilla warfare for targeted assassinations, including an ill-fated attack on the Presidential Palace on March 13, 1957 with the aim of eliminating Batista – the attackers didn't know that an office on the third floor, where Batista was located at the time of the attack, existed and army reinforcements soon overpowered the attackers (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 306). This destroyed the Revolutionary Directorate, leaving Castro's forces as the main armed resistance group against Batista.

As time went on, Castro and Cuban opposition would being to cooperate more closely, manifested in the signing of the Sierra Maestra manifesto on July 28, 1957, which stipulated that after Batista's fall a provisional government would rule Cuba for a year before elections were held, promised to restore the freedoms and rights guaranteed by the 1940 constitution, pledged to start a literacy campaign and adopt a program of agrarian reform – the manifesto tied the rest of the opposition to Castro's movement and the fact that it was signed in the Sierra Maestra mountains, Castro's stronghold, confirmed M-26-7's pre-eminent position in the ranks of the opposition. The opposition would next sign the Miami Pact, concerned mostly with the make-up

of the provisional government after Batista's fall, although it's legitimacy would take a hit when Fidel Castro's M-26-7 withdrew from the pact in early 1958 – the lack of a provision condemning foreign interference in Cuban affairs, aimed squarely at the U.S. with its history of intervention in Cuban affairs, being the main cause of the withdrawal (Perez-Stable, 1998, pg. 58).

By early 1958, M-26-7 influence grew enough to the point that they opened a second front, the Second Oriental Front under Raul Castro, in March 1958. What helped the rebels gain recognition among the people was that they effectively created a state within a state, rivaling Batista's authority – under the auspices of the Civil Administration for Liberated Territories, the rebels formed equivalents of government departments (Justice, Finance, Education etc.), they had created a police force and intelligence service, founded schools and established a taxation system, creating a rival government to Batista.

March 1958 was notable for another development, as on March 14, 1958, the U.S. government announced an arms embargo against Batista's Cuba (Franklin, 2016, pg. 17). The societal and economic upheaval caused by the rebel insurgency, strikes and demonstrations against Batista's regime all over the island and Batista's heavy-handed repression caused Cuba to spiral further into chaos which became too much for the Eisenhower administration.

And yet, even an arms embargo and increasing protests and demands for Batista to resign from the American business community, the Catholic Church and local elites didn't deter Batista from further military actions against the rebels (Staten, 2005, pg. 79). Batista would launch an offensive in the summer of 1958, Operation Verano, aiming to finally end the M-26-7 insurgency – the offensive would end in failure, as although the army significantly outnumbered the rebels, they couldn't dislodge them from the Sierra Maestra mountains. In fact, after the conclusion of

Batista's offensive, the rebels began offensive actions of their own, opening a new front in the Escambray mountains in central Cuba under Che Guevara in October 1958. The rebels would begin taking city after city in the coming months, until the battle of Santa Clara in late December would seal the fate of Batista's regime – Batista, seeing the hopelessness of his situation, would flee Cuba late on December 31, 1958. By the early hours of the New Year, one thing was clear – the Revolution had won.

1.4. Castro's Cuba and the U.S. – from revolution to the Cuban Missile Crisis (1959-1962)

The three years between 1959 and 1962 would be characterized by the ever-escalating conflict between the Castro government and the U.S., leading up to the closest moment the Cold War between the U.S. and USSR threatened to turn into a "hot" war with the missile crisis, with humanity on the brink of a devastating nuclear conflagration. This period would mark the beginning of the final rupture of relations between Cuba and the U.S., one that hasn't been mended to this very day.

In the immediate aftermath of M-26-7's victory over Fulgencio Batista's forces, even the most pessimist observers couldn't foresee such a dramatic outcome. Upon Batista's flight to exile after the rebel's victory in the Battle of Santa Clara in late December, there was no indication that the new government intended to rupture relations with the U.S. or turn to the USSR – former judge Manuel Urrutia was appointed president, former Bar Association Jose Miro Cardona was appointed prime minister and the new cabinet contained other moderates such as would-be 1952 Ortodoxo presidential candidate Antonio Agramonte and Raul Chibas, brother of the deceased firebrand Eduardo Chibas (Martinez-Fernandez, 2011, pg. 368). Yet in a space of just over two years from Batista's flight, diplomatic relations between Cuba and the U.S. would be broken off. The question is, how did this such a rapid deterioration happen?

To start, the reasons behind why the Revolution happened, and why it was so successful, need to be examined. Cuba, when compared to other Latin American countries, enjoyed a relatively high standard of living – In Latin America, Cuba had the most television sets per capita, the second most automobiles per capita and the third highest income per capita (Staten, 2005, pg. 81). What these statistics mask, however, is the brutal rate of income inequality and uneven development between the rural and urban (especially when comparing Havana)

populations – the average per capita income in Havana reached $374 while it was only $91 in rural areas, 87% of homes in urban areas had electricity compared to 9% in rural areas, Havana (excluding the sugar industry) received 75% of the foreign investment in Cuba and 52% of the non-sugar industry production was centered around the capital (Staten, 2005, pg. 81). Such a level of inequality and poverty concentrated in the rural areas, from where the M-26-7 movement drew their support and had established their base, explains why there was such an appetite for change.

The deterioration of relations with the U.S. can also be explained by the growing disenchantment with the U.S. many Cubans began feeling as the 1950s wore on and the U.S. continued supporting Batista's brutality and repression. The economic dependence on the U.S., already a significant issue for Cuba throughout the 20th century, only grew throughout the 1950s – 50% of the arable land was owned by American companies, 80% of Cuban imports came from the U.S., more than half of the sugar (still a key export for the Cuban economy) produced by Cuba was bought by the U.S., 40% of sugar production was controlled by the U.S. as well as 50% of the railroads and 90% of utilities (Staten, 2005, pg. 84). The United States also dominated cultural life in Cuba and many Cubans, especially middle-class Cubans, attempted to emulate the American way of life – the stagnating economy of the 1950s and U.S. support of Batista, however, made many Cubans realize that they would never achieve an American standard of life nor would the U.S. treat Cubans as equals (Staten, 2005, pg. 84-85). Fidel Castro's government would set their sights on not only ending the economic dependence on the U.S. but also encourage the decolonization of Cuban culture, emphasizing Cuban literature like that of national hero Jose Marti, in an attempt to create a new, united Cuban nation (Shnookal, 2020, pg. 42).

The moderate cabinet inaugurated in the immediate aftermath of the triumph of Batista wouldn't last long, as prime minister Cardona would resign in February of 1959, president Urrutia, having been marginalized by Castro in the previous months, resigned in July and by September, most of the original moderate cabinet had been replaced with Castro's hand-picked choices – the PSP, Cuba's foremost communist party, played a large part in pushing out the moderate cabinet and consequently in Cuba's leftward turn (Martinez-Fernandez, 2011, pg. 369). Cuba was gripped by a frenetic pace of change, much of it designed to benefit the poor peasants and working classes, as law after law was passed with the crown jewel being the long-awaited agrarian reform, which nationalized 2.5 million acres of land – other laws raised workers' salaries, cut rents and utilities and expanded education and health services (Martinez-Fernandez, 2011, pg. 370-371).

Washington took a dim view of the situation, with U.S. business interests coming under threat of these reforms, and so began a self-perpetuating cycle of economic conflict back-and-forth between Cuba and the U.S. which the USSR exploited to move Cuba closer to their orbit. The arrival of Soviet First Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan to Cuba in February 1960 seemed to confirm Washington's worst fears – a communist regime had taken root not 90 miles from U.S. shores. By the end of 1960, American oil refineries would be nationalized, the Cuban sugar quota would be slashed, the USSR would step in to fill the trading gaps and finally, a trade embargo against Cuba (active to this day) would be introduced on October 19, 1960 – diplomatic relations would also soon be severed on January 3, 1961 and the U.S. embassy in Havana would close its doors (Martinez-Fernandez, 2011, pg.371). During a Democratic dinner in Cincinnati in October, 1960 presidential candidate John F. Kennedy would comment on the failure of the U.S. in preventing a communist government from taking root in Cuba, specifically criticizing the

actions of the Eisenhower administration in supporting Fulgencio Batista, saying that the Cuban people "began to feel that we were more interested in maintaining Batista than we were in maintaining freedom – that we were more interested in protecting our investments than we were in protecting their liberty" (Kennedy, 1960).

The United States didn't simply sit idly by and as early as March, 1960, began plotting covert actions aimed to overthrow Castro. The drily named "Plan for Covert Action against the Castro Regime" envisioned the creation of a moderate opposition among Cuban exiles, a covert intelligence network inside Cuba and a paramilitary force of exiles meant to start a guerilla war in Cuba, all without the U.S. involvement being made public (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 357). What started as covert anti-Castro actions would snowball into one of the biggest U.S. failures during the Cold War, the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion.

The U.S. began training a group of Cuban exiles in Guatemala, Brigade 2506, and the intent of the operation, as presented by a CIA report from early January, 1961 was to establish a beachhead by Brigade 2506 which was to be a rallying point for anti-Castro forces inside Cuba and precipitate a general uprising against Castro's government (Ferrer, 2021, pg.360). Reality, however, differed greatly from the report's lofty goals. The brigade, 1,500 men strong, landed in the Bay of Pigs on April 17th, however stiff resistance and a determined Cuban counter-attack, along with a lack of air and naval support upon which the success of the operation hinged meant that by April 20, 1961 the invasion had ignominiously failed and members of the brigade not killed in combat were captured by the Cuban forces.

The failed Bay of Pigs invasion would have a two-fold effect on Cuba – Fidel Castro solidified his hold on power and any hopes of normalizing relations between the two countries quickly faded. Another result of the aftermath of the failed invasion was that Cuba moved even

closer to the USSR and the Soviets increased their military presence on the island, the exact opposite effect than intended.

Castro, eager to protect Cuba from further invasion and Khruschev, eager to thumb his nose at the U.S., agreed in the summer of 1962 that Cuba would host Soviet nuclear missiles. Once a U.S. U-2 spy plane had discovered the nuclear missile sites on October 15, 1962 and President Kennedy was notified, the specter of all-out nuclear war enveloped the world as the hawks advising Kennedy wished to attack Cuba – Kennedy, however, would settle on instituting a naval blockade of Cuba on October 22. Kennedy and Khruschev would begin a tense six-day negotiation, as a result of which the Soviets would withdraw their nuclear missiles and the U.S. would publicly pledge not to invade Cuba, with a secret provision that the U.S. would also withdraw their nuclear missiles from Turkey – Castro wasn't consulted on this by the Soviets, which he took as a personal humilitation (Martinez-Fernandez, 2011, pg. 372). Later, during a 1992 conference on the oral history of the Missile Crisis, organized by Brown University in Havana, Fidel Castro would meet former U.S. Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara and when asked about whether he would've used the nuclear missiles in defense of Cuba, stated that "Yes, I would have agreed to the use of nuclear weapons. I would have agreed, in the event of the invasion, with the use of tactical nuclear weapons" (Perez-Stable, 2011, pg. 6).

The Cuban Missile Crisis didn't result in an all-out nuclear war and was a triumph of diplomacy – the Cold War would never reach that close to a boiling point. For Cuba and the U.S., however, the Missile Crisis ruined any hopes that relations between the two countries would stabilize. Hostility between the two would remain in the coming decades, manifesting itself in various ways, but even today, Cuba remains under U.S. embargo and the chances of that changing at any point in the near future remain slim.

2. Operation Peter Pan (1960-1962)

2.1. Post-revolutionary Cuba – causes of emigration and the "golden exile"

While Cuban migration to the United States is most often studied and remembered in the context of the Cuban Revolution and its aftermath, migration to the U.S., and specifically south Florida due to its geographical proximity to Cuba, from the island had been a reality since the 19th century. Emigration from Cuba in this period was motivated primarily by the political turmoil on the island, as the influx of immigrants quickened in the wake of the Ten Years' War and the Spanish-American War – by the year 1900, some 33,000 Cubans were admitted to the United States and settled primarily in Key West, Tampa, New Orleans and New York City (Duany, 1999, pg. 73-74). Economic upheaval related to the prices of tobacco and sugar and an influx of those seeking political refuge continued to fuel immigration to the U.S. in the pre-revolutionary period – out of the nearly 1 million Cuban immigrants registered by the U.S. government between 1869 and 1996, around 27% were registered before 1960, demonstrating the long history of Cuban immigration that had existed before the Cuban revolution (Duany, 1999, pg. 75).

It would be the wholesale changes to Cuban society introduced by the Cuban revolution that would fuel an extraordinary wave of emigration from Cuba to the United States and shape the relationship between the two countries up until the present day. The first to leave Cuba in the immediate aftermath were those with close ties to Fulgencio Batista's regime, fleeing from political persecution that soon followed in the aftermath of the revolution.

This would soon change, however, as many upper-class and middle-class Cubans would leave the island in droves as the revolution gathered pace, disillusioned by the new government's increasingly left-wing politics, the rapid reshaping of Cuban society and economic losses (Martinez-Fernandez, 2014, pg. 71-72).

This migration resulted in a massive brain drain for Cuba, with many top professionals and businessmen leaving the island, seeking a better future in the United States, as out of 6,000 doctors in Cuba in 1959, about half left to the U.S., more than two-thirds of the faculty of the University of Havana left for Miami (the senior medical faculty shrinking from 200 to 17) – these early exiles had much higher education levels than the Cuban population as a whole, with 36% having at least some college education (Ferrer, 2021, pg.103). Interestingly, in the decades that followed Cuba built a reputation as a medical "superpower" as the right to free healthcare was enshrined in the Cuban constitution and continued to function even in spite of U.S. sanctions – this is a good example of the upward mobility made possible by Cuban Revolution.

Another important characteristic of those who left Cuba for exile in the immediate post-revolutionary period was that most of the exiles came from the urban Cuban population – 62% came from the capital, Havana, with another 25% coming from other large Cuban cities, with the urban population representing 87% of those that left (Martinez-Fernandez, 2014, pg. 72). This in many ways explains why such a disproportionate amount of those who left were highly educated and held so much capital in pre-revolutionary Cuba – the island was notorious for the income divide between the urban and rural populations. The fact that so many of the earliest exiles from Castro's Cuba came from the professional classes and represented the most highly educated Cubans also explains why they've been mythologized as "golden exiles" in the American public perception. While the massive brain drain had a devastating effect on Cuba and its economy, one upshot was that it allowed for increased social mobility on the island for those who choose to remain in Cuba and were trained to replace for the jobs the exiles left behind (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 403). An argument could be made that this social mobility and replacement of professionals by

those trained by Castro's government also helped solidify their hold on power, as these newly-trained professionals were owed their new positions to the government.

Leaving Cuba behind, though, wasn't a decision taken lightly and was often a traumatic experience for those who left. The hostility of the Cuban government towards those who made the decision to leave played a huge role in causing that trauma – the would-be exiles would lose their jobs immediately after applying for an exit visa, in February 1960 a law was passed that decreed the confiscation of property for all exiles and they were insulted with epithets like *gusano* (worm) and traitor (Martinez-Fernandez, 2014, pg. 72). Government-organized mobs organized repudiations of the exiles and they were harassed and insulted all the way to the airport – their houses were egged, they were insulted and sometimes even physically beaten and endured long interrogations, humiliating strip searches and confiscation of almost all personal property upon arrival at the airport (Martinez-Fernandez, 2014, pg. 74). The experience at the airports would become a focal point of the trauma endured by the exiles and those moments would become seared into the minds of many:

> Everyone remembers the airport. After saying good-bye to family, travelers waited in a glass-enclosed room dubbed the pecera , or the fishbowl. From inside they could see their relatives on the other side, pushing up against the glass, communicating by signs. Women wore sunglasses to hide puffy, red eyes. A teenager later recalled seeing grown men cry for the first time. A six-year-old boy watched customs officials tear up his father's graduation diploma from the University of Havana. A young grandmother remembered the humiliation of being searched too thoroughly, having personal items rifled through, being made to disrobe, seeing babies in diapers checked for hidden jewelry. (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 402-403)

The Cuban exiles of the immediate post-revolutionary period were also politically valuable for the United States, beyond even the immediate impact their departure had on weakening the Cuban economy. They would become a valuable asset to the U.S. in discrediting Fidel Castro's Cuba, and by proxy the USSR and socialism, their acceptance to the United States having a valuable political dimension in the Cold War struggle between the two dominant political blocs – the exiled Cubans were afforded special resources unlike other immigrant groups, started by the Eisenhower administration and expanded by the Kennedy administration, being granted temporary legal status, job training, work permits, English classes, housing assistance, subsidized child care and job referrals by the U.S. government (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 404). The Cuban government would also find political value in the exiles, primarily exhibited in the rapid expansion of national security agencies in the wake of the U.S. instrumentalization of exiles for their own national security and foreign policy goals -

Such generous programs and provided support also allowed this early wave of exiles to acclimatize to the U.S. much more easily, contributing to their positive image in the following decades. What also helped the new exiles to get used to their new surroundings was the extraordinary solidarity shown to them by the Cubans already in Miami – many had personal ties with the exiles and alongside the generous government support afforded to the new arrivals, the help in finding jobs and psychological support afforded to them by the Cuban community already located in Miami was of great help to the exiles in this period (Alberts, 2005, pg. 234).

In total, around 250,000 Cubans would flee into exile to the United States between 1959 and 1962, representing the first major migratory wave from Cuba to the United States after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution – this number represents 23% of all Cuban exiles in the U.S. (Duany, 1999, pg. 76). The majority of exiles settled in Miami and southern Florida, although

there was a concerted effort by U.S. authorities to resettle a portion of them around the U.S. – 37,000 were sent to New York, 19,000 to New Jersey, 14,000 to California and 13,000 to the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico although many of these would later return to the Miami area in the coming years (Martinez-Fernandez, 2014, pg. 76). While Miami would remain a center of Cuban-American culture and to this day remains influenced by Cuban culture, Cubans who settled elsewhere assimilated more thoroughly into the broader U.S. population – in Milwaukee, scarcely a decade after their arrival, Cubans became more integrated with the general population and those that chose to emphasize their Cuban identity were fast becoming a minority (Portes, 1968, pg. 516).

The perception that they were "golden exiles" would also color the perception of all Cuban immigrants to the United States going forward, causing a discord and backlash once further waves of immigration didn't fit that image. Public discourse about Cubans, however, would still emphasize how Cubans were a "model minority", even as the racial dynamics of subsequent waves of Cuban exiles and refugees would shift in comparison to the golden exiles (Brewer Current, 2008, pg. 52).

2.2. Operation Peter Pan (1960-1962)

Arguably the most dramatic event within the so-called "golden exile" was Operation Peter Pan, or *Operacion Pedro Pan* in Spanish, an airlift of unaccompanied Cuban children sent alone by their parents to the United States which ran from late 1960 up until the suspension of commercial flights between the U.S. and Cuba in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October of 1962. Operation Peter Pan was organized and coordinated by Father Bryan Walsh of the Catholic Welfare Bureau, based out of Miami, Florida and is a representation of just how dramatic the changes in Cuban society were in the post-revolutionary period.

What became known as Operation Peter Pan actually consisted of two separate but connected programs – Operation Peter Pan and the Cuban Children's Program. Father Walsh, who had a leading role in both programs, would define the difference between the two as such:

> The Cuban Children's Program was inaugurated to provide foster care for Cuban refugee children who found themselves in the United States without the care and protection of their parents. Operation Pedro Pan was developed to help Cuban parents send their children unaccompanied to the United States to avoid Communist indoctrination. Both programs developed at the same time but, while Operation Pedro Pan terminated with the missile crisis, the Cuban Children's Program is still in operation at the time of writing. (Walsh, 1971, 379)

The roots of the program are deeply connected with the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution and parent's fears, real or imagined, for their children's future under Castro's government. The trigger for many to send their children unaccompanied to the U.S. were the changes to the educational system brought forth by the new Cuban government, in conjunction

with wild rumors about the Cuban government taking children away from their parents and eliminating *patria potestad*, parental authority – this rumor was given life in a November 1960 declaration by the National Confederation of Parents' Associations in Cuba, sponsored by the Catholic Church, which called on parents to remember their inalienable rights to raise their children according to the teachings of the Church (Shnookal, 2020, pg. 105).

Wild rumors surrounding *patria potestad* and the Cuban government's supposed aims began to proliferate over the coming months – one particularly gruesomely absurd rumor was that Cuban children were sent to the USSR for indoctrination and that those who failed to be indoctrinated were killed, ground into meat which was then canned and sent to Cuba in the rations that the Soviet Union sent to Cuba at the time (Shnookal, 2020, pg. 106).

While rumors like those are of course laughable, they betray the very real atmosphere of fear and anxiety many Cuban parents felt about their children's future in revolutionary Cuba. Many of the parents of the Peter Pan children were convinced that they would imminently lose custody of their children to the government and most Peter Pan children would recall that it was exactly that which prompted them to send their children to the United States (Shnookal, 2020, pg. 106). Actions undertaken by the Cuban government to reform the education system, though innocuous on their own, were taken as undeniable proof that the loss of *patria potestad* was imminent – the introduction of comprehensive files to track every child's education and the introduction of government-run child-care centers fed the growing belief that the Cuban government would soon attempt to take children away from their parents (Shnookal, 2020, pg. 110). Anxiety about the wholesale destruction of the pre-revolutionary social order and the issue of social class also were a factor in the decision to believe these rumors, as one Cuban journalist would describe:

> The "diversionary campaign" about *patria potestad* was totally absurd, commented a Cuban journalist, but nevertheless, "for reasons of class," it suited some parents to believe the rumors, and for that reason they were more than ready to send their children "to the promised land of Walt Disney—the United States. (Shnookal, 2020, pg. 109)

Anti-Castro activists and the U.S. government used the real fears of Cuban parents to their advantage, having an active hand in disseminating and fueling the *patria potestad* rumors, both in Cuba and in the U.S. itself. A particularly illustrative example of this occurred on the 16th of September after two print shops run by members of the anti-Castro Revolutionary Movement of the People (MRP) in Havana and Cienfuegos were raided by the authorities – they had printed a fake *patria potestad* law supposedly soon to be enacted by the government, which would, among other things, limit parental access to children between the ages of 3 and 20 years-old to two days a months and ban on minors leaving the country with breaches of the law being considered counter-revolutionary activity carrying the punishment of between 2 and 15 years in prison (Shnookal, 2020, pg. 113).

Ramon "Mongo" Grau and his sister Polita Grau, the nephew and niece of former Cuban president Ramon Grau, who assisted in the evacuation of children through Operation Peter Pan, would later admit that the *patria potestad* rumors were intentionally designed to hurt the Castro government – Mongo would say that it was a "propaganda test to hurt Fidel" and Polita would say it was a way "to destabilize the government" so that people would "lose faith in the revolution", proving that the rumors were used in an attempt to hurt Castro's government (Shnookal, 2020, pg.125). Father Walsh himself would mention that the rumors played a part in the parents' decision to send their children over – Walsh, out of sincere belief or due to his anti-

communist stance, doesn't mention that the supposed *patria potestad* law was totally false (Walsh, 1971, pg. 382).

In such a loaded atmosphere, with ever wilder rumors spreading all over Cuba and the Castro government making moves to reshape not only the education system but the entire Cuban society, the reasons behind why so many parents would send their children unaccompanied to the U.S. become clearer. With the pre-revolutionary structure of Cuban society being broken down and reshaped by the new government, one can see how the parents' decision to supposedly save their children from being taken from them and indoctrinated against their wishes led to their participation in Operation Peter Pan.

Operation Peter Pan would get its start in December 1960, when Jim Baker, director of the Ruston Academy, an American private school in Havana, would meet with Father Walsh on December 12th – Baker wished to open a new school in the U.S. for the children attending Ruston Academy, including the children of the heads of the American Chamber of Commerce in Cuba and as he searched for a location for the new school, he was told to turn to Father Walsh for help as Walsh was already taking care of some Cuban children (Conde, 1999, pg. 48-49).

The two men would agree on the contours of the new program, with the U.S. embassy in Havana would grant student visas to participants in the program and Father Walsh's Catholic Welfare Bureau would take responsibility for the children and fill out the necessary immigration forms – this was to be kept secret and communication between the two men would be through letters delivered to and from Cuba in diplomatic pouches (Walsh, 1971, pg. 391). As the number of unaccompanied minors grew, the Catholic Welfare Bureau would first and foremost attempt to find the children's families, only in case of failure would they provide foster care for those children who didn't have families or they couldn't be located (Walsh, 1971, pg. 392). The

decision to prioritize finding the children's families who were already in the U.S. was explained as follows:

> Once our agencies had received the promise of government support, it seemed clear to me that our agencies were obligated to provide a well-arranged and well-planned reception for those children who would need care. Our first thought was to provide care and protection, when necessary, for the children already living here with friends and relatives. It is important to stress the when necessary. When separation from parents is necessary, it is always much better for a child to be with relatives or friends if at all possible. We know that even a poor family is usually better than any foster family or group care institution. (Walsh, 1971, pg. 392)

The operation hit a major snag in early January, 1961 with the closure of the U.S. embassy in Cuba and the breaking off of diplomatic relations between the two countries on January 3rd, as new visas couldn't be issued anymore. An intermediate solution was to re-route the children to Kingston, Jamaica on a British visa and upon arrival they would be issued a U.S. visa and sent on to the U.S. from there (Conde, 1999, pg. 52). On January 9th, Father Walsh met with State Department officials and agreed upon a scheme where he would be allowed to issue visa waivers to any children from 6 to 16 entering the United States under guardianship of the Catholic Diocese of Miami (Conde, 1999, pg. 53).

Another element of support from the U.S. government concerned the reimbursement of federal funds to the Catholic Welfare Bureau and other private entities taking care of the children, as the Federal Children's Bureau signed a contract with Florida's Department of Public Welfare on March 1st to provide temporary aid for Cuban refugees, including the Peter Pan

children – the set rate were $5.50 per day per child in individual care and $6.50 for children in group settings, covering the cost of shelter, food and clothing (Conde, 1999, pg. 61). Both this and the visa waiver scheme, unique in American history, show the great importance of Cuba to the U.S. in the context of the Cold War and the unprecedented support provided demonstrates how unique Cuba's relationship to the U.S. truly was.

A question that naturally poses itself is how and why did the Cuban government allow so many children to leave and how much did they know about the program? What's known is that there were people inside Cuba who were helping facilitate the children's flights to Cuba, including the aforementioned Grau siblings, as well as employees at airlines running the flights that brought the children over – most of them would never be arrested for facilitating those flights and the Cuban authorities were only made aware of the full extent of Operation Peter Pan after Polita Grau, who had been arrested in 1965, told the story in great detail to an informer in prison (Shnookal, 2020, pg. 199). Hiding that thousands of children had left Cuba was obviously impossible and it's highly improbable that the Cuban government wasn't aware that something was going on – one possible explanation is that the government wasn't as concerned with their departure because those that wanted to leave weren't keen on the revolution and that the departure of the regime's opponents, or at least their children, would strengthen the revolution in the long run (Shnookal, 2020, pg. 202).

Operation Peter Pan would continue running until the suspension of regular flights between Cuba and the U.S. in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. What started as a trickle of children arriving in December 1960, grew at pace in the following months, with a particular surge after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 – demand for children's visas skyrocketed in the aftermath, as the failed invasion signaled that Castro's regime wouldn't fall

anytime soon (Conde, 1999, pg. 65). The demographics of the children of the children participating in the Peter Pan program matched the demographics of the golden exile, with only slight deviations – 57.75% came from Havana, 11.5% classified their family's status in Cuba as upper-class, 80.52% classified it as middle-class and only 3.99% as lower-class (Conde, 1999, pg. 220-221).

All told, just over 14,000 children would arrive in the U.S. under the auspices of Operation Peter Pan until the termination of the program, being settled all over the U.S.:

> We would continue to grow in all aspects of the program during the following 21 months. We would receive more than 14,000 children at the airport. We would take 7,464 children under care. We would place them in foster care in 35 states under the auspices of 95 different child welfare agencies. We would set up three large reception centers in Miami and establish two group-care facilities for teen-age boys in Miami with a State Department of Public Welfare authorized population of 1,500 children and a total staff in Miami of 465 persons. We would do all of this before the Cuban Missile Crisis shut off commercial air traffic on 22 October, 1962. (Walsh, 1971, pg. 412)

The children's exodus played an important role in the development of anti-Castro propaganda in the U.S. as the stories of children escaping communist indoctrination resonated with audiences, framing the revolution as a threat to children – this would be used to explain the origins of the Cuban exile community in child-centric terms, giving a particularly poignant voice to the betrayal and disillusionment the exiles felt with the Cuban Revolution (Casavantes Bradford, 2016, pg. 289). It would also serve as a counterweight to the fact that the Cuban

Revolution was in many ways enabled by Cuban teenagers and youth in an attempt to demonstrate that it wasn't just the revolution that had a claim to Cuban youths.

2.3. The lived experiences of the Peter Pan children

Permanently leaving your country as an unaccompanied minor, no matter how well-organized the program might be, was a monumentally difficult and traumatizing ordeal for many of the Peter Pan children. While about half of the 14,000 children were picked up by their relatives and family members who already lived in the United States, the rest went through processing camps like Camp Matecumbe in Miami before continuing on to various orphanages and foster families. The pain of being separated from their families, difficulties in adjusting to a new country, culture and language and the uncertainty of ever being able to reunite with their families in an ever more tense Cold War climate where Cuba itself threatened to become the epicenter of a global nuclear conflagration weighed heavily on the children. Fully understanding the impact this had on them is only possible by examining their testimonies and lived experiences of the exodus. Through their stories, it's possible to gain a deeper understanding of the impact the exodus had on both Cuba and the United States and how it affected relations between the two countries as well as how the reasons why and how the U.S. became a promised lands for those seeking refuge from Cuba and Castro's government.

The new Cuban government's focus on reshaping the educational system in particular motivated a significant number of parents to send their children to the U.S. through the Peter Pan program. The *patria potestad* hoax, and more consequently the fears and anxieties it unearthed in Cuban parents, was a significant motivator for many to send their children to the U.S. in search of a better future. For some, it was the 1961 literacy campaign, as children from urban areas went to the countryside to teach peasants how to read and write, which caused them to make that

fateful decision to leave their homes. Beatriz Infiesta, one of the Peter Pan children, recalls that it was these changes to the educational system that motivated her to leave Cuba:

> I felt like a pariah at the Instituto in Matanzas," says Beatriz Infiesta, then fourteen, of the time before her departure. "Sometimes you were in class and they would ask for a minute of silence for Patrice Lumumba [the slain Congolese Premier], or they asked why you had not gone to alphabetize peasants. I didn't like what was happening." (Conde, 1999, pg. 45).

Mel Martinez, who went on to become Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in the George W. Bush administration and United States Senator for Florida, describes how he became disillusioned with the new direction of Cuba after his school was closed and the priests expelled:

> The closing of my school and the expulsion of the priests turned me once and for all against the Communist regime. With Sagrado Corazón de Jesús closed, I had to attend the public high school in Sagua. In my time there I saw that the Communist regime was clearly shifting Cuba's schools away from the normal education mission-teaching reading and writing and math skills to indoctrination. Our books were filled with Communist propaganda, with hostility to the Catholic Church, the United States, and the rich or the perceived rich. (Martinez, 2008, pg. 37)

Guillermo Vidal's testimony sheds light on just how much of an impact the negative rumors of parental alienation by the state had on his parents' decision to send him and his three brothers to the U.S.:

> The rumors and stories grew ever more horrifying, and if radio, television, and the newspapers didn't literally bear the stories out, the government-controlled news did seem to

> certify that children in Cuba henceforth would be puppets and the de facto property of Fidel, a prospect that engendered a strange kind of madness in Mami. (Vidal, 2013, pg. 57-58).

The volatile political situation on the island and increasing threats of violence towards presumed enemies of the revolution also played a significant role in Mel Martinez's departure from Cuba:

> This was not mere heckling; it was vicious. "Kill him! Kill him!" the militiamen shouted. As an athlete, I had learned to tune out catcalls from the crowd, but my mom and dad heard every word. My parents now revealed that they had been terrified: "These people had guns," they told me. "They were yelling at you, saying, "Get him! Get the Catholic!" To my mom and dad, this was the crucial moment, when men with guns were shouting "Kill him!" about their teenage son. (Martinez, 2008, pg. 40)

The possibility of an all-out war between Castro's Cuba and the United States weighed heavily on Guillermo Vidal's parents, as he describes his father's reasoning for sending him to the U.S.:

> Although Papi paid close attention to the rumors that reached his ears, and although he too was troubled when a colleague simply vanished, it was his belief in the inevitability of war with the United States that foremost drove his desire to see his sons safely out of the country. (Vidal, 2013, pg. 57)

Unsurprisingly, the anxiety about the prospect of leaving their families weighed heavily on the children, heightened by the seemingly interminable wait for their flights, as Mel Martinez recalls:

> Even after we knew that I had been approved for the Peter Pan program, we had no idea when I would be leaving. We were told that I would receive a telegram when a flight opened up, but we'd receive only about two days' warning and would then have to rush to Havana to catch the plane. This was an anxious time, and must have been agonizing for my parents. (Martinez, 2008, pg. 45)

Guillermo Vidal vividly describes his anxiousness and sadness as his departure date of September 29, 1961 approached:

> All I remember is holding tightly to each of them as they helped me prepare for a day whose end none of us could quite envision. I was numb and I cried continually, and every sweet pleasure of the preceding days had already vanished, replaced by a sense that I was about to die. (Vidal, 2013, pg. 63)

The children's fears reached their peak when they boarded their planes and their departure from Cuba and their families turned into reality, as Marlene Fiero, 11 years old at the time, recalls:

> I felt that I was alone in the plane and I was really afraid of where I was going. I didn't know anything about the United States," she says. "So, when I got to the airport in Miami I realized that there were a lot of kids like me. There were about fourteen or fifteen of us, and they herded us together and put us in these little vans and took us away and all of a sudden I felt like I was lost, and I thought, 'Oh my Lord I don't have anybody here. (Conde, 1999, pg. 72)

Mel Martinez also recalled the flight to the United States as being an anxious affair for all the children involved:

> There were eleven of us on that plane, I believe. Many of the children were younger than me; some were as young as nine or ten years old. That flight, as you might imagine, was filled with anxiety. Seated next to me was a girl, about eleven years old, who was extremely anxious. I was scared and nervous as well, but I did my best to console her. (Martinez, 2008, pg. 57)

The experience of leaving their native country necessitated that the children grow up and mature much sooner than usual, as Guillermo Vidal describes:

> Yet for my brothers and me, Operation Peter Pan demanded, in point of fact, that we grow up in a single day. We were simply offered no other choice, and I know I never called them Kiko and Toto again once we had banked away from Havana en route to the United States. (Vidal, 2013, pg. 67)

Vidal and his brothers would be bitterly disappointed after arriving in the U.S., as they couldn't locate their family members who were living in the U.S. and help from the camp administrator wasn't forthcoming:

> He did not pledge to find our grandfather or aunts and uncle, however, and I think it was likely for that reason that I suffered the worst asthma attack of my life that night. I remember dreaming that I was dying, then awakening unable to breathe. I struggled so hard to suck in air that I couldn't speak, making only frantic deep-throated gasps, and I careened wildly around the enormous room waking dorm mates as I could, but because 1 couldn't speak, none of the children I roused had any notion of what was wrong. (Vidal, 2013, pg. 73)

Upon arrival to the United States, the first place that many of the new arrivals were sheltered in was Camp Matecumbe in Miami, Florida – Martinez recalled that "The bunks were so close

together that if your neighbor coughed, you could feel it. In a camp surrounded by pine trees, we felt as though we were in the middle of nowhere. (Martinez, 2008, pg. 55)

Father Francisco Pala, the camp administrator, described the conditions at the camp as follows:

> We had fifteen to eighteen year olds, the most troublesome. The camp's capacity was for about 100 and we had about 500 there. We used tents, and when it rained, everything flooded. We had a couple of showers, and that was it. We built a new building, but that took some time. (Conde, 1999, pg. 78)

Margarita Oteisa, who worked as an English teacher in Camp Matecumbe, described how the children had different reactions to their time in the camp:

> There have been two types of reaction to Matecumbe," says Margarita Oteisa. "There was the reaction that Matecumbe bonded them and they even have reunions; perhaps these were the most sensible ones. For others, it was so horrible, the separation from their parents, that they have wanted to erase all memory of Matecumbe. It was too painful. (Conde, 1999, pg. 85-86)

Camp Matecumbe was meant as a temporary shelter, after which the children would be moved on to other shelters, orphanages and foster family placements. Mel Martinez moved on from Matecumbe after 40 days and was placed in Camp St. John near Jacksonville, Florida which he described as follows:

> Whereas Matecumbe was strictly in and out, with massive turnover, the camp in Jacksonville was less transient. There was a sense of community, because the kids there had been living together for quite some time. At Camp St. John life was more social, less

> disorienting, and far more fulfilling, and friendships were formed in that camp that have lasted to this day, like mine with Cesar. (Martinez, 2008, pg. 60)

St Raphael's Hall in Miami, which was run directly by Father Walsh, one of the masterminds behind Operation Peter Pan, created fond memories for Jorge Findlay, who described that "Saint Raphael's was so nice. It had no gates or fences. You could stroll around, as long as you were back for dinner." (Conde, 1999, pg. 86)

Separation anxiety and separation from their parents significantly impacted the children, as Leopoldo Arista, who worked as a teacher in the Florida City shelter describes a heart-wrenching moment with one of the children:

> He recalls how once, when he went to take a nap, one of the Florida City children said, "Can I lay down next to you and take a nap also?" When his own son came into the room and also laid down, the Florida City boy told him, "Please don't be jealous. Let him pretend he is my father for a while. (Conde, 1999, pg. 90)

Although it was difficult and often sporadic, some of the children did remain in contact with their families. Mel Martinez illustrates just how important these moments, however fleeting, were for soothing the pain of separation:

> In that initial phone call even the simplest reminder of home was a great salve for me; our conversation was all about my situation and how soon I might move out of Matecumbe. It was short and to the point. For days afterward I relived that brief conversation in my head as I coped with my homesickness. (Martinez, 2008, pg. 56)

As strange as the United States must have been for the children, the children themselves were strange to their American peers, as Raquel Mendieta, transferred from St Raphael's to an

orphanage in Dubuque, Iowa, recalls an amusing interaction with her classmates after her arrival to the orphanage:

> They thought that people in Cuba lived in trees and didn't wear clothes and didn't have television and had never seen a ballpoint pen. So we were on equal terms. It was very difficult to adjust to the idea that these people had never heard of Cuba. I said to some classmates, "I am from Cuba," and they asked, "Cuba, Illinois?" (Conde, 1999, pg. 119)

The Cuban Missile crisis, which also signaled the end of Operation Peter Pan, made it clear that the separation between the parents and the children may even be permanent, as Mel Martinez described:

> Through all my months in America I had felt confident that I'd soon be reunited with my family. Even when my father's three- month target passed, I knew that at least Ralph and Aunt Luisa had made it to America. My parents couldn't be far behind, I had told myself. But now, I knew, everything would change. For the first time, I realized that I would be in for a long separation from my family. Maybe even a permanent separation. The hopes that had sustained me for months suddenly disappeared. (Martinez, 2008, pg. 82)

Martinez further explained how this realization affected him, stating that "When I finally acknowledged that I might never see my family again, it was, naturally, extraordinarily depressing. The experience of forced separation from my family was so searing it will stay with me forever." (Martinez, 2008, pg. 85)

Guillermo Vidal was also deeply impacted by the Cuban Missile Crisis, as he feared for the lives of his parents in the case of all-out nuclear war:

> I found it impossible to sleep during those terribly anxious nights, and as we watched the news during each day, I thought constantly about my parents, wondering how their actual

> deaths would occur when the nuclear bombs began to explode. And even if the three of us survived the nuclear war, it was hard to imagine the future: with our parents dead, our status as orphans would be cemented, and we would be forced to live at Sacred Heart until we were old enough to be shipped to another asylum. (Vidal, 2013, pg. 100-101)

A significant number of the Peter Pan children experienced abuse and violence during their stay in orphanages and foster family placements. Raquel Mendieta described her experience at the orphanage in Dubuque, Iowa:

> These were the people that we went to live with. We came from middle-class homes in Cuba and we had lived a very sheltered life. Our culture calls for young girls to be chaperoned everywhere they go. We went from living that kind of life to living in this kind of environment where every second you didn't know whether you were going to be killed or someone was going to beat you up or what was going to happen to you. (Conde, 1999, pg. 120)

Jorge Garrandes, who was placed in St Vincent's orphanage in Vincennes, Indiana, illustrates the tough conditions he and other Cuban children faced and how those experiences bonded them:

> All the Cuban kids would stick together as we were all living the same misery. St. Vincent's was child slave labor," he adds, emphasizing his negative memories of the place. "They would take us to pick corn, apples, or strawberries and we would see that the farmers would pay the nuns. (Conde, 1999, pg. 127)

Dulce Maria Sosa, placed with a foster family at 10 years old, experienced physical sexual abuse at the hands of her foster father:

> As she describes it, she was sitting in the kitchen when her new foster father told that he was desperate, that he was so anxious to be able to touch her breasts and kiss her. She tried to change the subject. She tried to figure out what to do, but as in cases of sexual abuse, she was powerless. “He started fondling me and kissing me and told me not to say anything. My only choice was to remain silent and put up with it, and I had to do it for almost three years.” (Conde, 1999, pg. 156)

Dulce’s 12 year-old sister also faced sexual assault from their foster father, although in her case it didn’t escalate to physical harassment:

> While the perverted foster father did not physically fondle twelve-year-old Mari, she was not spared perversion. Dulce explains. “With her, he would stand by the bathroom window, watch, and masturbate, which he also did with me,” says Dulce. The irony, as she sees it, is that, “They had a reputation for being the best family, a religious family.” (Conde, 1999, pg. 157)

Faustino Amaral, only 6 years old at the time of his arrival in the United States, experienced particularly horrific abuse and degradation at the hands of his foster parents in Albuquerque, New Mexico:

> Whenever one of the children did something wrong I was the one who got beaten up,” he says. “I had asthma. I have sinus problems. Because I couldn’t eat and breathe at the same time and because I wheezed when I ate, they would put me to eat with the dog. They would actually set my plate next to the dog’s plate, and I had to fight the dog off for my food. (Conde, 1999, pg. 158)

Guillermo Vidal and his brothers experienced violence as well after being transferred to Sacred Heart orphanage in Pueblo, Colorado:

> What Roberto, Juan, and I discovered almost immediately was that a culture of violence thrived - and was encouraged to thrive - at the orphanage. Outlaw Jim McCoy ruled mercilessly with his wide leather belt, striking boys constantly for infractions both real and imagined. (Vidal, 2013, pg. 81-82)

One particular incident at the orphanage seared itself into his mind, as he witnessed another boy being punished for attempting to escape:

> When one of us would occasionally run away- desperate to escape, even for a day - McCoy would ritually employ his belt's big buckle. It was a punishment he reserved for that specific offense, and I'll never forget watching in horror as he lacerated Jimmy Aragon's head with blow after blow from the metal buckle when the boy, hungry and defeated, returned to Sacred Heart - Jimmy screaming in pain during the beating, then enduring the further humiliation of McCoy shaving his head so the rest of us could read a cautionary tale in the cuts and welts he suffered. (Vidal, 2013, pg. 82)

The children also struggled with the language barrier, as Mel Martinez described how “suddenly in America I was having trouble with my studies, and it started to affect how I felt about myself. I knew all these feelings stemmed from the language barrier. But still they persisted” (Martinez, 2008, pg. 73-74). Olguita Alvarez described how she progressively forgot the Spanish language, saying that “My parents would call every Sunday. “They tell me that I would become more silent every week, speaking less and less. By the time I returned to Miami, five months later, I had forgotten my Spanish” (Conde, 1990, pg. 122). Guillermo Vidal also mentions how speaking Spanish was discouraged in the Sacred Heart orphanage, as the abusive custodian McCoy told him “"I don't want to hear any of you speaking Spanish ever again. You will speak only English

from now on." Then he added, "Your names are no longer Roberto, Juan, and Guillermo. You are now Bob, John, and Bill" (Vidal, 2013, pg. 80).

The language barrier would also come between the children and their parents, as their parents made their way to the United States in the following years, as Alicia Brito, 9 years old when she arrived in the U.S. and 14 years old when she reunited with her parents, describes:

> I could understand but I couldn't speak, although they had to explain some words. I could understand everyday talk, but when my brain started readjusting I would get horrible headaches! I would talk to the gringos in Spanish and to my parents in English! (Conde, 1999, pg. 168)

The children's eventual reunion with their parents caused mixed emotions and shock, as Guillermo Vidal describes how the news of his parents arriving to the U.S. from Mexico shook him and his brothers:

> I was stunned. I was angry as well, and terribly confused. I had convinced myself in the preceding months that nothing substantive had changed in my life. Mami and Papi lived in Mexico now - that much was easy enough to accept - yet I still firmly believed I would never see them again."(Vidal, 2013, pg. 116)

This coping mechanism caused a rift between the Vidal brothers and their parents, especially in light of their placement with a foster family, the Eddys, who had embraced them wholeheartedly:

> There was no way to explain to them why we felt we had to erase from our lives any hope for a reunion with them in order to simply survive, yet how we nonetheless still longed for the daily sustenance and larger meaning of a family life, one the Eddys had offered without any strings attached. (Vidal, 2013, pg. 124)

Mel Martinez highlighted another curious consequence of his separation with his parents and coming to the United States, the role reversal as the children took on a parent-like role as they helped their parents adjust to life in the United States:

> This role reversal with parents was a universal experience for the kids in the Peter Pan program. By the time our parents arrived here, we were fluent in the language and had acclimated ourselves to the new culture and its customs. We were assimilated, even if we still spoke with accents, but our parents were alienated, knowing neither the language nor the culture. Many of us had to step up. (Martinez, 2008, pg. 119)

Some parents, like Guillermo Vidal's, struggled with accepting the change in their children and their Americanization:

> They were wounded that we had become so American so quickly, that we seldom spoke respectfully or even wistfully of our island heritage-that we never expressed what it meant to us to be Vidals-and rather than evidence pride in the fact that their sons had learned to speak English so well and so swiftly, that too was an injury to them. (Vidal, 2013, pg. 124)

Other parents struggled with life in the United States, some even becoming abusive, as Josefin Santiago described how her father struggled after arriving in the U.S.:

> When my father got to the United States he was literally digging ditches and guess what? He snapped. And guess who he took it out on? He started giving me black eyes and beating up on me. He came over here when I was fifteen and I left home when I was seventeen. It was like I didn't ever really get to go back home. (Conde, 1999, pg. 187)

Guillermo Vidal's parents likewise had trouble with adapting to life in the U.S. and the challenges they faced in this new situation:

> They did daily battle with language and cultural barriers, arduous jobs, bills they couldn't find means to pay, and three teen- agers increasingly intent on demonstrating their independence; and together with their undisguised dislike for each other, those stresses relentlessly boiled over into chaos and combat. (Vidal, 2013, pg. 131)

Others yet had an easier time as they found a community of Cubans in their new country, as Mel Martinez says about his parents that "they also had a number of Cuban families nearby they had befriended, including some they had known distantly back in Cuba. This meant they had a community to fall back on and socialize within." (Martinez, 2008, pg. 133)

Even with all the trials and tribulations that they faced, a majority of the Peter Pan children consider their experience to be a positive one – 69.60% answered positively to a questionnaire asking them if they found the experience to be a positive one, describing that it made them stronger, taught them self-reliance and taught them how to be independent (Conde, 1999, pg. 205). Only 7.60% percent answered that the experience was a negative one, saying that it was traumatic experience, painful and that separation anxiety was too much to bear (Conde, 1999, pg. 206). The other 22.80% percent answered that it was neither positive or negative.

Roberto Zaldivar would comment on the experience of the Peter Pan children, stating that:

> As another child refugee once told me, 'We have been marked for life,' and it is true. Our experience has made us different, made us mature ahead of time. Gave us responsibilities that we did not need to have at such an early age, yet made us value many things that other people don't value at all. I have seen people my age blaming their parents for all this. And it is not the fault of our parents, but the fault of a government on our land who

made us and them do what we did—decide to leave our homeland. (Conde, 1999, pg. 210)

Carlos Eire, in his memoir *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, vividly describes his own feelings about leaving Castro's Cuba, exemplifying the fear of indoctrination that seemed pervasive among those who left Cuba post-revolution:

> I was one of the lucky ones. Fidel couldn't obliterate me as he did all the other children, slicing off their heads ever so slowly, and replacing them with fearful, slavish copies of his own. New heads held in place by two bolts, like Boris Karloff's in Frankenstein, one bolt forged from fear, the other from illusion. (Eire, 2003, pg. 72-73)

Yvonne Conde, a Peter Pan child herself, commented on the unique position of the children and their relationship with their identity:

> Many of the children feel like I do, not completely American. Not out of ingratitude, but our hearts beat to a different rhythm, one made up of rumbas, guarachas, and danzones. It is a rhythm that makes us get teary-eyed when hearing the Cuban national anthem and makes us feel patriotic when reading anything by José Martí. (Conde, 1999, pg. 217)

The lived experiences of the Peter Pan children show that their situation wasn't as simple as usually presented and their experiences show the depth of struggle many of them faced with life in the United States. Contrary to the simplistic interpretations that Operation Peter Pan only brought positives for the children, their stories about the pain of separation, the abuse that some of them endured and the complicated navigation of their identities as neither fully Cuban and neither fully American show that their situation was significantly more complex than usually presented. Regardless, most would view their arrival and the chance to live in the United States as opposed to Castro's Cuba as a good decision, in the end. What their experiences show,

however, is that it's necessary to examine situations like Operation Peter Pan in conjunction with the lived experiences of the participants in order to gain a holistic understanding of the events themselves and do their story justice.

3. The Mariel boatlift (April-October 1980)

3.1. The Carter administration and Cuba – *El dialogo* and the led-up to the Mariel boatlift

After the flashpoint that was the Cuban Missile Crisis, relations between Cuba and the U.S. normalized somewhat, in comparison – naturally, the two countries were still enemies, the embargo against Cuba was there to stay and relations remained tense and unfriendly. As mentioned previously, the Missile Crisis was the final line in the sand – Cuba would remain a socialist country, standing firmly against the United States. This doesn't mean that Cuba was a Soviet puppet, on the contrary – Cuba pursued an independent foreign policy and was one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement, founded in 1961 in Belgrade.

Fidel Castro, after being humiliated by being sidestepped during the negotiations to resolve the Missile Crisis, ensured that Cuba would have an independent foreign and domestic policy, free of interference from any foreign power, friendly or otherwise – this had been the case from the very beginning of his insurgency against Batista, as his repudiation of the opposition Miami Pact back in 1958 demonstrated. As the lines in the sand were drawn, the U.S.-based exile groups lost hope that Castro would be removed from power and the U.S. itself lost interest in Cuba because the situation on the island was unlikely to change. U.S. commitments elsewhere, primarily in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, also meant that Cuba's importance to U.S. foreign policy aims waned in the years following the Missile Crisis.

Another consequence of the Missile Crisis was the suspension of commercial flights between Cuba and the U.S., which drastically impacted the number of Cubans arriving in the United States – their options were reduced to either arriving first in third countries before proceeding to the U.S. or undertaking a risky journey by sea in an effort to reach the U.S. mainland. In 1965, however, things would change as Castro, embarrassed by the increasing

number of news stories about Cubans leaving by boat, opened the small port of Camarioca and allowed Cubans from the U.S. to pick up their relatives who wished to leave – Castro's announcement of the policy would coincide with President Lyndon B. Johnson signing into law the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 which phased out quotas based on nationality, declaring that Cubans were welcome to arrive (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 406). The Camarioca boatlift was a foreshadowing of the Mariel Boatlift in 1980, although on a much smaller scale. The boatlift proved untenable, however, and the two governments would agree to begin an airlift instead, the so-called Freedom Flights, which ran until 1973, bringing over almost 300,000 Cubans on 3,048 flights in total – the new arrivals differed greatly from the earlier exiles, as they were mostly women and the elderly, military-age males being forbidden to leave (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 406).

What the Freedom Flights demonstrated was that diplomacy and cooperation between the U.S. and Cuba wasn't impossible. It's important to note that diplomacy between Cuba and U.S. allies in Europe (even with Francoist Spain, which was staunchly anti-communist) and the rest of Latin America continued even as the U.S. pressured them to sever relations – while the members of the Organization of American States (OAS) would sever relations in 1962, by 1975 the multilateral sanctions were revoked and they were free to determine whether or not to re-establish relations with Cuba, while European countries never broke off relations in the first place (Roy, 2009, pg. 36-37). With détente being a major foreign policy focus of the U.S. and USSR, beginning in November 1974, then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger would lead secret discussions with Cuban emissaries over a period of 10 months about a range of topics, including U.S.-Soviet relations, the decolonization wars in Africa and the prospect of restoring trade and diplomatic relations between the two countries – these talks would stall, however, due to a lack

of prioritization from both sides and Cuba's increasingly public involvement in the Angolan Civil War (Sweig, 2016, pg. 91-92).

New life would be breathed into the diplomatic relationship between Cuba and the U.S. with the election of Jimmy Carter in the 1976 U.S. presidential elections as one of Carter's main policy aims would be to move away from the *realpolitik* foreign policy pursued by his predecessors towards a policy that emphasized human rights and friendlier relations with hostile countries, including Cuba – Cuba, although not a priority for the administration, would be a part of that approach, with the main goal being establishing a framework to help move towards a normalization of relations between the two countries (Sweig, 2016, pg. 92-93). Even though a full restoration of relations didn't happen, some important bilateral questions were resolved – Cuba and the U.S. signed an agreement establishing a maritime boundary line in the Gulf of Mexico and established Interest Sections in both the U.S. and Cuba, the first official diplomatic representations since relations were broken off in 1961.

One other aspect that contributed to the thaw in relations between the U.S. and Cuba was the dialogue, *el dialogo*, initiated by a group of Cuban exiles with the Cuban government in late 1977. The exile group at the forefront of preparing these efforts was grouped around the magazine *Arieto*, organized into the Antonio Maceo Brigade, and they would travel to the island in December 1977 – this would set the stage for *el dialogo*, as a delegation of 75 exiles led by Cuban-American banker Bernardo Benes twice talked with Cuban government officials, in late November and early December 1978, ultimately resulting in the release of some 3,000 political prisoners from Cuban prisons (Martinez-Fernandez, 2014, pg. 156). Not all exiles were happy about this rapprochement with the hated Castro regime, and the *dialogueros* found themselves

the target of anti-Castro terrorist organizations like Omega 7, with their homes and business being bombed upon their return to the U.S. from Cuba (Martinez-Fernandez, 2014, pg. 156-157).

Another important step was the revocation of the U.S. travel ban to Cuba in 1977, which finally allowed travel between the two countries, including for purely tourist purposes – even an academic exchange program between Johns Hopkins University and the University of Havana was established (Sweig, 2016, pg. 93-94). The lifting of the travel ban was greeted with much enthusiasm by many Cubans living in the U.S., with over 100,000 making visiting Cuba in the first year alone, netting the Cuban government $150 million (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 411). These family reunification visits would also play a key role in triggering the Mariel boatlift, an unintended consequence of the new policy and the exiles' visit to the island.

3.2. The Peruvian embassy crisis, the Mariel boatlift and reception of the Marielitos

The Peruvian embassy crisis kicked off on April 1, 1980, when 6 Cubans stole a city bus in Havana and rammed the gate of the Peruvian embassy, seeking to apply for asylum in Peru – the Cuban government demanded that they be returned, however the ambassador refused, citing the principle of inviolability. The next day, April 2, 1980, the Cuban government demolished sentry boxes in front of the embassy and the Cuban guards left their posts – the news that the embassy grounds were open spread like wildfire through the city and by the time night fell on Havana that day, hundreds of people had arrived on the embassy grounds with the goal of seeking asylum (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 412). This was the catalyst of the Peruvian embassy crisis, which would ultimately lead to the Mariel boatlift and the arrival of 135,000 Cuban refugees into the United States.

The roots of the crisis can be directly linked with the family reunification visits which took place the previous year, as Cubans discovered just how big the gulf in prosperity was between Cuba and the United States:

> In the loaded encounters between Cubans from abroad and Cubans from the island, the latter were often left wondering. Why was the government offering those who had left what they who had stayed—and done voluntary labor, or cheered at rallies, or joined CDRs—had never had? Cubans played with words to make sense of the conundrum. The gusanos (worms) had returned as butterflies, they joked. The traidores (traitors) were really just traedolares (dollar bringers). It wasn't just that those who left seemed to be leading more prosperous lives than those who stayed. It was also that the government showed itself publicly in a light no one had ever seen. Either the government had lied

> when it called the exiles traitors, or the government was subordinating that belief to the need for hard cash. (Ferrer, 2021, pg.412)

The opening of the embassy was followed by the arrival of more and more Cuban citizens wishing to apply for asylum and to leave Cuba – in just the first 48 hours, 10,800 people crammed into the embassy. The United States, Peru, Costa Rica and Spain would in the next few days decided to take in several thousand of the asylum seekers but many, out of a mistrust towards the Cuban government, more thousands would stay in the embassy, even as the situation inside became dire, continuing the impasse – the Cuban government wasn't idle, either, as it began an organized harassment campaign against those remaining in the embassy:

> The government denigrated and systematically harassed the crowd gathered inside the embassy. On April 19, through the coordination of the CDRs, it mobilized nearly one million people to march in repudiation of the crowd. "*!Que se vayan! !Que se vayan!*" (Go away! Go away!) chanted the marchers. The next day, Castro announced that those wishing to leave could do so and opened the port of El Mariel so vessels could come to fetch them. The government used the opportunity to deport thousands of so-called "undesirables." They are "the scum of the country," Castro blasted in his May Day speech, deriding them as "antisocial homosexuals, drug addicts, and gamblers." (Martinez-Fernandez, 2014, pg. 159)

And so, the port of Mariel was declared open by Castro and refugees started to pour out of Cuba and head towards the United States. The exodus would be impossible, though, without the efforts of Cuban exiles in Florida, who mobilized to take advantage of this unique opportunity to get their loved ones out of Cuba – the first boats with Cuban refugees from Mariel harbor would arrive in Key West, Florida on April 21, 1980, marking the beginning of the Mariel

boatlift which would last all the way until October of the same year, when the Mariel port was closed once again (Ferrer, 2021, pg. 413-414).

As the boats of all shapes and sizes, including those with questionable seaworthiness as Cuban-Americans descended on Mariel harbor, the situation in the port itself became chaotic, as Manuel Murillo, who had arrived in Mariel harbor in late April to pick up his family, describes:

> The port eventually got so crowded that it was almost possible to move from boat to boat as if crossing a pontoon bridge. Once docked, we waited for about five days until we got permission from the Cuban military to get off the boat and turn in our requests. We had to approach a table to fill out an application that included the names of the people we had come to pick up, their addresses, and our familial relationship to them. We then returned to the boat to wait until the families had been contacted. When someone asked how much it would cost to get their relatives out, a Cuban soldier responded that it was free because Cuba wanted to get rid of the scum. (Garcia, 2018, pg. 42)

The Mariel boatlift proved how unique the relationship between Cuba and the U.S. really was (and still is) as it stands in stark contrast to the relationship towards immigration from other Latin American countries – while those immigrants were, and in large part still are, viewed as a problem from the start, Cubans enjoyed special status due to the unique historical circumstances between Cuba and the U.S. during the Cold War.

But, the messiness of the situation, along with insinuations that Castro had emptied the prisons and psychiatric institutions and sent tens of thousands of criminals to the U.S., greatly impacted the reception of the Marielitos upon the arrival to the United States. The U.S. public's appetite for accepting new refugees was also low, as the U.S. was still in the grips of a recession and faced other foreign policy woes like the ongoing Iranian hostage crisis (November 1979 –

January 1981), where 52 U.S. diplomats and citizen were held hostage in the U.S. embassy in Tehran in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution – the Mariel boatlift and the addition of an undetermined number of Cubans fueled the fires of further discontent. The Carter administration had to walk a fine line between two official lines with the first being characterizing the Marielitos as individuals fleeing persecution and tyranny and the second being a concerted effort to discourage Cuba from sending an unsustainable human wave of refugees hurtling toward the U.S. – President Carter's aide, Jack Watson, would quip that Castro was sending "people like bullets" to the United States (Borneman, 1986, pg. 74). Miami, the destination for many Marielitos and the center of Cuban-American life in the U.S. was also gripped in a crisis of its own which coincided with the Mariel boatlift, as racial tensions spilled over in the infamous Miami riots in mid-May, 1980, in the wake of an acquittal of 4 police officers in the death of Arthur McDuffie, a local black businessman.

It wasn't just the volatile political situation in the U.S. that affected why Marielitos were perceived more negatively than earlier cohorts of Cuban exiles and refugees as there were several points of difference between them and earlier waves of Cubans arriving in the United States. For starters, the Marielitos were predominantly young (the average age being 34 years old) and were raised after the revolution and had no memories of pre-revolutionary Cuba, they were predominantly male (70%) and single, had a higher proportion of non-whites (18% of the total), specifically Afro-Cubans, than earlier waves and a lower number of Marielitos were professionals and administrators (Martinez-Fernandez, 2014, pg. 159).

The Cuban government used the Mariel boatlift not only as a pressure valve in an effort to reduce dissatisfaction caused by the stagnant economy but also to get rid of "undesirables", including homosexuals, religious dissenters, prisoners, psychiatric patients and people refusing

to work – some 26,000 of the Marielitos had criminal records in Cuba, though most had records for minor crimes that weren't offenses in the U.S. (including political prisoners) and the number of criminals among the Marielitos was actually lower than in the general U.S. population (Martinez-Fernandez, 2014, pg. 160). However, the damage was done, and negative headlines as well as the insinuations by the Cuban government severely impacted the reputation of the Marielitos among the general public.

The inversion of perception of Cuban refugees was drastic, as polls conducted in the aftermath of the boatlift would show that Cubans ranked first in negative perceptions about immigrant groups and last in positive perceptions, with one poll placing Cubans near the top of a list of least desirable neighbors – the positive perception of Cubans as a model minority and "golden exiles" was definitively gone (Martinez-Fernandez, 2014, pg. 161). Relations between earlier exiles and Marielitos was also strained, as ideological and cultural differences resulting from decades of separation would come to the fore – a 1983 survey of Marielitos showed that 75% believed that earlier exiles discriminated against Marielitos and 52% reported that they personally experienced discrimination (Fernandez-Martinez, 2014, pg. 161).

In the end, the Mariel boatlift would reflect negatively on both Castro's Cuba and the Carter administration. For Cuba, although it allowed them to moderate the anti-government sentiment among the population, the sight of tens of thousands of Cubans desperate to leave, many of them working class, discredited the supposed successes of the Revolution and embarrassed the government (Martinez-Fernandez, 2014, pg. 159). For the Carter administration, the chaotic nature of the boatlift, the failure to organize a more organized arrival for the Cuban refugees and the perception that Castro played the administration by saddling the U.S. with

“undesirables”, combined with other domestic and foreign woes facing the administration, helped Ronald Reagan win the 1980 presidential elections (Sweig, 2016, pg. 96-97).

3.3. The lived experiences of the Marielitos

Unlike the children of the Peter Pan program, the Marielitos faced numerous challenges when attempting to leave Cuba. For starters, the main difference was that the revolution had been only a couple of years old when the Peter Pan children left, most of their memories being tied to pre-Castro Cuba. The Marielitos, on the other hand, had lived under Castro's rule for over 20 years before they managed to leave Cuba, with many, as mentioned previously, being political prisoners, the children of political prisoners or classified as undesirable for a number of reasons. The Marielitos also faced abuse and desperate conditions in the Peruvian embassy and during processing before Castro finally allowed them to leave, unlike the Peter Pan children who, relatively speaking, had a significantly easier time leaving Cuba. Their lived experiences of exiting Cuba tell of a harrowing exit, full of fear and uncertainty and the rejection that they faced once they finally arrived in the United States.

Some had decided to leave Cuba due to their status as dissidents and political prisoners, famous Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas being one of them – as a result of his writing, he was imprisoned and in his memoirs he describes how he was broken by the State Security:

> They wanted me to make a confession stating that I was a counter- revolutionary, that I regretted the ideological weakness I had shown in my published writings, and that the Revolution had been extraordinarily fair with me .... I did not want to recant anything, I did not think that I had to recant anything; but after three months at State Security, I signed the confession. Needless to say, this only proves my cowardice, my weakness, the certainty that I am not the stuff of which heroes are made, and that fear, in my case, had won over moral principles. (Arenas, 2020, pg. 122)

Arenas would also come to see the Mariel exodus, and the Peruvian embassy incident in particular, as a mass rejection of the Castro regime and first big rebellion against it:

> The events at the Peruvian embassy were the first mass rebellion by the Cuban people against the Castro dictatorship. After that, people tried to enter the U.S. Interest Section office in Havana. Everybody was seeking an embassy to get into, and police persecution reached alarming proportions. (Arenas, 2020, pg. 153)

What happened at the Peruvian embassy, as harrowing as it might've been, had some positives for some, as Alejandrin del Valle describes the companionship he developed with his fellow Marielitos:

> I would never be able to explain in words the camaraderie experienced and all that I had endured in such a short amount of time. Before I stepped outside that door, I made a promise to myself. If I ever told the story of my experiences, I would have to say, that the most intense days of my life were, "The Days of the Embassy." (del Valle, 2007, pg. 94)

However, one reason for leaving Cuba that many Marielitos list as among the most significant is that after seeing Cuban exiles who had returned to visit Cuba, they noticed that they were significantly more prosperous than those who stayed in Cuba. Luis de la Paz describes how the arrival of the exiles conflicted with government propaganda about how the exiles lived in the United States:

> This event prompted a deep curiosity among Cubans on the island, who were told that the Cubans who had left to the United States lived in poverty and were going hungry. Black Cubans were told that Americans would set the dogs on them and that they would suffer even more hardships. However, when these exiles began to visit Cuba and arrive full of gifts and

personal stories about their travels and their properties, many people on the island began to wonder if they had been deceived. These exiles who were now visiting appeared to be the complete opposite of what the government had said. (Garcia, 2018, pg. 99)

Osvaldo Ramirez also spoke about how the image that the Cuban government built up about the exiles' life in the U.S. turned out to be false:

> I remember that shortly before the Mariel boatlift, many Cubans began arriving from the United States to visit their families, the so-called capitalists. Many of these people were just common workers who seemed to be doing very well economically in the United States. The Cuban government had spent many years creating the image that Cubans living in the United States were poor and had abandoned their families. For the first time, though, Cubans on the island began to think, "If these are common workers who can travel freely anywhere and spend a lot of money bringing us presents, life cannot be so bad there." (Garcia, 2018, pg. 94-95)

This contrasted with the situation in Cuba itself, as Minerva de la Arena describes how her parents struggled to feed themselves and their children:

> Nevertheless, I could not stop thinking about my parents' difficulty in finding enough food. 1 recalled that the only thing we always had to eat at home was eggs and that my parents were constantly arguing because of the lack of food; many problems arose from their struggle to feed their family. A lot of the food that we got in my house was purchased from the black market, and we had to eat it in hiding because this was illegal. (Garcia, 2018, pg. 64-65)

Alejandrin del Valle also spoke about how the new contact with exiles motivated so many Cubans to leave, as the difference between the levels of prosperity between the two groups were immediately obvious:

> When the Cubans in exile were given permission to return to the island to visit their families still living there, we all realized the wealth these people enjoyed. It was easy to tell them apart by the clothes they wore and by the happiness shining in their faces, also because of the presents they brought with them, which sometimes were worth thousands of dollars. It was just as easy to tell which Cubans lived on the island, because they showed no prosperity whatsoever. (del Valle, 2007, pg. 104)

While the Cuban government claimed that those Cuban that had taken refuge in the Peruvian embassy were all criminals, the experience of those who were there disagrees with that assessment, as Carlos de la Arena describes how even small acts were considered crimes by the government:

> In the following days, most of the people I encountered inside the embassy were professionals; many of them were teachers and doctors. The government started the rumor that many were criminals, but that was a lie. In fact, many of the people in jail in Cuba were not criminals but rather people trying to survive because almost everything was illegal in Cuba. For something as simple as carrying a one-pound bag of coffee in your pocket, you could go to jail and end up serving time in prison. (Garcia, 2018, pg. 50)

As the crisis wore on, however, the Cuban government saw in the exodus a possibility to rid itself of criminals and sent a number of prisoners to join those looking to leave Cuba – Manuel

Murillo, who had come to Mariel from Miami with his boat to pick up his family noticed how after a while, single men who said they were prisoners showed up at the harbor:

> I remember being surprised by how many young people I saw, mostly in their early twenties or early thirties. Some were single, and many others were with their families, however, on about the tenth day, many of the people that began arriving were only single men without families. After asking around, I soon found out that most of these people were fresh out of prison. They had been given the option to leave Cuba or stay in prison and face the possibility of a double sentence. (Garcia, 2018, pg. 44)

Luis de la Paz also noticed strange men who didn't quite fit in with the rest of the people awaiting to leave Cuba, even though they were a diverse group coming from all strata of society:

> For me it was very interesting to see the mix of people who were there. There were people of all ages and social strata: families, young professionals, and a significant number of single people with very hard faces that I realized had been brought directly from prison or taken out of psychiatric hospitals. Many of these people were covered in prison tattoos. (Garcia, 2018, pg. 102-103)

The conditions inside the embassy deteriorated as the number of people who had taken refuge there grew and the standoff with the Cuban government wore on. Carlos de la Arena talks about how those inside the embassy began to eat leaves from trees in the courtyard:

> As the days went by, things got very hard inside the embassy, and a rumor started that the police were going to break in and arrest everyone inside. From that point on there was the ever-present fear that we could be detained or massacred. Journalists were not allowed in, as Cuba was not a free country. After a week or so the situation inside the embassy became

chaotic; there was no food, and everyone was so hungry that we began to eat the stems off the papaya trees and the leaves off the other trees. (Garcia, 2018, pg. 50)

He would also go on to illustrate just how catastrophically unsanitary the conditions inside the embassy were, as those trapped inside had few options but to relieve themselves where they slept:

> Most days, I was forced to sleep on top of pools of urine since there was practically no room to move around. It was very difficult for menstruating women due to the lack of sanitation. There were only two portable bathrooms for approximately 10,800 people. Having lost our privacy, we had to relieve ourselves in front of everyone. However, most of us supported each other. When faced with adversity those who have a sense of morality do not lose it, but those who do not become animals. (Garcia, 2018, pg. 51)

Carlos Morales mentions how he grew thin while at the embassy and how the people inside grew so desperate that they began eating cats, also mentioning that the Cuban state had infiltrators among those inside the embassy:

> I lost a lot of weight while at the embassy. I remember that several people on the fourth day ate a cat; they offered me some, but I didn't want any. Four or five cats were killed and distributed; they prepared them, used a campfire, and broiled them. By then, I was about to faint. A big commotion started because someone from the Interior Ministry had infiltrated us and somebody recognized him. He was covered in blood when the embassy officials took him out in an ambulance. (Garcia, 2018, pg. 61)

Reinaldo Arenas also mentions how the Cuban government infiltrated agents among those leaving the island, stating that they used the Mariel boatlift as a cover to send agents into the United States:

> Before boarding the boats, we were sorted into categories and sent to empty warehouses: one for the insane, one for murderers and hard-core criminals, another for prostitutes and homosexuals, and one for the young men who were undercover agents of State Security to be infiltrated in the United States. (Arenas, 2020, pg. 155)

A particularly interesting element of the Mariel boatlift was that a number of those leaving were homosexuals – Arenas, who was homosexual himself, describes how it was his sexuality that played a large part in why he was allowed to leave and mentions the peculiarities of how homosexuals were perceived in Cuba according to their preferred sexual positions:

> The best way to obtain an exit permit was to provide any documentary proof of being a homosexual. I did not have such a document, but I had my ID, which stated that I had been in jail because of a public disturbance; that was good enough proof, and I went to the police. At the police station they asked me if I was a homosexual and I said yes; then they asked me if I was active or passive and I took the precaution of saying that I was passive. A friend of mine who said he played the active role was not allowed to leave; he had told the truth, but the Cuban government did not look upon those who took the active male role as real homosexuals. (Arenas, 2020, pg. 154-155)

Arenas wasn't the only one who noticed this pattern, as Miguel Ordoqui witnessed how a man that he knew pretended to be homosexual in order to be allowed to leave the island:

> Many men would pose as homosexuals in order to leave. A large, muscled man who had been a lifeguard at the old Nautical Club told us that he wanted to leave. We took his

grandfather's identification card and we replaced it with his photo. He plucked his eyebrows and acted very feminine around the soldiers. They asked him why he was leaving and he answered, "Because I am a homosexual." The soldiers then told him that he wasn't gay and was using that as an excuse to leave. Nevertheless, he was able to leave the country and now lives in California. (Garcia, 2018, pg. 90)

The repudiations of those in the embassy and in Mariel harbor were a particularly vicious and traumatic experience, as the government organized mobs who would insult and attack those attempting to leave – Carlos de la Arena describes how he encountered a woman who had participated in that abuse in Miami Beach:

Several neighbors never took part in these demonstrations, but others did participate and are now living in the United States. I have seen some and had to remind them. Some have asked me for forgiveness, and I have forgiven them. Once, in Miami Beach, I bumped into the woman who had been president of the CDR in my neighborhood, one who had abused a lot of other people, and she said to me, "Listen Carlos, I was very wrong." I couldn't control myself, and I said to her, "I am not going to punish you, but someone up there will take care of that, because you harmed a lot of people, even innocent people who ended up in prison because of you." (Garcia, 2018, pg. 52)

Reinaldo Arenas mentions how even those who had only contacted their relatives in the United States to come pick them up were physically attacked by the mobs:

Lots of people were physically attacked, not only for being at the Peruvian embassy but merely for sending telegrams asking their relatives in Miami to come for them at the Port of Mariel. I saw a young man beaten unconscious and left on the street just as he was

coming out of the post office after sending one of those telegrams. This happened daily, everywhere, during the months of April and May 1980. (Arenas, 2020, pg. 154)

After being allowed to leave, the decision to leave weighed heavily on many of the Marielitos, as Patsy Feliciano describes the sadness her mother felt as they left Cuba behind:

> We departed from Mariel, leaving our beloved Cuba behind. My parents had their eyes fixed on the land while Cuba got smaller and smaller. I remember looking at my mom. Her sadness scared me. Wasn't this what we had wanted? Were we going to be okay? I couldn't imagine then her immense loss. At that time, I doubt I clearly understood mine. (Garcia, 2018, pg. 79)

Some, like Reinaldo Arenas, were happy to leave Cuba behind but saw how leaving impacted others, as he witnessed a young man breaking down after their boat left Mariel harbor:

> For me, who for so many years had wanted nothing more than to abandon that land of horrors, it was easy not to cry. But there was a youth, perhaps seventeen years old, forced, on board in Mariel having to leave all his family behind, who was crying disconsolately. There were some women with children who, like me, had not eaten in five days. (Arenas, 2020, pg. 156)

The voyage to the United States, in boats that were often overloaded beyond capacity, was a harrowing experience in and of itself, as Carito Lumpuy describes how she and the people traveling with her on the same boat endured a difficult journey as the weather took a turn for the worse during their voyage:

> I remember that during the voyage, sometimes a rain cloud would appear all of a sudden and our boat would start filling up with water. The men on board had to grab some buckets to bail it out. Many people were very dizzy, and others were seasick and vomited.

> At one point we realized that the captain and the woman with him were also afraid because they began to drink. They probably also thought that we weren't going to get through the bad weather. (Garcia, 2018, pg. 56)

Upon arrival in the United States, some were surprised at the friendliness and generosity they experienced from the Americans, in contrast to the picture painted by Cuban government propaganda – Leonardo Gisbert Sao describes his first encounter with an American when he boarded a boat like this:

> There, I had my first encounter with the so-called American imperialists when the yacht's captain kindly gave me a bar of soap and a towel. I then learned that this was the soap that mechanics use to wash. The captain invited us to eat and took us to the kitchen on the boat, opening some green bottles of beer. This was more kindness and generosity than I had expected. (Garcia, 2018, pg. 73)

Luis de la Paz was struck in particular when an American man referred to him as "gentleman", which brought him great joy:

> The fact that they had called me a gentleman gave me a great sense of joy; I felt that I was being treated like a human being and not as a slave. That, to me, was very important. Almost from the first moment I set foot on land, I felt a huge difference: I felt a great elation, first because of the way I was received and second because I had won and had been able come to the United States. That was my personal victory. (Garcia, 2018, pg. 103)

However, this rosy picture wouldn't last long as many of the Marielitos experienced stigmatization and discrimination upon their arrival to the United States. Some, like Luis Caballero, took pride in the term Marielito:

> In the beginning, people would ask if I was a Marielito, and some even tried to offend me. But for me, Marielito is a word that makes me proud. The Mariel boatlift was my ticket to freedom. Years before I had tried to leave Cuba through the Camarioca port in the freedom flights, but it never happened, so it was the Mariel boatlift that gave me the opportunity to come to freedom. (Garcia, 2018, pg. 85)

Luis de la Paz described how “Marielito” was used pejoratively to disparage the new arrivals and how they immediately stood out from earlier exiles by their way of dress:

> The term Marielito was synonymous with "filth" and "scum," coined to make us feel less than those Cubans who had preceded us in exile by fifteen or twenty years. People would ask if you were a good Marielito or a bad one. Good or bad, and there were a number of stereotypes as to how Marielitos dressed compared to everyone else. Marielitos were the only ones who wore jeans rolled up, as that was the fashion in Cuba. Our color combinations were also judged by others. We were known for wearing whatever was given to us because we arrived with only what we wore.” (Garcia, 2018, pg. 104)

Osvaldo Ramirez also talked about how, as soon as they were arrived, the Marielitos were wrongly stereotyped as criminals:

> When I arrived, the general perception in the United States was that the worst of Cuba had come from Mariel, but that was not the case. This was the negative image that the Cuban government wanted to create for those who left Cuba at that time. They portrayed the Marielitos as prisoners who were rapists, criminals, and murderers. A few criminals did go to Miami, and it did give the rest of us a bad image. However, most Marielitos were students and workers. (Garcia, 2018, pg. 98)

Mirta Ojito, author and journalist, spoke on how the arrivals from Mariel differed from those Cubans who had been exiled earlier:

> Being a Marielita specifically is different to being a Cuban in Miami. I feel first of all Cuban, not particularly Marielita, but I can't deny that I left Cuba in 1980, and that sets me apart from other people that came here at the beginning of the revolution. Being a Marielita is hard. A lot of people didn't understand us, didn't care for us, we were different. We were darker. (Skop, 2001, pg. 449)

Marielitos, as a general rule, did not regret coming to the U.S., as Alejandrin de Valle describes how his desire from freedom overruled his regret about leaving his life in Cuba behind:

> The departure was overwhelming for me, I felt as if I had left a part of myself there on the island, but I realized that no one had forced me to go to the United States; it was a decision I had made on my own. Freedom has a price, and I was ready to pay it. If I were faced with this decision again, I would do the same thing without hesitation. If oppression and freedom could be measured in gold, freedom would be the heavier of the two because being free is the most prized possession a person can have. (del Valle, 2007, pg. 129)

Others, however, wouldn't be as satisfied with their new life – Reinaldo Arenas, although happy to leave Cuba behind, felt out of place in Miami because of the exaggerated culture of *machismo* and felt that the city was merely a poor simulacrum of Cuba:

> The typical Cuban machismo has attained alarming proportions in Miami. I did not want to stay too long in that place, which was like a caricature of Cuba, the worst of Cuba: the eternal gossip, the chicanery, the envy. I also hated the flatness of the scenery, which could not compare with the beauty of an island; it was like the ghost of our Island, a

> barren and pestiferous peninsula, trying to become, for a million exiles, the dream of a tropical island. (Arenas, 2020, pg. 160)

Arenas would also poetically describe the feeling of being an exile and the pain that he and tens of thousands of others of Cubans would feel as they were forced to leave their homeland behind:

> Now, needless to say, after ten years, I have realized that an exile has no place anywhere, because there is no place, because the place where we started to dream, where we discovered the natural world around us, read our first book, loved for the first time, is always the world of our dreams. In exile one is nothing but a ghost, the shadow of someone who never achieves full reality. I ceased to exist when I went into exile; I started to run away from myself. (Arenas, 2020, pg. 160)

Unfortunately, Arenas' life would end in tragedy. After contracting AIDS in the U.S., he would commit suicide by overdose in New York on December 7th, 1990, leaving behind an accusatory suicide note that illustrates the depth of pain and alienation he felt in exile, blaming Fidel Castro personally for his untimely end:

> I end my life voluntarily because I cannot continue working. Persons near me are in no way responsible for my decision. There is only one person I hold accountable: Fidel Castro. The sufferings of exile, the pain of being banished from my country, the loneliness, and the diseases contracted in exile would probably never have happened if I had been able to enjoy freedom in my country. (Arenas, 2020, pg. 175)

The stories of the Marielitos show just how desperate their situation became in the lead-up to the Mariel boatlift in particular and in Cuba, in general. They also serve as a testament to their personal fortitude and determination to live a better life, a life that Castro's Cuba couldn't

provide them. Their experiences with discrimination demonstrate how the perception of Cuban immigrants had shifted in the U.S. from the so-called golden exiles of the early 1960s, the Operation Peter Pan children among them.

Conclusion

The circumstances in which the Peter Pan children and the Marielitos arrived, the manner of their arrival and their reception once they came to the U.S. demonstrate just how much the situation inside Cuba, inside the U.S. and the relations between the two countries changed and shifted in just under 20 years within the context of the Cold War. The Peter Pan children arrived through an organized program, were enrolled in a program that took care of their needs and were generally well-received, even as some of them suffered through traumatic experiences and abuse in orphanages and by the hands of their foster families. The Peter Pan children, as well as the other exiles who arrived in the same time period, were lauded as golden exiles and model minorities, with the public perception in the U.S. being that they were saved from communism, arriving as the conflict between Cuba and the U.S. escalated and while there was still some hope, however faint, that Castro's government might fall. But Castro's government persevered against slim odds and the Communist Party of Cuba is still in power today – Castro himself would remain in charge until 2008, when he was succeeded by his brother, Raul. Castro's Cuba maneuvered well diplomatically, joining the Non-Aligned Movement while also maintaining close relations with the USSR and diplomacy with European countries which allowed it to persevere even under immense U.S. pressure.

Marielitos, on the other hand, arrived in a chaotic manner, with the U.S. unprepared to deal with such a large influx of refugees. They also faced discrimination and an unwelcoming public, as social and ideological differences with earlier exiles, a result of them being raised in socialist Cuba, as well as a concerted effort to portray them as criminals and undesirables resulted in a much frostier reception and fewer resources being allocated to taking care of them. This is a consequence of the changed relationship between Cuba and the U.S. – while Cuba was

a top priority of U.S. foreign policy in the early 1960s, by 1980 the situation between the two countries had stabilized and its importance to U.S. foreign policy had been much diminished. Still, U.S. sanctions are still in place to this day and relations between the two countries are still frosty – Cuba is still listed as a state sponsor of terrorism by the U.S. in 2023, alongside Iran, North Korea and Syria, even though Cuba had stopped supporting insurgent groups and revolutionary movements decades ago.

The sanctions remain in place in large part because of the experiences of the Cuban exiles and their fierce anti-Castro stance – this is especially true for the "golden exiles" like the Peter Pan children. Cuban-Americans still play an outsized role in domestic U.S. politics, especially in Florida – they still drive the fiercely anti-Cuban foreign policy of the U.S. and both the Democrats and Republicans, eager to not lose their votes, defer to an anti-Cuban stance in order to appease them. But, the sanctions have failed in their aim as Cuba is not internationally isolated, the Cuban Communist Party is still in power and all attempts to change the Cuban government had not succeeded – the only tangible result of the sanctions is the impoverishment of Cuba and its citizens.

One way of looking at the difference between the Peter Pan children and the Marielitos is as a microcosm of attitudes towards immigration in the United States present to this day – on the one hand, the reception of the Peter Pan children represents the idealization of immigration, as immigrants saved by their arrival to the U.S. while the reception of the Marielitos represents the opposite, a group of "undesirables" who are a burden to the U.S. There's also a racial element at play here, as the Peter Pan children primarily came from the middle-class and were predominantly white while the Marielitos had a higher proportion of Afro-Cubans.

Still, even the Marielitos were in a privileged position compared to immigrants from other Latin American countries, especially those who illegally immigrated to the U.S. as they were allowed to stay legally. Even as anti-immigration sentiments rose in the decades after the boatlift, Cubans still enjoy special privileges which is evident in the "wet foot, dry foot" policy, where Cubans who manage to land on U.S. soil are allowed to stay legally while those caught at sea are returned to Cuba or sent to a third country – before 1995, even Cubans who only reached U.S. territorial waters were admitted to the U.S. This policy, only revoked in 2017 in the context of Obama's thaw of relations with Cuba, shows the unique position Cubans had in the political discourse surrounding Latino immigration to the U.S. – even as Mexicans and Central Americans were vilified and illegal immigrants face deportation daily, Cubans who reached the U.S. had a (relatively) easy path to citizenship.

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