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# SPECIAL MEMORANDUM

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*Bolsheviks and Heroes: The USSR and Cuba*

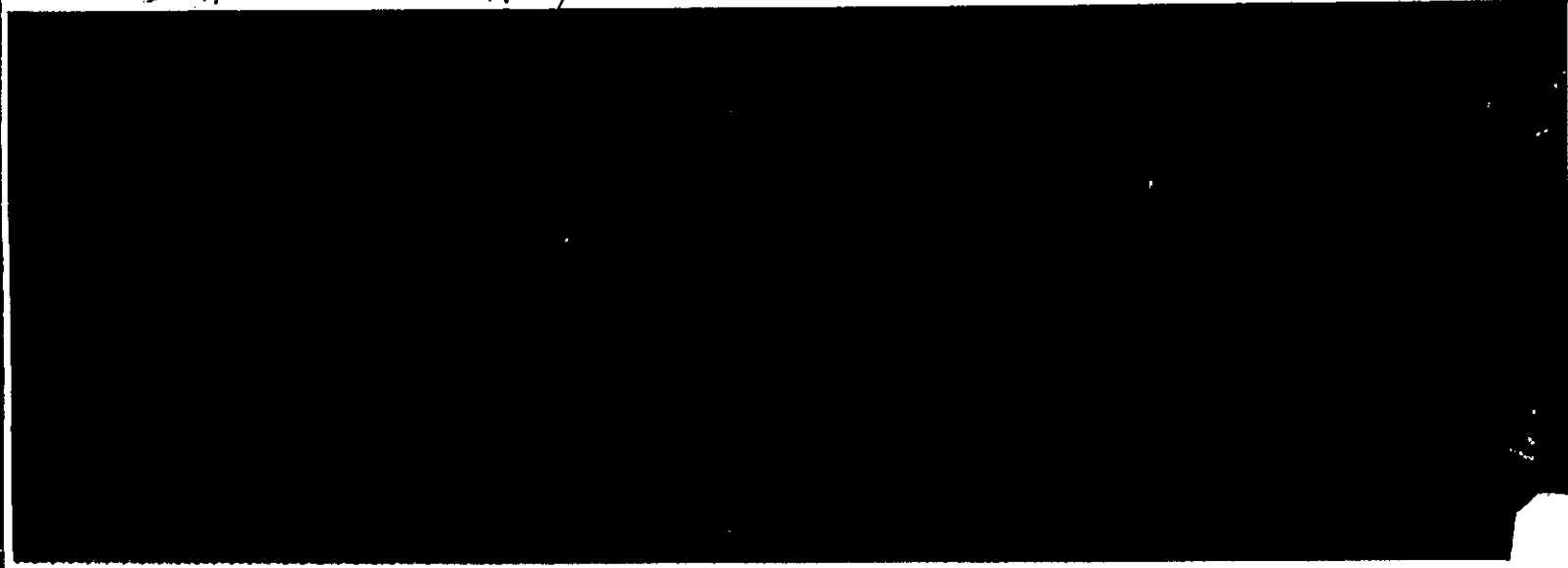
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21 November 1967



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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

21 November 1967

SPECIAL MEMORANDUM [REDACTED]

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SUBJECT: Bolsheviks and Heroes: The USSR and Cuba\*

INTRODUCTION

Brezhnev thinks that Castro is some kind of idiot, and Castro probably isn't very fond of Brezhnev either. This is still supposed to be a secret, but other symptoms of serious strain in the Soviet-Cuban relationship have become publicly conspicuous. The bonds which join them still seem to be much stronger than the issues which divide them; nevertheless, the Soviets may now be close to losing their patience, and the Castroites never had very much to begin with.

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Bolsheviks have always proceeded from the fact that socialist revolution is not ... a conspiracy of a group of heroes .... Experience shows that ... manifestations of national insularity inevitably weaken the positions of communists in the face of the class enemy .... Marxists-Leninists have always understood that socialism cannot be transplanted from one country to the other by means of armed force ....

-- Brezhnev, 3 November 1967

1. The mixed blessings of alliance with Castro's Cuba have never been so dramatically demonstrated as during the events surrounding the USSR's 50th anniversary celebrations. For one thing, the Cubans directly affronted the Soviets by appointing a member of Castro's third team to head the Cuban delegation to the Moscow festivities after the Soviets had officially announced the planned attendance of Cuban president Dorticos. For another, either because of Soviet insistence or Havana's resistance, this worthy did not even deliver the customary congratulatory address to his Soviet hosts. Next, the Cubans compounded the insult by boycotting the traditional diplomatic reception in Moscow presided over by Soviet chief of state Podgorny. And finally, lest anyone miss the point, the Cubans were the first to leave Moscow after the celebrations were over (presumably racing the Rumanians to the airport for the honor).

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2. The Soviets for their part demonstrated little of the restraint that has heretofore characterized the public handling of their recalcitrant Caribbean ally. Just prior to the anniversary gathering in Moscow, Soviet publications carried obituaries of Che Guevara, and also articles by two of Moscow's more obedient Latin American communist party leaders, that seemed to challenge the value of Castro's revolutionary philosophy and to convey -- concerning Guevara's death -- more of a smug "we told you so" than an expression of sympathy to the bereaved. In any case, the Soviets reacted to the Cuban diplomatic snubs during the anniversary celebrations with a measure of acrimony. For example, in his lengthy discourse on the achievements of the "Great October," Brezhnev took an oblique but unmistakable swipe at Castro's support of rebellions elsewhere in Latin America and even at Castro's personalized and heroic style of revolution (see quotation above).

3. Clearly, a low point has been reached in the relationship of the two communist partners. The question thus arises as to whether the divergencies that have been accumulating over the past few years and have now broken more blatantly into the open augur any fundamental change in Moscow's support of the Cuban regime.

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4. Although Castro himself has in the past alluded to attempts by Moscow's supporters in Latin America to persuade the Soviets to join the "economic blockade" of Cuba, apparently he has long judged that Moscow could not afford to suspend or curtail its economic assistance. In fact, Castro has evidently felt so confident of the USSR's inability to abandon support of Cuba that his spokesmen have in effect endorsed Albanian criticism of Soviet assistance as a "yoke on the shoulders" of recipients, thus demonstrating Cuba's ability to defy the hand that feeds it.

True, Castro has at times displayed some sensitivity to Soviet views on one issue or another, but Moscow's official positions are rarely an overriding consideration in his pursuit of causes either at home or abroad. Indeed, the modest Cubans have specifically criticized the USSR's management of its own affairs, its interference in Cuban affairs, its handling of the Vietnam war and the Middle East crisis, its aid to Latin American governments, and its attitude toward revolutionary tactics in the Third World.

5. A number of reports suggest that -- in the face of all this -- the Soviet leaders are now prepared to get tough if Castro does not mend his ways. One of the more interesting and

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reliable reports cites a Brezhnev conversation with leaders of a European communist party during the height of the Middle East crisis. Brezhnev is said to have launched into an emotional tirade against Castro's domestic and foreign policy "fantasies." He claimed that the Soviet Union has never had such an "expensive friend" as Cuba, and then threatened that if Castro did not soon come to his senses Cuba "cannot last," since the Soviets were unprepared to keep the Cuban leader "afloat" indefinitely. At one point in the conversation, Brezhnev went so far as to compare the Cubans unfavorably with the Chinese -- a line that was recently echoed in Pravda by a Latin American communist party leader.

6. This is not to say, of course, that the Soviets do not see some advantages in their alliance with Cuba. Surely, they are pleased to point to their sponsorship of a socialist "beacon" in the Western Hemisphere, and they are well aware that Cuba stands as a symbol of Soviet willingness and ability to provide support even to remote allies. They recognize that their relationship with Cuba serves as a reminder of the USSR's status as a global power and as a propaganda device with which to taunt the US. They are also happy at times with Castro's nuisance value vis-a-vis the US.

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7. By now, however, the Soviets must be increasingly impressed with the liabilities associated with their support of Castro's Cuba. They are painfully aware that their economic aid alone has cost them an average of roughly \$300 million annually since 1961 (a figure including drawn credits and grants as well as the sugar purchase subsidy). They know that Cuba's importance as a model for other fledgling nations has greatly diminished. More important, they have found that Cuba does not afford them a good foothold for incursions into other Latin American states. Castro's alienation of a majority of Latin American communist party leaders, his insistence on the need for revolutionary change through violent tactics, and his refusal to cooperate with less militant and non-communist forces of the left in Latin America have created more difficulties than opportunities for Moscow.

8. The Soviets' relationship with Castro thus provides them with a continuing demonstration that the burdens imposed by commitments to small allies can exceed the benefits. But how to disengage when the political and economic costs of a commitment exceed the returns? Specifically, how could the Soviets pull out of Cuba and look at the world or themselves in the morning? It would be a confession of monumental failure -- the first and

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only socialist enterprise in the New World abandoned -- and it would seriously damage Soviet prestige and be widely interpreted as a victory of sorts for the United States.

9. It is true, however, that the Soviets have had some considerable practical experience in these matters -- in Yugoslavia, in China, and in Albania. A special set of circumstances governed Moscow's actions in each of these cases, but there were some similarities in Soviet behavior. In each instance, the Soviets sought through subversion or economic pressure or both to bring the other party to heel. In each instance, of course, the Soviets failed and then withdrew. Public disclosure of the seriousness of the situation and an open exchange of insults did not occur until the relationship had already passed the point of no return. The Soviets, of course, insisted in each case that their withdrawal had been compelled by the sins and crimes of the other side. Finally, in each of these cases, the Soviets were willing to withdraw even at the risk of great harm to their national prestige and the unity of the communist movement at large.

10. Cuba is, of course, a special case and poses different problems. Moreover, times have changed, Khrushchev no longer reigns in Moscow, and the present Soviet leaders are surely more



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cautious than he. Then too, given his personal peculiarities and enthusiasms, there can be no assurance that Castro's upset will persist. Relations between Castro and the USSR almost reached the name-calling stage after the Soviet withdrawal of missiles from Cuba in 1962, but in May 1963 Castro journeyed to the Soviet Union and there proclaimed that he had received a "magnificent impression of Comrade Khrushchey, .... without a doubt one of the most brilliant intellects I have ever known." Thus, Castro in 1967, having just snubbed the 50th anniversary ceremonies, might conceivably travel to the USSR in 1968 and put his fickle arms around Brezhnev. The Soviets for their part could swallow their pride and accept the embrace. For that matter, assuming no effort to make up, it is conceivable that the Soviets and the Cubans could maintain their alliance in some kind of repair for the indefinite future, even if their quarrels should break completely into the open.

11. Given the strong motives of each side to maintain their relationship, we do not believe that Soviet-Cuban difficulties will come to a head in the near term or that Soviet-Cuban ill-will is likely to lead to a break in relations comparable to, say, the Sino-Soviet split. But with each side apparently believing that

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the other cannot afford to become really obstreperous, either or both could easily make a major miscalculation. The emotional content of the quarrel, obviously intense on the part of the Latins, now seems to have assumed considerable proportions on the Russian side as well. The effects of this emotionalism cannot be predicted, but symptoms of stress should be watched for. If the quality of Sino-Soviet polemics is an indication, then it would appear that, once exposed, Communist nerves are as raw as everybody else's, maybe rawer.

12. If the Soviets should threaten to curtail their economic support unless the Cubans behave themselves in Latin America -- and perhaps Kosygin dropped a hint of this when he visited Havana last June -- Castro's reaction might be unrestrained. The Soviets, in turn, might not be of a mind to humor any such lack of restraint. Perhaps indeed, they have already entered just such a process of moves and countermoves made in hurt and rage. Perhaps in the end, if the Soviets really do get tough, Castro might feel impelled to make important concessions. That,

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at any rate, would seem to be the way to survival. But a high faith in his own skill and rectitude might blind Castro to the costs and risks of defying the Soviets.

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