

FJM-37: Report From a Cuban Prison VII  
New Year's Eve celebrations and  
A little History

New York, New York  
July, 1973



Last night, New Year's Eve, I whiled away the hours using the edge of my toothpaste container to gouge "Happy New Year 1972" into the wall. I thought about past New Years and decided that few had ever been very exciting. The last enjoyable one was a party my senior year of high school. Somehow, since then New Year's Eve has never been what it's supposed to be, although this has to rank as the worst yet.

Meanwhile, outside the compound I could hear the beat of bongos and voices singing, happy sounds that must have come from the homes that encircle the prison complex. The celebrations last night were not for New Year's itself, however, but in commemoration of the Thirteenth Anniversary of the Triumph of the Revolution. I presume in honor of that occasion this morning each prisoner received a tasty sweet roll for breakfast in place of the plain hard ones we usually have. I didn't even notice the difference until I had finished it and then connected the roll with the celebrations last night. Other than that, there has been no change in the routine except for the presence of a new prisoner they brought in early this morning.

Usually we don't know when a new man is brought in because arrivals are processed at night or early in the morning so that their detention doesn't attract attention. But the new one this morning caused such a stir when he was brought into the cellblock that everyone heard him coming all the way from the bottom of the stairs. From the sound of his voice he must have been a young person about the age of 20. He came screaming, shouting all the way up the stairs and down the corridor. I presume the guards were holding him, although they made no sounds at all. Just his voice carried through the prison, from one end to the other. It was pitiful to hear, but one can only shrug. He was afraid, and for good reason. When they locked him in, he continued to bang on the iron grating of his door, kicking it at times too. Then he went to the air vent and shouted from there, trying I guess to attract attention outside the prison. But it was to no avail. After a half day, he gave up and is silent now.

When Castro came to power thirteen years ago, I was still in high school and couldn't have even pointed to Cuba on the map, let alone identify the name, Fidel. Yet for Cubans, that day represented one of the high points of history. It was the week the ragged Rebel Army of 800 swept down from the Sierra where they had been on the defensive for two years, fought across Camaguey and Las Villas (spearheaded by the Guevara's lead column) and drove on to Havana. It was a brilliant tactical victory. Che with his column surrounded Las Villas. Raul Castro descended from the northern flank and Camilo Cienfuegos converged on Havana from the South. Meanwhile, on New Years, Batista packed his money and his bags and escaped to the Dominican Republic.

For eight days afterward, there were euphoric celebrations throughout Cuba. The central highway from Las Villas to Havana became one gigantic parade route for 500 miles as millions lined the road just to catch a glimpse of Fidel and his column marching to Havana. All along the highway in each provincial capital, the crowds demanded that Castro stop and speak to them. He of course obliged, talking as he still does for hours, sometimes well past midnight. Already he was organizing his political support, formulating strategy based on the watchword, Unity.

Finally entering Havana, a half million Cubans welcomed Castro in front of the Presidential Palace, the same one that Fulgencio Batista had so hastily vacated the week before. After speaking for hours, Fidel then left the platform and as one witness described it, walked like Moses through the assemblage, while the crowd opened up before him, parting like the Red Sea. In one voice they shouted: "Fi-dell! Fi-dell! Fi-dell!" It was, Cubans repeat, a moment that will never be forgotten, a meta-historical moment when people and leader were one,

Last night's festival was a political celebration, therefore, just as all holidays in Cuba are now. Each commemorates some particularly significant moment in the Revolution's development. (Christmas has been indefinitely suspended due to the exigies of the sugar harvest; Easter is never mentioned; and Thanksgiving is unheard of in Cuba.) Besides the celebration on January 1st, International Worker's Day is commemorated on May 1st. This year, workers have been holding practice sessions for the May Day Parade scheduled to March through the Plaza de la Revolucion. Three hundred thousand are expected to participate, after which Fidel will deliver a major speech on Foreign Affairs.

The largest festivity held each year, however, takes place on July 26, this in honor of what Cubans call the opening

## ***Año del Centenario de Martí***

---

**Santiago de Cuba, Lincea, 27 de Julio de 1953**

---

# ASALTADO

# MONCADA

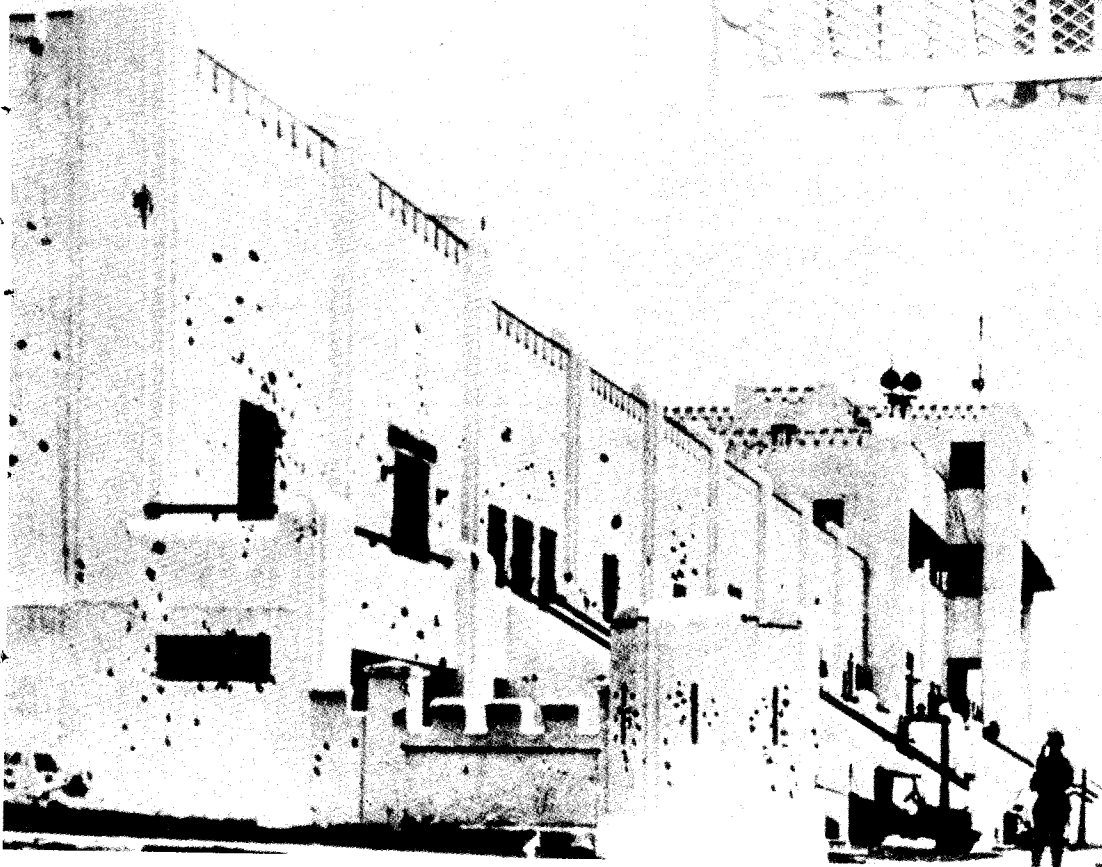
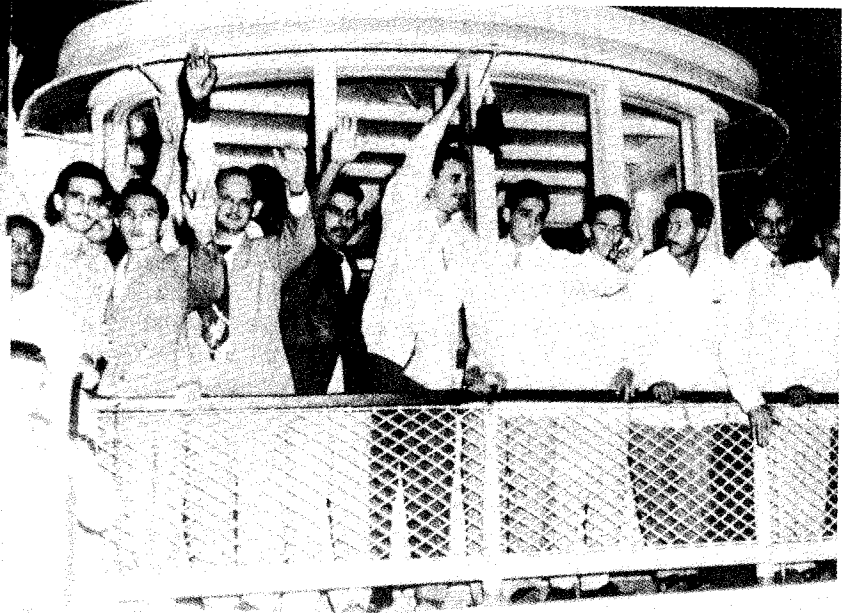
salvo of the Revolutionary struggle, the first, Castro-inspired attack on the Moncada police barracks in Santiago de Cuba. It was that day, July 26, 1953, that "the Revolution was born," says Jesus Montane, one of the few leaders of the attack who survived. On that day, Fidel, Raul and 165 other volunteers drove from a secret rendezvous point on the outskirts of Santiago to the Moncada fortress where a thousand or more soldiers were barracked. Attacking from three different directions, the poorly armed insurgents lost the vital element of surprise when a sentry post gave the alarm before being overrun. After that the battle lasted no more than an hour and its outcome was inevitable. Only 17 of the 165 escaped to the mountains, Fidel among them, where they were subsequently captured. The other volunteers were not killed in the action, however. Sixty-eight were taken prisoner and murdered or tortured to death by Batista's police. Fidel's own description of what occurred was delivered before the court that tried and sentenced him following his capture. The speech, entitled History Will Absolve Me, was a four hour oration Castro gave without a note. It is also considered one of his most eloquent statements and subsequently formed the basis of the July 26 manifesto. It begins: "I am writing this document with the blood of my dead brothers. . . .

"The truth is out; it is known all over Oriente Province, and all the people are talking about it, sotto voce. The people also know that the charges to the effect that we treated the regime's soldiers inhumanely are false. In the trial, the Government was unable to make a single one of its charges stand. The 20 military men whom we captured at the beginning of the battle and the 30 wounded, who were never even insulted, appeared at that trial. The medical examiners and experts, and the witnesses for the prosecution themselves, pulled the rug out from under the Government's charges, some of them making their statement with admirable honesty. It was proved that the weapons had been purchased in Cuba; that there was no liaison whatsoever with politicians of the past; that nobody had been knifed to death; and that there was only a victim in the Military Hospital, a patient who was wounded when he looked out of a window. The attorney for the prosecution himself--a strange case, indeed--was obliged to recognize, in this summing up, 'the honorable, humane conduct of the attackers.'

"In sharp contrast to all this, where were our wounded? There were only five of them. Ninety dead and five wounded. Can anyone conceive of such a ratio in any battle? What happened to the rest of them? Moreover, where were the fighters who were arrested on July 26, 27, 28 and 29? The people of Santiago de Cuba know the answer to this question. The wounded were taken out of private hospitals, dragged away from the operating table



TOP: FULGENCIO BAPTISTA  
MIDDLE: FIDEL BEING DEPORTED  
TO MEXICO IN LATE 1953  
BOTTOM: PHOTO TAKEN AFTER THE  
ATTACK ON THE MONCADA  
BARRACKS.

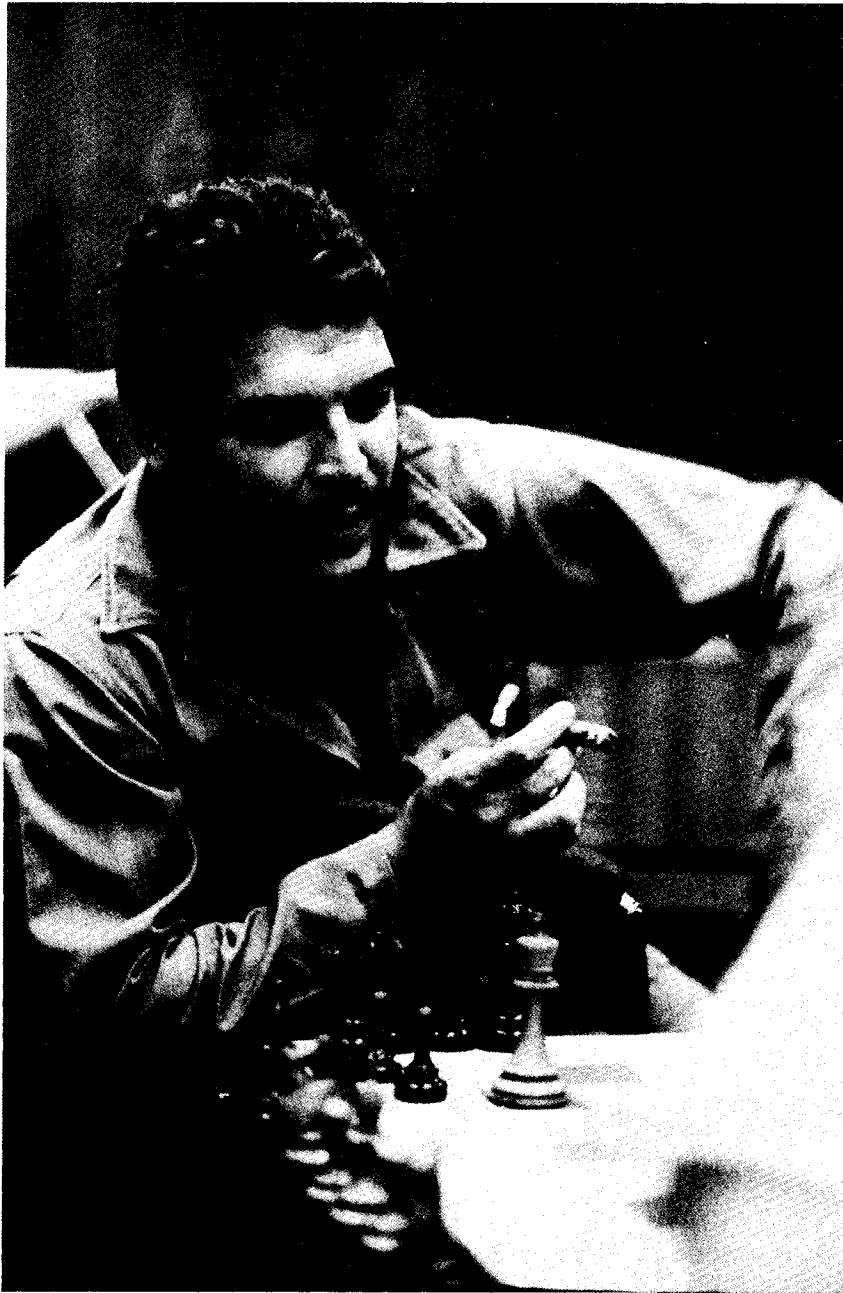


in many cases, and murdered--in more than one case, even before they were taken out of the building. Two wounded prisoners and their guards entered an elevator. When the doors opened again, the two prisoners were dead. Those who had been taken in at the Military Hospital were given intravenous shots of air and camphor. One of them, an engineering student named Pedro Miret, lived to tell the tale.

"Only five--I repeat--remained alive. Two of them, Jose Ponce and Gustavo Arcos, who were taken in at the Spanish Club, were defended by Dr. Posada, who refused to let the soldiers lay a hand on them, and another three, Pedro Miret, Abelardo Crespo and Fidel Labrador, owe their lives to Captain Tamayo, an army doctor who, pistol in hand, in a courageous gesture worthy of a true professional, transferred them from the Military Hospital to the Civilian Hospital. The regime was bent on liquidating even these five. Numbers are far too eloquent.

"As far as the prisoners are concerned, a sign similar to the one appearing at the entrance of Dante's Inferno, reading 'Abandon all hope,' could have been hung up at the entrance of the Moncada. Thirty prisoners were shot to death the first night. The order for the execution was brought in at 3:00 p.m. by General Martin Diaz Tamayo, who said that 'It was a shame for the Army to have suffered three times as many losses as the enemy, and that ten men would have to be killed for each soldier dead.'

"The order was the product of a meeting of Batista, and a number of other chiefs. To avoid any legal obstacles, the Council of Ministers, that same Sunday evening, among other things, suspended Article 26 of the Statutes, which establishes the custodian's responsibility for the life of the prisoner. The slogan of 'ten for one' was carried out with merciless fury. When the bodies were buried, they had no eyes, no teeth and no testicles. The murderers, even removed their victims' clothes and shamelessly exhibited them everywhere. There were demonstrations of indescribable courage by those who were tortured. Two girls, two heroic comrades named Melba Hernandez and Haydee Santamaria, were arrested at the Civilian Hospital, where they were giving first aid to the wounded. That evening, at the Army garrison, a Sergeant by the name of Eulalio Gonzalez, nicknamed 'The Tiger,' approached Haydee. Opening his blood-stained hands, he showed her the eyes of her brother, which his torturers had just pulled out. A little while later, she was told that her sweetheart, who was among those taken prisoner, had been killed. Indignantly, she faced her captors, saying, 'He's not dead, for to die for one's country is to live.' The girls were spared. Those savages didn't dare touch them. And they are exceptional witnesses to what happened in that hell.



ERNESTO CHE GUEVARA:  
above PLAYING CHESS  
below OFFERING A LIGHT  
TO JEAN PAUL SARTRE IN  
1965.



". . . What is taken into account at the time of going into a battle for freedom is not the number of weapons in the hands of the enemy but rather the number of virtues among the people. If a hundred courageous young men died in Santiago de Cuba, this would mean only that there are a hundred thousand young men in our homeland who are also ready to die. Look for them, and you will find them. Guide them, and they will march forward no matter how hard the road may be. The masses are ready, and all they need is to be shown the right course.

"To denounce the crimes--there's a duty; there's a terribly powerful weapon; there's a formidable, revolutionary step forward. The cases have been filed, and the charges have been ratified. Let us demand that the murderers be punished. Let us demand that they be thrown into prison. If necessary, let a private prosecutor be appointed. Let us employ every available means to keep these cases from arbitrarily being transferred to military jurisdiction. Very recent events favor such a campaign. The mere publication of the charges will bring serious consequences for the Government. I repeat that not to do this would constitute an ineradicable blot. I hope that one day, when our homeland is free, a journey will be made through the countryside of the indomitable province of Oriente to gather the bones of our heroic comrades--martyrs of the Centennial--and place them all together in a great tomb next to that of the Apostle with a thought of Jose Marti for an epitaph: 'No martyr dies in vain. No idea is lost in the blowing of the winds. They may drive it away or bring it near, but the memory of having it go by always remains. . . .'"

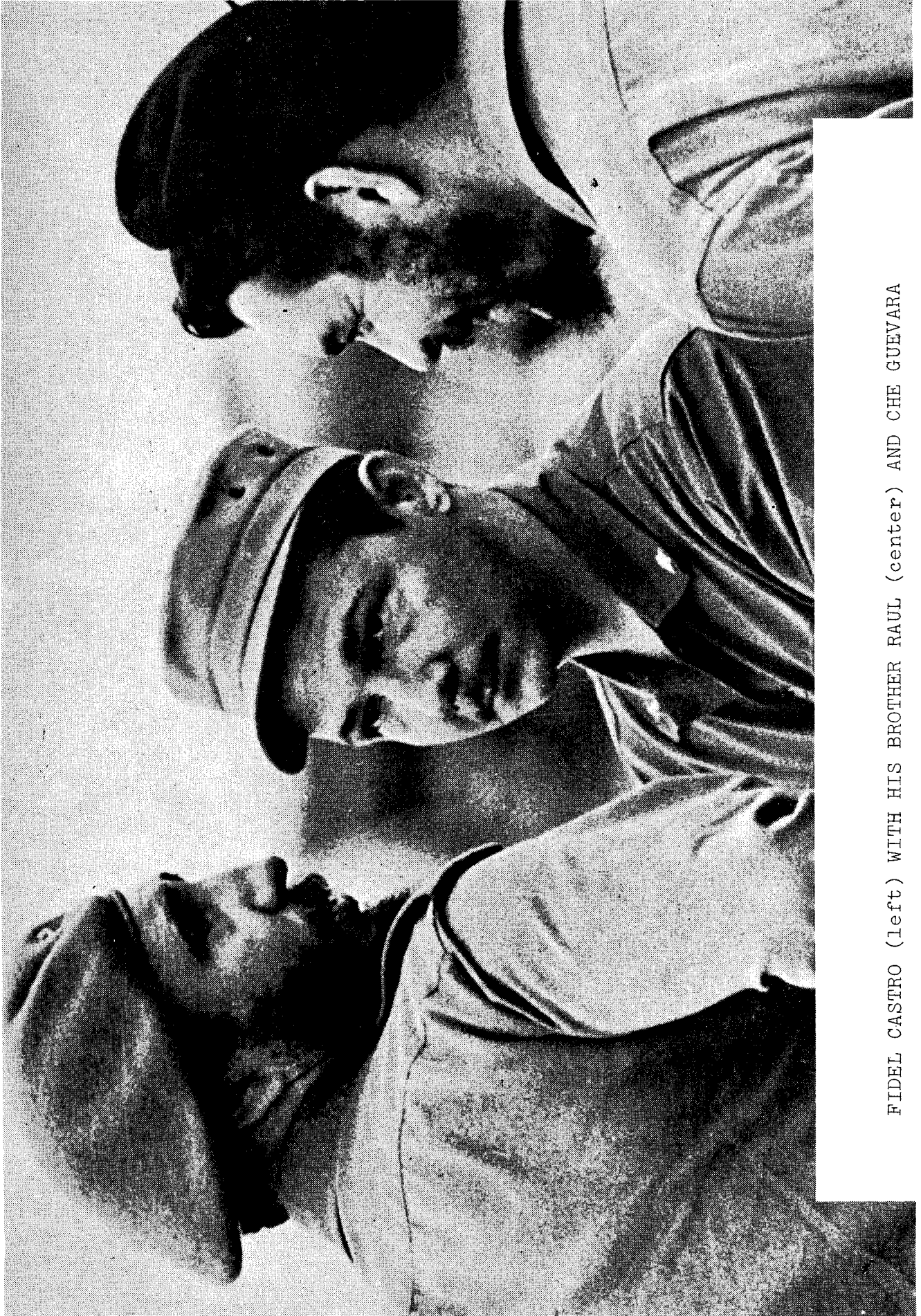
"Twenty-seven Cubans still have enough strength left to die and fists with which to fight!

"FORWARD, TO FREEDOM!"

Despite his eloquence, Fidel, his brother Raul and the other survivors were sentenced to imprisonment on the Isle of Pines. After two years, however, in a political deal Batista made with the opposition party, the prisoners were released and exiled to Mexico where they continued to organize.

In September each year, there is also a commemoration of the 1961 founding of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs). On September 28 of that year, Fidel was addressing the people in the Plaza when a series of explosions rocked the city of Havana. Presumably they were set by anti-Castro groups opposed to the policies the Revolution was enacting at that time. As the explosions continued . . . one . . . two . . . then three and four of them. . . Castro became enraged and announced





FIDEL CASTRO (left) WITH HIS BROTHER RAUL (center) AND CHE GUEVARA

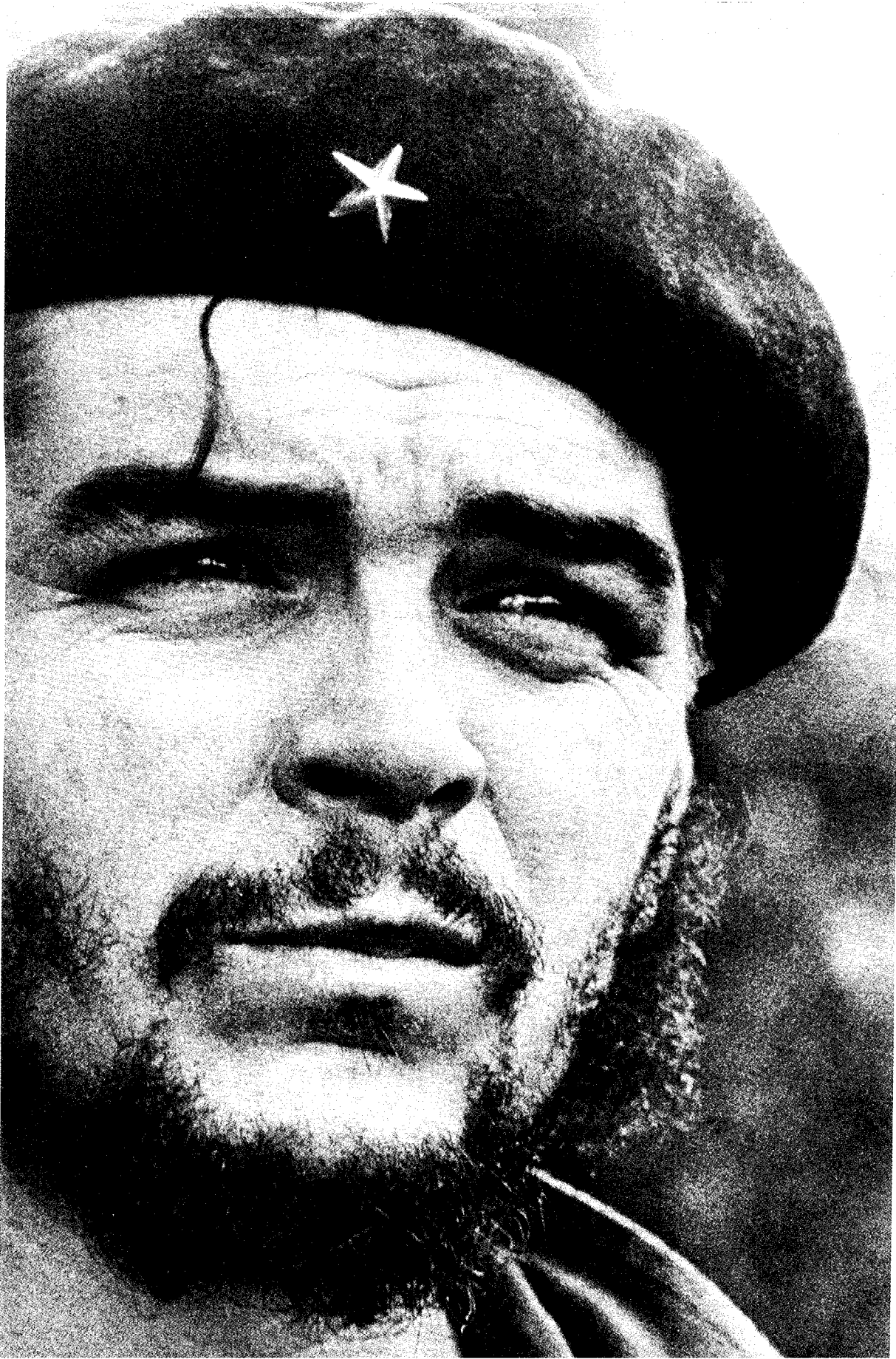
from the platform that the only effective way to deal with counter-revolutionary groups was to organize the people block by block into what he then described as defense committees. Since then, three million Cubans have been incorporated into the CDR's, each block having its own committee entrusted with defending the Revolution.

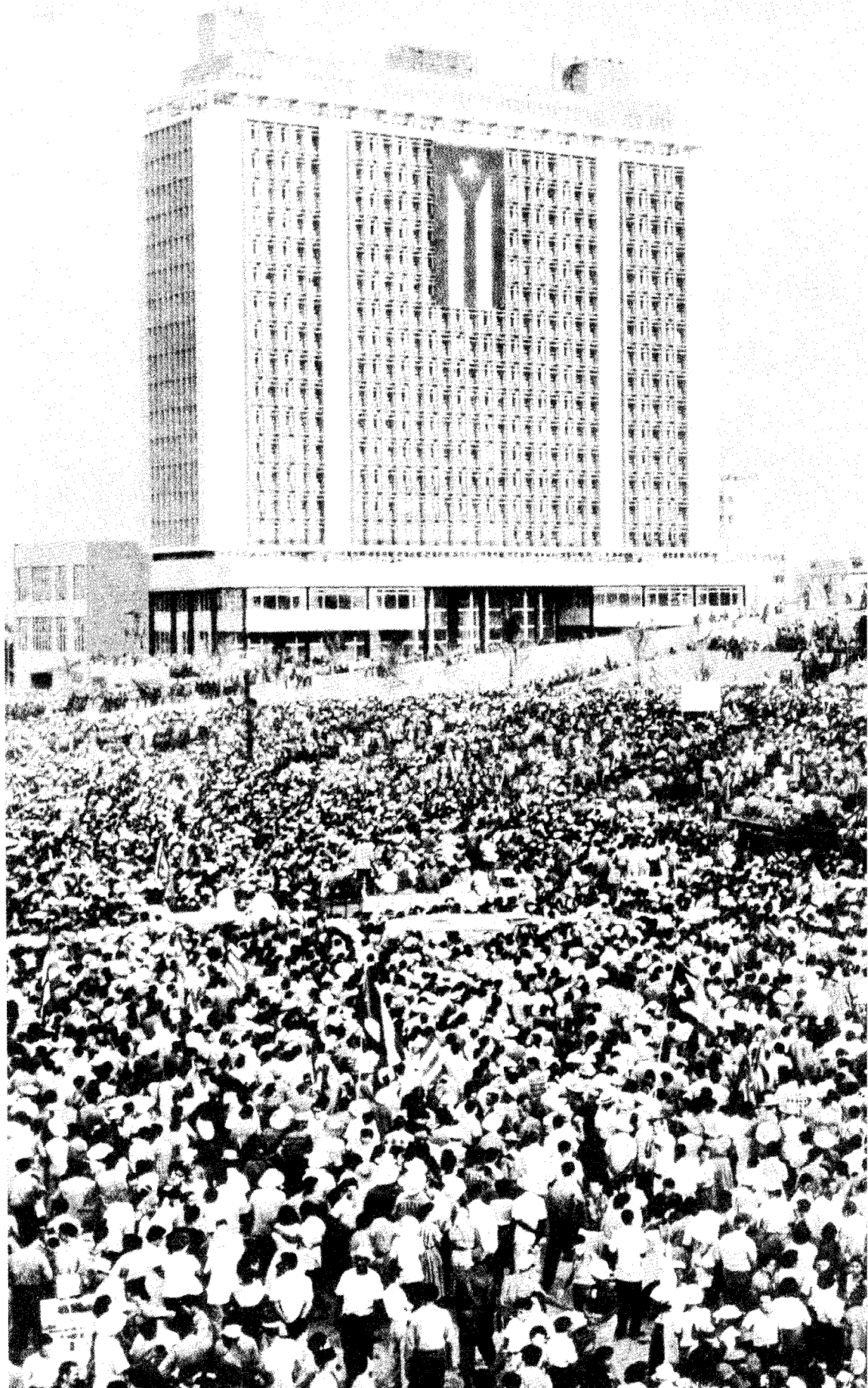
Then, in October, there were two dates set aside-- the 8th and the 28th--marking the deaths of two of the Revolution's most popular figures, Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos. Guevara, an Argentinian doctor, and Camilo met Fidel in Mexico in 1955. Together with eighty-two other men they planned the invasion that subsequently took place on December 2, 1956 aboard the Granma. Of the eighty-two only twelve survived the landing. The rest were cut down by Batista's police who had been alerted beforehand. The twelve, however, escaped to the Sierra and formed the core of the Rebel Army. Guevara was appointed its chief medical officer while Camilo commanded one of the four main columns that eventually liberated Havana.

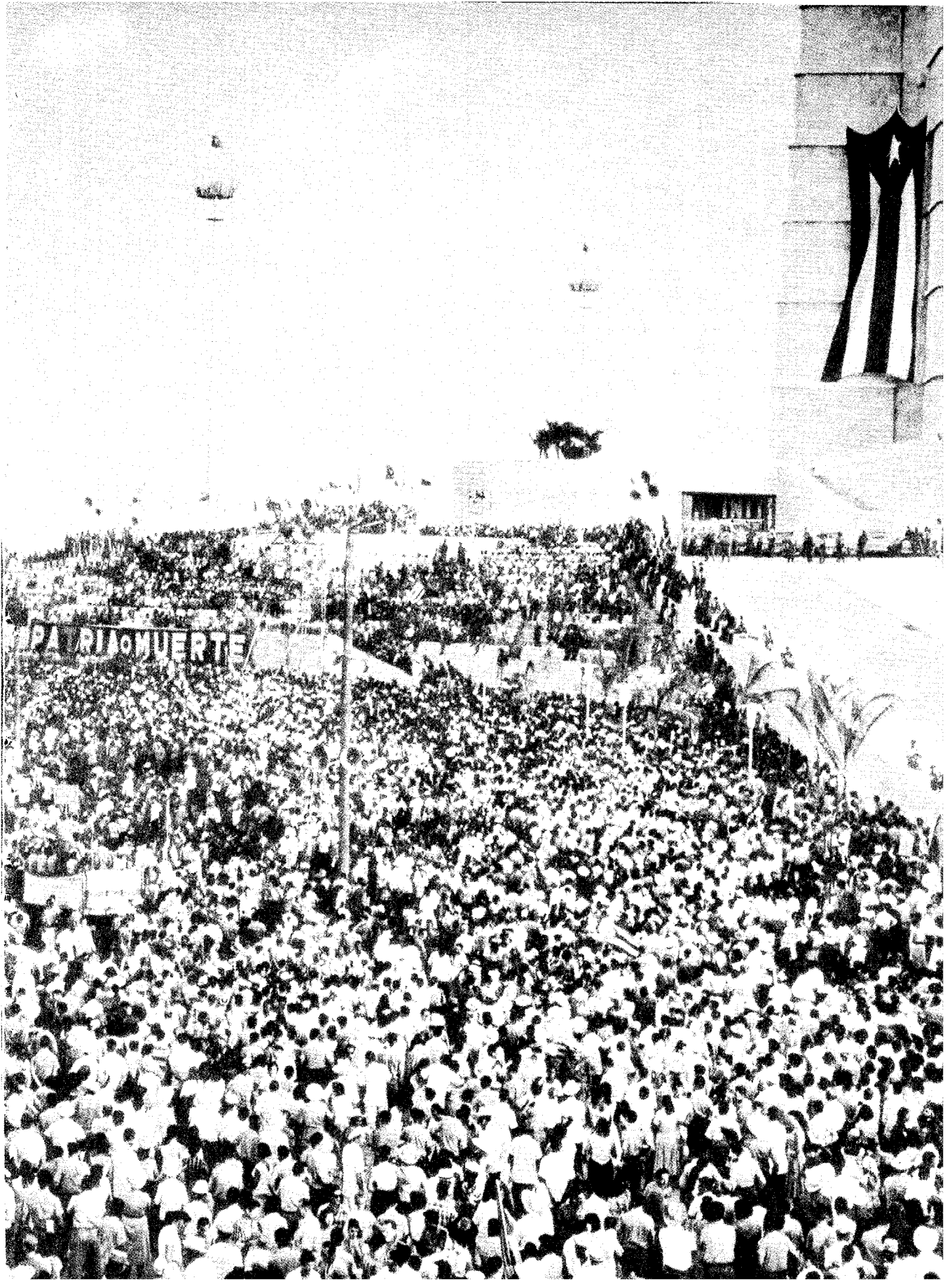
Eleven months later, in November, 1959, Camilo Cienfuegos mysteriously disappeared while flying from Las Villas to Havana. The little two engine aircraft he was aboard was never recovered and many suspect he was assassinated. Although neither side claims any proof, anti-Castroites believe Fidel himself ordered Camilo's death because there were indications (they say) that Camilo was unhappy with the direction the Revolution had taken and was about to publicly announce his resignation from the Army. Castro and the Revolution, however, have always viewed Camilo as a heroic figure (they call him the Unforgettable Camilo), honoring him every October 28th by throwing flowers into the Bay of Havana. Castro has said that if Camilo's death was not an accident, then counter-revolutionary elements were responsible for his murder.

Guevara remained in Cuba following the fall of Batista and was appointed the Minister of Industry. But paperwork was not his forte. He was then appointed the Revolution's Ambassador at Large, visiting numerous foreign countries advocating armed struggle. After leading an unsuccessful guerrilla war in the Congo, Guevara returned to Havana en route to Bolivia where he believed conditions were ripe for another Vietnam in Latin America. But on October 8, 1967, Bolivian Rangers, acting on orders issued from La Paz (Cubans and many observers who were there say the command came from CIA) machine gunned Che in Higuera, an isolated village in southeastern Bolivia. The following is Fidel's account of that murder. (Guevara was being held prisoner, already wounded in his left leg, at the time.)

"Barrientos [President of Bolivia at the time of Che's death], Ovando [Bolivian army commander in chief and leader of a







successful coup in September 1969<sup>7</sup>, and other top military chiefs met in La Paz and decided to assassinate Che in cold blood. . . . Major Miguel Ayoroa and Colonel Andres Selnich, two Rangers trained by the Americans, ordered a noncommissioned officer, Mario Teran, to murder Che. Teran went in i.e., into the schoolhouse in Higuera, where Che was being held<sup>7</sup> completely drunk, and Che, who had heard the shots that had just killed a Bolivian and a Peruvian fighter, seeing the brute hesitate, said to him firmly: 'Shoot, don't be afraid.' Teran left the room; and his superiors, Ayoroa and Selnich, had to repeat the order, which he finally carried out, firing his machine gun at Che from the waist down. The official tale that Che had died a few hours after combat was already in circulation; this was why his executioners gave orders not to shoot him in the chest or the head so as not to produce instantly fatal wounds. Che's agony was thus cruelly prolonged till a sergeant, who was also drunk, finally killed him with a pistol shot in the left side."

Today, Cubans revere the memory of "El Che." Only the death of Fidel Castro could have matched the national trauma experienced by the Cuban people when the news that Che had been killed was verified by the Revolution. Proof that Che had in fact been executed was announced by Fidel on Cuban television. At the same time, he was able to show to the people the notebooks Che had used to record his Bolivian Diary. These, his hands (which had been cut off by the Bolivian Rangers before the body was burned) and a death mask were smuggled into Cuba by the Bolivian Minister of Interior who defected with them. That defection, incidentally, is a very moving tribute to Che Guevara. The Minister in question, still living in Cuba, was pointed out to me one August night when Fidel was speaking at the Chaplin Theater. He was sitting directly behind us, a friend from the Ministry of External Affairs, and myself, when my friend nudged me and told me the story. Apparently, the Minister of Interior, even though he had indirectly participated in the capture of Guevara was so impressed by what he read in Che's diary that he decided that he couldn't support his own government's suppression of the guerrilla movement any further. And so he defected.

*Frank McDonald*

Received in New York on August 8, 1973.