Translated excerpt

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Das letzte Buch über Fidel Castro

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The final book on Fidel Castro

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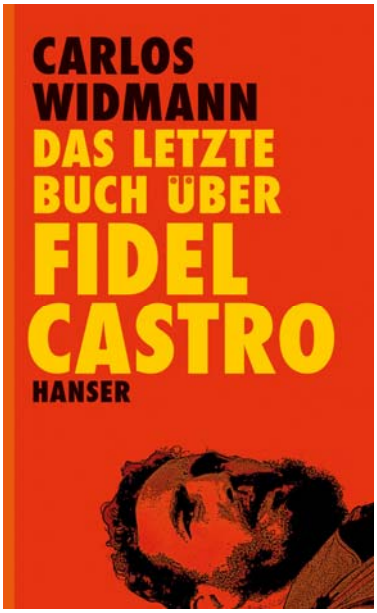

An early epitaph

"Fidel Castro is a giant of the twentieth century who, much to our good fortune, reaches into the twenty-first."

—Hugo Chávez

These warm-hearted words of the former Venezuelan president stemmed from a desire to be acknowledged by the world as the spiritual heir and successor of the Cuban revolutionary. They do contain two fundamental truths, however. Fidel Castro is—or was—an oversized figure of contemporary history, whose influence went well beyond his country's potential. And, yes, he does "reach" from his own century into the new one, having managed longer than any other ruler in living memory to impress, win over, and subjugate his people. Without wanting to make too bold a prediction, it seems he is likely to keep on doing so for some time to come even after his passing.

Spectacular deeds and infectious rhetoric aside, the most characteristic thing about his rule was its unfathomable length, despite dramatically dwindling effectiveness. The exceptionally tenacious office-holder invites some bizarre comparisons. He ruled his country as long as six German chancellors did theirs: Adenauer, Erhard, Kiesinger, Brandt, Schmidt, and Kohl together spent a total of 49 years in office, just like Fidel Castro. The list of US presidents who felt provoked by one and the same adversary in Havana is even more impressive: Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush senior, Clinton, Bush junior, and Obama. Even compared to the rulers of the Soviet empire, Castro seems unique. In terms of the duration of his rule, he surpassed

Lenin, Stalin, and Khrushchev put together, with two years of Brezhnev on top of it. The dictatorship of Chairman Mao seems almost tolerable by comparison (at least if you're not Chinese): 22 years less than that of the Cuban comandante.

"A mid-sized island at the northern outlet of the Gulf of Mexico"—that's how the Argentine Che Guevara nonchalantly described his adopted country. Stalin Peace Prize winner Nicolás Guillén, Castro's favourite poet, celebrated Cuba as a "long, green lizard, with eyes like stone and water." Indeed, without this reptile, the extra-long history of world communism would have been a good bit shorter, and probably a lot more dull. Fifty-three years—and counting—of power exercised by a single leader, his brother and heir, and a handful of old comrades; this feat alone could be accorded a place of honour in the Guinness Book of World Records. For the grains of sand have kept trickling through the hourglass even after February 24, 2008, when the then 81-year-old president officially relinquished his abundant offices to his slightly younger successor—his kid brother Raúl, born in 1931.

Even while these lines are being written, our protagonist has yet to retire for good in the arena of power politics. The party organ *Granma* (i.e., "Grandma") and its partner newspaper *Juventud Rebelde* ("Rebel Youth")—surely among the most soporific journalism to be found outside of Pyongyang—have been publishing a loose series of articles entitled "Reflections of Comrade Fidel," which seem to exercise a certain authority—over Cuba's foreign policy, for example. And the Comandante still plays the elder statesman, receiving foreign leaders in his casual pensioner's attire, the photos often resembling an Adidas advertisement. Or sometimes the well-appointed Havana aquarium is opened just for an American journalist, whom he treats to a water ballet, complete with synchronized swimmers and dolphins. Or, his head deeply bowed, he appears in

the Apostolic Nunciature to receive a kind of nondenominational blessing from the coeval German pope. With scenes like these still taking place in Cuba, no one can really claim that the Castro era is over. The struggle goes on, and the cult of personality along with it. The pale shadow of his former self, once loved and loathed throughout the world, Fidel Castro is still uncannily present on the island—as a charismatic phantom, a babbling oracle.

Could this one-man-rule of marathon length over a none-too important country go down in history as an unduly prolonged episode—if not as a monstrous world historical footnote—not unlike the autistic dynasty of Kim Il-sung in North Korea? We shouldn't count on it. The ignominy of being filed away by historians in the category of abnormal or irrelevant outsiders will likely not be the ultimate fate of this hoary revolutionary, not to mention nearly three generations of Cubans.

"History will absolve me!" the clean-shaven young attorney Fidel Castro theatrically proclaimed in October 1953, in a court in Santiago de Cuba. His reckless and amateurish attempt with 100 armed insurgents to storm an army barracks of the Batista dictatorship had failed and was bloodily suppressed. But a mere five years later, this same lawyer—now a bearded guerrilla—was actually rewriting twentieth-century history. To be sure, Fidel Castro has been quite a mover. Whether the world and Cubans have benefited from this is a completely different story. And as far as his self-proclaimed absolution is concerned, the verdict of history is unfathomable. Those who can wait might be in for a surprise. The German novelist Martin Mosebach, upon encountering the ubiquitous absolution quote on his visit to Havana, scoffed that "Nero and Genghis Khan, too, are viewed sympathetically by the experts nowadays."

Historians have long stopped treating history as if it were a Shakespearean drama, reducing it to the heroic exploits and crimes of a few exceptionally powerful figures. Social and economic developments are now their primary focus. But in the case of Cuba, they're banging their heads against a brick wall. Fidel Castro is probably an anachronism. Like other twentieth-century dictators, he's a case in point for the excessive influence of a single individual on the historical process. It was Castro's drive for self-fulfilment, his formidable ego, his thirst for power, and his will to leadership more than anything else that allowed Cuba—since 1960, the "First Free Territory of America," according to Radio Havana—to set itself up for nearly three decades as a stage, participant, driving force, or spoilsport in the struggle between the great powers.

The perfect leading man, Fidel Castro was—to use today's jargon—a global player for an exceptionally long time. "The best political solo entertainer on the international stage," the German star reporter Hans Ulrich Kempski dubbed him in the early 1970s. It was under his rule, with his rhetorical skills, and the sacred icon of Che Guevara, that Cuba was able to exercise an influence on other nations and continents, indeed on the political and intellectual movements of the past century—in Latin America and even Western Europe, which has a soft spot for Cuba on account of its Spanish heritage. At one point (and once was enough), in October 1962, the island became the scene of a battle of nerves between the superpowers, which put humanity on the brink of a nuclear war—not least, it might be added, at the behest and instigation of Comandante Fidel Castro.

Cuba's "export of revolution" and its partnership with the Soviet Union are a never-ending story that span well over a quarter of a century. Apart from that, though, the key events in the island's history all occurred during the first four years after Castro's conquest of Havana. The move was surprisingly quick, and

caught almost everyone off guard. The bloodiest henchmen and cohorts of Batista (but also many active opponents of the revolution) were shot to death within a matter of months. The literacy campaign was completed by 1961. Healthcare-system reform and the rationing of foodstuffs had been implemented by late 1962. The Bay of Pigs invasion, carried out by Cuban exiles with the blessing of President Kennedy and the support of the US Air Force, was masterfully averted by Castro in April 1961 and offered him the ideal opportunity for proclaiming socialism. The nationalization of American and Cuban sugar plantations, of US oil refineries, and all industrial and commercial enterprises took place at an alarming speed, and the abolition of small shops and businesses, down to watchmakers and cobblers, didn't take much longer. The exodus to southern Florida of the upper and middle classes also took place during the honeymoon of the revolution. And even the missile crisis, with Khrushchev at least managing to wheedle from Kennedy the tacit guarantee of non-aggression for communist Cuba, was over in 1962 with the withdrawal of Soviet medium-range missiles and the dismantling of their launching pads.

All of this is history—newly researched, supplemented, and retold time and again. That a considerably different or more complete picture will emerge once the regime has come to an end and the archives in Havana are opened is a prospect that seems unlikely. As the author and controller of his own legend, Fidel Castro is much too interested in secrecy, whitewashing, and idealization—naturally after his death as well. But what does it mean for the regime to "come to an end"? Who would dare these days to give it an expiration date? *Castro's Final Hour* was the title of a book by Pulitzer Prize winner Andrés Oppenheimer, a courageous investigative reporter who was certain of the imminent downfall of

communist Cuba. The only problem with this admirable report about Fidel Castro's demise is that it was published in 1992—more than two decades ago.

What he did get right was that the heyday of Cuba's role on the stage of world events was by that time a thing of the past—a then still recent past, which meanwhile seems like ages ago. But the crucial question since the fall of the Berlin Wall, right down to the present day, has always been and continues to be: When will the Cuban people finally cast off their dominating patriarch and/or his geriatric accomplices in power, and how can they rid themselves once and for all of their tropical version of communism—without bloodshed and, especially, without foreign intervention?

About 80 per cent of all Cubans living in Cuba today know nothing but revolutionary Cuba. Whether or not this island people can liberate themselves from the mental and spiritual tutelage forced upon them by a single man and from half a century of bureaucratic condescension by a one-party system, without falling into its former status as a US protectorate—this is the fateful question the entire hemisphere is faced with. Fidel Castro's legend has only recently taken hold in some of the poorest republics of Latin America, and certainly has a greater appeal and more of a future there than it does in Cuba. The youngest generation in Havana and its environs nowadays cultivates a form of narcissism wholly inspired by the West. The youth of today's Cuba is sick and tired of their boring old taskmaster with all of his claptrap about saving the world.

Things are different in other parts of Latin America—in Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru, in Ecuador and Venezuela, and even in the political folklore of bigger countries like Argentina and Brazil. The myth of the manly defier who stands up to the rich and to the hegemonic United States has gained new currency there,

conjured up by the half dozen leftist populists recently installed in their respective presidential offices. Paying lip service to Cuba, Fidel, and Che is now part and parcel of government propaganda in these countries. All those wanting to pose as a bulwark in the grand defensive battle—against local oligarchs, multinationals, faceless international finance capitalism, and especially against the "behemoth of the North," the root of all misery, exploitation, underdevelopment, and humiliation—try their best to profit from the aura of Fidel Castro.

The message of social justice was a staple in Latin America long before the Cuban revolution, and was spread in an active or demagogic manner—by Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico, by Eva and Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina, by Victor Paz Estenssoro in Bolivia, and even by the young Fulgencio Batista in Cuba, just to name a few. But it was the Cuban revolution that turned this message into a promise of salvation for the entire continent and beyond. It provided the heroic epic that made the efforts of democratic reformers seem laughable, and effectively reduced the political options for several decades: guerrillas or gorillas—radical subversives or reactionary military men.

However much the opening of secret archives in Cuba might one day compromise the reputation of the *comandante en jefe*, Fidel Castro's legend will hardly be tarnished; indeed it is essentially indestructible. The Cubans themselves are the least likely to destroy it, as the departure of their regime will inevitably divide the population into winners and losers, the liberated and the insulted, into advocates of the new and those who mourn the loss of the old. For the champions of the poor in Latin America and the Third World, however, Castro will probably always remain the violent young humanist with the telescopic rifle, who fought for the right of his afflicted people to have access to free education

and health care—and whose much-maligned food ration cards made sure that no Cuban would starve. More importantly, Fidel's brand of anti-imperialism aimed at his northern neighbour was both national and nationalist in origin, deeply rooted in the country's own history, and long had an identity-building effect for the humiliated class of Cubans. In the eyes of many historians and journalists, the island republic thanked Castro's revolution not only for its becoming socialist but for its becoming for the first time genuinely Cuban.

There are plenty of weighty and fairly irrefutable counterarguments to each of these views. Pointing them out, however, can seem petty-minded and pedantic, if not to say downright philistine. People generally don't like it when their beliefs are undermined. "Anyone trying to debunk myths or even outright lies is seen as a thief who is trying to take away something precious," says Argentine historian Cristian Buchrucker. The Moscow-loyal Cuban communist leader Anibal Escalante, who was later thrown into prison by Castro, concluded rather soberly in the army periodical *Verde Olivo*, shortly after the victory of the revolution: "Cuba is among the Latin American countries where the masses have a particularly high standard of living"—not a prudent thing to say in those days, and one that got Escalante into hot water. After Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile, Cuba under the Batista dictatorship had the lowest rate of illiteracy in all of Latin America and the Caribbean.

With its mixture of inefficiency and corruption, of unequal distribution of wealth, feverish consumption, and rural neglect, the island republic has more in common with a state in the American Deep South—say, Louisiana—than with deplorable Caribbean neighbours like Haiti and Honduras. But even compared to New Orleans, Havana of the 1950s had a high standard of living and the cultural development of a vibrant cosmopolitan city. What's more, the social and

economic security of socialism and the new opportunities available to the Cuban lower classes brought on by the revolution were scarcely the new regime's own accomplishment, but were ultimately made possible with the backing of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc countries. Fidel's world revolutionary ambitions and his fighting spirit later encouraged the Kremlin to build up its exotic brother nation into the greatest military power of Latin America and the international battering ram of socialism. These efforts were indeed successful, with an impact on many countries around the globe for many years to come—but this was a long time ago, and something the "locals" aren't fond of recalling.

What a sight! Argentine president Cristina Kirchner shaking her movie-star mane of hair, swinging her hips, batting her long eyelashes, and probably cooing, too—all for old-man Fidel. She is one of the new generation of ruling populists in Latin America for whom a photo op with the Comandante is *de rigueur*. The South Patagonian petroleum and tourism kleptocracy of the fabulously rich Néstor and Cristina Kirchner vaulted itself into power by dint of a pact with leftist Peronism—a successful alliance now being carried on by Mr Kirchner's widow, after his premature heart-related death. She is probably the oddest of the Latin American parvenus now buddying up to Fidel.

In terms of loudness and international impact, however, Madame Kirchner was far surpassed by Venezuelan Hugo Chávez. The voluble lieutenant-colonel of paratroopers and former putschist from oil-rich Venezuela must have seemed like a godsend to Castro at a time when the old Soviet leaders were losing their grip on power. "Hurricane Hugo" had what it takes to be the Cuban regime's material saviour, and declared himself in all seriousness as Fidel's pupil and potential successor as a world revolutionary. To quote Chávez directly: "Fidel Castro is like a father to me, a beacon, utterly irreplaceable." That Fidel likewise

came to hold the Venezuelan in high esteem was more easily understandable. Without the oil tankers from Lake Maracaibo, his revolution would have hardly survived the downfall of his long-time sugar daddy, the Soviet Union.

In its seemingly endless death throes, continually prolonged by intravenous petroleum and dollar transfusions, Castro's Cuban socialism is more of a curiosity than a threat in the eyes of the rest of the world. A drip-fed utopia. The impressive urban ruins of Havana with its more than two million inhabitants and the fissured face of the old comandante are like two sides of the same coin. But together they serve as a metaphor for an antiquated revolution—perhaps misguided and doomed from the start—which in the course of half a century has transformed the Republic of Cuba into a picturesque poorhouse.

Only in the second half of the twentieth century did this island of cigars and sugar cane, about the size of now-defunct communist East Germany, acquire its disproportionate historical importance. In what was then still called the "backyard" of the United States, Cuba, a country blessed with the second-highest per capita income in Latin America after Argentina, attained something completely new and sensational in this part of the world. A dictatorship long backed by the Americans, one that ultimately grew bloodthirsty and excessive, was toppled by a tiny band of young guerrilla fighters. The latter, with its peasant following—or so the myth goes—had heroically fought their way from the Sierra Maestra in the southeast to the capital city in the northwest, and on New Year's Eve of 1959 were greeted as liberators in Havana, to the carnival-like cheering of crowds.