

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Last Soldiers of the Cold War: The Story of the Cuban Five* by Fernando Morais; *It's the Poor Who Face the Savagery of the US 'Justice' System: The Cuban Five Talk about Their Lives within the US Working Class* by Mary-Alice Waters ed.

Review by: Laurence Goodchild

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Fernando Morais, *The Last Soldiers of the Cold War: The Story of the Cuban Five* (London: Verso, 2015) pb 275pp. ISBN: 9781781688762

Mary-Alice Waters ed., *It's the Poor Who Face the Savagery of the US 'Justice' System: The Cuban Five Talk about Their Lives within the US Working Class* (New York, NY: Pathfinder Press, 2016) pb 135pp. ISBN: 9781604880854

Reviewed by Laurence Goodchild

On 17 December 2014, three Cuban intelligence officers, Gerardo Hernández, Antonio Guerrero and Ramón Labañino, were freed from US prisons and returned to a hero's reception in Cuba. As part of the undercover Wasp Network, tasked with infiltrating counterrevolutionary exile groups who had escalated their violent attacks against Cuba during the 1990s, Hernández, Guerrero and Labañino had paid dearly for their refusal to comply with the US authorities upon their capture in 1998. Along with their two comrades, René González and Fernando González, who were released in October 2011 and February 2014, respectively, they comprise the Cuban Five. Their release following 16 years behind bars is widely regarded as a pivotal step in the recent thawing of relations between Cuba and the US.

Despite the apparent pertinence of the Five's mission to the US' objective of fighting terrorism, and the central role that their release has played in the tentative détente between the US and Cuba, very little has been published in English about the Cuban Five. Predated by Matt Lawrence and Thomas Van Hare's self-published *Betrayal: Clinton, Castro & the Cuban Five* (2009) and Stephen Kimber's *What Lies across the Water* (2013), Fernando Morais's meticulously researched *The Last Soldiers of the Cold War* is only the third full-length English-language publication on the topic.¹

Based on dozens of interviews, and extensive documentary analysis (including that of Cuban intelligence services' archives), the foundations of Morais's book are solid. Rather than narrowly focusing upon the Five, Morais situates the operations of the Wasp Network within the broader context of Cuba–US relations, and particularly the tense and uncertain period following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Drawing upon his sources heavily for direct quotes, Morais interweaves personal testimonies of the key characters to establish a gripping narrative that often reads like a spy thriller.

Beginning with the story of René González's 'defection' from Cuba (a cover story utilised by him and several others to infiltrate the Miami-based Cuban exile community), Morais paints a colourful range of characters, from the undercover Cuban intelligence officers themselves, to the virulently anti-Castro figures

of Miami and the politicians that pander to their lobbying power. In stark contrast to their self-proclaimed humanitarian and progressive character, Morais presents the counterrevolutionary organisations as being ridden with self-interested, egotistical and violent individuals, who are set on military confrontation between the US and Cuba.

Whether it be through violating Cuban airspace with civilian aircraft (p. 107), shooting up Cuban beaches with machine guns, or planting bombs in Cuban hotels (p. 147), the methods employed by these organisations could neatly fit any objective definition of terrorism (Chomsky 1991). Through the twists and turns of intelligence and counterintelligence that Morais leads us through, readers will be struck by the profound hypocrisy of the US's 'war on terror'. Despite the US government's supposed focus on eliminating terrorism, characters who openly boast about their attacks on Cuba walk free within the US and are afforded tacit protection by elite political figures.

Delving deep into the labyrinth of 1990s Cuba–US relations, Morais's book comes to an abrupt stop with the sentencing of the Five in 2001. First published in the Brazilian's homeland in 2011, the English translation of *The Last Soldiers of the Cold War* does include a brief afterword written by René González, but otherwise is strictly limited in its timescale, and does not touch upon the Five's time in Prison or the international campaign established to call for their freedom.

For those whose appetite has been wet by Morais's book, the recently published set of interviews with the Cuban Five, *It's the Poor Who Face the Savagery of the US 'Justice' System*, is likely to be of interest. This slim title published by Pathfinder Press differs substantially from Morais's book. The main chapters consist of an interview with the Five conducted by Mary-Alice Waters, veteran of the US left, in Havana in August 2015. The edited transcript of this interview is accompanied by the introductory comments of both Waters and Fidel Castro and concludes with two final chapters: an interview that two journalists of *Cubadebate* held with Gerardo Hernández and a Q&A session the Five hosted at Ciudad Universitaria Jose Antonio Echeverria (CUJAE). All of the content is from 2015, and as is common with Pathfinder titles, a range of high-quality photos are also distributed throughout the book.

As suggested by the title of this collection, and in contrast to *The Last Soldiers of the Cold War*, the book primarily focuses upon the Cuban Five's years spent incarcerated in US prisons. The central topics of discussion include the conditions inside prison, the Five's view of the US criminal justice system, its differences with the Cuban system, and their relationships with other prisoners. Using their case to draw light to wider structural injustices perpetrated by the US system is a laudable aim, and while the points raised by the Five are interesting for a lay reader, I suspect that those with a more intimate knowledge of the US

system will simply be re-treading well-travelled ground. Unfortunately, the continued prevalence of unfair and inhumane aspects such as the distortions of the plea bargain (p. 40), structural racism (p. 42), solitary confinement (p. 46), exploitative prison labour relations (p. 49), and the death sentence (p. 64) will come as no surprise to many. Furthermore, for those aware of the vast differences in prison conditions between countries such as the US and Norway (Larson 2013), the suggestion that it is capitalist relations that cause the US system to maintain its particularly brutal features will ring hollow (p. 59).

Ultimately the book is at its most revealing and engaging when it maintains a specific focus on the Cuban Five's own imprisonment and when it fleetingly turns towards their views of the future. For example, it is inspiring to hear that the Five managed to maintain good relations with other Cuban prisoners (whose hostility might reasonably be assumed) and extended their solidarity to the Puerto Rican nationalist prisoners Oscar López Rivera and Carlos Alberto Torres (p. 82). Their opinions on the 'updating' of Cuban socialism, their country's changing relationship with the US, and the debates occurring within various Cuban publications are particularly valuable (pp. 97–105). At times Mary-Alice Waters may appear to be caught in her own stiff ideological straight-jacket, but she has clearly built up a tight rapport with the Five, and a more wide-ranging interview touching upon these topics would be welcomed.

Overall, despite certain setbacks, the key strength of the book is that it puts forward the testimonies of five Cuban revolutionaries who have had first-hand experiences of both US and Cuban ways of life. The Cuban Five could have easily taken the same route as the other five Wasp agents arrested alongside them, who decided to comply with the US government and remain in the States. While the Five may have had well-established lives in Cuba, those who leave Cuba for the US are not limited to downcast rafters, but also include those living more comfortably, such as professional athletes. So what motivated the Five? Although their opinions may appear to be somewhat limited by the oversimplified dichotomy that the narrative is framed by (bad imperialist US/good revolutionary Cuba), the Five come across as sincere individuals committed to defending the Cuban Revolution and Cuban national sovereignty.

Even though the Five shrug off suggestions that they might take up leading roles within the Government or civil society (p. 135), they have been centre stage at a historic moment in Cuban history, and their dramatic life stories are likely to be of interest for many years to come. Although both books cover a great deal of ground, certain questions do remain unanswered. For example, what happened to the other members of the Wasp Network who complied with US authorities and remained in the States? Was Gerardo Hernández the head of the network as maintained in Morais's book, or was Ramón Labañino his partner

in command, as stated by Labañino in the Pathfinder book (p. 51)? Legal and ethical concerns may mean that we will never know the full picture, but over time declassification and leaks could erode current uncertainties.

Taken together, these two titles complement each other well. While Morais's book examines the operations of the Cuban Five and their Wasp Network during the 1990s, the Pathfinder collection brings forward the perspectives of the Cuban Five themselves and elucidates their period in prison during the 2000s. Neither book is necessarily researched or authored with academic rigour, yet they would both serve as good starting points for those wishing to research related themes, and will certainly be of interest to a broad audience.

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Note

1. Several other shorter books are available, including *The Cuban Five. Who They Are. Why They Were Framed. Why They Should be Free* (2011) edited by Martin Koppel and Mary-Alice Waters; *United States vs. The Cuban Five. A Judicial Coverup* (2006) by Dr Rodolfo Dávalos Fernández; and *The Perfect Storm: The Case of the Cuban Five* (2005).

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