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Counting Castro's Victims

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"On May 27, [1966,] 166 Cubans -- civilians and members of the military -- were executed and submitted to medical procedures of blood extraction of an average of seven pints per person. This blood is sold to Communist Vietnam at a rate of \$50 per pint with the dual purpose of obtaining hard currency and contributing to the Vietcong Communist aggression.

"A pint of blood is equivalent to half a liter. Extracting this amount of blood from a person sentenced to death produces cerebral anemia and a state of unconsciousness and paralysis. Once the blood is extracted, the person is taken by two militiamen on a stretcher to the location where the execution takes place."

-- InterAmerican Human Rights Commission, April 7, 1967

This weekend marks the 47th anniversary of the triumph of the "26th of July Movement," which many Cubans expected would return their country to a constitutional government. Fidel Castro had other ideas of course, and within weeks he hijacked the victory, converting the country into one of the most repressive states in modern history.

Waiting for Fidel to die has become a way of life in Cuba in the past decade. Conventional wisdom holds that the totalitarian regime will hang on even after the old man kicks the bucket. But that hasn't stopped millions from dreaming big about life in a Fidel-free Cuba.




Fidel Castro

Cuban reconciliation won't come easy, even if Fidel's ruthless, money-grubbing little brother Raul is somehow pushed aside. One painful step in the process will require facing the truth of all that has gone on in the name of social justice. As the report cited above shows, it is bound to be a gruesome tale.

The Cuba Archive project (www.cubaarchive.org) has already begun the heavy lifting by attempting to document the loss of life attributable to revolutionary zealotry. The project, based in Chatham, N.J., covers the period from May 1952 -- when the constitutional government fell to Gen. Fulgencio Batista -- to the present. It has so far verified the names of 9,240 victims of the Castro regime and the circumstances of their deaths. Archive researchers meticulously insist on confirming stories of official murder from two independent sources.

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Cuba Archive President Maria Werlau says the total number of victims could be higher by a factor of 10. Project Vice President Armando Lago, a Harvard-trained economist, has spent years studying the cost of the revolution and he estimates that almost 78,000 innocents may have died trying to flee the dictatorship. Another 5,300 are known to have lost their lives fighting communism in the Escambray Mountains (mostly peasant farmers and their children) and at the Bay of Pigs. An estimated 14,000 Cubans were killed in Fidel's revolutionary adventures abroad, most notably his dispatch of 50,000 soldiers to Angola in the 1980s to help the Soviet-backed regime fight off the Unita insurgency.

The archive project can be likened to the 1999 "Black Book of Communism," which documented the world-wide cost of communism, noting that "wherever the millenarian ideology of Communism was established it quickly led to crime, terror and repression." The Castro methodology, Cuba Archive finds, was much like that used in Poland and East Germany, less lethal than Stalin's purges, but equally effective in suppressing opposition.

In the earliest days of the revolution, summary executions established a culture of fear that quickly eliminated most resistance. In the decades that followed, inhumane prison conditions often leading to death, unspeakable torture and privation were enough to keep Cubans cowed.

Cuba Archive finds that some 5,600 Cubans have died in front of firing squads and another 1,200 in "extrajudicial assassinations." Che Guevara was a gleeful executioner at the infamous La Cabaña Fortress in 1959 where, under his orders, at least 151 Cubans were lined up and shot. Children have not been spared. Of the 94 minors whose deaths have been documented by Cuba Archive, 22 died by firing squad and 32 in extrajudicial assassinations.

Fifteen-year-old Owen Delgado Temprana was beaten to death in 1981 when security agents stormed the embassy of Ecuador where his family had taken refuge. In 1995, 17-year-old Junior Flores Díaz died after being locked in a punishment cell in a Havana province prison and denied medical attention. He was found in a pool of vomit and blood. Many prison deaths are officially marked as "heart attacks," but witnesses tell another story. The project has documented 2,199 prison deaths, mostly political prisoners.

The revolution boasts of its gender equality, and that's certainly true for its victims. Women have not fared much better than men. In 1961, 25-year-old Lydia Pérez López was eight months pregnant when a prison guard kicked her in the stomach. She lost her baby and, without medical attention, bled to death. A 70-year-old woman named Edmunda Serrat Barrios was beaten to death in 1981 in a Cuban jail. Cuba Archive has documented 219 female deaths including 11 firing squad executions and 20 extrajudicial assassinations.

The heftiest death toll is among those trying to flee. Many have been killed by state security. Three Lazo children drowned in 1971 when a Cuban navy vessel rammed their boat; their mother, Mrs. Alberto Lazo Pastrana, was eaten by sharks. Twelve children -- ages six months to 11 years -- drowned along with 33 others when the Cuban coast guard sank their boat in 1994. Four children -- ages three to 17 -- drowned in the famous Canimar River massacre along with 52 others when the Cuban navy and a Cuban air force plane attacked a hijacked excursion boat headed for Florida in 1980.

The horror of that event cost one more life: After visiting survivors in the Matanzas hospitals, the famous revolutionary guerrilla Haydée Santamaría, already in despair over the massive, inhumane boat exodus from the Port of Mariel, killed herself. That was a tragic admission of both the cost

and failure of the revolution. The only riddle left is how, 25 years later, so-called "human rights" advocates like Argentine President Nestor Kirchner still embrace the Castro regime.

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