Cuba: Forced blood extraction from political prisoners before execution
Report of July 2015

The Cuban revolutionary regime one-upped the feared former East German political police, Stasi, which in the mid-1980s sold blood that had been “donated” under duress by political prisoners to the Bavarian Red Cross.\(^1\) Not only does Cuba engage in this same practice, but in the 1960’s it massively drained the blood of political prisoners on their way to execution.

Cuba Archive has credible information of at least eleven cases—twelve corroborated and one reported—of forced blood extraction before execution, two were U.S. citizens: Howard Anderson and Robert Fuller. Additional reports are being investigated. That the recorded incidents took place over the course of several years, from 1960 to 1964, and in different provinces, points to a widespread practice. Anecdotal accounts from former political prisoners of many more cases lack specifics. Because the victims were taken for the blood extraction on their way to execution, fellow prisoners left behind in their cells would not have known this was happening. However, it may be no coincidence that the cause of death listed in most death certificates of the executed is "hemorrhage."

A former Cuban political prisoner who served from 1963 to 1968 at Boniato prison in Santiago de Cuba confirmed to Cuba Archive that the practice was standard: "At Boniato in 1963, we were around 5,000 political prisoners. Each dawn two or three on their way to the firing squad would be brought for blood extraction to a specially designated area at the prison clinic, behind closed doors. Because I’m handicapped (unable to walk), I was held at the prison clinic. Although they wouldn’t let us see the victims, I was about twenty meters away and could hear everything. They did this to everyone going for execution."\(^2\)

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States (OAS) denounced the practice at Havana’s La Cabaña Fortress prison in a scathing April 1967 report.\(^3\) It asserts that blood was extracted from prisoners on their way to execution "with illicit and massive intentions ... for scandalous business purposes." According to the report, an average of seven pints\(^4\) of blood was extracted per person, producing “cerebral anemia and a state of unconsciousness and paralysis.” Once the blood was extracted, the prisoner was "taken by two militiamen in a stretcher to the location where the execution by firing squad takes place.\(^5\) Soviet and Cuban hematologists allegedly directed the blood extractions and conducted experiments at a special clinic at the prison; the blood was then sold to Communist North Vietnam for 50 dollars a pint.\(^6\) In addition, blood donations were required from family members of political prisoners (numbering tens of thousands) before being allowed visits.\(^7\) A Kingsport Post story of August 1966 reported on eyewitness who had fled Cuba including one who had worked at La Cabaña prison as having reported of this atrocity to the OAS.\(^8\)

Mass executions cease\(^9\) after the small farmers’ insurrection was extinguished around 1967-68 and no subsequent reports of this forced blood extraction are known. However, Cuba has continued to sell blood products to other countries, obtaining annual revenues averaging $30 million from 1995-2012. Blood is systematically obtained from citizens throughout Cuba led to believe that their altruistic and uncompensated donations are needed to save lives, unaware that the Cuban state is engaged in a lucrative export business. (See the Reports section of www.CubaArchive.org for international statistics and details of this practice.)

*See the following page for the list of documented cases and selected case profiles.

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\(^2\) Francisco Fernández Zayas, telephone interview (from Miami), February 17, 2006.

\(^3\) "Informe sobre la situación de los derechos humanos en Cuba," Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, L/V/II.17, Doc. 4 (español), 7 de abril de 1967.

\(^4\) One pint is equal to .47 liters. The average person has around 10 pints or 5 liters of blood, depending on their size (or 1/11th of their weight).

\(^5\) "Informe...", op.cit.

\(^6\) Ibid. (At USUS$50 per pint, Cuba would have an average of USUS$350 in revenues per involuntary donor, seven pints extracted).

\(^7\) Presumably, Cuba was selling lyophilized plasma, which it had started producing in 1965 and could be stored for several years. (Yudith Madrazo Soca, "Donación de Plasma: un gesto multiplicador de vidas," 13 de mayo del 2009 http://www.redciencia.cu/noticias/noticias_int.php?not=618).

\(^8\) "Informe...", op.cit.

\(^9\) Castro’s Atrocities against prisoners," Kingsport Post, September 8, 1966. (The eyewitness accounts were handed to the OAS by the Miami-based Commission for Humane Treatment of Political Prisoners in Cuba.)

\(^10\) Executions continued at a lesser scale as late as 2003.
Cases of forced blood extraction

Documented cases of blood extraction before execution.

*See case details at www.CubaArchive.org/database./

4. Robert Fuller, 10/16/1960, Santiago de Cuba.

Juan Pérez Cabrera, age 36, was shot in the head April 15, 1963 at Boniato prison, Santiago de Cuba for refusing to give blood before his execution. Pérez led an anti-Castro guerrilla group. He and his friend Andrés Rodríguez had been hiding at his house for eight months, but his neighbor went to inform on their whereabouts and they had to leave. Juan’s brother, Esposo, drove them to try to enter the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo. On the way, Andrés was killed, and the authorities rubbed Juan’s face in his blood. Juan and his brother were captured, and Juan was tortured in front of Esposo. Raúl Castro attended his trial. Before his execution, Juan was taken to the clinic to have his blood extracted; he rebelled and was shot in the forehead.

Elizardo Santana Bonilla, age 35, was executed March 13, 1962 at Calabazar de Sagua, Las Villas. The anti-Communist insurgent was part of the uprising led by small farmers and a member of Claro Mollinedo’s rebel band operating in the Escambray mountains. His blood was reportedly extracted by force from his body prior to his execution. The prosecutor, Sara Monzón, refused him his last request, a drink of water.

Robert (Bobby) Fuller, age 25, was executed October 16, 1960 in Santiago de Cuba. Born in Cuba of U.S. parents, his family had returned to the U.S. when he was a child. He served in the Korean War and then vowed to liberate Cuba from Communism. In October 1960, he was part of a group of around thirty men captured after landing at Navas Bay, Oriente province, to start a rebel operation. He, two other Americans, and five Cubans were quickly sentenced to death by a revolutionary tribunal. The execution was held at a large stadium in a circus-like atmosphere with thousands of people cheering. Just before he was led to the firing squad, his uncle and cousin were allowed to see him. Very weak, barely able to stand, and with cold hands, he told them his blood had just been forcibly drained from his body. The family presumed this was intended to make him look weak and cowardly; they did not know Cuba exported blood. Fuller left a young daughter.

Angel Moisés Ruiz Ramos, age 24, was executed December 1, 1961. Known by his second name, Moisés, he came from a humble family and worked in agriculture. A resistance leader for the province of Matanzas, he was betrayed by a person close to him. Authorities took him from his home, where he lived with his parents, in the middle of the night and executed him (without trial) at the Agramonte cemetery that same night with several friends. Prior to his execution, his blood was forcefully extracted. The family later learned he had been buried in a common grave.