

# FIDEL CASTRO and the Quest for a Revolutionary Culture in CUBA

Julie Marie Bunck

The Pennsylvania State University Press University Park, Pennsylvania

## Castro and the Children The Struggle for Cuba's Young Minds

First we tell tales to children. . . . And surely they are, as a whole false. . . . Then shall we. . . let the children hear just any tales fashioned by just anyone? . . . First . . . we must supervise the makers of tales; and if they make a fine tale, it must be approved, but if it's not, it must be rejected. . . . Many of these they now tell must be thrown out.

-- Socrates, *The Republic of Plato* Book 2, 377a-377c

The destiny of the fatherland and the Revolution will greatly depend on your participation. . . . You have enormous responsibility.

-- Fidel Castro to youth, 1991

Since more than 40 percent of Cuban citizens today are younger than forty years old, assessing the role of youth in the Revolution is an integral part of analyzing the Cuban government's attempt to transform culture. Fidel Castro and his revolutionary associates believed that Cuba's children would eventually determine whether a new socialist man would be created and whether the Revolution would succeed. From the beginning of the Revolution the leaders targeted the nascent minds of Cuba's youth for cultural change. Although many adults continued to hold prerevolutionary values and attitudes, the leadership hoped that the children's "virgin" minds, as Castro called them, would be open and malleable. In the early 1960s the leaders predicted that the next generation,

thoroughly imbued with an appropriate communist mentality, would confidently lead the country from socialism to communism. As prerevolutionary generations passed away, outdated "bourgeois" mores would die with them. A flourishing new Cuban culture would then emerge.

Fidel Castro believed that concentrating on molding Cuba's youth would have farreaching advantages. In seizing upon the energy, enthusiasm, curiosity, and innocence of children, Cuban leaders could garner support for the government as well as promote a sense of common purpose, mass participation, and revolutionary spirit among the next generation. Moreover, through the children the leadership could instruct parents and grandparents in the new ideology. Finally, by gaining control over children's education and daily activities, the government could help to transfer individual loyalties from the family to the state.

## **YOUTH AND EDUCATION IN PREREVOLUTIONARY CUBA**

Although Cuba's prerevolutionary private educational institutions, predominantly Catholic, were among the best schools in Latin America, the vast majority of citizens had no access to them. The public schools, often corrupt and inefficient, educated most children. Throughout the public school system teachers tended to be poorly trained. Worst of all, rural education remained grossly neglected. At the time of the Revolution only twentyone public secondary schools were scattered about the countryside. The prerevolutionary disarray of the Cuban public school system led to unfortunate consequences. The 1953 census indicated that approximately 25 percent of all individuals ten years or older had never been to school at all; in addition, more than 50 percent had dropped out before completing the sixth grade.<sup>1</sup>

During the 1950s Cuban public education remained abysmal. Between 1950 and 1958 the population grew at 2 percent a year, but primary public school enrollment increased only 1 percent a year. On the eve of the

Revolution fewer than 50 percent of the children between the ages of seven and fourteen attended school. Indeed, only about 12.8 percent of Cuba's 6.4 million citizens had received an education. Given the poor quality of the schools, students who did attend generally received an inadequate education. In the 1950s three out of four Cubans who had "completed" their schooling were either illiterate or at best semieducated.<sup>2</sup> In 1958 Cuban illiteracy stood at about 24 percent.

## PHASE ONE

### Basic Education and Literacy

Immediately after taking power, the Cuban government boldly transformed the prerevolutionary educational system.<sup>3</sup> During the first half decade Fidel Castro's two cardinal goals were literacy and ideological education. Even prior to the Revolution he had claimed that literacy should be a government priority. As early as 1953, when Castro stood trial for commanding an attack on the Moncada Army Barracks, he declared that literacy was critical to a successful revolution and to subsequent economic, political, and social progress. In 1955 Castro promised that "a revolutionary government would undertake the integral reform of the educational system."<sup>4</sup> Two years later in his *Sierra Maestra Manifesto*, Castro called for an "intense campaign against illiteracy."<sup>5</sup>

Upon taking power, the revolutionary leadership confronted a stagnant public education system. Adult education scarcely existed. Graft and corruption flourished. On October 13, 1959, the revolutionary government, intent on carrying out its promise to transform Cuba's educational institutions, passed Article 149 of the Cuban Constitution. Designed to revamp education in the country, this article authorized the government to regulate completely the educational system, to abolish all private schools, and to dictate school curricula. At a very early date Castro thus seized the total control necessary to reform Cuban education.<sup>6</sup>

## The Literacy Campaign

On September 26, 1960, Castro announced before the United Nations General Assembly:

Next year our people propose to launch an all-out offensive against illiteracy, with the ambitious goal of teaching every illiterate person to read and write. Organizations of teachers, students, and workers - the entire population - are preparing themselves for an intensive campaign; and within a few months Cuba will be the first country in the Americas to be able to claim that it has not a single illiterate inhabitant.<sup>7</sup>

"Death to illiteracy will be the number one goal of 1961," declared Cuba's First Congress of the Municipal Councils of Education in October 1960. The following month Cuban officials launched a special census to locate illiterates. Then, in the following ringing terms Fidel Castro announced that 1961 would be the "Year of Education":

[W]e shall be able to proclaim to the entire world that in our country there remains not one person who is unable to read and write. . . . [W]e shall terminate the school year early and mobilize all the students from the sixth grade up. . . . [W]e shall organize an army of teachers and send them to every corner of the count.<sup>8</sup>

Following through on its promises the Cuban government then recruited and trained literacy workers for teaching responsibilities. On January 28, 1961, Castro announced that on April 15 all secondary and preuniversity schools would close. Officials would then recruit "an army of one hundred thousand literacy workers" selected from students who had completed at least the sixth grade and were at least thirteen years old. Castro reminded the students that to live and work, to serve and assist, to teach and learn with the poor, humbler rural masses would be a privilege as well as a duty. At this time the government also formed a volunteer group called the "Conrado Benito Brigades," which consisted of youngsters (*brigadistas*) who were to be sent to the most remote corners of Cuba to

teach and "revolutionize" the illiterates. The excitement and image of such an adventure, of such an all-encompassing national effort, captured the energy, dedication, and enthusiasm of most Cubans. For the young, especially, the literacy campaign was an exciting event, laden with hope and anticipation. The sense of a new and promising beginning pervaded the Cuban people.<sup>9</sup>

By the end of the summer the leadership had fully trained and equipped, mobilized and deployed its "literacy army." The "final offensive" against the "entrenched fears of ignorance" was under way. Children, relieved of their school work, were put into uniforms, supplied with hammocks and blankets, and sent to the countryside to "alphabetize" the illiterates.<sup>10</sup> In fact, during the literacy campaign the Cuban government transported more than a quarter of a million students to locations across the length of the island. It supplied them with three million books and more than one hundred thousand paraffin lamps. For the next six months students lived with rural families and battled illiteracy.<sup>11</sup>

Although the speeches, billboards, and newspaper articles promoting literacy were not particularly ideological in content, the textbooks took on clear political overtones. The Ministry of Education prepared two texts for the campaign, called *Let's Alphabetize* and *We Shall Triumph*. Although the books did not explicitly mention socialism, communism, or Marx, each consisted of twenty-four "themes of revolutionary orientation" that covered such topics as imperialism and nationalization, racial discrimination and anti-Americanism.<sup>12</sup>

As the end of the literacy campaign neared, the government planned a "victory" celebration. Fidel Castro invited the participants to Havana for a week of fun: sports, recreation, cultural activities, a big parade, and a speech by Castro himself.<sup>13</sup> On December 15, 1961, the crowds of youth began to arrive. One scholar described the occasion as follows:

Dressed in the remnants of their uniforms, often wearing peasant hats and beads, and carrying their knapsacks and lanterns, the *brigadistas* swarmed into the capital, singing and laughing and exchanging stories of their experiences. The similarities between the joyous return of the literacy army and the triumphant entry of the guerrilla troops only three years earlier were not lost on the population. It was one of the Revolution's finest hours.<sup>14</sup>

All Havana turned out for a spectacular festival culminating in Castro's speech. The revolutionary government claimed that virtually all Cubans could now read and write. While perhaps not as successful as the Revolution's leaders boasted, the campaign did increase literacy significantly throughout the country. The campaign stood as an important early triumph for the government and the nation. The leadership had taken an initial, highly successful measure aimed at transforming Cuban culture.

The literacy campaign, involving more than one and a quarter million Cubans, also mobilized the masses in impressive fashion. As the campaign progressed, it reached a scope, duration, and intensity that states usually attain only on a war footing. The leadership's rhetoric charged the movement with the dramatic imagery of national emergency, revolutionary battle, and heroic victory. The literacy campaign thus revealed the militaristic style of the revolutionary leaders. It set a precedent of militarism that would steadily intensify over the next thirty years. Castro and his assistants conceptualized the literacy campaign, as they did nearly all national efforts, as a military exercise: as a "war," a "battle," or a "struggle." Over time this militaristic mentality came to dominate policy making concerned with cultural change.

Cuban leaders further enhanced revolutionary enthusiasm by vigorously praising and applauding supportive citizens. The leadership commended teachers and students alike for their displays of national pride and accomplishments. The literacy campaign allowed those who had formerly

only observed the new government's actions to contribute actively to a cause that virtually all the people supported. The campaign thus effectively motivated the masses to participate in and support the Revolution. In fact, the literacy crusade formed an wholly unprecedented experience for every Cuban. It stood as a positive challenge to the people. It symbolized a government undertaking that would indisputably benefit the country.

Consequently, most citizens wanted to be involved, whether from a sense of idealism or adventure, humanitarianism or curiosity, patriotism or altruism.

The literacy campaign also had a lasting impact because for nearly six months it consumed every participant's life. The intimacy of the activity pulled Cubans together in a single patriotic and noble effort, thereby strengthening the feelings of common purpose, mutual support, and nationalism. The leadership could logically conclude that, since voluntarism underlay the literacy campaign, Cubans emerged from the "battle" with a stronger sense of revolutionary determination. Authorities praised all the participants as selfless revolutionary "soldiers" and "heroes."

Equally important, perhaps, the literacy campaign provided the leadership with a vital sense of momentum in its efforts to reconstruct Cuban society.<sup>15</sup> Predictably, once Castro declared the socialist character of his

Revolution in April 1961 and then announced his Marxist-Leninist faith the following December, the government's educational policies took on a stronger ideological flavor. Once the revolutionary leadership had abolished private and religious schools, the education of young Cubans became a powerful tool to mold the island's culture and create the new Cuban citizen.

### **Ideological Education**

As early as mid- 1960 Cuban leaders had already started to emphasize Marxist ideology within the education system. In April 1960 the government established the *Instituto Superior de Educación* to prepare school teachers

for their role in the new school system by teaching them Marxist-Leninist precepts.<sup>16</sup> In late 1961 the government sent seven hundred students to study in Soviet-bloc countries. In July 1961 the National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA) sent another one thousand students to Eastern Europe to study for a year. In August and September 1962, two thousand more students joined them. In addition, about fifty older students attended universities in the foreign communist countries.<sup>17</sup>

In January 1961 the leadership perceived a particularly pressing need for ideological specialists, people who "would be the builders and loyal supporters of the 'new society,' who understood the basis of Marxism-Leninism and could influence its development in Cuba."<sup>18</sup> Shortly thereafter the government formed the Schools of Revolutionary Instruction ("EIRs;" or *Escuelas de Instrucción Revolucionaria*), designed to develop revolutionaries for leadership positions. On December 20, 1961, Castro explained: "[T]he task of these schools . . . is the ideological formation of revolutionaries, and then, by means of these revolutionaries, the ideological formation of the rest of the people."<sup>19</sup> The government carefully selected students for the schools. To be chosen, one had to demonstrate not just basic intelligence but a keen understanding of proper revolutionary attitudes as well.

The Cuban leadership opened twelve regional EIRs and one national "finishing" EIR. For an intensive three months, more than seven hundred students attended the schools fulltime; they then completed their term by studying another three months at the national school. By the beginning of 1962 more than ten thousand students -- all at least fourteen years old -- had attended the EIRs and had absorbed carefully planned political and ideological education. By late 1963 nine national schools existed, along with seven provincial schools, and two hundred local EIRs.<sup>20</sup>

In early 1962 Castro opened boarding schools (*internados*), "where life [was] rugged, work [was] hard and disciplined,"<sup>21</sup> and began awarding the



scholarships, or *becas*, promised the *brigadistas* during the literacy campaign. Once again, officials selected recipients based on their revolutionary participation and that of their parents. By mid-1962, seventy thousand children had received a free opportunity to attend boarding school. Most students traveled to Havana and lived all week in "scholarship hostels," the abandoned houses of Miami-bound Cubans, before returning home on Saturday night.

The *becados* studied specific topics. The first year, for example, approximately 401 started training to be nurses, 1,743 learned to fish in Varadero, 125 studied agricultural accounting, 70 attended the national school of sugar cooperatives, and 300 took classes on the artificial insemination of livestock.<sup>22</sup> The leadership gave the students uniforms, books, board, and lodging. By 1965 Havana alone housed 80,000 *becados*, most of whom spent only one day a week with their parents.<sup>23</sup> On May Day 1966, Castro announced that more than 150,000 youngsters were living in boarding schools and receiving an education at the state's expense.<sup>24</sup>

These scholarship programs<sup>25</sup> stand out for several reasons. Perhaps most important, they offered to students of all socioeconomic levels the opportunity to receive an education that was free, but at the price of a significant degree of ideological conformity. During these early years, the numbers attending school increased quickly. The programs also marked the beginning of a steady expansion in the centralized control of education. Government officials selected the participants, chose their field of study, housed them comfortably, and fed them well. By separating children from parents and carefully supervising them, the government could use the scholarship programs to influence the upbringing and discipline, socialization and ideological training of youth.

On December 13, 1961, at a conference on revolutionary ideology and objectives, Gaspar Jorge García, the Secretary-General of the Trade Union

of Education and Scientific Workers (SNTEC), explained the goals of the revamped educational system: "The society in which the children will live . . . will be Communist when they are adults. Communist! . . . What is proposed is to train active and conscientious builders of the Communist society. . . . [I]t will be achieved to the degree that old educators are reeducated and a new mentality is created, a new socialist mentality."<sup>26</sup>

The system of rewards and deprivation that underlay the scholarship program allowed the government to encourage Cuban citizens to cooperate with official revolutionary programs. The leadership rewarded compliant citizens who had strong records of revolutionary participation with educational opportunities for their children. It denied unsupportive citizens such benefits. To attain the government's most coveted educational rewards, a family had to show unflagging support for the government's programs. By rewarding ideological conformity, rather than intelligence alone, the Castro leadership succeeded in strengthening its grip on Cuban society, though it sacrificed the benefits of providing the most education to the best and brightest students.

### **Training Teachers for Revolutionary Education**

In the quest to transform the culture of Cuban youth, school teachers stood out as one notable target group. Since teachers can exert much influence over children, the government wanted to prepare its teachers, intellectually and ideologically, to mold the "new men." In 1961, after consulting with Soviet and Czechoslovakian officials Cuban leaders designed a project to improve teacher quality.<sup>27</sup> Shortly thereafter, the Cuban Ministry of Education opened the first teacher training school in Minas del Frio. Although voluntary, the school actively recruited many students and had a substantial effect on the education of Cuban youth.

Minas del Frio, a mountain town in the Sierra Maestra, conveys the tough romanticism of the guerrilla struggle that led to Castro's victory. Indeed,

Cuban officials designed the school to provide teachers with a "revolutionary" as well as an educational experience. The leadership hoped that, in preparing students to take on rural instruction, the Minas del Frio school would inculcate professional dedication, a revolutionary conscience, and doctrinaire Marxism Leninism. In January 1962, three thousand students started classes at the school. By August more than one third had become discouraged and left. One year later the leadership rewarded those committed students who had remained through the rigorous program, transferring them to a luxurious school at Topes de Collantes.<sup>28</sup> Thereafter, many of these students, as well as those from other teaching preparatory schools, demonstrated their loyalty to the Cuban government by joining the *"Frank País Brigade."* Students pledged to teach wherever the leadership sent them, and Castro assured ample rewards.

For loyal teachers who worked in the countryside, the leadership built a center at La Plata. While relaxing on weekends, teachers could exchange ideas, participate in group activities and games, and revive their spirit and enthusiasm for attaining revolutionary objectives. In addition, a lavish resort at Varadero served as an exclusive summer vacation spot for rural school teachers. To attract vacationing teachers, the government significantly subsidized rates. Perhaps it had to. Upon arrival the teachers found themselves required to take "refresher courses" in revolutionary teaching techniques.

During the early 1960s, to complement the official initiatives focused on teachers, the content of Cuban education underwent major changes as well. On all levels the leadership reformed syllabi and course materials and refocused their ideological orientation. A Cuban emigré has described the changes she observed during her elementary school years in the early 1960s as follows: "[A] curriculum was implemented which stressed political awareness. . . . Every story read, game played, or assignment given seemed designed to develop within us a . . . sense of moral obligation to the state."<sup>29</sup>

During this period the authorities abolished the independence of each Cuban school. They rooted out the major differences and even the lesser distinctions that had long characterized various schools.<sup>30</sup>

### **Youth Organizations**

To influence children to accept the idea of a revolutionary "new Cuban man," the Castro government invented and established various youth organizations. On May 10, 1960, the government introduced the Association of Rebel Youth (AJR). This group, created by the Army's Department of Education and tutored and supervised by professional cadres, sought to mobilize young people between the ages of fourteen and twenty-seven.<sup>31</sup> The AJR, later renamed the Union of Young Communists (UJC), quickly evolved from the original idea of a mass association to a highly exclusive Party organization.<sup>32</sup>

The revolutionary government also created another important group known first as the Union of Rebel Pioneers, then as the Union of Pioneers in Cuba (UPC). Officials organized its members to engage in acts of solidarity, recreation, and community service, such as campaigns to collect bottles, newspapers, and trash. In addition, the state employed the UPC, similar to the Boy Scouts in the United States, to teach children revolutionary goals and requirements. Since the more elite UJC often selected its members from the Pioneers, the UPC served as a training ground for young revolutionaries.<sup>33</sup> The UPC selected its members based on the child's behavior, attitudes, school grades, and attendance, as well as the degree to which the child's parents participated in government-sponsored activities. By occupying children's spare time, the UPC organization furthered their political education in Cuba's revolutionary society. Once again the Young Communists and the Pioneers demonstrated the government's increasing use of a selective system that rewarded loyal "revolutionaries" and took away benefits from passive or dissenting citizens.

By late 1961 the CDRs had started to recruit children into special youth CDRs (*CDR infantiles*). In these organizations young Cubans took on the same types of vigilance and social service activities that the adult CDRs performed.<sup>34</sup> A central purpose was to encourage youngsters to identify more closely with the Cuban state. To further this goal, the government organized special activities for children, such as games, a national children's day, revolutionary poetry readings, and special celebrations on national holidays.<sup>35</sup>

### **Day-Care Centers**

In 1961 the leadership announced the opening of *círculos infantiles* (daycare centers), the first of which opened on July 26, 1961. With the government's guidance and support, the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) organized the program and opened thirtyseven daycare centers by the end of 1961. Although the daycare centers were primarily designed to encourage female entry into the labor force, they also targeted young children for early revolutionary education. Given the importance of the early years of childhood development in influencing later attitudes and values, the government seized the opportunity to use the centers to attempt to mold revolutionary beliefs among Cuba's toddlers.

The FMC also established schools to train girls over fourteen to work in the daycare centers. These schools taught revolutionary ideology as well as child care, productive work methods, and educational skills.<sup>36</sup> In order to attend, students had to be active revolutionaries and FMC members. As one revolutionary said, "We cannot have anyone lacking revolutionary conviction involved in the formation of the new generation."<sup>37</sup>

### **Militarizing Youth**

Despite these various programs aimed at Cuban children, as early as 1963 the country's youth were not thinking and behaving as the government had anticipated. In the initial years of the Revolution, Cuban society witnessed a

steadily rising rate of juvenile delinquency. To reverse this trend, the leadership enacted a law that required three years of military service for all fifteen- to seventeen-year-old "delinquents."<sup>38</sup> Castro justified this measure by stating that the government would discipline defiant, "problem" youngsters: "We know of many cases of young men who were a headache to their fathers, who were incorrigible, who misbehaved, who stayed away from their classes."<sup>39</sup> This November 1963 law also took in "uneducated, ignorant, [or] . . . parasitical" adolescents who had dropped out of secondary school.

Relying on a broad construction of this vague law, the Cuban government found many youths in need of military service. For these young men, service in the Armed Forces often entailed spending a large part of the year cutting cane or picking coffee beans for the state. The government openly divided the Army into two classes: those who would and those who would not be permitted to bear arms. Raúl Castro, head of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR), justified a three-year service period by claiming that it would enable the Army to increase production substantially. Thus, compulsory military service supplied the Cuban state with a cheap, yet organized, disciplined, and militarized labor corps. In fact, the delinquents law succeeded not only in supplementing the "volunteer" labor system but in reversing rising delinquency rates, at least for a time.<sup>40</sup>

What home and school failed to teach these youngsters, the FAR would teach, albeit with a somewhat different approach. Castro declared, "[W]hen life is too easy, when things come too easily, it isn't good."<sup>41</sup> In praising the military as the highest form of education and discipline, Castro proposed on November 13, 1964, that *all* youth serve time in the military. The Cuban leader argued that otherwise a large percentage of youngsters would develop "without discipline, without training, without being organized and without that conditioning which military instruction provides."<sup>42</sup> After implying that only military training can create a genuine revolutionary spirit, Castro suggested combining school and military training by establishing military centers of technological instruction.<sup>43</sup>

## **Curbing University Autonomy**

Along with juvenile delinquency, the universities posed a troublesome problem for the revolutionary government. The University of Havana, like most Latin American universities, had traditionally enjoyed almost complete autonomy from the state. Upon taking power, Castro immediately began to pressure the university to conform to official ideology. Cuban leaders quickly replaced the university's elected governing council with their own state-controlled body. After gaining administrative control of the Federation of University Students (FEU), the leadership then forced the opposition candidate in the FEU presidential election to withdraw from the race. Although the FEU continued to contain students with divergent political viewpoints, the Castro government had secured its control over the administrative board and the office of the president. These political power plays notably curbed the autonomy of university student organizations.

Shortly thereafter, in keeping with its goal of militarizing youth, the Cuban government created the University Student Militias within the FEU. Before long this organization provoked a conflict that marked the end of university autonomy. For some time the government tried to convince students that their "heroic mission" was to wear the "uniform of a militia member." Predictably, perhaps, students rebelled against this official pressure. In fact, fewer than three hundred out of twenty thousand students joined the Militias. Then, in February 1960 some students protested the diplomatic visit of the Soviet Union's Minister of Foreign Trade, Anastas Mikoyan. When Mikoyan placed a wreath on the statue of Cuba's revered hero, José Martí, these students became outraged that a representative of what was perceived to be an authoritarian regime would be "invited to insult the memory of Martí." They marched carrying signs that read "Down with Communism." Furious, Castro immediately replaced a substantial percentage of the university's faculty and textbooks and expelled hundreds of "counterrevolutionary students."<sup>44</sup> Once again the leadership subordinated scholarly excellence to ideological conformity.

By early 1962 Cuban leaders had enacted sweeping university reforms. The government changed standards for entry into the universities by establishing political criteria. To gain entry into the universities or remain at them, students had to demonstrate revolutionary enthusiasm and support. The state required all admitted students to take courses in dialectical and historical materialism for three semesters, comprising approximately 12 percent of a student's total education. In fact, the government required that all students in the University of Havana's Department of Political Science be members of either the UJC or the Communist Party.<sup>45</sup> In July 1965 Minister of Education Armando Hart declared: "[W]e must orientate education according to Marxism-Leninism. Marx *Capital* must . . . be studied in all primary grades. . . . [T]he teachings of Marxism-Leninism in the universities is obligatory."<sup>46</sup>

By the end of 1965 the university's faculty and staff members began complaining to the government about the quality of professors and students. Absenteeism concerned officials. Class attendance, by professors as well as students, had dropped precipitously. Some protested the government's newly acquired control of the university by openly shunning classes. Others were simply too busy with other matters to attend. Outside activities, from militia duty to voluntary labor to participation in mass organizations, occupied increasing time and energy. As a consequence, students paid little attention to homework. One official complained that "often students do not complete more than 18 of 30 weeks' work."<sup>47</sup> The university administration responded to these complaints by enacting stricter requirements: unless a student maintained 80 percent attendance, he or she was ineligible for the final examination.<sup>48</sup>

In addition, in May 1964 the government introduced polytechnical programs modelled after those in the Soviet Union. In 1961 Minister of Education Armando Hart had traveled to the Soviet Union to study its polytechnical educational system. The Cuban version of those programs eventually aimed to immerse students in practical, productive work. These objectives quite



clearly reflected Castro's distaste for educational institutions that nurtured in students what he called an intellectual, or "bookish," outlook on life.<sup>49</sup>

During the first five years of the Revolution, the leadership thus cast about, trying to find the proper role for education in the revolutionary society. The leadership shifted its policies during these early years from emphasizing basic literacy to promoting political and ideological socialization. Leading Cuban officials increasingly viewed education as a means through which a revolutionary conscience could be fostered and elitism abolished. The government thus expanded substantially its role in Cuban education. Initially, Castro and his colleagues had faith in the willingness of Cuban citizens to support enthusiastically a new approach to education. Despite the early optimism, however, troublesome signs of defiance among the nation's younger generation soon developed. As the years went by, their recalcitrance of youth warranted continual concern and comment by government officials.

## **A New Direction**

After the initial period of experimenting with different policies toward Cuban youth, by 1965 the Castro government was searching for a fresh approach to counter increasingly apparent difficulties. Che Guevara's powerful 1965 essay "Man and Socialism in Cuba", emphasizing the creation of the "new man" and the complete transformation of national culture, filled the intellectual void in policy making and rapidly became the guiding principle in Cuban educational endeavors.<sup>50</sup> In October 1965 the Castro government launched a revised educational "offensive." Minister of Education Armando Hart announced that the Revolution was entering an aggressive phase of educational development during which every Cuban would find his or her moral and ideological consciousness transformed. Political education would equal, and perhaps surpass, literacy in the Cuban government's priorities. Once again the leadership concentrated its education initiative primarily on youth.<sup>51</sup>

During the following two years the Castro government attempted to impose upon the educational system, and upon Cuban society, an explicit group of well-defined beliefs and values. As one scholar wrote, by late 1965 the aim for Cuban education had changed dramatically:

[The aim] was no longer simply to raise the level of basic knowledge and skills, but to foster the creation of a new man; a socialist man, honest, selfless, devoted to the community, and freed from greedy and corrupt bourgeois inclinations. . . . The overall purpose of education at all levels is to produce better Communists, men and women, unconditionally loyal to the party and party leadership.

## **The Steady Expansion of the Government's Role in Education**

In 1965 the Castro leadership expelled another group of students, intellectuals, and artists from the University of Havana. On May 26, 1965, Jaime Crombet, the former president of the FEU, spoke at the University, instructing "the Union of Young Communists and the Federation of University Students [to] see to it that the curriculum follows the orientation of Fidel Castro."<sup>53</sup> In another university lecture three weeks later, Blas Roca, a member of the Central Committee, advocated creating Communist Party cells to "facilitate the campaigns of the University to eliminate counter revolutionaries and homosexuals."<sup>54</sup>

This campaign to further official authority over Cuban education extended beyond the universities. In July 1966 the government took over administering the *círculos* from the Federation of Cuban Women. The leadership immediately changed the manner in which the daycare centers operated. Although originally operating five days a week, the *círculos* now expanded their schedules to include Saturday. Some centers even went so far as to offer twenty-four hour, sleep-in care for the children.<sup>55</sup>

Most important, the government redefined the objectives of day-care centers. An original aim had been to free mothers from the daily daytime care of their children, thus providing better opportunities to join the work force. By 1965, however, the government explicitly acknowledged that the centers were also designed to provide children with a collective environment in which to grow up and be instilled with revolutionary values. Clementina Serra, Director of the National Program of Childcare Centers and a member of the Central Committee, said "[T]he childcare program has two main objectives: to liberate women so they can become an active part of the productive work force, and to aid in the social development of the children. Both objectives are very important, but the formation of the child is primary."<sup>56</sup> The political education of Cuban children had joined sexual equality as a chief rationale for the child-care centers.<sup>57</sup>

### **Youth Organizations Take on a New and Important Role**

In 1966 the Cuban leadership turned its attention to revolutionary youth organizations. The government saw these groups as a valuable means to occupy children's spare time, and it urged youngsters to join and participate.<sup>58</sup> Aside from providing a social forum for children, such organizations helped the government to educate and control Cuban youth, to curtail juvenile delinquency and the nascent "capitalist attitudes" that the Marxist-Leninist leaders so feared.<sup>59</sup>

To increase participation, the Cuban leaders opened to all children membership in the popular youth organization, the Young Pioneers. The government apparently viewed this group as an effective tool with which to involve every child in revolutionary activities. Ricardo García Pampin, an adult leader of the organization, explained that the Pioneers would become more than an extracurricular community service organization. It was to become "a vehicle for engaging in the ideological struggle."<sup>60</sup>

One underlying objective in opening up membership in the Young Pioneers may have been to pressure parents to take a stand on their attitude toward

the government.<sup>61</sup> García Pampin elaborated: "We were in the process in which everyone had to define himself: they were either on the side of the Revolution or they were not." Through this tactic the leadership tried to expose adults who were not actively revolutionary. García Pampin explained that this youth group "forced" parents to decide whether they stood with Fidel Castro as "revolutionaries" or against him as "*gusanos*." In fact, García Pampin stated baldly that the Pioneer adult directors encouraged children to practice loyalty to the Revolution before loyalty to family.<sup>62</sup> One Cuban emigré recalled her childhood activities in revolutionary Cuba: "Then fact that the state was of greater importance than family, friendship, or religion was always emphasized."<sup>63</sup> García Pampin further explained:

We could talk of many interesting experiences of children who have transformed the conduct of their parents. For instance, a doctor was planning to leave the country, and his son was a Pioneer. . . . Then the son, when it came time for them to leave, told his father that he was a Pioneer, and that Pioneers don't betray their country. The decision was made by the child; the father stayed.

Whether such stories were true or apocryphal, professional cadres did tutor and supervise the Pioneers, teaching the youngsters to adhere to a strict code of conduct. Jesús Montane, one of the organization's adult leaders, explained that the cadres taught the Pioneers "to develop a sense of honor, modesty, courage, comradeship, love of both physical and intellectual work, respect for workers, and responsibility in caring for social property. . . . [and] a love for our Revolutionary Armed Forces and the Ministry of the Interior."<sup>65</sup>

After 1966 membership in the Young Pioneers increased markedly, and the organization became extremely active and visible among Cuban youth.<sup>66</sup> For instance, the Pioneers carried out school competitions for "exemplary student" status. Students earned official recognition by participating in productive activities and revolutionary events and maintaining respectful

relations with teachers and other students. The government lauded those Young Pioneers who conducted themselves as dedicated revolutionaries by practicing cleanliness, self-analysis, punctuality, cooperation, obedience, good attendance, and disciplined study. The state rewarded such loyalty with a pin, flag, banner, or some other revolutionary symbol.<sup>67</sup> In the late 1960s the Pioneers also began to stage public political debates on such issues as American imperialism, material incentives, and productivity. They also produced radio programs and presented plays that reenacted events in Cuba's revolutionary history such as the attack on the Moncada Barracks, the landing of the *Granma*, and the Bay of Pigs victory. The government also established summer camps at which Pioneers participated in revolutionary activities and took classes on ideology.<sup>68</sup>

Over the following five years the status of the UPC continued to grow as the leadership increased its emphasis on preparing children ideologically for eventual UJC membership. García Pampin explained why the Pioneer organization grew in significance in the late 1960s: "We are trying to form future communists. . . . [T]he schools alone can't satisfy all the objectives that we have set out for ourselves. . . . The Union of Pioneers is better structured than the schools for creating the kind of characteristics we want to see in our young people."<sup>69</sup> By the end of the Revolution's first decade the Pioneers had become a valuable tool in official efforts to mold youth attitudes.