Lillian Guerra, *Heroes, Martyrs, and Political Messiahs in Revolutionary Cuba, 1946–1958*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2018. 370 pp. (Cloth US\$ 40.00)

Lillian Guerra has written another major contribution to Cuban history, drawing on her extensive knowledge of Cuban archives, other primary sources, and personal interviews that shed new light on a decisive period of Cuban history. For too long most work on the Cuban Revolution has accepted false claims or misleading myths about its origins and development. One is the mistaken notion that a small group of guerrillas, under Fidel Castro, embodied the revolutionary struggle and that urban activists played only a supporting role. Yet anyone who has spent time with veterans knows that the historical record does not confirm this view. Guerra's book is the most recent attempt to correct the historical record, showing how Cuba's democracy underwent a crisis, which ended in dictatorship. Especially significant is the way Guerra highlights the role of men and women who participated in mass mobilizations, civic activism, and a wide range of organizations that fought for social justice and democracy. Equally important, she returns Cuba's most popular politician of the time, Eduardo Chibás, to his rightful place as the most important leader who challenged corruption. Between 1946 and his suicide in 1951, Chibás embodied Cubans' desire for national dignity and democracy. Even after his death, his long shadow over all opposition groups (including Castro and his followers) shaped the moralistic discourse of the resistance to Batista. The figure of Chibás has almost disappeared from official histories of the Revolution, despite the fact that (to my knowledge) no veteran of the Revolution, on or off the island, would deny his historical importance.

Guerra's argument is twofold. First, the Cuban Revolution before the late 1950s was conducted by grass roots civic activism and not armed struggle in the mountains. By the second half of the 1950s, Castro's 26th of July Movement was part of the larger network of resistance groups, but the guerrilla forces in the mountains were by no means the vanguard of the struggle. It is true that after 1957 the inability of the Cuban army to defeat the guerrillas meant that Castro's star within the revolutionary leadership rose rapidly. But what brought Batista down were the combined efforts of civic organizations throughout the island and the guerrillas, not simply the latter. The second argument Guerra makes is that between 1946 and 1959 Cubans clamored for a messianic leader who could lead them toward a more democratic and socially just future. Chibás served that role well before 1951. Yet during the most intense and violent years of the struggle against Batista, there was no single leader who could replace him. According to Guerra, Castro understood this problem well, and he and his clos-

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est followers consciously set out to replace the myth of Chibás with the myth of Fidel. By 1958 many Cubans did indeed see Fidel as the new revolutionary messiah. Others, however, worried that Castro could use his messianic power to lead Cubans into another dictatorship. This latter group increasingly were labeled “counter-revolutionary” because of their refusal to become *Fidelistas*. But in their minds it was they, not Fidel, who remained loyal to the ideals of Chibás and José Martí.

One cautionary observation: “Messiahs” use their power to mobilize, inspire, and convince, but also to manipulate, obfuscate, and deceive supporters. Guerra highlights the negative aspects of Castro’s messianic power. There is good reason for this emphasis, but we should be cautious. The danger with highlighting the negative aspects of Castro’s power is that it risks silencing supporters of the socialist stage of the Revolution who *never* viewed Fidel as a messiah and whose support for the regime was principled and intelligent. Before 1959 the Revolution was not socialist; after 1959, at the height of the Cold War, revolutionaries had to make a Pascalian wager no one could have foreseen. Do they refuse any accommodation with internal and external Communists and bet—against all historical precedent—that the United States would allow Cubans to determine their own destiny? Or do revolutionaries wager that the Revolution’s survival depends on its embrace of socialism and—against all historical precedent—that the Soviet Union would allow Cuba greater independence than the United States would? Certainly positive or negative evaluations of Castro’s leadership played a role in peoples’ political calculations, but we should not assume that everyone who remained loyal to the socialist revolution did so because they were hoodwinked by a messiah.

Guerra’s book is essential reading for anyone who wants a more accurate picture of Cuba before 1959.

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