Review Article

The Coards and the Grenada Revolution

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Bernard Coard, *The Grenada Revolution: What Really Happened?* The Grenada Revolution Volume 1. Kingston and St. George's: McDermott Publishing, 2017. xx + 349 pp. (Paper US\$18.50)

Bernard Coard, *Forward Ever: Journey to a New Grenada*. The Grenada Revolution Volume 2. Kingston and St. George's: McDermott Publishing, 2018. vii + 386 pp. (Paper US\$19.50)

Bernard Coard, *Skyred: A Tale of Two Revolutions*. The Grenada Revolution Volume 3. Kingston and St. George's: McDermott Publishing, 2020. xx + 388 pp. (Paper US\$19.50)

Phyllis Coard, *Unchained: A Caribbean Woman's Journey Through Invasion, Incarceration & Liberation*. Kingston and St. George's: McDermott Publishing, 2019. viii + 292. (Paper US\$14.50)

Each of these volumes supplies the kind of detailed information concerning the Grenada Revolution that only its participants could have provided. As such,

the books are invaluable for anyone interested in the Revolution's many accomplishments or its tragic demise.¹

In *Skyred: A Tale of Two Revolutions*, Bernard Coard (hereafter BC) details Eric Gairy's ascendancy, as well as the growth in opposition to his rule that culminated with the military victory of the New Jewel Movement (NJM) on March 13, 1979. In *Forward Ever: Journey to a New Grenada*, he concentrates on the NJM's governance of Grenada between 1979 and 1983, exploring its foreign policy dealings with both Cuba and the United States, its response to domestic opposition, and its health, education, and economic accomplishments. *The Grenada Revolution: What Really Happened?* presents BC's account of the political crisis that resulted in the execution, by members of the NJM army, of Maurice Bishop, the party's leader, and seven of his close associates. And in *Unchained: A Caribbean Woman's Journey Through Invasion, Incarceration & Liberation*, Phyllis Coard (hereafter PC) describes the shocking prison conditions she endured for almost 17 years, as well as the sham trial of the 17 Grenadians, including both Coards, who were charged with ordering and carrying out the executions.

BC writes that in its early years the NJM was influenced by Franklyn Harvey, an activist who believed that political parties were an obstacle to social transformation. Harvey argued that "the Mass organization of the working-masses is the only way out if we are to seek social liberation."² After 1974 however, his thinking lost favor when a mass action in Grenada—a long general strike—failed to dislodge Gairy from power. In the wake of that defeat, party leaders came to believe that, in order to succeed, the NJM had to become a Leninist party. According to BC, a "tightly knit, highly disciplined, work-oriented party structure, backed up by a well-organized support structure" was required (*Skyred*, p. 245). The NJM's transformation into a Leninist party—secretive and rigidly disciplined—was very likely the reason that its armed wing was able to surprise Gairy's troops on March 13, 1979, and secure power for the party.

On the morning following the NJM's triumph, Bishop delivered a speech to the nation that addressed the future: "Let me assure the people of Grenada that all democratic freedoms, including the freedom of elections, religious and political opinion will be fully restored to the people."³ Hours later, he received

1 The books under review include unsourced quotations. In this review, we will assume that those quotations accurately reflect the substance of conversations.

2 Franklyn Harvey, *Rise and Fall of Party Politics in Trinidad and Tobago* (Toronto: New Beginning Movement, 1974), p. 70.

3 Maurice Bishop, "A Bright New Dawn," in Chris Searle (ed.), *In Nobody's Backyard: Maurice Bishop's Speeches: 1979–1983, A Memorial Volume* (London: Zed Books, 1984), p. 7.

a call from Tom Adams, Barbados's prime minister. Adams proposed a plan to quickly restore constitutional rule in Grenada, with the NJM as the ruling party. His proposal was to secure the resignations of Gairy loyalists in Parliament, and then hold bi-elections. Since Adams was sure that the NJM would easily win the seats vacated by Gairy supporters, the party would constitutionally be empowered to form the government.

According to BC, Bishop was initially noncommittal, but a week later Adams called back, demanding a decision. During that call, Bishop turned to BC and asked, "What do you think?" Though BC admits that he "had given none of this any thought!" he nevertheless replied, "Let's accept the proposal." Bishop indicated his agreement and began to reply to Adams, "We are in agreement ..." But after those three words, he hesitated and then, according to BC, changed "entirely what he was about to say to Tom Adams." BC quotes Bishop as saying to Adams, "Let me call you back in about an hour" (*Forward Ever*, pp. 27–30).

Immediately following the phone call, a formal meeting of the party's Political Bureau (PB) rejected the Adams plan and decided to delay elections for five years. It was at that moment that the trajectory of Grenada's history was determined. The PB's decision broke the promises Bishop had given to the people on the first day of the revolution, and according to BC it "unleashed forces of many kinds and on many levels, of which we were unaware" (*Forward Ever*, p. 31). BC writes, "Our establishment of an effective one party state; the prevention of the functioning of a free media—even with all its abuses; our suspension of the constitution beyond the first 12–24 months; and the failure to hold elections during the period, would all come back to haunt us in September–October 1983."

BC refers to these illiberal actions as "strategic political errors" (*Forward Ever*, p. 99). But they were more than just errors. They were the kind of antidemocratic practices that become systemic when a political party assigns to itself the sole right to rule on behalf of the people, a role that defines Leninism. That role followed from the belief, as Bishop put it in his ideologically-defining "Line of March" speech, that "we still are way way ahead ideologically of the masses of our people ... we are much more politically and ideologically developed than them."⁴ The elitism that Bishop articulated in this way provided the justification for NJM's retaining its Leninist structure after 1979. Coard, despite the self-criticism present in these volumes, never quite acknowledges elitism as the radical flaw in NJM's politics.

4 "Line of March for the Party Presented by Comrade Maurice Bishop Chairman, Central Committee to General Meeting of Party on Monday 13th September 1982" (marked "Confidential"), p. 17.

The NJM's Leninist vanguardism not only compromised its claim to democratic rule. It was also the source of the internal crisis that enveloped the party. At the time of its accession to power, the party had only 51 full members. Over time, that number proved to be insufficient given the task the party assigned itself. BC writes that by July 1982, "two-thirds of the [Political] Bureau and CC [Central Committee] had experienced serious bouts of illness, more than half hospitalized for varying periods of time" (*The Grenada Revolution*, p. 65). The consequence was, as recorded in CC meeting minutes, that "The party's internal state and links with the masses [are] at its worst since the Revolution."⁵

By mid-September of 1983 the situation had become dire. At an extraordinary three-day CC meeting, numerous members criticized Bishop's leadership as the main source of the party's troubles. Liam James cited three characteristics Bishop lacked but which were "needed to push the revolution forward at this time: 1) A Leninist level of organization and discipline. 2) Great depth in ideological clarity. 3) Brilliance in strategy and tactics." With this in mind, James went on to argue that Bernard Coard "is the only Cde. [Comrade] that have [sic] the necessary qualities to merge with Cde. Leader." That merger, James proposed, could take the form of joint leadership of the party, a leadership shared by Bishop and Coard. After much discussion, the meeting voted in favor of James's proposal, with nine votes in favor, one opposed, and three abstentions including that of Bishop himself.⁶

A week later, a NJM General Membership (GM) meeting was called to finalize the question of the party's leadership. There Bishop spoke at length, reporting that he was "confused and emotional" and "having horrors." According to the meeting minutes, he said that he was "suspicious" that the comrades believed that "I am the wrong person for the leader." Furthermore, he pointed out that the Grenadian people were likely to resist the CC's joint leadership decision because "the masses have their own conception and perception that may not necessarily be like ours who study the science." For these reasons, Bishop insisted, "I can't accept this compromise, it is unprincipled," and said that he was "considering the option of withdrawing from the BP and the CC."⁷

5 "Minutes of the Central Committee Meeting, Saturday 26 June, 1982," in Department of State and Department of Defense, *Grenada Documents: An Overview and Documents* (Washington DC: 1984), Document 103, p. 1.

6 "Extraordinary Meeting of the Central Committee NJM, 14–16 September, 1983," in *Grenada Documents: An Overview and Selection*, Document 112, pp. 14, 23, 34.

7 "Extra-Ordinary General Meeting of Full Members, Sunday 25th September, 1983," in *Grenada Documents: An Overview and Selection*, Document 113, pp. 14–15.

By the end of the meeting, however, Bishop reversed his position and agreed to share party leadership with BC. The minutes of that meeting record that Bishop “admitted to the GM that his response to the CC criticism and decision was petit bourgeois.” He concluded that he now believed “joint leadership would help push the party and the revolution forward.”⁸

As it turned out, however, Bishop once again changed his mind. According to Don Rojas, Bishop came to believe that joint leadership “would have effectively removed him from influence in the top decision-making organs of the party.”⁹ The fact is, however, that shared leadership would have done nothing to overcome the party’s real crisis—its shortfall in membership. Only by becoming a mass party and shedding its Leninism could the NJM have had a chance of resolving its serious problems. Rejecting Leninism, however, would have represented a radical transformation of the party. That was something no one in the leadership of the NJM—including BC himself—was prepared to do.

While BC’s volumes detail the NJM’s struggles, PC’s personal memoir largely avoids a discussion of the party’s history. Although she was a prominent member of the party’s CC, head of the National Women’s Organization, and Minister for Women’s Affairs, she offers no analysis of what went wrong in the years before 1983. On the few occasions when she comments on her years in power, she, like BC, regrets what she calls “mistakes” and “our immature bungling in handling the political crisis” (*Unchained*, p. 196).

PC was captured by the American military when it invaded Granada in October, 1983. After being held as a “prisoner of war” on a U.S. warship, she was transferred to the Grenada prison where she spent the next sixteen and a half years. Her book graphically describes her horrific incarceration—her almost complete isolation, hunger and thirst, as well as the constant physical and mental humiliations and punishments, meted out by sadistic guards, that left her suicidal and suffering from posttraumatic stress and chronic depression.

Through all of this, she suffered from the demoralizing certainty that she and her comrades would never get a fair trial. She describes the court’s flouting of normal legal procedures from the trial’s beginning in 1984 to its 1991 final rejection of 38 grounds of appeal. The irregularities she identifies include denial of defendants’ access to their lawyers, a biased jury selection process, and the judge’s ruling as inadmissible documents that she was convinced would

8 Paul Seabury & Walter A. McDougall (eds.), *The Grenada Papers*. (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1984), pp. 314–15.

9 Steve Wattenmaker, “Grenada: What Went Wrong,” *The Black Nation*, Summer/Fall 1984, p. 18.

have established their innocence. PC believed from the beginning that “guilty verdicts are certain” and “the trial will be rigged” (*Unchained*, p. 70). Her judgment differs little from Amnesty International’s final assessment of the trial as “fatally flawed” and “a gross violation of international standards.”¹⁰ Most egregious in this regard is the fact that the United States—given its interest in a guilty verdict to justify its invasion of Grenada—provided generous financial compensation to the judges trying the case.

The trial of PC and her associates never provided a convincing answer to the central question of who was responsible for the deaths on October 19. That day, members of the CC, Bishop, and the demonstrators who had earlier released him from house arrest, had gathered at Fort Rupert. PC reports that at the trial, Cletus St. Paul, formerly Bishop’s bodyguard, testified that he had observed members of the CC conversing at Fort Frederick, just before People’s Revolutionary Army (PRA) personnel were dispatched to Fort Rupert. According to her, St. Paul did not report that he had heard an order to execute Bishop and the others. Nonetheless, she writes, the prosecution and judge inferred that it was at this meeting that the assassination order was issued. PC maintains that it was on that inference alone that she and the others were found guilty and condemned to hang.

In *What Really Happened*, BC presents his own account of the CC meeting at Fort Frederick, claiming that there was no talk of executions. He writes that Ewart Layne, the day-to-day commander of the PRA, had come to believe that the situation at Fort Rupert was not a political one, but in fact called for a military response. According to BC, Layne stated that the army needed “to recapture that location [Fort Rupert] and restore order there” (*The Grenada Revolution*, pp. 294–95). When none of the CC members objected to his plan, Layne ordered a contingent of soldiers to retake Fort Rupert. That decision to dispatch troops set in motion the tragedy that followed.

By October 19, the leadership of the NJM was already in disarray. During the previous ten days, rumors racing through the country had led both Bishop and the Coards to fear for their lives. One rumor had it that the Coards were planning to murder Bishop—a rumor that BC and others believed was started by Bishop himself. A second rumor, based on Bishop’s bodyguard’s warning that “blood will flow,” was taken to mean that Bishop was planning to murder BC. With an American invasion thought to be imminent, Grenada had descended into chaos.

10 Amnesty International, “The Grenada 17: The Last of the Cold War Prisoners?” online at <https://amnesty.org/en/documents/AMR32/001/2003/en>, p. 22.

It is unclear who fired the first shots at Fort Rupert, though BC provides evidence that it was the demonstrators and not the PRA that did so. In any case, 15 minutes of gunfire killed and wounded many Grenadians. Minutes later, more shots rang out. Bishop and his associates, having surrendered, had been executed at the hands of a PRA firing squad.

The Grenada Revolution ended that day. But its end was presaged the moment that most members of the CC turned on Maurice Bishop, and he, with the support of the Grenadian people, resisted the party's will. The Coard volumes go far toward making clear not only that they themselves shared partial responsibility for the tragedy, but that they were its victims as well.