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“IT WAS A CALL FROM THE REVOLUTION” – CULTURAL AND SCIENTIFIC COLLABORATION BETWEEN CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND CUBA IN THE 1960s, 70s AND 80s

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Although traditional relationships between Cuba and Czechoslovakia, economic above all, go back further than the second half of the twentieth century, the political and social changes in Cuba at the end of the fifties and the beginning of the sixties and the rise of Fidel Castro to power and his inclination to Marxism-Leninism were what marked the start of the close contact between the two countries that would last three decades. The growing political, ideological and economic convergence of Cuba and Soviet bloc countries was also reflected in a significant way through cultural and scientific collaboration. In 1962, the House of Czechoslovak Culture had already been founded in Havana.¹ Later, in reciprocity, the House of Cuban

¹ This was the first and only cultural and informative center of a foreign country in Cuba. It came to be very popular amongst Cubans for its film and music programs and also for its open buffet that was sometimes offered. The number of visits to the House of Czechoslovak Culture was around 50,000 people in the year 1962, and it continued to grow annually. In 1978, the House was visited by more than 800,000 people through about 200 events. See "Information on Czechoslovak-Cuban Cultural Cooperation", 3 May 1979. Archiv ministerstva zahraničních věcí - AMZV (Archive of the Czech

Culture was established in Prague. In the scientific field, the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences contributed significantly to the creation of the Academy of Sciences of Cuba; starting in 1963 there was an agreement to directly collaborate between the two organizations. The institutes intensely collaborated above all on biological science, but there was also important collaboration in the fields of geography, geology, electronics and meteorology. Apart from sending experts for long stays (between 100 and 200 Czech experts per year over the first half of the 60s), the Czechoslovak Academy offered the Cuban institutes material support: apparatus and equipment.

Another important part of the cultural and scientific collaboration that will be discussed later in this text constitutes granting university scholarships that represented one of the concrete forms of the so-called “fraternal international support,” later-called “socialist.”² Apart from

Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs), f. Dokumentace TO- Kuba (Regional Office Documentation – Cuba), 1979, dossier 19, folder number 19.

² Ideologically Cuba went from the “colonial and

receiving solid professional training, Cuban youth, during their several-year stays, were to develop a positive attitude towards communism, and it was supposed that upon returning to Cuba they would actively participate in, among other things, the development of mutual relations.³

The Czechoslovak government offered university scholarships to Cuba for the first time in the summer of 1960. Although there were only ten openings, the political importance of the gesture was considerable.⁴ A significantly greater number of scholarships was negotiated in the fall of the same year, during Ernesto Che Guevara's stay in Prague. Czechoslovakia granted Cuba some 250 scholarships for university studies, particularly in technical fields, and some 350 short term stays for mid-degree youth interested in completing an internship in Czechoslovak industry.⁵ It was

economically underdeveloped" country category to the "national-democratic" country category in mid-1961. In practice, this meant and implied that, from then on, Czechoslovakia would have a similar relation with Cuba as it had with other European countries in the "socialist bloc" and offer similar benefits, first and foremost economical.

- 3 Besides students, some 30 thousand Cubans passed through Czechoslovakia as part of the so-called "Temporary Work and Professional Training Program for Cuban Citizens in Czechoslovakian Organizations," that lasted from 1978 until 1989 and in which Cuban youth workers were principally placed in businesses in the Czechoslovak textile industry. This group's history and stay in Czechoslovakia, as well as individual destinations, go beyond the subject of this investigation and will be the topic of another text in the future.
- 4 The definite decision to grant the scholarships was made during the office of the Czech Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Jiří Hájek in Cuba. "Kuba – udělení stipendií" (Cuba – Granting of Scholarships) 14 July 1960. Národní archiv – NA (National Archive), f. Ministerstvo školství a kultury (Ministry of Education and Culture Collection), Zahraniční stipendisté v ČSR 1959–1964 Kuba (Foreign Scholarship Recipients in the Socialist Republic of Czechoslovakia 1959–1964, dossier Cuba), unorganized material, inventory number 26.
- 5 "Letter from F. Krajčír to Dr. E. Che Guevara" 14 November 1960, Archiv ministerstva průmyslu a obchodu – AMPO (Archive of The Ministry of Industry and Trade), f. MZO (Ministry of Foreign Trade Collection), dossier "Právní, mez. smlouvy, Kuba" (Legal Matters, International Contracts, Cuba) unorganized material, box 2.

considered an unusually high number of scholarships which reflected the rise of Cuba's political importance for the Socialist Republic of Czechoslovakia. So many scholarships, in general, were only granted to countries considered to be of "priority interest" (in this period Iran, Iraq, Algeria, and some sub-Saharan African countries).

The selection of scholarship recipients –done in the beginning by Cuban authorities, first and foremost by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Higher Education (some scholarships were granted by the International Student Union)⁶– were subject to certain criteria. A clear condition was to sympathize with the revolution (be a revolutionary). Applicants were also subjected to various "endurance" and "ethics" tests, which formed part of the general revolutionary and combat mood of Cuban society at that time. The test could consist in, for example, the applicant climbing up and down the highest mountain in Cuba (1,974 m.), participating in reforestation efforts, etc. We cite from the recollections of those that decided to subject themselves to the selection tests in order to study at Czechoslovak universities:

I went to MINREX to receive information [about] the scholarships and the first thing that you had to do in order to participate in the call for applicants was to climb up and down Turquino Peak. [Later] they granted me the scholarship and then I spent three months planting eucalyptus trees, we had to reforest the country, then they picked up the students that were to study in the socialist countries, we were like two thousand in total.⁷

A psychologist would see you, you had the notes and then they had you do volunteer work for a time in very difficult places to see if you could stand it. We for example [worked] two months to replant forests on the peninsula of Guanahacabibes. They sent everyone they punished there and they sent us

6 From the Czechoslovak side the only condition for the acceptance of university students was to have finished secondary school.

7 Interview with J. B. (former student of SVŠT – Slovak Technical University of Bratislava, Faculty of Engineering, 1961–1968) 22 September 2009, Havana.

there [too], we the students were there.⁸

Everyone filled out an application to go study abroad, and you might or might not receive a response or you might receive a response three years later. An obvious requirement was to be in favor of the Revolution but no one asked you, you didn't write it anywhere because all the students at that time were in favor of the Revolution because those that weren't had gone to Miami.⁹

The young peoples' motivations to study in a far away socialist country, another topic to which we paid attention in the interviews, were varied and changed according to the period. While in the 60s an ideological and patriotic motivation prevailed, the generation that went to study in the 70s and 80s perceived this opportunity in a more pragmatic way and one could argue that the motivation that prevailed was not ideological.

Of the first generation of scholarship recipients that went to Czechoslovakia at the beginning of the 60s, reasons like "to honor my country", "it was a call from the Revolution" or "we wanted to help the country" dominated in their narrations. Although the parents of these young men and women were, in their majority, of anticommunist sentiments (or they described themselves as anticommunists) and surely did not share the enthusiasm of their children in their decision to go study in Eastern Europe, the influence of the Cuban leadership – above all the charismatic Minister of Industry Ernesto Che Guevara – over the youth and students was significant. In his public speeches Guevara repeatedly accentuated the need for Cuba to build its own industry, and he encouraged young people to study technical careers in socialist countries.

These are some interview extracts, where the former scholarship recipients recall what their motivations were to go study in Czechoslovakia:

We understood that the two countries with the most advanced socialism were the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia and I wanted to see how this system behaved and... logically I asked to go to the Soviet Union, most of us wanted to go to the Soviet Union, but there weren't any more spaces so I was able to choose between other countries and I chose Czechoslovakia (...) Most of us students were young, nineteen, twenty years old, so all of us wanted to help our country and they called us together and at that moment the Minister of Industry was Che Guevara and Che Guevara had a lot of influence over the youth. So he made the call and made it clear that we had to develop industry in the country in order to have a more promising future and that the youth who identified with revolutionary attitudes and wished to help the country could study in socialist countries that as friends offered us this possibility. And I asked to go.¹⁰

The principal objective was to honor my country which had sent me to study (...) To understand our generation you have to see it through eyes of the seventies (...) the revolutionary fervor was very intense, very strong, all of us were patriots, all of us loved... even those that later changed their minds but in that moment the whole world loved Fidel and the Revolution and so just to have been selected from the great masses of Cubans, as students to go study in socialist countries, was an honor, an honor that I couldn't pass up.¹¹

Another motivation frequently mentioned by the first generation of scholarship recipients is – maybe surprisingly – the admiration that the youth felt towards the level of Czechoslovak industrial development and the appeal of its products, above all of mechanical engineering, well-known in Cuba since the time of Batista. In connection, it is interesting to mention an event that took place in mid-1961: the industrial exhibition "Czechoslovakia – Comrade Country" sponsored by the Czechoslovak Embassy in

8 Interview with E. M. (former student of VŠT – Technical University of Košice, Faculty of Metallurgy, 1961–1967) 12 September 2009, Havana.

9 Interview with J. Z. (former student of VŠCHT – Institute of Chemical Technology Prague, 1964–1971) 2 September 2009, Havana.

10 Interview with M. C. (former student of VŠCHT - Institute of Chemical Technology Prague and PřF UK – Faculty of Sciences in Prague, 1961–1968) 18 September 2009, Havana.

11 Interview with J. Z. (former student of VŠCHT - Institute of Chemical Technology Prague, 1964–1971) 2 September 2009, Havana.

Havana, and whose objective was “to present the Socialist Republic of Czechoslovakia as a comrade country, socialist country with developed industry which with its products is able to provide great assistance to the Cuban people in the construction of its own independent economy.”¹² As the archive documents and also some oral testimonies show, this event was probably one of the most successful in the promotion of Czechoslovakia in Cuba. Among other things, the exposition managed to attract the attention of young Cubans and awaken their interest in the country and its educational system:

I worked as a mechanic, I was a lathe operator. I had some familiarity with Czechoslovakia, I had seen a fair, a fair they gave here in Havana. A fair of all things technical and the sort. Of the socialist countries, Czechoslovakia was the country that had the most technology, that manufactured 68% of the world supply. The supply that Czechoslovakia had, the lathes they had, were fabulous, for that period they were fantastic, and I took [from the fair] a number of books and I read about Czechoslovakia. I was very knowledgeable about all the products that Skoda manufactured, I knew that for every transatlantic [airplane], the propeller was all made by Skoda. Everything made by Skoda was very famous, turbines... I chose Czechoslovakia because I very much liked precision mechanics... and where it was most advanced was there.¹³

If we look at the motivations of the following generation of students that went to Czechoslovakia in the seventies or eighties, we would find that the dominant reasoning is to “see the world”, “know other countries” and the like. These motivations must be understood, naturally, in the concrete context of political and social change: in contrast with the first years of the Revolution, Cuba in the seventies was already significantly sovietized, including restrictions on the freedom to circulate, of expression, etc. The scholarship recipients

confess why they went to study in Czechoslovakia at this time:

To be sincere, I never thought about studying metallurgy... I come from Holguín and at that time there were only careers in textiles in the province of Holguín and in metallurgy overseas. I had an interest in studying overseas (...) not so much because of the career as such, but to get to know the idiosyncrasy, the language, or in other words, a way to get to know the world, it was an option, right, because you aren't responsible for any of the expenses, all the expenses are covered by the state... So when I finish my pre-university courses I liked medicine which I had requested on the Cuban side and I liked metallurgy overseas, one had nothing to do with the other, but anyhow I decided then on metallurgy.¹⁴

Additionally, there is an increase in motivations of the pragmatic sort: more frequently the narrators mention better opportunities to find a good job after returning to Cuba. In fact, at this time the relations between the two countries to a great measure were determined by the entrance of Cuba in the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance – COMECON (1972), accompanied by changes in demand in the Cuban labor market. One scholarship recipient who left Cuba in 1977 recounts:

Actually I didn't choose Czechoslovakia in order to study, we studied here in a school for translators and interpreters. When I started at that school [in 1975] I actually didn't go to study the Czech language, what I requested was English and French like the rest of the world... but that was when Cuba joined the COMECON and at the time here in Cuba there were a lot of people that knew English, French but there were very few people who knew languages from Eastern countries so that year they opened up all the Eastern European languages at the school. And we chose Czech a little by chance. I had never heard a word of Czech, I didn't know anything about Czechoslovakia.¹⁵

After arriving to Czechoslovakia the Cubans

12 “Zpráva do vlády o výstavě v Habaně” (“Report for the Government About the Explosion in Havana”, undated), NA (National Archive), f. MZO (Ministry of Foreign Trade) 1945–1968, Kuba (Cuba), box 11.

13 Interview with J. B. (former student of SVŠT – Slovak Technical University of Bratislava, Faculty of Engineering, 1961–1968) 22 September 2009, Havana.

14 Interview with M. M. (former student of VŠT Košice, Faculty of Metallurgy, 1977–1982) 19 September 2009, San Agustín.

15 Interview with L. Ch. (former student of FF UP, Faculty of Philosophy at Palacký University of Olomouc, 1977–1981) 11 September 2009, Havana.

attended a one-year Czech language course provided by University of 17th November (USL)¹⁶, more accurately by its Institute for Language and Academic Training (FJOP USL). The courses were organized at university institutes spread out across the country, often in small and quite isolated towns. In the seventies the language courses were year-long, later they didn't last longer than six months. In 1976 the Cuban linguistic training system changed: first they had to pass the preliminary courses at "Hermanos País" Institute at the University of Havana. The Institute (also called "Facultad Preparatoria") was specifically created to teach languages to the students who were going overseas. The preliminary course lasted a year, and all the students selected to receive scholarships were required to attend. The scholarship recipients originally from the provinces had to move to Havana for a year for this purpose. Before leaving Cuba students attended a political training course organized by the Institute administration, and also took, within the framework of the language classes, a basic terminology course on Marxism-Leninism.¹⁷ The language classes were complemented by visits to and presentations at the Czechoslovak House of Culture in Havana, by readings from the Czechoslovak press, the projection of films, et cetera.

During their studies in Czechoslovakia the scholarship recipients were paid stipends of approximately 700 Czechoslovak crowns monthly, postgraduate students 1,200 crowns (the average gross salary fluctuated between 1,900 and 2,200 crowns). These were raised another one hundred crowns in the second half of the 70s. With this sum, students financed on-campus lodging and

their meals in the cafeteria. They had access to free medical treatment and enjoyed the same benefits as the Czechoslovak students (discounts etc.) Twice each term they received 500 crowns for clothing, and each year another 400 crowns for educational materials.¹⁸ Unlike students from other developing countries, first and foremost from Africa, who came from well-positioned families and had pocket money (in currency or in so-called "vouchers" that were valid at the Tuzex chain of stores where one could get export and foreign capitalist goods),¹⁹ the majority of Cubans depended on the stipend. Until 1964 they were allowed to have extra incomes. Amongst the most popular jobs were temporary jobs at the beer factories; the least popular were in the steel factories. While in the 60s the Cuban Embassy in Prague on occasion provided Cuban students with vouchers for Tuzex, for example, for clothing purchases,²⁰ it later prohibited them for "ideological reasons", which was not just incomprehensible to students but was also systematically alluded to:

Supposedly we didn't have a reason to have another currency that wasn't the crown, and [the Embassy] prohibited it from us, but of course, the whole world knew that it was there [at Tuzex] where you bought the best goods. And you would say to yourself: What's wrong with it? Why can't I buy [at Tuzex], what does that have to do with me, how does that affect me ideologically?²¹

16 Similarly to Patrice Lumumba University of Moscow or Karl Marx University of Leipzig, University of 17th November was dedicated to training students and young professionals from Third World countries in the communist spirit. It was founded in 1961 and existed until 1974.

17 "Příprava kubánských studentů ke studiu v ČSSR" ("Preparation of Cuban Students for Study in the Socialist Republic of Czechoslovakia") 12 April 1978, AMZV, f. Dokumentace TO- Kuba (Regional Office Documentation – Cuba), 1978, dossier 19, folder number 14, p. 2.

18 Letter from the Vice-Minister of Education Edun Kořístek to the Vice-Minister of Foreign Trade Kohout 8 November 1960, NA (National Archive), f. MŠK (Ministry of Education and Culture) – dossier "Stipendia, Zahraniční stipendisté v ČSR 1959–1964, Kuba" (Scholarships, Foreign Students in CSR 1959–1964, Cuba.), inventory no. 26, p. 1.

19 ŽÍDEK, Petr. Československo a francouzská Afrika 1948–1968 (Czechoslovakia and French Africa 1948–1968). Praha: Libri, 2006, p. 39.

20 Interview with J. M. (former student of VŠT Košice, Faculty of Metallurgy, 1961–1967) 12 September 2009, Havana. Interview with E. M. (former student of VŠT Košice, Faculty of Metallurgy, 1961–1967) 12 September 2009, Havana.

21 Interview with M. M. (former student of VŠT Košice, Faculty of Metallurgy, 1977–1982) 19 September 2009, San Agustín.

Just like other foreign students, Cuban students that studied in Czechoslovakia were also organized under their National Union, that formed part of the Federation of Latin American Students. On one hand, the Cubans proved less “spontaneous” than, for example, the African students (in general they informed their Embassy beforehand and “in a disciplined way” about their participation in demonstrations in support of Palestine and Vietnam), on the other hand there were conflicts in both their contact with the population and with the Czechoslovak authorities. The Cuban students regularly criticized the official position of Czechoslovakia as “corrupt” or “unrevolutionary”, et cetera. They also didn’t like their classmates’ lack of political enthusiasm. Cuban nationalism also played a certain role that their Czech classmates were not always able to fully understand:

My classmates would tell me: you Cubans are fools because you don’t want anything to do with the Americans.²²

Just like the Africans, black and mulatto Cubans occasionally experienced displays of xenophobia and racism, above all in the big cities. For Czech society in the 60s and 70s, strictly homogeneous and isolated from the outside world, encounters with a greater number of colored people constituted a shocking and for some even a traumatizing experience. During the first half of the 60s in Brno (the second largest city in Czechoslovakia) an average of ten serious assaults against Cuban students took place per year.²³ It is necessary to make known that with respect to these attacks the Czechoslovak authorities remained quite indifferent; according to the official propaganda,

22 Interview with M. M. (former student of VŠT Košice, Faculty of Metallurgy, 1977–1982) 19 September 2009, San Agustín.

23 “Informace o stálých provokacích o útocích proti kubánským stipendistům v Brně“ (Report on Constant Provocations and Attacks Against Cuban Scholarship Recipients in Brno) 5 May 1967, NA (National Archive), f. ÚV KSČ (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia), mez. odd. (International Office) KUBA 1967–1969, dossier “Kuba, zprávy MŠK o studentech” (“Cuba, Reports from the Ministry of Education y Culture on Students”).

racism did not exist in the socialist society.

During the second half of the 60s when Czechoslovakia experienced a measure of political and social liberation, the Cuban government limited the number of students there for ideological reasons. Particularly students studying the social sciences were transferred to Cuba (political economy, philosophy, but also for example senior year students in the film school Čimelice). A report from the International Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia from the fall of 1967 says about the Cuban students: “During the school year 1966-67, the [Cuban] Embassy’s control over their students became much more directive. It has become evident their effort to isolate Cuban students in the greatest way possible, not only from Czechoslovak citizens, but also from other international students. 26 Cuban students were withdrawn, of which 12 were already in their fourth and fifth year at university. One student from the University of Economy of Prague was returned to Cuba no less than three days before the defense of the student’s dissertation. Neither the University of 17th November nor the specific schools have been informed of the return of the students (...) According to information from some of them they have been reprimanded for the supposed adoption of our petty-bourgeois and revisionist theories of Marxism-Leninism” and the acceptance of some “petty-bourgeoisie harmful habits” of our way of life. Outwardly, the students’ return is justified by the urgent need for professionals in Cuba and that they can finish their studies in their home country. These reasons can be questioned, given that, for example, one very good student from the University of Economy was sent to do manual labor in the plantations.”²⁴

The Cuban students’ stays later continued during the so-called “normalization” period (Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia from 1968 to 1989). The general improvement in mutual

24 “Informace o studentech z Kuby“ (“Information on Students From Cuba”) 23 October 1967, ibidem.

relations –accompanied by the creation of the Cuban Consulate in Bratislava in the fall of 1970 and Fidel Castro’s official visit to Czechoslovakia in 1972– were reflected, in the sphere of educational and cultural cooperation, in the expansion of existing agreements. Thus the number of Cuban scholarship recipients that went to Czechoslovak universities stabilized at about twenty-five or thirty students per year.

A situation similar to that of the second half of the 60s –that is to say, the return of scholarship recipients in Czechoslovakia to Cuba for “ideological reasons”– was repeated at the end of the 80s with the arrival of the perestroika. This, naturally, wasn’t pleasing to Castro, above all because it included the streamlining of economic relations with Cuba and some drastic restrictions on the “mutually beneficial” business that represented a substantial burden for the economies of the Soviet bloc, including that of Czechoslovakia.

The subsequent events that occurred in Central and Eastern Europe at the end of 1989 and the beginning of 1990 not only affected the diplomatic and economic relations of the region with Cuba. Cultural and educational ties were also significantly affected: after 1990 only a few individuals came from Cuba to Czechoslovakia to study.

Many of the graduates from Czechoslovak schools occupied upon their return Cuba leadership positions in state agencies, ministries, companies and services. The scholarship recipients that studied industrial careers served during a large part of their lives (or still serve) in the Ministries of Industry, Metallurgy, Energy, etc. Others found work in the new institutes of education and investigation or participated directly in the founding of new university careers and academic centers.²⁵

25 Of the great number of male and female Cubans that stood out professionally in the State administration we could mention, for example, Isabel Allende who, following her studies at Charles University in Prague, worked first in diplomatic service (Ambassador in Moscow and Varsovia), afterwards she was Vice-Minister of Cuban Foreign Affairs and today is Director of the ISRI

One can imagine that during the years 1960-1989 about a thousand male and female Cubans passed through the Czechoslovak educational system, this number representing more a maximum limit. In the Czech archives one can locate the basic information (length of study, kind of career) of some 700 Cuban students and specialists.²⁶ The absolute majority of the cases dealt with university scholarship recipients. Scholarships to study in secondary schools were only granted to Cuban citizens until the 1977-1978 school year and they don’t add up to more than a few dozen. Without a doubt, it is a great shame that this important investment in Cuban personnel hasn’t been profitable and hasn’t been utilized to improve Cuban-Czech relations, which are currently not very good. Although one cannot entirely assume that any improvement in the current situation will lead to the restoration of economic, cultural and educational ties to levels quantitatively similar to the 60s, 70s or 80s, it would be interesting, as much for the Czech environment as for the Cuban environment, to try to reestablish the thirty-year tradition and revive the former “special relation that surpassed official relations between former socialist states”.²⁷



(Superior Institute of International Relations “Raúl Roa García”). Mario Cruz, one of the founders of the Institute of Microbiology of the University of Havana is also a graduate of Charles University. The Team of Translators and Interpreters of the Council of Ministers ESTI is currently led by Lázara Chang, graduate of the Faculty of Philosophy of Palacký University of Olomouc.

26 “Seznamy zahraničních absolventů všech druhů škol v ČSSR” (Lists of Foreign Graduates from all types of schools in the Socialist Republic of Czechoslovakia), NA (National Archive), f. DZS MŠ ČSR Praha (Center for International Services of the Ministry of Education CSR, Prague), boxes 1259 and 1261.

27 OPATRŇY, Josef. Československo-kubánské vztahy v období 1945–1989 (Relations Between Czechoslovakia and Cuba 1945–1989, accessible at URL: <<http://www.zahranicnapolitika.sk/index.php?id=231>> [online, 30. 06. 2007]