

Granma: More Than a Boat

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WRITER'S COMMENT: For UWP 102C: Writing in History, we were tasked with developing a research project centered around creating an original argument on a historical topic or public history site that demonstrated our ability to utilize primary and secondary sources effectively. After hearing that public history consists of analyzing museum exhibits, memorials, and other sites accessible to the public, my mind was instantly taken to the UC Davis study abroad trip I took to Cuba in August 2019. Not only did I take courses on the riveting topic of Latin American Revolutions at the epicenter of one of the most infamous revolutions in all of history—I also visited the majority of sites key to the Cuban Revolution itself. Fidel Castro's yacht, named Granma, stood out because of its role in taking Castro back home to liberate Cuba from corruption and widespread inequality. After the life-changing and vibrantly informative trip I took to Cuba, I felt I could do the Granma justice by capturing its immense significance to Cuban history after the Revolution.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Who will ever forget the misadventure of the Granma after reading the introduction to Maria Collazo's article? Here, Maria achieves what many history writers strive to do; she brings the past alive with a combination of factual detail and narrative force that draws readers in and leaves us wanting to know more. Maria, however, does more than just tell us an interesting story about the past. She shows us that the significance of the Granma lies not only in its literal journey bearing Fidel Castro and his men to Cuba 1956, but in the figurative uses the yacht has served, and continues to serve, as vessel for conveying and controlling the narrative of the Cuban Revolution

itself. Her argument persuades because she has done the hard work of the historian—finding and analyzing primary and secondary sources, drawing upon her own observations from her site visit of the historic yacht while studying abroad and, above all, gracefully putting these materials together in the service of her own interpretation of the Granma as a site of public history.

—Melissa Bender, University Writing Program

One stormy night in November 1956, a young, exiled Fidel Castro had a dream. He was going to be at the forefront of the movement for liberation in his home country of Cuba. Originally made for twelve passengers, eighty-two men squeezed onto a small yacht named Granma and set off on their journey to free Cuba. Shortly after embarking on the voyage, passenger Ernesto “Che” Guevara remembered a “frenzied search for anti-seasickness pills” that were never found. The crew of revolutionaries merrily “sang the Cuban national anthem and the ‘Hymn of the 26th of July’ for about five minutes,” when the trip took a turn for the worse.¹ Men were seen clenching their abdomens, piled over buckets, and laying in “strange positions” unable to move for fear that they would release whatever they had eaten the day before.² The trouble continued as the yacht arrived two days later than expected and at the wrong target location. After wandering for days, the crew was spotted by the Cuban army. When Castro’s plan began falling apart around him, he and fifteen of his men that had not been captured, lost, or murdered regrouped and sought refuge in the surrounding Sierra Maestra mountains. For seventeen months, the men prepared for the fight of their lives and when the time came, they swept in and emerged victorious.³ More than a small rickety yacht, the Granma that they traveled on would become symbolic as the physical and psychological vehicle that sped the Cuban Revolution into fruition.

With a new regime in place, Fidel Castro made the 26th of July movement relevant in the lives of Cubans by making his journey to

1 The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “26th of July Movement,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, 20 July 1998. www.britannica.com/topic/26th-of-July-Movement. Founded by Fidel Castro in 1955, the 26th of July Movement (Movimiento 26 de Julio) was a revolutionary organization credited with overthrowing the Fulgencio Batista regime in 1959.

2 Thomas C. Wright, “Fidel Castro’s Road to Power, 1952–1959.” In *Latin America in the Era of the Cuban Revolution and Beyond* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 10.

3 Ibid., 11.

power part of a longer revolutionary folklore in Cuba. One way he did this was by integrating the importance of the *Granma* into the fabric of Cuban history. Whenever the island fell on difficult times, they could rejoice in the fact that they were part of the larger fight to rid themselves of dictators that oppressed them. Although part of the allure of this revolutionary tradition included emphasizing certain events and perspectives of the Cuban Revolution over others, the value of the *Granma* in the eyes of Cubans would not waver. Through the inclusion of firsthand accounts that witnessed Castro's rule, sources within and outside of the island give insight about the *Granma* Memorial as a key artifact in the Museum of Revolution and its role as part of a larger plan to change the narrative about what a communist government was really like. While some journalists critiqued Castro's methods to promote an ideology that painted him as a hero, others praised his courage and to this day see him as a liberator. Regardless of what perspective is accepted, one thing is clear: post-revolution, the *Granma* was employed as an instrument in Fidel Castro's regime to positively rewrite the way Cubans thought about their place in history and the way the revolution was understood around the world.

After the overthrow of Fulgencio Batista in 1959, Fidel Castro established himself as the new president of Cuba. Castro's administration vehemently went to work on capturing a Cuban history to be proud of through several mediums, one being museums. In 1974, the presidential palace in Havana, Cuba would be turned into the *Museo De La Revolución* (Museum of the Revolution), dedicated to covering the exploits of Fidel's 26th of July movement.⁴ The *Granma*, an 18-meter-long, rundown, diesel-powered yacht was moved from its place in Havana Bay into its own permanent outdoor exhibit behind the museum. Encased in glass as part of the *Granma* Memorial under the *Pabellon Granma* (*Granma* Pavilion), it is surrounded by several planes, vehicles, and missiles utilized in other key events of the revolution. Despite being guarded by soldiers 24 hours a day, seven days a week, year-round, the *Granma* has been open for the public to see since its opening.⁵ What is remarkable about the Museum of the Revolution is that it houses so many crucial artifacts within its walls. Tourists could stay in Havana and see some of the most revered relics of the Cuban Revolution, ranging from Che

⁴ "Museo de la Revolución," 2018, www.lahabana.com/guide/museo-de-la-revolucion/

⁵ "*Granma* Memorial," 1976.

Guevara's beret to a Soviet tank used by Castro. I believe the museum with exhibits like the *Granma* Memorial, serve a greater purpose beyond just documenting a radical period in Cuba's history. Its easy accessibility to tourists from around the world also coincides with what some scholars believe was a tactic used by Castro to export a more positive, Soviet-aligned understanding of the Cuban revolution abroad.

Before pondering the purpose of emphasizing certain artifacts of Cuba's past, it is important to explore where this perspective came from. Cuba began pushing the idea of a glorious revolution following the removal of Fulgencio Batista's regime. At that crucial moment, Castro's 26th of July Movement was not well enough organized nor adequately versed in government policy to outline the next steps for the country. Thus, the Communist Party of Cuba stepped in and modeled the new Cuban government after the "Soviet bloc countries of Eastern Europe."⁶ How did this manifest? Castro's regime dissolved capitalism on the island, collectivized agricultural production by placing it under government control, nationalized millions of dollars of private property, and forged tight relations with the Soviet Union.⁷ Essentially, the two nations formed a partnership. Cuba received much needed economic and military support. In return, the Soviet Union attained a new ally in Castro, to support their own military endeavors and further promote Marxist-Leninist ideology as the sole method of running a corruption free socialist state.⁸ Castro welcomed the permeation of Marxist-Leninism throughout Cuban society and culture but adapted it to highlight his successes and those of his guerrilla revolutionaries. Starting with educational institutions like museums, Castro sought to recreate the Soviet framework to ensure the success of the Cuban Revolution.

According to researcher in cultural anthropology Pablo González, following 1975, museums were transformed from impartial institutions

6 Franklin W. Knight, and Sandrah H. Levinson, "Cuba," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 17 Mar. 2020, www.britannica.com/place/Cuba. Following World War II, the Soviet Union maintained control of several eastern European countries that became known as the Warsaw Pact alliance (also known as the Soviet bloc/Eastern bloc).

7 Knight and Levinson, "Cuba."

8 W. John Morgan. "Marxism-Leninism: The Ideology of Twentieth-Century Communism." *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* 14, no. 2 (Dec. 2015): 656–662. doi:10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.93075-7. Marxist-Leninism was a communist ideology and movement that aimed to replace capitalism through a two-stage revolutionary process. First, to create a political party that would gain control on behalf of the working class and secondly to establish a one-party socialist state.

to those skewed toward a communist agenda. Museums became “instruments of ideological and aesthetics instillation” encompassed by a “Marxist-Leninist worldview,” that sought to eradicate capitalism and implement a dictatorship ruled by the working class.⁹ Rather than retell the Cuban Revolution in terms of facts, Castro allowed ideology to sway the way people, events, and artifacts would be described. To understand Cuban history and culture was to accept ideas pushed by the Cuban government as undeniable truth. Regarding the *Granma*, Cuban historians chose to speak about the eighty-two passengers as confident heroes, instead of young untrained men who made a lot of mistakes that got more than two thirds of their crew killed. Castro believed that the revolution was an “extraordinary process of education” and that it was his administration’s duty to “create the consciousness” of the people.¹⁰ Thus, it was in Castro’s best interest to convert Cuba into a state where all aspects of life were restricted to a narrow view of the revolution, because in the eyes of many, he became a liberator and his enemies the tyrants. The idea of the guerilla fighter and all things associated, like the *Granma*, would be ingrained as part of Cuban revolutionary history through constant references that boosted Cuban morale, even when the world portrayed them as massive dependents of the Soviet Union.

Apart from the narrative being advertised by the Cuban government, American journalists for the *Los Angeles Times* Shirley Slater and Harry Basch would take in the Museum of the Revolution through an objective lens in their account of a 1988 Havana. They would describe several museum exhibits and upon seeing the *Granma*, they recited how it was housed in a “huge glass exhibit case like the Viking ships in Norwegian museums,” of Europe.¹¹ Holding Cuba’s chosen artifacts to the degree of those in museums across the globe proves that Castro was successful in his representation of highlighting a just revolution worth remembering. If even foreigners from a rival nation like the United States could marvel in the glory of an object like the *Granma* without criticizing it as part of a ploy that solely captures a narrow retelling of Castro’s rule, then this narrative of Cuban history would not be so readily contested by others.

9 Pablo A. González, “Museums in revolution: changing narratives in revolutionary Cuba between 1959 and 1990.” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 21, no. 3 (2015): 270. doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2014.939102

10 González, “Museums in revolution,” 265.

11 Shirley Slater and Harry Basch. “HAVANA CUBA.” *Los Angeles Times*, 29 May 1988. www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-05-29-tr-5454-story.html

More recently, toward the final months of Castro's life in 2016, Jennifer Dickey of *The Public Historian* wrote a review of the Museum of the Revolution that focused on the progress of the renovations being made to various exhibits, including the *Granma* Pavilion. Dickey wrote, "the most notable differences between the older and new exhibits are the presentation of a chronology of the events covered in each room" that include "short, descriptive text in both English and Spanish that relates to the objects" within the cases.¹² Providing information in English could only be a sign that the Cuban government was ready for a wider audience to understand their perspective of the Cuban Revolution. Rather than just view the *Granma*, tourists could now learn its importance to the country as a whole. In rooms that were yet to be updated, there continued to be limited explanations on artifacts with contested histories. To even undergo the renovations in the first place may have also been indicative that Castro was finally willing to move forward with incorporating a more expansive understanding of the country's past, not just spreading a particular ideology as a substitute for the truth. Regardless of any inconsistencies in design, Dickey expressed that, at face value, the chosen artifacts on display created a strong image of Cuban revolutionaries that fought through "impossible odds and despite the continuing imperialist aggressiveness of the United States" to achieve victory. Whether the museum would be able to offer a more "truthful interpretation and inclusion of a history" past the fall of the Soviet Union was yet to be determined.¹³ However, Dickey expressed an interest in returning when the long overdue project would be complete. Overall, these three perspectives on the Museum of the Revolution find themselves settling on the understanding of Cuba coming together to solidify their history post-Batista into the story of a new era, the relics of the revolution highlighting the struggle to achieve it.

Aside from lending its name to a province and new national park, the *Granma* initially became ingrained as part of the Cuban Revolution's mythos as the voice of the communist party of Cuba. A 1966 *Time Magazine* article stated that in "Havana's Communist daily *Granma*," Castro explained his quarrel with Peking [now spelled Beijing] about

12 Jennifer W. Dickey "Museo de la Revolución (Museum of the Revolution)" *The Public Historian* 38, no. 3, (Aug. 2016): 157. doi.org/10.1525/tph.2016.38.3.155

13 Ibid., 161.

how they had “committed an act of economic aggression” by reducing rice shipments to Cuba and sending “huge amounts of propaganda for espionage purposes,” to the Cuban military.¹⁴ The method in which the magazine introduced Castro’s new newspaper was clearly aimed at reminding everyone that as a communist dictator, Castro would use the paper as a mouthpiece to spew his lies and biased opinions. Even further, the article makes a point to criticize Castro for threatening to cut ties with communist ally China, and further aligning his country with the Soviet Union. It was clear that the United States was not buying the narrative of a free Cuba under Castro’s communist regime. The footnote at the end of the article cemented their position; *Granma* was the new communist newspaper, but it was also a “corruption of the word grandmother.”¹⁵

In “Cuban Communicators,” writers James Carty Jr. and Janet Terry would touch on how Cuba’s communist party in 1976 would now encourage journalists to comply with the parameters that allowed only specific coverage of the regime. *Granma* had become “the nation’s largest and most influential newspaper,” but Castro’s administration still desired that other journalists “devote special attention to the development of a truly revolutionary and socialist style,” in Cuba.¹⁶ Everywhere the *Granma* newspaper fell short, other news sources were burdened with the task of further spreading the ideals of the revolution to Cubans living on the island and abroad. How this is relevant to the *Granma* is in its role as a vehicle of delivery. Back in 1956, the small yacht delivered the revolutionary guerillas to Cuba. Then, as a newspaper, *Granma* would deliver information as a direct line of communication between Castro and the Cuban citizens. Similarly, the *Time Magazine* article and “Cuban Communicators” emphasized that Castro wanted more than to just unify his country. He was going to use several mediums of communication and entangle them with specific historical events to create an environment where a dictatorship could survive—an environment where the government was directed by and for the working class. Naming the national newspaper *Granma* was not just a reference to a boat, it was all part of a strategy to keep Castro in power by controlling the way Cubans

14 “Cuba Down with Imperialism—12,000 Miles Away,” *TIME Magazine*, 18 Feb. 1966. content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,899011,00.html

15 Ibid.

16 James W. Carty Jr., and Janet Liu Terry. “Cuban Communicators.” *Caribbean Quarterly: A Journal of Caribbean Culture* 22. no. 4 (1976): 59–67. doi.org/10.1080/00086495.1976.11829278.

understood his position of authority over them. To Cuban citizens, Castro was more than a leader: he was a father to a revitalized nation that thrived to protect its citizens from inequality and corruption. Since the communist party could not convince everyone that there was only one way to interpret the events of the revolution, news outlets, radio stations, and museums ensured the 26th of July movement would be praised by presenting only the information that was most beneficial to its understanding. To admit the revolution was flawed was to admit that the entire movement was a mistake, and through the lens of a revolutionary consciousness, that could never be so.

Today, Cuba has kept the memory of the *Granma* voyage alive and well. On one of the few Cuban websites I could access, I discovered a special edition of the newspaper *Granma* that celebrated the 50th anniversary of the yacht's voyage. "Nunca se escuchó una sola queja, ni un lamento, ni en esos momentos ni en los que vinieron después, que serían crudos y difíciles, sino todo lo contrario, en medio de toda la tensión siempre hubo una broma o un chiste a flor de labios."¹⁷ This article was meant to highlight the bravery of the eighty-two men that put their lives on the line for the sake of their country. Additionally, it invoked a sense of respect for the insurgents because they made the ultimate sacrifice to liberate all Cuban citizens from the oppression. "Así de esa manera, con absoluto desprendimiento y patriotismo hicieron aquella proeza y desde aquel pequeño yate fundaron una invencible fuerza que, como dijo el poeta, brilla con luz propia y nada puede apagarla."¹⁸ Whether an ode to the guerilla fighters or complete propaganda, there is no doubt that the language surrounding the revolution was emotionally charged. Instead of including instances of anxiety, the author chose to recite the most positive moments of the *Granma's* voyage to raise Cuban morale.

Thus, the *Granma* would represent all the best sides of the Cuban Revolution. For better or worse, Castro would use this revolutionary lore to unify Cuban citizens when most of the world turned a blind eye to the difficult position they had been put in. Forging stability came at the cost

17 "Lo que brilla con luz propia, nada lo puede apagar." *Granma Cuba Si*. (Havana: Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba). Translation: "There was never a single complaint, nor a lament, neither in those moments nor in those that came later, which would be crude and difficult, but quite the opposite, in the midst of all the tension there was always a joke or a joke on the surface of lips."

18 Ibid. Translation: "Thus in that way, with absolute detachment and patriotism they did that feat and from that small yacht they founded an invincible force that, as the poet said, shines with its own light and nothing can extinguish it."

of hiding the shortcomings of Fidel Castro's 26th of July movement for what Castro and many revolutionaries believed would help them achieve a more just world. More than just a boat, the *Granma* became the symbol for that small sliver of hope, that chance to initiate a new chapter in history.

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