

“Strength to Die and Fists to Fight”:
Fidel Castro’s Letters from Isle of Pines Prison
And His Plans for the Cuban Revolution

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I hope one day, in a free motherland, we will travel together through the fields of indomitable Oriente, gathering up the heroic bones of our comrades to unite them all in a great tomb next to that of Martí, as martyrs of the Centennial. Their epitaph will be a quote from Martí: “No martyr dies in vain, nor is any idea lost in the motion of the waves and the blowing of the winds. They move away or they come closer, but the memory remains of having seen them.” ... We still have the strength to die and fists to fight. From all of us, we send you a strong embrace.¹

On December 12, 1953, from his prison cell on the Isle of Pines, Fidel Castro professed a willingness to give up his life for the promise of a free Cuba despite having achieved little thus far. While in solitary confinement, Castro wrote prolifically to family, friends, and compatriots using whatever paper he could find, often balancing letters on a plank to write.² Throughout his correspondence, he obsessed over plans for the revolution and dreams of victory. In these letters, Castro detailed his motivations for seeking a violent confrontation, the means by which to achieve change, his own readiness to sacrifice his life for the cause and the limitations of his leadership. During his time in prison, Castro defined his vision for Cuba and worked to initiate a grassroots rebellion against the Batista regime. Despite the fact that this portion of Castro’s life is often minimized, in this paper I will analyze the contents of the letters, which provide valuable insight into the inner workings of the revolution and its potential supporters.

This paper examines letters written by Fidel Castro during his two-year incarceration in the Isle of Pines prison in Cuba from November 1953 until May 1955. This collection of correspondence gathered by Luis Conte Agüero, a member of Castro’s revolutionary army, contains twenty-one letters of the Castro prison letters.³ Although

¹ Fidel Castro, *December 12, 1953. To Luis Conte Agüero*. In *The Prison Letters of Fidel Castro*, ed. Ann Louise Bardach (New York: Nation Books), 12. Oriente is an eastern province of Cuba. Jose Martí, during the mid-19th century, was the Cuban leader of a revolt against Spanish colonial authorities. Idolized by Cuban citizens, Martí became a national hero representing opposition to oppressive regimes.

² Castro, *November 29, 1954. To Lidia Castro*. In *The Prison Letters of Fidel Castro*, 12.

³ Fidel Castro, *Introduction to The Prison Letters of Fidel Castro*, ed. Ann Louise Bardach and Luis Conte Agüero (New York: Nation Books, 2007). Luis Conte Agüero was the recipient of much of the

there were a variety of different recipients for the letters, a significant number of the letters in the anthology were addressed to Conte. Only recently, has this collection become available to the public in English translation. For historians, this is the quintessential set of Fidel Castro writings, an unfiltered anthology of documents providing tremendous insight into the life and motivations of the leader. One letter addressed to Luis Conte, on December 12, 1953, is the longest and most valuable of the documents due to its detailed accounts of the Moncada attack and the abuses of the Batista regime, in addition to providing concrete plans for a future revolution. Beyond his prison letters, Fidel Castro has extensively documented his own life and works to provide his interpretation of the revolution. Ernesto “Che” Guevara, a compatriot, has also written accounts of Castro’s contribution to the revolt. Despite some limitations and biases, they provide eyewitness accounts to events and reasoning for the revolution.

While various aspects of Fidel Castro’s life have been extensively studied, historians have not written the majority of work on Fidel Castro. In terms of biographies, historian Robert E. Quirk’s *Fidel Castro* is considered to be the authoritative text, providing a comprehensive examination of the leader’s life from birth to present.⁴ Meticulously researched, Quirk characterizes Castro’s elevation to power as a series of

correspondence. Conte presents the most extensive volume of letters available to date. The work itself is available in full-text English and Spanish, providing a tremendous resource to historians and biographers seeking to understand Castro through an unfiltered lens. Since the documents were sent to specific individuals, few have survived. No writings to Castro during his imprisonment were included in the text, and while it is an understandable exclusion, events that might have influenced the tone and content of Castro’s letters are also missing from the collection. The intended audience of the correspondence varies. At times, it is clear that the document was to be read out loud to followers, while in other instances, Castro simply sets forth instructions to be carried out.

⁴ Thomas Leonard, “Review of Robert Quirk, *Fidel Castro: The Full Story of His Rise to Power, His Regime, His Allies, and His Adversaries*”, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 539 (1995): 196-197.

rash decisions followed by improbable successes.⁵ Other authors such as Leychester Coltman, Volker Skierka, and Tad Szulc have published more popular books on Fidel Castro.⁶ Although they are trained writers or journalists, basic elements of historical research are missing. Historians have not yet reached the revisionist or post-revisionist phase of analysis of Castro since he is a relatively new historical figure. As a result, Quirk's work is the most definitive historical portrayal of Fidel Castro's life. Much of his analysis focuses on the later years of Castro's regime, rather than his ascent to power.

Prior to Batista's seizure of power, it was possible for Cuban citizens to have an active and productive voice in government, the outlet through which Castro first attempted to implement his reforms. Due to widespread discontent during the 1930s, the Cuban Constitution was finally enacted in 1940 as a means to protect the rights of citizens. The Constitution called for the defense of economic, civil, and social liberties in addition to basic property rights. For a brief period, the new government elected officials to administrative positions and a legislative body was chosen. However, in 1952, "a military coup preempted the constitution as Fulgencio Batista restored the army to political preeminence."⁷ Castro was particularly angered by this action and immediately sought to end Batista's presidency.

⁵ Robert E. Quirk, *Fidel Castro* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995). Although numerous attempts were made, Quirk was unable to interview Castro in person during the course of his investigations.

⁶ Leychester Coltman, *The Real Fidel Castro* (United States: Yale University Press, 2005). Leychester Coltman, British ambassador to Cuba, shared a close personal relationship with Castro. Although *The Real Fidel Castro* contains some insight into the intricate workings of Castro's administration, the information provided prior to Coltman's personal experiences lacks a significant bibliography to trace the sources. However, the vast majority of the content appears to be consistent with other biographies. Tad Szulc, *Fidel: A Critical Portrait* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000). Szulc, an American foreign correspondent draws upon extensive personal interviews with Castro to provide an insightful work. However, the work does not include a traditional footnote or endnote bibliography; Volker Skierka, *Fidel Castro: A Biography* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006). In *Fidel Castro: A Biography*, Volker Skierka provides a balanced view of Castro's life and revolution.

⁷ Perez- Stable, 36.

Castro quickly became frustrated with Batista's rejection of the established political process and resorted to extra-governmental means to achieve change. The earliest attempts to overthrow the Batista Administration were unsuccessful. At first, Castro tried to oust the regime from within the government. Early on, he ran for political offices with his eventual goal being the presidency.⁸ Although only in office a short time, Batista suspended many of the rights recently given to citizens despite his pledge to work with the public.⁹ Batista argued that the Cuban people should "shoulder to shoulder, ... work for the spiritual harmony of the Great Cuban family and feel, in this land that belongs to us all, as Martí wished, Cubans and brothers, men and women, united in the same ideal, the same hope, the same aspirations for progress and democracy, for freedom and justice."¹⁰ Batista was able to control the actions and image of his administration through his first year in office. Shortly thereafter, rumors regarding brutality against political prisoners surfaced. Elections were continually postponed and Batista remained in his self-appointed chief of state position.¹¹

Although lacking in popular support, Batista managed to maintain control of Cuba, which fueled Castro's demand for change and added validity to his call for a revolution. Batista's administration remained in Cuba thanks, in part, to the backing of the United States government who had significant economic stakes in the country.¹² He maintained a certain level of support internally as well; although, it was primarily from

⁸ Quirk, 33.

⁹ Quirk, 42, 37-39. The coup was by most accounts bloodless and achieved without significant resistance. The public, while not particularly dismayed to witness the end of the previous regime, was under no illusions regarding Batista's intentions.

¹⁰ Quirk, 39. As quoted in Quirk, one of Batista's early speeches to the public as broadcasted via radio to the Cuban public.

¹¹ Quirk, 47-50. In an attempt to avoid dealing with an elected position, Fulgencio Batista created the position of head of state shortly after coming to office.

¹² Perez, 19-21. John Charles Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire: a concise history of Latin America*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 262.

the upper classes. Batista was able to retain a firm grasp on the country and its citizens.¹³ As a result of the outside interference, the administration's abuses, and the abandonment of any attempts to carry out the will of the public, Castro built a revolutionary group to address those issues. When it appeared that a collapse was unlikely, Fidel Castro and his followers began to escalate their efforts by shifting their focus outside of governmental processes.

From the first days of the Batista regime, Castro argued against the legality of Batista's government and advocated for the reactivation of the Cuban Constitution of 1940.¹⁴ He petitioned the courts for Batista's imprisonment and the removal of the current regime from office. When his attempts to work within the government failed, Castro started to advocate armed revolts against the administration. Shortly thereafter, Castro and a group of his followers executed a poorly planned assault on the Moncada Barracks. Marifeli Perez-Stable argues that it "was a resounding fiasco. Dozens of youths were captured, tortured, and killed, the rest imprisoned."¹⁵ As soon as his safety was ensured, Fidel Castro surrendered to Archbishop Enrique Perez Serantes, a family friend, after a brief standoff with the military. He was put on trial for his crimes, found guilty and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. During his closing arguments, he gave his "history will absolve me" speech, which was a fundamental piece of propaganda used to

¹³Edward Gonzalez. *Cuba Under Castro: the limits of charisma*. (United States: Houghton Mifflin Company), 32. According to Gonzalez, Batista "was personally corrupt and opportunistic, ...he succeeded in winning over virtually every organized sector of Cuban society, ...legitimizing his rule and stabilizing the old order."

¹⁴ Gonzalez, 44-45.

¹⁵ Perez- Stable, 53. Soldiers present during the attacks on the Moncada Barracks, in retaliation for the assault, were often responsible for the inhumane treatment of the revolutionaries. In one case, a sister of a revolutionary was presented with her brother's eyes during an interrogation.

argue for and validate the future revolution.¹⁶ He was taken to Isle of Pines, Cuba's civilian prison, a short time later. While originally sentenced to fifteen years in prison, Castro only served two years before receiving amnesty and eventually exiled.¹⁷ Despite the short duration of his imprisonment, Castro wrote prolifically. His letters contain intensely personal statements regarding his emotions and general treatment in prison.¹⁸ In order to establish himself as the voice of the people, Castro used his tenure behind bars as an opportunity to disseminate his message and to organize the future revolution.

In his earliest prison letters, Fidel Castro outlined major goals for the reshaping of Cuba, providing a clear view of the problems citizens faced, and what he aspired to achieve. From the beginning, Castro's plans were socialist in nature with a major emphasis on land redistribution and reform, individual control of labor and its fruits, rewarding citizens who provided for their families and for the country. As punishment those who refused to commit to his policies of the state, he "mandated the confiscation of all property."¹⁹ Under the guise of reforms, Fidel Castro framed the goals he would have implemented had his attack on the Moncada Barracks been successful. In the first letter, he argued for "[the] reestablishment of the Constitution of 1940, modified" with amendments to accommodate recent changes to the Cuban government.²⁰ Some part of

¹⁶ Castro, ix. There is some speculation as to whether Castro ever delivered the "history will absolve me" speech during the course of his trial. No transcripts were taken, so there remains some question whether it was simply written later and distributed to the public. The story, if false, would have added validity to Castro's case and made the revolutionaries appear willing to counter the current administration's status quo.

¹⁷ Castro served only two years in prison before being granted amnesty by the Batista regime. After his release, he continued to plot the overthrow of the government, which resulted in his exile.

¹⁸ One of his personal connections was able to transfer Castro to a civilian prison. Since Castro attacked a military barracks, his time at a military prison facility would have, undoubtedly, been significantly more harsh. Throughout his letters, Castro repeatedly discussed his maltreatment and the abuses of his captors. During his incarceration on the Isle of Pines, locally known as Cuba's Devil's Island, Castro was fairly well treated despite his complaints to the contrary.

¹⁹ Castro, *December 12, 1954*, 9.

²⁰ Castro, *December 12, 1954*, 9.

the government, at this point, could be saved. Democracy remained a fundamental part of Castro's plan. Underneath the struggling Cuban economy, Castro believed was a vibrant market with tremendous potential that could be utilized through the "energetic policy of the state, directly intervening in the creation of new industries."²¹ As demonstrated through his confidence in the constitution, Castro argued that the problem was not inherent within the government, but rather the corruption of the Batista regime had permeated all levels of society.

In his first letter, Castro claims that in order to correct the problems of the Batista administration, a set of six laws to reform the Cuban government must be implemented. Prior to his imprisonment, Castro contended that "the government made sure that all [the] documents [disappeared]" that included any of his primary reforms.²² Therefore, this one letter became his only opportunity to establish his agenda for the public. In the letter, Castro argued that the primary targets of his reforms were members of the lower class, including "small sugar cane growers, tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and squatters."²³ In addition, these individuals should be granted land titles as the first order of business for his new government. Landowners under the previous regime would have been compensated for their losses. Beyond land control, he claimed the revolution should give "workers the right to the final profits of enterprises and a 55 percent share in the cane's yield to the small sugar cane grower."²⁴ Fidel Castro planned to diversify the economy of the state, moving away from the traditional and troublesome sugar monoculture, instead providing incentives for new industry and breaking up the dominant special interests

²¹ Castro, *December 12, 1954*, 9.

²² Castro, *December 12, 1954*, 9.

²³ Castro, *December 12, 1953*, 9.

²⁴ Castro, *December 12, 1953*, 9.

determined to preserve the old agricultural system.²⁵ In addition, he wrote, “another law would have decreed the dismissal of all the judiciary, administrative, municipal, provincial, or national officials who had betrayed the Constitution.”²⁶ It is apparent that, in Castro’s view, the corruption of the current administration was inherent throughout civic leadership and not simply the major figures of the Batista regime. Through the early communiqués, it is evident that while the Moncada attack failed and even though he was not adequately prepared to lead a military revolt, Castro did have concrete plans for the future of Cuba.

For Castro, it was essential upon entering prison, to use his situation to spread his ideologies throughout the country and to build up his revolution, which he was able to achieve through his correspondence. In a letter to Luis Conte on December 12, 1953, Castro asked for a manifesto to be written and requested that he receive the credit for its creation. In addition to his immediate plans for Cuba, the document was to include a description of the atrocities committed by the Batista regime. Castro asserted that the manifesto should “call for the punishment of the murders, ...demand their incarceration, ... the simple publication of the charges will have tremendous consequences for the government.”²⁷ Castro planned to use his connections at the University of Havana to have it published in their student newspaper, *Alma Mater*.²⁸ Although he did not personally write the manifesto, Castro clearly dictated the content and direction of the document from his prison cell.²⁹

²⁵ Castro, *December 12, 1953*, 9.

²⁶ Castro, *December 12, 1953*, 9.

²⁷ Castro, *December 12, 1953*, 11.

²⁸ Castro, *December 12, 1953*, 11. *Alma Mater*, fittingly, was the student newspaper at the university where Castro received his law degree. It was thought to be at least partially outside of the influence of the government.

²⁹ Castro, *December 12, 1953*, 11.

Throughout his correspondence, Castro argued for the use of various mediums including radio, national and student newspapers, and interpersonal communication to spread his revolutionary propaganda throughout the country. In a letter to his wife, Mirta, on April 17, 1954, Castro urged the printing of a pamphlet denouncing the Batista government, promoting the revolutionary ideology, and describing the atrocities committed against political prisoners. In the writings, he discussed a “true tribute” of the anniversary of the Moncada Barracks attack on July 26.³⁰ The gatherings were to be held at a number of locations throughout the country including University Esplanade, “the Institutes, and in Santiago de Cuba.”³¹ While Castro, at times, was frustrated by the apparent indifference displayed by the media, he sought to take advantage of their ability to disseminate information.³² He asked his followers to appeal to “the directors of newspapers and radio stations to present the problem and ask for their cooperation.”³³ Castro believed that “the intervention of *Bohemia* would be decisive... a well-written article in the magazine is too much for these people to withstand” especially if it included “photographs and opinions... commented on by criminal justice experts.”³⁴ He also intended for Luis Conte to act as his surrogate for the public audience. Castro planned for Conte to appear on the television program Meet the Press due to his charismatic presence, maturity, and his public popularity.³⁵ While removed from direct public appeals, Castro maintained a strong grasp on the leadership of the revolutionary party, with subordinates deferring judgment to him even from prison.

³⁰ Castro, *June 12, 1954*, 20.

³¹ Castro, *April 17, 1954*, 15.

³² Castro, *June 19, 1954*, 23.

³³ Castro, *June 19, 1954*, 26.

³⁴ Castro, *June 19, 1954*, 26.

³⁵ Castro, *February 17, 1955*, 57. The television program Meet the Press (Ante la Prensa) is a Cuban version of the American news program. In the letter, Castro praised Conte’s ability to articulate the true nature of the cause citing Conte’s extensive writing and public speaking background.

As evident through his letters, Castro specifically targeted certain groups of individuals as potential supporters of a Cuban Revolution in order to extend his public base. From the beginning, Castro advocated a benevolent attitude towards all people. In the letters, he recommended a soft approach, with a minimal amount of confrontation in order to build a larger base of followers.³⁶ Castro claimed the public instinctively was able to differentiate between legitimate leaders and tyrannical dictators. They would, therefore, lend their support to his movement.³⁷ In the correspondence, he advocated for socioeconomic reforms, which would encourage the lower class to support his cause.³⁸ He believed the inclusion of students would be advantageous to the movement. While Castro claimed that university students had previously misplaced their efforts, they would achieve greater success by joining his movement.³⁹ He argued that “without any doubt, the youth who oppose the government constitute the immense majority of our generation.”⁴⁰ In addition, he wrote that “a tested and trusted youth is worth one thousand regular men.”⁴¹ Castro hoped that by reaching out to this audience he would have wide reaching popular support, even years down the line, when he was eventually able to generate an armed action against Batista.

In addition, Castro argued in his letters that using his connections to revolutionaries abroad would serve to build support for the revolution among the international community, with the caveat that the revolt itself should remain under Cuban

³⁶ Castro, *April 17, 1954*, 15. Castro argued his followers should act with a “soft touch and a smile” in order to “defend our points without ruffling any feathers.”

³⁷ Castro, *June 12, 1954*, 21.

³⁸ Castro, *August 14, 1954*, 45. Castro planned for his program to “encompass—amply, boldly, and concretely—the serious socioeconomic problems facing the nation and deliver a truly new and promising message to the masses.”

³⁹ Castro, *June 19, 1954*, 26.

⁴⁰ Castro, *February 17, 1955*, 57.

⁴¹ Castro, *August 14, 1954*, 45.

control. While he wanted outside involvement, Castro was willing to sacrifice any financial or political contribution they could bring if it meant the removal of local control of the revolution.⁴² He argued “it [was] also necessary to have a dignified commemoration on the 26th of July” in New York, Mexico, and Costa Rica hoping to build Cuban emigrant support.⁴³ By creating sympathy and interest abroad, Castro expected to lessen the American support for the Batista regime.

Throughout his early correspondence, Castro recognized the need for an army regardless of whether the revolution was conducted peacefully or by force. He claimed that it was essential for the revolutionaries to have the capability to conquer their opposition; otherwise, the revolt runs the risk of failing to achieve its objectives.⁴⁴ While he admitted that the Cuban military did not readily join his cause, he believed that Batista’s regime “[had] been poisoning the soul of the military, falsifying the facts, imposing prior censorship.”⁴⁵ Castro does not argue that the revolution should be non-violent; rather, he believed violence was justified by the end results.⁴⁶ In a letter late in his prison term, Castro wrote,

We are not troublemakers by trade, nor blind partisans of violence if the motherland we seek can be achieved with the weapons of reason and intelligence. No people would follow a group of adventurers who aimed to lead the country to civil war unless injustice is the rule and peaceful and legal means are blocked to all citizens in the civic contest of ideas. We agree with Martí that ‘it is criminal to promote a war that can be prevented and criminal to fail to promote one that is inevitable.’⁴⁷

⁴² Castro, *April 17, 1954*, 15. Castro specifically named José Pardo Llada, a Cuban radio commentator in Columbia, and Raúl Martínez and Lester Rodríguez, members of Castro’s revolutionary party.

⁴³ Castro, *April 17, 1954*, 14- 15.

⁴⁴ Castro, *August 14, 1954*, 44.

⁴⁵ Castro, *March 1955*, 66.

⁴⁶ Castro, *December 12, 1953*, 12.

⁴⁷ Castro, *March 1955*, 69-70.

He saw the involvement of force as necessary to maintain power although that force would come from within his own organization and not through a military coup.

Throughout his letters, Castro associated his cause with the ideals of liberty, freedom, justice, and country. Immediately upon incarceration, Castro called for justice for the dead. However, he argued that it could not exist under the current regime, necessitating a power shift.⁴⁸ He claimed to personify the ideals of the revolution because of his willingness to be “sent to jail for the crime of defending liberty, rights, and the Constitution.”⁴⁹ In one letter, Castro argued that his followers were loyal defenders “of the cause, which is the cause of those who do not resign themselves to be slaves in the thousand-times glorious homeland where today her children are even denied the right to be men.”⁵⁰ Complementing their performance, Castro took great care to praise his comrades for their loyalty and dedication to the cause.⁵¹ This rhetoric was used to differentiate between Castro’s revolutionaries and Batista’s administration, polarizing the values each party represented, and serving to encourage the public to stand on the side of liberty and justice.

Castro meticulously outlined his case against Batista and his followers in several of his letters. He attacked the regime claiming they were involved with “atrocious tortures” and “barbaric and insane mass murders.”⁵² Through the use of rhetoric including the words “massacre” and “terror”, Castro sought to motivate his audience to action and to convince them of Batista’s guilt. He described the treatment of his

⁴⁸ Castro, *December 12, 1953*, 1. Castro claimed that without justice his fallen comrades cannot lie in peace and that their loss motivated him to continue on with his work to redeem Cuba.

⁴⁹ Castro, *December 12, 1953*, 6.

⁵⁰ Castro, *June 12, 1954*, 18.

⁵¹ Castro, *July 31, 1954*, 35. Castro meticulously described his loyal followers as committed to the cause and not necessarily to him. They were acting at Cuba’s behest not his. They served to make Castro a servant of “Cuba,” an equal, and not elevated as a leader.

⁵² Castro, *December 12, 1953*, 1.

compatriots who were arrested and often subsequently killed. In the letters, Castro wrote, “When the dead were buried, they had no eyes, no teeth, and no testicles; their valuables were taken by the killers, who later showed them off shamelessly. The tortured exhibited scenes of indescribable courage.”⁵³ Castro claimed these attempts to damage the spirit of the revolution were the efforts of a cowardly dictator, which would most certainly fail.⁵⁴ In addition, he attacked specific figures in the Batista administration with particular rancor. For Castro, the worst insult he could give was an assault on an enemy’s manhood. In one piece of correspondence, Castro wrote, “Only a queer like Hermida, at the lowest degree of sexual degeneration, would resort to these methods, of such inconceivable indecency and unmanliness.”⁵⁵ In his letters, Castro used this rhetoric to build up support for his cause and to establish a common hatred of the government among the populace.

The letters also reveal that Castro was fearful of censorship and concerned that his achievements would remain undocumented. The primary goal of his correspondence was his desire for his work to be preserved. From his earliest days in prison, Castro accused the government of disposing of his papers and argued in numerous letters that the government censorship of his writings prevented him from writing more frequently.⁵⁶ He claimed, “The government made sure that all of these documents disappeared.”⁵⁷ The correspondence that was distributed, he maintained was strictly personal and not political. Castro argued that the inept officials “might view even such a kindred and humane

⁵³ Castro, *December 12, 1953*, 3-4.

⁵⁴ Castro, *June 12, 1954*, 18-19.

⁵⁵ Castro, *July 17, 1954*, 32. Ramón Hermida Antorcha was the Minister of Governance (Interior). He was responsible for overseeing all police activities. It was not explicitly stated in the letter what Castro’s specific grievance with Hermida was concerning or why he, as opposed to Batista, was singled out. In this collection of correspondence, Castro does not question Batista’s sexuality.

⁵⁶ Castro, *February 17, 1955*, 58.

⁵⁷ Castro, *December 12, 1953*, 9.

correspondence as yours and mine as suspicious.”⁵⁸ While it remains uncertain to what extent Castro’s letters were censored, it is clear that his writings were often preoccupied by this concern.

Castro also expressed concerns over internal factors in his correspondence, including personal ambition and the lack of clear leadership, which might hamper the creation of a revolution. He feared subordinates would misinterpret orders or act without proper leadership. In a private correspondence to Luis Conte, Castro wrote, “I fundamentally believe that one of the greatest obstacles to the creation of such a movement is the excess of personalities and ambitions of groups and leaders. It is difficult to compel each man of value and prestige to give himself to the service of a cause, a vehicle, an ideology and a discipline, forsaking any vanity or aspiration.”⁵⁹ According to Castro, those obstacles could only be overcome if a person was willing to be patient and work without the promise of prestige and glory.⁶⁰ In the same letter, he goes on to claim, “No movement can be organized if everyone thinks they have the right to make public declarations without consulting others; nor can anything be expected if it is constituted by unmanageable men who, at the first disagreement, take the path they deem more convenient, tearing apart and destroying the movement.”⁶¹ In order to establish a revolution in Cuba, Castro argued that absolute unity behind a singular leader was essential. While he does not specify that he should hold that position, it is apparent

⁵⁸ Castro, *March 18, 1955*, 62-63. Despite Castro’s concerns over censorship, it appears that the letters remained fairly intact. While it is not clear if any information was censored, the content of all of the letters remains and there are explicit instructions to subordinates included. While censorship is a common practice among prisons, it is clear that for some reason Isle of Pines prison was not particularly strict.

⁵⁹ Castro, *August 14, 1954*, 43.

⁶⁰ Castro, *August 14, 1954*, 43-44.

⁶¹ Castro, *August 14, 1954*, 45. Castro was concerned with the future of his revolution. Citing Napoleon Bonaparte and earlier Cuban revolutionary Jose Martí, Castro argued for the creation of an impermeable leadership structure that would serve to break down the Batista regime.

that Castro saw himself in control. Furthering that notion, he retained that status through his extensive directives laid out in his correspondence, despite remaining in virtual seclusion while in prison.

Castro questions his contribution to the revolution, in addition to demonstrating a willingness to step away from his leadership position in a number of letters. In a note to Luis Conte, Castro expressed doubts he could be of any further use to the rebellion and claimed that if he were innocent and useful to the revolution, he would emerge from prison “free of any suspicion.” However, he argued that if it were not for this cause, he would be “vilely, ignominiously, and brutally destroyed.”⁶² This frustration was due to his isolation while in prison and the knowledge that his family was suffering during his absence. Throughout his incarceration, Castro’s family experienced financial difficulties and often threats of violence.⁶³ As a result, Castro’s motivation for living stemmed from his dedication to the movement and his desire to see his goals achieved in Cuba. In one letter, Castro wrote, “My reason for living is that I believe that I have duties to fulfill.... I have contemplated how much easier it would be if I were dead. I hold the 26th of July above my own person and the instant I realize that I can no longer be useful to the cause—for which I have endured so much—I will take my own life without hesitation.”⁶⁴

Castro described the end of his leadership as being synonymous with his death.

At the same time throughout his writings, Castro contended that while he was still needed he would be willing to endure hardships in order to continue the fight. He

⁶² Castro, *July 31, 1954*, 35.

⁶³ Castro, *July 31, 1954*, 36. Castro’s wife, Mirta was threatened during his incarceration. During his absence, Castro’s family was in a dire financial situation before his wife approached her family for support (much to Castro’s dismay). In 1955, while Castro was still in prison, his wife filed for divorce. Castro, *[Undated] (After July 1954)*, 41. Castro, *March 13, 1955*, 60-61.

⁶⁴ Castro, *July 31, 1954*, 37. July 26th was the date of Castro’s attack on the Moncada Barracks, which was annually celebrated. In addition, the July 26th movement was the name of Castro’s revolutionary army, in honor of those who died during the Moncada incident.

maintained that what he had achieved “through infinite sacrifices and noble ideals cannot be destroyed by destroying [his] name.”⁶⁵ Castro declared that, if released, he would lead by example, living devoid of comforts, only receiving enough sustenance to survive, requiring little shelter, and dressing simply with his singular luxury being books.⁶⁶ Those texts, Castro argued, were necessary to educate him on leadership, revolution, political philosophy, and psychology.⁶⁷ An expertise in all of these areas, he believed was fundamental to waging a successful revolt and he used his seemingly endless hours in prison pouring over texts.

Throughout his correspondence from the Isle of Pines prison, Fidel Castro argued for continued efforts towards ousting the Batista regime and establishing a free Cuba. From his earliest letters, he attacked the conduct of the Batista administration by describing their countless abuses on Cuban population. By using various mediums to disseminate his propaganda, courting the impoverished public, and pledging to establish a free state, Castro orchestrated the future revolution from his prison cell. Although at times concerned about the internal stability of his organization and his own contribution to the rebellion, Fidel Castro tirelessly sought to win the support of the populace and to achieve his goals.

⁶⁵ Castro, *July 31, 1954*, 37.

⁶⁶ Castro, *May 2, 1955*, 75-76. Early on in his imprisonment, Castro suggested initiating a hunger strike. In this set of letters there remains little evidence that he ever followed through with the idea. During his time in prison, Castro requested books on leadership and war be sent. Besides writing correspondence, most of Castro’s time in prison was spent reading.

⁶⁷ Castro, *May 2, 1955*, 76.

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Appendix