

WORLDS APART AND YEARS AWAY:
OPERACIÓN PEDRO PAN
AND THE CUBAN CHILDREN'S PROGRAM

by

ROBERT C. HYATT

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in History
in the College of Arts and Humanities
and in The Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term 2010

Thesis Chair: Dr. Luis Martínez-Fernández

ABSTRACT

Between December 1960 and the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, 14,048 Cuban children were sent by their families out of the country to the United States through a program known as *Operación Pedro Pan*. The children's memories of their homeland, their adopted country, and the program itself were formed by such factors as their age at the time of their expatriation, the length time that they spent apart from their families, and the communities that they were exposed to in the United States. While several novels and scholarly works have been written about Operation Pedro Pan, many authors have debated its purpose- whether or not the Central Intelligence Agency was trying to destabilize Fidel Castro's government- and its effectiveness because, having been a part of the exodus, their experiences influence how they report the stories of others. This paper analyzes newspaper articles, surveys, interviews, and literature written by Pedro Pans such as Carlos Eire's *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, to determine how the widely accepted narrative of the United States saving Cuban children from "communist indoctrination" was formed in the United States and how this compares to the experiences of the Pedro Pan Children.

DEDICATIONS

For my parents and family, thank you for your encouragement and love.

For my professors, thank you for your guidance and words of wisdom.

For my friends, thank you for keeping my spirits high throughout this process.

For Katie, thank you for being my strongest supporter and best friend.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my professors, Dr. Luis Martínez-Fernández, Dr. Robert Cassanello, Dr. Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, and Dr. Lupe García for their invaluable guidance throughout the course of this thesis. Thank you Dr. García for piquing my interest in Latin American history, and for helping me in the beginning stages of this project. Thank you Dr. Martínez-Fernández for agreeing to take over as my thesis chair, and for seeing this project to its completion. Thank you Dr. Rodríguez Milanés and Dr. Cassanello for serving on my committee, and for sharing your invaluable insights. I would also like to thank Denise Crisafi and Kelly Astro for their encouragement, advice, and support throughout the process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHILDREN OF THE CUBAN REVOLUTION.....	5
EXPERIENCES IN THE UNITED STATES	20
REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCE	31
CONCLUSION.....	46
BIBLIOGRAPHY	50

INTRODUCTION

For thousands of Cuban families, one of the most profound legacies of the Cuban Revolution was the transformation of the family unit. Between 1960 and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, 14,048 Cuban children were sent by their families to the United States through a program known as *Operación Pedro Pan*. The children's memories of their homeland, their adopted country, and the program itself were formed by several factors, such as their age at the time of their expatriation, the time that they spent apart from their families, and the locations into which they moved in the United States. The process of emigrating from Cuba and the political ideas of the children's parents and the communities in which the Pedro Pans were relocated have substantially influenced the formation of their memories of the experience. The prevailing account of the program given by the program's organizers and supporters of over 14,000 Cuban children being sent to the United States as a last resort to protect them from the despotic Cuban government needs to be understood in the context of the Cold War era discourse that pitted the free, democratic United States against the oppressive, communist Cuban government. Newspapers of the period in the United States ran stories of children being used by the Cuban government as leverage against those who opposed the Revolution, being sent to Soviet bloc countries to be indoctrinated, and organized into Juvenile Patrols that were instructed to inform on their counterrevolutionary parents and neighbors. They implied that individuals and communities in the United States that took these children in were not only providing them with shelter, they were striking a blow against the Castro regime and saving them from communism. While the program's supporters and the media in the United States focus on how the experience made these children independent and

resilient adults, personal memories of the traumatic experience of being separated from family and home have been downplayed and marginalized.

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of Operation Pedro Pan. Reunions of Pedro Pans to celebrate this milestone have drawn increased attention in the program from the media. In addition, in the wake of the tragic earthquake in Haiti on January 12, 2010, individuals have suggested a similar program for Haitian orphans. Others, such as the English newspaper *The Guardian*, have cautioned against the so-called Operation Pierre Pan insisting, “[T]he architects of this plan might be well advised to think twice. Indeed the anonymous person who wrote that ‘the road to hell is paved with good intentions’ might easily have foreshadowed Miami’s Operation Pedro Pan.”¹ The paper went on to explain that Operation Pedro Pan was not the first of its kind, and noted that between 1938 and 1939 Kindertransport brought 10,000 Jewish children to Britain from Nazi-threatened central Europe. Additionally, during the Spanish civil war, 20,000 children were sent out of Spain’s Basque country to Mexico, Britain, and several other countries, including the Soviet Union.² The paper stated that the Cuban parents believed they would be shortly reunited with their children because, “Previously, whenever a radical government took power, conservative Cubans appealed successfully to the US to intervene.”³ However, the Bay of Pigs invasion failed to overthrow Fidel Castro and parents were delayed even longer in joining their children in the United States. The portrayal of the program as a detrimental experience that should not be repeated runs contrary to the popular portrayal of the program as a measure that saved Cuban

¹ Richard Gott, “The Lessons of Operation Pedro Pan,” *The Guardian*, 19 Jan 2010, 2.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

children from communism and taught them to be resilient and successful individuals on the whole.

Authors of scholarly works and novels have focused on the program's purpose (whether or not the Central Intelligence Agency was trying to destabilize Fidel Castro's government) and its successfulness. María de los Ángeles Torres, the author of *The Lost Apple*, and Yvonne Conde, the author of *Operation Pedro Pan*, were both Pedro Pans. The parents of Víctor Triay, the author of *Fleeing Castro*, left Cuba in 1960 and he was born in Miami in 1966 at a time when many Cuban children were still waiting to be reunited with their family. Although all three have produced rich works that greatly contribute to the historiography of the operation, their approaches to the topic have been influenced by their own experiences, as well as the experiences of their family and friends. Rather than diminishing their importance, this fact allows for a closer study of the interplay between the discourse of Cuban exiles, the popular portrayal of the program, and personal memories.

Conde vividly recounts stories told to her by participants, but does not delve into how these views have been molded by the Cuban exile community. Torres points out in the introduction to her book that, "The result has been an official narrative of the origins of the exile community that is imposed on all our experiences. The stories tell of a heroic flight from repression to freedom."⁴ Her research focuses on government documents and memos to support her thesis that, "[T]he exodus was not a contest over protecting children but rather about competing state-building projects."⁵ She argues that democracy and communism depended on the education of children to ensure a bright future for their respective societies, and during the Cold War the two

⁴ María de los Angeles Torres, *The Lost Apple: Operation Pedro Pan, Cuban Children in the U.S., and the Promise of a Better Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

systems competed for the minds of children. Triay argues that the program was successful in the sense that it responded to the Cuban parents' needs and wishes. He believes that, “When it came time for the decision either to submit to the state—representing a system that the parents found repugnant—or to send the children to safety in the United States, where political and religious freedoms were assured, the Cuban parents opted for the latter.”⁶ While his work contributes to a better understanding of the program, it does not explain how the children who felt the repercussions of this decision formed memories of the past. Rather than retelling the stories of the participants of the program, this thesis will examine how individuals have come to understand their experiences. Newspaper articles, surveys, interviews, and literature and scholarly works written by Pedro Pans such as Carlos Eire’s *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, will be analyzed to determine how the widely accepted narrative of the exodus was formed in the United States and how this compares to the experiences of those who were involved.

⁶ Víctor Andrés Triay, *Fleeing Castro: Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children’s Program* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998), 104.

CHILDREN OF THE CUBAN REVOLUTION

In 1959 Fidel Castro and the “bearded rebels” were widely hailed as the liberators of Cuba by those who opposed the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. After Batista seized power in 1952, conditions for many Cubans worsened while businesses from the United States saw increased profits. Fidel Castro and his rebels promised reform and free and fair elections. However, these elections never really materialized and the revolutionary government soon began to take actions that disquieted many Cubans and the United States government. Former Batista officials were hunted down, brought in front of military courts, and publically executed. Wayne Morse, a United States Senator from Oregon, condemned these actions as “blood baths” and asked that the Cuban leaders “withhold executions until emotions cool,” to no avail.⁷ The Cuban government enacted the Agrarian Reform Law in May 1959, which limited the size of farms and real estate, and angered United States sugar mill owners that lost thousands of acres of sugarcane land.⁸ The Cuban government went a step further in July and announced that all United States business and commercial property on the island would be nationalized. These actions, among others, led the United States to fear that the Cuban government was communist, and after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 these suspicions were confirmed. Fidel Castro announced at that time that he was a Marxist-Leninist and would be until the last day of his life. These developments not only disconcerted the United States, but also unnerved many Cuban parents that feared for their children’s well being in a communist dictatorship.

As early as August 1959, the revolutionary government had begun taking steps that worried Cuban parents. *Hoy*, the newspaper of the Communist Party in Cuba,

⁷ R. Hart Phillips, “Military Court in Cuba Dooms 14 for ‘War Crimes,’” *New York Times*, 13 Jan 1959, 1.

⁸ R. Hart Phillips, “Cuban Land Reform Adds to Uncertainty,” *New York Times*, 24 May 1959, E4.

although not associated with the government at this time, argued that the Boy Scout organization in Cuba was “an instrument of Yankee imperialism to penetrate the conscience of the Cuban youth,” and that children should instead join the Juvenile Patrol.⁹ Hoy stated that the Juvenile Patrol was taught “love of Cuba and the ideals of the revolution,” and, more specifically, it would “combat juvenile delinquency, help prevent traffic accidents, fight discrimination, help improve understanding between the armed forces and civilians and cooperate with the Agrarian Reform Law under which land is being distributed to the landless.”¹⁰ Ruby Hart Phillips of the *New York Times* took issue with the mobilization of Cuban children into a militia-like organization and claimed that, “Before the advent of Dr. Fidel Castro, the ambition of every small boy and [many girls] was to own a cowboy suit and two guns, like the heroes of the United States Westerns shown on television here with Spanish dubbed in.”¹¹ Soon, however, the Cuban children began asking their parents to instead buy them “olive green revolutionary uniform, complete with beard and rifle.”¹² While this may have been an exaggeration, the Juvenile Patrol’s ranks were swelling and many took notice of the organization’s military-like appearance.

In a *New York Times* article on August 7, 1959, Ruby Hart Phillips stated that the Juvenile Patrol had approximately 1,000 members in Havana. A little more than two weeks later, the *New York Times* reported that there were 32,000 members in Havana.¹³ Whether or not these numbers are completely reliable, they show that the organization was growing and it was highly visible in the capital city. The revolutionary police organized the Patrol, and the children were given military training, which they displayed in their precision drills during a national demonstration

⁹ “Red Paper Assails Cuban Boy Scouts,” *New York Times*, 24 Aug 1959, 6.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ R. Hart Phillips, “Castro Movement of Children Rises,” *New York Times*, 7 Aug 1959, 6.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “Red Paper Assails Cuban Boy Scouts,” *New York Times*, 24 Aug 1959, 6.

on July 26.¹⁴ Phillips observed, “On a sidewalk [in Havana] the other day, a young, self-appointed captain was drilling his five small soldiers. ‘Uno, dos, Fidel Castro,’ he chanted as the group marched back and forth.”¹⁵ The former Miami Chief of Police and Pedro Pan, Raúl Martínez, reflected, “My parents didn't like it but I always wanted to be in the militia. If I'd stayed I'd be in Castro's secret police or I'd be one of those thugs he surrounds himself with on trips to the UN.”¹⁶ Other Cuban parents shared the Martínez's uneasiness, and this unease grew as the government's reach was expanded into the education system.

On January 6, 1960 the Education Ministry in Cuba announced that boys and girls in high school must learn to bear arms and support the People's Militia.¹⁷ Although there was a societal acceptance of youths bearing arms in Cuba due to its history of upheaval and armed resistance, it was now being mandated in schools. The ministry announced that physical education teachers in the high schools would receive military instruction from army officers so that they could train the students.¹⁸ Earlier in the year the revolutionary government urged Cuban children to join the National Rebel Youth, which would assist in the defense of the island against an “imminent U.S. attack.”¹⁹ Equally disturbing to many Cuban parents, Yvonne Conde, the author of *Operation Pedro Pan*, notes, “On May 13, 1960, *Revolución* published photos of the first group of volunteer young women headed for the mountains in a mission to teach peasants how to read and write. Although undeniably this was a worthy cause, it clashed with Cuban social standards and distressed many parents.” She explains that Cuban women from middle and upper class families led sheltered lives, and were

¹⁴ R. Hart Phillips, “Castro Movement of Children Rises,” *New York Times*, 7 Aug 1959, 6.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Lucy Ash, “Pain of Cuban Children Sent into US Exile,” *The Independent*, 5 Nov 2000, 23.

¹⁷ “Cuban High Schools Get Army Program,” *New York Times*, 7 Jan 1960, 10.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ R. Hart Phillips, “Havana Drums up Fear of Invasion,” *New York Times*, 28 Oct 1960, 10.

constantly chaperoned. Therefore, many parents from these classes balked at the thought of young women living alone, unsupervised among peasants in the countryside.²⁰ Many parents were alarmed by these developments and feared that the Cuban government would supplant their authority in the lives of their children.

Alejandro Portes points out in his analysis of Cuban immigration that prior to the Cuban Revolution of 1959, the population of Cuban immigrants in the United States was fairly inconsequential.²¹ He cites the 1960 census, which reported that 79,156 Cuban-born individuals were living in the United States. He goes on to state that, “If the refugees who arrived during 1959 are subtracted from these, the prerevolutionary Cuban population in the country can be estimated at no more than 30,000.”²² However, between 1959 and 1980 more than 800,000 Cubans left their country, which represents approximately one-tenth of Cuba’s population. Portes argues, “Though the American government defined the movement from the start as a political exodus, it is clear that individual determinant of emigration were frequently economic.”²³ Wealthy Cubans lost wealth and economic power, and left the island soon after the victory of the revolution to organize the overthrow of Fidel Castro while in exile, or to regain wealth and status in the United States.²⁴ Interestingly, Félix Masud-Piloto draws attention to the fact that at the same time that the United States was welcoming Cubans “fleeing communism,” it was far less accommodating to individuals trying to escape poverty and repression in nations throughout the rest of

²⁰ Yvonne M. Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14,048 Cuban Children* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 18.

²¹ Alejandro Portes and Robert Bach, *Latin Journey: Cuban and Mexican Immigrants in the United States* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 84.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

Latin America that were capitalist and pro-United States.²⁵ President Eisenhower and successive United States presidents allowed such emigration from Cuba because of humanitarian concerns, the belief that exile forces would be able to invade and retake Cuba, and the desire to discredit the revolutionary government.²⁶ This background allows for a better understanding of Operation Pedro Pan and what set its participants apart from other Cuban refugees.

Félix Masud-Piloto characterized the program to send Cuban children unaccompanied children to the United States as “the most bizarre episode of the Cuban migration to the United States during the Eisenhower administration.”²⁷ He explains, “The program began in 1960 as a result of wild rumors circulating in Cuba and the exile community in Miami about Castro’s revolutionary programs. One of the most sensational and powerful of those rumors was the one about the ‘*patria potestad*,’ or the rights of parents over their children.”²⁸ Yvonne Conde states that, “When Cuban parents who sent their children alone out of Cuba are asked today [1999] why they took such a drastic step, they cite many reasons, but two are usually mentioned- fear of communist indoctrination and fear of *patria potestad*.”²⁹ Cuban parents were frightened by the prospect of the state usurping this authority and becoming the guardian of their children. Information began to circulate among Cuban mothers that the government would become the legal guardian for Cuba’s children, control their education, house them, and possibly send them to study in the Soviet Union.³⁰

²⁵ Félix Roberto Masud-Piloto, *With Open Arms: Cuban Migration to the United States* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988), xi.

²⁶ Ibid., 33.

²⁷ Ibid., 39.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 25.

³⁰ Ibid., 26.

It remains unclear how the speculation started, but it was fueled by individuals saying that they had seen a document signed by government officials and the government announcing in December 1960 that an index would be kept on the activities of all of the island's students outside of the classroom.³¹ The document circulated through the underground network in Cuba stated:

All children will remain with their parents until they are three years old, after which they must be entrusted to the Organización de Círculos Infantiles [state day-care centers]. Children from three to ten would live in government dormitories and would be permitted to visit their parents no less than two days a month... Older children would be assigned to the most appropriate place and thus might never come home.³²

Castro came out publically and claimed that the document was a forgery created by the United States Central Intelligence agency to discredit the Cuban Revolution.³³

The rationale for the index given by the government was that the schools would better understand the needs of the students if they knew what life was like in their homes, but many parents saw this as a step toward losing their children to the government. The so-called Cumulative Academic Record documented grades earned, student conduct and "political integration," which meant their commitment to the revolution.³⁴ The index would keep record of students' aptitudes and interests, and many parents feared that the government would sort out the island's brightest children and send them to Russia to be educated. Masud-Piloto recalls, "Other stories related that children were picked up off the streets and never seen again; that orphanages, such as Casa Beneficiencia, had been emptied and all children sent to the Soviet Union for indoctrination, and that in the town of Bayamo, fifty mothers had signed a

³¹ Ibid.

³² Masud-Piloto, *With Open Arms*, 39.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Marilyn Gilroy, "Operation Pedro Pan: Memories and Accolades 40 Years Later," *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education*, 15 July 2002, 8.

fact to kill their children rather than hand them to Castro.”³⁵ His own parents feared that he would be indoctrinated by the government and forced to serve in the army to protect the revolution. Consequently, the family immigrated to the United States to escape these perceived eventualities.

Katherine Oettinger, then the chief of the United States Children’s Bureau of the Social Security Administration, stated in a report filed September 14, 1962, “A dramatic case in point occurred in November, 1960, when two children were brought before the juvenile court in Key West, Florida, by their mother. She explained that she had smuggled them out of Cuba because she feared that they and their three hundred classmates in a private Cuban school might be sent to Russia for education and indoctrination.”³⁶ However, the mother had to return to her husband and home in Cuba, and asked for help in placing her children in a suitable home until the family could be reunited.³⁷ Such fears were confirmed on January 21, 1961, when Fidel Castro announced that the Soviet Union and Cuba would exchange 1,000 children to learn agricultural methods.³⁸ *Revolución*, the official paper of Fidel Castro’s 26th of July Movement, said the program was “something to be grateful to the Ministry of Education for improving all Cubans culturally, vocationally, civically, morally, and intellectually.”³⁹ The children of Cuba were being taught the principles of communism and the ideals of the revolutionary government.

In turn, Cuban students were expected to teach anti-imperialism and revolutionary principles to illiterate peasants in the countryside. The *New York Times* reported that, “The [Cuban] Government has issued two books to these volunteer

³⁵ Ibid., 39.

³⁶ Katherine Brownwell Oettinger, “Services to Unaccompanied Cuban Refugee Children in the United States,” reproduced by Carlos E. Cortés, ed., *Cuban Refugee Programs* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 378.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ R. Hart Phillips, “Youth Farms Set by Castro Regime,” *New York Times*, 23 Jan 1961, 1.

³⁹ Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 26.

teachers to teach the illiterate adults. The first book is a primer based on the words so often heard from leaders of the revolution. The other is a manual for the teachers.”⁴⁰ For example, “Instead of ‘a’ for apple, the primer has ‘a’ for ‘agrarian reform.’ The ‘c’ stands for ‘cooperatives of the peasants.’”⁴¹ The article goes on to say that, “When the pupil has learned the letter ‘o,’ ‘e’ and ‘a,’ he is told they are initials of the ‘Organización de Estados Americanos.’ He is taught that the O.A.S is an instrument of the ‘imperialist United States.’”⁴² The Cuban Ministry of Education even published and distributed a poem to children in the fourth grade and up about racial discrimination in the United States. In part, the poem read, “I swear to you, Uncle Sam that one day in Algiers or Siam, as is done with all the dead, we will bury close together the dollar and the Ku Klux Klan.”⁴³ The children, therefore, were not only learning the ideals of the revolutionary government, but also stamping out illiteracy and promulgating hatred of the United States throughout the countryside. To this end, schools were closed on April 15 so that approximately 100,000 school children from the sixth grade to high schools could form an Army of Education to teach peasants how to read and write.⁴⁴ Rather than allow their children to be used by the revolutionary government, or risk their well being by opposing these measures, many parents decided that it would be better to send their children to the United States.

On December 7, 1961, Wendell N. Rollason, director of the Inter-American Affairs Commission in Miami, told a United States Senate subcommittee that, “[...] children of persons suspected of being members of the Cuban underground had been paraded in front of their parents’ prisons in Cuba to extort confessions from the

⁴⁰ R. Hart Phillips, “Youth Farms Set by Castro Regime,” *New York Times*, 23 Jan 1961, 1.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ R. Hart Phillips, “Cuba Gives Pupils Poem Scoring U.S.,” *New York Times*, 27 Nov 1960, 34.

⁴⁴ “Education Plans Stir Cuban Fear,” *New York Times*, 19 Feb 1961, 31.

parents.”⁴⁵ The revolutionary government was not only indoctrinating the children of the island, it was also using them to bend counterrevolutionary parents to its will. In April 1961 Castro’s government announced the formation of the Union of Rebel Pioneers with children as young as seven years old. They would be trained in primary schools to prepare them to join the Association of Rebel Youths.⁴⁶ They were expected to report individuals, including family members, engaging in counterrevolutionary activities, or harboring counterrevolutionary attitudes.

Katherine Oettinger stated in her September 1962 report that while it is hard for parents in the United States to imagine sending their children alone to a foreign land, “Cuban parents have made and are making [this decision] in the belief that the alternative- indoctrination with the malignant seeds of communist dogma- would be infinitely more detrimental to the welfare of their children.”⁴⁷ Countless newspaper articles like the one written by Ruby Hart Phillips that reads, “These parents would rather entrust the children to relatives, friends or strangers in the United States than permit them to be indoctrinated with Communist ideas,” drive this point home.⁴⁸ The United States media cast the program as another example of the failures of communism and the triumph of democracy. Cuban parents were so afraid that their children would be brainwashed that they were willing to send them away on their own. What was worse, the Cuban government allowed families to be torn apart; however, the media in the United States did not question if the government should be encouraging Cuban families to separate. Whether or not the United States calculated that the operation would be a huge blow to communism in world opinion, or that it would destabilize the Castro regime, the government began to collaborate with child-

⁴⁵ C.P. Trussell, “Abuse of Parents Charged to Cuba,” *New York Times*, 8 Dec 1961, 24.

⁴⁶ “Cuba Regiments 7-Year-Olds,” *New York Times*, 5 April 1961, 18.

⁴⁷ Brownwell Oettinger, “Services to Unaccompanied Cuban Refugee Children in the United States,” 377-384.

⁴⁸ R. Hart Phillips, “14,072 Children Sent Out of Cuba,” *New York Times*, 9 March 1963, 2.

placing agencies to receive the children who were being sent from the island.

Monsignor Bryan O. Walsh, then the director of the Catholic Welfare Bureau in Miami, began to hear stories in 1960 of Cuban children who had been sent to the United States and left without proper homes after living arrangements fell through.⁴⁹ Their parents had asked strangers at the airport who were also leaving to the United States to take care of them, but Monsignor Walsh believed that these arrangements would likely breakdown and leave the children on the streets. Kathryn Close explained in an article for a journal titled *Children*, “In the fall of 1960 after his agency had just suffered a 30-percent budget cut, Father Walsh met Pedro, a 15-year-old Cuban boy who for the whole month he had been in Miami had been spending each day with a different Cuban refugee family, none of whom could keep him.”⁵⁰ Walsh believed that soon many children would be in the same situation as Pedro. This chance meeting and J.M. Barrie’s magical tale of Peter Pan taking children away to Never Land would later give rise to the name Operation Pedro Pan. Walsh believed that there would soon be increased child-care problems due to the breakdown of impermanent placements, and he called a meeting of the Family and Children’s Division of the Miami Welfare Planning Council.⁵¹ Consequently, the Miami child-placing agencies and the federal government worked together in order to find satisfactory arrangements for the unaccompanied children, and Walsh was given the authority by the U.S. government to send visa waivers to Cuba for children whose parents wished to send them to the United States.⁵²

On March 9, 1962 Gene Miller wrote an article in the *Miami Herald* that described the situation of the unaccompanied children refugees. He wrote, “For 15

⁴⁹ Kathryn Close, “Cuban Children Away From Home,” *Children* 10:1 (1963): 4. Reproduced by Carlos E. Cortés, ed., *Cuban Refugee Programs* (New York: Arno Press, 1980).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

months, the Catholic Diocese of Miami quietly helped relocate 7,778 children- all fleeing Cuba without their parents. [...] The Communists are certain to call it child smuggling. No one is telling exactly how it is done. No one will. The risk of reprisal is too great.”⁵³ He added, “God willing, they will not stay too long. They hope to return to their parents who sent them to America to escape communism.”⁵⁴ On May 26, 1962 the *New York Times* ran an article on Operation Pedro Pan’s beginnings, its scope and impact. By that time approximately 10,000 children had arrived unaccompanied in the United States and the article says, “Until recently, when its size gave it away, the activity was a carefully guarded secret.”⁵⁵ Even at the time of publication, no one discussed how the operation was run in Cuba and how the children were getting waivers. Father Bryan Walsh was unsure of how long the program could continue, but said, “We just plan from one day to the next and thank God for each additional one we have.”⁵⁶ On the other hand, “Business men in Havana say that Fidel Castro apparently would rather have the dollars than the children.”⁵⁷ The United States had the moral high ground, the media argued, because the country was saving children from the evil and inhumane Castro regime, and, therefore, could not possibly be accused of “child-smuggling.”

In October 1986, Ramón Grau, the nephew of former Cuban President Ramón Grau San Martín, was finally able to explain his role in Operation Pedro Pan. Between 1960 and 1962, Grau worked with Monsignor Bryan Walsh and foreign diplomats that acted as couriers to get visa waivers to Cuban children.⁵⁸ Although newspapers ran stories on the arrival of unaccompanied children in the United States,

⁵³ Gene Miller, “Peter Pan Means Real Life to Some Kids,” *Miami Herald*, 9 March 1962.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ “Cuban Children Helped in Florida,” *New York Times*, 27 May 1962, 41.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ “Tortoises, Pedro Pan, and Mass,” *New York Times*, 6 Oct 1986, A16.

officials closely guarded information on how these children were receiving waivers to enter the country to ensure the program's success and to protect the Cuban collaborators that made the program possible. Walsh claimed that, "[Grau's] full role, kept secret until now, got thousands more children out of Cuba than would have otherwise been possible."⁵⁹ The *New York Times* hailed him as the "Peter Pan of Cuba," and stated that his mission was, "Protecting the young from the rigors of a changing political environment." Grau said in the interview, "We took advantage of something that is very characteristic of a Communist regime, and that is great attention to the rules."⁶⁰ When he ran out of waivers, he spent the night forging waivers that would fool Cuban officials. However, he was eventually convicted of smuggling children out of the country and was imprisoned for more than twenty years.⁶¹

After the children arrived safely in the United States with their visa waivers, they were sent to foster families, camps, and boarding schools in at least 105 cities and towns in 38 states.⁶² The program to get the children out of Cuba was called Operation Pedro Pan and the process of placing the children was known as the Cuban Children's Program. In 1962, in order to care for the children, Congress allocated \$13,800,000 for the program out of \$70,110,000 apportioned for refugees through the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act.⁶³ The United States government was clearly invested in making the program work, but scholars, such as María de los Ángeles Torres, have questioned its motives. She has speculated that the children of counterrevolutionaries were brought to the United States to insure that they would be

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Mirta Ojito, "Ramon Grau Alsina, 75, Cuban Who Aided Children's Escape," *New York Times*, 6 Nov 1998, C21.

⁶² R. Hart Phillips, "14,072 Children Sent Out of Cuba," *New York Times*, 9 March 1963, 2.

⁶³ Ibid.

able to fight the government without the fear of reprisal against their families. She has also asserted that the Central Intelligence Agency used the operation to destabilize Castro by taking away Cuba's youth. The children represented the future of Cuba, and would have contributed to society had they not been sent to the United States. The CIA has done little to dispel these rumors by refusing to release documents regarding the program.

Even though the Central Intelligence Agency has never acknowledged its role in Operation Pedro Pan, individuals have asserted that the agency orchestrated the program although they are unable to provide any substantiating documents. Flora González Mandri writes in an article for *Latino Studies* that the program was “engineered by the US Central Intelligence Agency in cooperation with the Catholic Church working in the US and underground in Cuba.”⁶⁴ An article in the London newspaper, *The Guardian*, states that the program was “informally orchestrated by the CIA and the Catholic Church.”⁶⁵ The Cuban government perspective of Operation Pedro Pan is even more vehement in its declaration that it was planned and carried out by the CIA. Ramón Torreira Crespo and José Buajasán Marrawi, a former commander of the Cuban intelligence department, wrote in a book titled *Operación Pedro Pan: Un Caso de Guerra Psicológica Contra Cuba*:

[Operation Peter Pan] was one of the most secret actions of subversive and psychological warfare developed by the CIA, the Department of State and religious institutions in the United States created with subversive ends, where the principal victims would be defenseless children and parents, often deceived or cunningly confused by false rumors, with destabilizing ends.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Flora González Mandri, “Operation Pedro Pan: A Tale of Trauma and Remembrance,” *Latino Studies* 6:3 (October 2008): 252.

⁶⁵ Richard Gott, “The Lessons of Operation Pedro Pan,” *The Guardian*, 19 Jan 2010, 2.

⁶⁶ Ramón Torreira Crespo and José Buajasán Marrawi, *Operación Pedro Pan: Un caso de guerra psicológica contra Cuba* (Havana: Editora Política, 2000), 72. Reproduced by Flora González Mandri, “Operation Pedro Pan: A Tale of Trauma and Remembrance,” *Latino Studies* 6:3 (October 2008): 256.

Víctor Triay argues that it is preposterous to assert that Cuban parents sent their children to the United States as a result of any deliberate misinformation from the CIA. He believes that people who cannot acknowledge how bad it was in Cuba are the ones who argue that the parents must have been tricked into sending their children away. Triay states, “To say Pedro Pan was justified is to admit that the Castro Revolution in fact created conditions that were so extraordinarily bad that regular, middle class people found it necessary to send their children unaccompanied to the USA.”⁶⁷ He adds, “Since these ordinary parents did in fact take that step, those individuals who do not wish to face the reality about the Castro regime want to argue that those parents must have somehow been manipulated- and who better for them to cast as the manipulator than the CIA?”⁶⁸

Regardless of the actual impetus, which cannot be known until documents regarding the program are declassified, the United States government and community leaders felt pressure to take care of Cuban children refugees. They felt this pressure not only because it was the right thing to do, but also because they were afraid it would add to the propaganda used against the country. Max Frankel wrote in the *New York Times* a month before Operation Pedro Pan began that the United States could expect to have several hundred unaccompanied children arriving from Cuba each month.⁶⁹ He added, “[Miami community leaders] believe that anti-American propaganda throughout Central and South America may be focused soon on the plight of Cuban children and jobless refugees here in an attempt to discredit this country’s reputation for opportunity and hospitality.”⁷⁰ In the Cold War era, when the United

⁶⁷ Marilyn Gilroy, “Operation Pedro Pan: Memories and Accolades 40 Years Later,” *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education*, 15 July 2002, 8.

⁶⁸ Marilyn Gilroy, “Operation Pedro Pan: Memories and Accolades 40 Years Later,” *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education*, 15 July 2002, 8.

⁶⁹ Max Frankel, “Plight of Cubans in Miami Growing,” *New York Times*, 16 Nov 1960, 13.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

States and the Soviet Union were fighting proxy wars around the world, it was essential for the United States to maintain its prestige as the land of democracy, freedom, and opportunity. In the wake of María de los Ángeles Torres' lawsuit against the Central Intelligence Agency, internal memos were released that showed that, "the CIA was waging a public relations battle and acting defensively about its role in Operation Pedro Pan."⁷¹ Government officials were determined to cast Operation Pedro Pan as an unqualified success that sullied the image of communist Cuba and, by association, the Soviet Union.

⁷¹ Torres, *The Lost Apple*, 238.

EXPERIENCES IN THE UNITED STATES

Monsignor Bryan Walsh and the Miami Catholic Welfare Bureau, with the support of other Catholic, Protestant, Jewish welfare organizations, and the Federal Government, organized the Cuban Children's Program to care for the 14,048 children that arrived in the United States between 1960 and 1962. The responsibility fell to the Catholic Welfare Bureau because roughly ninety-five percent of the children were Catholic.⁷² Approximately 6,000 of the children were reunited with their relatives or family friends as soon as the children arrived in the United States.⁷³ The Miami Catholic Bureau cared for 6,912 children, and the Jewish Family, as well as the Children's Service of Miami and the Protestant Children's Service Bureau, cared for the remaining children.⁷⁴ As of March 9, 1963, Monsignor Walsh said his bureau had under its care 3,665 Cuban children. Of these children, 1,054 were located in the Miami area, and the others had been sent to Catholic institutions, foster homes and boarding schools in 105 cities and towns of 38 states.⁷⁵ In Florida five centers were established and Cuban refugee couples were often employed as house parents. Phillips noted, "[O]nly a few of the children arriving here have shown effects of the Communist indoctrination campaign in Cuba." She added that many of the children had been kept out of school for two or three years by their parents to avoid the mandated, revolutionary instruction.⁷⁶

In the formative stages of the program few parents, children, or organizers could have envisioned how long the care of the young expatriates would last. Many

⁷² R. Hart Phillips, "14,072 Children Sent out of Cuba," *New York Times*, 9 Mar. 1963, 2.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid..

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

believed that it was only a matter of time before the youngsters could return to their parents in a post-Castro Cuba. For this reason, the children initially felt like (and were treated as) short-term guests rather than long-term residents. In a report on the unaccompanied children, Katherine Oettinger stated, "Temporary visitors are something of a novelty and are likely to be given special kinds of attention and consideration. Children who become part of the community for a more prolonged time are soon expected to fit into the customs and patterns of life there."⁷⁷ Despite the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, which made the probability of their quick return to Cuba less likely, many of the young people remained confident that they were only visiting the United States, and they did not wish to leave Miami, or care to learn much English.⁷⁸ Close added that, "The efforts of the receiving agencies to get the children out of the crowded conditions in Miami were for a long while somewhat hampered by the reluctance of many of the youngsters to leave an area where they felt close to home and had many friends."⁷⁹ The children were playing the waiting game and they preferred spending their time around the people and culture to which they were accustomed instead of familiarizing themselves with the unknown.

Many of the Pedro Pan children had not attended school in over a year because they had been closed in Cuba, and they were consequently behind in their studies. Close observed, "While most of the young people learn English quickly when in school with American children, nearly all the Cuban children in Miami have been somewhat handicapped in this by the fact that they are with Cubans most of the time."⁸⁰ Children in foster homes interacted with other Cuban children and Latino foster parents in Spanish, and the same was true in arrangements for larger groups

⁷⁷ Brownwell Oettinger, "Services to Unaccompanied Cuban Refugee Children in the United States," 382.

⁷⁸ Kathryn Close, "Cuban Children Away From Home," 3.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Close, "Cuban Children Away From Home," 6.

with Spanish-speaking staff.⁸¹ The fact that some were reluctant to learn English meant that they would not catch up quickly in school. Other Cubans, who were also bidding their time in the United States, surrounded the children outside of the classroom and spoke Spanish primarily. In several schools in Miami, the students spoke less English because the student population was between sixty and eighty percent Cuban.⁸²

In October 1962, an article in the *New York Times* stressed the importance of relocating Cuban refugees from Miami to communities throughout the United States. It announced, “[Government officials in charge of the Cuban refugee program] are about to step up their efforts to find sponsors willing to help refugees relocate elsewhere.”⁸³ The article added, “Three movies are being made to show to community groups, and exhibits are being prepared. Plans are also under way for wide distribution of a booklet explaining who the Cuban refugees are and why they came to this country.”⁸⁴ However, it also pointed out that when the government began trying to relocate the refugees, most Cubans did not want to leave Miami because the climate was similar to Cuba’s, they had made friends with fellow Cuban exiles, could eat Cuban food, speak Spanish, and had access to news from Cuba.⁸⁵ The city took on many Latin-American characteristics as approximately 100,000 Cubans arrived between 1961 and 1962, and one Cuban interviewed for a newspaper article stated that we was glad that he relocated to Cleveland because he never would have learned English in Miami.⁸⁶ Many of the Cuban children were initially reluctant to learn English because it was not a necessity in an environment that allowed them to

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ “Cubans in Miami are U.S. Concern,” *New York Times*, 21 Oct 1962, 41.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ R. Hart Phillips, “Miami is Going Latin as Cubans Make Their Effect Felt in City,” *New York Times*, 18 March 1962, 85.

converse in their native language. In time, however, many desired to learn English as quickly as possible so that they could help their parents when they were reunited in the United States.⁸⁷

Most of the placing agencies that used group care utilized existing facilities; although, some opened homes for teenage boys and had Cuban refugees serve as house parents. Close reported that, “[I]n Montana, 40 boys are living in what was once the governor’s mansion, supervised by 2 refugee couples. And in Portland, Oregon, an agency has rented 6 houses in a residential area, each house serving as a home for 5 or 6 Cuban teenagers and a Cuban refugee couple employed as house parents.”⁸⁸ The placing agencies were reluctant to place Cuban children in institutions for dependent and neglected children because many of institutions’ original children had severe emotional difficulties. Many Cuban children protested when they were told they would be placed in these institutions, and said that they did not want to be placed in “an orphans home.”⁸⁹ In a report published in December 1962, Katherine Oettinger said, “Foster-family placements have proved beneficial to many of these children and rewarding to the foster families. For many other children, however, certain special considerations have made institutional care the most logical type of care.”⁹⁰ She stated that more than half of the unaccompanied children were between the ages of 13 and 17 and “at a stage in which conformity- ‘fitting in’ and being like one’s peers- is important to a sense of personal security.”⁹¹ She observed, “Some of these children, who have already experienced so much strain, appear to be able to adapt themselves more easily in an institution in which they are in company with

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Brownwell Oettinger, “Services to Unaccompanied Cuban Refugee Children in the United States,” 380.

⁹¹ Ibid.

other Cuban children in similar circumstances than in individuals foster-family homes where greater personal, language, and cultural adjustments may be required of them.”⁹² She adds, “This can be a shattering experience- or it can be a broadening and exciting one, a source of permanent enrichment when the children do eventually return home.”⁹³ The experience was an extremely difficult one for children who would not be reunited with their families for several years, and, unfortunately, they were unable to return home with the lessons that they had learned.

Although the operation was touted as a humanitarian measure to save innocent children from communism, there were still individuals in the United States that believed the country should take care of its own children first and foremost. Some school boards even objected to their placement in the public schools because they were nonresidents.⁹⁴ Kathryn Close correctly noted that most programs that involve immigrants from another country, even the Cuban refugee program, are met with some sort of resistance in communities.⁹⁵ She explained, “There are those where resentment has been expressed over ‘doing more for the Cuban children than we are doing for our own.’”⁹⁶ A report on January 1962 announced that, “Resettlement of refugees in other states, better planning among private and governmental agencies, stepped up Federal participation and increased community understanding have combined to relax tensions which had threatened to flare into the open.”⁹⁷ Ruby Phillips claimed in a report in the same month that, “Almost without exception the Cuban refugees want to return to Cuba. But it is apparent that they are becoming

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 382.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 8.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ “Cuba’s Refugees,” *New York Times*, 28 Jan 1962, 140.

convinced there in no hope for a quick overthrow of the Marxist-Leninist regime of Fidel Castro.”⁹⁸

Articles and reports on Operation Pedro Pan often acknowledge that the children who were sent to the United States came from middle to upper-middle class families in Cuba. Kathryn Close wrote in the journal *Children* that the majority of the unaccompanied children came from middle class families, were in their early teens, and about two-thirds were boys.⁹⁹ This assertion is substantiated by a survey conducted by Yvonne Conde for her book, *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14,048 Cuban Children*. When the respondents were asked the socio-economic status of their families in Cuba, a majority responded that they were upper middle class.¹⁰⁰ Of the 426 responses, approximately sixty percent said upper middle, twenty percent said lower middle, seven percent said lower upper, and four percent each said upper upper, upper lower, and middle middle (which was written in because it was not an option).¹⁰¹ The results are less reliable because the respondents were asked to categorize themselves rather than asking for the actual income of the family; however, it is safe to draw the conclusion from these results that the majority were from comfortably well-off families. Why this should be the case is a more difficult matter. It is likely that the wealthier families were the ones who sent their children to the United States because they had the money for the plane tickets, and because they had more to lose in a communist society. Others have pointed out that Cuban children from this group were regularly sent to the United States for education, making the idea of sending them unaccompanied to the United States less foreign to the parents. Close states, “Most of them apparently were well prepared for ‘being sent to school in

⁹⁸ R. Hart Phillips, “Plan to Resettle Cuban Refugees Across Nation Started in Miami,” *New York Times*, 6 Jan 1962, 3.

⁹⁹ Close, “Cuban Children Away From Home,” 3.

¹⁰⁰ Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 221.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

the United States' - not a new practice among well-to-do Cuban families."¹⁰² Rather than noting that the children were more likely to be successful because of their socioeconomic status and education, articles argued that Pedro Pans' experiences made them more resilient and independent; thus, they more likely to be successful.

Once separated, parents had difficulties in reuniting with their children in the United States for numerous reasons. Some did not have enough U.S. dollars to buy their plane tickets, while others could not get permission from the government to leave, had to stay and take care of their own parents, or were imprisoned.¹⁰³ Many refused to turn over all of their possessions to the government, a requisite for departure, and decided to stay in hopes of out-lasting the revolution.¹⁰⁴ The general waiting period between the children's and parent's arrivals varied anywhere between three months and two years; although, many were left waiting for more than three years and others were never reunited with their parents.¹⁰⁵ Despite being absent in person, the parents retained their role as guardians and many were able to stay in regular contact with their children. Kathryn Close notes, "The older children tend to consult their parents by telephone before making any major decisions or accepting any plans made for them by agency or schools- reversing the charges so that the bill can be paid with pesos in Cuba."¹⁰⁶ Although the foster families and organizers were now providing care, the children did not offer the same respect to them as they did their parents. Close recounts:

This deference to parents had been the cause of both joy and consternation to the agencies caring for Cuban children. While struck with the children's unquestioning obedience to their parents, they have on occasion found some of the parents' instructions to their children rather trying- as when a once-pampered daughter was told she did not

¹⁰² Close, "Cuban Children Away From Home," 6.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 7.

need to help her foster mother with the dishes, or when a girl with a severe toothache refused to go to the dentist because her mother told her the cavity in her tooth would close if she took calcium pills.¹⁰⁷

It is understandable that the parents would want to retain authority over their own children, but it is surprising that the parents would tell their kids to disobey the requests of a family that was generous enough to open their home for a refugee. This would inevitably strain the relations of the two different cultures and discourage mutual understanding.

Several newspaper articles and reports on the program and its children mentioned attributes that made taking proper care of the children difficult. It was said of the group of children, “They have delighted their caretakers with their politeness, irritated them with their noisy chatter, enraged them with their untidiness, impressed them with their respect for their parents’ wishes, and won them with their charm.”¹⁰⁸ Additionally, several sources noted that the greatest difficulty for the care of the children was that they were accustomed to being taken care of by servants.

Supposedly, the children were shocked when they were told by their foster families to do household chores, such as taking out the garbage or picking up their clothes.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, many of the Cuban teenagers believed that they would be placed in boarding schools, and when they were instead sent to live with families some initially did not recognize the authority of the foster parents.¹¹⁰ Close notes, “Difficulties in communication because of language differences have sometimes aggravated the problem. However, the younger children seem to settle quickly into their foster parents’ home after the first frightening days of strangeness.”¹¹¹ Ruby Hart Phillips also noted, “[T]hey talk a great deal and are very noisy [...]” and adds, “Both in foster

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 8.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

homes and the centers here the children felt at first that they were being imposed upon when they were told to clean their rooms or do their household chores.”¹¹² Rather than attributing their talkative nature or unwillingness to do chores to their age and circumstances, writers concluded that this was because of their nationality and social class. For those children who were accustomed to being raised in a wealthy family, it must have been a difficult adjustment when they were placed in camps, group homes, and orphanages. These were not adults who had immigrated to the United States, done nothing productive, and assumed that the government would take care of them. They were kids that had been transplanted from one society to another that had different customs and spoke a different language.

The majority of the children were pre-teens and teenagers, ages when many are reluctant to do chores and eager to speak with friends. However, instead of drawing similarities between children in the United States or having readers imagine how difficult it would be to be separated from their parents and placed in the homes of complete strangers, the readers are made to think that the Cuban children are somehow different. Katherine Oettinger writes in a report on the exodus that, “The fact that this large group of political refugees has come directly to our shores without an interim period in some other country has created a heightened emotional climate in which we in the United States have quickly learned to know the Cuban people and they have learned to know us on a person-to-person basis.”¹¹³ However, it appears as though generalizations were made regarding the Cuban children that would in fact hinder a better understanding between the two groups.

¹¹² R. Hart Phillips, “14,072 Children Sent Out of Cuba,” *New York Times*, 9 March 1963, 2.

¹¹³ Brownwell Oettinger, “Services to Unaccompanied Cuban Refugee Children in the United States,” 384.

President Kennedy directed Mr. Ribicoff in February 1961 to, “Furnish Federal assistance to local schools to help meet the increased costs resulting from the influx of Cuban children,” and, “Provide aid for the care and protection of unaccompanied children- ‘the most defenseless and troubled group among the refugee population.’”¹¹⁴ William Mitchell, the Commissioner of the Social Security Administration, announced in a round-table discussion in February 1962 that thousands of unaccompanied children had arrived and that, “[P]arents were sending the children here because they feared the children might be ‘recruited’ for training in Soviet-dominated countries.”¹¹⁵ Abraham Ribicoff, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, called for families in the United States to help care for children sent out of Cuba “to thwart enforced Communist indoctrination in Cuban schools.”¹¹⁶ He assured the public that the Cuban refugees who were in need were being treated the same way that Americans in need were treated.¹¹⁷ He stated that the federal government was providing the Cuban refugees with assistance benefits, taking care of the needy Cuban children, helping to educate them in public schools, and resettling thousands of Cubans throughout the country so they could work and provide for themselves.¹¹⁸ Mrs. María Alba, the Cuban Women’s Anti-Communist Organization, along with William Mitchell, Commissioner of the Social Security Administration, asked that individuals donate toys for Cuban refugee children in the United States. She recalled, “Cuban Premier Fidel Castro charged that Santa Claus was an American, a very cold American, who would not bother to pay any Christmas Eve visits to Cuban refugee children.”¹¹⁹ She, and others, wanted to prove Castro wrong.

¹¹⁴ John W. Finney, “President Orders Cuba Refugee Aid,” *New York Times*, 4 Feb 1961, 1.

¹¹⁵ “73,000 Set to Quit Cuba,” *New York Times*, 15 Feb 1962, 3.

¹¹⁶ “Aid for Cuban Children Asked,” *New York Times*, 8 March 1962, 35.

¹¹⁷ “U.S. Homes Found for 2,000 Cubans,” *New York Times*, 3 Apr 1961, 18.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ “Cubans in U.S. Seek Toys for Refugees,” *New York Times*, 29 Nov 1961, 25.

By taking in helpless Cuban children and providing for them and other Cuban refugees, they were striking a blow against Castro and communism.

REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCE

In the United States the widely accepted account of the exodus program is that the Cuban children were protected by their parents from communist indoctrination by sending them unaccompanied out of Cuba. However, in Cuba the program is seen as yet another example of how the imperialist United States government has tried to destabilize the revolution by surreptitious means.¹²⁰ These memories have been driven by the discourse surrounding the Cold War ideological battle between communism and democracy. The United States media has pointed to the desperation of Cuban parents to save their children as proof of the evils of a communist regime. While on the other hand, Cuba uses the operation as an example of the lengths that the capitalist-imperialists would go to strike at Fidel Castro and the revolution. Gene Miller claims in an article for the Miami Herald that, “The Communists are certain to call it child-smuggling.” Miller counters this argument by explaining that the children were being sent out of Cuba because their schools had been shut down, erroneously reporting that they were starving, and their parents feared the possibility that their kids would be sent to the Soviet Union for a more extensive education in communism.¹²¹ To add to the suffering of the innocent, “Red Cuba” did not even allow the young exiles to bring enough clothing to weather the cooler climate of the northern states.¹²² To the public in the United States, this was further evidence of the nefarious nature of the Cuban government.

María de los Ángeles Torres and Triay have taken similar evidence to support two drastically different arguments. Torres argues in her book, *The Lost Apple*, that, “[T]he exodus was not a contest over protecting children but rather about competing

¹²⁰ Torres, *The Lost Apple*, 229.

¹²¹ Gene Miller, “Peter Pan Means Real Life to Some Kids,” *Miami Herald*, 9 March 1962.

¹²² Ibid.

state-building projects.”¹²³ This is an example of a “countermemory” to the widely held belief that the magnanimous United States saved Cuban children from communism. Yael Zerubavel writes that a countermemory is, “[An] alternative commemorative narrative that directly opposes the master commemorative narrative, operating under and against the hegemony, thus constitutes a countermemory. As the term implies, [it] is essentially oppositional and stands in hostile and subversive relation to collective memory.”¹²⁴ *The Lost Apple* was named after a 1963 documentary by the same name that filmed the children’s camps. A child by the name of María Sosa sang at one point in the film, and Torres discovered later that she moved out of the camp to California shortly after the film was made. Sadly, in this new home María Sosa was sexually abused.¹²⁵ Although sexual abuse was not common, there were some cases in addition to instances of physical and emotional abuses.¹²⁶ Torres states, “The children’s complaints to supervisors about mistreatments and abuse in institutions and foster homes often went uninvestigated if not unheard.”¹²⁷ She concludes, “Those complaints did not suit the mythology spun in the ideological battle of the Cold War about children who had been rescued from the evils of communism- their real experiences, to be lived and suffered silently.”¹²⁸

Torres argues, “All [of those involved were driven] by the urgency to save children- not because they were in physical danger, but rather they believed that the minds of children mattered to the future of country and it was imperative that the children be saved from Communist brainwashing.”¹²⁹ Newspapers in the United

¹²³ Torres, *The Lost Apple*, 22.

¹²⁴ Bruce E. Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant: Historical Memory in the American South* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 9.

¹²⁵ Torres, *The Lost Apple*, 182.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 5.

States talked about communism as if it were a disease that the children could have contracted before they were sent out of Cuba. Ruby Hart Phillips writes, “Monsignor Walsh said that only a few of the children arriving here have shown effects of the Communist indoctrination campaign in Cuba.”¹³⁰ In the setting of the Cold War it was a shock to the system that communism had spread to within ninety miles of the shore of the United States, and every child that was saved from indoctrination was considered a moral victory. Torres believes that, “The language of politics would not allow us to speak of the pain of separation or, for that matter, question whether or not that separation had been necessary. The separations were justified by the need to have saved us from communism.”¹³¹

María de los Ángeles Torres expresses a common sentiment when she says that she cannot imagine sending her own children away as her parents did. She adds, however, that the circumstances were different at the time in Cuba and that she hopes she never has to make a similar situation.¹³² Despite her criticism of the United States motivations for conducting Operation Pedro Pan, she concludes in the article she wrote for the Washington Post, “Despite all those years of longing to return, I think now that I would have been at odds with the government. I no longer question my parents’ decision. What I suspect, though is that the options they and others had were shaped far more by political strategies that valued security and ideological aims than by children’s needs.”¹³³ She acknowledges that many individuals were driven by a desire to help, but states, “I still can’t help thinking that we were pawns in a game of international politics, and, like a child, if you don’t know the whole story, you’re

¹³⁰ R. Hart Phillips, “14,072 Children Sent Out of Cuba,” *New York Times*, 9 March 1963, 2.

¹³¹ Torres, *The Lost Apple*, 216.

¹³² María de los Ángeles Torres, “Uprooted by History; We are Cuba’s Lost Children in Search of Our Past,” *The Washington Post*, 1 Feb 1998, C1.

¹³³ Ibid.

inclined to imagine the worst.”¹³⁴ The Central Intelligence Agency’s refusal to declassify reports that could shed further light on the program has led to more fears that it was aimed more at subverting the Revolution than saving Cuban children.

Víctor Triay, on the other hand, argues that the program was successful in the sense that it responded to the Cuban parents' needs and wishes. He believes that, “When it came time for the decision either to submit to the state—representing a system that the parents found repugnant—or to send the children to safety in the United States, where political and religious freedoms were assured, the Cuban parents opted for the latter.”¹³⁵ He adds:

Other criticisms of the Cuban Children's Program smack strongly of political ideology. Grupo Areito, a group of Cubans in the United States who are sympathetic to the Castro regime, includes some former Pedro Pan children who have stated, as recounted by Joan Didion, that the distinction between being sent to camps in Russia and camps in the United States was insignificant for the young refugees.¹³⁶

Triay attempts to refute this claim by citing the reaction of ten Pedro Pan interviewees, without acknowledging that others may have agreed that either experience would have been equally traumatizing. The children sent to the United States were forced to leave their families and homes, and had no assurances that they would see either ever again.

Although Torres’s book is a secondary source about Operation Pedro Pan, in many parts it reads as an autobiography when she recounts her own experiences. She admits that she was one of the more fortunate children sent alone to United States. She was placed in a foster family, but when they could no longer care for her, a relative took her in.¹³⁷ Other kids were sent to orphanages where they faced

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Triay, *Fleeing Castro*, 104.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Torres, *The Lost Apple*, 249.

maladjusted peers and a strict staff accustomed to handling problem children. Torres later joined the Antonio Maceo Brigade, a group that was in favor of reopening dialogue between the United States and Cuba, and traveled back to the island in 1979. She began to question why she and over 14,000 other children were separated from their families, but was met with resistance by both the United States and Cuban governments.

The Central Intelligence Agency, which Torres and others believe was involved in the program in the early 1960s, repeatedly turned down Torres' requests for access to documents regarding the program and when she tried to establish a research project in Cuba it was "politically manipulated."¹³⁸ The Cuban government used children's return to the island as an opportunity to strike at the exile community, and her family and many in the exile community viewed her trip to Cuba as an "act of treason."¹³⁹ Torres, like many other veterans of the program, has sought to understand the circumstances surrounding her expatriation. As she says, "The need to understand what really happened has motivated many Pedro Pans to delve into the past. However, because the operation played out on the world stage of the Cold War, documents about this time period have been nearly impossible to obtain."¹⁴⁰ She adds, "Both the U.S. and the Cuban governments are still interested in spinning the facts. The battle has moved from saving children's minds to controlling the narrative of the exodus."¹⁴¹ Individuals, such as Torres, were unable to access documents regarding the program that forever changed their lives. When Torres requested documents on Operation Pedro Pan, the Central Intelligence Agency had released documents surrounding the

¹³⁸ Ibid., 19.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 229.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

Bay of Pigs and the Missile Crisis.¹⁴² However, they withheld documents regarding this program. Reunions have been held to allow Pedro Pans to reconnect and books have been written to share the experiences with a larger audience. The governments may be able to control the official narrative of the operation by withholding classified documents, but what they cannot change is the private memories of those involved.

Carlos Eire, one of the children sent out of Cuba, wrote *Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy*, which won the National Book Award in 2003. In this memoir he recounts his privileged life as the son of a judge before the Cuban Revolution, and how his world gradually came crashing down around him as it progressed. He bashfully describes the luxuries that he enjoyed as a member of one of the more wealthy families in Havana before the Revolution, which stands in stark contrast to his experiences as a young expatriate in the United States. Speaking about his and fellow Pedro Pans experiences, Eire said in an article in the *New York Times*:

Our parents sent us to the United States to save us from a monstrosly disastrous revolution, not knowing if they would ever see us again, and not knowing where we would end up. Most of us had no relatives or contacts in this country, so we were all scattered to the four winds, shuffled off to any foster home or institution that could take us in. Some of us never saw our parents again. All of us had to adjust, and most of us learned how to thrive on adversity.¹⁴³

Eire dealt with his adversity in exile by detaching himself from the world of his childhood, and he refers to each instance of being uprooted as death. He describes the ensuing transformation when he says, “In the wink of an eye-in a fraction of that, really- you pass through the burning silence, and you emerge in exactly the same spot, in the very same body, gloriously transformed, a glowing blank slate.”¹⁴⁴ Eire would have to wait over three years to be reunited with his mother and would never again

¹⁴² Ibid., 238.

¹⁴³ Carlos Eire, “In the Wake of the Storm, Rage, and Redemption,” *New York Times*, 25 Sept 2005, 14.

¹⁴⁴ Carlos Eire, *Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), 381.

see his father, who remained in Cuba with his adopted son. Eire's memoir portrays the traumatic experience of leaving family, friends, and homeland behind as an exile at the age of twelve.

Silvana Paternostro says of Eire, "He is not a Cuba expert and does not pretend to be. He is upfront about the factual mistakes in his book. He is not an activist either, not for the right or the left. Because he has no agenda, he makes comments that get him in trouble, in anti-Castro Miami and in pro-Cuba New York."¹⁴⁵ The memories of his childhood recorded in his book had been relatively free from the politics of the Cuban exile population because he was largely apart from the community. He recounts an instance at Florida International University when he says, "This one man stands up, a Cuban, and asks, 'What does our exiled political leadership think about your book? What does so-and-so think?'" and he listed about six people, and I said, 'I'm sorry, but I don't know who any of these people you're mentioning are.' And everyone started clapping and laughing, this room full of people."¹⁴⁶ This instance shows that there is pressure for conformity in personal accounts within the Cuban exile community, and Eire was not concerned with complying with this pressure. When asked about any historical inaccuracies in his book he responded, "Oh, it's no problem. Because this book is what it is. There are other things historians often try to sort out, not just what happened, but how what happened made an impact in people's lives. And any good historian is very conscious of the fact that any account, especially a first-person account, is only one part of a much larger scope."¹⁴⁷ It is important for the reader to approach Eire's work as the account of how one individual felt the impact of the Cuban Revolution, rather than as

¹⁴⁵ Silvana Paternostro, "Carlos Eire," *BOMB* 90 (Winter 2004): 75.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

a book detailing its history. Eire is writing with the images of his past in mind and about the community of which he was a part. His is not a book that discusses the Cuban Revolution, its causes and effects, but the reverberations that he and his family consequently experienced. He had family members who were arrested and tortured by Cuban police; understandably, he did not care to recognize any supposed achievements of the revolution. As María de los Ángeles Torres wrote in *The Lost Apple*, “There is no one overarching narrative that can capture the complexities of our parents’ emotions or our individual experiences. Even though our collective story has been bound by a very well guarded mythology born of revolution, persecution, disillusionment, and fear, there are, in reality, as many stories as there are Pedro Pan children.”¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, rather than argue that Operation Pedro Pan was a program intended to undermine the Cuban government without considering how the experience of being separated from their families would affect the children, as Torres does in her book, Eire focuses on his personal experiences.

Carlos Eire’s experiences were typical. In a survey conducted by Yvonne Conde, the majority of respondents came from financially well-off families and 190 out of 442 were not reunited with their families for more than three years, much like Eire.¹⁴⁹ Many of the children and organizers of the exodus program interviewed by Yvonne Conde and Víctor Triay claim that the process of separation was necessary to escape communist indoctrination in Cuba, and that it made the children tougher and more resilient individuals. When the children (now adults) of Operation Pedro Pan were asked in a survey conducted by Conde if they thought that their parents had done the right thing by sending them to the United States, over eighty-five percent responded “yes.” When asked if they would have done what their parents did in the

¹⁴⁸ Torres, *The Lost Apple*, 251.

¹⁴⁹ Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 224, 225.

same circumstance, approximately forty-six percent responded “yes,” while thirty-two percent said ‘no’ and twenty-two percent were ‘unsure.’ Of the 442 total respondents to the survey, only 320 answered the latter question.¹⁵⁰ The non-responses likely indicate that more individuals were undecided as to what they would have done in the situation or were unwilling to speculate. When asked if the experience of being a child refugee had a positive or negative effect, sixty-nine percent responded positively, while less than eight percent responded negatively and approximately twenty percent said that it had both a positive and negative impact.¹⁵¹

Similarly, in a sociological study conducted by Jose Goyos, 170 adult Cubans who came to the United States through Operation Pedro Pan were asked to evaluate their experience in the program. Forty percent of their respondents ranked the experience as being “neutral,” thirty-five percent said that it was a “good” experience, ten percent saw it as “poor,” six percent saw it as “excellent,” and six percent did not respond.¹⁵² When asked if they would make the same decision as their parents if given the same situation, thirty-six percent said yes, thirty-five percent answered, “don’t know,” and twenty-five percent responded no.¹⁵³ When asked to describe their experience, many spoke of how the experience made them stronger and independent. However, many also spoke about, “the ‘pain,’ the ‘confusion,’ the ‘bad’ and in some cases, the ‘horrible experience.’”¹⁵⁴ One male respondent stated, “after Hurricane Andrew my mother-in-law wanted us to send our kids to Gainesville with her. I told her I would not do to my kids what my parents did to me... don’t ever separate

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 225.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 228.

¹⁵² Jose Manuel Goyos, *Identifying Resiliency Factors in the Adult “Pedro Pan” Children: A Retrospective Study* (PhD diss.: Barry University, 1996), 82.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 82, 85.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 86.

yourself from your kids.”¹⁵⁵ However, if such a large percentage thought that their parents did the right thing by sending them unaccompanied to the United States and a clear majority said that it had a positive effect on them, why did so few say they would do what their parents did given the same circumstances? The participants in Conde’s survey were specifically asked, “Would you do what your parents did under the same circumstances?”¹⁵⁶ Miguel Bretos, who arrived unaccompanied in the United States in August 1961 at the age of seventeen, mused in the foreword to Margaret Paris’ book *Embracing America*, “I have always wondered whether, under similar circumstances, I would have sent my own children away. Probably not, but then, who am I to judge?”¹⁵⁷ Although the question of whether or not they would have made the same decision as their parents given the same situation is hypothetical, it shows how difficult the experience was for many of the children.

While many of the participants believe that their exile was a necessary one that saved them from injustices in Cuba and that their parents did the right thing in sending them away, they are reluctant to state that they would do the same as their parents given identical circumstances. Many Pedro Pans experienced hardships, were forced to mature ahead of their time, and struggled with their identity due to their displacement. As Yvonne Conde stated in an interview for *The Times* in 1992, “We are stuck in never-never land. Most of us feel we are not really Americans and yet we don’t identify with other Cubans. We are in between.”¹⁵⁸ Of those who said that their separation was a negative experience, they explained that it had made them harder, forced them to take on difficult responsibilities at a young age, and left them with a

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 91.

¹⁵⁶ Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 205.

¹⁵⁷ Margaret Paris, *Embracing America: A Cuban Exile Comes of Age* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002), xi.

¹⁵⁸ David Adams, “Peter Pans Turn Back the Clock,” *The Times*, 27 Nov 1992.

sense of lose (one individual compared the experience to losing a limb).¹⁵⁹ Cuban parents retained guardianship of their children sent to the United States, but roughly seventy percent of the respondents to Conde's survey said that they did not see their parents until over a year after their arrival.¹⁶⁰ When their families finally joined them, the ordeal was still not over.

In *Fleeing Castro: Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children's Program*, Víctor Triay discusses the reactions of several Cuban children when they were reunited with their parents based on interviews he conducted for his book. He writes:

There were children who believed that their parents did not love them because they had sent them away. Such families needed a time of healing. For others, a seemingly unbreachable [sic] cultural rift had developed during their separation. Some had grown accustomed to a different type of home environment and had difficulty reaccepting their parents' authority. Still, families ultimately adapted well to their new situation. Children commonly accepted leadership roles in the family after reunification because of their parents' ignorance about life in the United States and their inability to speak English.¹⁶¹

Carlos Eire and his older brother were two children that were forced to assume leadership of the family when their mother joined them in the United States (their father remained in Cuba and Carlos never saw him again.) Eire says, "My brother and I became [our mother's] guardians. We supported her. We found our apartment. We bought our furniture. We found the used TV, the radio, the dishes. We spoke for her. We read newspapers for her and interpreted movies and television programs. We took her places on buses and train."¹⁶² The children sent to the United States through the operation struggled to become a part of society in the United States. They were joined years later by parents who had to go through the same process, or by those who refused to do likewise.

¹⁵⁹ Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 205.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 224. Fifteen respondents to the survey said that they never saw their parents again.

¹⁶¹ Triay, *Fleeing Castro*, 102.

¹⁶² Eire, *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, 205.

Former Chief of Police in Miami, Raúl Martínez, was twelve when his parents sent him unaccompanied to the United States. Lucy Ash wrote an article in *The Independent* about an interview she conducted with Raúl Martínez. She wrote, “Back in Havana, his parents also suffered, and their marriage disintegrated soon after his departure. When I asked Chief Martínez how he coped with the separation, his sharp, brown eyes unexpectedly filled with tears. His father came over seven years later, but relations were strained.”¹⁶³ He said, “I couldn’t help resenting him. I felt like saying, ‘Where the hell were you all the time I was growing up?’”¹⁶⁴ He had to wait sixteen years before he was able to see his mother. Ash concludes the article by asking rhetorically, “So what, in the end, was Operation Pedro Pan? A disinterested mercy mission? An act of psychological warfare, robbing Cuba of the middle class that it needed most, as the current Cuban government insists? Or, as many of the children believe, a programme of mixed motives, blending humanitarianism with realpolitik?”¹⁶⁵

Frank Martínez was fifteen-years-old when he was sent by his parents to the United States. In an article in the *St. Petersburg Times*, his mother, Felipa Martínez explained, “I didn’t want Fidel Castro to take him away from me. I cried a lot, I suffered a lot. Imagine what it’s like for a mother to have to separate herself from her child. How can I not be happy that I got him out of there?”¹⁶⁶ Frank Martínez said that being sent to the United States was “the best thing that ever happened to me, because it made me a better person.”¹⁶⁷ Many Pedro Pans share this sentiment, and they believe the experience has made them more independent and resilient. He adds,

¹⁶³ Lucy Ash, “Pain of Cuban Children Sent into US Exile,” *The Independent*, 5 Nov 2000, 23.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Susan Benesch, “Airlift carried Cubans to Freedom,” *St. Petersburg Times*, 4 Nov 1990, 1A.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

however, “If I was to choose between having my own son go someplace else and having him be exposed to Communism, then he will stay with me and be exposed to Communism and we will plow through it together.”¹⁶⁸ Monsignor Bryan Walsh, also said in the same article, “The bottom line for the U.S. government [...] was that taking care of the Cubans was a blow in favor of freedom.”¹⁶⁹

In 2000, debate raged in the United States about whether Elián González should be returned to his father in Cuba after his mother died attempting to bring Elián to the United States in an inner tube. An article in the *St. Petersburg Times* states, “To understand the passion that Miami’s Cuban-American community feels for a young boy found floating in the sea on an inner tube, a history lesson is in order.”¹⁷⁰ The article elaborates, “This lesson takes us back to the early 1960s, just after Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba, prompting a clandestine effort to spirit Cuban children out of the country. The legacy of Operation Pedro Pan might make clear why so many people are fighting Elián Gonzalez’s return to Cuba.”¹⁷¹ Jose Pujals, a Cuban exile who worked with a network of other refugees dedicated to overthrow of Castro, claimed that, “If the Americans who want to send Elián back to Cuba could live only a few months in the conditions suffered by the Cuban people, they would never, never support sending him back.”¹⁷²

Dirk Johnson wrote in a *New York Times* article that, “Now, the case of Elián Gonzalez has loosed a flood of memories and emotions for the alumni of Pedro Pan people who long ago blended into the fabric of everyday American life.”¹⁷³ He interviewed Michael Musa and Rafael Pavelo, who were both sent unaccompanied by

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Lucy Morgan, “In the Name of Freedom,” *St. Petersburg Times*, 18 Jan 2000, 1D.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Dirk Johnson, “The Elián González Case: The Refugees,” *New York Times*, 22 April 2000, 10A.

their families out of Cuba. In response to the battle over whether Elián should return to Cuba or stay in the United States, Musa said, “The boy should be with his father. It’s a no brainer.”¹⁷⁴ Johnson pointed out, “It was a view shared by others who came to America in the Pedro Pan operation, a stance vehemently opposed by many Cuban-Americans in Miami.”¹⁷⁵ Pavelo explained this difference, “The Miami Cubans, they either came to the United States with their families, or were reunited with them very quickly. They don’t understand. It’s a very different situation when you’re talking about taking a boy away from his parent.”¹⁷⁶ Johnson notes that, “In the months after [Pavelo] was sent to the United States, his parents began to blame each other for the decision to send the boy away. Within two years, they divorced.”¹⁷⁷

María Vidal de Haymes, a professor in the School of Social Work at Loyola University, was not a Pedro Pan herself, but her two brothers were sent to the United States by her parents in 1961. After a brief stay in Miami, her brothers were sent to live in a residential facility in Lincoln, Nebraska, where they lived with about fifty other Cuban children.¹⁷⁸ Her brothers were fortunate in the fact that they did not have to wait long to be reunited with their family. She recalls, “On the evening of July 2, 1963, my parents, my great aunt, my sister and I departed from Havana on the *S. S. Maximus* and disembarked from the ship at the Everglades Port the following morning.”¹⁷⁹ She explains that their trip was rare during the period between the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Freedom Flights program that began in November of 1965. She adds, “Our trip had been sponsored by the U.S. Red Cross, as part of a medical supply exchange program. The ship had unloaded its cargo of donated pharmaceuticals and

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ María Vidal de Haymes, “Operation Pedro Pan: One Family’s Journey to the U.S.,” *Journal of Poverty* 8:4 (2004): 121.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 122.

medical supplies and returned to the U.S. with its new cargo of Cuban passengers.”¹⁸⁰ Interestingly she goes on to say, “Rooted in a Cold War era that ended years ago, the embargo has failed to achieve U.S. policy goals and has damaged U.S. economic, diplomatic and national security interests. It has also severely restricted travel to Cuba, keeping the U.S./ Cuba relations barrier in force between family members on either side of the Florida Straights.”¹⁸¹ She concludes, “If the embargo policy ever made sense, it certainly does not now. A lot had changed in forty years and it is time to change the embargo policy.”¹⁸² Operation Pedro Pan has been, and continues to be, an example of the struggle between the United States and Cuba over the minds of the masses. Whether one is discussing Elián González, the embargo imposed upon Cuba, or the recent tragedy in Haiti, the program is used to argue both sides of the argument.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 123.

¹⁸² Ibid.

CONCLUSION

The decision that some Cuban parents made between 1960 and 1962 to send their children alone to the United States was far more complex than one official memory could ever explain. In the United States and in Cuba Operation Pedro Pan has been used as a tool to discredit the other. A girl that Yvonne Conde calls Josefina (a pseudonym) told her, “I know why I came to the United States. It was because my father wanted me to be better off. He’d rather lose me to a Democratic country than to a Communist country.”¹⁸³ However, even when the children arrived in the United States they faced numerous hardships. They struggled to overcome the language barrier, waited anxiously to be reunited with their parents, and were often misunderstood in a culture so foreign to their own. Although the veterans of Operation Pedro Pan are told that they were saved from communism when they were sent out of Cuba, many also feel as though they lost a part of themselves through the process. Leaving Cuba not only meant escaping communism, but also being forced to leave a nation, a home, family, and friends.

The United States media has repeatedly reported on the urgency of the unaccompanied Cuban children exodus. Sources such as the *U.S. News & World Report* claimed that Cuban parents were so frantic to send their children away to avoid “the Communist brainwashing that is universal in Cuban schools.”¹⁸⁴ Masud-Piloto points out that, “Little was said, however, about the dramatic, and in most cases traumatic, situation the children faced: separation from their parents, arrival in a strange land, a language barrier, and adaptation to a new culture and environment.”¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 46.

¹⁸⁴ Masud-Piloto, *With Open Arms*, 41.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

The children were scattered throughout the United States, and the difficulties they faced went largely unreported in the United States media. Although officials reported some cases of abuse in foster care and other institutions, the newspapers did not pick up these stories.¹⁸⁶ Children outside of Florida had an especially hard time because they did not have the same community support, and were thrust into such a foreign environment. However, many individuals in the United States were quick to see the migration in ideological terms. A Republican Congressman from Minnesota, Walter H. Judd, represented this view when he argued that, “Every refugee who comes out [of Cuba] is a vote for our society and a vote against their society.”¹⁸⁷ The “defenseless” Cuban children that the United States saved from communism were touted as an even stronger blow to Castro’s revolutionary government.

The children who arrived in the United States through Operation Pedro Pan were unlike any other group of Cuban refugees. They had not been able to calculate the political and economic advantages of immigrating to another country as other refugees surveyed in Alejandro Portes’ book of Cuban immigration had. The parents, who agonized over what was best for their children, made the decision for them. The children, separated from their families and homeland, could not rely on the certainty of their convictions like other Cuban refugees. They were not attempting to regain wealth and economic power, or plotting how to overthrow Fidel Castro. They had less experience and knowledge of how Cuba was before the Cuban Revolution. Their longing derives from the separation from their families, homeland, and culture more than a return to a pre-Castro Cuba, outside of the experiences they had in childhood on the island. It is often said that the children of Operation Pedro Pan are more

¹⁸⁶ María Christina García, *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 25.

¹⁸⁷ Masud-Piloto, *With Open Arms*, 33.

moderate than the greater exile community, and this may be a contributing factor.

Many Pedro Pans supported the return of Elián González to his father in Cuba, although this was a rare position held by the rest of the exile community, because they had experienced separation from their parents due to a tug-of-war between the United States and Cuba.

In a recent *Orlando Sentinel* article about a reunion of Pedro Pans in Central Florida Susan Jacobson reiterated a theme that is so often shared about the program, “Five decades later, the children of Operation Pedro Pan are proud Americans with a shared past that has made them resilient and successful.”¹⁸⁸ It added, “In spite of the hardships, the experience gave the refugees important lessons.” One Pedro Pan, Manuel Izquierdo, summed up the program saying, “It was always traumatic, but I think it built character.”¹⁸⁹ Justo A. Martínez, another Pedro Pan, said in an earlier interview, “It was a very difficult decision for our parents to send us to the United States and, despite our success in this country, every Pedro Pan refugee asks himself, ‘Was it the right decision?’ I think it was. ... It was an act of desperation and unselfishness on our parents' part.”¹⁹⁰ Susy Rodríguez explained, “No matter how much you explain your situation to people, rarely do you find someone who really understands what it has been like for us, even among other Cubans.”¹⁹¹ However, rather than embrace the fact that the experience of leaving one’s family and home was an extremely difficult experience, the media has touted the program as an unqualified success that created independent and resilient individuals who were bound to be successful in life. Few have stopped to ask why so many of the individuals who were brought unaccompanied to the United States would make the same decision for their

¹⁸⁸ Susan Jacobson, “Operation Pedro Pan Reunion,” *Orlando Sentinel*, 6 March 2010, B3.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Víctor Manuel Ramos, “Reunion Will Reflect on Operation Pedro Pan,” *Orlando Sentinel*, 5 March 2010, A1.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

own children. Instead, the program is held up as an example of the evils of communism and the lengths to which Cubans would go to escape it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- “73,000 Set to Quit Cuba.” *New York Times*, 15 Feb 1962, 3.
- Adams, David. “Peter Pans Turn Back the Clock.” *The Times*, 27 Nov 1992.
- “Aid for Cuban Children Asked.” *New York Times*, 8 March 1962, 35.
- Alvarez Borland, Isabel. *Cuban-American Literature of Exile: From Person to Persona*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1998.
- Ash, Lucy. “Pain of Cuban Children Sent into US Exile.” *The Independent*, 5 Nov 2000, 23.
- Baker, Bruce. *What Reconstruction Meant: Historical Memory in the American South*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2007.
- Benesch, Susan. “Airlift Carried Cubans to Freedom.” *St. Petersburg Times*, 4 Nov 1990, 1A.
- Close, Kathryn. “Cuban Children Away From Home.” *Children* 10:1 (1963).
Reproduced by Cortés, Carlos E., ed. *Cuban Refugee Programs*. New York: Arno Press, 1980.
- “Cuba Regiments 7-Year-Olds,” *New York Times*, 5 April 1961, 18.
- “Cuban Children Helped in Florida.” *New York Times*, 27 May 1962, 41.
- “Cubans in Miami are U.S. Concern.” *New York Times*, 21 Oct 1962, 41.
- “Cubans in U.S. Seek Toys for Refugees.” *New York Times*, 29 Nov 1961, 25.
- “Cuba’s Refugees.” *New York Times*, 28 Jan 1962, 140.
- Conde, Yvonne. *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14,048 Cuban Children*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Crespo, Ramón Torreira and José Buajasán Marrawi. *Operación Pedro Pan: Un caso de guerra psicológica contra Cuba*. Havana: Editora Política, 2000.

- Reproduced by Mandri, Flora González. "Operation Pedro Pan: A Tale of Trauma and Remembrance." *Latino Studies* 6:3 (October 2008): 252-268.
- "Cuban High Schools Get Army Program." *New York Times*, 7 Jan 1960, 10.
- DeLaney, Jeane. "Review of *Fleeing Castro: Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children's Program*." *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 42 (2000): 170, 171.
- "Education Plans Stir Cuban Fear." *New York Times*, 19 Feb 1961, 31.
- Eire, Carlos. "In the Wake of the Storm, Rage, and Redemption." *New York Times*, 25 Sept 2005, 14.
- Eire, Carlos. "Review of *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14,048 Cuban Children*." *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 81 (2001): 822.
- Eire, Carlos. *Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy*. New York: The Free Press, 2003.
- Finney, John. "President Orders Cuba Refugee Aid." *New York Times*, 4 Feb 1961, 1.
- Frankel, Max. "Plight of Cubans in Miami Growing." *New York Times*, 16 Nov 1960, 13.
- García, María Christina. *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South Florida, 1959-1994*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996.
- Gilroy, Marilyn. "Operation Pedro Pan: Memories and Accolades 40 Years Later." *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education*, 15 July 2002, 8.
- Gott, Richard. "The Lessons of Operation Pedro Pan." *The Guardian*, 19 Jan 2010, 2.
- Goyos, Jose Manuel. "Identifying Resiliency Factors in the Adult 'Pedro Pan' Children: A Retrospective Study." PhD diss., Barry University, 1996.
- Haymes, María Vidal de. "Operation Pedro Pan: One Family's Journey to the U.S." *Journal of Poverty* 8:4 (2004).

- Jacobson, Susan. "Operation Pedro Pan Reunion." *Orlando Sentinel*, 6 March 2010, B3.
- Mandri, Flora González, "Operation Pedro Pan: A Tale of Trauma and Remembrance," *Latino Studies* 6:3 (October 2008): 252-268.
- Masud-Piloto, Félix Roberto. *With Open Arms: Cuban Migration to the United States*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988.
- Johnson, Dirk. "The Elián González Case: The Refugees." *New York Times*, 22 April 2000, 10A.
- Miller, Gene. "Peter Pan Means Real Life to Some Kids." *Miami Herald*, 9 March 1962.
- Morgan, Lucy. "In the Name of Freedom." *St. Petersburg Times*, 18 Jan 2000, 1D.
- Oettinger, Katherine Brownwell. "Services to Unaccompanied Cuban Refugee Children in the United States." Reproduced by Cortés, Carlos E., ed. *Cuban Refugee Programs*. New York: Arno Press, 1980.
- Ojito, Mirta. "Ramón Grau Alsina, 75, Cuban Who Aided Children's Escape." *New York Times*, 6 Nov 1998, C21.
- Paris, Margaret. *Embracing America: A Cuban Exile Comes of Age*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002.
- Paternostro, Silvana. "Carlos Eire." *BOMB* 90 (Winter 2004): 74-80.
- Phillips, R. Hart. "14,072 Children Sent Out of Cuba." *New York Times*, 9 March 1963, 3.
- Phillips, R. Hart. "Castro Movement of Children Rises." *New York Times*, 7 Aug 1959, 6.
- Phillips, R. Hart. "Cuba Gives Pupils Poem Scoring U.S." *New York Times*, 27 Nov 1960, 34.

- Phillips, R. Hart. "Cuban Land Reform Adds to Uncertainty." *New York Times*, 24 May 1959, E4.
- Phillips, R. Hart. "Havana Drums up Fear of Invasion." *New York Times*, 28 Oct 1960, 10.
- Phillips, R. Hart. "Miami is Going Latin as Cubans Make Their Effect Felt in City." *New York Times*, 18 March 1962, 85.
- Phillips, R. Hart. "Military Court in Cuba Dooms 14 for 'War Crimes.'" *New York Times*, 13 Jan 1959, 1.
- Phillips, R. Hart. "Plan to Resettle Cuban Refugees Across Nation Started in Miami." *New York Times*, 6 Jan 1962, 3.
- Phillips, R. Hart. "Youth Farms Set by Castro Regime." *New York Times*, 23 Jan 1961, 1.
- Portes, Alejandro and Robert Bach. *Latin Journey: Cuban and Mexican Immigrants in the United States*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985.
- Ramos, Víctor Manuel. "Reunion Will Reflect on Operation Pedro Pan." *Orlando Sentinel*, 5 March 2010, A1.
- "Red Paper Assails Cuban Boy Scouts." *New York Times*, 24 Aug 1959, 6.
- Torres, María de los Ángeles. *The Lost Apple: Operation Pedro Pan, Cuban Children in the U.S., and the Promise of a Better Future*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.
- "Tortoises, Pedro Pan, and Mass." *New York Times*, 6 Oct 1986, A16.
- Triay, Víctor Andrés. *Fleeing Castro: Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children's Program*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998.
- Trussell, C.P. "Abuse of Parents Charged to Cuba." *New York Times*, 8 Dec 1961, 24.
- "U.S. Homes Found for 2,000 Cubans." *New York Times*, 3 April 1961, 18.