Chapter 2

The FAR up to the Special Period, 1959–1990: The Third World’s Most Impressive Armed Force?

The small band of soldiers one sees in so many photographs marching down the Malecón (Havana’s magnificent ocean drive) in early January 1959, or accompanying their comandante in his triumphal parade through the smaller cities of Cuba and finally Havana itself in that first week of the new era, does not look much like an army. Instead, its young and grimy ranks seem something of a ragtag affair. But the illusion is just that.

It is true that it had only bested an army that was corrupt and had lost most of its will to fight, and not the mighty Batista machine most observers at the time and some even to this day seem to find irresistible; but it had fought its way across Cuba against tremendous odds, and had earned the right to be called the “Ejército” Rebelde. In both word and deed, it saw itself as the successor force to the mambises of the previous century. And while ideas of where the revolution should now go were very mixed indeed, leadership was firm and the need to remake Cuba clear. Without being excessively romantic, it is possible, indeed necessary, to see this army as revolutionary in many aspects. Its highest leaders, if not all its commanders, wished to see the deepest of reform of the country and an end to what was almost universally perceived as a pseudo-colonial status imposed by the United States.

Its rank and file were from all walks of life, and even if the members of the vital urban resistance, the Directorio Revolucionario, were mostly bourgeois or petit bourgeois, the army coming into the city over those days was mostly from the country. Its leadership was middle class in origin but not its younger and most junior members.
Much nonsense has been written about this to date, and this fact should be firmly kept in mind when assessing subsequent events.

**The Early Years of the FAR**

The army of the dictatorship was quickly disbanded, its personnel dispersed, and some of its more notorious commanders executed. The insurgents became the armed forces of the republic. In addition to internal security and external defense roles, they were also to be active in national development tasks, not a new responsibility for a revolutionary force newly out of the Sierra Maestra. Most of the new leaders of the country were serving members of the “armed forces” whose energy, determination, zeal, and connections ensured them, and the institution they would transform, a striking position in the formative years of the revolutionary regime.²

In such circumstances, the rebel army had enormous advantages, which the leaders could use to solidify their extraordinarily strong position in the state. They had the moral ascendancy that victory over Batista’s army brought them. In addition, they were clearly an army of the poor that had overcome great odds. They were likewise unassailable in their proven loyalty to the regime and to the key figure in it—Fidel Castro himself. Indeed, a major campaign to ensure loyalty was undertaken within the armed forces with mythmaking *de rigueur.*³

Frequently given key posts in education, the judicial system, land reform institutes, and the police, rebel officers and even NCOs soon brought the forces to preeminence.

Converting the moth-eaten army of the mountains into a professional force took time. Through Law 599, decreed in October 1959, the old ministry of defense was abolished along with the army, navy, air force, and Joint General Staff of the previous regime. By Law 600, decreed the same day, a new Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (*Ministerio de las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias—MINFAR*) was established. The former services were replaced by the *Ejército Rebelde* (Rebel Army), the *Fuerza Aérea Rebelde* (Rebel Air Force), and the *Marina de Guerra Rebelde* (Rebel Navy), and the former National Police by the *Policía Nacional Revolucionaria* (National Revolutionary Police). In fact, these forces had existed and had even been using these new names since January. But now the changes were official.

The 28-year-old brother of Fidel, Raúl Castro, was named minister and took over formally three days later.⁴ All these institutional names essentially remain to this day, and one could say the same for Raúl as minister.⁵ Raúl had of course already been the creator and commander