

***Memorias de un Soldado Cubano: Vida y Muerte de la Revolucion* [Memories of a Cuban Soldier: Life and Death of the Revolution]**

By Dariel Alarcon Ramirez aka “Benigno”; transcribed by Elisabeth Burgos. (Barcelona, Spain: Tusquets Editores, S.A., 2003), 354 pages, with endnotes and index. Foreword by Elisabeth Burgos. (Originally published in French (Librairie Arheme Fayard, 1996).

Reviewed by Juan

Memorias de un Soldado Cubano is a grizzled veteran colonel’s captivating recollection of Cuba’s Ministry of Interior (MININT), one of the nation’s intimidating and oft-feared security services. Dariel Alarcon Ramirez, best known by his nom de guerre “Benigno,” is a historic figure, who fought alongside Che Guevara in Bolivia during the fateful escapade that led to Che’s death at the hands of US-trained Bolivian soldiers. In this book, Benigno shares with us a rare first-hand account of a communist agent’s journey from illiterate peasant to senior MININT officer in charge of safeguarding Fidel Castro’s personal security. Benigno earned this prestigious position through a lifetime of achievement in attention-getting intelligence and security operations, exporting Cuban-inspired revolution throughout Latin America and Africa, and actively promoting Latin American communist activities. Benigno’s narration is wrapped in Cold War adventurism and intrigue. Adding meaningfully to the value of this historically charged account is a deliberate transcription of the oral history that a barely literate Benigno recited to transcriber Elisabeth Burgos over the course of many sessions. Burgos deserves great credit for drawing out Benigno and capturing the raw essence of his story.

This book is not about politics or ideology. It is a personal account in which the seasoned security official off-handedly exposes, often for the first time, a myriad of Cuban operations—a quality that is sure to appeal irresistibly to fans of intelligence literature. Benigno confirms much of what the United States has suspected of Cuban activities, but at times he provides brand new revelations of the involvement or extent of involvement of Cuban intelligence in seminal events from the 1960s into the 1990s. Revelations include secret missions to Peru, covert planning and financing of terrorist plots in various Latin American countries, and the clandestine training of citizens of countries friendly or neutral to Cuba. One vignette is illustrative: Cuban support and training of members of a Puerto Rican leftist terrorist group—one that went on to pull off the largest armored car heist on US soil—enabled the group to remit millions of stolen US dollars to Cuba to finance urban terrorist operations in Chile and in other Southern Cone countries. At the time, as a member of a MININT training team, Benigno helped prepare Latin American communist saboteurs, assassins, insurgents, and stu-

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dent activists. His outline of Cuban MININT training of leftist candidates from all over Latin America is full of details of Cuban involvement and support for instability in the region, activities about which US intelligence then only had suspicions or was generally ignorant.

One of Benigno's most damning assertions, and an acknowledged impetus for writing the book, is his unwavering belief that Fidel Castro deliberately sent Che to his death-mission in Bolivia. Benigno suggests that Fidel, in effect, condemned Che out of concern that Che's popularity represented a threat to Castro's own leadership in Cuba. While this accusation does not represent an entirely new theory, Benigno's insider access, closeness to Che, and long-time relationship to Castro add strength to the argument. The author first began having doubts about Castro's designs for Che in 1965, when Benigno was fighting alongside Che in the Congo. Following his daring 1967 escape from Bolivia, Benigno claims to have carried a marked, though hidden, anger over Fidel's betrayal and the loss of Cuban combatants. Benigno admits that his disaffection with the regime increased as corruption and the good life took deep root among Cuba's communist elite. He is struck by what he calls "the moral decay" of the regime and the influence that personal allegiance to the Castro brothers has over absolutely everything else. The examples of outrages and excesses that he cites, especially involving the Cuban elite and MININT leadership, are insights only available to someone who has witnessed events from the front row.

While *Memorias de un Soldado Cubano* stands out in several areas, Benigno's treatment of his childhood and his reflections on the meaning of his efforts make the book unique and humanize his account. As a near-illiterate of very humble rural origins, Benigno reminisces about his harsh childhood genuinely and evocatively. Even the simple vocabulary of these passages have an endearing quality. Benigno explained that he ran away from an abusive home when he was eight years old and took refuge in the remote mountains of Cuba where he remained essentially cloistered until he was driven into the guerrilla ranks by violence around him. As he tells it, during his ascent within the guerrilla ranks, ideology was largely alien to him. Benigno, who has lived in exile in France since fleeing the regime in the 1990s during an official visit, makes it clear that he disagrees with the current government and despises the Castro brothers. While the reader may detect a certain degree of contradiction in Benigno, there is no mistaking, however, that he is unremorseful and unapologetic for his past actions and that he is not "simpatico" to the United States or the Cuban exile community. This candor adds to his credibility.

In sum, the events Benigno chronicles fill gaps for those who have closely followed the 40 years of Cuban-assisted challenges to US security. The enthralling true-life tale of armed anti-Americanism, communist challenge, Cuban defiance, chicanery, espionage, and good vs. evil (told from the side of evil) is a must read for students of intelligence, the era, or the country. Unfortunately, Benigno's attention-getting historical account of the Cuban threat will remain out of reach to potentially interested readers of English only. The book is currently available only in French and Spanish.

(Note for nonnative Spanish readers: Students of Spanish capable of reading at the high school level should be able to appreciate the full impact of Benigno's writing.)

