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# STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE



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*A mass interrogation program launched and shaken down in time to play a useful role in the 1962 missile crisis.*

## DOMESTIC COLLECTION ON CUBA

Judith Edgette

Early in 1962 the intelligence community, under the coordination of CIA's apparatus for collecting foreign intelligence from sources in this country, began a greatly stepped-up effort to tap the knowledge of Cuban refugees. Since the beginning of the year, 1,700 to 2,000 refugees had been arriving weekly in Miami. Attempts had been made to talk to as many of the more knowledgeable as possible, but nothing like the full intelligence potential of the influx was being realized; there were not enough trained interrogators, no proper physical facilities to handle such numbers of people, and insufficiently comprehensive guidance from intelligence consumers. The fact that a large percentage of the refugees spoke only Spanish, and that the Cuban variety, added to the problem.

What clearly was needed was a large, well-staffed interrogation center in Miami and a controlling office in Washington to be the channel for the community's coordinated needs. In March, therefore, with the almost unlimited support of the military services and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, there was established at the former Marine Air Base at Opa-locka a Caribbean Admission Center as a service of common concern under CIA direction but staffed mainly by Department of Defense personnel. A teletype link for secure priority communications with Washington was installed in July.

### *Processing at the Center*

From the establishment of the Center in March to the cessation of regular airline flights in October approximately 55,000 people came in from Cuba by air. A smaller number arrived irregularly by boats, rafts, and other means. Because of the physical impossibility of interviewing all of them

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as they arrived, the Center limited its interrogations to males between the ages of 16 and 60 whose preliminary interviews by I&NS at the airport indicated a need for further questioning. Each of these was first required to fill out a standard (ostensibly immigration) form, listing biographic data such as past addresses, employment history, service in military or intelligence groups, and membership in revolutionary organizations. There were also questions of immediate intelligence or counterintelligence interest such as knowledge of Sino-Soviet Bloc personnel and activities in Cuba and names of members of the Cuban internal security forces. The form concluded with questions on relatives already living in the United States.

Then each man was put through a preliminary screening to determine his intelligence potential—his knowledge of military construction and activities, his familiarity with denied areas, any unusual observations he had made, his knowledge of Soviet personnel or of conflicts between Soviets and Cubans, and any information of operational or counterintelligence significance. This was the full processing for about two-thirds of the 11,500 men screened during the period. The remainder were formally and intensively interrogated at the Center against current intelligence requirements. More than 5,500 information reports were produced and 3,000 documents and other printed matter collected.

An effort was made to complete both the screening and the interrogation in one day in order to maintain a continuously flowing operation without backlog. It was desirable also for the sake of the intelligence yield to interrogate the refugees before they had become "contaminated" by advice from others as to what they should say, stress, or suppress. Some of them, however, had to be held longer, notably those with a great deal of information and those whose background warranted a call for special requirements from Washington. With I&NS assistance, facilities were provided at Opa-locka to keep these until they had been thoroughly debriefed.

These refugees were of much lower occupational, social, and educational levels than those who had left Cuba earlier. Because the Castro government was attempting to retain its most valuable professional people it rarely issued them exit permits. As a result, most source descriptions on reports from

the Center were depressingly similar: "Cuban national, so many years of age, six years (or seven or nine or four) of education, bus driver (or waiter or maintenance man or student)," etc. At first the substance of the reports was frequently depressing too. But after the first months, during which the interrogators acquired factual background and experience and the interrogation became a smoothly organized process, the reports improved substantially in quality, detail, scope, and over-all importance. Some of the refugees who had lived or traveled in out-of-the-way places furnished reports of unusual activity which turned out to be the only information available on these areas.

#### *Requirements Management*

To provide a central channel for community guidance to the Center, a special CAC Staff was established by CIA in Washington. One responsibility of this staff was to solicit requirements from members of the community, coordinate them, and transmit them to the Center. Requirements were received not only from USIB agencies but from other government offices and [REDACTED]. Many of these were quite general questions about economic, military, social, and political aspects of Cuban life. But special requirements tailored to the background of particular refugees were often served on other sources having the same general background with excellent results. Reinterrogation requests came frequently from the military services and the Department of Commerce.

Each of the Center's interrogators was required to be familiar, at least broadly, with all current requirements. A comprehensive selection of both open and classified material was compiled as general backing for the requirements. The presence of interrogators from the military services insured that sources with detailed military knowledge could be given interviewers familiar with terminology, background, and requirements in that field. Three senior intelligence officers were made responsible for the handling of requirements on socio-economic, military, and political subjects respectively. These requirements officers could formulate specific, detailed questions for especially knowledgeable sources and personally

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conduct the interrogation of those with extraordinary intelligence potential.

As requirements began to come flooding in there was a danger that the interrogators would become swamped with them and lose sight of old needs in the rush of new ones. A Watch List was therefore published every Monday calling attention to selected requirements, not necessarily the most recent or the most important, in an effort to see that no requirements were ever simply forgotten. To keep the interrogators up to date, briefings in depth were occasionally held by State, Commerce, military, or CIA personnel, and some of these were recorded for the benefit of interrogators unable to attend the live presentations.

A consolidation of the requirements of the entire community was prepared by CIA's Office of Research and Reports, and this Guide was put to immediate use at the Center and at CIA domestic field offices in areas where Cubans had concentrated. In January 1963 a revision of the Guide (now called *Collection and Reporting Handbook: Cuba*) was disseminated to all domestic field offices because of the wide dispersion of the Cubans. The Handbook proved so successful, from both collector and analyst viewpoint, that another revision was being prepared at mid-year.

*Follow-Up*

Another responsibility of the CAC Staff in Washington was to maintain complete records on all Cuban refugees arriving after March 1962. More than 75,000 documents concerning them are now on hand, including the screening forms they filled out at the Center, their regulation Immigration Service cards, and miscellaneous information they provided in applying for aid to the Cuban Refugee Center in Miami. These records, filed both by name and by alien registration number, have been valuable in answering questions from USIB and non-USIB agencies. They are also used as a source of background information for the CIA domestic field offices which undertake follow-up interviews.

The domestic field offices had responded early to the increased requirement for information on Cuba. From 12 February to 6 November 1962 they issued 1,358 reports on Cuban

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matters. In addition to interviewing U.S. citizens who had knowledge of Cuban life and the Cuban economy, they were used to track down and reinterrogate Cubans who had given some information in Miami and then had moved to other parts of the country. A collection officer would spend many hours finding, calming down, and questioning an elusive refugee to determine whether he really saw a rocket forty-five feet long in the mountains. More hours have been spent talking to the Americans who have been writing, calling, and telegraphing the Director that they have vital information on Cuba, information which may turn out to be indeed important or only a frenzied warning that Armageddon in the person of Fidel Castro is just around the corner.

After the President's speech of 22 October 1962 making the crisis public, the CAC Staff was requested to make a review of the reports on missiles, military installations, etc., that had been furnished by the Center and the ordinary domestic field offices. The resulting 45-page report showed that as early as June and July refugees were reporting suspicious Soviet activities and rumors that offensive military weapons, especially long-range missiles, were to be introduced into Cuba. Reports concerning denied areas and unusual construction made it possible to pinpoint probable main areas of Soviet concentration. It has since been stated publicly that refugee reports usually gave the first indication of abnormal activity and were often used in plotting the flights of surveillance aircraft. It can be said here that this reporting played a significant role in alerting the U.S. government first to the possibility and later to the existence of offensive Soviet weapons in Cuba. Two such reports were among the factors that led to the critical, timely resumption of surveillance flights.

After the flow of refugees was stopped in October, the Caribbean Admission Center's operations were skeletonized and moved to Miami, from where it continues to supplement the reporting from the regular Miami collection office and other CIA field offices around the country. If regular refugee flights should resume, Opa-locka could be reopened and operated on the old scale to provide significant amounts of timely intelligence from these fresh sources.