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Latin America Review

22 August 1960

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LATIN AMERICA REVIEW [Redacted]

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22 August 1980

CONTENTS

EO 12958 1.6(d)(1)>10<25Yrs
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EO 12958 1.6(d)(1)>10<25Yrs
(C) Cuba: Death of Two Heroines [Redacted] 7

by [Redacted]

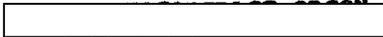
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(C) The deaths of two prominent revolutionary figures could add to Cubans' concern for the future. [Redacted]

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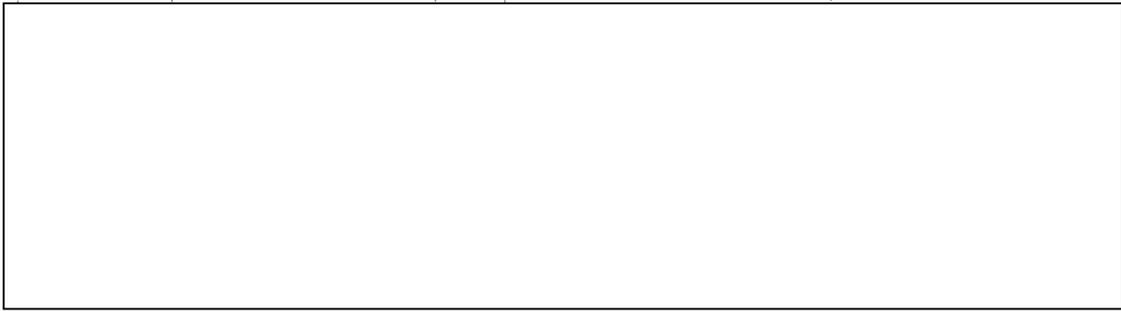
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Cuba: Death of Two Heroines

The deaths this year of two important female personalities of the Cuban revolution could lead some Cubans to question the current course of the revolution. The death of Celia Sanchez, 55, in January after a long bout with cancer deprived President Fidel Castro of the moderating influence and emotional support of a principal adviser and confidante. The suicide of Haydee Santamaria, 51, in July has prompted questions about her personal commitment to the Communist regime. A heroine from the earliest days of the revolution, Santamaria had long been revered as an example of revolutionary courage and dedication. Their deaths have come at a time of serious difficulties for Cuba and concern about the future.

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Castro's Confidante

Celia Sanchez was Minister-Secretary of the Council of State and one of a handful of women belonging to the Communist Party Central Committee since its founding in 1965. Working directly under Castro's supervision, she had been responsible since the triumph of the revolution in 1959 for keeping a semblance of order in the Cuban leader's public and private lives. She was tasked with ensuring that all of Castro's orders were carried out; screening people who wished to see him; answering all of his correspondence; responding to popular grievances; and acting as a coordinator between Castro and other high government officials. She also served as a bridge between Castro and the Cuban people, interceding with him to plead the cause of many petitions lost in the Cuban bureaucracy.

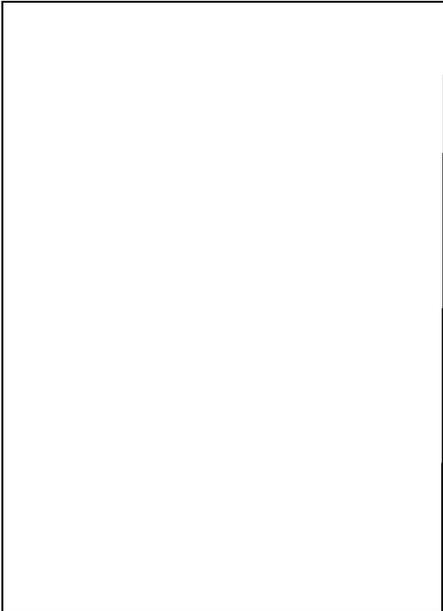
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Sanchez's death was a personal loss to President Castro. She had served as his secretary and most trusted confidante since the guerrilla days of the Sierra Maestra. For most of the 1960s, her apartment in Havana had been Castro's home

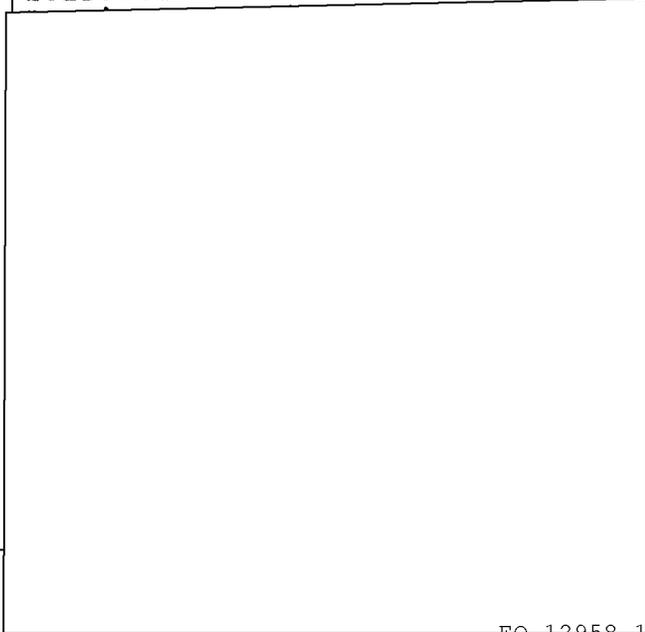
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22 August 1980

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and Cuban revolutionary head-
quarters. He sought her opinion
on many matters requiring a dif-
ficult decision and generally
followed her recommendations.

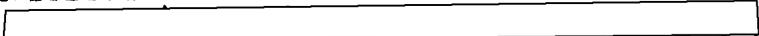


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"The Girl of Moncada"

Haydee Santamaria ranked with Sanchez as one of those almost mythical figures from the earliest days of the revolutionary struggle against President Fulgencio Batista. She was one of only two women who participated in the attack on the Moncada barracks in Santiago de Cuba led by Castro on 26 July 1953--the birth of the revolution. 

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Santamaria's connection with the anti-Batista struggle was laden with personal tragedy and suffering. Many of the 160-man attacking force were killed; Santamaria's brother, Abel, and her fiance, Boris Luis Santacoloma, were captured and tortured to death. Santamaria also was captured and forced to endure the tortures of her two loved ones, 

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Santamaria later stood trial with Fidel 

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22 August 1980

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(C) and Raul Castro and the few other survivors of the abortive attack, and was sentenced to seven months imprisonment. []

After her release, she became known as "the girl of Moncada"; a legend of courage, sacrifice, and dedication built around her. Santamaria, however, was ill, []

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[] Moreover, she saw a world indifferent to the tragedy of Moncada. []

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Nonetheless, [] Santamaria felt a debt to her dead men and a quickening of the ideal for which they had perished. She became the instrumental force behind the formation of Castro's 26th of July Movement following Castro's release from prison in 1955, and she served on its national directorate. Her tireless organizational work made her one of the most important figures in the rebel movement. She was largely responsible for organizing and securing funds for the Sierra Maestra guerrillas, and without her the revolutionary struggle might never have gotten off the ground. By the fall of 1958, hunted by Batista's police, she fled to the United States where she continued to raise funds for the rebel movement until victory was achieved in January 1959. []

EO 12958
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During the early years of the revolution, Santamaria maintained a prominent public position befitting her prestige and close friendship with Castro. She was the only woman on the national directorates of the two organizations that preceded the Cuban Communist Party (PCC)--the Integrated Revolutionary Organizations and the United Party of the Socialist Revolution. When the PCC was founded in 1965, she was named to its Central Committee. In 1976 she was elected deputy to the National Assembly and appointed to the Council of State. []

Santamaria's political influence, however, was more nominal than real. She never belonged to the close-knit, all-male group of Cuban policymakers, but her former husband, Armando Hart, is a member of the Politburo and her brother Aldo is Chief of the Cuban Navy and Vice Minister of the Armed Forces. Her influence appears to have been limited to having her friends appointed to

22 August 1980

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various government positions. The job that occupied most of her time and effort--director of the Casa de las Americas, an intellectual-cultural institution--had almost no political content. Her involvement with national and international women's groups also was almost devoid of any significant political substance. Even in the cultural field, Santamaria's role did not extend into

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22 August 1980

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the policymaking area, and her counsel probably was not sought during the cultural retrenchment of the early 1970s, when a number of Cuban intellectuals were repressed severely for their mildly critical positions vis-a-vis the revolution. Her death, however, may cause further despair among Cuban intellectuals, already hard-pressed by the regime's ideological rigidity.

There is no evidence to suggest that Santamaria was dissatisfied with her status in the Cuban hierarchy. The "girl of Moncada" continued to be recognized with the undiminished respect and prestige of a revolutionary heroine.

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Many questions remain unanswered about Santamaria's death. The manner of her suicide has not been revealed by Cuban authorities. The government, clearly embarrassed by such a dramatic demonstration of personal unhappiness from one of its heroes, blamed it on

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22 August 1980

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[redacted] it also expressed its disapproval by refusing to give her a state funeral suitable to her status. Delivering the eulogy at her funeral, Politburo member Juan Almeida left no doubt that Santamaria violated a basic revolutionary ethical principle by selfishly committing suicide: "As a matter of principle, we revolutionaries cannot agree with suicide. The life of a revolutionary belongs to his cause and his people and he should devote it to service until the last atom of energy and the last second of life." For one whose much vaunted personal sacrifices and dedication on behalf of the revolution had been held up for so long as an example for other Cubans, this was a particularly significant indictment. [redacted]

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Santamaria's suicide could be perceived by some of the Cuban public as a final act of despair--the most personal statement that the revolutionary dream for which she had sacrificed so much was shattered. She could be seen as a casualty of the sagging revolutionary elan affecting many sectors of the population. At the highest levels of the country's leadership, the dramatic manner of Santamaria's death two days after the 26 July celebrations is likely to reinforce a sense of malaise at this juncture in Cuba's 21-year-old revolution. Coming on the heels of Celia Sanchez's death, Santamaria's suicide also might [redacted]

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The Future for Women

Despite the often-claimed liberating impact of the revolution on Cuban women, they have remained effectively excluded from the leadership. No woman has ever served on the party's Politburo or its Secretariat. Out of a total of 124 Central Committee members and alternates selected in 1975, only 11 (8.9 percent) were women; more-over five of these were alternates, clearly a second-ranking position. [redacted]

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The deaths of Celia Sanchez and Haydee Santamaria accentuate the underrepresented status of women on the country's government group. The next PCC congress scheduled for December 1980 may elect more women to the Central Committee, but it is doubtful that female representation

22 August 1980

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in governing bodies will improve significantly in the foreseeable future. Moreover, Sanchez and Santamaria were more than just Central Committee members; they were irreplaceable heroines of the revolution and role models for Cuban women. Their loss could hamper government efforts to motivate women toward greater sacrifices on behalf of the revolution.

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22 August 1980