

*The Rise and Decline of Fidel Castro: An Essay in Contemporary History.* By MAURICE HALPERIN. Berkeley, 1972. University of California Press. Map. Illustrations. Index. Pp. x, 380. Cloth. \$12.95.

The historical imagination is a rare sensibility that permits one to situate oneself within the historical "moment" under study and to penetrate beneath appearances so as to reveal the interconnection between otherwise hidden historic processes. This applies as well to the writing of contemporary history (leaving aside historiographic problems such as inadequate availability of essential sources). Paradoxically, however, to witness events, or to participate in them directly, scarcely assures the necessary historic empathy, and may, indeed, act to obscure the meaning of the events to the participants themselves. Halperin's book may fall into the latter category. He spent more than six years in Cuba, roughly from 1962 through 1968, at the invitation of Ernesto Che Guevara. They met, Halperin states, in Moscow, where he was on the Faculty of the Academy of Sciences for three years. Once in Cuba, Halperin had little contact with Che because, as he explains, while both agreed "that the Soviet system was a poor model for Cuba," Halperin "leaned toward a liberal variant of the Yugoslav system," which Che opposed. "After Che's unexpected disappearance, Fidel began to move in Che's direction, and in time," Halperin writes, "I found myself intellectually and morally stranded."

It was Halperin's objective to provide a "narrative of the first five years (1959-1964) of Fidel Castro's regime and its external relations" (p. ix). He wished not to confine himself to a mere narrative, however, but to interpret events during these five years in the light of later developments, when the "symbiotic relationship between [Fidel's] rise and decline" would become visible. These, briefly, are Halperin's objectives in writing his book, its theme and method—and peculiar bias.

Halperin leads us to believe that he will utilize an historical method that, by interpreting "past" events from the perspective of the "future," attempts to grasp history as a process rather than as a set of "events" or a "period" which the historian selects arbitrarily. Thus, "future" events would be uncovered as aspects of a developing historical process. Unfortunately, this methodology, which might provide a depth of historical understanding not accessible to empiricists, is reduced in Halperin's work to a series of "digressions" into later events. Thus, in fact, he describes his own method (though not his theme) all-too-accurately: "The symbiotic relationship between [Castro's] rise and decline is *illustrated* by means of *digressions* into events of the following years, when the seeds have sprouted and reveal the shape and measure of the decline" (p. ix, italics added). Unfortunately, I believe

that Halperin does “illustrate” rather than provide systematic reasoning and evidence to support his interpretations; and his “digressions” remain digressions, rather than being incorporated into a coherent analysis.

It is also not clear to what Castro’s “rise and decline” refers, though this is often implied, and one statement by Halperin may accurately summarize his meaning: “Fidel’s exercise of arbitrary and absolute power for more than twelve years [has] . . . warped his judgment and crippled his sensibility,” leading to “unmitigated economic disaster” and making the “survival of the Castro regime . . . more dependent on the Soviet Union than ever” (p. 356). These are obviously claims of the utmost importance, all the more so for being made by someone with Halperin’s “inner” and “inside” experiences. For this reason alone the book should be read by Cuban specialists—with the care with which I shall indicate it deserves.

Readers of Halperin’s book will immediately recognize his self-described estrangement from the revolution and from Castro—the objects of his study. In this case, it is to the book’s detriment, which abounds in innuendo, hyperbole, and misstatements that vitally affect the total assessment of the book. Space permits discussion of only a few characteristic instances. Halperin writes that “*much* of what Fidel said” publicly during his 1959 visit to the United States “could not be printed *or even whispered* in Havana today, although . . . all Cuban newspapers at the time published extensive reports” (p. 46, italics added). To which of Castro’s statements the term “much” refers Halperin does not specify. “Today” presumably refers to sometime before mid-1971, when Halperin completed the book, perhaps even earlier. I found, however, and reported at that time, that in the late summer and early fall of 1969, I could freely discuss any issue with almost anyone in Cuba, whether ordinary citizen, Party functionary, or government official—even without whispering. Second, Raúl Roa, Cuba’s foreign minister, was a well-known radical intellectual in Cuba before 1959 who was outspokenly anti-Communist. In an article on the 1956 Hungarian rebellion, for example, he called Communists in the West “trained seals and chatterbox lackeys of Moscow,” and condemned the USSR’s brutal suppression of “the patriotic uprising of the Hungarian people.” Halperin writes: “Interestingly enough, this article was reprinted in a collection of Roa’s essays published in Cuba in November 1959 entitled *En Pie*, . . . a book that later disappeared from Cuban bookstores and libraries” (p. 63). Halperin specifies no date for the alleged disappearance of the book. As I have reported elsewhere, however, in 1961, 1962, and 1969 I located Roa’s book without difficulty

in the public and University libraries in Havana, which also had a host of other easily accessible anti-Communist publications. Further, while his assertion is prefaced with the phrase “interestingly enough,” Halperin does not inform us why this alleged fact is interesting. Are we supposed to conclude that the book was withdrawn from bookstores and libraries by the government? Or that the few copies of an obviously popular but out-of-print book that contained anti-Soviet views by the foreign minister disappeared no more mysteriously than would any popular but hard-to-come-by book in our own bookstores and (unfortunately) libraries? In a third instance, Halperin correctly states that Castro himself does not “indulge in vengeful and arbitrary brutalities” against his political opponents, whether the Communist Anibal Escalante who planned to seize power from Fidel and was sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment, or the former Revolutionary Directorate guerrilla leader, Rolando Cubela who was “discovered plotting the assassination of Fidel Castro. Cubela was tried, confessed, and was sentenced to prison for twenty-five years after Fidel ‘asked’ the court not to impose the death sentence” (pp. 155, 36). In a footnote to his statement on “arbitrary brutalities,” however, Halperin writes that “The same *probably* cannot be said of his [Castro’s] regime. While Castro has denied that prisoners in his jail are tortured and otherwise given inhuman treatment, released and escaped political prisoners have testified to the contrary” (p. 155, italics added). Yet Halperin, who lived in Cuba for six years, does not tell us that he made any effort to substantiate such ex-prisoners’ claims, that he spoke to any released prisoners personally, or that he visited or tried to visit and observe the workings of a prison at any time during his stay.

Halperin had an extraordinary opportunity to make a special contribution to our understanding of Castro and the revolution in Cuba. First, intellectual and moral estrangement from a revolution to which one is witness, or from a movement in which one has been a partisan, can heighten one’s sensibility and acuity of perception. Halperin—unfortunately for those interested in Cuba—is neither an Orwell, Koestler, Djilas, or Camus, and his style of discourse and method of argument detract even from his often cogent observations. Second, having spent six years in Cuba, two of them during the period of his book, and four immediately following, with the opportunity to observe major events at close range, with presumably greater access to documentation and to interviews and close association with many of the government’s principal figures, we might correctly expect an original contribution of information, if not insight. Contrary, however, to the blurb by Woodrow Borah on the book jacket, which terms the book a

“brilliant contribution to the literature on Cuba. . . ,” I can see no special contribution made by Halperin. I do think that the book is in many ways a very useful narrative of the first half-decade of Castro’s leadership of the revolution. There are occasionally brief but valuable discussions, such as, for instance, of the legacy of Antonio Guiteras to later Cuban revolutionaries, particularly Fidel. However, the paradox is that because of the flaws I have indicated, it requires a specialist to recognize and separate valid new bits of information from the book’s undocumented assertions, unspecified implications, and incorrect statements.

University of Wisconsin,  
Madison

MAURICE ZEITLIN

#### RELATED TOPICS

*History of Portugal*. Vol. II: *From Empire to Corporate State*. By A. H. DE OLIVEIRA MARQUES. New York, 1972. Columbia University Press. Map. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. Pp. 303. Cloth. \$15.00.

Without doubt, Volume II of Oliveira Marques’s *History of Portugal* is the best overall treatment of modern Portuguese history in the English language. Nonetheless, it falls short of the high standards set by the author in Volume I. The second volume is especially marred by its peculiar organization. More or less chronologically presented, the five chapters deal with the following topics: the constitutional monarchy, Africa, the First Republic, the New State, and the twentieth-century empire. The individual chapters are confusing. Demographic, social, ideological, and economic trends come first, followed by a narration of the actual sequence of events. This means that we learn the reasons for the Republic’s fall before we find out how it fell, or that before we learn who Salazar is, we are told about his ideology.

Marques did not arbitrarily choose 1815 as the beginning of his second volume. He views this date as a break in Portuguese history: a time when the country turned away from empire. The Salazar regime is viewed in the same manner: as a break with the past. The events themselves, however, contradict the author. Time after time, the themes of the first volume—the role of the colonies, the effects of emigration, the dependence on foreign imports, the domination of the economy by foreigners, and the importance of the Catholic Church—reappear in this account of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This masterful attempt at synthesis suffers from a difficulty indigen-