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Review: Ten Days in Harlem: Fidel Castro and the Making of the 1960s -- by Simon Hall

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***Ten Days in Harlem: Fidel Castro and
the Making of the 1960s.* By Simon Hall.
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REVIEWED BY

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While US President Dwight D. Eisenhower, on 22 September 1960, hosted a luxurious lunch for the heads of eighteen Latin American delegations to the United Nations (UN) in Manhattan's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, the Cuban prime minister Fidel Castro treated twelve employees of the Theresa Hotel in Harlem "to steaks and a round of beers in the hotel's downstairs coffee shop". The *Máximo Líder*, who in a calculated but strikingly counterproductive move had not been invited by the White House to join the high-ranking inter-American gathering, amusingly declared that "we are going to take it easy, we wish them a good appetite" and added that he felt "honoured to lunch with the poor and humble people of Harlem".¹ *Revolución*, the official newspaper-mouthpiece of Cuba's young revolutionary government, added insult to injury by publishing front-page photos of the two quite different luncheons, stating that whilst "the shark and the sardines eat together" their premier had regarded it as an "honour to eat with the humble".²

This staggering retort was one of many brilliant PR coups during Castro's week and a half sojourn in New York in September 1960. The then 34-year-old former *guerillero* used the opening of the fifteenth UN General Assembly to establish revolutionary Cuba on the world stage at a time of rapidly deteriorating relations between Washington and Havana to rhetorically attack the "Yankee Imperialists" from inside their very heart.

Simon Hall, Professor of Modern History at the University of Leeds, captures this spectacular moment in time with his latest book, *Ten Days in Harlem: Fidel Castro and the Making of the 1960s*,³ a highly fascinating and lively popular history account of the *Máximo Líder's* eventful stint in the unofficial centre of capitalism. The British historian, who with *1956: The World in Revolt* had already written an event-based book, convincingly depicts the visit as a catalytic event which provided a meaningful insight into things to come, and which would echo throughout various global conflicts of the 1960s.

Hall begins his 227 pages by outlining the tremendous mixture of challenges at the turn of the decade. In the autumn of 1960, the US "was beset by a series of deepening crises": growing demands from African-Americans for equal rights found their expression in a series of direct-action student protests that shook the "Jim Crow" South and "exposed President Eisenhower's gradualist approach to the race problem as hopelessly out of touch".⁴ As if this was not enough, the US found itself on the eve of an indicative presidential election between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. At the same time, Washington was hectically searching for ways to deal with a newly confident and belligerent Moscow, which perceived the accelerating dawn of the European empires as an opportunity to outplay its Western rivals in the nascent theatre of the so-called Third World. Tender hopes for rapprochement and disarmament between the Eastern and Western blocks quickly vanished following the U-2 incident of May 1960 and the lingering Berlin crisis.

The opening of the fifteenth UN General Assembly was meant to bring together an unprecedented who's who of international statesmen against the backdrop of further seismic geopolitical upheaval. In 1960, sixteen African nations gained independence and joined the UN, marking the "Year of Africa". In the aftermath of the newly independent

states joining, the successor of the League of Nations decisively changed its character and morphed into a “key forum for anticolonialism”.⁵ Meanwhile, the worsening Congo crisis kept the world in suspense.

For Castro, this unique setting presented an unparalleled chance that he used to establish Cuba as an important actor in international affairs, promoting “the politics of anti-imperialism, racial equality and leftist revolution”. Furthermore, he was able to add to the United States’ discomfort, guaranteeing “a decisive and fateful rupture in US-Cuban relations”.⁶

Hall’s narrative history centres around the many personal interactions and hard-to-believe storylines of Castro’s trip, such as the headline-grabbing switch from downtown’s unwelcoming Shelburne to Harlem’s Theresa Hotel. This incidentally placed a global spotlight on the US’s biggest wound, racial discrimination, and Castro was subsequently met with an enthusiastic reception by the local African-American community. Holding court from inside the famous but not all too luxurious landmark, he welcomed iconic world leaders such as Nikita Khrushchev, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Jawaharlal Nehru, Black civil rights activists like Malcolm X, and idols of the rising Western counterculture such as Allen Ginsberg.

The author complements his informed prose through American and British primary sources from the inside of their respective political administrations and by exhibiting the coverage of Cuba’s propaganda outlets. The excessive use of the latter probably marks the work’s biggest weakness, as it hinders the reading flow, inadvertently turning the reader into an expert on socialist didactics.

Although the text is chronologically based on Castro’s ten days in New York, Hall repeatedly makes excursions to provide the reader with a wide context of related topics, such as the history of Harlem, biographies of several luminaries who the *Máximo Líder* encountered, or the lasting fascination for revolutionist Cuba in the countercultural movements of Western societies. For example, Hall expounds on how Castro’s journey to New York “inspired adulation from an emergent New Left” and how it “helped to usher in a new decade of political, social and cultural tumult in an appropriately irreverent, rebellious and anarchic manner”.⁷ Furthermore, it is not rare to find gripping anecdotes throughout the book, such as the reference to Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre’s visit to the Caribbean island in March 1960, among others.

The author also describes the numerous rumours surrounding Castro’s legendary spell in Harlem. For instance, it was said that during a meeting at the Theresa, Black nationalists presented Fidel with their adventurous plans to “wage armed struggle in the belly of the beast”, right there in New York. After listening patiently, Fidel had allegedly walked over to the window. Dismissing the rather naïve plans for armed insurrection, the Cuban premier is supposed to have answered: “the Sierra Maestra,⁸ the mountains. I don’t see any mountains out there”.⁹

On a structural level, Hall emphasizes the many international developments that were set in motion as a direct result of Castro's theatrics in the Big Apple. He argues that the effusive meetings with Soviet leader Khrushchev, the first between the two statesmen, launched a Cuban-Soviet "honeymoon",¹⁰ that he interprets as a basic ingredient for the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Although the aftermath of the latter marked a serious estrangement in Moscow-Havana relations, it could not rupture the cementation of a "critically important alliance"¹¹ that lasted until the end of the USSR in 1991.

Hall also notes that the fervour and audacity in which the charismatic revolutionary attacked Washington during his days in NYC marked the last nail in the coffin for an already heavily strained relationship with the US, for which Castro's dismissal now became an urgent foreign policy imperative. This was a notion shared by contemporaries in *Time* magazine a week after Castro's departure, where they predicted that a "showdown" between the two neighbours was now "much closer",¹² foreshadowing the Bay of Pigs Invasion in April 1961.

According to Hall, Castro's sojourn also strongly symbolized the inexorable shifting of the Cold War's focus "from Europe to the Global South".¹³ The bustling protagonist of the book drew his own lessons from his stay in the US. The publication explains how Castro's spirited four-and-a-half-hour speech¹⁴ immeasurably strengthened his "reputation as a hero for the oppressed peoples of the world". In the following years, Castro would try to set up Cuba as "the torch bearer of the post-Bandung world",¹⁵ leading the island to host the Tricontinental Conference of 1966, which sought to enhance solidarity and cooperation between the Third World. He also felt inspired to further pursue the export of his revolution to Latin America and Africa, resulting in support for various leftist liberation movements. Castro was also further encouraged in his anti-American sentiment by the inhospitable antics of the Eisenhower administration (such as their limiting of the unwelcomed guest's radius of movement to Manhattan). Britain's ambassador summarized his observations after the revolutionary leader's triumphant return to Havana by pointedly noticing that Castro "was more megalomaniac than ever".¹⁶

Although Hall's underlying thesis is not all too sophisticated, characterizing Castro's stay as a "turning point in the history of the Cold War and a foundational moment in the creation of what we think of as the 'Sixties'",¹⁷ it comes across as fairly cogent. However, in particular, the concluding thoughts lack an in-depth macro history context, which could have provided the readership with a more nuanced understanding of the significance of the book's subject. The further course of Havana's relations with Egypt, Ghana, or India, whose leaders Castro had met in New York, or additional paragraphs on the shape of Cuban South-South cooperation after 1960 probably would have been revealing.

In spite of this, *Ten Days in Harlem* is an educational, panoramic, and enjoyable piece of microhistory, which manages the balancing act between appealing to a broad audience and maintaining academic substance with playful ease (such as by providing an extensive bibliography that invites the interested reader to research further). Vividly manoeuvring

between diplomatic tricks, the Cold War's systemic competition, decolonization, and the emergent civil rights, Black power, and radical student movements, *Ten Days in Harlem* would appeal highly to anyone interested in the “Global Sixties”.

NOTES

¹ Simon Hall, *Ten Days in Harlem: Fidel Castro and the Making of the 1960s* (London: Faber & Faber, 2020), 107.

² Hall, 107.

³ The paperback edition was published in November 2021.

⁴ Hall, 1.

⁵ Hall, 3.

⁶ *Ibid*, 2.

⁷ *Ibid*, 223.

⁸ The rebel's hideout during the armed struggle for Cuban Revolution.

⁹ Hall, 220.

¹⁰ Hall, 212.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 223.

¹² *Ibid*.

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ Still a UN record.

¹⁵ Hall, 215.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 203.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 2.