



IRIS Summer Fieldwork:
Post-Grant Summary

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Thanks to the generous support of IRIS via the 2024 IRIS Fieldwork Grant, I was able to complete almost all of my intended research in Cuba in the midst of perhaps the worst crisis in its post-1959 history.

When I arrived in Cuba for my dissertation research this year, beginning in March, I believed that I could get away with a few months in the Spring and again in the Fall, with minimal time spent in the country in its infamously hot and humid summers. This would also allow me time back home to recover as the country traverses an especially difficult economic crisis, which was guaranteed to wear me down if I spent an extended period there. Instead, it quickly became apparent that I would absolutely need to spend as much of the year in Cuba as possible since the key archive for my work, the Ministry of Foreign Relations (MINREX), in Havana, was barely open every week. Normally they would be open two days a week, mornings and afternoons, but due to energy-saving measures taken in response to the economic crisis they were only open for a few hours each morning. What makes matters worse, I had to lose over a month of my research stay merely navigating the Byzantine process of archival access in a country whose archival policies are based on their Soviet predecessors and are notoriously slow and difficult to access even in the best of times. While I originally asked for IRIS' support to cover only 6 weeks of the summer, in the end it helped me survive the entirety of summer in Cuba, which permitted me to cover the majority of the archival work I was able to complete all year.

My dissertation project focuses on Cuba's relationship with Spain from 1975-2008, and how this evolving relationship played a key role in the political system's survival following the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Thanks to IRIS' support I was able to slowly and meticulously comb through dozens of boxes of materials and photograph their key documents, which has given me all the evidence I could have asked for to show that Cuba pursued a proactive strategy of diplomatic normalization and economic integration decades before the end of the Cold War. From slowly cobbling together understandings on political prisoners and indemnities for nationalized properties in Cuba to scientific-technical exchange agreements and extensions of credit, both Spain and Cuba

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resolved the majority of their outstanding issues years before the Caribbean state lost its Soviet patron and was forced to pivot entirely to a competitive capitalist global economy.

My work is part of a wave of scholarship on Cuba which is increasingly fleshing out our understanding of its relations with countries other than the US, and in the process reshaping our understanding of that key relationship as well. If scholars like Renata Keller and Tanya Harmer have done this with Cuba's relationships with Latin American countries, Piero Gleijeses has with African countries, and Radoslav Yordanov has with Eastern European ones, my work builds on ties between the First and Second Worlds during the Cold War. Far from being entirely antagonistic and separate systems, both First and Second Worlds were increasingly economically and even culturally integrated from the late Cold War era, with Eastern European debt to Western Europe being a key weakness that led to its ultimate collapse in the late 1980s.

Although Cuba is best known for its building of ties with the emerging Third World, which it hoped to play a leading role in through organizations like the Non-Aligned Movement, it was also very much practicing a quieter but very serious strategy of engagement with developed capitalist economies, like those of Western Europe.

The centrality of this relationship to both Cuban and Spanish actors is patent through the fact that it survived crises attested to in the archives like the Manuel Sánchez Pérez affair in the 1980s, when a former diplomat who had fled and applied for asylum in Spain was almost kidnapped by gun wielding Cuban diplomats in broad daylight in a busy street in Madrid. His extra-judicial rendition by armed Cuban diplomats, likely at the orders of Fidel Castro, would have likely torpedoed normalization between the Caribbean Island and most other countries, but in this case it was one of many major faux pas that Madrid was willing to overlook after a relatively short cooling off period.

Another archival discovery made possible through work this summer was the centrality of what I am, tentatively, calling 'regional diplomacy'. Due to the extremely decentralized nature of Spain's political system after the return to democracy in 1975, with many autonomous regions engaging in their own de facto foreign policy strategies irrespective of Madrid's official line, Cuba was able to build extremely strong relationships with various regional governments even at times when the center was not amenable to stronger relations. These can be seen not just with more obvious cases like Catalan government, whose separatist project, organized labor movements, and more left of center politics made this easier, but also with Galicia under Manuel Fraga, an arch-conservative and Franco supporter who nevertheless built on his shared Galician heritage with Fidel Castro to build ties between his autonomous region and the Caribbean Island.

With the benefit of such a long research trip in Cuba I have been able to not just research but really take my time going through my materials, which gave me exactly what I needed to apply for several major fellowships this summer and fall. I have just received word that I have won at least one fellowship that will cover dissertation writing, so I am extremely grateful for IRIS' support throughout.

Best,

Andrés Pertierra