

[Triplett on Bayard de Volo, 'Women and the Cuban Insurrection: How Gender Shaped Castro's Victory'](#)

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The following book review from H-LatAm may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

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Lorraine Bayard de Volo. *Women and the Cuban Insurrection: How Gender Shaped Castro's Victory*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. xi + 272 pp. \$24.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-316-63084-6.

Reviewed by Jennifer Triplett (University of Michigan) **Published on** H-LatAm (November, 2018) **Commissioned by** Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

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In the final months of 1958, a rag-tag band of bearded men in olive fatigues swept across the island of Cuba—bolstered by groundswell of popular support along the way—and eventually ousted dictator Fulgencio Batista with their superior militarism, grit, and courage. At least, this is the official version of the story. During the last sixty years, however, scholars from a range of disciplines have attempted revisions on what Lorraine Bayard de Volo terms the “Cuban War Story,” the Cuban state’s official narrative of the events (both triumphs and failures) of the armed insurrection leading to the eventual regime change of January 1, 1959. Bayard de Volo’s compelling new monograph, *Women and the Cuban Insurrection: How Gender Shaped Castro’s Victory*, makes an important contribution to this revisionist literature by reexamining the Cuban War Story through a gendered lens.

Previous scholarship, such as that of Julia Sweig, has identified several key myths that the Cuban War Story perpetuates.[1] Such mythology includes Che Guevara’s Sierra narrative that privileged the rural initiative over the urban one, the importance of 1959 as a flashpoint (when, in fact, social revolution had been brewing since the Machado dictatorship of the 1930s), and the centrality of Fidel Castro. Bayard de Volo’s findings corroborate Sweig’s, but she further identifies two additional facets of the Cuban War Story that beg reconsideration: the erasure of women from the panorama of the insurrection and the privileging of the tactical aspects of war over ideological ones. In her examination of the events spanning from before the storming of the Moncada barracks in 1952 to the rebels’ eventual triumph six years later, Bayard de Volo illuminates the ideological aspects of the insurrection—the “battle for hearts and minds”—as well as women’s involvement in both the military and discursive theaters of war. Her gendered reassessment of the Cuban War Story allows her to make convincing theoretical claims regarding both the importance of ideas in armed conflicts and the

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role of gender as a “tactic” therein.

The book’s organization is an innovative one. It begins in 1952, well before many other examinations of the Cuban Revolution, and generally follows the course of pivotal events leading up to the rebels’ eventual triumph over the Batista regime. Bayard de Volo recounts episodes such as the botched storming of the Moncada barracks, the rebels’ time in exile, their 1956 return to Cuba in the landing of the *Granma* yacht, the general strike of April 1958, and the creation of an all-women combat platoon just before the conclusion of the armed conflict later that year. The empirical detailing of these events allows the author to bolster further the case for rejecting key mythologies within the Cuban War Story. At the same time, however, each chapter makes a theoretical move in support of the author’s arguments that both ideas and gender matter for understanding armed conflict.

In the second chapter, Bayard de Volo delves into women’s historical (pre-1950) political participation and mobilization in Cuba, thereby contradicting the Cuban War Story myth that the revolution sprang forth in 1958 from the efforts of Castro and his comrades. The author thus demonstrates that (1) the growing support for a social revolution began well before 1958 (or even the 1950s) and (2) women were politically active and organized well before Batista’s regime came to power. In keeping with the idea that the insurrection was both an ideological and a military one, the author speaks to both the symbolic importance of women’s previous mobilization and their tactical contributions to rebel efforts. On the discursive side, “rebels used narratives of women’s contributions in prior conflicts to legitimize contemporary women’s activism and inspire Cubans more generally to rebellion” (p. 23). From a military perspective, “tactics developed in the wars of independence were applied to the 1950s insurrection, and some women active in Cuba’s 1930s rebellion transferred their political experience to the 1950s, lending a sense of continuity as well as efficacy” (p. 25).

Chapter 3 examines the episode of the Moncada barracks. Here, Bayard de Volo begins to make the case for both the salience of the “battle for hearts and minds” and the predominance of women within the ideological narratives that emerged after the event. With the majority of rebels killed or captured after the storming of the barracks, Castro’s M-26-7 organization had to devise a way to reframe their abysmal tactical performance as a moral victory. Women who had participated yet survived, particularly Haydée Santamaría, were used during the rebels’ trial proceedings to evoke sympathy for the movement and to attack the savage, ruthless masculinity of Batista’s forces. While the physical abuse of male prisoners would not likely raise any moral red flags, the use of this torture to psychologically torment the captives’ female relatives clearly crossed the line of acceptability.

With the core group of rebels tried and exiled, chapter 4 moves on to the period of “abeyance” that is generally overlooked by the historiography. Bayard de Volo argues, however, that this was an important time for women involved in the anti-Batista movement since they enjoyed a degree of mobility and undetectability that their male counterparts did not. During this period, much of the women rebels’ work involved making progress in the “war of ideas” theater through enacting the roles of nurturers and mourners. Specifically, Bayard de Volo argues that, “women were cumulatively crucial in the nurturing of a rebel collective identity and oppositional consciousness among anti-Batista activists” (p. 68), owing in large part to social constructions of and ideals surrounding gender and femininity.

Chapter 5 continues with the historical narrative and examines the transition from abeyance, in which most M-26-7 male leaders were imprisoned or in exile, to resurgence, a time during which “women were edged out numerically and in terms of leadership positions” (p. 88). Bayard de Volo argues that there were three main barriers to women’s participation during this next phase of the insurrection: “family resistance, rejection by rebel men, and low-status assignments” (p. 91). Each of these three barriers is intimately linked to ideas of femininity and women’s proper role in society. Despite having carried the movement during the period of abeyance and made great strides along the ideological front in garnering support for the anti-Batista movement, women were directed to take a back seat as the movement resurged and male leaders returned from exile on the *Granma* yacht in 1956.

In chapter 6, Bayard de Volo sidesteps the historical play-by-play of the insurgency to focus on the gendered narratives that emerged during and after the revolution. Specifically, it is the absence of certain narratives that grabs Bayard de Volo’s attention. Whereas “tactical femininity” is lifted up as a desirable ideal, war stories surrounding women’s involvement in bombings and as victims of sexual assault are backgrounded in the Cuban War Story. What Bayard de Volo’s historical evidence allows her to demonstrate, then, is that “the urban underground used traditional femininity—particularly notions of women as passive and politically and sexually innocent—as a tactic of war” (p. 133). While women were praised for combining femininity and cunningness to hide weapons or important documents in their full skirts or false pregnant bellies, those who committed acts of violence such as bombings, or who were sexually victimized by pro-Batista forces, are mostly absent from the Cuban War Story.

The next chapter builds on the gender-as-tactic theoretical contribution made in chapter 6 to examine further the role of women within the ideological front of the rebel insurgency. Again, Bayard de Volo’s emphasis here is on the silences and omissions of the Cuban War Story. She documents mothers’ protests that unfolded during the armed insurrection, particularly following the death of urban underground leader Frank País. However, whereas mothers as public mourners and martyrs became emblematic of social struggles elsewhere in Latin America (as in the case of the mothers of the disappeared in Argentina and Chile), protesting Cuban mothers scarcely appear in the official version of events. According to the Cuban War Story, a mother’s role is to be self-sacrificing and to mourn stoically the loss of their martyred husbands and sons.

In chapter 8, Bayard de Volo returns to the historical narrative and shifts her focus from examining femininity and the role of women in the insurrection to analyzing the role of masculinity in the successes and failures of the general strike of April 1958. Once again, as had been the case with the storming of the Moncada barracks and the landing of the *Granma* yacht, the general strike was a tactical failure from a military perspective but a relative success in the ideological theater of war. The rhetoric and ideology employed in this instance centered on dividing and conquering the enemy using competing ideas of masculinity. As Bayard de Volo explains, “rebels waged a gendered offensive, redefining masculine hierarchies both between Batista’s forces and the rebels and within Batista’s forces” (p. 173). Discursively redefining ideal masculinity thus allowed the M-26-7 rebels to reconstitute their military failures as moral successes.

Nearing the end of the book and, consequently, the end of the historical narrative on the period of armed insurrection, Bayard de Volo pauses to take stock of the involvement and contributions of

noncombatant Cuban women. As in chapter 5, she examines the social factors that either compelled or deterred women from seeking involvement in the military theater of the insurrection. Specifically, she finds that women joining the M-26-7 guerrillas in the mountainous zones in the eastern part of the island were “ideologically drawn to the rebels, pushed by the repression, and called up from the *llano*[urban underground] for their skills” (p. 189). Women who experienced one or more of these attracting forces were, at times, able to overcome the previously mentioned obstacles of family opposition and rebel men’s objections.

As a counterpoint to the noncombatants of chapter 9, the centerpieces of chapter 10 are the few women who did become involved with active military engagement in the insurrection. Bayard de Volo traces the trajectories of a handful of women who became involved as combatants in the guerrilla engagements of the *sierra* and outlines the development of the only all-woman platoon to be constituted during the insurrection, Las Marianas (named for Mariana Grajales, the mother of independence hero Antonio Maceo). In keeping with her attention to the war of ideas, Bayard de Volo argues that the Marianas served an overwhelmingly ideological purpose and were militarily of little use (although their bravery could be used to deter the cowardice of their male comrades). The ideological utility of an all-woman platoon outlasted the armed insurrection itself. As Bayard de Volo notes, “In the long run, the post-1958 Revolution held up Las Marianas as a symbol of women’s equality, which in turn called upon Cuban women to participate in national defense” (p. 233).

By way of conclusion, Bayard de Volo spends the eleventh and final chapter revisiting the primary aims of the book as presented in the introduction as well as discussing a few of the lasting impacts of the revolution on contemporary Cuban society. She reemphasizes her urgent claim that we should look for a better balance in attending to both the military and ideological venues of any armed conflict. Furthermore, on both the military and ideological fronts, analyzing the role of women’s involvement reveals the extent to which social constructions of gender feature in the course and ultimate outcomes of such conflicts. Through the years of insurrection, women were involved with the rebellion in a variety of capacities, on both the military and ideological battlefields of the Cuban Revolution. Ultimately, however, Bayard de Volo argues that the guerrilla leadership “pursued armed insurrection in a way that both integrated women and even exaggerated their contributions while leaving the gender binary and thus power differentials intact” (p. 236).

Bayard de Volo’s work undoubtedly furthers our understanding of the Cuban insurrection and women’s role therein, but I would like to make two brief critiques in closing. First, much of her argumentation centers on identifying, highlighting, and explaining absences and silences in the Cuban War Story. Bayard de Volo attempts to make visible the women whose involvement contradicts the heroic-bearded-men narrative. For example, she explains, “I document *what* women did and *how* they were (and were not) integrated into insurrection and militarism” (p. 3). She relies on an impressive array of historic documentation—ranging from radio transmissions and clandestine press leaflets to oral history and personal communications—to establish the nature and extent of women’s participation in the M-26-7 anti-Batista efforts. In this, she is convincing. However, the meticulous piecing together of the historical record on the role of women in the rebel movement is quite a different task from then establishing the absence of women in the Cuban War Story, as Bayard de Volo also claims to do. I do not find the same methodological care and rigor to be evident for the period after the rebel victory. The Cuban War Story is one that has been cultivated and preserved for nearly sixty years, by both the Cuban state itself and the attendant historiography. Thus, it is

somewhat difficult to accept Bayard de Volo's narrative of silences surrounding insurrectionary women without evidence that she comprehensively and systematically combed through speeches, newspapers, magazines, and other sorts of primary documents for instances of what allegedly went unspoken in the post-1958 period.

But in my view the greatest shortcoming of the work is Bayard de Volo's singular focus on the M-26-7 movement and the women associated with it, an emphasis made at the expense of any analysis of women who may have been involved in anti-Batista efforts but not associated with Castro's organization. The effects of this decision are multiple. First, this emphasis reinforces two lines of mythology running through the Cuban War Story: the indisputable dominance of Fidel Castro (which has indeed been disputed in the revisionist literature on the revolution) and the inevitability of M-26-7's eventual dominance in the post-1958 panorama. More importantly, however, Bayard de Volo's undivided attention to the women of M-26-7 stands as a missed opportunity to explore gender as a tactic in all-women's anti-Batista groups. Delving into the tactics and discourses of groups such as the Women Oppositionists United or the Civic Front of Martíán Women would provide an interesting counterpoint to the participation of women as dictated by the men around them. Such a comparison could also shed light on the differences of gender as a tactic deployed by women versus by men.

Ultimately, Bayard de Volo's book is a thoroughly engaging and much-needed contribution to a gendered understanding of the Cuban Revolution in particular and of armed conflict in general. Given the author's contributions to our knowledge of women's participation in the Cuban insurrection, of the role of the war of ideas in the rebels' efforts, and of gender as a tactic of war, her book speaks to a myriad of audiences. Cubanists in general will benefit from her reassessment of the Cuban War Story as well as from her attention to the generally understudied role of women in the period of insurrection (Michelle Chase's work being a notable exception).[2] Of course, when Bayard de Volo discusses gender, there are implications not only for the women involved but for the men as well. Therefore, scholars of masculinity will also find value in her work. More broadly, however, this book provides a long-overdue assessment of the role of ideas in general, and gendered ideas in particular, for our understanding of contentious political action.

Notes

[1]. Julia Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution: Fidel Castro and the Urban Underground* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[2]. Michelle Chase. *Revolution within the Revolution: Women and Gender Politics in Cuba, 1952-1962* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

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