



# Red Heat: Conspiracy, Murder, and the Cold War in the Caribbean

By Alex Von Tunzelmann

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During the presidencies of Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, the Caribbean was in crisis. The men responsible included, from Cuba, the charismatic Fidel Castro, and his mysterious brother Raúl; from Argentina, the ideologue Che Guevara; from the Dominican Republic, the capricious psychopath Rafael Trujillo; and from Haiti, François "Papa Doc" Duvalier, a buttoned-down doctor with interests in Vodou, embezzlement and torture.

Alex von Tunzelmann's brilliant narrative follows these five rivals and accomplices from the beginning of the Cold War to its end, each with a separate vision for his tropical paradise, and each in search of power and adventure as the United States and the USSR acted out the world's tensions in their island nations. The superpowers thought they could use Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic as puppets, but what neither bargained on was that their puppets would come to life. *Red Heat* is an intimate account of the strong-willed men who, armed with little but words and ruthlessness, took on the most powerful nations on earth.

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## **Editorial Review**

### Review

"...a mesmerizing, Conradian tale where the truth is almost too dark to bear. A remarkably gripping popular history."—*Kirkus*

"Von Tunzelmann's diligent work will widen the eyes of cold war buffs."--*Booklist*

### Praise for Indian Summer

"Irreistible . . . A fascinating book that may well change how we look on the benighted world in which we live today."—*Los Angeles Times*

"Stirring...von Tunzelmann's brisk narrative is propelled forward by the personalities of five memorable individuals who all wanted and worked for independence...absorbingly readable."—*Fortune*

"Removes the veil from the colorful personalities and events behind India's independence and partition with Pakistan...von Tunzelmann writes with authority and confidence."—*The Washington Post*

"[A] captivating group portrait, pulling forth the most telling details of each figure's inner life. . .To have turned an era of such significance and continuing relevance into a page-turner, to both entertain and educate, is an admirable accomplishment."—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"This brilliantly written, dramatic, and at times controversial account of empire in India is almost impossible to put down. With it, von Tunzelmann has proven herself a force with which to be reckoned, both as a writer and as an historian."—Caroline Elkins, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*

"A brilliantly vivid page-turner that captures the backstage dramas raging on the eve of India's independence."—Tina Brown

### About the Author

Alex von Tunzelmann is the author of *Red Heat: Conspiracy, Murder, and the Cold War in the Caribbean* and *Indian Summer: The Secret History of the End of an Empire*. She was educated at Oxford and lives in London.

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### The Secret War

The plot was aimed at New York: the most famous city in the richest nation on earth, and the most sought-after prize for any anti-American terrorist. Reports said it was put into motion by a cell of fanatical young men, who saw the United States, with its interventionist foreign policy, as the world's oppressor.

A series of sensational attacks had been planned to hit almost simultaneously across the northeastern United States, with vast and indiscriminate loss of life. The targets were chosen because they were symbols of American wealth or the American military. New York was going to burn, and the world was going to watch.

That morning, New York was saved. The date was 17 November 1962. The fanatical young men were Cubans. They had planned to bomb Macy's, Gimbel's, and Bloomingdale's department stores during the Christmas rush and, simultaneously, to hit military installations and oil refineries. It was announced to the press that agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation picked them up just in time, mostly from a costume jewelry business, and also broke up what it claimed was a "sabotage school" run by Cubans who had been linked to their country's representation at the United Nations. From Washington, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy issued a statement praising the FBI. From Havana, Prime Minister Fidel Castro claimed that the arrests were "without foundation."<sup>1</sup>

History has few perfect parallels. On 11 September 2001, when a different group of anti-American fanatics did pull off an even more dramatic act of terror in New York City, there were plenty of differences between their fundamentalist Islamic ideas and those of the Cuban communists forty years before. But 17 November, coming just a fortnight after the Soviets had agreed to remove missiles from Cuba, had some similar themes. The United States' attempts to promote its own brand of freedom, democracy, and free market capitalism had offended third-world ideologies. They rallied around an icon of anti-Americanism—in 2001, Osama bin Laden; in 1962, Fidel Castro. Both men were the sons of privileged families. Both became revolutionaries. Both drew their strength from their oppositional position to what is sometimes (and not only by its critics) called the American empire, though others prefer the term American hegemony: the political ambitions, military adventures, and economic programs of the United States abroad. Both of their movements—fundamentalist Islam and communism—served the same purpose in a crude but effective type of American domestic politics. They could be portrayed simply and powerfully as an ultimate evil bent on the destruction of the United States. Against them, the nation could be rallied.

On that basis, both attacks would attract the attention of conspiracy theorists, some of whom asked whether the impression made on the general public was so beneficial to the American government's aims that it might have staged the attack itself. In the case of 17 November, the shocking thing is that the conspiracy theorists may well have been right. The Joint Chiefs of Staff had suggested in March 1962 that they could stage a terrorist campaign in Miami and Washington, and blame it on the Cuban government. There is no question that they were prepared to kill civilians in the process. Ideas put on paper included sinking boats full of real refugees fleeing from Cuba to Florida, and attempting to assassinate Cuban exiles. "Exploding a few plastic bombs in carefully chosen spots, the arrest of Cuban agents and the release of prepared documents substantiating Cuban involvement also would be helpful," the chairman of the Joint Chiefs wrote.<sup>2</sup> Repeatedly, Robert Kennedy himself suggested staging terrorist attacks on American military and diplomatic bases in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, and claiming that they were the work of Fidel Castro, to justify

an all-out invasion of the sovereign state of Cuba.<sup>3</sup> As these plots have come to light, it has looked increasingly like the official story of the supposedly "Cuban" attempted bombing of New York cannot be taken at face value. The question that must be asked about 1962 is not whether it is feasible that the government of the United States might have resorted to such techniques—evidently, it might—but what could have been going on among the palm trees on a couple of islands in the Caribbean to provoke a superpower to such extreme action.

In October 1962, John F. Kennedy and Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev would take their nations to the brink of a nuclear holocaust, a war of unimaginable destruction. The crisis was provoked by a band of bearded guerrillas, mostly in their twenties and early thirties. Two and a half years earlier, these guerrillas had improbably assumed control of a modestly sized island, previously notable in the American consciousness for cocktails, casinos, and pretty girls. They had allowed the Soviet Union to place nuclear warheads within striking distance of Washington, D.C. Never in its history had the United States been so threatened. Never had the world come closer to nuclear war.

For thirteen days, the possibility that the world might end veered terrifyingly close. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II had shown all too clearly what nuclear war looked like. A blinding flash of white light. Then the slow, ominous billowing of a mushroom cloud. For miles around, buildings, trees, all structures flattened into rubble. Close to the center of the blast, nothing remains but the shadows of human forms, their entire living bodies incinerated in a second by a flash of intense heat. Tens of thousands die instantly. Farther away, victims are blinded, scorched, and have the skin ripped off their flesh. In the weeks that follow, those who were close to the blast develop radiation sickness. They cannot eat. They bleed internally. Their hair falls out in clumps. Tens of thousands more die. In the years afterward, survivors experience high rates of leukemia and cancers of the organs. The total killed by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is estimated at between 150,000 and 400,000.

These two bombs—the Little Boy at Hiroshima, and the Fat Man at Nagasaki—were considered to have been relatively inefficient. By 1962, the Soviet nuclear arsenal in Cuba alone was thousands of times more powerful than the Little Boy or the Fat Man. The American nuclear weapons ranged against the Soviet Union in Europe and on the mainland of the United States were more powerful still. If even a small number of these instruments of death was used, it is no exaggeration to estimate that millions would die, millions more would suffer, and the world would never be the same again.

In Cuba, parents rubbed olive oil into their children's skin, believing it would repel napalm. In Texas and Virginia, gun stores sold out of rifles—bought not to fight invading Soviets, but to defend rural properties against potential refugees from bombed cities. In London, Trafalgar Square filled up with demonstrators shouting "Hands off Cuba!" Police manhandled them into vans. In Chile and Bolivia, there were riots. In Venezuela, saboteurs blew up an American oil pipeline. In Prague, demonstrators smashed the windows of the American embassy. Shops across the Soviet bloc ran out of salt and cooking fat, as people panic-bought supplies for a nuclear winter. Housewives at the American military base at Guantánamo Bay, in Cuba, were told to tie their pets up in the yard, leave their house keys on the dining room table, and stand outside with their children, awaiting the buses that would evacuate them. "For some strange reason I felt compelled to defrost the refrigerator," remembered one, "although I made a mess of the job by allowing the drain to run over and spilled the water all over the floor. I poured a little over a quart of milk into a pan and put it out for the cat. I hope my cat will be able to forage a living. . . . I felt as if I were enacting some terrible, compulsive dream. I cried, of course."<sup>4</sup> Unknown to her, to the Pentagon, and to the president of the United States, nuclear cruise missiles were being maneuvered into position amid the trees, just fifteen miles from the base's perimeter.

The story of the Cuban Missile Crisis, as it is usually told, is not a story about Cuba. The real object at stake,

it has been argued by some historians, may not have been Cuba at all, but the control of Berlin.<sup>5</sup> All the important events are presumed to have taken place in Washington or Moscow. What went on in Havana is widely considered to be irrelevant. The story of the Cuban Missile Crisis is not even a story about events. There was no fighting on the ground or at sea. No nuclear missiles were ever fired. War did not break out. It is a story about nothing happening.

While it may have been possible, from an American or a Soviet perspective, to believe that nothing happened, in the Caribbean plenty did. The missile crisis went down in American history as just thirteen days. From a Caribbean perspective, though, it was just one battle in an extraordinary secret war that spanned decades. George W. Bush's War on Terror was not the first time the United States declared war on an idea. In the 1950s, under the shadowy direction of the Central Intelligence Agency, it went to war against communism. This was not just a "cold war," a frosty standoff that never came to a fight. This was a real war. Dollars were spent. People were killed. Governments fell. To an incredible extent, the American public was at the time none the wiser.

This secret war was waged all over what was then called the third world: in Southeast Asia, in Africa, in Latin America. But it was in the Caribbean nations of Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic that it found its most sensitive and, for the inhabitants of the United States, most dangerous battleground: "only ninety miles from our shores," as John F. Kennedy often said.<sup>6</sup> That closeness mattered. When things went wrong in these nations, the exiles washed up in Florida, or flew to New York. They formed large, distinct communities, which have exerted significant influences on the nation's life as a whole—including, in the case of south Florida's Cubans, holding the balance of power in presidential elections.

Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic were the largest nations among the Caribbean islands, and the only fully decolonized republics. During the 1960s, several former British colonies, including Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, would also achieve independence. But their long histories of close relations with Britain, and continuing relationships with that power after independence, kept them largely out of Washington's Cold War purview. They were not the battlegrounds of this war.

The histories of Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic are by no means identical, but they share a few important factors. All were occupied and run by the American military during the early twentieth century. When the Cold War reached its zenith, each had brought forth a distinctive dictator. Cuba had Fidel Castro, a headstrong nationalist who became the world's longest-enduring communist head of state. The Dominican Republic had Rafael Trujillo, a capricious psychopath, who established perhaps the most effective authoritarian state ever seen in the western hemisphere—one usually defined as right-wing, though more accurately it had no ideology. Haiti had François Duvalier, a buttoned-down, bespectacled doctor with interests in embezzlement, torture, and the dark side of Haiti's syncretic religion, Vodou, whose regime defies belief of any kind. The United States would conspire to overthrow Fidel Castro, Rafael Trujillo, and François Duvalier, and to murder the first two.

Behind the Caribbean's paradise image of white sand beaches, lush jungles, and warm, clear seas lurks a gruesome human history. It is rooted in genocide, slavery, imperialism, and piracy, and these roots have shaped it well into the modern age. The passions and atrocities of the ancient world are often recalled. Graham Greene, one of the most perceptive observers of the Caribbean in the middle years of the twentieth century, wrote that François Duvalier's Haiti was best understood as a classical tragedy, "nearer to the Europe of Nero and Tiberius than to the Africa of Nkrumah." Fidel Castro studied closely the leadership styles of Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great; his code name among the Cuban revolutionaries, Alejandro, was his own middle name, but he used it as a tribute to the ancient Macedonian general. Arturo Espallat, Rafael Trujillo's security chief, described his master's rule as "absolute as that of any Roman emperor. I thought of Caligula, the mad Caesar. Caligula once appointed a horse to be consul of Rome. Trujillo

certainly could have announced that a horse was to be named president of the Dominican Republic, and Dominicans would have accepted it."<sup>7</sup>

This is a story of the machinations and the blunders of superpowers, and the brazen daring of the mavericks who took them on. It is a story of the rise of the politics of fear, and of the extraordinary things that even outwardly respectable governments have been prepared to do in their quests for control. It is a story of how the United States and the Soviet Union acted out the world's tensions in the theater of the Caribbean, attempting to use Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic as puppets. What neither superpower had bargained on was that their puppets would come to life. The result was tyranny, conspiracy, murder, and black magic; it was poverty, violence, and a new model of global interventionism that still dominates American policy. For this story is a prologue to later American-led interventions, covert and overt, all over the world, including those in Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Chile, El Salvador, Grenada, Honduras, Panama, Kuwait, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. The precedent is not merely figurative, but literal. The *Small Wars Manual* of the United States Marine Corps, used in many of these operations, was written on the strength of the marines' experience in the Caribbean.<sup>8</sup> What happened in Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic during the middle years of the twentieth century would not just change the Caribbean. It would change the world.

Excerpted from *Red Heat* by Alex von Tunzelmann

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