

Historical Reflections on a Dictator and Those Who Loved Him

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It should be easy to write about a disgraced dictator. Set forth the dirty deeds and be done with it. But no one is ever as simple as their worst transgressions. There is always more to the story. Somebody loved them and has a story to tell as well. As I began to uncover their stories, the task of writing a biography of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista, toppled by the Cuban Revolution in 1959, became more challenging. This research note is about one historian's efforts to navigate the confluence of history, family, and unexpected friendships.

Keywords: Fulgencio Batista, Batista family, Cuba, biographical writing, oral history, historiography

Debería ser fácil escribir sobre un dictador caído en desgracia. Exponer las fechorías sucias sería suficiente. Pero nadie es tan simple como sus peores transgresiones. Siempre hay algo más en la historia. Alguien los amó que también tiene una historia que contar. A medida que comencé a descubrir sus historias, la tarea de escribir una biografía del dictador cubano Fulgencio Batista, derrocado por la Revolución Cubana en 1959, se volvió más desafiante. Esta nota de investigación versa sobre los esfuerzos de un historiador por navegar por la confluencia de la historia, la familia y las amistades inesperadas.

Palabras clave: Fulgencio Batista, familia de Batista, Cuba, escritura biográfica, historia oral, historiografía

Introduction

As a young boy, I never imagined I would spend so much time recreating and interpreting Cuba prior to Fidel Castro. I grew up in West New York, New Jersey, in the 1970s. At that time, the town was heavily populated by Cubans who fled the Cuban Revolution and were making a new life as Cuban-Americans. These immigrants were beginning to flex their political muscle by wresting control away from the Italian and Irish immigrants who preceded them. Cuban businesses flourished with a bodega on every other street corner.

For many in the Cuban community, there were two political villains. Villain Number One was Fidel Castro. It was because of him that they found themselves living in West New

York separated from their families and property. A distant second was Fulgencio Batista Zaldívar (1901–1973), the corrupt politician with few scruples who opened the door for Castro by leading a coup to overturn a democratically elected government on March 10, 1952.

In our home the aftereffects of the Revolution dominated conversation. About once a month, a letter with strange-looking stamps containing onion skin paper as thin as butterfly wings arrived from Cuba. It contained the latest coded language from our relatives about life on the island. It was the height of the Cold War, and Cuba might as well have been on another planet.

Growing up in this environment led me to want to study Latin American history, specifically Cuban history. Several decades later, in the mid-1990s, my doctoral dissertation advisor at Rutgers University, Mark Wasserman, urged me to write a biography of Batista. The conversation went something like this: “Theory is not your strength, but, as a former journalist, you are suited to writing a biography, and no one else has done it.” I had misgivings. My father left Cuba in 1956 because of the deteriorating situation on the island. A union-activist friend of his died under mysterious circumstances. I was predisposed to dislike Batista. In writing about him, I was forced to confront events with a direct impact on my immediate family.

Historians face various challenges when writing about recent events while many of the historical figures are still alive. The same advisor who led me to the topic of Batista used to remark about historical research: “The deader the better.” But Batista died in 1973, so from a historical standpoint he is not yet very dead. To conduct my research, it was essential to immerse myself among the living who knew him and particularly those who loved him: his children—three sons and a daughter.

I did not imagine at the time that I would come to genuinely like Batista’s children and could not foresee the challenges that would pose for me as a historian. The aim of this research note is to share the challenges I faced and my strategies for overcoming them, in the hope that it is useful to other scholars embarking on similar research among the living. The strategies are outlined at the conclusion of this essay.

The Batista Project

I began my dissertation project in September 1996 when I flew to Miami to introduce myself to Fulgencio Batista’s oldest son, Fulgencio Rubén Batista (1933–2007), affectionately known as “Papo” to his father’s supporters. The surviving *Batistianos* were celebrating the sixty-third anniversary of the Sergeants’ Revolt of September 4, 1933, the military takeover that catapulted Fulgencio Batista to power for the first time.

Papo was an imposing figure presiding over the head table at the celebration. I was struck by the resemblance to his father: except for his baldness, he looked very much like him. After the event, I sheepishly introduced myself. I was amazed at his receptivity when I informed him of the project. He invited me to visit him two days later at his home in Coral Gables. Thus began an eleven-year cat-and-mouse relationship. At our first meeting, he quickly discerned that I knew less than I thought. He spoke in generalities of his father's legacy. He measured his answers to correspond to my level of knowledge. Rubén was fiercely loyal to his father and a staunch defender of his legacy. He was astute enough to know that nothing I could ever write would surpass the character assassination meted out by the Castro government.



“Gracias Cretino por ayudarnos A HACER La Revolución”

Caricature of Fulgencio Batista, Museum of the Revolution (former Presidential Palace), Havana.
Batista was placed in the Cretins Corner (Rincón de los Cretinos)
along with several US Presidents.
(Photo by the author, 1999)

The game was on. I knew it was going to be challenging work to separate him from his knowledge. He would distill it in droplets only when necessary.

Papo was one of the most impressive, cunning, and cordial men I ever met. As my knowledge grew, he divulged more by way of private correspondence, personal recollection, and signed sworn statements from his father's former friends and adversaries. Throughout the process, Rubén showed tremendous restraint and grace. Can you imagine someone coming to your home to regularly impugn your father's character? Most people would have thrown me out. I asked him questions about corruption, assassinations, and marital philandering. Sometimes a small grin would appear on his lips, but he never appeared flustered. Occasionally, his eyebrows would suddenly move upward at the beginning of a new line of questioning. He would smile and explain why I needed to see things from a different perspective—his perspective, his father's perspective. Every hour or so his wife or a housekeeper would appear with a serving of strong Cuban coffee and a glass of water. We would savor it and then return to fencing.

When I started, I did not fully know the debates into which I was parachuting. In the history of Cuba, Fulgencio Batista is one of the bad guys. Yet, he was, and still is, largely drawn as a stick figure caricature of an evil dictator. Depictions of him often lack nuance and complexity. I realized that by providing nuance I was in some ways rehabilitating him. Rubén and I discussed this from time to time. He knew that by talking to me I would have to engage with his truths. He admitted to trying to shape the narrative.

As I was writing my book, I occasionally wondered how he would react to one section or another. If I was too lenient in my interpretation, would scholars and the general audience think I had sold out? If I was too harsh, would I be doing so just to prove a point and maintain credibility in the academy? I kept reminding myself: Let the historical evidence lead the way.

Mirta Batista Ponsdomenech

Several months into the project Rubén paved my path to interviewing others in the family and surviving members of Batista's entourage. One of the first introductions was to his older sister, Mirta Batista Ponsdomenech (1927–2010), the eldest of Batista's nine children.



Mirta Batista Ponsdomenech,
eldest of Fulgencio Batista's children (c. 1997)¹

Visiting Mirta was like going to the home of a rich aunt. Her condominium faced Biscayne Bay, and her blinds were automated to adjust the sunlight streaming into her living room. In speaking of her father, she beamed like a schoolgirl. She remembered that when her mother grew impatient with her, she was referred to her dad for a fatherly lecture. Rather than enforcing discipline, he would try to reason and convince her of her mother's perspective. Whenever she was upset, she could always reach him. One time he interrupted a cabinet meeting to console her. She loved her father, but it quickly became apparent that she loved her mother in equal measure.

She gently interjected gender into the conversation. Her father deeply wounded her mother—Elisa Godínez Gómez, first lady of Cuba from 1940 to 1944—by his repeated marital infidelities. When Mirta was a little girl, they lived for a time on a military base, and rumors of her father's trysts circulated widely. She remembered her mother's humiliation as she encountered women familiar with the gossip. Cuban women of the time were expected to tolerate such behavior from their husbands. She related how her father served divorce papers on her mother after he left for a foreign trip around the time Mirta gave birth to her first child. She spoke in glowing terms about Fulgencio Batista as a father but left little doubt that, as a husband, he left much to be desired.

¹ All photographs courtesy of the author.

Jorge Batista Fernández

One person Papo was not eager for me to contact was his younger brother, Jorge Batista Fernández (1942–2020). When I asked for his number, Papo said something like, “I have no idea what he will tell you.” I thought to myself: Good. This is exactly what I want. Reluctantly, Papo gave me Jorge’s telephone number. Jorge was the oldest child of Batista and his mistress, Marta Fernández Miranda. At the time of his birth, Batista was still married to First Lady Elisa Godínez. He did not dissolve that marriage until several years later, and Marta became first lady after Batista’s 1952 coup.

I called Jorge, and he invited me to his apartment/condominium adjacent to the Chrysler Building in New York City, where we met on two occasions in July 2001. I remember interviewing him there for several hours as twilight unfolded with the sun’s fading rays gleaming on the façade of that monumental building.

Jorge did not disappoint. He was lively and animated. He addressed every issue under the sun. No hesitations. No brakes. He acknowledged his father’s corruption without calling it corruption. When contractors or business people gave his dad money, he accepted it. It was the way business was done: “He did not force them to give him money.”

Jorge was gay, a fact he could not openly admit while his father was alive. He married a woman whom he considered a friend, and they had a daughter together, a child he considered the greatest joy of his life. “Imagine the ‘strongman of Cuba’ having a gay son,” he remarked.

My favorite story from our meeting was when he told me how he and his mother counted out \$2.5 million in \$20 bills in a cubicle at a New York City branch of the Chase Manhattan Bank while his father was being held under virtual house arrest by Dominican dictator/strongman Rafael Trujillo. When the elder Batista fled Cuba on January 1, 1959, he had directed his pilot to fly to Santo Domingo (then Ciudad Trujillo) because he thought he would be welcome there. Instead, Trujillo extorted him and would not allow him to leave for exile in Portugal until he paid millions in cash.

After the meeting, Jorge and I corresponded for a bit. Some of his insights were included in the first volume of my Batista biography—*Fulgencio Batista: From Revolutionary to Strongman*—published in 2006,² and more will be included in volume two. I was struck by how heavily the legacy of his father weighed on him. People were always making assumptions about his wealth and lifestyle without knowing him. He told me that, although he loved his father, he felt he could not be his own man until after Batista died.

² New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006.

Jorge died during the Covid pandemic although the disease was not the stated cause on his Facebook page. The last photo I saw of him made me smile. It reflected his bemusing nature. In it, he was dressed up in a red and white Christmas outfit surrounded by over a dozen dogs in similar attire.

Just a year after the first volume of my Batista biography was published in 2006, Papo died. I do not remember how I first learned of it. I read the obituary in *Diario de Las Américas* with great sadness. I copied it and pasted it on my office door at Kean University. I realized most people would not read it, and many others would not know who he was. It was my way of grieving and acknowledging his passing. The chess match was over.

One of the last things Papo said to me after a book talk in Coral Gables was that the “worst part of his father’s story was to come” in volume two. He was right. The first volume covers the period between 1901 and 1940, when Batista could still claim some revolutionary/reformist attributes. He served as president of Cuba from 1940 to 1944 after winning a reasonably fair election. The most unflattering part of his career awaits volume two, when he overthrew a constitutionally elected government, destroyed his legacy, and forever became linked to the word “dictator.”

Roberto “Bobby” Batista Fernández

Before he died, Papo introduced me to his half-brother, Roberto “Bobby” Batista Fernández (1947–2022). I did one interview with Bobby in 1998 in the presence of Papo, but my contact with him was intermittent while his older brother was alive. Bobby, the way he preferred to be addressed, was the second child of Batista and Marta Fernández Miranda. My intensive interactions with Bobby began without any lofty expectations. He sent me a Facebook friend request in early 2017. I took this as a good sign for my research, since the death of Papo and later Mirta, left me with few sources within the family.



Bobby Batista Fernández, second child of Fulgencio Batista and Marta Fernández Miranda, October 20, 2018

Sometime after the friend request, I took a gamble and began to correspond with him to gauge his willingness to cooperate with the Batista project. His friend request coincided perfectly with a rekindling of interest in my biographical undertaking. I had set the project aside several years earlier, daunted by the enormity of the task. In the interim, I wrote about immigration and focused on public policy issues in New Jersey.

We met for our first Cuban lunch on July 28, 2017. It quickly became apparent that he was a fan of *buñuelos*, a sugary fried dough fritter popular in Spain, where he spent about half the year. We met on numerous occasions, and I would pepper him with questions about the Mafia in Cuba and his father's exile in Daytona Beach, Florida, in the late 1940s. I remember asking him one time whether he ever met Meyer Lansky, the famous Jewish financier for the Mafia. He never met him, and he doubted whether his father knew him. Such was our lunchtime banter.

Bobby spoke with great excitement of his research for a memoir on his life as the son of Batista. We exchanged stories about the travails of writing a book. Bobby published *Hijo de Batista: Memorias* in 2021.³ Although he largely presented a defense of his father's

³ Madrid: Editorial Verbum, Colección Biblioteca Cubana, 2021.

legacy, Bobby was courageous in publicly disagreeing with his father's decision to undertake the coup of 1952. It was a hard choice to break with his father, even posthumously. He also wrote of the discrimination his father suffered because of his mixed racial heritage, a subject other family members were reluctant to discuss.

Bobby visited our home in Freehold, New Jersey, on October 20, 2018. I met him at the bus station and proceeded to give him a historic tour of the Battle of Monmouth battlefield. He then joined us for dinner with my wife, a friend, and my in-laws. Although we did not intend it as such, it turned into a dinner of reconciliation. My father-in-law, Tomás Díaz, was part of the revolutionary movement that overthrew Batista. At the dinner, they gently acknowledged their historical differences but without rancor. They set them aside and reminisced about the Cuba of old.



Frank Argote-Freyre, Bobby Batista, Caridad Díaz, Thomas Díaz, Jr.,
Maria Elena Díaz and Tomás Díaz, October 20, 2018

I thought there would be more Cuban lunches. There were not. The last time I spoke to Bobby was July 20, 2021, by telephone as he prepared for a conference in Ourense, Spain, to speak about his father's coup and other issues. With the publication of his book, Bobby was invited to numerous events to provide his perspective. We spoke for more than an

hour about public-speaking strategies and effectively delivering a message to an audience. I learned of his death via Facebook in January of 2022.

A Historian's Strategies

There are, I hope, a few insights to be gained by this historian's journey. The struggle to separate personal feelings from historical fact gathering, I believe, has made me a better historian and person. I would summarize the major lessons as follows:

Establish transparency. It is important to reveal to readers the strengths and weaknesses of sources and our relationships with them. Shine a light on them. Make it clear in the acknowledgments, preface, and footnotes. This research note is part of that ongoing effort.

It is equally important to be transparent with sources. Do not avoid difficult issues. Do not promise to write anything that does not conform to the historical research, even if it means jeopardizing the source. Do not agree to forego interviews with some sources to placate others. In my case, the interviews with diverse and sometimes hostile sources benefitted the work and led to follow-up interviews because old rivals were interested in what each was saying about the other.

Seek informational intersections to verify first-person accounts. How does the information provided by the source compare to other accounts of events? Seek the intersection and confluence of accounts. Seek the disjunctures and contradictions in their accounts.

Batista children's love for their father does not invalidate their historical knowledge of him and the critical events in his life. For example, Papo knew only a day or so in advance of his father's intention to flee Cuba on January 1, 1959, in the face of victories by revolutionary forces. We know Batista fled; there is no doubt about that. His children's insights into his planning, to the degree they were aware of it, help fill in the historical picture.

I often debated with Papo the degree to which his father was aware of the violence and assassinations carried out in his name. He claimed his father was not responsible for those acts, but rather, they were undertaken by overzealous participants in his political movement. I disagreed and wrote about a pattern I detected in Batista's career. The passage below describes that pattern as it refers to the assassination of Blas Hernández, a military leader who opposed Batista during the Revolution of 1933:

Batista never ordered an investigation into the death of Blas Hernández. As he would do countless times throughout his career, Batista chose to ignore the misdeeds of fellow officers to preserve army unity and his own position. [The perpetrator] was the first to get away with murder under Batista's leadership, but he would not be the last. (*Fulgencio Batista: From Revolutionary to Strongman*, 120)

Papo never said a word about that passage.

Be judicious when using firsthand accounts. Individuals can provide unique, firsthand perspectives and insights which can, however, be misleading as well. Let your audience know if there is no way to corroborate a personal reflection by a source close to the subject or with a vested interest in the outcome of a story. Leave it out if it seems implausible.

Did the Batista children have a bias in favor of their father? Of course, they did. They also had access to materials through correspondence and personal memories that were singular and invaluable. All sources seek to highlight or downplay historical events based on their place in the narrative. As scholars, we should not run away from controversial sources but rather seek to incorporate them into our research.

Leave no question unasked, no file uncopied. An early lesson shared by my history mentors was to copy every possible pertinent document when visiting an archive. The return journey is uncertain. The same may be said when questioning the living. There is no guarantee of tomorrow.

Each of the Batista family members mentioned in this research note died too soon. In some cases, I thought it politically unwise to ask a certain question at a certain time. In other cases, I was exhausted and left some subjects for another day. There were other questions I did not anticipate. In retrospect, I may have erred, at times, on the side of caution. Perhaps this is the lament of all researchers?

Time is seldom a historian's friend.

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Argote-Freyre is involved in many social causes, including the struggle for immigrant rights and social justice. He serves as Chair of the Latino Action Network Foundation, Chair of the Fair Share Housing Center, and Director of the Latino Coalition of New Jersey. Argote-Freyre served as Chair of the New Jersey Commission on New Americans. Earlier in his career, he worked as a journalist and columnist for ten years and as a congressional press secretary.

He is currently working on his next book, *Fulgencio Batista: From President to Dictator*.
