

Atahualpa Recio: The last journalist murdered in Cuba



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by Pedro Martinez Pirez / Radio Havana Cuba

Some Ecuadorians are still aware that the remains of a compatriot, journalist Carlos Bastidas Argüello, have been resting in the Cristobal Colon Cemetery in Havana for 62 years. Bastidas worked for two months as a reporter in the Sierra Maestra, located in the eastern region of Santiago de Cuba, and found admiration in the rebel guerrillas that fought the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship.

The solidarity shown for Fidel Castro's rebel forces, as broadcast by the Ecuadorian journalist on Radio Rebelde radio station under the nickname of Atahualpa Recio, was perhaps the element used by the intelligence services of Batista's government to arrange his murder once he returned from the mountains to Havana, in order to prevent him from getting the support of Ecuador and the rest of the world, to the righteous cause of the Cuban struggle.

Carlos Bastidas was only 23 years old, but he was already an experienced journalist. Only days before he was killed on May 13, 1958 in Havana by one of Batista's hired guns, he met in the capital with

Ecuadorian Ambassador to Cuba, Virgilio Chiriboga. According to his brother Edmundo, Bastidas handed the official some documents and rolls of film, in one of which he is seen in the Sierra Maestra with Comandante Fidel Castro.

I once had the opportunity to interview Otto Suarez Saravia in his home in Havana, before he passed away. Otto was a Cuban communications technician who was given the task of studying the political thought of Carlos Bastidas and to find out the driving force of the Ecuadorian journalist that led him to risk his life while interview Fidel in Sierra Maestra. Otto Pérez Saravia's testimony to Radio Habana Cuba is extremely valuable.

"An Ecuadorian journalist, coming from the same region as Ché and sent by clandestine people, shows up in Sierra with the history of having made a public statement on Radio Rebelde under the name of Atahualpa Recio. When he arrived, we were in El Naranjo area. We had directed the antennas towards the city of Santiago de Cuba. In such an entangled context, with the strike of April 9th and the arrival of Bastidas, we felt a welcomed relief: he was a journalist who knew how to provide information and news, someone who knew what he was doing. I was 18 years old and half way through my Baccalaureate. I had a basic cultural understanding, a fair knowledge of politics, but I was not a professional in the field of communications or humanities. Before I proposed anything, Bastidas was already eager to collaborate with the radio broadcasts. He contacted Guillermo Sardiñas, the priest with the olive green cassock, who was in the Sierra Maestra as well, and other several local residents, then proceeded to create a special program for Radio Rebelde that lasted four days. Eventually we ran out of fuel due to the April strike, and Fidel was stranded waiting for the plane that would carry the weapons from Costa Rica. Fidel decided then to attack San Ramon to support the strike, and at the same time they would test the efficiency of the new weapons, which included a 50 caliber machine gun. I had not been able to see Fidel yet. He would either stop by El Naranjo or I could go to Las Vegas. Then, Comrade Crespo says: "The journalist wants to interview Fidel, and that creates a problem. I can assign a guide for him, but no one knows where he came from. More specifically, we don't know him. He may be a fine person, a revolutionary man, etc., but it takes a trustworthy person and certain cultural level to interact with him. "

"After spending a few days with Bastidas," continued Otto, "I noticed that he had been able to impress everyone for his willingness to come from Ecuador just to collaborate with our struggle, also for his decision to be present at the San Ramón combat, and the peculiarities of the Ecuadorian Indigenous people he told us about, as well as for the internationalism he inspired in all of us."

At the end of the interview for Radio Habana Cuba, Otto Suárez Saravia said he regretted not been able to maintain a friendship with Bastidas, since he was murdered in Havana, "but I thought that a Cuban medical brigade working in some indigenous areas from Ecuador should take his name."

Another person who, as a young rebel woman, met Carlos Bastidas in the Sierra Maestra mountains, is the current Brigadier General Delsa Esther Puebla, known as Teté Puebla, who gave Radio Habana Cuba a highly valuable testimony.

"I was honored to meet Carlos Bastidas when he came to the Sierra to interview our Comandante. I was 17 years old and was attending the sewing workshop, and another one about bombs. He realized that the bombs dropped by the enemy had "Made in the USA" written on them, and that Batista's soldiers murdered many peasants, raped women, and burned their villages. Carlos Bastidas spoke with our compensinos, visited the schools, visited the workshops where the bombs were turned into mines for the self defense of our guerrilla men. This is how he fell in love with our Revolution."

After commenting that the young Ecuadorian journalist spent two months in the Sierra Maestra mountains, Brigadier General Teté Puebla revealed that Carlos Bastidas had also interviewed her "to prove that in the Sierra Maestra there were women who believed and defended the people's revolution. This is why I can say that he was a humble person, a simple person. He planned to publish a documentary and return to Cuba to continue assisting our guerrilla forces."

Mario Augusto Carranza Rivera, a Guatemalan man who joined Column Number One led by Comandante Fidel Castro, also met Carlos Bastidas in the mountains.

In one of the annual tribute ceremonies to Carlos Bastidas, taking place at the headquarters of the United Nations Association of Cuba located in Havana, Carranza recalled the exemplary behavior and humility of the Ecuadorian journalist in the Sierra Maestra, as well as his valuable contribution to Radio Rebelde broadcasts to disseminate the actual reasons of the fight against Batista's regime.

At some events organized by the Press Commission, which I have chaired since January 28, 1999, other persons, in some way related to the murder of Carlos Bastidas told us their experiences, such as the forensic doctor René Guardaluse, who revealed the attempts of the Batista's men to steal the lifeless body of Carlos, once in the morgue.

The book written by Juan Marrero González, who died four years ago in Havana, entitled ANDANZAS DE ATAHUALPA RECIO, contains extensive information about Carlos Bastidas Argüello's life. Its first edition was published in Ecuador, thanks to the solidarity and aid of the Ecuadorian professor and journalist Alberto Maldonado Salazar, who was the Dean of the Faculty of Journalism at the Central University of Quito. However, the book was later reissued by the Pablo de la Torriente Brau publishing house, and the Technical University of Cotopaxi.

I remember attending both presentations of the book, one on May 7, 2008 in the city of Latacunga, capital of Cotopaxi province, where I was proud to accompany the journalist Juan Marrero and Carlo's only brother Edmundo Bastidas Argüello.

The presentation in Havana was held at the José Martí International Institute of Journalism, during a conference organized by the Union of Cuban Journalists (UPEC), from May 12 to 14, 2008, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Carlos Bastidas' murder. Relatives of the last journalist murdered in Cuba were present, as well as several Ecuadorians who traveled only to participate in the memorial that day, including the poet Pepe Regato, who recited some of his poems dedicated to the Ecuadorian martyr.

Two years ago, on the sixtieth anniversary of this sad event, the National Assembly of People's Power, the Union of Cuban Journalists, the Jose Marti International Institute of Journalism, the United Nations Association of Cuba and Radio Havana Cuba joined the tribute to Carlos Bastidas.

The Mausoleum that treasures the remains of Bastidas, at the Cristóbal Colón Cemetery in Havana, has been chosen to pay tribute to the Ecuadorian Journalist, as well as the José Martí International Institute of Journalism, where a memorial plaque was also placed at the entrance. I had the honor of speaking at the ceremony organized to inaugurate this dedication, and I remember that among the attendees were Brigadier General Teté Puebla, the ambassador of Ecuador to Cuba at that time, María Augusta Calle, as well as Ariel Terrero, Director of the host Institute.

The impact that the Bastidas murder had on Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro was described by Tubal Páez Hernández, Honorary President of the Union of Cuban Journalists. Tubal, who promoted solidarity with Bastidas in the Cuban Parliament, handed the script of Fidel Castro's speech, read by Radio Rebelde station nine days after the crime.

"In recent days we received a news that plunged us all into deep sorrow," Fidel Castro expressed. "The murder of the Ecuadorian journalist Carlos Bastidas by the repressive forces of the Batista dictatorship in the capital of the Republic."

"The official version", added the Comandante, "was that the journalist Bastidas was killed by a police officer when he was drunk and running after a woman." "As usual, commented Fidel, "in addition to the hideous crime, they expose a vile slander; the outrageous murder angers us as much as the imputation. Bastidas's family, his professional colleagues, his friends, his compatriots from Ecuador, those who knew

him in school as a brilliant and intelligent student. They must have suffered the terrible impact of his tragic death, and the impotence of hearing from the lips of his victimizers, the rogue version of the assassination of a criminal, a sadist. "

Fidel then added: "Those who understand the gratitude of Cubans to men and women who in all our liberating struggles have come from distant lands to give their blood and their lives, will, as well, understand our pain."

Fidel Castro ended his speech: "From here, today, we can do nothing to punish the criminals, but we solemnly promise to all journalists across the Continent, and to the citizens of Ecuador that the offender will pay for the crime, and we convey, to that noble people, so many times beaten and that have tirelessly fought for their freedom, our condolences and our indignation as brothers, for the crime committed against that nation, which is also a crime committed against the whole continent."

Less than a year after Fidel's announcement and promise, the triumph of the Revolution took place on January 1, 1959. The murderer of Carlos Bastidas and other Batista henchmen, took refuge in Miami, where some of their descendants continue to enjoy the protection of the U.S. government.

In May 1959, Jacinto Vázquez de la Garza, who had been the representative in the exile to the July 26th Movement in Ecuador, was entrusted by Fidel Castro to travel to Quito and provide a modest financial aid to Carlos Bastidas Argüello's family.

Jacinto Vázquez fulfilled the mission and participated in the ceremony carried out in Quito on May 13, 1959, on the first anniversary of the murder of Carlos Bastidas.

As told by Jacinto Vázquez himself, who showed me some Ecuadorian newspapers of the time, when we also highlighted the revolutionary career of Vázquez de la Garza, the leader of the 180th Battalion of the Milicias Nacionales Revolucionarias, who heroically fought in Playa Girón, also the Ambassador of Cuba to various nations in the Middle East and close friend of former Foreign Minister Ricardo Alarcón de Quesada.

Over the years, and due to my historical relationships with the people of Ecuador, I have carried out several works, so that journalism students and professionals learn about the deeds and life of Carlos Bastidas Argüello.

This way, I had some musician friends from Ecuador write two songs dedicated to the last journalist murdered in Cuba. The first song was written by Camilo, the brother of the musician Ataulfo Tobar, and it was released in the presence of the famous painter Oswaldo Guayasamín at the Union of Journalists of Ecuador, in Quito. The second song, was written by Son País Group, which stood out for the support of the Popular Revolution led by former President Rafael Correa Delgado.

And it was precisely Correa, who in his historic speech in Havana on January 8, 2009, recalled "that the Cuban Revolution had an Ecuadorian martyr, the journalist and patriot Carlos Bastidas Argüello, assassinated in May 1958 by Batista's paid men."

Correa was the speaker at the event for the 50th anniversary of Fidel Castro's entry in Havana, and his speech was delivered in the same place where Fidel spoke five decades earlier during a memorable ceremony in which white doves perched on his shoulder, and also accompanied by Commander Camilo Cienfuegos.

In his speech, Rafael Correa, feeling proud and emotional, stressed: "Today we pay tribute to Carlos Bastidas, for being the representative of the sacrifice of our peoples."

Although planned, we will not be able to carry out the tribute to Carlos Bastidas Argüello, this May 13th as we do every year, at the headquarters of the United Nations Association of Cuba, in Havana. According to the recommended measures to face the pandemic, however, Cuban journalists will remember the brave Ecuadorian who died for the Cuban Revolution.

We cannot and will not forget the journalist who interviewed Fidel Castro and, under the nickname of Atahualpa Recio, collaborated with several broadcasts on the radio station created by Comandante Ernesto Che Guevara in the Sierra Maestra mountains.

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