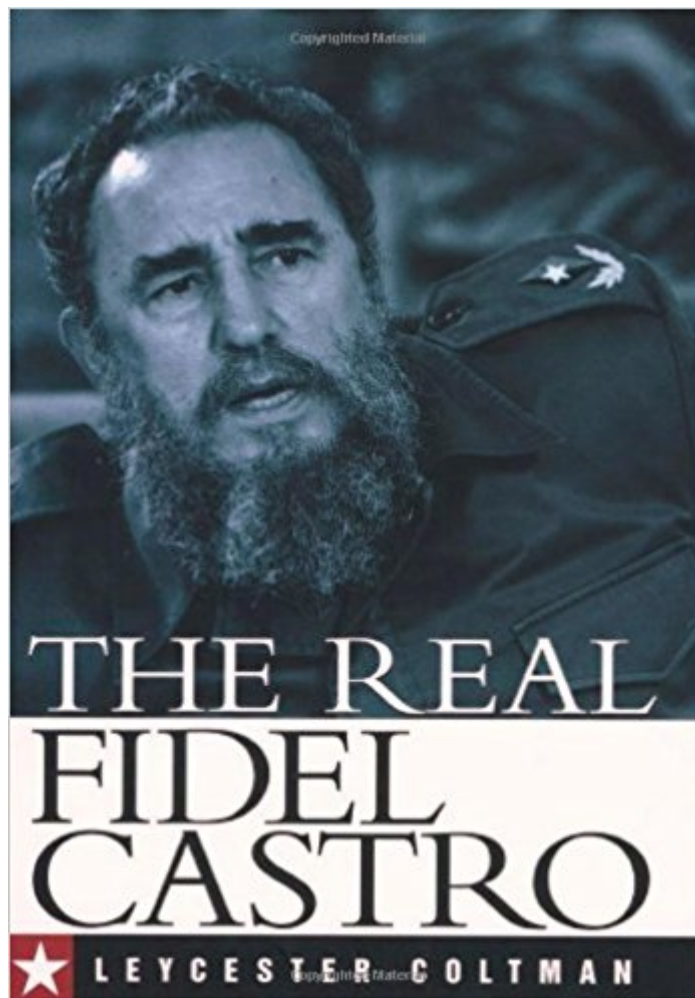


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The Real Fidel Castro



Synopsis

Rhetoric during and after the Cold War years has painted starkly contrasting portraits of Cuba's Fidel Castro: an unblemished idealist on the one hand, a ruthless dictator on the other. This book, an intimate and dispassionate biography of the revolutionary leader, shows that neither assessment is true. Leycester Coltman, British ambassador to Cuba in the early 1990s, came as close to personal friendship with Castro as any foreigner was permitted. With frequent contact and regular conversations, Coltman was in a unique position to observe the dictator's personality in both public and private situations. Here he presents a close-up view of the man who for half a century has been loved, admired, feared, and hated, but seldom really understood. Coltman chronicles the events of the Cuban leader's extraordinary life from the political activism of his university days in Havana to periods of exile, imprisonment, and guerilla warfare alongside Che Guevara, to the uncertainties of his old age. Drawing on personal observation and archival sources in Cuba and abroad, Coltman explores the contradiction between the private character and the public reputation, and highlights the complexities of the consummate actor who continues to play a crucial role on the international stage.

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Customer Reviews

Who is the real Fidel Castro? Some would characterize the longtime Cuban ruler as a ruthless dictator, crushing all opposition and starving his own people to feed his own hunger for power. Others point to a revolutionary leader who has adhered to Marxist-Leninist principles while being

popular enough at home to outlast nine American presidents. Former British Ambassador to Cuba Leicester Coltman provides an exhaustively researched history of Castro and reveals a man constantly driven by passion, usually able to lead by force of personality, and possessed of a subtle ability to shift his politics in order to maintain an advantage. *The Real Fidel Castro* traces his middle-class upbringing and career as a student agitator who swiftly gained notice both positive and negative for taking part in revolutionary politics throughout Latin America. Later, Castro, having failed in initial attempts to overthrow General Fulgencio Batista, takes to the jungle along with Che Guevara to prepare for what would eventually be a successful coup. Once in power, however, the revolutionary must learn to be a diplomat and a political strategist as he navigates a messy victory in the Bay of Pigs conflict and suffers an embarrassing defeat in the Cuban missile crisis. While he is often characterized as having been a mere puppet of the old Soviet Union, Coltman's portrayal indicates the relationship was much more complicated; Castro recognized the need for a strong ally who also opposed the United States but questioned the ideology of the Soviets and worried over what the proposed reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev would bring to the world's largest Communist nation. Although Coltman came to know Castro while serving in Havana, he doesn't gloss over the swift executions given to those who defied "the revolution" or Castro's penchant for imprisoning those thought to be politically dangerous. In the end, Coltman, who died shortly before this book's publication, is nonjudgmental and shows Fidel Castro to be a man as complex as the world he lived in. --John Moe

In a remarkably evenhanded and illuminating biography, Coltman (former British ambassador to Cuba) reveals how Fidel Castro repeatedly has frustrated his foes: surviving defeat, exile, and imprisonment to bring down Batista in the early 1950s; misleading American politicians long enough to secure absolute power over his island nation; forging an advantageous alliance with the Kremlin; and preserving his regime in a post-Cold War world dominated by Cuba's powerful capitalist neighbor. Long personal conversations enable Coltman to penetrate a psyche still opaque to most scholars. It will chafe Castro's detractors that Coltman discerns in that psyche rare courage and resourcefulness. But it will vex Castro's admirers that Colman exposes deep political inconsistencies (an early opponent to Soviet imperialism, Castro metamorphosed into a slavish Soviet supporter) and personal callousness (marriage never restrained the revolutionary libido). Detractors and devotees alike will marvel at how the young prisoner who resorted to invisible ink to inscribe *History Will Absolve Me* has aged into an old man in a historical riptide that he can already feel pulling him into oblivion. Bryce Christensen

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This biography traces Fidel Castro's life from beginning to sometime in the 1990s. It describes with clarity his contribution to maintaining the revolution and why, after by now 55 years, still 60 % of Cubans support it, as I was told on a recent visit. I would have liked to have as a first chapter the conditions prevailing in Cuba before the revolution as this would show how a seemingly disorganised small band of people could prevail over such a strong dictator as Batista. I would also appreciate very much a follow on from the author, if possible, to bring Castro's biography up to 2014.

The Real Fidel Castro is a good read for anyone interested in modern history. Like him or hate him, Fidel Castro made history, is history. A history buff's must read.

Wow! Interesting

It's a history book. Not very interesting, but like Sergeant Friday would say "its the facts... jut the facts".

It was not as good as I had hoped though it does give a persdonal view and is biased because of it. However a good read nonetheless.

Leycester Coltman has done a great job bringing the life and legend of Fidel Castro to a British reading public, which has neither the glut of Cuba literature in its book market nor the polemical axe to grind like most North American authors. There's nothing truly new here, but as one reviewer wrote it's in the presentation, in Coltman's sweeping yet concise style. (I suspect the former ambassador is more a professional public speaker than writer.) One sticking point is his discussion of Communism. Like most conservatives, to Mr. Coltman it's something one must be "for" or "against," with little room for ambivalence. This has dogged liberals as well in trying to understand the Revolution's evolution. In Fidel's early years one gets the sense he was as ambivalent toward Marxism as toward electoral democracy: the dilemma of a middle-class radical. In other times and places this resolved itself in fascism. Fidel's "bourgeois" progressivism originally had little in common with the workers, class struggle, the vanguard party - all the tropes of classic Redness, though he was intellectually familiar with them and inspired by revolutionary literature. Just as

Batista's coup "changed everything," opening the road of armed struggle, so did Fidel's own conquest of power require definition and structure and "continuing revolution." While this led to embracing the Leninist model, the process was not immediate, and Castro took pains not to call it that until a fait accompli. When Coltman writes that Castro in late 1960 "did not want to be a second-class associate of the Socialist camp, but an equal partner inside the camp," (p. 188) he jumps the gun: at that time, with an imminent US strike, it was still to Fidel's advantage to maintain formal non-alignment. So at this point it's relevant to ask: was Castro's revolution worth the thunder and sacrifice? Coltman draws back from final judgment, leaving that to his reader. It's certainly true that on a personal level, for Castro, it was a success. Like Sinatra, he can sing that he did it his way. And for Cuba many positives were accomplished that couldn't have been done otherwise, except by breaking the logjam of history. The Cuban Republic of 1902, born of US intervention and investment, had reached a dead end. But the Cuban Revolution (always capitalized), by its very exceptional success, was not replicable elsewhere. Its imitators destroyed the last hopes of postwar democracy in Latin America through three decades of hemispheric civil war; spawning largely doomed leftist insurgencies, the blood sacrifice of a generation, and the backlash of terrorist national security regimes subsidized by a paranoid cold war United States. And like the US in Indochina, Fidel felt obliged to extend his blessings globally in Africa. As with the American military-industrial complex, revolution for Cuba became - rather than a means to an end - an end in itself. An excellent introduction to those unfamiliar with the vast literature already out there, and preferable to many.

Covered within these pages is the story of Castro's early life, the strong influence of a hard working and successful businessman father as a role model, growing up as the illegitimate son of a young woman that was a helper in the kitchen in the large Castro estates. Coltman provides the reader with other aspects of Fidel's life; the early law student days at the University of Havana looking for the political spotlight; the unsuccessful Moncada attack with pro-democracy youth after Batista's coup overthrowing the Republic; the subsequent trial, imprisonment and then exile; his return to fight guerilla warfare; the triumph of the Revolution in 1959; his secret alliance with the communists in early 1959; the trial and 20 year conviction of Commander Matos, who resigned his command to protest communist infiltration; the mysterious disappearance of legendary Commander Camilo Cienfuegos; the government takeover of Cuba's free market economy; the formation of the G2 secret police; the Bay of Pigs; the alliance with the Soviet Union and the Cuban Missile Crisis; Cuban revolutionary support activity for Angola and Nicaragua; the demise of the Soviet Union;

Cuba's economic hardships under the Castro regime; and the shooting of two Hermanos al Rescate aircraft. This book is a good introduction to the life, rise to power, and totalitarian rule of Fidel Castro over Cuba.

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