

J E F F M O R G A N

Hemingway and the Cuban Revolution

For Whom the Bell Tolls in the Sierra Maestra

Reading should be encouraged at all times, with an effort to promote books that are worthwhile and that enlarge the recruits' facility to encounter the world of letters and great national problems. . . {and are} designed to produce formidable benefits in moments of combat.

—Che Guevara, *Guerilla Warfare*

In a 2009 spoken autobiography, Fidel Castro states that Ernest Hemingway's 1940 novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, "helped me conceive our own irregular war," adding "we always went back to it, consulted it, to find inspiration" (209). It is fruitful to consider *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in conjunction with Che Guevara's *Guerilla Warfare* and *Episodes of the Cuban Revolutionary War*. Hemingway may have had more to do with the Cuban Revolution than he knew

The connection between Hemingway and Castro has been noted before. Photographs of Hemingway shaking Castro's hand in 1960 after the Cuban leader had won the annual and last Hemingway Marlin Fishing Tournament are almost ubiquitous in Havana. It was the only time they met. Hemingway's secretary, Valerie Hemingway, who later married Hemingway's youngest son, Gregory, was there and reports overhearing their talk. Castro referred to *For Whom the Bell Tolls*

and mentioned how “the book had given him some ideas” (119). Hilary Hemingway, daughter of Ernest Hemingway’s younger brother, Leicester, co-authored *Hemingway in Cuba* with Carlene Brennan and in the 2005 book indicates that Castro was very keen on matters involving action behind enemy lines in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (122). Norberto Fuentes, a journalist and friend of Castro who ultimately fled the island, recounts a conversation in which Castro liked the story “about a rear guard that fought against a conventional army,” claiming that he heard Castro say Hemingway’s “novel was one of the books that helped me plan the tactics with which to fight Batista’s army” (174).

It’s difficult to correlate the guerilla action during the Cuban Revolution with the action depicted by Hemingway in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* as most, if not all, of the military maneuvers would probably come across as common sense; however, a focus on Castro’s word choice of “inspiration” from the spoken autobiography could help further understanding of the more philosophical, idea-oriented, existential character of the Cuban Revolution, particularly when cast in a light with Hemingway’s novel. Word of Castro’s interest in the novel was out before the 2009 spoken autobiography. In 1992 Robert E. Gajdusek writes “Jordan’s acts, as Fidel Castro noted, are almost an essay on the use of irregular troops in behind the line operations” (46). As an individual and as a leader, Jordan represents a strong existential character as do some of the members of Hemingway’s fictional band of guerillas; in fact, Samuel Show describes Pablo’s gang as the most individualized ensemble characterization in Hemingway’s canon (99). The individualism points to their existentialism, for an existentialist, as Jean-Paul Sartre tells us, must create his own reality, which is what fighters like Robert Jordan, Pablo, Pilar, and Anselmo do.

And, this is what Castro and Guevara did. Sartre noticed right away the existential character of the Cuban Revolution, visiting the island for around a month in 1960. His moments with Guevara were immortalized with the iconic photography of Alberto Korda, who, during this assignment, also captured the image now in iron on the vast side of Cuba’s Ministry of the Interior building in Revolution Square. Sartre also visited with Castro, and the moments he and Simone de Beauvoir spent with these revolutionaries convinced them of the revolution’s existential character. Castro and Guevara had certain resemblances to Robert Jordan. For example, Sartre emphasizes Guevara’s work ethic, noting that his meeting with Guevara was at midnight. Sartre stresses the Spartan setting to help illuminate the serious focus and disdain of abstraction in these revolutionaries. They were all so quiet, limiting their words to what seemed essential. Hemingway would

be proud. Guevara comes across in Sartre's *Sartre in Cuba* as a model, a virtual Nietzschean superman dancing near the abyss of a revolution that is only partly finished. Sartre gained a similar sense around Castro, whom Sartre characterizes as a man who "joined the details and the whole, inseparably" (123). Detail oriented, Castro comes across to Sartre as another Cuban role model. His simple, clean, but worn dress symbolized his work ethic. He took Sartre on a tour of tourist sites, chastising workers for poor work. Castro chastised one worker within earshot of Sartre with "I say that if someone doesn't do all he can all the time – and more – it's exactly as if he did nothing at all" (123). Every worker must do his part. Later, with some peasants, Sartre hears Castro claim "We have to demand all that is possible of everyone" (135). These focused workers, Guevara and Castro, resembled Robert Jordan. These men could have lived in palaces, but Jean-Paul Sartre found them living modestly, like Jordan preferring his sleeping bag. Sartre also noticed that, similar to Jordan, Guevara and Castro, like most good existentialists, lived in the moment. An insightful observation of this was grasped by Sartre in Castro's oratory, his description almost pegging the Hemingway code hero. Sartre writes of Castro, "he thinks out all that he is going to say. He knows it, and, yet he improvises" (143). To be sure, there are parallels between the philosophies in the Sierra Maestra and the Sierra Guadarrama, suggestive that Castro's suggested use of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* deserves some critical, analytical attention.

Earl Rovit is another Hemingway scholar who makes general links between guerrillas and existentialism in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (146), but it is the two primary foreign components to each guerilla band who epitomize existential qualities and need some strong consideration. In *Guerilla Warfare*, Guevara writes of young idealists from other classes, like himself and Robert Jordan, joining the revolution. As slippery a philosophy as existentialism is, it often characterizes a modern man who believes he is doing the right thing even if against all odds. If we think of the great German existentialist Karl Jaspers insisting on nobility, we are close to Hemingway's code hero exhibiting grace under pressure. Jaspers would view Hemingway's code hero, though, as he would any man, for, to Jaspers, each man must have his own philosophy. However, such a stance forces the man to make choices, often under pressure. In fact, the man most often referred to as the father of existentialism, Soren Kierkegaard, wrote about this, detailing life as a series of decisions often in difficult situations. To further this existential connection, Jordan and Guevara are not unlike the existential hero of Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, for they, too, have their impossible missions. To illustrate, Pilar refers to Jordan as "very serious" (132), but Hemingway's modernist style gives us glimpses

into Jordan's own thoughts: "He fought now in this war because it had started in a country that he loved and he believed in the Republic" (163), or he "fought that summer and that fall for all the poor in the world, against all tyranny, for all the things [he] believed and for the new world [he] had been educated into" (236); furthermore, by the end of the novel when death is near, Jordan's thoughts take him to reflecting that he had "fought for what [he] believed in for a year now" (467). Sherry Zivley is instructive in her attention to Jordan's ideological focus when he's dying and sniping (118-23). Jordan muses, "If we win here we will win everywhere" (467). Later, he thinks of himself as lucky and having lived a full life, and, near the bitter end, he even considers how his side in the civil war could improve its lot with the acquisition of more short wave transmitters. He is on duty to the end.

Castro's spoken autobiography suggests that readers of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in the Sierra Maestra may have benefited from two existential role models, Guevara and Jordan. Castro should have sensed the connection between Jordan's ideals and Guevara's, and he no doubt applauded Guevara's existentialism as much as he liked the Marxist tone in Hemingway's novel. Indeed, the untiring work ethic of the guerrillas of the Sierra Maestra is characterized in Castro's letter to the signers of the Miami Pact, a bogus union of Cuban revolutionaries. In the letter, Castro summarizes the first year of the revolution, emphasizing the over-achieving guerrillas gaining an upper hand militarily and proudly recapping their accomplishments, their work ethic. When Leo Gurko characterizes Hemingway's guerrillas, he could be characterizing the Cubans. "Only a handful of men are involved, but a whole campaign hinges on their effort" (120). Sartre's writing about the enormous responsibility faced by existentialists is again instructive as the mighty smallness of the guerrilla band seems to defy the existential metaphor of Sisyphus. Other existential thinkers further the possibilities for these kinds of connections between the Sierra Maestra and the Sierra Guadarrama. For instance, Freidrich Nietzsche asks in *The Gay Science*, "What is good-heartedness, refinement, and genius to me, when the human being who has these virtues tolerates slack feelings in his faith and judgments?" (76). The good existentialist is always on duty, which is why Jaspers prefers the word philosophizing to philosophy, for the verb denotes action. The dread, failure, and death that permeate the writings of many existentialists lead to the existential drive to live in the moment. Robert Jordan certainly does, but he is ultimately a winner who takes nothing. The Cuban Revolution has gotten the rock to stay for over fifty years.

Though Marxist ideology is evident in the novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* moves more towards an existential work ethic. In the original manuscript of the

novel, Hemingway had written that Jordan was a member of the communist party; however, this was deleted for publication (Grebstein 216-17). In addition to avoiding the hassle, the change makes Jordan's ideology more individual, as if he is creating it himself, such as when he considers how awful his orders are from Golz. Pablo figures right away how impossible the mission is, but Jordan accepts this harsh, grim reality and adopts an existential view. He is optimistic and solution-oriented when he thinks that he must follow the orders "because it is only in the performing of them that they can prove to be impossible" (162). There are few absolutes, if any, in Robert Jordan's philosophy. For him, there is work, and in his work he is able to create his own reality. This is quite evident in Jordan's inventive and utilitarian diction. For example, when the gypsy in Pablo's band asks about getting a tank, Jordan claims they can, saying to the gypsy, "I will teach you. You make a trap. It is not too difficult" (19). Jordan's focus on his comrades reminds of the Socratic Method. Socrates may have been one of the earliest existentialists, for he lives in the moment of his students' questions. Jordan and Guevara live in the moment of their struggles, and that their lives are a struggle enhances their existential character. They become like Fyodor Dostoevsky's narrator in *Notes from Underground*. Socrates, Robert Jordan, and Che Guevara can be seen as existential models.

Jordan's instructions to Anselmo regarding a lookout are equally affirming of his existentialism as he is practical and allows for Anselmo to be creative in his responsibility. "Take the gypsy with you that he will know from what point you will be watching so you may be relieved. Pick a place that is safe, not too close and from where you can see well and comfortably. Stay until you are relieved" (78). Later, in the snow, Anselmo considers leaving before he is relieved, but he has his orders and is disciplined. He is like Jordan, who, when thinking about the deadly prospect of the mission, considers they will not live but moves past that fear to his work. "What did it matter as long as they did the bridge properly? That was all they had to do tomorrow" (355). Hemingway characterizes Jordan as having "the ability not to ignore but to despise whatever bad ending there could be" (393). This is an existential work ethic, and the Cubans may have picked some of it up while reading Hemingway in the Sierra Maestra.

An episode from the Cuban revolution that epitomizes how the rebels adopted an existential work ethic occurred in the late summer and early fall of 1958, an episode that illustrates an existential quest similar in its seeming futility to Jordan's mission. A plane carrying weapons and gasoline for trucks was knocked out by Batista's forces, leaving a poorly fortified group led by Guevara to march for Las

Villas province in the Santa Clara area on August 31, 1958, cutting communication as they go. With trucks, the Cubans planned on a four day trek across the island to this more central province. They encountered a hurricane on September 1 and lost most everything. Later, they were spotted and on the run the rest of the way. They were bombed. But, peasants were helpful, and they finally saw Las Villas, reaching the surrounding Escambray Mountains on October 16. The timing was still fine because the group was to stop Fulgencio Batista's phony November 3 election and further cut communication lines for the dictator. While preparing to descend the mountains, they took on a small garrison from October 26-27 (*Episodes* 324-29). They ultimately accomplished the mission. The existential drive evident here could readily be taken from Jordan's impossible orders if we are to take Castro at his word on utilizing the novel in the Sierra Maestra. For contrast, Batista's men are not so properly indoctrinated into the existential mindset for war. At one point, during this same march, Guevara's group was splashing through a lagoon under a full moon and trying to get around some of Batista's men. They remained undetected (*Episodes* 371).

Batista's men were not existential; they were not code heroes in the Hemingway sense, and they apparently lacked the requisite indoctrination when it comes to an existential struggle like war. Richard Fantina writes, "The avoidance of necessary pain represents cowardice. The acceptance of necessary pain represents courage, the primary virtue of the Hemingway code hero" (69). In order to carry on in such fashion, an existentialist would make an ideal of the harsh, grim reality, rather than turning to an abstract understanding of events. Sartre seems to despise abstraction. The aversion to that which is outside our own existence is at the heart of atheism in existential thinking. Even Socrates claimed to know nothing for sure. In *Antichrist*, Nietzsche writes that faith "means not wanting to know the truth" (181). Abstraction is so disapproved by Martin Heidegger that he cannot even accept Sartre's mantra that existence precedes essence. Suggesting that there is an essence is too much for Heidegger, who focuses on being, which is defined by doing. Existentialists tend to avoid metaphysics. Robert Jordan avoids it, too, and so did the Cubans, indicating yet another potential echo from the novel to the Cuban Revolution. Once, after the death of a comrade, some guerillas debated whether dreams predicted reality. One guerilla had dreamed details of the death, and reports suggested his dream was divine. Guevara jumped into the debate to educate these guerillas on the importance of finding an ideal in reality, not in dreams (*Episodes* 122). For the Cubans, spirituality fared just as poorly as dreams when it came to finding the ideal in the real. To evince this side, Guevara mentions

Eligio Mendoza, who was certain that he was protected by a saint. He was killed (*Episodes* 171).

Hemingway covers similar ground in his novel. Pilar reads Jordan's palm and sees something, seemingly grave, but refuses to reveal it. Naturally curious, Jordan, though, emphasizes that he does "not believe in such things," and when she asks what he believes in, he answers with "my work" (19). Despite abandoning organized religion, Pilar again gets under Jordan's skin with more idealistic, romantic thinking when she speaks of earth-moving sex and how, if lucky, one may experience such an ideal up to three times in a lifetime. Jordan has had enough, rebutting that the guerillas "have enough work and enough things that will be done without complicating it with chicken-crut. Fewer mysteries and more work" (176). Anselmo gets it. During his lookout in the snow, he thinks of the lack of ideals in his life but eventually realizes that the ideal is in his work, contemplating that "one thing I have that no man nor any God can take from me . . . is that I have worked well for the Republic. I have worked hard for the good that we will all share later. I have worked my best from the first of the movement and I have done nothing that I am ashamed of" (197). Save sleeping with Maria, Jordan, apparently following the more Nietzschean work ethic that allows for fun, appears happiest at work. A good example is when he first scrutinizes the bridge and "sketched quickly and happily; glad at last to have the problem under his hand; glad at last actually to be engaged upon it" (35). By focusing on his work, Jordan and guerillas like Anselmo are able to make the ideal out of the real.

To maintain a focus on the ideal nature of their work, guerilla bands must frequently indoctrinate, and that occurs in both the reality and the fiction of this discussion. Guerilla fighters need to respect their leaders and understand the tactics that are to draw them closer to the social purpose of their particular warfare, which is to be a part toward winning the overall war, and once a guerilla understands these things, he attains a state of valor and moral superiority like, hopefully, their leaders. If the Cubans were reading and studying *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in the Sierra Maestra, they would find a good role model for indoctrination with Robert Jordan, who admires his leader, Golz and who, in turn, gains the respect of Pablo's band. Part of that respect comes from Jordan's focus. He explains to Maria that he has not "thought of anything except the movement and the winning of this war" (348). Another part comes from the clarity of orders. It is essential that the guerillas understand tactics. Jordan and Anselmo coming to an understanding regarding the blowing of the bridge is a good example. Additionally, during the threat of cavalry, Jordan takes the time to explain a tactic involving placement

of a machine gun that none in Pablo's band had given much thought to. When the cavalry do come, Augustín wants to wipe them out, and Jordan must educate him on why they cannot. Killing the fascist cavalry "would avail nothing. That would serve no purpose. The bridge is a part of the plan to win the war. This would be nothing. This would be an incident. A nothing" (277). Clearly, Jordan feels compelled to emphasize the social purpose of the fight through indoctrination into the philosophy behind which they are fighting.

To be sure, instances redolent of indoctrination are frequent in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. To make clear to Pablo's band that they must fight to win, Jordan must overcome Pablo's reluctance to fight. Pablo has seemingly lost touch with the social purpose of the war and this mission, and, early on in Hemingway's novel, he appears capable of sabotaging the mission and ultimately endangering the war effort. However, Jordan will do anything for the cause, even killing, which may include killing Pablo. Others in the band are not as seemingly lost as Pablo. Theirs is more of a matter of ignorance. The gypsy, for instance, struggles with the social purpose. Pilar, on the other hand, gets it, describing Spain as a "country where no poor man can ever hope to make money unless he is a criminal, . . . bullfighter, or tenor in the opera" (184). Anselmo, again, gets it, evident when, on watch in the snow, he laments the loss of his house which this war would win back. Like the Cuban Revolution, the Spanish Civil War involves class struggle. Back in Madrid, Jordan's friend Karkov once explained that "All must be brought to a certain level of political development; all must know why they are fighting" (246). In both Hemingway's novel and the Cuban Revolution, the reason for fighting is to avoid tyranny, and the elimination of the forces of tyranny looks like the only way to stop the oppression. Stemming from the self-consciousness of Kierkegaard, the existential man constantly surveys his decision making, striving to exemplify the characteristics he values while at the same time illustrating the character to live in the moment and change. A poet with existential characteristics, Rainer Maria Rilke asserts man's need to change, and existentialists like Jordan and Guevara indoctrinate by example. They model the acceptance of change, living in the moment, and a focus on the social purpose of the war.

The advice of Karkov may be one of the parts of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* that the Cuban Revolutionaries may have found especially intriguing. Guevara was the best example. Like Jordan is in Hemingway's novel, Guevara was an idealistic foreigner in his fight, yet he lead and focused on every detail of the mission as when he pointed out to his comrades packing flaws that affect mobility and survival (*Episodes* 140). If someone new joined the band, Guevara began an indoctrination

program with that newcomer, emphasizing concepts such as farming collectively and the value of individual work. He even tried to indoctrinate prisoners. As early as April 1957, Guevara refers in *Episodes of the Cuban Revolutionary War* to nightly reading sessions. During a quiet time in the spring of 1958, when there were only skirmishes, Guevara operated a training camp or school in Minas del Prio. The curriculum leaned heavily on literacy and political theory and was designed to restock the Sierra with freshly indoctrinated troops. While marching in early September of 1958, Guevara found the time to lay the groundwork for a rice workers union in Leonero, near the provincial border of Oreinte and Camaguey, remarking that “the social conscious of the Camaguayan peasantry is minimal” (*Episodes* 363-69). The Cubans developed Radio Rebelde in the winter of 1958, and that was only the beginning of their use of media for indoctrination, a practice the Cubans took to another level, from education to propaganda, after the triumph of the revolution, but, in the Sierra, the truth was paramount. In *Episodes of the Cuban Revolutionary War*, Guevara tells the story of men listing their kills after the Battle of El Uvero. The men exaggerated, having collectively killed more enemy fighters than there were enemy fighters. For Guevara, this became a teaching moment. “Preoccupation with the truth was always a central theme in reports from the Rebel Army, and we attempted to imbue our men with a profound respect for the truth and a feeling of how necessary it was to place truth above any transitory advantage” (175).

Another key existential component worth tracing from Hemingway to the Cuban Revolution is the idea of living in the moment. Sartre is again instructive towards that end. He writes, “we are condemned every moment to invent man” (41). Consequently, every moment provides an opportunity to intuitively draw on a vast reservoir of experience and understanding to create a reality from a range of possibilities. Sartre writes of losing focus of the moment, that time when “the possibilities I am considering are not rigorously involved in my action” (46). Existentialism is a philosophy of action and involvement. Sartre would argue that few live in the moment. Robert Jordan does, and Cuban leaders like Castro and Guevara seemed to, and they may be drawing on their experiences with *For Whom the Bell Tolls* when it comes to fighting in the moment and realizing that often there is no need to wait, but to do.

Fighting in the moment can be seen in both Hemingway’s novel and the Cuban Revolution. Early in the novel, Golz states, “I never think” (8). A few breaths later the narrator tells us Golz takes things as they come. Early in the first cave episode, Pablo asks Jordan if he’d rather be shot than left for dead, offering his services, and Jordan asserts his living in the moment mentality by stating “If I ever have any

little favors to ask of any man, I will ask him at the time” (21). Later, the time or moment passes for Jordan to shoot Pablo, and he is smart enough to realize it. He’s also smart enough to realize that he and Maria have a brief time for an ideal. Jordan thinks, “take what time there is and be very thankful for it” (166), and within the same interior monologue, shrouded in the specter of a bad mission, Jordan later thinks “There is nothing else than now. . . There is only now” (169). *For Whom the Bell Tolls* often reminds us that there is no need to wait. The most outstanding example is Pablo’s pre-emptive strike, the massacre of the fascists before the fascists came into power. A local cheers, “Pablo is not one to wait for them to strike” (106). This was before Pablo lost his focus. Pablo and the others, even El Sordo, all support blowing the bridge immediately if not sooner. Another example is near the end of the novel when Jordan is to fire first at the sentry, and he instructs Anselmo to shoot the sentry if he is still sitting, stressing “Do not wait” (410). There are a couple strong examples of the Cubans adopting a similar strategy during the revolution, suggesting yet another tip of the hat to Hemingway. Most of the Cuban rebels did not want to start the Battle of El Uvero, but on May 28, 1957, Castro forced his will. They pressed on. He saw no need to wait. By summer, Castro’s guerilla army controlled the Sierra Maestra, ending a rather nomadic phase in the army’s evolution. Castro was also quick to chastise his urban colleagues for failing to initiate a general strike on April 9, 1958. To him, they lacked the spirit of taking action.

The philosophical links between Hemingway’s novel and the Cuban Revolution enrich understanding of both, but there is one military action that deserves attention, bombing bridges. The military action of neutralizing transportation is as old as the hills, but the surprise bombing of the bridge in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which is supposed to coincide with a Republican surprise attack on Segovia, has its parallel in the Cuban Revolution. In *Guerilla Warfare*, Guevara, echoing the common sense of centuries of war, writes that “the weakest points of the enemy [are] by road and railroad” (23). It is important to remember Pablo’s band revels in their earlier success with a train. In *Episodes of the Cuban Revolutionary War*, Guevara details their big bridge bombing. He writes of the August 1957 attack on Bueycito. The Cubans planned to have a miner blow up “the bridge connecting Bueycito with the Central Highway, to slow up the enemy forces” (202). Guevara continues, the “bridge near the Central Highway had been blow up. As we passed in the last truck, we blew up another small wooden bridge over a creek. The miner who did it was . . . Cristino Naranjo” (203). Other than Guevara and Castro, this

Cuban probably comes closest to Robert Jordan, and this action is too close to pass on and at least deserves mentioning.

Fidel Castro states he took things from *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and since he does not state what those things are, and since action parallels like the one detailed above are all too common in war, it is rewarding to examine the guerilla existential thinking that permeates both Ernest Hemingway's fiction and the real world of the Cuban Revolution as written by Che Guevara. This way, we understand both a bit better. Literary analysis helps us live our lives, and since art does, too, it makes sense that the Cubans might turn to Hemingway. There is much more to be done with all the parallels, which deserve a scholar who knows more about war and more Spanish. *Hasta la victoria, siempre.*

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