



STEALING BEARD

Castro Fidel, Ramonet Ignacio. *Fidel Castro. My Life. A Spoken Autobiography*. Translation from Spanish. M.: RIPOL classic, 2009, 784 pp.

Reviewed by Vladimir Orlov

"Spoken language is not the same as written language – the accent, the tone of voice when you speak. When you see it written down, repeating a word throughout a paragraph may look unnecessary. But it's correct when you're speaking – you're emphasizing." So said Fidel Castro. Those words of his, along with the transcripts of 100 hours of conversations with the Cuban leader can be read in a huge tome released in 2009 by the Russian publisher *RIPOL classic*.

Speaking for myself, I would have preferred to listen to Fidel's memoirs rather than read them. In writing, the tone of this book does not simply change. It fades. Alas, there's no CD bundled with the book. But that is understandable. It would be unconscionable of me to demand Fidel's voice bundled with a Russian translation.

This book is a strange genre, an unusual mix. Its subtitle says it is a biography. It isn't. Ignacio Ramonet, the European journalist and left-wing philosopher who persuaded the Comandante to spend many hours reminiscing about the 79 years of his life, did no more than carefully arrange Fidel's texts dictated in 2004–2006. Ramonet himself admits that the resulting work was really a cross-genre of journalism and essay-writing.

The first edition of this book came out in Spain in 2006. Later on, Fidel himself cross-read the text, making some amendments and corrections. According to Ramonet, "this version of the book has been totally revised, amended and completed personally by Fidel Castro, who finished rereading it in its entirety in late November 2006". Since then, "A Spoken Autobiography" – which is essentially Fidel's only autobiography – has been published in more than 20 languages. The time has now come for a Russian edition.

Even those readers who do not closely follow the developments in Cuba will notice the date: "late November 2006". That means that the Cuban leader – or rather the former Cuban leader, a turn of phrase that still does not feel quite real – made his revisions after several extremely complicated surgeries starting from July 26, 2006 – the date he was forced by his illness to retire from governing the country. To all intents and purposes, we are in fact looking at the political will of one of the greatest political figures of the 20th century.

Only after reading "My Life" from cover to cover does one truly realize something that was actually supposed to be quite obvious: here is a true *giant*, now in forced retirement but still in a position to survey the second half of the 20th century from a lofty vantage point that no other living politician – with the possible exception of Nelson Mandela – has come even close to ascending.

Fidel muses a lot about power and the people who wield it. Many of them are no longer with us; Fidel pronounces his judgment on them, as well as the entire 20th century. Everyone and everything is gone – only he still remains. He goes over several US presidents, one after another, from Dwight Eisenhower to George Bush Jr. He is scathingly contemptuous of that last one, blasting him with the moniker "little Bush". But he has a lot of respect for JFK (despite the Cuban missile crisis) and Jimmy Carter, whom he once received in Havana. For me, the most memorable appearance was that of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who shows up on one of the very first pages. It turns out that the boy Fidel once sent FDR a letter written in English. Here it is:



President of the United States . . .

If you like give me a 10 dollars bill green american, in the letter, because never, I have not seen a 10 dollars bill green american and I would like to have one of them.

My address is:
Sr Fidel Castro
Colegio de Dolores
Santiago de Cuba
Oriente, Cuba

I don't know very English but I know very much Spanish and I suppose you don't know very Spanish but you know very English because you are American but I am not American.

Towards the end of the book, Fidel confides that his monthly salary as head of the Cuban state was 30 dollars (in Cuban pesos, of course: the dollar was banned on the island in 2004. The announcement was made in a notable and traditionally long TV interview which I happened to watch live sitting in front of a television in Havana with Fidel's own son).

Ignacio Ramonet often brings Fidel – and the reader – to the “ruler or tyrant” issue. He openly admires Fidel as a genius of our century – or should I say the past century? – and sees him as the Don Quixote of our days. He declares that admiration right from the start, from the very first page, in the intro, which paints the picture of Ignacio Ramonet talking to Fidel in the Comandante's office, where a wire statute of Don Quixote astride his steed Rocinante stands on display in the corner. Ramonet sees Fidel as a ruler of hearts and minds who has passed the test of time with flying colors.

It is on these terms that this book has to be taken – but that is also one of its fundamental weaknesses. Anticipating that charge, Ramonet warns the reader, or rather lays down the law:

I have never liked those narcissistic interviewers who never stop attacking their interlocutor and are eager to demonstrate that they're cleverer, more intelligent and better prepared than the person they are interviewing. . . . Nor do I like those who think of the interview as a police interrogation in which there's a cop on one side of the table and a suspect on the other. . . . There is also the dishonest and cowardly notion of the interview as a genre that allows the person interviewed to be stabbed in the back by the interviewer, under the pretext that journalist is free and 'objective' (on behalf of the perverted notion of freedom of the press), and allows the interviewer to do what he or she likes with the interviewee's statements: keep certain passages and throw out the others, take a statement out of context, omit details, cut our qualifications and leave statements 'bald', and never allow the person interviewed to reread his or her own words before publication . . .

Well, the view is clearly stated, and for that clarity at least Ramonet has my respect. But is he actually right? Is he not simply trying to ease the task that would have been too much for him otherwise? I think that would be a good question to discuss at some journalism master-class. I took Ramonet's methodology on his own terms. But as I made my way through those 100 hours of conversations, I kept stumbling upon the obvious failings of this approach, and my disappointment grew. It wasn't Fidel I was disappointed with. It was his interviewer. The only purpose of his questions seemed to be propping up the structure of the future book, and facilitating smooth transitions from one scene to the next. Increasingly those questions degenerated into an impersonal echo of what Fidel had just said, as if Ramonet didn't quite catch that. But being a prominent left-wing intellectual, the interviewer must have realized the vulnerability – and sometimes the downright boredom – of his technique. Instead of sparkling dialogue, the reader is proffered a rehash of Fidel's previously published and fairly verbose orations, interspersed by insipid questions in a (failed) bid to inject some dynamism and make it all look like a proper interview. Ramonet must have felt something of this, for he made a few stabs at demonstrating (to his European readers, rather than the monolith named Fidel) his concerns about *certain aspects* of life in Cuba. He also kept returning to questions about the fate of this or another dissident – but Fidel parried those charges with the utmost ease. Only once, when questioned about the Ochoa case (portrayed in the book at the “drug trafficking case”) he seemed a bit incoherent and annoyed, as if being attacked by a stubborn little mosquito.

In some episodes Fidel is very emotional – but those episodes are few and far between. He mainly reserves his vitriol for American imperialism and Cuban emigration to Miami. He sounds persuasive – but predictable, too. And nowhere does he really explode, rushing head-first into

a heated exchange. Ramonet's toothless questions simply fail to provide adequate challenge for Fidel's talent as a great debater to really shine in this book.

Maybe that is part of the reason why the pages about Fidel's early years are a plain bore. The Cuban leader recalls every slightest detail about his formative years – but how did he really become what he is? We have detailed descriptions, year by year, sometimes even month by month – but no real insights. Maybe that is just another side of Fidel's talent as a storyteller: he weaves his own story artfully, saying only what he wants to say, without losing his stride – while the interviewer just sits there and listens without making the slightest attempt to dig deeper. Only occasionally do we get a glimpse of the real Fidel. "I loved to climb mountains. When I saw a mountain, I saw it as a challenge. I would be seized with the idea of climbing that mountain, getting to the top. Sometimes the bus would have to wait four hours because I was climbing a mountain."

"All the glory of the world lies in a grain of corn," Jose Marti once said – and Fidel often recalls these words. It seems that thoughts about "great deeds, virtue and glory" simply won't let him rest, and he returns to them again and again. But then the interviewer asks him towards the end of the book: "How do you think history will judge you?" Fidel's answer to that is, "That's something it's not worthwhile worrying about. You know why? (...) In 100 years people will look back on us as a tribe of barbarians and uncivilized cavemen who aren't worth remembering." And then, "Napoleon talked about *la gloire*, he was constantly concerned with glory. Well, in lots of countries today the name Napoleon is known more for the cognac that bears his name than for all the things done by the real general and emperor. So I say, why worry?"

One of the final chapters, "Summing up a life and a revolution", is probably the most exciting in the whole book. Here one can finally hear Fidel's distinct voice behind the text – the voice one really begins to miss reading the previous hundreds of pages. I really wish I could learn Fidel's opinion about the Fidel brand of cigars – though I do release how tactless that question would be, especially coming from such a tactful interviewer. There is, however, a funny story of how Fidel quit smoking to give a good example to the Cubans. Here the Comandante seems to be shooting his own country's economy in the foot: "When we give a box of cigars to a friend, we say, 'With this box, if you smoke, you can smoke, if a friend of yours smokes, you can pass it along to him; but the best thing you can do is give this box to your enemy.'" One begins to wonder whether any other world leader would dare say something like that about his own country's main export product – however well deserved that product's stellar reputation may be. You can't but admire the fact that this particular leader puts his nation's health above narrow economic interests.

In such a huge folio, everyone will find a few of Fidel's mini-gems, his famous short *mots*.

Here's the one about the two years he spent in jail in 1953–1955: "I'm almost nostalgic for those years in prison, because that's the time in my life when I had the most time to read."

Or this one about Marx: "In the Communist Manifesto one can see the influence of Balzac's style – the clarity of the prose, the effectiveness and elegance of the simple expression."

Or his admiration for French cuisine, which Fidel picked from French communist party chief Georges Marchais and the actor Gerard Depardieu, and which seems almost comical against the general background of the Comandante's Spartan ways: "French wines, cheeses and foie gras are the best in the world. How delicious! And what variety! What flavor!"

Or maybe this reply to the question of what he thinks about Saddam Hussain, who was still alive at the time: "How shall I put it... A disaster. An erratic strategist. Cruel with his own people." These words didn't make it to the book itself though – they were chucked out by Fidel when he was making his revisions.

There are also some historical anecdotes in this autobiography which deserve detailed critical analysis and even verification, because their veracity – with all due respect for Castro's powers of recollection and Ramonet's diligent editing – is not immediately obvious. For example, speaking about the war in Angola, Castro claims that Cuba's and Angola's adversary, South Africa, possessed "eight atomic bombs" at the time, "provided to them by the United States", "similar to those they exploded in Hiroshima and Nagasaki". "The South Africans had had atomic bombs supplied by the United States? I didn't know that," – Ramonet says, politely. "Not many people do, but it's the truth," Castro insists – and then recounts his conversation with Nelson Mandela after his coming to power in South Africa. "Mr. President, do you know where the nuclear



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weapons that South Africa had are? – No, I don't know." Nonproliferation specialists will be happy to say that this particular anecdote may safely be disregarded.

The impression Fidel creates is that of a lonely monolith towering over the 20th century, which has passed right before his eyes. That impression is only reinforced by the chronology section at the end of the book. It is not always strictly relevant to Fidel himself, and here at least Ramonet's voice is much more distinct than in the rest of the book. Maybe that is because he did not feel burdened by the need to agree than secondary part of the work with Fidel? Ramonet lays down before our eyes the entire political theatre of the last 70 years of the 20th century, and of the first six years of the 21st. It includes the execution by the shooting squad of Zinovyev and Kamenev (a year after Castro entered a Catholic college); the Yalta conference (Fidel receives his Bachelor's degree); Mao's triumphant march into Beijing (a month after the birth of Fidel's first child, Fidelito Castro Dias-Balart) ... Year after year, name after name. Names from the past, from a century that is already gone. Che Guevara – killed. Kennedy – killed. Hemingway – shot himself. Khrushchev – deposed, dead. Ho Chi Minh (whom Fidel probably mentions more than anyone else among his heroes) – dead. Olof Palme – killed. Francois Mitterrand, Pierre Trudeau, John Paul II – to whom Fidel devotes many pages in his memoirs and whom he truly respected as prominent thinkers – dead, dead and dead. Past century, indeed.

Some of those who are given warm praise in Fidel's memoirs are still with us, including Jimmy Carter, Jiang Zemin (who has already retired) and Hugo Chavez (who is still very much at the helm). The Venezuelan leader is spoken of very fondly, and mentioned far more often than Castro's own brother and successor Raul (who was also asked to cross-read the book). On the other hand, do those fond affections truly matter? Fidel's young ally Felipe Perez Roque is also quoted very often in this book – but where is he now that Raul has come to power?

It is in this chronological bolt-on to the memoirs themselves that the reader actually gets the glimpses of the political kitchen in Cuba and around it – while the main body of the book is quite bereft of such things. It is here that we see the only mention of Alina Fernandez Revuelta, the "rebel daughter"; or the series of sackings of former allies in 2003 – some were ousted for "corruption", others were charged with "embezzlement". Ramonet does touch upon the subject of corruption – but he gives the issue of the Comandante's personal life a wide berth, and he warns the reader about this in the preface, just like he does about his interviewing technique. So it comes completely out of the blue when you read this in the chronology: "February 1980: Fidel Castro marries Dalia Soto Del Valle, a teacher from the city of Trinidad, with whom he has had a relationship since 1961 and with whom he has had five children. The marriage is not made public." That immediately makes one feel how one-sided this autobiography is, albeit understandably and predictably so. And it makes one wish for a new book: it should be just as comprehensive, but it should also be a proper biography.

The Russian readers will obviously be especially interested in the parts of the book dealing with Cuba's relations with the Soviet Union and Russia. They will hardly fail to notice that this is a rather painful subject for Fidel. Recounting the events of the Cuban missile crisis, he speaks quite respectfully about the Soviet Union and Nikita Khrushchev. But he does make the eventual conclusion that Khrushchev did not take advice from his allies; he ignored Cuba, and all the agreements with the Americans were done behind Cuba's back. There is bitterness and sorrow here. There is even more of them in Fidel's views of Gorbachev and Perestroika: "If we'd had that perestroika, the Americans would have been delighted, because, as you know, the Soviets destroyed themselves". It even comes as a bit of a surprise after those words that Fidel then relents, describing Gorbachev as "a man with good intentions". One cannot help the feeling that the Comandante would have really liked to finish that phrase and say outright what destination those good intentions had paved the road to.

He also talks in great detail about Cuba's military help to Angola and other African nations. He makes no secret of how proud he is of that "internationalist" stance. He seems to contrast it with the Soviet position:

... We became convinced that if we were directly attacked by the United States, the Soviets would never fight for us, nor could we ask them to. (...) We asked Soviet comrades several years before the collapse of the USSR: Tell us honestly – are you going to help? And they said, no. And we knew that was going to be the answer.

Looking back at the late 1980s and early 1990s, I see the Soviet Union's and Russia's role in Cuba differently that I did back at the time. I regret that our country essentially turned its back on Cuba.

We felt that we were up to our ears in our own problems, so Cuba was not a priority. We are now paying the price for that political selfishness – or short-sightedness. So I can understand Fidel's bitterness and sometimes even sarcasm, as well as the bitterness of ordinary Cubans. The fact alone that a country that found itself still under a US blockade and now abandoned by its main ally has managed to survive through that extremely difficult decade is worthy of respect and admiration.

But the key problem with this book is that the image of the Great Beard does not really become any clearer once you have read it. He talks and he talks, but nowhere does he actually reveal himself. He doesn't want to. He wants to exit the stage still obscured by the legend of him, which no-one will soon be able to separate from reality. At one point, Ramonet seems finally to stop beating about the bush: "At the age of 79, [as of the writing of the book], when you look back over your life ... what are you sorry that you did do?" "Well, let me think. What do I have to regret, something to be sorry about", Castro begins – only to plunge into several pages of recollections that have nothing to do with either regret or repentance. Then he suddenly cuts his monologue short: "I don't regret anything".

A nice answer. Nice and short.

