

Five Reviews of Historical Books

By Armando Simón

Operation Nemesis: The Assassination Plot that Avenged the Armenian Genocide by Eric Bogosian

This book was obviously timed to come out for the centenary of the Armenian genocide, which was carried out by the Turks. For a century, the Turks have insisted that everyone else in the world must pretend that the genocide did not occur. This mindset is similar to that of Serbians' and Croatians' that they did not commit any genocide in Bosnia, as well as the Japanese insistence on ignoring the crimes in Nanking and elsewhere by their troops. To read and learn about the sickening actions that took place during those times is to make one either despair or to wish for the total annihilation of the human race. (You may not want to learn what happened, but you must.)

For non-Armenians (like myself) it comes as a revelation that the Armenians were able to organize themselves after the massacres into a conspiracy, and avenge, to some degree, that horrific crime and this book details the steps that were taken for retaliation against the masterminds of the genocide. This must have come as a shock to the Turks, that a race of self-proclaimed warriors should be bested by a race of poets and merchants.

There are a lot of tidbits of information that are by themselves important, such as that there was a war crimes trial at the end of WWI (we are usually told that the Nuremberg trials were groundbreaking), or, that Israel, which is supposed to be so righteous, so ethical, so superior to everyone in the region, refuses to label the systematic,

planned butchering of the Armenian people as a genocide (I forget: do they own the rights to the word "genocide"?), or, that the United States only declared war only on Germany during WWI and not the other Central Powers, or, that those lower level Turks who refused to participate in the genocide had their throats cut by other Turks. This latter fact is relevant to the pompous, self-righteous individuals who often condemn Germans for not having prevented crimes by the Nazis (actually, quite a few did, but they are seldom pointed out, preferring collective guilt).

There are a few problems with the book, at least from my perspective. The majority of the story is simply a retelling of an autobiography by S. Tehlirian, who assassinated the Turkish Himmler. The author then pads the tale with background information, later developments and tidbits from other assassins' accounts. Mind you, by doing so he has made the information more widespread than if the accounts had remained by (and thereby for) Armenians. It reminds me of another book,

That little country, Armenia, still exists. But it is surrounded by hostile forces. The last thing that its people should ever do is antagonize its neighbors.

Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire by Victor Sebestyen

I remember at the time wondering what this new Gorbachev fellow was up to, he was so different from his predecessors and, much later, how it was all going to end. The stories, the quotes are facts that was readily available to any scholar, but the author brings out several pieces of information that we were not privy to at the time, such as the reason for shooting down the Korean civilian airline (ironically numbered 007) and how Andropov almost started WW III through his obsession that America was about to launch a first strike. Gone also is the myth that General Jaruzelsky of Poland imposed martial law in order to prevent a Soviet invasion (as

was generally believed); indeed, he repeatedly asked the Soviet Union to invade, but Gorbachev vetoed the idea. The most bizarre, nay shocking, revelation was that President Bush wanted several of the countries in Eastern Europe to remain ruled by the Communists and considering the stupidity of his son as a later president, one can see that the apple didn't fall far from the tree.

Unfortunately, the book suffers from gaps in information. In a way, it is understandable since it shifts constantly from one Eastern European country to another as the Soviet Empire began to collapse, but that is no excuse if Sebestyen was going to write about the topic. He totally omitted the coup against Gorbachev, didn't mention Yeltsin or the Lithuanian president. It should have had details about the Russian atrocities in Afghanistan, which was the cause for galvanizing the Western world against the Soviet Union after decades of believing that the Soviet Union was just interested in preventing an invasion of the Warsaw Pact by NATO, as the propaganda had fostered. In short, the book should have been much bigger and therefore more thorough. Even so, it was a good read. For some of us, it was a stroll down memory lane.

John Paul Jones: Sailor, Hero, Father of the American Navy by Evan Thomas

Although one can complain about the emphasis on Jones' thirst for glory, if it is a main character trait that is present throughout a person's entire life, it cannot be said to be an overemphasis.

I do not believe the author's motivation was to belittle Jones. The fact of the matter is that most great men, particularly those in the political and military arenas—but also in artistic, sports and scientific arenas—ARE obsessed with obtaining fame and glory. Indeed, if it was not for this thirst for glory, I would argue that they would not achieve anything for lack of motivation. The flaw here is in believing

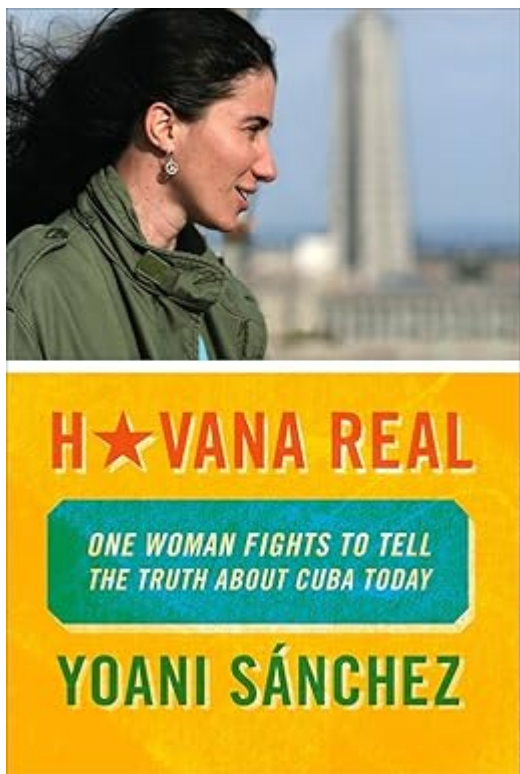
that the thirst for glory is a negative character trait. It is not. It is a motivator, although not the only one. Jones was also patriotic and loyal to his adopted country and the author repeatedly points it out and contrasts it with Benedict Arnold.

Jones was also subject to depression due to the (bankrupt) Continental Congress not having the resources to furnish him with a ship that fitted his talents. That is natural. It is also natural to be depressed when being unable to achieve what you have no doubt you could achieve.

I would also like to point out that it is very, very rare for a hero to be without character flaws, or who is devoid of some past act, or acts, that by themselves are reprehensible. Whether one is talking about Simón Bolívar, MacArthur, Patton, Edison, Gandhi, Churchill, or M. L. King, each of those individuals had severe character flaws; nonetheless, they achieved great things of benefit to mankind. I am only aware of a handful of famous historical Heroes who appear to be perfect: Garibaldi, Lincoln, Washington.

One last point: my dwelling on the subject's psychology should not be misconstrued as meaning that this biography is a psychological study. It is not. There is plenty of information regarding the military and the diplomatic aspects of his career.

Havana Real: One Woman Fights to Tell the Truth about Cuba Today by Yoani Sánchez



Instead of a book detailing the politics of the Communist privileged class in Cuba and the national and international politics, this book gives the reader a good look at the everyday life of the people, through the blog reporting of a skinny woman with stainless steel backbone named Yoani Sánchez. As such, it is much more honest and revealing than any posturing or any lies told by the senile psychotics that rule the Communist country. Or by that obscene slug, Michael Moore.

Yoani left Cuba years ago but, remarkably, she made a conscious decision to return to Cuba and live life there as a free person inside a dictatorship and she did so through a unique approach. She states that whereas most people in that totalitarian regime keep a low profile, give false information to the authorities, and whisper their opinions, she would do none of those things, but rather act and write defiantly. For a long time, her complaints were met by apathy and urgings to conform—not by the authorities, but by her fellow citizens who had been castrated long ago.

The book is a chronological collection of her blogs. In her blogs (and the book should really be read piecemeal), she details the everyday hustle to find food for her family and medical supplies for ailing friends and family. And throughout her accounts of the daily mundane activities, there shines forth little gems: “Our leaders would lose all effectiveness without the United States in the role of enemy.” “When some confused tourist asks me what a typical Cuban dish is, I answer I don’t remember, but I know the most common everyday recipes. And I list them: rice with a beef bouillon cube.”

“Others were driven into exile by the suffocating lack of freedoms, the desire to shout on a street corner even if nobody hears.” “Laughter is like hard stones in the teeth of authoritarians.”

It would be such a relief if some of the stupid Canadian tourists that go to the island as some sort of pretentious defiance against America would read the book prior to wallowing in luxury in their hotels amidst such misery. Nah. It won't happen.

The Sugar King of Havana: The Rise and Fall of Julio Lobo, Cuba's Last Tycoon by John Paul Rathbone

This biography of Julio Lobo, a Cuban of Spanish Jewish ancestry is unique. Lobo, as the title of the book points out, was the foremost sugar producer of the island, internationally renowned, his life spanning most of the 20th century. What makes this biography unique is that it dissolves any two-dimensional caricature. Lobo, on his own motivation, treated the workers at his *centrales* generously, building schools, giving scholarships, etc. When the author went back recently to interview the people still living around the now run down *centrales*, they all were nostalgic about the old man. Lobo opposed Batista and the rampant corruption that went with his dictatorship. When the Communists took over his Havana building the workers resigned in protest, but he urged them back to work, fearing for their safety as retribution from the regime.

Additionally, far from the myth of Americans pulling the strings on the Cuban economy, Lobo, at least when it came to the sugar economy, forced the Americans to their knees. He even succeeded in a hostile takeover of an American company long before hostile takeovers became commonplace.

There are also tidbits of peripheral, yet important,

information here and there. First, there is the undeniable fact—independently testified by countless visitors—that Cuba has become decrepit since the Communists usurped the original anti-Batista revolution. There is also the statistical fact that one in ten Cubans have (successfully) left the country; that would be like six million Brits, or 26 million Americans leaving. That says something right there. There is also the fact that the United States instituted an arms embargo against Batista. Lastly, there is the often-ignored fact, mentioned by Escalante, the head of the Cuban Communist Party in 1960 (which, incidentally, supported Batista against Castro), that at the time Cuba had one of the highest standard of living in Latin America and there were more doctors in the country than Holland, Japan, or England.

But these are minor details in the book apart from the biography and they are unlikely to convince any true believer with their homoerotic infatuation of the Communist dictators Fidel and Che. The fascinating thing about fanaticism—whether religious or political—is that it invariably turns normal persons into idiots.

Armando Simón is the author of A Cuban from Kansas and Fables from the Americas.