

Berlin – Moscow – Havana

by

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In April, 1989, when Mikhail Gorbachev, president of the former USSR, visited Havana, the majority of young people had been born after the 1959 revolution. And we, the majority, were present at the welcome ceremony that the Communist Party of Cuba always staged for visiting presidents. I was there at the corner of Calle C and Carlos III, waving a Soviet flag brought by my sister, a political economy graduate from the University of Lomonosov in Moscow. My other older sister graduated as an engineer in industrial planning from Bakú State University (located in the capital of the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan). And very soon I would land at the Berlin-Schönenfeld Airport, because I would be studying in East Berlin, capital of the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR or East Germany).

A revolutionary Cuban family could have no greater pride than their children studying in the country of the founders of Marxist Leninism. The Berlin Wall fell that same year, on the night of November 9-10, but we didn't know that until sometimes afterwards. The same people who decided to censure the Soviet publications "News from Moscow" and "Sputnik" because they did not sufficiently uphold communist ideals, were the same people who banned any news of the fall of communism in East Germany. When Fidel decided to tell us, we learned that the USSR and the rest of communist Europe had also fallen in a big way.

And so the Special Period in Times of Peace of 1991 arrived, with all the weight of communism bearing down on us. Up until then we drank our breakfast café con leche with Soviet powdered or condensed milk, and sipped Soviet apricot nectar at snacktime. We lunched on rice and "Russian meat" and stuffed Bulgarian peppers. The cucumbers and cabbage in our salads were from East Germany. We dined on Bulgarian chickens and drank Moldavian wine. The buses were Hungarian Ikarus, the new cars were Soviet Ladas or Volgas...We saw "Russian cartoons" like Tio Estiopa (the embodiment of the morals and values of communist ethics) and hit films like "Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears" (1980). We listened to FM rock stations on our Soviet Selena brand radios (when they discovered that we could hear American music from Miami on WQAM and WGBS, they disabled the FM receptors on the new Selena models). Our heroes, in addition to Martí, Camilo and Che, were Marx, Engels, Lenin and their long saga.

But all of this ended, it ended when Fidel announced in 1991 that we were entering the Special Period, because the Soviet Union was no more, and communism in Eastern Europe had also disappeared with it. We had to resist, and resist in order to save the revolution. Every mass media outlet blared these revolutionary words over and over again... resist, resist. The food and drink from communist Europe were no more, but Cuban production was finished too. There was no bread and milk, the water and power went out and even the

Russian cartoons left us...Everything had ended and now we had to reinvent everything...Everything was over.

1. Who was Mikhail Gorbachev? Why was he in Havana?
2. In what year did the Berlin Wall fall? Why didn't the author know about it right away?
3. In what year did the Special Period in Times of Peace begin?
4. Name 3 goods used in Cuba before the Special Period that came from the Soviet Union.
5. What happened when the government discovered that they could hear American rock stations on their radios?