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Few events in Cuba’s past provoke disputes as intense as those over Operation Pedro Pan. For the Cuban revolutionary state and its supporters, the unaccompanied migration of more than 14,000 minors to the United States between 1960 and 1962 was the result of a deliberate attempt to sow anticommunist panic on the island from the belly of the US intelligence community. In this view, the exodus unnecessarily tore innocent children from their families and nation, all while exposing them to potential abuse with US foster parents or in predominantly Catholic Church-run facilities. For most former Pedro Pan children, by contrast—and for the larger Cuban diaspora in the United States of which they are a part—the operation officially known as the Cuban Children’s Program represents a story of heroism and Cold War sacrifice. Parents made the heartbreaking, but justified, decision to save their children from communism before they themselves could leave the country. From this perspective, it is unconscionable to even explore the degree to which US government operatives might have fanned or exploited, let alone created, rumors that the Cuban government would completely usurp parental rights and send children to the USSR. As prominent former Pedro Pan children’s organization Operation Pedro Pan Inc. argued over a decade ago, such inquiries besmirch the “courageous men and women who made our exodus possible and the American people for their unparalleled humanitarianism in our hour of need.”[1]

Ramapo College professor John Gronbeck-Tedesco walks inescapably into this contested terrain in his new book, *Operation Pedro Pan: the Migration of Unaccompanied Children from Castro’s Cuba*. While probably no study of Pedro Pan can elude some objections from entrenched memory camps, Gronbeck-Tedesco has authored a sensitive, balanced account that admirably seeks to avoid familiar trip wires where possible. Treatment of the US government’s involvement in the “patría potestad” rumor, perhaps the main source of contention over the years, is brief and judicious, with Gronbeck-Tedesco recapping arguments and evidence on both sides more than tak-
ing a firm position of his own. Meanwhile, discussion of the origins of the children’s exodus in Cuba, and the radicalizing context of the Cuban Revolution behind it, is compelling but limited to a couple of chapters. Instead, the book excels in its extensive attention to the children’s complex adjustment in the United States in the crosshairs of a multilayered resettlement operation, the Cold War, and changing racial, ethnic, and national politics in the 1960s. Neither evil enterprise nor purely inspirational fable, Operation Pedro Pan in this telling is a messy story, as it should be.

One area that demonstrates Gronbeck-Tedesco’s care with his subject matter is his treatment of the physical and sexual abuse that some Pedro Pan children later alleged they suffered in the Cuban Children’s Program’s care. Celebratory exile accounts of the Pedro Pan experience have long marginalized such stories of trauma and hardship—whether in Catholic resettlement camps, orphanages, or foster families that took in unaccompanied Cuban children. At the same time, condemnatory versions from Havana often seize upon such allegations opportunistically to indict the program entirely, along with the United States and the broader “counterrevolution” in which US and Cuban exile actors took part. Drawing on contemporaneous documentation from Miami’s Catholic Welfare Bureau (CWB); Operation Pedro Pan’s chief Catholic organizer, Monsignor Bryan Walsh; the Florida State Department of Public Welfare; and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) of the federal government (which provided funding for all of the parties above), Gronbeck-Tedesco shows that program administrators were aware at the time of allegations of poor conditions, corporal punishment, and worse forms of mistreatment in some facilities hosting Operation Pedro Pan minors.[2] However, their responses ranged from attentive and concerned to inadequate. The book also unearths troubling evidence of administrators’ homophobic anxieties about non-normative sexual behavior and fashion among Pedro Pan boys, with one affiliated professional recommending hormone injections for any displaying “feminine” traits (p. 34). At the same time, Gronbeck-Tedesco is careful to not paint with a broad brush, balancing difficult testimonies of physical and sexual abuse that did occur (whether at the hands of other Pedro Pan children or their caretakers) with accounts of the greater majority who fared better and remain grateful for, and at times even effusive about, the care they received—notwithstanding the obvious challenges of displacement and family separation all endured. Overall, the discussion of abuse is well documented, sensitive, and circumspect where appropriate. Even the most determined defenders of a celebratory take on the Pedro Pan legacy should appreciate the balance the author achieves.

Gronbeck-Tedesco also deserves praise for his careful exploration of how Pedro Pan children integrated into their new environments, whether in Miami or further afield. To do so, he situates the ethnic and to an extent racial prejudice that Pedro Pan children and other Cubans faced against the backdrop of an evolving civil rights conversation in South Florida, which was still struggling to throw off the shackles of Jim Crow. Cubans occupied a paradoxical position in this landscape. Most hailed from the upper and middle classes of Cuban society and would have identified as “white” at home. With their arrival in the United States supported by the US government as a symbol and statement of anticommunist solidarity, Cubans received access to not only generous resettlement assistance, but also local spaces in Miami, including lunch counters, “white” schools, and bus seats, that had typically, and sometimes still, excluded racial minorities. At the same time, early on Cubans were also denigrated with racial terms like “Spic” or could face discrimination in seeking housing. These experiences could be even harsher for those Pedro Pan children relocated far away from the heart of the burgeoning Miami exile community in places like Montana, Chicago, or Kansas.
Finally, readers will be moved by Gronbeck-Tedesco’s exploration of the difficulties Pedro Pan children faced when reconnecting with family years later. Most Cuban unaccompanied minors’ parents did find their way to the United States eventually. But because the Pedro Pan kids already had a leg up on the immigrant journey, they often ended up “parenting” their elders as they adjusted to US society. The book also reveals that reunions were sometimes not automatic or quick, as staff at the CWB and other agencies did not always have a close tab on which parents or other relatives had arrived. More troubling, sometimes program administrators barred releasing children into relatives’ care, for example, if non-parents wanting to claim them were unmarried.

Indeed, the book is full of juicy tidbits that will leave Cuba-philes wanting to know more. For instance, Gronbeck-Tedesco casually drops that the first director of the Cuban Refugee Program was the former director of the War Relocation Authority that had interned Japanese-American during World War II. How on earth was that experience deemed relevant? Likewise, he notes that Monsignor Bryan Walsh, as committed an anti-communist and friend of Cuban exiles as there was at the time, traveled to socialist Cuba in 1963 to attend the funeral of one of the few Cuban Catholic bishops still on the island. What did he, or his exile supporters, think of the trip? Most shocking, readers will learn that, in the course of corresponding with and making phone calls to children’s parents in Cuba to obtain legal permission for placing them with relatives who had already arrived—not an easy task given breakdowns in communications after US-Cuban diplomatic relations ruptured in 1961—program administrations actually heard from a few parents who demanded their kids be returned to the island. But did any ever go back? What became of them if so?

The answers to these mysteries may have to await another study. But one question that Gronbeck-Tedesco does not quite answer directly, and probably should, is, Why write this book in the first place?

Unaccompanied child migration—particularly from Central and South America—has certainly been in the news in the past few years. This has revived references to Pedro Pan as an aspirational ideal or, more likely, a unique model from which draconian contemporary immigration policies have strayed irreparably. Gronbeck-Tedesco mentions such recent happenings in his introduction and conclusion. But a more detailed, less passing engagement with these controversies and their relationship to Pedro Pan memory might have made clearer why a fresh look at the operation is so timely. The politics of comparison between Pedro Pan and other child migration experiences have been particularly fraught within the Cuban American community, as attitudes toward immigration in Florida, including among former refugees and immigrants like the Pedro Pan children, have turned more punitive.[3] Thus, when South Florida Catholic leaders invoked the Pedro Pan story in 2022 to protest Governor Ron DeSantis’s move to delicense Catholic facilities housing unaccompanied migrant children from Central and South America—the same kinds of facilities that once housed Pedro Pan children—leaders of organizations like Operation Pedro Pan Inc. dismissed any similarity between contemporary child migration and their own experiences.[4] A respectful, but probing reexamination of Operation Pedro Pan like Gronbeck-Tedesco’s seems well timed to chip away at narrow Cuban exile exceptionalism and restore a modicum of empathy for children fleeing equally desperate, albeit different, contexts of violence and insecurity. Or at least one can hope.

At the same time, this book enters a crowded field of Pedro Pan scholarship, and that warrants some commentary.[5] Twenty years ago, interdisciplinary scholar María de los Ángeles Torres, a former Pedro Pan child herself, reviewed many of the same federal and Catholic Welfare Bureau records for her classic study *The Lost Apple: Opera-
tion Pedro Pan, Cuban Children in the U.S., and the Promise of a Better Future (2003). Admittedly, her book was much more invested in exploring the island context in which the operation originated and unearthing the truth, or not, of CIA involvement in fueling the flames of worry. Her citation of evidence partially supporting the latter contention earned her the enmity of those former Pedro Pan children who have assumed roles as custodians of a quasi-official Pedro Pan memory in Miami—like those organized as the aforementioned Operation Pedro Pan Inc. Other parts of her book, though, cover similar ground as Gronbeck-Tedesco’s in addressing the potent symbolism of children in the Cold War and the difficulty of navigating personal and collective memories of the Pedro Pan experience. Gronbeck-Tedesco even mentions controversy over De los Ángeles Torres’s work within his discussion of Pedro Pan memory toward the end of his book and otherwise cites her extensively.

More recently, Deborah Schnookal also turned over reams of US and select Cuban government files to address the question of US culpability. The resulting book, Operation Pedro Pan and the Exodus of Cuba’s Children (2020), lands on a starker accusation than De los Ángeles Torres ever articulated: Operation Pedro Pan was, she contends, the result of a deliberate “patria potestad hoax” (p. 105). Not surprisingly, her work has been presented in Havana and translated into Spanish by a press that frequently publishes Fidel Castro’s writings. It, too, has joined the struggle over Pedro Pan memory, a struggle that is transnational, as historian Anita Casavantes Bradford has examined and Gronbeck-Tedesco arguably could have explored more thoroughly.[6]

Let me, then, make the case for what Gronbeck-Tedesco’s study contributes to this literature that he does not. Beyond the archival depth of his exploration of the resettlement infrastructure and resulting conflicts, beyond his subtle treatment of the acculturation experiences of Pedro Pan children, what this book most offers is a route out of the either/or framings that have bogged down debates over Operation Pedro Pan for so long. It is possible, Gronbeck-Tedesco shows, to acknowledge legacies of abuse and hardship and recognize stories of success, generosity, and gratitude. It is possible to face the disquieting implications of the United States seeing, even manipulating, Cuban children as anticommunist symbols, especially when other migrant subjects did not receive the same favorable publicity or treatment, at the same that we seek to genuinely understand the increasingly authoritarian climate in Cuba that, patria potestad rumors aside, led so many middle-class Cuban families to send their children off into the unknown.

The memory of Operation Pedro Pan may never be settled. Former Pedro Pan children will continue to record multivalent, multivocal accounts of their experiences. That, too, Gronbeck-Tedesco shows, is not just inevitable, but necessary.

Notes


[2]. HEW provided funding to agencies like the CWB, and the Florida State Department of Public Welfare, as part of its Unaccompanied Cuban Children’s Refugee Program, itself a subset of the wider Cuban Refugee Program sponsored by the federal government beginning in 1961. (Temporary assistance had begun in 1960). Voluntary agencies/NGOs like CWB—as well as secondary players like the Jewish Family and Children’s Service, the United Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, and the Miami-based Children’s Bureau—were then charged with primary responsibility for Pedro Pan children’s care and placement, when possible, in host families, group homes, and other facilities in South Florida and across the country.

[3]. Those comparisons became particularly sensitive when allegations of sexual abuse sur-

[4]. Patricia Mazzei, “DeSantis vs. Miami’s Archbishop, with Cuban Americans in the Middle,” New York Times, March 15, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/15/us/florida-immigration-cuba-pedro-pan.html. One noted community leader and former Pedro Pan even couched her rejection of the comparison out of concern for the abuse that migrant children today were subjected to by human smugglers. This is an ironic position given the ways “official” Pedro Pan memory in the Cuban American community has long downplayed allegations of abuse in the program itself in the 1960s.


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