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Memory, Destruction, and Traumatic Pasts in Cuba: The Escuadrón 41 During Batista's Dictatorship, 1958

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Abstract

After a military coup in 1952, Cuba entered in a dictatorship with extreme state repression. By 1958 a colonial fortress in the city of Matanzas became a torture and detention center known as Escuadrón 41. Illustrating a case of forgetting, its destruction presents an atypical case study that defying official master narratives. Here, I analyze how is a traumatic past remembered through the lens of conflictive ideologies by intertwining the concepts of place of memory, destruction, and cultural trauma, which provides an account of a peripheral place and its local significance in the process of defining Cuba.

Keywords Cuba · Dictatorship · Memory · Trauma

Introduction

With the return of democracy to several Latin American countries in the 1980s, archaeology played a significant role in the search, recovery, and identification of victims of state terrorism during the local dictatorships (Funari et al. 2009a; Rosignoli 2015). Pioneering work in Argentina (Belleli and Tobin 1996) expanded to Uruguay, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and (Funari et al. 2009a; Zarankin et al. 2016), especially to Europe, where wars and concentration camps have garnered scholarly attention (González Ruibal 2012, Myers and Moshenska 2011). In Latin American, the archaeology of dictatorships acknowledges the existence of these type of processes since the 1920s and focuses on the period that saw the rise of leftist movements influenced by the Cuban Revolution in 1959 (Funari et al. 2009b; Rosignoli 2015; Zarankin and

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Salerno 2008). However, there is little recognition of the dictatorial processes during the first half of twentieth century in Cuba, including Gerardo Machado and Fulgencio Batista, the latter being the context for the rise and development that resulted in the Cuban Revolution.

Clandestine detention and torture centers are one of the archaeological focuses, where violence has been exposed through the study of the buildings, the identification of human remains, and associated materiality (Chaparro and Curtoni 2019; Diana et al. 2008; Zarankin and Niro 2009). The documentation of architectural changes for repurposing extant structures, the modification a posteriori to hide the state's terrorist actions, the identification of material culture associated with that time, and recovering stratigraphic and contextual information for preservation and musealization projects are some of the expected contributions of archaeological research (Duguine et al. 2013). As a result, many of these places are recognized as "sites of memory," to remember violent events of the recent past, linked to Nora's (1966) concept of *lieux de mémoire*, places where memory is crystallized, in which a residual sense of continuity between past and present remains. In this sense, archaeology is a significant approach to not only identify the victims but also understand the ways that authoritarian regimes implemented extreme forms of repression.

The significance of memory, and the dialectic process of remembering and forgetting has been discussed in the last two decades, considering how and why some groups remember or forget their past (Shackel 2003). Its link to specific places as a spatially situated phenomenon (Van Dyke 2019) has revealed the importance of archaeology for recovering a material past where ruins, monuments, and historic landscapes act as mnemonic devices that evoke a powerful interaction of meanings (Jones 2012). In that sense, archaeology has a significant influence in the communities and their memories such that "Excavations can serve as nexuses of memory, meeting places where personal narratives can be shared, challenged and renegotiated." (Moshenska 2007:91). Local communities play a significant role by adding experiences and oral histories to the archaeological remains, which can create a unique democratic discourse around a site, contributing to a sense of place or community identity. In that sense, the involvement of the public can create sites of memory, resulting in a socially powerful outcome in community involvement and interaction. Archaeology can act as a catalyst for their memories, turning the site into a discourse of memory and history (Moshenska 2007).

In the case of traumatic events, archaeological excavations provide a "theater" to transmit and negotiate traumatic memories. Archaeological excavations and the narratives of the artifacts become part of the social memory fabric. But also, "excavations activate an intense process of memory work relating to a diverse and fragmented body of memories" (Jones 2012:362). Archaeology is seen as a powerful medium of connecting the material and unwritten/spoken worlds, integrating the interpretation of oral history, memories, and archaeology which engage communities and their identities. However, the academic and research status of modern conflicts in Cuba is still neglected, with one significant exception, a project conducted by Sweden archaeologists, in collaboration with local historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists, focusing on the Cuban Missile Crisis in the context of the Cold War as dark heritage (Burström et al. 2009; Karlsson 2017, 2020; Karlsson and Diez Acosta

2019). For over a decade, this project has looked at an archaeological and anthropological perspective of the materialities left behind by the Cuban and Soviet troops (Gustafsson et al. 2017), with special focus on concrete structures, as well as the local communities' memories of the conflict (González Hernández et al. 2014).

For this case study, I draw from the idea of dark heritage (Lennon and Foley 2000, cited by McAtackney 2014) and negative heritage (Meskell 2002) intertwined with memories and post-memories in the archaeology of modern conflicts (Jones and Russell 2012; Moshenska 2010). Dark heritage is associated with the tourist consumption of sites of death and destruction, enclosing memories of the darkness of human nature, painful memories that we might not want to remember (Karlsson 2020; McAtackney 2014). Beyond the tourist sites, the concept has grown to places with disturbing histories. In that sense, it is related to the concept of negative heritage: "a conflictual site that becomes repository of negative memory in the collective imaginary" (Meskell 2002:558). Meskell proposed a dual nature: one positive and didactive, and the other erased. Yet, the meaning of negative heritage needs to be contextual, not necessarily in opposition (positive vs. erased), especially when dealing with post-memories.

Today, opposite positions on the Cuban government ontologies mobilize very different kinds of "memory work." On the one hand, the emphasis given by current president Díaz-Canel to the national Historical Memory Program (Martínez Hernández 2020) and how to make it more visible shows the official support, which have been illustrated through an official master narrative that is based on museums and other cultural institutions, especially after the 1970s (Alonso González 2018). However, this homogeneous vision is questionable. Memory work is diverse in practice, notably on a local scale, as I will illustrate. On the other hand, opponents, both within and beyond the island boundaries, engage with the past in diverse and dissimilar ways, from nostalgia to idealization (Bustamante 2021). Present-day uses of the past romanticize Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship to support political agendas. However, this study adds nuance to this discussion by analyzing how a traumatic past is remembered through the lens of conflictive ideologies. Integrating the geography of memory to an archaeology of the contemporary era can contribute to expose a complex and traumatic past linked to the local, and sometimes forgotten, structures and artifacts, by intertwining the concepts of place of memory, destruction, and cultural trauma. This is related to the construction of today's Cuban identity, both within and beyond the island, considering the ways in which the past is framed towards the idea of "cubaness."

Framing the Cuban Past

The significance of the past in constructing a Cuban national identity has been fully recognized (Miller 2003; Pérez Jr. 2013), but which past is recognized is strictly related to the political agenda of the new government. A link between the nineteenth-century independence wars and the revolutionary movement led by Fidel Castro was stated in his manifesto *La Historia me Absolverá* [History will Absolve Me], during the trial in 1953, after the assault to the Moncada Barracks (Castro 2007). This his-

torical connection has been widely recognized by scholars (Wilkinson 2008), identifying its Cuban ideological roots after the nineteenth-century independentist leader José Martí, and the early twentieth-century anti-imperialist leaders Julio Antonio Mella and Antonio Guiteras (Valdés 1975).

Nonetheless, the Cuban revolutionary government took a position that clearly rejected the past (Miller 2003), which included the symbolical and physical demolition of military structures or converting them into schools. Discussing the Cuban past became relevant during the 1970s, when politics about the past were materialized with two laws to protect the cultural heritage and the creation of municipal museums, instrumental in presenting the new master narratives (Alonso González 2018). Yet, these narratives selected iconic passages of the struggle for the Cuban Revolution, erasing and homogenizing the local heterogeneity linked to specific places. Although oral history and memories have been part of the approaches in the study the Cuban history after the revolution (Bustamante 2021), these are framed as contesting the national narratives in the island and the diaspora, considering highly visible and central places of the Cuban Revolution. The conflicting relationship between the local dominant ideology and the contesting diaspora has been characterized as a symbolic cultural war that is been fought within the realm of memory (Rojas 2006). However,

Fig. 1 Aerial photograph showing the location of the Escuadrón 41 (Peñas Altas battery) in the bay of Matanzas, Cuba. Photographs: Google Earth. Composition by the author

there is no consideration about peripheral places and their local significance in the process of defining Cuba. In this sense, the Escuadrón 41 of Peñas Altas, in Matanzas (Fig. 1), contributes a significant case study to illustrate how the politics of the past have been interpreted in the periphery of the Cuban government, and how the past is mobilized to define Cuba from conflictive ideologies.

In that sense, I intend to understand how a traumatic past is remembered through the lens of conflictive ideologies when creating places of memory. To answer this question, I consider that the traumatic past is mediated by a complex intersectionality between the Cuban government's dominant ideology and its contestation by the Cuban diaspora, which implies two dimensions -physical and symbolic- of destruction and a dialectic relation of power. The Escuadrón 41 of the Rural Guard, located in the colonial battery of Peñas Altas, in the City of Matanzas (Fig. 2) is a particularly significant place to understand these relations, considering its role during the Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship (1952–58) as a detention and torture center, its eventual demolition and oblivion at the rise of the Cuban Revolution. By establishing significant relationships of the dictatorial times, I intend to go beyond the conflictive ideologies, exposing how its meaning is relationally constructed while emerging from the practices under a confusing ideological time.

Looking at the physical and symbolic destruction of places of memory after the Cuban Revolution, which is at the same time mediated by the dialectical relation of power, provides an opportunity to analyze how the traumatic past of the Batista's dictatorship is interpreted by the Cuban government dominant ideology while contested

Fig. 2 Partial view of the colonial fortress Peñas Altas in 1901. Source: Hernández de Lara et al. (2019)

by the Cuban diaspora. I argue that the destruction of the Escuadrón 41 in Matanzas, Cuba, was not only physical but symbolical, erasing the time of the enemies in contrast with the new dominant ideology. At the same time, the place was forgotten by homogenizing its locally situated histories into a national master narrative, supported by a sanitized landscape. The forgetting aftermath resulted in distinctive official and unofficial ways of remembering with conflicting local and national memorials.

From the Peñas Altas Battery to the Escuadrón 41

The Peñas Altas battery, also known as Cagigal Battery, was located on the south side of the Bay of Matanzas, Cuba (see Fig. 1), near the old hamlet of Bellamar, right in front of the Castillo de San Severino, across the bay. It was built during the colonial government of Juan Manuel de Cagigal y Martínez, between 1819 and 1821 (Hernández de Lara et al. 2019) and its original configuration included a semicircular barbette battery on the seaside, with a gate on the south side that was protected by a palisade connecting to the coastline (Fig. 3). A latrine was located within the perimetral wall, on the east side. The building included the barracks for the troops and the officials, a kitchen, and an artillery room (Blanes Martín 2001; Hernández de Lara et al. 2019).

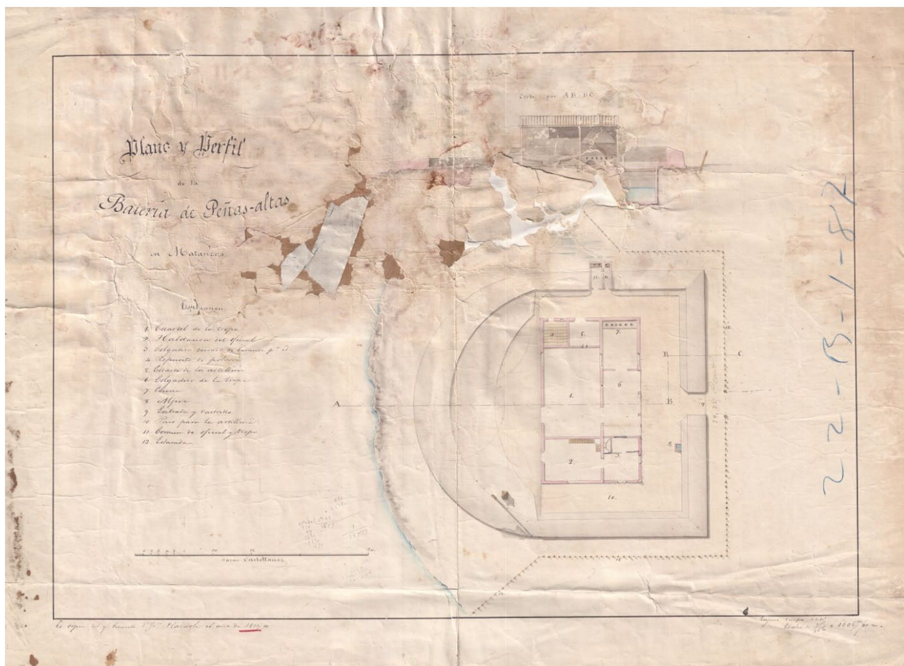

Fig. 3 Peñas Altas battery. Map made by Eugenio Campos de Letemandi, dated between 1841 and 1860. Source: AGMM, CUB-91-10

By 1876, an enlargement project was proposed and likely completed by 1886 (Fig. 4), as shown by different maps between those years (Hernández de Lara et al. 2019). The changes to the original structure included the demolition of the southern perimeter wall, building new walls that continued from both sides of the semicircular battery toward the southeast. Three additional buildings were supposed to be built within the new area, although a map from 1907 (Fig. 5) does not include any structure on the proposed location. Instead, a couple of structures, a "demolished pavilion" and a "roofless structure used as a powder magazine" existed on the opposite side of the previously planned buildings (Hernández de Lara et al. 2019).

Knowledge of the Peñas Altas battery throughout the twentieth century is very sparse and incomplete, although it appears to have been under military domain until its official designation as the headquarters of the Guardia Rural Escuadrón 41 in January 1958 (Chávez Álvarez 2007). Even when the Escuadrón 41 operated in the Peñas Altas battery for a year (1958), its impact on the local population resulted in remembering the place by naming it after the military term *escuadrón* (squadron). The Escuadrón 41 was one of five components of the Regiment 4 Plácido, assigned to control the province of Matanzas (Uralde and Rosado 2006). Here, Escuadrón 41 will refer to the archaeological site, as synonym of the Peñas Altas battery, encompassing the perimetral walls, building/s, and other structures and associated materialities.

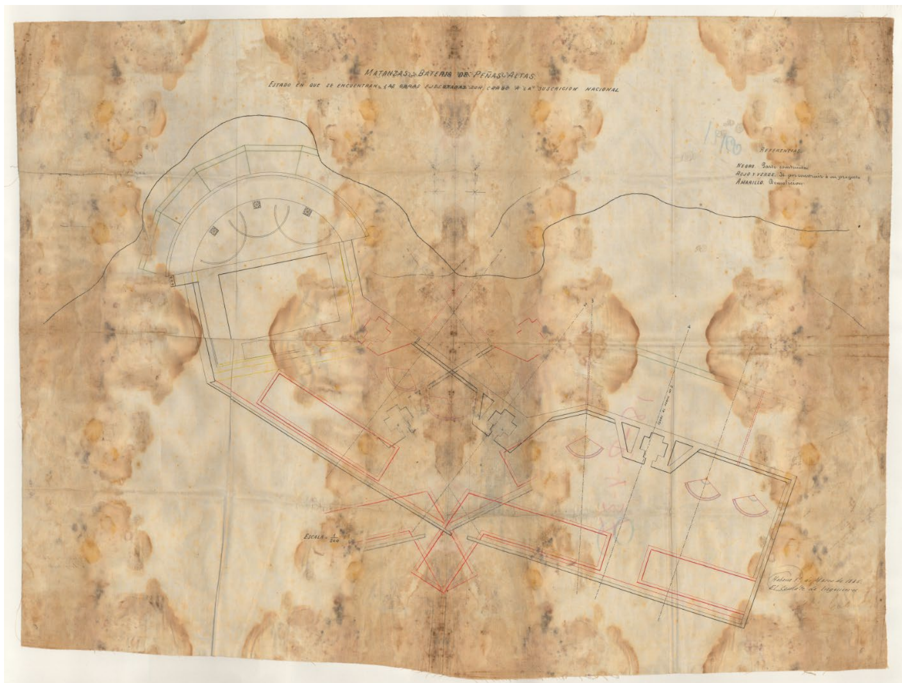

Fig. 4 Peñas Altas battery by 1886, showing the state of the building's enlargement. Source: AGMM, CUB-55-08

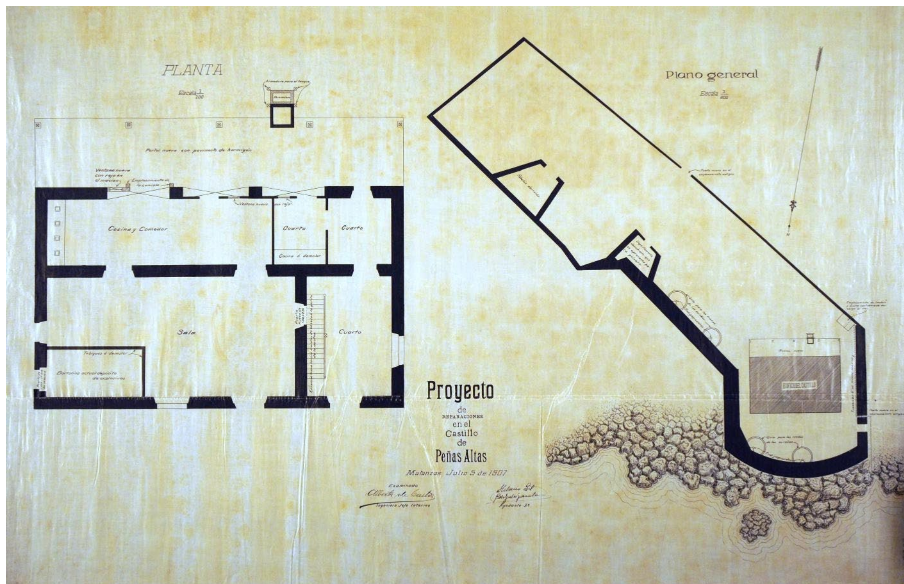

Fig. 5 Map of the Peñas Altas battery showing the internal distribution of the main building and the general layout of the structure (1907).
Source: Hernández de Lara et al. (2019)

Methods and Sources

From a methodological perspective, the analysis of the Escuadrón 41 will intertwine documentary sources, memories, monuments, architecture, and material culture in the interpretation of the past (González Ruibal 2019; McAtackney 2014; Moshenska 2007; Orser 2010, 2017). In this case, the site is studied from its origin to its demolition. To delineate the history of the structure to its modifications and uses, with an analysis of the historical cartography (Hernández de Lara et al. 2019; Hernández de Lara and Orihuela 2019). This information provides a basic understanding of the place, its architectural configuration, and how it changed through time, and provide insights to analyze the physical and symbolic dimensions of its destruction. Considering the questions of what was destroyed, what was not, and why, will speak toward the meaning of destruction and cultural trauma.

Additionally, I use testimonies of people who were imprisoned in the place to provide a distinctive dimension, linking a peripherical place in the Cuban Revolution to the national narrative and providing insights about personal and social strategies of contesting state terrorism. It also contributes to spatially situating heroes, by establishing their place of punishment, where they were murdered, through a painful process of remembering. In addition, these memories contribute to understanding how the place changed, by describing structures and their uses. This type of information is yet to be found in documentary sources and it is possible that it was either concealed or destroyed, a common practice reported in Latin American dictatorships (Zarankin and Salerno 2011).

Fieldwork at this site included photographs and mapping to document its transformation and memorialization to analyze how the past is remembered through plaques, monuments, and murals, who is remembering the past, and what past is remembered. It informs how the place is constructed and imagined from the present, and how the master narratives are interpreted from a local perspective, sometimes showing how the past is mobilized to define Cuba, contesting the dominant ideology.

Contextualizing Ideologies

There is a fundamental ontological debate that can be traced to the aftermath of the Cuban Independence War (1895–98) and the first US military occupation of the island (1898–1902). The implementation of the Platt Amendment (1901), which conditioned the end of the occupation of the island, resulted in anti-American demonstrations (Pérez 2013). The amendment granted the US the right to intervene in Cuban affairs, selling or leasing territory for coaling and naval stations, which ultimately resulted in the "permanent lease" of the Guantanamo Bay. This lack of sovereignty was the reason for calling the Independence War the "postponed revolution" (de Armas 2002).

However, even before the Platt Amendment, the independentist leader Máximo Gómez envisioned the development of anti-US sentiment. On his campaign diary, on January 8, 1899, after exposing the illegitimate occupation, he stated: *"La situación pues, que se le ha creado a este Pueblo; de miseria material y de apenamiento, por estar cohibido en todos sus actos de soberanía, es cada día más aflictiva, y el día que termine tan extraña situación, es posible que no dejen los americanos aquí ni un adarme de simpatía."* [The situation, then, that has been created for these People (Cubans); of material misery (because of the war) and regret (as a result of the US occupation), for being self-conscious in all his acts of sovereignty, is every day more afflictive, and the day that such a strange situation ends, it is possible that the Americans will not leave here even a driblet of sympathy.] (Gómez 1941:425). This sentiment increased in the following years, until what has been called as the *Revolución del 33* [Revolution of 1933] that resulted in the end of the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado, and the Platt Amendment in 1934.

Intertwined was the so-called Sergeants' Revolution, which elevated Fulgencio Batista as a leader, who was behind the scenes in the Cuban politics for the first half of the twentieth century. Batista later served a four-year term as the elected president of Cuba between 1940 and 1944 but became the Cuban "strongman" in 1933, a period in which the United States maintained a neocolonial relationship with the island (Argote-Freyre 2006). After a hiatus, Batista tried a comeback in 1952 as a presidential candidate but opted to lead a military coup with support from the US government (Domínguez 1998). Batista's dictatorship, between 1952 and 1958, was characterized by armed conflicts between different organized groups, ultimately resulting in the Cuban Revolution (1959). Yet, the political scenario would dramatically change after Fidel Castro's proclamation of the Cuban Revolution as a Socialist state in April 1961, and its explicit opposition to the United States' capitalist system. This last turn in local politics intensified a diaspora to the US, where an established

Cuban community existed since the nineteenth century and increased during the first half of the twentieth century, especially during Batista's dictatorship. The new wave of Cuban emigrees, in general, was characterized by their opposition to the revolutionary government's politics, resulting in the Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961 and tense relations for the following decades. Even though the Cuban diaspora is not homogenous, as neither the Cubans within the island, an ontological and political distinction might be based on the socialist-oriented ideological agenda supported by the Cuban government, and a capitalist-liberal ideology of the Cuban diaspora, characterized by its opposition to the Cuban Revolutionary politics.

Defining Concepts

In this project I draw from three main conceptual frameworks anchored in the archaeology of the contemporary era and the geographies of memory: destruction, place of memory, and cultural trauma. Destruction has been understood in various ways depending on the theoretical focus. In processual archaeology, especially Michael Schiffer's (1996) contributions to the understanding of cultural and natural formation processes affecting the archaeological records allowed the documentation of the physical changes to the site. From a postprocessual perspective with the idea that everything is meaningfully constituted, destruction has been considered culturally mediated as well. The negative (devastation by war) and positive (ritual destruction) conceptions of destruction are seen not as sharp distinction as one might think, there could be ambivalent realities. In this sense, the relation between people and destruction is meaningful, especially when considering hate and its impact on ethnic, religious, or ideological destructions of historic buildings and other structures with symbolical values. Thus, it has been proposed that embracing destruction is a way to accept its central role in archaeology, both as a productive metaphor and a social phenomenon involving people and things (González Ruibal 2013). Destruction also deals with time and its different dimensions, emphasizing the ability to capture a single moment as an ephemeral event made material for producing a sense of presence (González Ruibal 2014).

Additionally, I draw on Massey's (1995) concept of place of memory, defined by its articulation based on social relationships that connect places to the geographical beyond. In this sense, places are created from the present in an infinite process of becoming, allowing different readings of the past. Places are not the same every time we look at them since new connections are established on a daily basis. By mapping the social relations behind the Escuadrón 41 it is possible to understand how different ideologies and interpretations of the past and significance of the place are put into action when memorializing and remembering this space, considering that "a group represents the past through place in an attempt to claim territory, establish social boundaries, and justify political actions" (Till 2003:289). This analysis would provide insights into the politics of memory prevailing in the construction of this place.

The violence that characterized Batista's dictatorship involves dealing with trauma, as a cultural phenomenon that affects the groups' identity. In this sense, I lean towards a socio-anthropological conceptualization of trauma, instead of a physi-

ological one, drawing from the ideas of cultural trauma developed by Ron Eyerman, Jeffrey Alexander, Neil Smelser, Piotr Sztompka, and Bemhard Giesen (Olick et al. 2011), to analyze how the events associated with the dictatorship significantly affected Cuban society. For Alexander cultural trauma "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Olick et al. 2011:307). This trauma is mediated by power since what is remembered or forgotten represents political interests. Yet, in this case, after the military coup, the complex sociopolitical scenario on the island was characterized by armed conflicts between different organized groups against the new authoritarian regime. Violence dramatically increased in the cities with extreme state repression which included imprisonment, forced exile, murder, and disappearance of people (*desaparecidos*). In his remarks for the democratic convention of October 1960, John F. Kennedy (1960) referred to it as the "brutal, bloody and despotic dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista." The use of extrajudicial strategies frequently resulted in *desaparecidos* (Bellelli and Tobin 1996) and/or murder, as well as the display of corpses in public spaces, as was the case of Franklin Gómez and Miguel Sandarán, murdered at the headquarters of the Escuadrón 41 in Matanzas (Chávez Álvarez 2007). This shows the intentional use of violence by state agents against individuals and groups for the purpose of intimidat-

Fig. 6 3D photogrammetry of the site superimposed to the 1886 historic map, and the internal distribution of the main building from the 1907 historic map. Map by Esteban Grau

ing or frightening a broader audience, which is the basic conceptualization of state terrorism (Jackson et al. 2010).

Documenting the Escuadrón 41

Mapping the location of Escuadrón 41 was accomplished using 3D photogrammetry and memory maps, based on the testimony of one of two survivors who suffered prison during January 1958 (Fig. 6). Today, the archaeological site shows a standing wall that was part of the enlargement of the colonial fortress dating back to 1886 and the semicircular barbette battery on the seaside. The 3D photogrammetry focused on the visible walls and the modern structures, considering its potential impacts to the preservation of original wall foundations and its significance for the archaeological excavations. The documentation efforts included a marble commemorative plaque placed in 1983 which reads: *"A la memoria de todos los revolucionarios que sufrieron prisión y torturas en el Escuadrón 41 que radicara en este lugar. VIII Semana de la Cultura, Matanzas, octubre de 1983"* [To the memory of all revolutionary people who suffered prison and torture in the Escuadrón 41 that existed in this place. VIII Cultural Week, Matanzas, October 1983]. It should be mentioned that the size

Fig. 7 Partial view of the preserved standing wall showing the mural painting (2021), the obelisk, and the marble plaque. Photo by the author (2021)

and location of this plaque did not contribute to its public recognition, considering its poor visibility (Figs. 7 and 8).

A more recent effort to remember those *revolucionarios* is an obelisk with individual plaques, including the name and date of birth of each person, located right in front of the plaque, which by the way partially obstructs its visibility (see Figs. 7 and 8). The monument was built between 2006 and 2007 by the local representation of the *Asociación de Combatientes de la Revolución Cubana* (ACRC) [Cuban Revolution Combatant Association], with a plaque that reads: "perpetuating the memory of the deceased combatants." It is curious that there is no reference to the documented *revolucionarios* tortured and killed on-site, including Franklin Gómez and Miguel Sandarán, although their bodies were found somewhere else.

The monument is accompanied by a mural painting, signed by Alejandro on March 13, 2019, on the only standing wall (see Fig. 7). It follows a narrative from left to right that refers to the assault of the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba (1953) and the revolution victory. The Moncada Barrack scene includes a yellow barrack-style building with *revolucionarios* being killed by the Guardia Rural. The *revolucionarios* appear with green uniforms and a M-26-7 band on the arm; some of them with their eyes covered with a band. The Guardia Rural has brown uniforms, military helmets, and long rifles. Waves of a red sea cover the bottom along this area,

Fig. 8 View of the monument, the commemorative plaque, and part of the mural in 2011, on the remaining original wall. An in-progress construction attached to the external side of the original wall is visible. Photo by the author (2011)

which turn red and black with the victorious *revolucionarios* atop, as a symbol of the revolution's triumph. A distinctive section continues, showing a black and red divided by a white band with the inscription: "*nuestros muertos jamás serán olvidados*" [our dead will never be forgotten]. The top red side is illustrated by a rising sun and black shadows of victorious people rising rifles, as a symbolical representation of the triumphant revolution. The right end is completed with a Cuban flag.

Previous photographic documentation conducted by the author in 2011 showed a different mural (see Fig. 8). On the left side, the M-26-7 flag with armed *revolucionarios*, the capitalized word *REVOLUCION* [revolution] integrated with a Cuban flag and abstract symbols. The colors red and black are predominant, an allusion to the M-26-7 flag colors. The green is used for the *revolucionarios* clothing, and a few yellow rays behind them representing the sun and the new sunrise that is symbolically associated with the revolutionary movement and the change in society. On the right side, a capitalized phrase painted in red reads: *NUESTROS MUERTOS JAMÁS SERÁN OLVIDADOS*, the same one that was included in the new mural painting.

The area where the colonial fortress was located is currently divided by a road, which was part of the construction of a residential tower in the 1970s. The previously described standing wall and the monument are located on one side of the road. On the other side, near the seaside, a public park with a playground is sitting on top of the old

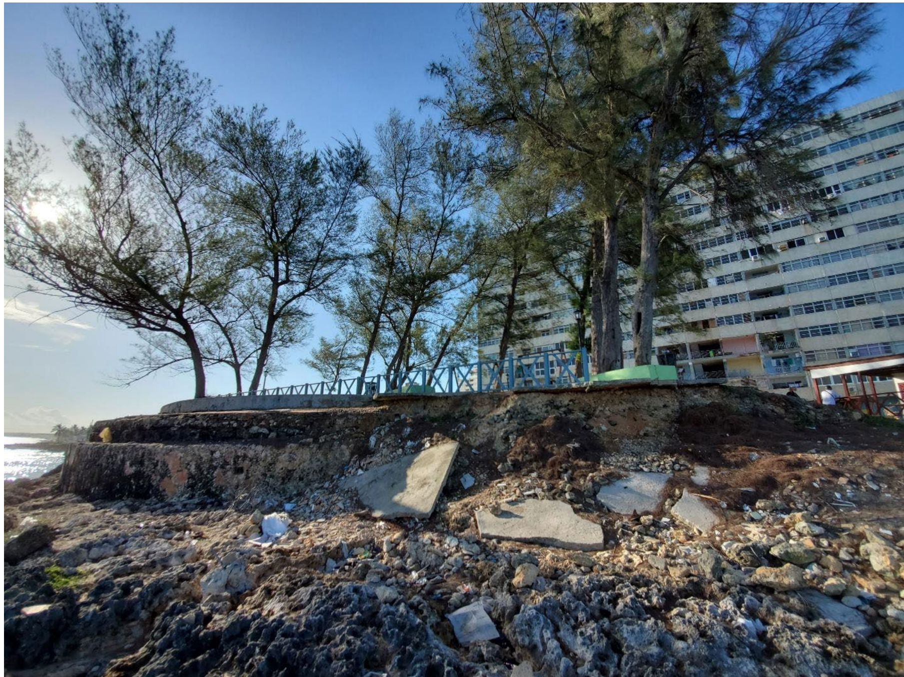

Fig. 9 Looking at the old section of the colonial battery, showing the semicircular barbette battery (on the left), part of the fence for the public park and playground on top, and the residential tower on the back. Photo by the author (2021)

section of the colonial battery. The 3D photogrammetry documented the semicircular barbette battery, including the old drainages on the wall, and additional drainages cut in the bedrock, ground truthing features that were identified on the nineteenth- and early twentiethcentury maps (Fig. 9).

Considering the location of the remaining standing wall and the semicircular barbette battery as reference points, the whole place is imagined based on the information provided by the nineteenth-century maps. However, as mentioned before, there are no twentieth-century documentary sources available about the transformations that occurred during the dictatorial times. Some insights were provided by Autreberto Arestuche, a survivor who was imprisoned and tortured in January 1958. He had been caught at his home on December 23, 1957 and remained in the previous location of the Escuadrón 41, in the Versalles neighborhood. When he was moved to the new location, "Castillo Fornaris, the military chief at the Escuadrón located in Mocha, shows up around 2 in the afternoon with… the two martyrs, Franklin Gómez and Miguel Sandarán, handcuffed… and they put them in front of our cell… in a room they had to interrogate… we were in the cell watching the operation from afar." Based on his testimony: "The regiment was moved to Gelpi and the [Escuadrón] 41 is left in… that was the motorized [police]… in Peñas Altas… and we were moved too, we four… we were transferred."

Fig. 10 View from the main road showing the apartment tower and the remaining standing wall on the right. The structures described in the testimony might have been located near the visible face of the tower. Photo by the author (2021)

This testimony provides the location of additional structures within the building that were unknown. Based on the description, this room was located on the west side, where the nineteenth-century construction projects included a couple of structures, but was not finished, considering the only known early twentieth-century map (Hernández de Lara et al. 2019). Published testimonies by Felix Ponce, who was imprisoned and tortured there, mention at least three rooms: the captain's office, an interrogation room painted in yellow (that included a long table and two chairs), and a narrow room where he was imprisoned. Ponce refers that during his prison time he never was moved to a cell (Ponce Valdés 2003). The interrogation room is likely the same mentioned by Arestuche. The area was demolished and gave way to the construction of an apartment building (Fig. 10) and remains one of the potential archaeological loci.

Fig. 11 Photographs dating from 1962 showing piles of debris, and part of the preserved semicircular battery.
Source: Hernández de Lara et al. (2019)

Remembering and Forgetting the Escuadrón 41

Debris observed on a photograph from 1962 suggest that the demolition of the torture and detention center probably took place that year or earlier (Fig. 11). Although most historians and archaeologists refer to the presence of remaining structures (Blanes Martín 2001; Hernández Godoy and Rodríguez Tápanes 1999; Jiménez de la Cal n.d.; Pérez Orozco et al. 2010), others have assumed that no vestiges of the original building exist (Álvarez Chávez and Menéndez 1994).

Some historians briefly refer to the recent use of the building as the place that hosted the "repressive elements of the Batista's dictatorship" (Jiménez de la Cal n.d.:7), as a prison where revolutionaries were tortured and killed (Hernández Godoy and Rodríguez Tápanes 1999), or as the headquarters of the Escuadrón 41 (Chávez Álvarez 2007; Pérez Orozco et al. 2010). Other fortresses in Matanzas have been thoroughly studied, resulting on published monographs and articles (Hernández Godoy 2006a, 2006b; Menéndez Alfonso 1988), while the first article on Peñas Altas has only been recently published (Hernández de Lara et al. 2019). This lack of attention to Peñas Altas suggests an intentional action of forgetting, not only by using a physical action of oblivion with the demolition of the structure but also marginalizing its history, consciously or unconsciously, or both.

Moreover, the demolition itself provides a meaningful discourse. In this case, the ambivalent destruction of Peñas Altas is not easy to define because of its dual negative and positive nature (González Ruibal 2013). If we consider the multitemporality of the building, a colonial fortress that became a detention and torture center, its destruction results are negative. But this destruction is also positive if we consider the act as a ritual/ideological response to forgetting the enemies and the values (torture, disappearance of persons, imprisonment, murder) they represented. Furthermore, the destruction of the building did not end with its demolition. Even though the destruction is not well documented, cultural formation processes affecting the site can contribute to the understanding of what I call a continuous and aggregated oblivion of the place.

The destruction of the site likely reproduced similar symbolic practices that were common after Cuban Revolution as a way of forgetting the times of the enemies. For instance, the demolition of the Posta 4 in the Columbia Military Camp, Batista's army headquarters in Havana, by Camilo Cienfuegos, commander of the Revolutionary Army, on March 10, 1959 (BVT 1959:83). The symbolism is not only demolishing a military location by the victorious army, but doing it on the same date of the military coup of 1952. The same occurred in the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba, where Fidel Castro himself participated in the partial demolition of the old fortress in January 1960. "He raised the demolition pickaxe. He started the tractors and cranes to tear down the old walls that, if they had a tongue, would be the most formidable allegations against the regime" (Bohemia 1960:55). This meaning was extended toward all other barracks across the island, although with different degrees of destruction. As the same editorial mentioned: "A kind of moral prophylaxis required the demolition of that barrack, like so many others that served as a den to the tyrant's henchmen" (Bohemia 1960:55). At the same time, a double symbolism was implemented, including destruction and construction, opposing the old regime to the triumphant revolu-

tion. Several of these barracks became schools, and Fidel Castro participated in their inaugurations. "The barracks of tyranny fall under the onslaught of bulldozers and in their places, schools will radiate the spiritual light that will guide future generations." (Bohemia 1960:81). In Matanzas, this was the case for the Goicuría barracks, the previous headquarters for Batista's regime within the province until it was moved to Peñas Altas in January 1958, where a group of *revolucionarios* conducted a failed attack in 1956 (Chávez Álvarez and Jiménez de la Cal 2000). However, Peñas Altas had a different fate: oblivion preceded by destruction.

As previously mentioned, by 1962 the site consisted mostly of piles of concrete and stones covering a traumatic past. But the clearing and abandonment of the area produced a sanitized version of a place that no longer existed (see Fig. 10). Once the destruction process concludes, construction becomes a tool for forgetting, creating new material referents that blur the past while making the place invisible. The construction of a residential structure is a symbolical way of forgetting, not only partially building atop of the place, but adding a monumental structure that visually and physically cover the landscape. Sidewalks, sculptures, and grass helped to sanitize a traumatic past. Furthermore, the previously mentioned road not only divided the historic building into two parts but resulted in a flowed perception of the place as two different things on both sides of the road, significantly influencing the later remembering process.

Moreover, the parcellation of the adjacent area of the structure, where one of the remaining standing walls survived, allowed the construction of new residential buildings attached to the external side of the historic wall, contributing to the continuous oblivion of the place. Additional construction activities in the public park, including light poles, reconstruction of the playground and sand fill, and the construction of a new structure functioning as a bar/cafeteria, were conducted without considering the historical significance of the place, although publicly contested (Hernández de Lara 2021).

After all the intentional efforts to forcibly forget the place, a policy change in the heritage and memory of the Cuban Revolution became evident during the 1970s and 1980s with the institutionalization beginning with a new Constitution in 1976 and the first law promulgated in 1977 for the protection of cultural heritage. The new policies recognized the role of the museum in cultural identity, implementing a homogeneous narrative to support the new ideological agenda. Museums had grown from 28 to 1969 to 235 in 1983 (Alonso González 2018). This last year when the plaque is placed in the preserved standing wall. This contributed to the fragmentation of the place, one "remembered" by the plaque, and the other one is forgotten. Despite the poor visualization of the plaque, the meaning created after placing the plaque in that specific location was likely the excuse to select where to build the new obelisk. However, it is interesting to note that the monument was built by a local association in support of the Cuban Revolution, while at the same time memorializing their war veterans and their families, not directly linked to the place, changing the relations on which the present is constructed through an imagined past and its situated materialization. Instead, the mural painting is speaking to the dictatorial times, and the Cuban Revolution process, in which the detention and torture center that operated in the Escuadrón 41 played a local significant role, by imprisoning, torturing, and killing

people, whose bodies were later disposed of in strategic locations across the city of Matanzas as a way of state terrorism, intimidating or frightening a broader audience.

As we saw before, other places across the island were transformed into schools, including the Goicuría Barracks in Matanzas. However, the Escuadrón 41 of Peñas Altas had a different finality. Its partial demolition is likely targeting significant areas within the torture center, considering that the cell where Arestuche was imprisoned, as well as the room where Franklin Gómez and Miguel Sandarán were interrogated and tortured, were both demolished. A symbolic demolition of those haunted spaces occurred. A traumatic place in the landscape was abandoned and consciously forgotten. Yet, the assumption that a traumatic past from the Batista's dictatorship would be highlighted by the revolutionary government is put into question, illustrating a case of forgetting that contrasts the national master narratives.

Even though a new dominant master narrative has been produced and reproduced after the Cuban Revolution in 1959, a homogenizing history has been leaning toward the results on a national scale, reducing the local representations of the violent and traumatic past. In that sense, the demolition of the Escuadrón 41 significantly influenced the forgetting process, not only among the community but especially in the written history of the city and the historical imagination. The limited treatment of the history of the building, significantly its role during Batista's dictatorship is surprising. Even the only comprehensive local history of that period uses a broad approach to the economic, political, and social distress, with brief mentions about the building itself. This forgetting allowed new constructions, including the road and buildings, contributing to the physical and symbolically fragmentation of the memory. The result of this forgetting is explicitly presented in the uses of the past.

The efforts toward remembering the place have been limited in scope, with a selective memory that only mentions the *revolucionarios* and their parents but excludes the role of the oppressor, thus forgetting the historical context. The dichotomy between *revolucionario* and *tirano* (tyrant), needs to be established to expose the traumatic past on its own, to deal with it in the present, and understand how it affected Cuban society from a local perspective. This relational context, showing the complex, dynamic, conflictive, and traumatic nature of the dictatorial times would respond to decontextualizing uses of the past currently in vogue.

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Conflict of interest The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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