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“Un orgullo de Cuba en los cielos del mundo”. Cubana de aviación from Miami to Bagdad (1946–79)

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Abstract
This article focuses on the transformation of the carrier Cubana de aviación before and after the 1959 Cuban revolution. By observing Cubana’s management, labour force, equipment, international passenger and freight traffic, this article aims to outline an international history of this Latin American flag carrier. The touristic air relationships between the American continent and Spain that could be observed in the 1950s were substituted – in the 1960s and 1970s – by a web of political “líneas de la amistad” [Friendship Flights] with Prague, Santiago de Chile, East Berlin, Lima, Luanda, Managua, Tripoli and Bagdad. This three-decade period allows us to interrogate breaks and continuities in the Cuban airline travel sector and to challenge the traditional interpretations of Cuban history. This work is based on diplomatic and corporative archives from Cuba, United States, Canada, Mexico, Spain and France and the aeronautical international press.

Keywords
Cuba, aviation, revolution, blockade

Compared to its Caribbean and Latin American neighbours, Cubana de aviación had the most original international network between the 1960s and the 1980s. Without regional connections before the early 1970s (with the exception of Mexico), the Cuban national airline flew to Prague, East Berlin, Luanda,

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Maputo, Tripoli and Bagdad. It was clear that the aircrafts followed the lines of the revolutionary government headed by Fidel Castro since 1959, in the context of the global Cold War. As the sole socialist state on the continent, it diverged from other American countries which had built integrated regional networks. Moreover, State-owned Cubana from 1959 is less known than the one founded in 1929 as the Compañía Nacional Cubana de Aviación Curtiss which was managed by private hands until the takeover of 1959.

Historical analyses of the Cubana de aviación tend to emphasise a radical break between the republican period (1902–58) and the revolutionary one (after 1959), replicating hegemonic public discourses. The two major (but non-academic) studies about the Cubana both end their analysis in 1961 and present important political biases. For Diana Rodríguez and Juan Rodríguez, Cuban exiles in Florida, the nationalisation of the Empresa Consolidada Cubana de aviación meant the end of free enterprise in aviation and of the golden period of the 1950s when Cubana was among the ten biggest air carriers in Latin America.¹ On the other end of the spectrum, for Marrón Duque de Estrada, a Havana-based old Cubana worker, the same event marked the triumph of the policy of the “chosen instrument” which led to the unification and nationalisation of all the Cuban airlines to serve the nation and the revolution.² Implicitly, both views agree on the idea that the history of the main Cuban airline does not deserve to be written after 1961.

This paper challenges this and addresses the internationalisation of Cubana de aviación from its first flights to Miami in 1946 to the latest developments of the late 1970s. Focusing on the evolution of Cubana’s international network (as much as on management, labour, technology and passengers), I want to investigate how Cubana flew the Cuban flag as a national airline before and after the revolution. What was Cubana exporting “en los cielos del mundo” [in the skies of the world] as an advertisement of the 1950 stated and how did the context of the Cold War and blockade shaped its role? I argue that after the revolution of 1959, the development of Cubana was conditioned by the policies of United States and the blockade that had major consequences on its operations. The militarisation and then the sovietisation of the airline from the late 1960s and in the 1970s were the responses by the Cuban state to develop the airline. Soviet aid to Cuban aviation allowed Cubana to serve the new purposes of the Cuban foreign policy.

1946–58: A Cuban Cubana?

In the context of rapid growth of the international air transport after Second World War, Cuba found itself in a very good position to serve as a crossroad between South and North America. Sydney Clark noted in her 1946 travel guide for American tourists to Cuba that “Nowhere has the pace of expansion been faster

¹ Diana Rodríguez and Juan Rodríguez, En alas Cubanas (Miami: Cuba Aero, 2002).
than in services to and through Cuba”. This boom did not only affect passengers but also air cargo. For instance, in 1947, Cuba represented 23 per cent of all USA air freights exports and 32 per cent of the imports. The main question for the Cuban leadership was how to take advantage of its geographical situation: as Cuban historian Herminio Portell stated, Cuba needed to avoid becoming “a small Polynesian island without [its] own aviation to which foreign aviators did a favour [by] bringing their planes full of merchandise”. At the end of Second World War, Cuba had an old airline, *Cubana de aviaciόn* and an international airport near Havana, at Rancho Boyeros, both under Pan American World Airways control. *Cubana de aviaciόn* was founded in 1929 as “Comпания Cubana de Aviaciόn Curtiss” and bought by Pan Am in 1932, the latter taking also control over the airport. In the nationalistic context of the presidencies of the *Partido Revolucionario Cubano Autέntico*, those of Ramόn Grau San Martίn (1944–48) and Carlos Priό Socarrάs (1948–52), the Cuban state pushed for a stronger involvement of local investors in *Cubana* and in the airport management, but the negotiations failed several times. The policy of Pan Am in the Cuban market was to intensify the offer of flights between Miami and Havana, as well as to progressively withdraw from *Cubana* (a policy followed with its other Latin American subsidiaries at that time) and to sell the Havana airport in order to focus on air transport activities.

Whereas Pan Am shares in *Cubana* were reduced to 52 per cent in 1945, 48 per cent in 1948 and 20 per cent in 1953, in this period the Cuban governments supported new smallest airlines such as *Aerovιas Q*, *Aeropostal* and *Expreso Ae´reo Interamericano* rather than *Cubana*. *Aerovιas Q* was founded by colonel Quevedo, former manager of *Cubana*, in late 1945 in order to “cubanise” air transport in Cuba against the influence of USA airlines (especially Pan Am). Among a lot of privileges, the military-controlled *Aerovιas Q* and *Cuba Aeropostal* obtained from president Grau San Martin and his acting first lady Paulina Alsina de Grau to operate from the military airfield of Columbia in Havana rather than at Rancho Boyeros. This situation raised the opposition of the union of air transport workers (*Federacio´n A e´rea Nacional* hereafter FAN), of the government of United States and other airlines for the unfair competition, as well as of the large part of Cuban society because of the smuggling in the Columbia airfield. However, it was only in February 1960, under the revolutionary government, that Rancho Boyeros regained its status as the unique civil airport of Havana.

The internationalisation of *Cubana*s routes implies that *Cubana* appeared as a Cuban company for the foreign countries, as indicated in the negotiations for the

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3 Sydney Clark, *All the Best in Cuba* (New York: Mead, 1946), 7.
inauguration of Cubana’s route to Madrid (April 1948) and New York (May 1956). For instance, the Spanish Foreign Ministry wanted to be certain that Cubana was effectively Cuban and was not Pan Am’s instrument to set foot in Spain.8 Also the New York service was the key objective of Cubana (as for all the other Latin American carriers in the 1950s) but Cubana faced the competition of National Airlines and Línea Aeropostal Venezolana which, respectively, inaugurated New York–Havana and Caracas–New York (via Havana) routes. In 1949, some economic circles in Havana and the FAN aimed for a service to New York, but the USA Civil Aeronautics Board permit to Cubana was delivered only August 1951 and was conditioned to Cubana’s task to differentiate his logo and public relations from those of Pan Am.9 This decision forced Cuban government to consider as best solution to develop Cubana de aviación. Cuban President Carlos Prio Socarrás (1948–52) created the Banco de Fomento Agrícola e Industrial de Cuba (BANFAIC) and in January 1952, the latter asked a feasibly study from Booz Allen & Hamilton management consultants in New York, so to “study Cubana’s operation, financial condition and management, and its relations with Pan American World Airways”. The report concluded that “Cubana should dissolve all agreement with PAA and should take any other steps necessary to achieve full independence”.10

In this context, Pan Am envisioned to recover the planes leased to Cubana and end its international routes in February 1952. But it abandoned this plan since “as soon as decisions are known, labour will undoubtedly announce a general strike demanding government intervention”: “labour will refuse service to PAA aircraft, reservations etc.”, and “there will be a general attack against PAA by means of press, radio and other forms of propaganda”.11 For the head of the Pan Am Latin American Division, Wilbur Morrison:

However, the situation has gradually become worse over the past several years and the only thing that saved this company from bankruptcy four years ago was its monopoly on the Cuba-Spain route. But for the impossible labor situation the company could still be saved and operate at a profit. However, I do not consider it worthwhile to continue fighting a losing battle with a bunch of Communists. You will recall that this has been my opinions since 1945 when I insisted that we sell out to Expreso. It is most unfortunate that Expreso was unable to comply with the sale agreement which we entered into at that time.12

8 Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana (hereafter ANC), Ministerio de Estado (hereafter ME), Box 1131, File, 17526, Spanish Foreign Ministry to Spanish Embassy, 24 July 1948.
11 UM, PAWAR, Series 4, Sub-series 12, Box 2, W. Pine to E. Balluder, 6 February 1952.
12 UM, PAWAR, Series 4, Sub-series 12, Box 2, W. Morrison to E. Balluder, 2 July 1951.
Under Pan Am rule, the nationalistic FAN took a stand against Pan Am arguing that Cubana was not a Cuban company because it was ruled by a USA citizen, Warren Pine\textsuperscript{13} and considered Pan Am as alien “lords”.\textsuperscript{14} Pan Am was already considered as a symbol of USA imperialism in the 1950s in Cuba but it was after the Revolution that this image was reinforced.

Pan Am directives were negotiating with three interested groups for the sale of Cubana and Rancho Boyeros Airport. Their first line of negotiation targeted directly the Cuban government for a takeover by the State. The second option was driven by Amadeo Barletta, a businessman, owner of the newspapers El Mundo, and the third one was José López Vilaboy, owner and director of newspaper Mañana. We can infer that Fulgencio Batista, who took power on 10 March 1952 demitting Prio Socarrás, agreed with José López Vilaboy for his purchase of both Rancho Boyeros and Cubana from Pan Am. So, in 1954, Pan Am liquidated its remaining 20 per cent of Cubana shares. With the aid of BANFAIC and after Banco de Desarrollo Económico y Social, Cubana became an important instrument of the development of tourism in the island. With credit lines offered by the banks, Cubana ordered new aircrafts, as Vicker Viscount for the Miami line, Superconstellation for the line of New York, Madrid and Mexico, and, in 1957 four Bristol Britannia and two Boeing 707. With 337,416 passengers flown at home and abroad in 1958, Cubana was an important Latin American private airline in a country with around 6.8 million inhabitants when in Argentina Aerolíneas Argentinas flew 482,000 passengers in a country of 20 million inhabitants.

In other words, between 1946 and 1958, the international network of Cubana was consolidated between the Caribbean, America and Europe, largely with the support of the Cuban state. The Miami line was the most important in terms of passengers though Cubana suffered the competition from USA airlines.\textsuperscript{15} Other lines aimed to integrate Cuba in a regional market for USA tourism in the Caribbean like Port-au-Prince (1953), Kingston (1954), Nassau (1957), attracting some passengers and served with less prestigious and smaller aircraft such as DC-3 and DC-4. The New York route inaugurated in 1956 became rapidly the most profitable one. Mexico and, above all, Madrid were destinations that embodied the historic ties between Hispanic nations.

The CEO of Cubana, José López Vilaboy, used the airline to promote tourism in Cuba abroad and promoting linking with other businesses. “The new patron of Cuba”\textsuperscript{16} with Spanish origins organised a touring exhibit of Cuban landscape painting with a prize of US$ 1000 that was inaugurated in Madrid’s Círculo de Bellas Artes in October 1957. Another of those initiatives was the inauguration of the Tropicana Special flight between Miami and Havana that included a


\textsuperscript{14} C. Sánchez, “Sobre la Realidad de una Crisis”, Aerovoz, April 1953, p. 16.

\textsuperscript{15} ANC, MINREX, Box 19, File 349, M. Quevedo to Ministry of State, 9 February 1953.

\textsuperscript{16} A de Foxa to J.P de Lojendio, 18 September 1953 in Agustín de Foxá, Obras Completas, tomo 3, (Madrid: Editorial Prensa Española, 1976), 508.
dance show. Nevertheless, 1958 proved to be a problematic year for Cubana. Its intimate relations with the government of Batista discredited the company and led some rebels to hijack Cubana’s planes; some pilots deserted, and exiled fidelistas [that is anti-Batista] harassed Cubana’s pilots in the airports of Miami, Madrid and Mexico. On 25 September 1958 the Havana airport was targeted by an action of sabotage and partially burnt: the fate of Cubana and its master, López Vilaboy, was deeply interlocked with the Batista regime that fell on the eve of the 1959 New Year.

1959–62: Cubana in the revolution, revolution in Cubana?

What to do with the national airline Cubana in time of revolution? The first action was to renew the image of the flag carrier with the mission to bring back the Cuban exiles. The new “revolutionary” government granted more than one million Cuban pesos to pay for tickets for the refugees that were transported back by Cubana from Miami, New York, Mexico, Madrid, Santiago de Chile, Buenos Aires. Cubana was under the control of the newly created Ministerio de Recuperación de los Bienes Malversados [Ministry of Ill-Gotten Goods]. López Vilaboy maintained a struggle against the interventores [the administrators designed by the government], asking a public trial to show he was not a puppet of the Batista (testaferro), but eventually he left Cuba in September 1959. The first interventor Genaro Hermida was presented in the Diario de la Marina as “a young hard-working man with new ideas” but in private a Pan Am manager wrote that Hermida and most of the new directives appointed by the State “nobody knows a damn thing about aviation”. As Alfred Padula underlined, “in this moment of crisis, Fidel gave preference to men of known loyalty to the revolution. Technical or administrative competence was a secondary consideration”. In the early 1960, the presidents of Cubana changed quickly and two figures remained in the shadow. First was the experienced Mario Torres Menier, involved in the 1933 Revolution against Machado, Cuban

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20 José López Vilaboy, Motivos y Culpables de la Destructión de Cuba (San Juan de Puerto Rico: Editora de libros Puerto Rico, 1973), 430.


22 UM, PAWAR, Series 4, Sub-series 12, Box 2, Memorandum Latin American Division to Balluder “Cubana Gets New Officers”, c. March 1959.

representative during the 1944 Chicago Convention and at the International Civil Aviation Organization: he remained the international specialist for Cuban international aviation policy until his death in 1977.24 The communist militant and aviation specialist Víctor Pina Cardoso was the other man of Cubana in the 1960s: he played a big part in developing relations with Czechoslovakia and USSR and using Cubana as medium for Cuban Regime.25

In his first declaration about air transport as Prime minister, Fidel Castro told Cubana workers in March 1959 that “his men” were aiming at merging Cuban airlines and developing new routes such as Chicago or Los Angeles.26 Indeed, it looks like the new government had two strategic goals: the unification of domestic airlines and the implementation of new routes. Cubana could indeed inaugurate a flight to Kingston on December 1959 and to Caracas in March 1960, but the growing confrontation between the governments of Cuba and United States challenged the future of Cubana, especially in oil supply. Esso monopolised the oil supply for Cubana,27 and when Cuban government nationalised the Esso, Shell and Texaco refineries in July 1960, Cubana had to face the retaliation. Esso cut its credit line to Cubana in all the airports where it refuelled out of Cuba and the only solution left for Cubana was to pay cash to other oil companies. For some months, Luis Martínez (managing director of Cubana) gave between 50,000 and 100,000 USD (equivalent to circa today’s 410,000 and 820,000 USD) each week in cash to the pilots for refuel,28 but later Cubana looked for friendly suppliers in the airports of the East Europe. At the same time, from July 1960, any Cuban plane that landed in United States was subject to embargo in the name of the Harris & Company advertising writ against the Cuban state and against Cubana for debts. Although the Cuban government contracted the left-wing attorneys Victor Rabinowitz and Leonard Boudin in New York to defend Cubana,29 Harris & Company obtained the seizure of six planes up to 1961 when the last Cubana flight landed in the United States. The rupture of diplomatic ties between Washington and Havana in January 1961 and the seizures of planes marked the final of Cubana’s flight, though Pan Am continued its flights to Havana until 22 October 1962.

24 “Falleció el ingeniero Mario Torres Menier, pionero de la aviación cubana”, Granma, 15 January 1977, p. 3.
28 Luis Martínez Menocal, Historias de la Aviación Cubana (Havana: Editora Política, 2009), 84.
The purchase of spare parts for United States-built planes as the DC-3, the DC-4, the C-46 or the Super Constellations became more and more difficult until the proclamation of the embargo in October 1960 that definitively prohibited it. Cuban authorities decided to sell some of the planes that could not be used in these conditions. Mortimer “Morty” Rabson, a United States citizen, veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Civil Spanish War (1936–39) and friend of Víctor Pina Cardoso, was charged with the complicated task of selling Cuban Super Constellations, and to find buyers in Europe, Africa and Asia and could sell one before dying. Two more were sold later by a Spanish associate. Some DC-3 and DC-4 were cannibalised for the use of their spare parts in order to keep the other working as one of the four Bristol Britannia. The Cuban press began to exalt the heroism of Cubana’s workers who repaired and manufactured spare parts. Among the innovation introduced, Cubana workers installed bus seats in DC-3s for the interior traffic or create a press to repair Britannias’ windows instead of sending them to United Kingdom for reparations. In November 1960, a Cuban commercial mission to Ottawa, headed by minister Regino Boti and largely publicised in Cuban press, obtained licenses for the importation of instruments and engines for the Britannia. As Harold Boyer argued, the first “great debate” about Canadian economic relations with revolutionary Cuba took place in Parliament Hill in Ottawa about aircraft materials for Cubana. Liberal MP Paul Martin asserted that the exports “could easily be transferred to [a] military aircraft and that it was even possible that some of the Cuban planes could be reconstructed for military purposes”, suggesting that “any flights of a ‘commercial’ nature could easily be conceived of having strategic functions in that they provided Cuba with an important means of carrying on her vital foreign trade”. Nevertheless, the Diefenbaker government maintained the licenses and Canada became the key spot for the maintenance of the Britannia in the next years.

The first contract for Soviet-built aircraft was signed at the Leipzig’s world fair in March 1961 by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade, Jacinto Torras, and the minister of Transports, Julio Camacho. This first deal overlapped with the internationalisation of Soviet aircraft technology with the creation of Aviaexport in 1961. At the same time, Cubana acquired its twelve Soviet Ilyushin IL-14 for domestic lines, along with Air Mali, Ghana Airways and Air Guinée. In November 1962, Cuba signed a very favourable agreement to buy three IL-18s

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30 Martínez Menocal, Historias de la Aviación Cubana, 84.
36 Ibid., 186.
37 Martínez Menocal, Historias de la Aviación Cubana, 34–5.
from the USSR as well as spare parts. In the aftermath of the Missile crisis, the contract was a sort of gift to the Cuban government: three Soviet crews were sent to Cuba for training, while five Cuban crews were sent to USSR for technical training. The supply question was very tense: the first IL-18 full of their own spare parts reached Cuba after landing in Moscow, Belgrade, Rabat, Conakry, Recife, Port of Spain in the last days of December 1962, whereas the USA Department of State obtained the prohibition of overflight and technical stops from NATO countries.

The summer of 1960 proved to be a defining moment for the transformation of Cubana in all the ground in many respects. As Aerolíneas Argentinas and Líneas Aéreas Venezolanas left Havana as destination in October 1960, Cuba faced the dire consequences of isolation. Cubana sought to open new routes to other countries with independent lines with United States as Difenbakers’ Canada, De Gaulle’s France and the Brazil under João Goulart, the promoter of the Brasilian Política Externa Independente, but it failed for different reasons. Neither Ottawa nor Brasilia was going to challenge Washington, whereas Paris eventually refused due to Cuba’s support to Algeria independency groups. The new connection with Prague was the only one to materialise. The first experimental flight to Prague was run in November 1960 and the weekly line was inaugurated on 28 February 1961. The president of the Banco Nacional de Cuba, Ernesto Che Guevara and Víctor Pina Cardoso took a great deal of interest in the development of the new connection. In the first year of exploitation, the Cubana line to Prague facilitated the exchange of official and touristic delegations between East Europe and Cuba, transported Cuban coinage produced in Czechoslovakia in times of shortage, spare parts for the Britannia, Cuban soldiers injured during the Bay of Pigs Invasion, Czechoslovak dogs for the new Cuban border guards, fellow travellers from the West and world progressive intelligentsia looking for political references in the Cuban revolution.

40 Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères de France, La Courneuve (hereafter AMAEF), File 87QO/44, Bayens (ambassador in Brasilia) to minister, 28 December 1962.
41 Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), Ottawa, RG25, Vol. 6171, file 72-AGS, Green to Diefenbaker, 10 November 1960.
42 AMAEF, 87QO/42, Du Gardier (Ambassador in Havana) to minister, 17 September 1960.
46 Martínez Menocal, Historias de la Aviación Cubana, 97.
The establishment of refuel stops for Cubana was a major issue. The airports of London, Hamilton (Bermudes) and Santa Maria (Azores) were eventually closed for Cuban aircrafts by USA pressures and at the end of 1961 the route by Gander (or Halifax) and Shannon was established. Cubana trained Czechoslovak pilots in transatlantic flights and lent one of its four Bristol Britannia to the Czechoslovak State’s airlines. In the official Cuban production (as cartoons, advertisement and in the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos’ reels) the new line of Prague was presented as a victory against USA imperialism, a rapprochement with European socialist countries and a window on the world. Six months after the inauguration, the minister of Transport Omar Fernández qualified the Prague route as “one of the vital nerves of our socialist revolution”.

Some of the personnel of Cubana disagreed with the new orientations of the Cuban government and the management of Cubana. In the early days of January 1961, Cuban pilots Eduardo Tomeu and Miguel González decided to stay in Spain after sending their relatives to Miami. The two senior pilots, who flew over the Atlantic since 1948 cited his refusal to fly the Prague line beyond the Iron curtain. Indeed, from the 1960s onwards, Cubana was confronted with massive defections, initially at destination such as Miami, New York and Madrid and afterwards in the refuelling points of Shannon (Ireland) and Gander (Canada). In February 1961, the British chargé d’affaires in Havana, Ian Sutherland, estimated that three-quarter Cubana flying personnel had defected. In 1962, the New York Times evaluated that 70 out 150 pilots who flew to Florida had remained there, while the president of Cubana confirmed later that only 3 out of 23 pilots engaged in transatlantic flights were still in Cuba in 1961. In April 1962, Flight International mentioned 16 pilots of Cubana that had deserted in the previous eight months.

1962–70: “Volando sobre el cerco”

In 1962, the journal Panorama Económico Latinoamericano dedicated a report to Cubana called “Volando sobre el cerco” (flying over the siege). As all the articles published in Cuba in the 1960s, it was marked by optimism: the air blockade would be overtaken by the heroism of Cuban workers and the aid of socialist countries.

*fnote continued*


50 “Habana-Praga”, Noticiero ICAIC no. 27, 5 December 1960, 0 min40.


But the period between 1962 and 1970 was the moment of maximal isolation for Cuba with Cubana serving only Mexico, Madrid and Prague. The 1962 Missile crisis put a temporary end to all international flights. Pan Am, KLM, Mexicana de aviación and Iberia ceased their activities at the height of the crisis: only the Spanish airline returned to Cuba once the crisis was resolved. The United States government intended to establish an air blockade around Cuba, and in this strategy, one goal was to limit the flights of Cubana abroad. The Department of State tried to impede the resumption of flights to Madrid in late 1963.\(^56\) It pressured France and United Kingdom to impede refuelling stops in the Cayman Island\(^57\) or Guadeloupe, for charter flights.\(^58\) Moreover, 1964 military coup that overthrew president Goulart, put to end the hope of links towards Brazil. Further investigations led by Cubana to establish new links (with Canada, to Paris, to Alger and to the Bahamas) all failed.\(^59\)

No need to remark how the number of passengers transported out of the island by Cubana fell drastically after 1960. In 1962, Cubana had flown 16,200 passengers abroad. In 1970, they were 31,100, that is, more or less the level of 1949 (see Table 1).

The profile of the passengers also deeply evolved: Cuban citizens were not free to exit the island and tourism became a privilege for people selected by the communist party (Partido Comunista de Cuba from 1965) and the Unions (Central de los Trabajadores de Cuba). Cubana’s lines also served to transport Latin American militant and guerrilleros between their countries and Cuba via Prague, with the aid of Czechoslovak intelligence.\(^60\) Cubana occasionally served to transport Cuban soldiers, as it happened in October 1963 to support the Algerian army in the “Sand war” against Morocco.\(^61\) Finally, in a context when the main escape to leave Cuba was Madrid and Mexico (1962–65) and after the “freedom flights” Varadero-Miami (1965–73), Cubana organised some charter flights to transport Cuban emigrants to Lisbon, Paris or Prague, waiting for a further lift to go to the United States.\(^62\)

With the drain of pilots and qualified workers to the United States, Cubana had to form new specialist and implement tactics to keep them in Cuba. Already in

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\(^{58}\) AMAEF, 87QO/76, Du Gardier (ambassador in Havana) to minister, 1 April 1964.

\(^{59}\) LAC, RG 25, Vol 13518. file 42-8-3-1, Memorandum “Civil Air Relations with Cuba”, Latin American Division to Economic Division, 2 April 1964; AMAEE, Box R-7377, File 24, Acta de la reunión no. 182 de la CIPAI, 29 September 1964; AMAEE, 87QO/76, Compte-rendu de la visite du Directeur de l’Aviation Civile cubaine auprès du Directeur des Transports Aériens, 5 August 1964; “Cuba Suspends Nassau Flights, Bahamas Governor Announces”, Miami Herald, 26 September 1964.


Table 1. Cubana’s passenger, 1950–80.

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>International</th>
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<td>165,261</td>
<td>53,122</td>
<td>218,383</td>
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<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>170,308</td>
<td>70,747</td>
<td>241,055</td>
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<td>1953</td>
<td>139,204</td>
<td>71,109</td>
<td>210,313</td>
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<td>1954</td>
<td>153,175</td>
<td>87,733</td>
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<td>164,804</td>
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<td>279,865</td>
<td>421,292</td>
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<td>1957</td>
<td>183,395</td>
<td>145,621</td>
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<td>1958</td>
<td>155,804</td>
<td>24,259</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>950,800</td>
<td>35,300</td>
<td>986,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>895,400</td>
<td>38,500</td>
<td>933,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>771,100</td>
<td>43,100</td>
<td>814,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>649,200</td>
<td>53,700</td>
<td>702,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>654,400</td>
<td>63,800</td>
<td>718,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>645,700</td>
<td>85,100</td>
<td>730,800</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
1959, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias* sent some young people to be formed as pilot at the regional International Civil Aviation Organization School in Mexico. In the next years, military pilots were sent to train in Czechoslovakia, the Popular Republic of China and the USSR, while in the early 1960s, *Cubana* was highly militarised in terms of personnel of staff. A special revolutionary mind-set was imposed on all the staff: for instance, flight attendants had to first swear political loyalty. Daisy Dueñas was a model of Cuban fly attendant: member of *Milicias Nacionales Revolucionarias*, of the *Federación de las Mujeres Cubana* and of the *Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas*, she participated in the *zafra* (sugarcane crop) and she won an award in shotgun shooting. As the pilots of the 1950s were described in the 1960s as *bourgeois*, flight attendants were criticised as "characters" from "high society" or a "beauty contest" which wanted to "travel" without the "concern to be useful to society". "Age" or "colour" was abandoned as criteria for their recruitment and "political conditions" and "revolutionary spirit" were substituted to them. Nevertheless, the three main qualities remained to be "young, good-looking and attentive", leaving room for very ambiguous outcome about the real selection of personnel. The few pilots and attendants who had not escaped were privileged. The Canadian ambassador at Havana interviewed an anonym pilot of *Cubana* in 1964. He said a pilot was paid 1200 pesos a month, more than a mechanic who received 200 pesos a month, in addition to other material and symbolic advantages. Generally, in the 1960s, aviation workers had the highest wages in Cuba, and Cuban authorities alternated between reward and threat to control *Cubana*’s personnel. The stick was the army guard in the domestic flight to prevent hijackings and control of the correspondence with relatives. Nevertheless, there was some opposition of Cuban and *Cubana* rules as the hijacking by a flight engineer of *Cubana* in 1966 demonstrated it. The hijacking failed, the pilot and the guard were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>International</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>546,400</td>
<td>108,500</td>
<td>654,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>612,700</td>
<td>124,000</td>
<td>736,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>621,400</td>
<td>258,100</td>
<td>879,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>556,200</td>
<td>198,100</td>
<td>754,300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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63 “La Mujer Cubana en el Transporte”, *Mi-Trans*, August 1962, p. 23.


killed, and the engineer was condemned to the death penalty. Afterwards, Rafael
del Pino, from the military forces, was designated as the new president of Cubana
(1966–68) and imposed a militarisation of the company and a new organisation of
labour and party: the militarisation of Cubana in the 1960s was a state management
response to fully control the company and it arrived before the sovietisation of the
1970s. Five hundred employees were fired and substituted by personnel from
the army.66

1971–79: Sovietisation and desbloqueo (end of the blockade)

A few days after Salvador Allende was appointed president of Chile in November
1970, he announced the resumption of diplomatic ties with Cuba. Immediately,
LAN Chile and Cubana began to study a new route between Havana and Santiago.
LAN route never materialised due to the opposition from the United States, as well
as from the Chilean army (and conservative press). But Cubana was prompt to take
this opportunity: Agustín Venero went to Chile in February to sign an air agree-
ment, and, in route to Chile, he said to the press that Cuba was disposed to “start a
commercial offensive” in international aviation with “all the countries”.67 Indeed
Cubana inaugurated the route to Santiago in June 1971,68 a date which marked the
beginning of the “desbloqueo” (i.e. the beginning of the end of the blockade),
despite having more a symbolic effect than economic.69 Some delegations, some
tourists, some press and books, some weapons flew between Havana and Santiago
until the overthrow of Allende on 11 September 1973. It was an important step for
the reintegration of Cuba in the Americas.

If the Chilean route did not survive the end of Allende’s presidency, signalled
retrospectively the beginning of Cubana’s expansion phase in the 1970s. The list of
Cuba’s air agreements (see Table 2) shows the increase of signed conventions in the
1970s described as an “aeronautic potential” by the director of Instituto de Aviacio-
ón Civil de Cuba.70 However, every new agreement did not lead to the establishing of a
new route, and inversely, not every Cubana’s line was based on an agreement. The
countries which signed air agreements with Cubana can be divided into three
groups: Western countries interested in the new Cuban tourism wave such as
Canada, Belgium, Switzerland; Non-Aligned Movement’s countries more or less
supporting diplomatically Cuba such as Chile, Guyana, Barbados, Guinea,
Equatorial Guinea, Trinidad and Tobago, Algeria, Jamaica, Sierra Leone,
Guinea Bissau, Angola, Nicaragua; and finally COMECON countries that forma-
lised the integration of Cuba in the Eastern bloc as Poland and Hungary. After the
founding of new connexion with Santiago, Cubana flew in October 1973 to

66 Rafael Del Pino, En Proa a la Libertad (Mexico: Planeta, 1991), 141.
67 AMAEE, Box R-13465, File 63, Dispatch EFE, 14 February 1971.
68 Arturo Acevedo, “Abierta la Línea Aérea Entre La Habana y Santiago de Chile”, Juventud Rebelde,
69 “Chile. Fidel y Salvador, un Solo Corazón”, Panorama, 16 November 1971, p. 59.
48–9.
Kingston (Jamaica) and Georgetown (Guyana), with stops in Bridgetown (Barbados) and Port of Spain (Trinidad and Tobago) the possibility to reach Conakry. In the context of ‘‘Operation Carlota’’ (i.e. the Cuban intervention in Angola), Cubana supported The People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola, while 1976 agreements with Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau Angola and Cape Verde secured a safe itinerary to reach Luanda, all the more so crucial considering the issue of refuelling points in the Atlantic.71 The last agreement signed during this period was with Libya, which led to the opening of the line to Tripoli and Bagdad

Table 2. Cuba’s air transport agreement until 1980.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Portugal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Czechoslovakia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>USSR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>GDR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Chile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Guyana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Barbados</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Hungary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Poland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Guinea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Equatorial Guinea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Trinidad and Tobago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Algeria</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Panama</td>
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<td>1975</td>
<td>Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Belgium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
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<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Guinea Bissau</td>
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<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Angola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Cape Verde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ICAO.

in 1979.\textsuperscript{72} It materialised, without an air agreement, a political rapprochement with Gaddafi and Hussein (in Iraq). After the Sandinista victory against Somoza in Nicaragua, \textit{Cubana} managed daily flights between Havana and Managua.\textsuperscript{73}

\textit{Cubana}'s expansion was backed by USSR aid, using one jet aircraft, the IL-62. As Table 3 shows, the 1970s was the decade of the sovietisation of the \textit{Cubana} fleet, although the old Britannia was still operational in Angola (as Gabriel García Márquez wrote in his account of “operación Carlota”). After the integration of Cuba in the COMECON in 1972, \textit{Cubana} began to use IL-62 with Cuban-Soviet crews and in the summer 1977, \textit{Cubana} purchased its own IL-62 to be used in the lines to Berlin, Luanda, Tripoli and Bagdad.\textsuperscript{74} Moreover, in July 1975, the Organization of American States lifted its economic and diplomatic sanctions against Cuba, which led to the opening of a line to Panama. With Jimmy Carter’s new policy to Cuba, travelling was allowed between the United States and Cuba and charter flights of USA airlines between those two countries began in 1977. In 1979, \textit{Cubana} was occasionally authorised to land in the United States.\textsuperscript{75} Nevertheless, \textit{Cubana} did not play a major role in the renaissance of tourism in Cuba: 3034 tourists in Cuba in 1970; 39,727 in 1975; and 96,156 in 1979 were mainly carried via charter flights of foreign airlines.\textsuperscript{76}

1979 is the apogee of Cuba’s diplomatic reintegration before Reagan’s years and the fall of USSR in 1991. In 1979, \textit{Cubana}, celebrating its 50th anniversary, took a great part in the organisation of the sixth Non-Aligned Movement Summit in Havana, and flew again to the United States 18 years after its last flight. It also inaugurated its first and unique line to Asia, with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. In the 1970’s decade, the number of \textit{Cubana} passenger grew from 31,100 in 1970 to 258,100 in 1979 (see Table 1). Cuban soldiers to Angola, Cuban instructors and construction experts to Iraq, Cuban fishermen to East Germany, Cuban teachers and physicians to Nicaragua, Cuban athletes to world competition, Cuban “exiles” in United States to Cuba, African students to Cuba, etc. the \textit{Cubana}'s passenger of the 1970s were radically different from those of the 1960s, although travel abroad remained a rare privilege in Cuban society.

\textit{Cubana}'s expansion was also met by a wave of terrorism in Europe and America led by the anti-regime \textit{Coordinación de Organizaciones Revolucionarias Unidas}.

\textsuperscript{72} “Llega a Bagdad Avión de Cubana Con Parte de los Constructores Cubanos Que Laborarán en Obras en Iraq”, \textit{Granma}, 5 May 1979, p. 8; “Inaugurada ruta de Cubana de Aviación que enlaza a La Habana con Trípoli y Bagdad”, \textit{Granma}, 20 December 1979, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{73} AMAEF, 87QO/136, Favitski to Poncet, 13 November 1979.


\textsuperscript{75} On the United States–Cuba negotiations on this question, seeArchivo General del MINREX, Havana Fondo Estados Unidos, Piratería aérea (década del 70), Box 16, Conversaciones sobre el permiso para vuelos chaÁrter de Cubana de aviación a los Estados Unidos, efectuadas en el hotel «Sierra Maestra», el día 31 de mayo de 1979, año 20 de la victoria.

Table 3. Origin of Cubana’s aircraft.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>USA</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>URSS</th>
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<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>1958</td>
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<tr>
<td>1978</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On 24 March 1974, Cubana offices in Mexico were bombed, and on 18 August 1976 were those in downtown Panama City as well as Cubana desk in Panama International airport, as those in Madrid the same year. This campaign culminated on 6 October 1976 with the attack against a flight of Cubana after its take off from the Seawell airport of Bridgetown (Barbados) which resulted in the death of all 73 persons on board (memorised as “crimen de Barbados”).

Conclusions

Cubana de aviación became wholly controlled by Cubans in 1954 and developed an important network of destinations in the Americas, mainly in the United States and centred around Miami. The Castroist revolution of 1959 nationalised the airline and made of it the single one to operate in the country. Facing a global blockade in 1960s, Cubana could not develop its networks and was reduced to Madrid, Mexico and the new Prague connection. The flights to Santiago from June 1971 authorised by Salvador Allende marked the beginning of the desbloqueo which symbolically culminated in 1979 with Cubana coming back to Miami and opening the first Latin American line to Asia, to Bagdad.

Although a large part of the issues analysed here are focusing on the Cold War period, in many aspects, this history can be useful to enlighten the current Cuban context. For instance, if the resumption of charter flights between the United States and Cuba in 2016 under Obama’s presidency was publicised as a symbol of the new relationships between the “intimate enemies”, few commentators underlined that this applied only to USA airlines. Cubana’s absence in the United States’ airspace can be explained, in part, to the predictable reaction of part of the Cuban community in United States and a political lecture of the history of Cubana.

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