

land of revolution

thing—what most students were doing.

There is still a tremendous emphasis on education. Free education is provided on all levels and 150,000 students are on scholarship.

FREE EDUCATION

Since books, and tuition are free, the scholarship applies to food, shelter, clothing and transportation.

We talked to several students from the University of Havana. They had not been formally chosen to talk with us, so we were anxious to see if their opinions differed from what we thought might have been the official party lines of the guides.

They told us that voluntary labor is, in fact, voluntary. The university year is arranged around the harvest season so students can do voluntary labor to help harvest the sugar crop.

The boys with whom we talked were scholarship students and perhaps their determination "to lay down their books and fight for Cuba if she is ever invaded again" relates to their realization that they owe their advantageous position to the revolution.

The students said their greatest problem is lack of qualified instructors. Many of the best trained and qualified personnel left after the revolution. As a result many students are teaching some courses while taking more advanced courses.

The emphasis in post secondary education is on science, medicine and technology. A course in Marxist philosophy is often compulsory.

STUDENT PROBLEM

Another major student problem is the lack of resource materials and reference reading—especially for students in the humanities.

Since the revolution the government has been expanding health services especially to the rural and poor populations. Doctor's care and medicines are free.

The government has done much to clean up the corruption and bribery that existed during Batista's regime. It has also worked to stop racial discrimination which used to exist against the 20 per cent Negro minority.

It seems the program has been successful, for one counter-revolutionary I met said: "Negroes don't seem to know their place any more."

Problems still exist however. Cubans are subject to severe rationing of clothing and food stuffs. Some of the articles rationed are lard, oil, rice, all types of beans, toilet and laundry soap, detergent, tooth paste, beef, chicken, milk, fish and vegetables. Some of these articles are rationed only in the cities.

NO UNEMPLOYMENT

One of our sources said meat is available only once a week and cheese only at Christmas. Since we were special guests, we received only the finest food.

Another problem solved by the

revolution is that of unemployment. In Batista's Cuba, as much as 30 per cent of the population was without work. Now many people work at several jobs.

Paul Kidd, a news reporter who was asked to leave Cuba this August, mentioned in his series of articles on Cuba that he had been inside a "forced labor camp". These camps are officially known as military units to aid production.

They were not included in our tour but we heard they did exist.

Although the military units

were very unpopular, according to one Cuban, people were not overwhelmingly afraid of being drafted to them.

Of course a significant number of Cubans are opposed to the revolution but this has been the case with every social change—there have always been those who opposed it.

But the majority seem to support the revolution and every day we met unofficially with people enthused about what the revolution had done.

For example, one day I talked

to a militia man in front of the University of Havana. He said before the revolution he could not go near the Habana Libre Hotel, because of no money and poor clothes, but now he could go in. "It is partly mine now," he said.

Another time, we were struggling up Sierra Maestra Mountains to visit a teacher training school. Against this background of vivid green mountains and beautiful valleys, our guide paused pointing and identifying himself and then each of us in turn said our names. Then he pointed to himself again

and proudly said "Communista?" and looked at us again. He was very disappointed when we said "no", but smiled in acknowledgement when we said in halting Spanish, "We are still your friends".

But some are opposed to what the government is doing. One man said to us before quickly moving away, "Things were much better here before the revolution—Castro is making everything in this country worse."

FRIENDLY PEOPLE

Whether the Cubans we met were in favour of the revolution or against it, they were the most friendly people I have ever met. They were extremely kind and shared what they had as extensively as their limited resources would permit.

Although the revolutionary government has thrown its resources behind education and done an extensive job in increasing the literacy rate; the news and publications available for the readers is severely slanted and limited in quantity.

When commercial advertising is eliminated, this increases the field available for government advertising. The government is trying to unite the people to aid governmental goals like production and to seek their support for the regime.

Yet there are some examples of freedom of thought. In a little bookstore I saw books and magazines presenting a large variety of viewpoints.

Religious freedom exists, but it, too, is limited. The amount of pressure against the congregations consisting largely of older people, children and women who attend mass is unknown.

OFFICIALLY FREE

The official government policy is summed up as saying there is absolute freedom of religion for all faiths so long as they do not interfere with the social development of the country.

Cuba has a rich cultural history and most people are keenly interested in the fine arts. The government has established the National Art School for the training of artists in many fields.

Castro's government also encourages folk culture among the people. The Afro-Cuban influence is strong particularly in folk music and dancing.

Thus, Cuba is a country where the people are striving for happiness as best they can under the government which is working for interests of the majority.

The people did not seem less happy than in Canada or Mexico, but they also did not seem happier. They went through the usual routines of living—eating, working and striving for their country which is progressing materially, slowly, but progressing.

The people may be as varied in their support of the government and its policies as are North Americans but they seem just as ready to die for their concept of peace and freedom.



—Irene McRae photo

CUBAN SCHOOL HOUSE ON SIERRA MAESTRA MOUNTAINS
... not much, but a start in the battle against illiteracy