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The Emergence, Persistence, and Success of the Cuban Social Movement Las Damas de Blanco

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Abstract

In a three-day period, March 18-20, 2003, referred to as The Black Spring, the Cuban government arrested and imprisoned 75 journalists, human rights activists, and pro-democracy advocates. In response, the wives, mothers, and daughters of these political prisoners formed the non-violent protest organization, Las Damas de Blanco (The Ladies in White), calling for an improvement in prison conditions and the release of their relatives. In March 2011, after eight years of Las Damas' activism, the final prisoners were released. The women's organization, now named the Laura Pollán Damas de Blanco Movimiento, continues its human rights activism despite continued repression. Combining elements of structural, cultural, and nonviolent action theoretical approaches, I analyzed 12 oral histories of organization members to examine the factors associated with the organization's emergence and development. I argue that a pervasive ethos of care within Las Damas provides a foundation for the organization's endurance and success. This study is important because a better understanding of the Laura Pollán Damas de Blanco Movimiento may further the advancement of other activist organizations.

Keywords: Social movements, Women's movements, Cuba, Human rights activism

Women's collective action has produced significant social change throughout the world. In Paris on October 5, 1789, 7,000 women occupied City Hall demanding access to grain and bread to feed their starving families. Turned away, they marched 12 miles to the Palace of Versailles to appeal to Louis XVI who was forced to return to Paris. This dramatic assertion of will signaled a turning point in the French Revolution. In Washington, D.C., on March 3, 1913, the Women's Suffrage Parade became the first civil rights demonstration to take place in the U.S. capital. The march drew 8,000 women from across the nation and reinvigorated the suffrage movement, culminating in the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920 granting American women the right to vote. In Pretoria, South Africa, on August 9, 1956, 20,000 black women marched to deliver petitions to Prime Minister Johannes G.

Strijdom, protesting the extension of pass laws to women. The pass laws, a major component of the apartheid system, restricted the rights of blacks to live and work in white areas and required blacks to carry identity documents. Pass laws were repealed in 1986. Protests against pass laws were a significant strategy in the anti-apartheid movement, which finally achieved success in 1994.

These protests were part of larger social movements that sought to address issues of particular concern for women, such as family economic survival, women's political representation, and restrictions on women's freedom. In this article, I focus on *Las Damas de Blanco*, (the Ladies in White), who organized in Cuba in 2003 to publicly protest the repression of their husbands, sons, and brothers by the authoritarian Castro regime. I present the results of a study analyzing oral history interviews of *Las Damas* members to better understand the organization's emergence, development, and success. The theoretical framework for this study integrates concepts from structural, cultural, and nonviolent action perspectives.

Beckwith (1996) defines women's movements as a genre of social movements "characterized by the primacy of women's gendered experiences, women's issues, and women's leadership and decision making" (p. 437). Feminist movements develop from a gendered analysis of power, seek equal rights and justice for women, and include an inherent challenge to patriarchy. Women in social movements continue to face challenges from vestiges of the separate spheres ideology which reserved the public sphere of politics and economics for men, and relegated women to the private sphere of home and family. Women's participation in women-only social movements presents a significant threat to the status quo due to their visible transgression of both political and gender norms (Roth & Horan, 2001).

The ability of social movements to effect social change depends on the political context, specifically the degree of openness/closure of formal political access (McAdam, 1982). A social movement has a higher chance of succeeding in a democracy where the provision of rights of assembly, association, and speech, and an accessible free press facilitate mobilization. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Women's Christian Temperance Union brought, for example, prohibition and other social reforms to the United States, and the Women's Social and Political Union successfully campaigned for women's voting rights in the United Kingdom. Opportunities for collective action can arise during transitions to democracy while the social order is disrupted (Ray & Kortweg, 1999). In the late 1970s and early 1980s protests by the *Madres del Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina and the Group of Family Members of the Detained-Disappeared in Chile against the "disappearing" of their children and grandchildren influenced the delegitimation of the military regimes (Loveman, 1998). In nondemocracies, challenges to authoritarian regimes are swiftly and harshly repressed. In March 2015, in China, "the Feminist Five" were detained for 37 days for posting information in public about sexual harassment. The Feminist Movement is expanding in China among urban educated women, and those associated with the group report being detained, surveilled and censored for calling attention to gender inequality (Haynes, 2018).

The Cuban Context

In January 1959 after leading the revolution ousting the Fulgencio Batista regime, Fidel Castro became prime minister of Cuba. In 1965 Cuba's single political party, the Cuban Socialist Party, renamed itself the Cuban Communist Party. The revolutionary government adopted a formal Constitution establishing Cuba as a socialist state with a centralized economy providing its citizens with free education and health care in 1976. Fidel Castro became president and first secretary of the Communist Party until 2008, when Raúl Castro, Fidel's brother succeeded him as President. Fidel Castro remained leader of the Communist Party for three more years; he died in 2016. Raúl Castro succeeded Fidel as leader of the Communist Party and holds this position currently. In 2019 Miguel Diaz-Canel became president of Cuba.

The state-controlled economy suffered a major crisis after the collapse of Cuba's primary economic partner, the Soviet Union, and when Soviet subsidies to Cuba ended in 1991. Social and economic benefits have been reduced significantly, as has access to full employment. Cubans remain subject to extreme austerity measures imposed during this "special period in peacetime." Cubans face shortages in everyday consumer products such as food, medicine, household goods, and supplies. Daily life is difficult due to deteriorating housing and lack of durable goods such as household appliances and personal vehicles and access to public transportation. These extreme economic conditions have exacerbated racial inequalities as Black Cubans are less likely to find employment in the more lucrative tourist industry and have less access to foreign remittances (Gordy, 2015).

The revolution brought Cuban women some measure of gender equality. The Cuban constitution grants equal rights to women and the law specifies equal pay for equal work. The Federation of Cuban Women, founded in 1960, by Raúl Castro's wife, Vilma Espin, secured several benefits for women such as affirmative action programs for women in new industries and the Family Code which mandates that husbands and wives share childcare and other household responsibilities (Smith & Padula, 1996). The state provides maternity leave and affordable childcare. Women make up close to half of the labor force; however, traditional gender roles and sexist ideology remain firmly entrenched (Htun, 2007; Sarmientao, 2010). Cuban women bear the major responsibility for childcare, food provision, and household upkeep (Nazzari, 1989). Working women in Cuba face an extended second shift (Hochschild & Machung, 1989) as women spend an average of 34 hours per week on domestic tasks, compared to men who spend 12 (Htun, 2007). Household tasks are all the more time-consuming due to shortages of food and other essential products, a lack of labor-saving devices such as dishwashers and microwave ovens, and the scarcity of reliable transportation.

The economic crisis of the 1990s and its severe impact on material living conditions incited civil protests which state security forces violently repressed. A few small independent pro-democracy groups arose in reaction to the government's inability to alleviate the suffering of its citizens (Goméz, 2003). Cultural activists performed "ideological interventions" through their art, and the hip-hop movement that critiques social and economic conditions that emerged (Saunders, 2018). In August 1994 after brutal food shortages, extended blackouts, and the collapse of public transportation, citizens rioted in the streets of Havana (Taylor, 2014). This

spontaneous protest, referred to as *Maleconazo*, was dispersed by state security forces wielding machine guns, baseball bats, and thick steel bars. Fidel Castro himself appeared in a military vehicle to quell the outburst. Castro, as he did at Mariel in 1980, temporarily suspended the illegal exit law, and allowed citizens to leave the country. Over the next several weeks more than 32,000 Cubans fled the country in makeshift rafts, relieving Castro of his most determined dissenters (Ravsburg, 2014).

Authoritarian regimes forbid autonomous forms of political organizing to avert potential challenges to their rule (Ray & Kortweg, 1999). These regimes suppress citizens' rights to assembly, association, and speech, and lack open and accessible forms of mass media, all of which form the requisite infrastructure to support a social movement (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2009). Cuba has precluded the formation of social movements by 1) strongly monitoring citizens' political participation, 2) steering citizen demands toward certain social and cultural issues and away from political issues, and 3) a process of selectively combining repression and political opening (Geoffray, 2014). A recent U.S. Human Rights Report (U.S. Department of State, 2018) cites Cuba for multiple human rights violations including harsh and life-threatening prison conditions, politically motivated detentions and arrests, absence of judicial independence, and holding political prisoners. The Cuban government controls all forms of media, the right of assembly is restricted, and freedom of expression is limited to that which "conforms to the aims of socialist society" (U.S. Department of State, 2018, p. 11). Government-organized mobs, called Rapid Response Brigades, are deployed to assault and disperse those who assemble peacefully.

La Primavera Negra

Over a three-day period, March 18-20, 2003, referred to as *La Primavera Negra* (the Black Spring) state security forces arrested and imprisoned 75 independent journalists, human rights advocates, pro-democracy supporters and other dissidents in the most severe crackdown since the1990s. This crackdown was largely in response to the rise of Cuban independent journalism and the Varela project (Bond, 2003). The Varela project, begun by Oswaldo Payá in 1998, sought a legal referendum to amend the constitution to grant citizens rights to freedom of speech, press, and assembly, amnesty for political prisoners, and free elections. Payá and other activists obtained over 11,000 signatures on a petition which they presented to the Cuban National Assembly in May 2002. However, to prevent such a referendum, Castro himself amended the constitution decreeing Cuba to be permanently and irrevocably socialist.

One of the women interviewed for this study described how she and her husband were both arrested at their home on the morning of March 18, 2003. The police kicked down the front door and took her to the local police department where she was interrogated until 11 pm. When she returned home, she found her husband gone and her children crying. Everything in their home had been destroyed. The police confiscated their papers, books, even their wedding photos, none of which was returned.

Those arrested were charged with various crimes including engaging in U.S.-funded subversion and they received sentences for up to 27 years. This level of repression against political dissidents had not occurred in Cuba since the years immediately following the revolution (Goméz, 2003). The prisoners were sent to prisons far from their homes, where conditions were horrendous. They were tortured, denied food, water, and medical care. Such harsh repression indicates an independent press and public support for democratic reforms, which pose a significant threat to the authoritarian regime. Two weeks after the roundup, the wives, mothers, and sisters of these political prisoners formed *Las Damas de Blanco*, to advocate for improved prison conditions and the release of their relatives.

Theoretical Framework

Political process theory (McAdam, 1982; Tarrow, 1983) is the framework most frequently utilized in contemporary research on social movements. According to this structuralist orientation, the political system itself determines the availability of opportunities for collective action. These "political opportunity structures" encompass the relative openness/closure of the political system, the presence and stability of elite allies, and the state's capacity and propensity for repression (McAdam, McCarthy & Zald, 1996, p. 10). A political system's formal institutional structure and informal organization of power relations delimit processes for challenging its policies. Alliances with elites such as labor unions, non-governmental organizations, and religious institutions, can facilitate or constrain collective action. State repression can both decrease and increase the likelihood of collective action. Research indicates that repression accelerates collective action in democracies but deters it in non-democracies (Gupta, Singh, & Sprague, 1993). Political process theory has been used to examine the emergence and development of a wide variety of social movements, although it disregards the influence of cultural factors and lacks explanatory power in authoritarian contexts (Noonan, 1995).

Cultural theories of social movements derive from social constructivism, which attends to the ways in which social situations are defined and the meaning-making processes associated with courses of action (Merton, 1948). Culturalist orientations to collective action center on four main concepts: framing, identity, culture, and emotion (Oliver, Cadena-Roa, & Strawn, 2003). Framing is a process of meaning-making in which a structural situation is experienced, defined, and exemplified in a collective action frame (Snow & Benford, 1992). A collective action frame is an interpretive schema that defines a situation as unjust, attributes blame for causing it, and assigns responsibility for correcting it (Snow & Benford, 1992). A frame is the basis around which a sequence of events or experiences is arranged in a meaningful way (Snow & Benford, 1992, p. 133). A social group's culture binds it together through shared beliefs and signifying behaviors (Sewell, 1999). Gender ideology is an important organizing element of any culture. Due to their gendered social roles and experiences women tend to mobilize around issues of equal rights and justice, community integrity, and family survival (West & Blumberg, 1990). Members of a social movement share an action-oriented collective identity based on their understanding of the movement's meaning and purpose (Melucci, 1995).

Emotional investment is an important component of collective identity (Melucci, 1995). Activists must manage their own emotions and perform public displays of emotion as movement strategy.

Scholars of nonviolent action believe that movement organization, strategies, and tactics are theoretically relevant to the study of social movements (Schock, 2005). Nonviolent action theoretical approaches are particularly useful for examining social movements in nondemocratic contexts as they focus on the ways in which challengers strategically use power to undermine the state. Nonviolent action effects political change by applying economic, social, or moral pressure on the state, and undermining its power (McCarthy, 1990). Sharp (1973) categorizes nonviolent action into three categories: 1) nonviolent protest and persuasion (petitions, marches, vigils); 2) social, economic, and political noncooperation (protest emigrations, boycotts, strikes); and 3) nonviolent intervention (sit-ins, nonviolent occupations, hunger strikes). As Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963) explained, the point of nonviolent action is to "create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community which has consistently refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to so dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored" (p. 2). Nondemocratic states react to collective action with a continuum of repressive tactics ranging from police surveillance to deadly force (Tilly, 1995). Lack of access to information, economic insecurity, and ideological indoctrination render citizens in nondemocracies vulnerable to state power, making any collective activity costly and high risk (Schock, 2005). According to this approach, for social movements to be successful in nondemocracies, they must be able to endure repression and they must be able to weaken state power and legitimacy (Schock, 2005).

Methods

Data for this study came from videos of oral history interviews conducted with members of *Las Damas de Blanco* and other Cuban human rights activists. The interviews were conducted by researchers from the University of Miami as part of the Human Rights Oral History Project and are archived in the University's Cuban Heritage Collection. Twelve interviews were selected for analysis based on nonprobability sampling of theoretically relevant groups. After receiving permission to use the interviews for this project, I had them transcribed and translated into English using a professional transcription service. Although the original interviews are publicly available, for this article I have not used interviewees' names or included identifying information in any quotations.[2] I use the term *Dama* to refer to an individual member of the organization, and the term *Las Damas* to refer to the organization as a whole.

I utilized two methods of data analysis. Concepts were defined using the first phase of grounded theory methods, open coding, which entails a line-by-line examination of the text, and an iterative process of comparison (LaRossa, 2005). The collective action frame was identified using micro-frame analysis to model the ways in which beliefs, meanings, and experiences are organized in the interpretation

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[2] For interviews, see https://merrick.library.miami.edu/cubanHeritage/chc5312/

of a situation (Johnston, 1995). Micro-frame analysis entails a close examination of the text and explores relationships between concepts.

Analysis

Emergence and Development

Prior to the arrests, the women were not involved in politics, although most were somewhat aware of their husbands' activities. After the arrests, the women felt called to action, as one *Dama* explained: "Men in Cuba are very sexist and they don't want the women involved in anything. Then they took our men. What did the government think? That we would stay home doing nothing?" Immediately after the arrests, Laura Pollán and Berta Soler, the originators of the movement, and several other women began attending Santa Rita Catholic Church in Havana for mass and to pray for their imprisoned relatives. Two weeks later, Pollán, Soler, and 23 other women dressed in white, with a small photograph of their relative pinned to their blouses, each carrying a gladiolus flower, slowly walked down Havana's Fifth Avenue in silent protest after receiving mass at the church. These marches continue every Sunday to this day. Not only are the women breaking the law, they are breaking gender norms as well. The women are well aware of the historical import of their action, as one explained: "Since the year 1959, there has not been a group of women opposing the government, as we do now."

A silent march is a collective public expression of mourning against an act of violence or unjust conditions and the ensuing trauma (Margry, 2011). This type of nonviolent protest communicates shared feelings of disapproval and moral outrage aimed at the state or society in general. While *Las Damas*' ritual march itself is transgressive, it strategically incorporates cultural norms and symbolic elements to avoid blatantly antagonizing state authorities (West & Blumberg, 1990). The color white represents the innocence of the prisoners and the peaceful intentions of the protesters. The gladiolus flower, with its multiple buds, symbolizes family. The photograph is a reminder that the political prisoner is a person, a man with a family who cares for him and seeks his return. Santa Rita Catholic Church does not have a politicized congregation, nor was it an ally for *Las Damas*, however it serves as a symbol of safety and sanctuary from which to begin the march. Enacting this ritual march enables the *Damas* to represent themselves as traditional, family-oriented women, who pose little threat to the regime, and are acting out of concern for the welfare of their imprisoned husbands, fathers and sons.

A husband of one of the *Dama*s described prison conditions thus:

> If Dante would have seen the political prison, he would have abandoned his work and said, "That's it." To the sentence you have, they will add suffering. They will apply torture, hunger, overcrowding, deny you medical attention – in addition to the sentence. They are pleased when they see you far away from your family, when there are problems in your family, when someone dear to you dies… Life in prison is so harsh, so sinister, so *Dantesque*, that it is difficult to depict.

As their sentences wore on, the prisoners developed illnesses and pre-existing conditions worsened due to lack of medical treatment. Family members were allowed one visit every four months. On these occasions they traveled at great inconvenience and expense to bring food, medicine, and supplies and to provide psychological and spiritual support. While traveling, the *Damas* met women from other provinces whose relatives had also been incarcerated in the crackdown and they were thus able to expand their network and generate solidarity for the movement throughout the island.

Members of *Las Damas* share a collective identity that was imposed upon them by the state's imprisonment of their family members. Although the *Damas* had not known each other previously, their shared status and similar experiences drew them together. Early on, Pollán hosted "literary teatimes" in her home, where the women read letters from the prisoners and discussed the problems the men were having in prison. These were occasions for consciousness-raising and education about non-violent protest. As one of the *Damas* explained: "Laura started to activate the women." This collective identity became further developed through their collective action. In addition to their weekly marches, the *Damas* wrote letters to Fidel Castro and later to Raúl Castro, pointing out the injustices done to the prisoners and their families. The *Damas* also assembled peacefully in small groups and stood silently outside the prisons.

Gender is a significant component of the collective action frame employed by *Las Damas*. In their interviews, many of the women stated that their action was unforeseen: "we took the regime off guard," "they didn't think we would turn into what we did," "we were women, they didn't take us seriously." *Las Damas* turned the ideal of Cuban womanhood on its head, by using the traditional gender norms and essentialist ideology that generally subordinated them as a source of power instead (Sidwell, Hafen, & Evans, 2006). Cultural constructions of womanhood centered on the self-sacrificing, caring nature of women (Noonan, 1995). Cuban women take care of their husbands, their children, their households, and their communities (Nazzari, 1989). *Las Damas*' activism was ignored at first because it was perceived as simply an extension of the women's traditional gender roles (Neuhouser, 1995). In the wake of the arrests, the specter of family disintegration loomed large; in highlighting their essential roles as caretakers *Las Damas* created a culturally resonant frame that legitimized their action against the state. Additionally, framing their activism as family caretaking allowed the *Damas* to portray their behavior as non-political. I characterize the collective action frame used by *Las Damas* as an *ethos of care* (Tronto, 1993). Due to the regime's institutional neglect of the prisoners' needs and the violence perpetrated on them while in custody, the *Damas* had to intervene to provide them with physical and psychological care. The men's incarceration also made it more difficult for the *Damas* to provide adequate care for their children and other family members.

This *ethos of care* extends to the organization members themselves. The *Damas* care for one another by providing material and emotional support, by "giving each other strength," and offering their homes as "a type of refuge." As one *Dama* explained: "We would see how our people were deteriorating and we'd put ourselves in the place of the other wives, mothers, or sisters, whose brothers were

suffering the same fates." *Las Damas* also provides care to the community by helping people in exile and providing food and clothing to those who are without. Several women's movements in Latin America, such as the *Madres del Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina and the *CO-MADRES* in El Salvador, have employed a maternal collective action frame to demand information from their governments about their "disappeared" children and relatives (Kumba, 2001). *Las Damas,* however, specifically eschewed the maternal frame stating that they "did not organize as mothers, but as women."

The emergence of the *Las Damas* movement was triggered by the state's sudden and harsh repression against the 75 journalists and activists. The organization's rapid mobilization took the regime off guard and the women were able to capitalize on the lack of immediate response and seize their own political opportunity (Loveman, 1998). In this case, the political opportunity was not created by an opening in the political system, rather the further closing of the system in the form of severe repression provoked the women to take action. The women's heretofore public invisibility enabled them to challenge the regime when it was extremely risky for anyone else to do so (Sidwell, Hafen, & Evans, 2006). *Las Damas* created a narrow fissure in the political system and was able to maintain the opening. At first, the state used gender to delegitimize the organization, but more serious repressive tactics soon followed.

> In the beginning, they didn't think we were important, just crazy old women with a gladiolus, but they did try to scare us so we would leave. Once we started walking through other neighborhoods, they realized that we were making a place for ourselves, that people were becoming familiar with us, the people were standing in solidarity with us and that they supported us. That's when they started to repress us.

Two years into the movement, beginning on Palm Sunday 2005, the women began to be harassed and brutally attacked by state-sponsored mobs, known as Rapid Response Brigades. The mobs consist of hundreds of people brandishing chains, bats, and pipes. These people include state security forces, and also regular citizens, who are bused in and coerced by the regime into attacking other Cubans. They shout pro-regime slogans and threats and vandalize and destroy the women's homes and property. These incidents, referred to as *actos de repudio* (acts of repudiation), are designed to publicly humiliate and intimidate dissidents. One of the *Damas* described the Palm Sunday incident thus:

> There were 32 of us and we had one three-year-old girl with us. More than 200 men and women trained by the Cuban government appeared there with signs, Cuban flags, and loudspeakers, saying that we were mercenaries, anti-revolutionary worms. They hit me in the legs with their flags and said "Hey black lady, what are you doing? You should be ashamed." It was an act of repudiation, but not as violent as the ones to come.

In addition to the physical violence perpetrated in these acts of repression, the regime deploys counterframing to discredit and neutralize the movement (Benford,

1987). In this type of counterframe the threatened group attacks the collective character of the movement, and claims its leaders are collaborating with the enemy (Benford & Hunt, 2003). The *Damas* are cast as anti-revolutionaries, a serious accusation in Cuba, and the enemy is the United States, who is supposedly funding the movement (Bayard de Volo, 2011). In Cuba, the revolution did not end with the rebel victory in 1959, rather it continues as "an ongoing state political project, event, structure, and process" and every Cuban is expected to be a revolutionary (Gropas, 2007, p. 533). The symbolism of revolutionary struggle permeates the culture through official state media, the armed forces, state sanctioned mass organizations, educational institutions, and the Communist Party (Fegan, 1966). Murals depicting the revolutionary heroes Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and Camilo Cienfuegos, and slogans *Patria o Muerte, Venceremos* (Fatherland or Death, We Will Win), *¡Hasta la Victoria, Siempre!* (Until Victory, Always) are ubiquitous throughout the island. The ongoing revolutionary struggle contends that there is some outside influence that must be eliminated in order for the revolution to be victorious (Fegan 1966). This counterframe depicts *Las Damas* as opposing the revolutionary values of social equality, nationalism, and anti-imperialism. One *Dama* noted that they know the message behind these *actos* is not for them, because they will never leave the movement, the message is instead aimed at the bystanders "who at some point might have felt some connection with us and might have decided to join us, but upon seeing these things they might tell themselves 'You have to think twice.'"

A Critical Event

Las Damas continued their weekly marches and were met with increasingly violent *actos de repudio*. Mob members pulled the women's hair, scratched them, tore their clothes, and beat them. The women were sometimes forced into cars and released in vacant fields far away from their homes. On the seventh anniversary of the Black Spring, beginning on March 15, 2010, *Las Damas* marched every day for seven days. At the end of the week, diplomats from eight European countries, and the United States attended mass at Santa Rita Catholic Church with *Las Damas* (Pérez-Stable, 2011). For the next three Sundays, state security prevented *Las Damas* from marching. In April, after three exceptionally violent acts of repudiation lasting seven hours each, Cardinal Jaime Ortega asked to meet with five of the *Damas*. The cardinal told them he had sent a letter to Raúl Castro asking for an end to the violence against the women. One of the *Damas* said to the Cardinal, "We've been doing this for seven years. How are you just now realizing it?," to which the Cardinal replied, "It's just too much now."

Las Damas' activism during the seventh anniversary of the Black Spring and the state's harsh response to it, represents a "critical or triggering event" that signaled a turning point for the movement (Rasler, 1996). This critical event crystallized the movement's purpose and attracted widespread international support for the movement and condemnation for the regime. A lengthy meeting with Ortega and Raúl Castro resulted in several concessions: the *Damas* were allowed to march down Fifth Avenue; the prisoners were moved to prisons nearer to their homes; and 26 ill or injured prisoners were granted medical care (Pérez-Stable, 2011). Cardinal Ortega had several additional meetings with Raúl Castro regarding the prisoners. In

March 2011, those prisoners who agreed to be exiled to Spain were released. However, 12 of the prisoners refused to leave Cuba and so remained in prison. These prisoners said they wished to achieve freedom and democracy from within Cuba, not from outside. In July, after an 11-day hunger strike by one of the *Damas*, the remaining prisoners were released. Although they are allowed to remain in Cuba, their movements and activities are limited, and they cannot leave the country.

Credit for the release of the prisoners has largely been attributed to Cardinal Ortega, however, according to the *Damas* it was in their April meeting with the cardinal that they suggested "if the regime really wanted to get rid of the problem of the 75 and the Ladies in White, they could release the prisoners and remove them from Cuba." Although Ortega, representing the Catholic church, met with Cuban authorities, the Church should not be considered an ally as it was for the *Madres del Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina and the Co-Madres in El Salvador. The prisoners and *Las Damas* reached out to church officials for support multiple times and were rebuffed. The *Damas* question the motives of the church, as one explains:

> For me, I think the Church was looking for a space. It's looking for a space and I think it's finding it. We asked them if they wanted to intervene for us in a dialogue and they said no. The Church, I don't know if they were trying to achieve prestige …

In 1959, Castro proclaimed Cuba an atheist state and in 1992 the Cuban constitution was amended to make Cuba a secular state. Religious expression had been suppressed in Cuba until the fall of the Soviet Union. Goldenziel (2009) argues that the Cuban government has recently expanded religious liberty for strategic reasons: 1) to attract humanitarian aid and financial support from international religious groups; 2) to provide spiritual comfort during the economic crisis of the Special Period; and 3) to benefit from a provision in the U.S. embargo that allows religious groups to travel to Cuba. The state monitors religious groups though, to ensure they are not advocating or supporting political opposition (Pérez-Stable, 2011). The *Damas*' perception seems to be that through their intermediary efforts the church sought to establish a position of influence.

Success

Las Damas achieved its ultimate goal – the release of the 75 political prisoners incarcerated during the Black Spring of 2003. But *Las Damas* did not demobilize once its goals were met as many women's movements do (Neuhouser, 1995). Instead at Pollán's direction it evolved into a human rights movement and continued its weekly marches and other activism. Eight months after the prisoners' release, Pollán was hospitalized with a fever and shortness of breath. She was moved to a different hospital and not allowed visitors. A week later, on October 14, 2011, Pollán was dead, her body unrecognizable to the *Damas*. The women insist "they got rid of Laura," attributing her death to the state which purposely withheld necessary medical care. After Pollán's death the organization changed its name to the *Laura Pollán Damas de Blanco Movimiento* (Laura Pollán Ladies in White Movement) and have expanded the focus of their activism to include the release of

all political prisoners, adequate medical treatment of prisoners, to promote national and international awareness of the human rights situation in Cuba, and to bring about social and political change. The *Damas* continue to experience significant repression through arbitrary detention and violent *actos de repudio*.

There are additional cultural and symbolic indicators of the success of the Laura Pollán Ladies in White Movement. For this, or any group of women living under an authoritarian regime, engaging in collective action itself is quite an achievement (Bosco, 2006), as it suggests that the regime is not impenetrable (Schock, 2005). As a result of their collective action the women have increased their autonomy, confidence, and political efficacy (Schild, 2008). The state's acceptance of the movement, albeit grudgingly, as a legitimate political actor also demonstrates success (Gamson, 1990). Due to limited internet access in Cuba, many of *Las Damas'* fellow citizens remain uninformed about the movement, but through strategic use of electronic media its message has reached a global audience and the organization has gained widespread support (Del Riego & Rodriguez, 2011). The movement has received a significant amount of international recognition, earning the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought (European Parliament), The Human Rights Award (Human Rights First, United States), the International Award for Human Rights (Spain), and the Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty. Such international support was critical in tipping the balance of power, since for economic and political reasons Cuba is increasingly concerned about its international reputation.

The *ethos of care* collective action frame has been key to *Las Damas'* success because it provides a culturally acceptable interpretation of the movement's meaning and action (Snow & Benford, 1992). The political imprisonment of the 75 men threatened the safety and integrity of their families. This unjust situation was caused by the state and could only be remedied by the state's release of the prisoners. In calling attention to this injustice and seeking redress for it, the women's behavior aligned with their culturally acceptable gender and family roles of providing care for their husbands and families, which therefore justified their nontraditional behavior (Noonan, 1995). Providing care to each other enabled *Las Damas* to develop the type of relationships needed to sustain the movement in the face of continued and severe repression (Bosco, 2006).

Soon after the movement's original goal of having the prisoners released was met, *Las Damas* expanded its goals to human rights and social change. While the practical goal of locating their "disappeared" children and relatives was not ultimately achieved, *Las Madres del Plaza de Mayo* and the CO-MADRES have transformed their movements into movements for women's rights and human rights. As part of the *Laura Pollán Damas de Blanco Movimiento* transformation, the organization established stringent rules to guard against state infiltration and adopted an inclusive web-like organizational structure (Helgesen, 1995). The *Laura Pollán Damas de Blanco Movimiento* currently has about 300 members. It has delegations in nine provinces, a national executive committee that meets with the delegation representatives, and a disciplinary council that decides which actions will be undertaken. The movement is adopting new technologies as they become available (internet access is still limited in Cuba). According to one *Dama*, the

Cuban people desperately need information, specifically, the truth about the past, and *Las Damas* lacks the resources to combat the propaganda of the regime. The *Damas* note "there has been an awakening among the youth," "many young people are joining the opposition" and they look forward to "working together to change the island from within." The movement has recently opened its membership to women who are not family members of prisoners and it has begun developing relationships with men's opposition groups. The movement still maintains an *ethos of care*, as one *Dama* explains:

> What we're doing now isn't political; it's social, human. We're becoming involved in everything, in important issues where some of our people are suffering. They're hungry, abandoned by the government, and left totally defenseless by the government. We're trying to feed them, house them, and protect them.

Conclusion

Las Damas de Blanco has been profoundly successful as a women-only social movement in a country governed by an authoritarian regime. After eight years of continuous collective action, *Las Damas* achieved its goal of the release of the 75 political prisoners incarcerated during the Black Spring of 2003. The organization continues as the *Laura Pollán Damas de Blanco Movimiento* and has expanded its focus to improving human rights in Cuba. *Las Damas is an* autonomous women's movement which successfully challenged the authoritarian regime in a nondemocratic state; thus, it is important to increase our understanding of how the organization emerged and developed and the factors attributing to its success. Insights from structural, cultural, and nonviolent action theoretical perspectives provide a framework for explaining this phenomenon.

The movement formed in response to harsh repression levied upon the 75 independent journalists, human rights advocates, and pro-democracy supporters. The wives, mothers, and sisters of the political prisoners mobilized based on the collective identity imposed upon them through the state's action. I argue that by unexpectedly stepping out of their place in their homes and into the public political arena, the women created their own political opportunity. Because the women's action was unanticipated and the women were considered insignificant, the regime delayed aggressive counteraction, giving the women time to claim a small political space, which they did not relinquish. Viewed through an *ethos of care* frame, *Las Damas'* collective action aligns with traditional gender roles and can therefore be perceived as nonpolitical. The regime continues to repress *Las Damas* relentlessly, yet the women persist.

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