



Soviet Relations with Latin America, 1959-1987; The USSR and Latin America: A Developing Relationship; Soviet Aims in Central America: The Case of Nicaragua

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The American Political Science Review, Volume 84, Issue 4 (Dec., 1990), 1346-1347.

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Sat Dec 29 00:45:51 2001

Soviet Relations with Latin America, 1959–1987. By Nicola Miller. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. 252p. \$39.50 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

The USSR and Latin America: A Developing Relationship. Edited by Eusebio Mujal-Leon. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989. 408p. \$39.95.

Soviet Aims in Central America: The Case of Nicaragua. By G. W. Sand. New York: Praeger, 1989. 126p. \$34.95.

As the crisis in Central America escalated in the 1980s, attracting the attention of both policy makers and scholars, two principle interpretations of Soviet policy emerged. The first, exemplified by scholars such as Cole Blasier and Wayne Smith, held that the Soviet Union was instinctively cautious in its policy toward Latin America. Soviet initiatives were constrained by “geographical fatalism”—the view that since Latin America was in Washington’s sphere of influence, the prospects for establishing socialist regimes there were dim. Cuba was *sui generis*—a historical accident unlikely to be repeated. In this view, the Soviets were apt to take advantage of opportunities to cause headaches for Washington if such opportunities arose, but they would not invest significant resources or pose any fundamental challenge to vital U.S. security interests in the region. Central America was simply too far from the Soviet Union’s core foreign policy interests.

An alternative view, proposed by more conservative scholars such as Jiri Valenta, held that the success of the Nicaraguan revolution in 1979 erased traditional Soviet pessimism about the prospects for revolution in Latin America. Emboldened by visions of further victories, the Soviets launched an aggressive strategy to challenge the United States in its own backyard, hoping thereby to divert Washington’s attention and resources away from the rest of the globe. This perception of threat reached its apogee at middecade, when the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America (the Kissinger Commission) echoed Reagan administration warnings that the Soviets intended to threaten the United States from its undefended southern border directly, thereby necessitating the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Europe.

Nicola Miller’s *Soviet Relations with Latin*

America makes a powerful case that Soviet policy did not shift significantly in response to the crisis in Central America. After presenting a brief but excellent history of Latin America’s Communist parties and their relationship to the Communist International, Miller examines four cases of Soviet policy in Latin America: the forging of Moscow’s alliance with Cuba; Moscow’s refusal to provide significant economic aid to Salvador Allende’s Popular Unity government in Chile; Soviet efforts to expand normal political and commercial relations with major Latin American countries (Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, and Venezuela); and Soviet policy in Central America.

In each case, she concludes, the Soviets proceeded cautiously, reactively, and with an eye toward their own economic self-interest. The chief lesson that Moscow seems to have drawn from its experience with Cuba was to avoid being drawn into any other politically difficult and economically costly entangling alliances with Latin American revolutionaries. Whether in Chile, Grenada, or Nicaragua, Soviet policy was consistent: Moscow refused to adopt leftist government as clients by making an open-ended economic commitment to them. Instead, the Soviets urged their erstwhile allies to normalize relations with the United States, remain a part of the Western international economic system, and go slow in building socialism. The strength of Miller’s thesis is bolstered by her thorough research and carefully crafted argument drawing on primary sources from the Soviet Union, Latin America, the United States, and Europe. This book is an important new contribution to the literature.

G. W. Sand’s brief monograph, *Soviet Aims in Central America*, contrasts with Miller’s work in every respect. He gives a highly polemical rendition of the most extreme version of the view that the Soviet Union has a master plan for the subjugation of Central America. Rife with historical inaccuracies, his essay takes no account of the existing scholarly literature on Soviet foreign policy or Latin America, and is almost entirely devoid of primary source material. Instead, it is based largely on publications of the U.S. State Department’s Office of Public Diplomacy—a special unit set up in 1983 to proselytize Congress and the public in support of Reagan’s Central American policy.

There is no pretense of balance in this work;

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Sand is issuing a clarion call warning of the impending apocalypse. His vision is conspiratorial: the Soviets are omniscient and virtually omnipotent in their drive for world domination, and Central America is the decisive battle. "If the United States should be unwilling to keep Central America in the Western World," he writes, "it stands to lose . . . World War III, which has now long been in progress" (p. 8). He dismisses Mikhail Gorbachev's New Thinking in foreign policy as nothing more than a deception designed to lull the United States into complacency. In short, this is not a serious book.

Mujal-Leon's collection of 12 essays, *The USSR and Latin America*, includes contributions by both Latin American and U.S. scholars with diverse points of view. It covers many of the same issues as Miller's book and, despite some differences of emphasis and interpretation, reaches similar conclusions. The lead essay by David Albright situates Soviet Latin American policy in the broader context of Soviet policy toward the Third World, with particular attention to policy debates among Soviet analysts. He concludes that Moscow has been more interested in expanding commercial ties with the large capitalist countries of South America than in extending aid to revolutionary regimes in Central America and the Caribbean. Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier concurs in her article on Soviet economic policy in Latin America. Aldo Vacs, focusing specifically on Soviet relations with Argentina and Brazil, notes that pragmatism and mutual economic benefit have been the guiding principles.

The implication of all these essays is that Washington policy makers have been a bit hysterical over the past decade about the Soviet menace in Central America. In an enlightening article, historian Richard L. Millet traces Washington's fears of communism in Latin America from early worries over Bolshevik Mexico in the 1920s to contemporary concerns over Marxist-Leninist Nicaragua in the 1980s.

In their essay on Soviet policy in Central America, Peter Clement and W. Raymond Duncan agree that Moscow has been cautious and pragmatic but nevertheless conclude that its aim in Nicaragua was to "cultivate a major client on the Central American mainland" (p. 278). This conclusion looks dubious in retrospect; in late 1989, the Soviet Union actually cooperated with the United States to pressure

the Sandinistas to hold free elections—which they lost. Clement and Duncan err by failing to see Soviet economic and military aid to the Sandinistas in context: they never mention that it came at least partly in response to U.S. economic pressures on Nicaragua and the largest CIA proxy war since Laos.

The key Soviet relationship in Latin America is with Cuba, of course; and Mujal-Leon includes two essays on it. Jorge Dominguez provides a nuanced look at the Cuban-Soviet foreign policy partnership. "Cuba has carved out not only a margin of autonomy under Soviet hegemony but even a leadership role; it has induced the Soviets to make commitments that the Soviets alone might not have undertaken to the same extent," he writes; nevertheless, "hegemony means, above all, that Cuba accepts Soviet limits on its foreign policy" (pp. 159-60). Cuban autonomy is at its zenith in Latin America, Dominguez argues, because it is a region of low priority for Moscow but of vital interest to Havana. Carmelo Mesa-Lago and Fernando Gil summarize an immense amount of data on their exhaustive examination of Cuban economic relations with the Soviet Union, documenting Cuba's increasing dependence on both trade and aid from the Soviet Union during the late 1970s and 1980s. Unfortunately, their study was completed before the disintegration of socialism in Eastern Europe and the mounting domestic economic problems facing the Soviet Union, both of which will have profound economic consequences for Cuba. Since early 1990, Fidel Castro has repeatedly warned Cubans to prepare for unprecedented austerity because deliveries from the Eastern bloc are no longer assured.

Indeed, this is the major problem with both the Miller and Mujal-Leon volumes. Despite excellent research and analysis, both seem a bit anachronistic in the wake of the cataclysmic changes in Eastern Europe that demolished the post-World War II international order and augur the end of the Cold War. Even the Soviet relationship with Cuba, the bedrock of Moscow's Latin American policy for a quarter century, is suddenly problematic. As Mikhail Gorbachev struggles to contend with domestic economic dislocations and resurgent ethnic conflicts, Latin America is slipping farther from Soviet concerns than ever before.

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