

Book Reviews

Becker, Marc (2017) *The FBI in Latin America: The Ecuador Files*, Duke University Press (Durham, NC), xii + 322 pp. \$99.95 hbk. \$27.95 pbk.

The Special Intelligence Service (SIS) of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) operated in Latin America between 1941 and 1947, committing 700 agents to the project. Marc Becker, of Truman State University in Kirksville, MO, an authority on indigenous and leftist resistance movements in Latin America, turns his attention in the book under review to the case of the FBI's role in Ecuador. He asks a good question. The Franklin D. Roosevelt administration meant the SIS to help stymie Nazi advances, so why did the Bureau send 45 agents to that country, where there was no Nazi presence at all? He advances two explanations. First, the SIS effort was part of the United States imperialist plan, enacted on behalf of its multinational corporations, to secure control over raw materials and market opportunities. Second, there was a disconnect between State Department officials who welcomed 'openings to the left' (p. 3) when appropriate, and the FBI's director J. Edgar Hoover, who was a hard-line anti-communist for whom resisting fascism was a secondary goal.

Even 'more interesting and more useful' (p. 4) than the foregoing question, Becker thinks, is the degree to which FBI reports on Ecuador throw light on that country's history. Here, he makes an evidential point that will resonate with social historians in the United States. FBI files on domestic US matters supply considerable details about activists who met with Hoover's disapproval – African Americans, feminists, gays, leftists, and labour organisers amongst them. Of course, the reports are written to please, and there is a need to accumulate other evidence to paint a balanced picture. And this is what Becker has done. He has delved into official, printed, non-FBI documents from the United States and Ecuador, he has spent time in archives in Quito, Cotacollao and Washington, D.C., and he has trawled the contents of newspapers published in Quito and Guayaquil, in order to provide us with an evidentially rounded-out account of Ecuadorean resistance, especially by the left.

The FBI in Latin America: The Ecuador Files tells us about the personalities of the era, for example Alberto Carlos Arroyo de Río, the president of Ecuador, 1940–1944, who was in charge at the time of the war with Peru in 1941, when the Ecuadoreans were outgunned. The war was over a territorial dispute, and, consistently with Becker's theme, not a justification for anti-Nazi intervention by the United States.

Becker supplies us with further character and biographical portraits of some of those who sought to change the political climate, including Manuel Agustín Aguirre, Gustavo

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Becerra, and Pedro Antonio Saad Niyaim. He discusses the Ecuadorian communists' quandary over the doctrine of Browderism – Earl Browder, the general secretary of the Communist Party of the United States, decreed that when America and the Soviet Union became allies in World War II, communists should support the war effort. Ecuador was militarily aligned with the United States – what should local communists' stance be? La Gloriosa, the Glorious May Uprising of 1944, was the culmination of wartime discontent, but although it spelled the end of Ríó, the Ecuadorean left lacked the strength and unity of purpose to achieve permanent change.

Becker pays some heed to the Monroe Doctrine, but sees it as an instrument of imperialism, and not, as its framers claimed, a statement of the anti-imperialist case. He regards American capitalism as homogenous, yet one might argue that historically some businessmen objected to foreign interventionist policies that favoured their commercial rivals – the fruit growers versus the fruit importers, the sugar beet versus the sugar cane interests. He deploys a tired cliché in depicting Hoover as a rigid anti-communist. Hoover was an opportunist. He had dropped anti-communism when the national mood swung against the Red Scare of 1919. He was also a *bureaucratic* empire builder, craving permanent expansion for his beloved FBI. In 1947, the Harry Truman administration stripped the FBI of its Latin American responsibility, handing the job to the newly formed Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). It was a time of real fear of the growth of communism south of the Rio Grande, yet Hoover refused to let the new agency have the names of local agents the FBI had accumulated over last six years. Anti-communism meant less to him than the embittering taste of bureaucratic defeat.

Setting these reservations aside, Marc Becker has asked a provocative question about the reasons for the FBI's presence in Ecuador, and has marshalled his evidence in a way that results in an authoritative study of Ecuador's left. The latter achievement was, after all, his principal goal.

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