

BOOK REVIEW

The CIA in Ecuador. By Becker Marc (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020. xi plus 317 pp. \$27.95).

Readers of *The CIA in Ecuador* could be forgiven for expecting an exposé of malignant operations illegally undermining social reform or propping up a dictatorship in the Andean country. Such is what CIA defector Philip Agee infamously produced in his 1975 *Inside the Company*, naming names of CIA officers and revealing the schemes of the agency in 1960s Ecuador.

In contrast, Becker uses a newly declassified body of CIA *intelligence* documents—not “ops” reports—to delve into the history of the Communist Party of Ecuador, or PCE, from the late 1940s to the late 1950s. In 2000, the CIA Records Search Tool (CREST) database released some documents. In 2017, records went online in the CIA’s Electronic Reading Room.

Agee chronicled a more tumultuous decade, when the Cuban Revolution raised the levels of left-wing ambition and right-wing paranoia throughout Latin America. Becker, a social historian, is more interested in social movements than in Cold War security issues, and the relatively placid 1950s in Ecuador provide an apt canvas on which to imagine the antecedents of the 1960s. During the 1950s, Ecuador’s governments, such as those of José María Velasco Ibarra and Galo Plaza Lasso, were populist and repressive but also democratically elected.

What Becker finds in CIA reports runs along two argumentative lines. The first is that, despite the low stakes in 1950s Ecuador, the CIA officers who reported on the PCE while acting as “attachés” at the embassy inflated the danger posed by a group that never attracted more than a few thousand followers. To be sure, CIA intelligence could be accurate, insightful, and detailed, as Piero Gleijeses found in his own work. More often, the documents reflected “exaggerated fears, misplaced concerns, and bureaucratic attempts to justify the agency’s existence” (38). For instance, the CIA in Ecuador suspected the PCE of plotting violence—even of orchestrating a riot after an ill-conceived “War of the Worlds”-type radio broadcast in 1949—while the actual coup-plotting socialists or populists went unstudied. Scholars such as Robert Alexander and Cole Blasier were also too suspicious of communists in Latin America who raised funds through raffles rather than “Moscow Gold” (the title of Chapter 4). Such a focus on outside plotting emerged because the CIA “failed to comprehend the domestic roots of radical critiques of society” (54).

The second and more important argument is that Ecuador’s communists were inclusive, independent, and democratic rather than the violent, illegal Stalinist dogmatists that the CIA wanted them to be. CIA officers reported on

the debates inside the PCE, usually on public display during the decade's many party congresses. Fissures ran in many directions, but the main one divided the followers of longtime party leader Ricardo Paredes of Quito, who championed outreach to social movements of Indigenous peoples and others, from the disciples of upstart Pedro Saad of Guayaquil, who was more focused on the urban working class and electoral democracy. No faction advocated violence. They were never controlled by Moscow. Trotskyists worked alongside Maoists, and women alongside Afro-Ecuadorans (though the majority of members were men of European descent). And most agreed with the "broad front" approach of creating an anti-conservative alliance with social democrats and liberals, even though such groups rejected the PCE.

While Becker is absolutely correct about CIA misinformation, he himself overstates the resonance of the PCE with the country's subaltern peoples. Communists' hearts may have been in the right place when they "sought to empower marginalized workers and peasants to enable them to assume control over society," but Becker too often takes them at their word when they planned to support social movements (2). He reiterates often that "the communist party placed itself at the front of working-class struggles" (92); that "the party was particularly effective at supporting labor movements and encouraging strike activity" (94); or that, "through engagement with everyday forms of organization they demonstrated their resolve to fight for steady and important advances in society" (159). As a result, he argues, "these militants created the conditions for heightened levels of political activism in the 1960s" (8).

But what concrete forms did this "placing," "support," or "engagement" take, exactly? Rarely does the author present evidence of the PCE's grassroots actions. The party spent the 1950s as a small, cash-strapped, atomized grouping of cells that could emit a noble-sounding resolution in favor of workers or denounce Yankee imperialism, but rarely did it follow through with real-world action. In a chapter titled, "Everyday Forms of Organization," the PCE's biggest achievement is the "interpellation" of a conservative minister (164). Never in the 1950s did they, instead, help form a union, take peasants' side in land disputes, launch a student strike, or defend women's rights in court.

Despite this shortcoming, *The CIA in Ecuador* nevertheless stands as the most detailed look at the country's communists during the largely neglected decade of the 1950s. With what he admits are flawed CIA reports and neglect of PCE coverage in Ecuador's newspapers, Becker adopts the attitude that "more sources are better than no sources" and uses his significant detective skills and knowledge of the country to suggest who might have written which document and what might have happened behind the scenes (9). The problem with relying so much on CIA documents is that Becker sometimes finds himself in the difficult position of questioning their veracity while having no alternate version of events. Still, this book brims with new information that will be useful for any historians of Ecuador's politics or of communist parties in Latin America. It should also inspire others to use CIA documents in equally creative studies of the hemisphere.

Alan McPherson
Temple University
alan.mcpherson@temple.edu