

# The CIA in Ecuador

**Marc Becker**

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Using Central Intelligence Agency records that were released in 2000, Marc Becker weaves together the story of leftist activities and organizations in Ecuador between World War II and the Cuban Revolution of 1959. While Becker—who teaches history at Truman State University, and has published widely on Latin American radicalism, including *The FBI in Latin America* (2017) and *Twentieth Century Latin American Revolutions* (2017)—sheds light on the activities of the CIA, this book is not focused on that government organization. Instead, the author uses the lens of the CIA in order to fill in the gaps in the literature of the left in the 1950s, a period often referred to as a “lost decade” for communists, socialists, and other leftist groups that were attempting to change the social and political landscape in Latin America. Becker writes that leftists were actively engaged throughout the period, yet for several important reasons, the scholarship on this subject is scarce. Becker notes that even participants on the left often ignore the 1950s in their memoirs. In *The CIA in Ecuador*, he fills this void in the literature on social and political organizing during the 1950s in setting the stage for the greater level of militancy that characterized the 1960s.

Becker explains how leftists were situated in Ecuador in the short period between the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War (1944–1947). Although communists gained momentum during the war, they soon found themselves marginalized. In Becker’s view, leftist hopes and aspirations were dashed by missed opportunities, the rise of anti-communist sentiments, and the rise of populist and personalist movements, which were supported in large part by a growing electorate that, he notes, voted against their own self-interests. The presidency of José María Velasco Ibarra best represents this populist trend in Ecuador. He won the presidency five times between 1934 and 1972 by running on a campaign that supported the interests of the poor, only to betray them in favor of the ruling oligarchy. This pattern did nothing to promote democracy in Ecuador, as the military overthrew him four times. Although the Communist Party in Ecuador did not face the repression endured by its counterparts elsewhere in Latin America, Ecuadoran communists failed to take advantage of their postwar situation. Both international and domestic forces created a hostile environment for Ecuador’s left, but the left was not dead. On the contrary, leftist politicians and parties won gains on the local level in terms of articulating party platforms, building labor movements, and advancing progressive ideas.

Becker devotes the book’s second chapter to the role of the CIA in Ecuador following World War II. He notes that most scholarly attention has been focused on the covert operations of the CIA in places such as Guatemala in 1954 and Chile in 1973, but very little scholarly work has focused on the raw data collected from its agents. Becker reinforces the usefulness of that empirical

data for insights into local developments. Because of the redaction of names from CIA reports, it is difficult to assess how data were acquired or anything about the backgrounds and qualifications of those agents writing the reports. The inconsistent redactions, however, made it possible for Becker to identify Colonel Albert Richard Haney as the first CIA officer stationed in Ecuador in early 1947. Haney had a long career with the CIA, and he would be the chief architect of the CIA's plot to overthrow Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. Haney, like many other agency operatives at the time, had the designation of "attaché" in the US embassy. At this time, counterintelligence work in the region shifted from the Federal Bureau of Investigation to the CIA, which coincided with the shift in focus from data collection to covert actions. The CIA records in Ecuador in the postwar period demonstrate, according to Becker, the agency's "exaggerated fears, misplaced concerns, and bureaucratic attempts to justify the agency's existence" (38). Ecuador faced multiple coup threats and political disturbances during this period. What CIA operatives misunderstood was that the Ecuadorian Communist Party (PCE) opposed extraconstitutional paths to power. Instead, the PCE was nonrevolutionary, had weak links to Moscow, and espoused a reformist, European, social welfare, and parliamentary system of government. Becker confirms that the CIA (and other US policymakers) failed to understand the domestic roots of radical ideas and tactics.

The PCE not only faced endless challenges throughout the 1950s, but it was also divided internally, which undermined its effectiveness in achieving its goals of challenging the problems of exploitation, persistent poverty, and marginalization. From 1949 until 1959, the PCE held three party congresses. Those meetings expose the competing ideologies of the moderate and militant wings of the Ecuadoran communists, and the CIA coverage of those meetings demonstrates a shift in CIA surveillance. Becker asserts that the CIA's information gathering deteriorated during this time, even missing completely the Fourth PCE Congress. By the mid-1950s, CIA reports no longer provided insights into internal Communist Party organizing. Even so, the PCE placed itself at the front of working-class struggles and continued the fight for a more fair and just world. The PCE held its sixth party congress in May 1957, the first Communist congress in a Latin American country since the Soviet victory over the Hungarian People's Republic government in November 1956. This congress elicited much attention from the CIA: "The PCE platform of that year accelerated growth in communist, and more broadly leftist, activity in Ecuador," writes Becker (232). Social movement activity grew from then until 1959. To the CIA, Ecuador was now becoming a prime communist target in Latin America. The more militant wing of the PCE pushed for more radical action, paving the way for a more "aggressive left in the 1960s."

The victory of the Cuban Revolution in January of 1959 sent shockwaves throughout Latin America, and in Ecuador, the "social protest and violent governmental repression of radical desires represented the end of an unusual period of institutional stability" (235). Leftists in Ecuador were able to help thwart the finalization of plans for the eleventh Inter-American Congress planned for Quito in 1960; the *New York Times*, for example, blamed the PCE for preparing a campaign to disrupt the conference. 1959 saw increased Communist activities and an influx of Communist propaganda into the country. Protests and social upheaval marked 1959 in Ecuador, due mostly to pervasive domestic problems. After the Cuban Revolution, the CIA paid greater attention to leftist activities and internal developments in Ecuador.

Becker concludes by stating that during the 1950s, "the CIA hardly ignored the Western Hemisphere, even marginalized countries like Ecuador" (250). He cleverly uses declassified CIA records to fill in the details of the activities of the Ecuadoran left during the 1950s. Becker's work represents a turn in the literature by presenting a well-documented challenge to the prevailing idea that conservative movements and politicians dominated Ecuador in the 1950s. Instead,

the 1950s witnessed the emergence of mass popular movements and the Communist Party of Ecuador played a significant role. *The CIA in Ecuador* is an important work that challenges mainstream ideas about the Left in Latin America in the 1950s. It would be useful in both undergraduate and graduate courses in Latin American history.

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