

The CIA in Ecuador. By Marc Becker. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press. 2021. 336pp. £76.32. ISBN 978 1 47801 035 7. Available as e-book.

The CIA's public notoriety has long stemmed from its amply chronicled global role as the covert action arm of the US government, which quickly eclipsed its foundational rationale as an intelligence-gathering agency. *The CIA in Ecuador*, however, is not an exposé of CIA interference in the Andean nation in the mould of dissident CIA agent Philip Agee's *Inside the Company: CIA diary* (New York: Bantam, 1975), though it does point to at least one instance of possible intervention in a process the agency was at first meant merely to observe.

As in his well-received earlier book—*The FBI in Latin America: the Ecuador files* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017; reviewed in *International Affairs* 94: 4)—which skilfully used FBI agents' field reports to good effect, Marc Becker draws for his new work on recently released CIA surveillance reports accessible through the agency's electronic reading room as well as on State Department documents in the US national archives. He does so primarily in order to flesh out the largely forgotten history of the Communist Party of Ecuador (PCE), and political activism in general, during the relatively quiescent years between 1948 and 1959—when the traumatic regional impact of the Cuban revolution prompted the rash of CIA 'dirty tricks' subsequently brought to light by Agee. So detailed is the information available that Becker goes as far as to suggest that the CIA acted (unwittingly) as 'a biographer of the party' (p. 86).

Becker, as a historian of the left, understandably devotes considerable space to justifying his recourse to this unaccustomed source in the absence of surviving PCE archives and the spotty coverage of the party's activities by the Ecuadorian press. The lengthy CIA surveillance report it engendered, he avers, constitutes the only extant account of the debates that took place at the fractious 1952 party congress. Conversely, 'the departure [from Ecuador to another posting] of one dogmatic and obnoxious CIA officer [Albert Haney, one of the few operatives it is possible to identify by name] may have undercut potential insights into the 1949 party congress' (p. 85). This, then, is a study that mines the 'raw data' garnered by CIA agents in the field, rather than a consideration of the policies that ensued among decision-makers in Washington (p. 26). None of the reports by CIA or embassy officers are taken at face value, and all are subject to critical scrutiny. The underlying anti-communist narrative which led the agency to amplify the communist 'threat' beyond what any hard evidence suggested is laid bare. This is reflected, for instance, in the unsubstantiated canards that communists rather than the right were behind the many plots against the Galo Plaza Lasso administration (1948–52) in its first years, and that the party was in receipt of 'Moscow gold'. The CIA documentation, Becker maintains, reflects in fact exaggerated fears, misplaced concerns and bureaucratic attempts to justify the agency's existence (p. 38).

The overall portrait that Becker paints of the PCE is of a financially strapped and organizationally weak party that was small in membership compared to the socialists; divided between adherents on the coast linked to organized labour and those in the highlands who looked to peasants and Indigenous groups for support;

and split over tactics and ideology, heralding the open rift that was to occur in the 1960s between a pro-Soviet wing that clung to the parliamentary road to socialism and a Maoist group that advocated revolutionary violence. As the author tartly comments on one particular report on the state of the party in Guayaquil in March 1949: 'This was hardly the description of a party worthy of surveillance' (p. 74). Yet, ever upbeat, he contends that the PCE—in its perennial pursuit of the lofty goal of 'a more just and equitable world' (p. 68), something of a refrain throughout the book—reflected Ecuador's demographic diversity better than other parties. He also argues that the party was always stronger at the local than at the national level, given that its natural constituency was excluded from the franchise by literacy requirements, and that its apparent factionalism revealed in reality 'sincere militants engaged in critical and open debates over how to advance their struggles' (p. 164). For Becker, it is the ability of the PCE to punch above its weight that in part makes it an important topic of study (p. 18).

The CIA in Ecuador should constitute a model for historians interested in deepening the study of the left in other Latin American countries (and more widely) during the early Cold War, even where more domestic primary sources are available than in the case of Ecuador. It represents an eminent piece of detective work, accompanied by thoughtful and reasonable analysis. Becker's rapid-fire account of unrest in Ecuador in the wake of the 1959 Cuban revolution hopefully presages a successor volume on the left during the more turbulent 1960s.

Philip Chrimes