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Soviet Backfire in Mexico

QUITE APART from the vast effrontery of the Soviet Union's aborted attempt to plant highly trained Mexican agents and provocateurs inside Mexico, the sudden exposure of the eight-year-old plot may have a profound anti-Soviet reaction throughout Latin America.

Moscow's diplomatic probing with traditionally anti-Communist governments in the hemisphere, just on the verge of success, is now endangered by the Soviet cloak-and-dagger maneuver. The facts of that maneuver, breathtaking in its audacity, are just now coming into focus.

In 1963, under auspices of the Mexican-Soviet cultural exchange agreement, the Soviet-Mexican Cultural Institute in Mexico City chose the first batch of promising left-wing Mexican students for a four-year scholarship at Moscow's Patrice Lumumba Institute. The central figure selecting these first 10 students was the second secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City (one of the five Soviet "diplomats" now expelled by the Mexican government).

After the four-year university course, during which they underwent indoctrination in Communist Party and revolutionary tactics, the 10 students asked for field training in antigovernment subversion. They formed themselves into the Revolutionary Action Movement.

BUT MOSCOW would not provide this revolutionary training in the Soviet Union itself. If discovered, the Mexican government would instantly retaliate.

To keep Soviet hands clean, the students were sent by rail to East Germany, where they acquired North Korean passports. They returned to Moscow and then flew, via Soviet Aeroflot Airline, to Pyongyang, capital of North Korea.

In Korea, they were given six months' training in guerrilla tactics, at a location far from the prying eyes of diplomats. Their training completed, they threw away their passports, flew back to Moscow and returned to Mexico on their Mexican passports. It is unthinkable that all this could have been accomplished without Soviet complicity.

Two more groups, totaling 19 Mexican students, followed the precise course of the first 10. Back in Mexico, they set up eight clandestine training centers, most in remote provincial towns, and started recruiting. Mexican counterintelligence agents uncovered the plot and arrested approximately one-third of the revolutionary students 10 days ago.

The official reaction of the Mexican government, probably the most sophisticated in Latin America, was highly unusual public indignation. Five Soviet diplomats were declared persona non grata and sent home. Beyond that, the affair raises serious questions about Soviet standing throughout the hemisphere —as in Venezuela.

Venezuela has been a key Soviet target for subversion, financed partly through Soviet aid to Communist Cuba, partly through Eastern European Soviet satellites. Attempting to warm relations with Caracas by exchanging diplomatic delegations, Moscow finally reached agreement last December after tortuous negotiations conducted intermittently for almost 20 years.

THAT AGREEMENT limits Soviet personnel in the new embassy to 15, including cooks and chauffeurs. So far, only three Soviet diplomats have actually taken up residence. With the explosive Soviet subversion against Mexico now surfaced, Venezuela will undoubtedly clamp additional restrictions on the new Russian embassy.

In Costa Rica, a 30-year ban on Soviet diplomatic activity was lifted several months ago, but no Russians have yet arrived. Against the Mexican backdrop, Costa Rica—a traditional democratic bastion in Central America—may have second thoughts (despite January ratification of a surplus coffee-purchase agreement with Moscow).

Likewise, the Russians have been making strenuous efforts to sign a cultural agreement with Colombia, which renewed diplomatic relations with the Soviets in 1968. The agreement was signed last summer but it has not yet been ratified by the Colombian parliament.

All these careful diplomatic probes by Moscow are now endangered by Moscow's patronage of the aborted Mexican affair. Just how much they are endangered is evident in the formal Soviet response to Mexico's expulsion of the five Soviet diplomats. Unable to deny the facts, the Russians blamed the embarrassing affair on "powers"—that is foreign countries—"that are opposed to Soviet-Mexican relations."

What powers? What motivation? The Russians can't answer that question.