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Soviet Interest in Latin America

Central Intelligence Agency
Directorate of Intelligence
April 1977

Key Judgments

The Soviet Union has long been interested in increasing its influence in Latin America, but has had difficulty in formulating a successful policy for the area. Early attempts by Moscow to use the local communist parties to gain a foothold failed, in part, because the Soviets did not understand the Latin American milieu and had little expertise in Latin American affairs. Until the early 1960s they seemed to assume that because of the basic instability of the area, "socialist" revolution was inevitable once a local communist party was activated. The basic flaw was their belief that Latin America was, and is, overwhelmingly dominated by conservative forces that have been unsympathetic to Moscow. Moreover, the area did not fit the Soviet mold of revolution in less developed nations. The countries have been independent for a long time; they are culturally and politically developed; they have a rather extensive educated elite, and for the most part, they are not attracted to foreign political ideologies and have regarded the Soviet Union as a political and ideological pariah.

In recent years, however, the Soviets have had some success in the area—most dramatically, of course, in Cuba. They have made these gains by shifting their emphasis from local communist party relationships to state-to-state relations. Soviet prospects are still limited, however, by Moscow's own economic problems and its inability in most cases to provide the Latins with any civilian technology they do not already have. Soviet successes have been partly the result of growing expertise in Latin American affairs and a relative decline of US influence in the area. Other factors have been the latent anti-US nationalism present in Latin America, the Soviet Union's emergence as a global power with observable economic, military, and political clout, and the survival of Castro's Cuba with Soviet assistance.

There now seems little doubt that the Soviet presence in Latin America will increase in the future, especially as East-West tensions relax. The Soviets are now beginning to view the area not as a region within the US sphere of influence, but as an arena for US-Soviet competition. Although Latin America certainly is not on the "front burner" of Moscow's priorities, the Soviets are not likely to ignore any opportunity to erode the economic and political power of the US. The Latin Americans' grudging appraisal that they have been overly dependent on the US for political, economic, and military assistance and should now seek alternative friends, suppliers, and markets is made to order for Soviet exploitation.

The current economic recession in the West, the increasing effort by many Latin nations to use their raw materials as an economic lever against the US, and the current impasse between Washington and much of Latin America over the human rights issue can only encourage Moscow. As long as the Soviets continue their low-key approach to the region, as long as they are willing to cut their losses during periodic reversals such as in Chile, and as long as the US fails to stabilize its own relationship with the Latins, Moscow will be able to make inroads on the still-preponderant US influence in the area.

Soviet Interest in Latin America

Following the revolution of 1917, the Soviets had little time to give much thought to Latin America. Unlike the West European powers and the US, the USSR had no political, economic, or cultural ties with the area. Peruvian political leader Haya de la Torre, who visited Moscow in 1924 and talked with the new Soviet leaders, was struck by how little they knew about Latin American social conditions. Other Latin American visitors to Moscow came away with similar impressions. Lenin himself had some knowledge of Mexico, but was more interested in the country as a source of potential opposition to US imperialism than in the local politics.

The Soviet Union's first diplomatic incursion into Latin America came in 1924, when it established relations with Mexico. Almost immediately, however, the Mexican government was faced with heavy-handed and crude subversive tactics, and six years later diplomatic relations were severed.

In South America, the Soviets made their greatest headway in Argentina and Uruguay. The first Latin affiliate with the Communist International was the Argentine party. In 1926, Uruguay recognized the USSR, and in the following year, the Argentines allowed the Soviets to set up a trade agency in Buenos Aires. Because of the agency's subversive activities, however, the Argentines closed it in 1931.

During the 1920s, the Soviets were unable to win over any prestigious or popular Latin American political leaders to their cause. In 1931, however, Luis Carlos Prestes, a Brazilian involved in the "Tenentes Movement" was invited to Moscow to be groomed for leadership of the Brazilian Communist Party. Prestes' success in attracting a following was shortlived, and in 1936 he was arrested after being involved in a mutiny of army units. As a result of the uprising, Uruguay—under Brazilian pressure—broke relations with Moscow and protested Soviet attempts to foment revolution in Latin America.

World War II

The heroic image of the Soviet people during the war and Moscow's alliance with the Western democracies created a favorable climate for the renewal of relations between the USSR and Latin America. Between 1942 and 1945, 13 Latin American countries established relations with the USSR (mainly because the US encouraged them to do so). Communist parties were formed in each of the 20 Latin American republics. In addition, Communist-front organizations, such as the World Federation of Trade Unions, the International Federation of Democratic Women, the World Federation of Democratic Youth, the International Union of Students, the International Association of Democratic Jurists, the World Peace Council, and the World Federation of Teachers Unions, became active in the hemisphere.

None of the parties or front organizations was successful in rallying Latin Americans to communism; yet they did serve to mold public opinion and open channels of communication for the Soviets. By the end of 1946, the USSR was formally recognized by 15 Latin American nations and appeared to have gained respectability in the area.

The Cold War

The advent of the Cold War in 1947 ushered in yet another era in Soviet-Latin American relations and reversed the good feelings established during World War II. Brazil and Chile broke relations with Moscow in October 1947, citing interference in local affairs. Ecuador subsequently denied that it had ever established relations. Colombia severed ties in May 1948 following communist-inspired riots in Bogota. In June, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic followed suit. In 1952, one month after Batista came to power, Cuba severed ties. Havana's action was followed by Venezuela under Perez Jimenez. Guatemala broke relations in 1954 shortly after the overthrow of the communist-dominated Arbenz regime, and Bolivia severed its relations the following year.

The 1960s

The late 1950s and early 1960s marked another turnabout in Soviet-Latin American relations. The major breakthrough was the establishment of relations with Castro's Cuba in 1960. Other factors contributing to the resurgence of the USSR were the Soviets' obvious military and economic power and their potential for increased trade with the region. The campaign to increase cultural ties between the two areas also began to meet with some success, and many Latins, even though they did not approve of the Soviet government, came to admire Russian accomplishments in technology and the arts. Gone from the scene, moreover, were most of the crude Soviet tactics of the 1920s and 1930s. Soviet representatives now appeared to be genuinely interested in state-to-state contacts as well as in Latin American culture, economics, and politics.

Current Soviet Strategy and Activity in Latin America

During the post-Stalin era, the Soviets have tried to carve a niche for themselves—diplomatically, economically, and culturally—in the Third World. In 1961, Khrushchev outlined this policy and made particular reference to the Third World for waging the key battle against colonialism and imperialism.

At the 24th Party Congress of 1971, which is best remembered for its approval of the larger concept of detente with the West, Premier Kosygin announced, "In the coming five-year period, the further expansion of the USSR's foreign economic ties with the developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America is planned." These ties were to be established on the basis of a state-to-state relationship. The conspiratorial approach that had dominated Soviet policy in the early days was largely abandoned. Although the Soviets keep in close touch with the local communist parties, there have been few examples in recent years where this contact has been illegal or has been subject to criticism from the local government.

Political Objectives

The Soviets' long-range political objectives in Latin America, as cited by Soviet leaders, were to be attained by continued utilization of the local communist parties, state-to-state relations, and proselytization among university students, labor unions, and cultural organizations. For a period in the 1960s Moscow also viewed the rural peasantry as a revolutionary social force. The Soviets pointed to Cuba as an example of how the destruction of agrarian capitalism by rural-based insurgents can lead to the rise of the peasantry. Moscow concluded that far-reaching and democratic agrarian reform in Latin America was an inseparable part of the antifeudal and anti-imperialist revolution.

Moscow's propaganda support for rural guerrillas, however, was not the same strategy as Castro's, which featured monetary assistance and active participation—actions that severely complicated relations between the Latin American and Soviet governments. The Soviets, nonetheless, certainly would have been happy with a Cuban-supported guerrilla victory. But the crushing of insurgent activity in Bolivia in 1967, coupled with failures in Venezuela, Colombia, Guatemala, and Peru, dampened the USSR's belief in the rural strategy.

The propensity of the Cubans to support the most radical elements rather than the local communist parties, in fact, led to a continuing dispute between the Soviets and the Cubans over what strategy should be utilized in Latin America to bring about "liberation"—Cuba's active support for revolutionary movements or the USSR's utilization of the local communist party as well as state-to-state relations. Only in recent years has this argument been resolved in favor of the Soviets. Moscow is still hopeful that some "progressive" leader will emerge from the governing elite—perhaps a military officer—who will be able to rally both the urban proletariat and the rural peasantry.

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This hope notwithstanding, Soviet policy has been pragmatic enough to cover all possibilities. Essentially, the Soviets will give at least moral support to any group or class, acceptable to Moscow, demanding liberation or at least improved living conditions, and will espouse the cause of any nation claiming to be a victim of imperialism. The current situation in Latin America, characterized by underdeveloped, stagnating agrarian, or semi-industrialized economies, presents an opportunity for possible Soviet exploitation. Many Latin American countries—especially in the Caribbean—so badly need economic assistance that they are beginning to look for help anywhere and everywhere.

The situation in Chile under Allende seemed a Soviet dream come true. In Moscow's view, however, the Chilean regime never was well enough entrenched to prevent the moderates and the right wing from returning to power. When the coup finally occurred, the Soviets were unwilling and unable to intervene to protect their friends. While many Latin American communists undoubtedly were disheartened by Moscow's failure to act decisively, noncommunist leaders apparently were gratified by the Soviets' restraint. One outcome of the Chilean affair has been that many Latins are more willing than before to accept the Soviets as a responsible source of support against US economic or political sanctions. Moreover, since Allende's overthrow, Moscow has identified Peru as a substitute "progressive" nation and has been lavishing attention on the military leadership there.

There is, of course, a coincidence between the Latin American desire to reduce their dependence on the US and the Soviet desire to reduce the US presence and influence in the hemisphere. Moscow has been heartened in this regard by the lifting of OAS sanctions against Cuba, its own increasing diplomatic relations with Latin America,* and Latin support for some of the Soviet line at international forums.

The successful transformation of Cuba into a Soviet client has also been a gain for Moscow. It demonstrated that the Monroe Doctrine—preventing extrahemispheric interference in Latin America—is a dead issue. In the Cuba-USSR relationship, although Havana is not necessarily a surrogate for Soviet policies in the hemisphere or the rest of the world, there are obviously times when there are coincidences in ambitions and policies. From the viewpoint of the political support the Cubans can provide the Soviets in Third World—especially Latin American—forums, Moscow's investment in Havana has been paying off.

* The Soviets now have relations with 14 Latin American countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Guyana, Jamaica, Mexico, Peru, Surinam, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

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Economic Objectives

Soviet economic relations with Latin America have expanded markedly in recent years. Mutual commercial exchanges still are not a significant portion of the overall trade of the USSR or of Latin America's global trade. The Soviet market, however, has become important for some major countries—the USSR, for example, was Argentina's largest importer in 1975 and is currently Brazil's fifth largest market. Between 1969 and 1976, Soviet economic credits extended to the area, exclusive of Cuba, rose from \$140 million to over \$500 million. This upsurge reflected a Soviet desire to expand exports in the face of burgeoning deficits within the area. Latin American drawings on these credits to the end of 1976, however, amounted to less than \$142 million because of the private sector's unwillingness to make purchases from the USSR. Although Soviet deficits have continued to grow—the deficit in 1975 approached \$900 million—trade continues to dominate Soviet relations with Latin America.

The Soviets also have signed a number of technical and scientific agreements with various Latin American countries. Mexico has signed contracts with the Soviet-dominated Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CEMA) for cooperation in agriculture, industrial technology, and science, and Jamaica and Guyana are seeking observer status in the organization. While Soviet economic trade and aid is minuscule in comparison with Moscow's total effort in the less developed countries, there is a pronounced tendency among the Latin American nations to diversify their trade and economic relations. A continuation of this tendency, as well as the growing Latin receptivity to Soviet purchases, will ultimately lead to increases in Soviet commercial activity in the area.

Military Objectives

Moscow has long called for the independence of the Latin American armed forces from US influence and armaments. The Soviets see the Pentagon's influence as all-pervasive in the various Latin American military establishments. Moscow views the current squabble between the US and the Latin American military over the human rights issue and the renunciation by many of the Latin countries of US military assistance programs as an exploitable situation. The Soviet press in recent weeks, in fact, has played up the "worsening relationship" between the US and the Latin militaries.

In the meantime, the Soviets have been offering themselves as an alternative weapons supplier. A few Latin American military delegations have traveled to Moscow to inspect military equipment. Peru, however, has been the only Latin American country to buy Soviet hardware. Its purchases include [] SU-22 fighter-bombers, MI-8 helicopters, T-55 medium tanks, and antiaircraft artillery as well as SA-3 and SA-7 surface-to-air missiles. Moscow also has 35 military advisers in Peru assisting in training and maintenance of the Soviet equipment.

The USSR has recently offered to sell military equipment to Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela. Ecuador is also reportedly interested in purchasing Soviet interceptors, but military leaders in Quito are hopeful that the threat of another Soviet arms client in Latin America will force Washington to come up with an arms deal. It is likely that most of the Latin nations will continue to look to France, West Germany, the United Kingdom, and Israel as the major weapons suppliers. Many Latin American countries may be enticed by Moscow's attractive arms offers, but few will probably actually sign any military contracts.

From the Soviet viewpoint, the most important aspect of their military equipment sales to Latin America is the incursion into the previously exclusive Western market. Soviet technicians and advisers may introduce some political leverage. In the case of Peru, however, their presence so far has not led to substantial political gains. In fact, last year Lima became more moderate even as Soviet military assistance increased.

Cultural Objectives

Soviet cultural exchanges with Latin America are designed to win sympathy and friends and to prove, as Lenin once said, that "the Bolsheviks are not such terrible barbarians as they are supposed to be." The Soviets have repeatedly claimed that US culture has been designed for the privileged minority, whereas theirs is universal and popular. Student exchanges are one way to lessen Latin fear and distrust. The long-range effectiveness of the cultural exchange program cannot be determined, but an improving political, economic, and cultural atmosphere will certainly increase Soviet acceptance in the area.

Organizational Presence in Latin America

The Soviet diplomatic presence in Latin America is organized along lines similar to that of the US. Each embassy contains a political and economic section. There are press people, trade and aid personnel, and consular officers. Of the approximately 500 Soviets residing in Latin America, excluding Cuba, the best estimate is that about 20 percent are intelligence officers. Presumably, these people handle the liaison activities with the local communist party.

Soviet Diplomatic Presence in Latin America

	Total	Trade Mission	KGB ¹ (known or suspect)	GRU ² (known or suspect)
Argentina	51	[]
Bolivia	34 (plus about 150 technical aid personnel)			
Brazil	70 (plus about 22 technical aid personnel)			
Chile	3 (UN/FCLA)			
Colombia	40			
Costa Rica	27			
Ecuador	38			
Guyana	16			
Mexico	75 (plus about 15 technical aid personnel)			
Panama	8 (no official representation: 2 Tass representatives and 6 cultural exchange people)			
Peru	112 plus 35 military advisers			
Trinidad	1 (lives in Caracas)	L]
Uruguay	38			
Venezuela	17			

¹ Committee for State Security.

² The military's Main Intelligence Directorate

The Latin View

Historically, the Soviet Union has been regarded as a kind of pariah by most Latin Americans. The Luso-Hispanic world has little in common with Russia. Early Soviet attempts to subvert a number of Latin governments reinforced this image. The world situation has changed, however, and many governments that are interested in finding new sources of credits and technology, as well as new markets, have overcome their deep-rooted fear and repugnance of communism. The Argentines, for example, do not link the guerrillas operating in their country with the pro-Soviet communists as they might have in the past. (Indeed, they are not associated.) The military government says that it is willing to have diplomatic relations and trade with everyone, regardless of political ideology.

Unquestionably, detente has also added to Soviet respectability. The Latin American argument is that if the US can have cordial relations with Moscow, then surely they can follow suit. In addition, the military and economic development of the Soviet Union is admired by many Latins and viewed as a potential counterweight to US influence.

One cannot underestimate the role of Cuba in this equation. Latin American nationalism, of course, was present before Fidel Castro appeared on the scene. The Cuban leader did prove, however, that it was possible to thumb one's nose at Washington and still have an alternative source of economic and military assistance. This picture has appealed particularly to several other nations in the Caribbean. Conversely, the enormous cost of economic assistance to Cuba may have sobered Soviet pretensions to aid other Latin American countries trying to disassociate from the US. (The Soviets frequently cautioned Allende, in fact, against cutting himself off economically from the West.) Cuba still remains, however, as a symbol of Soviet support against "US imperialism." As Latin American countries increase trade and diplomatic relations with Cuba, the standing of the Soviet Union in the area will inevitably be enhanced.

This does not mean that economic and political relations between the USSR and Latin America have been completely friendly and smooth. There is continuing suspicion among the Latin American nations of Soviet intentions. Most of the governments maintain a tight watch on Soviet diplomats, and any suggestion of interference in domestic matters is quickly rebuffed. In their commercial relations with Latin America, despite the prospect of lucrative terms, the Soviets have been hampered by a lingering reputation for exporting overpriced and inferior goods.

The overriding factor in all aspects of Latin-Soviet relations has been the appeal of the USSR as an alternative economic partner and military supplier to the US. The Latins are becoming more receptive to Soviet aid offers because of their balance-of-payments difficulties. The Soviets, in turn, have encouraged sales by concentrating their efforts on areas of high priority such as energy—they have been promoting low-cost funding for hydroelectric projects in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Guyana.

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As for military equipment sales, even though the utilization of Soviet equipment would probably pose logistic and technical problems, many Latin countries may find Soviet military aid offers difficult to turn down in the future. The US Government's refusal to sell certain military equipment to the Latins has been an important factor, but the most significant problem has been the US stance on the human rights issue. Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay have already rejected further US military assistance in protest of Washington's "interference in internal affairs." Their desire for new military equipment will lead them to buy from someone, and attractive Soviet offers may generate sales.

In the political sphere, many Latins are probably appreciative of the Soviets' pro-Third World stance at international forums on many issues of the north-south dialogue. Again, as in the economic and military cases, the USSR is being used by the Latins to balance off the US. The Latin reaction to the human rights issue is also important politically because many nations of the area—especially those in the southern cone—already felt neglected by Washington. This issue will increase their sense of isolation from and irritation with the US. The USSR could be the final beneficiary.

Soviet Prospects in Latin America

The Latin American world, with the major exception in Cuba, has not been very susceptible to Soviet overtures over the past 50 years. The people have been less receptive to propaganda than Soviet leaders expected, and the major social movements of the area have been national rather than international. In the Soviet view, however, economic "contradictions" in the industrially developed nations inevitably lead to "contradictions" between them and the less developed states. Moscow, therefore, expects an ultimate intensification in the anti-imperialist national liberation struggle throughout the Third World, including Latin America.

The Soviets appear to be undecided on how to go about exploiting the opportunities presented by this economic crisis. In the past, they have worked through the various local communist parties; they have provided moral support to rural guerrillas; they have increased state-to-state relations; and they are now trying to establish military equipment liaisons with the various Latin American military establishments. Moscow's constant objective in all this is the erosion of US economic and political influence.

Despite its occasional setbacks, Moscow seems to believe that Latin America's economic and political nationalism—particularly its anti-US aspects—will persist and deepen. The Soviets hope that as this occurs their own trade and diplomatic relations with Latin America will continue to grow and that the USSR will become a significant economic force in the area. This economic involvement will do away once and for all with the pariah image, which more than anything else has isolated the Soviets from the hemisphere.

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In the final analysis, the key factor governing the extent of the Soviet-Latin American relationship is the US. The Soviet Union still cannot influence Latin American affairs as much as it can exploit economic and political conditions and US policies. So long as the US fails to develop a consistent and acceptable policy for the region, political opportunism and tactical flexibility will work to Moscow's advantage and further erode US influence.

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*The author of this paper is
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and should be directed to*

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