

RUSSIAN POLICY IN LATIN
AMERICA :
Past, Present, and Future

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LATIN AMERICA THROUGH SOVIET EYES: THE EVOLUTION OF SOVIET PERCEPTIONS DURING THE BREZHNEV ERA. By Ilya Prizel. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Pp. 253. \$44.50.)

THE RUSSIANS AREN'T COMING: NEW SOVIET POLICY IN LATIN AMERICA. Edited by Wayne Smith. (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1992. Pp. 196. \$25.00.)

SOVIET RELATIONS WITH LATIN AMERICA, 1959-1987. By Nicola Miller. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Pp. 252. \$39.50 cloth, \$12.95 paper.)

Perestroika, the collapse of Soviet Communism, and the disintegration of the USSR all pose immense challenges to scholars studying the foreign policy of Russia in Latin America. For Russian and non-Russian experts alike, these developments demand reconsideration of past Soviet policies without the ideological preconceptions that distorted the picture during the cold war. Moreover, the changes in Soviet activities that transpired during the era of perestroika itself also deserve special attention. Finally, the emergence of a new postcommunist Russia is requiring specialists to define that country's interests in Latin America and to visualize its future policy in the region.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the archives of the Soviet Foreign Ministry declassified a number of documents relating to the period following World War II. These materials, in combination with what is known about decision making under Leonid Brezhnev, permit some conclusions to be drawn about the general features of Soviet policy in Latin America. With the exception of Cuba under Fidel Castro and, to a certain extent, Nicaragua under the Sandinistas, Latin America never ranked high on the list of Soviet foreign-policy priorities. There were, however, several bursts of interest in the region. For example, Joseph Stalin was somewhat unexpectedly receptive to Juan Perón's idea of rapprochement between Argentina and the USSR, a trend that both rulers hoped to use to counterbalance U.S. influence in the Western Hemisphere. But such moments of

excitement were short-lived and never changed the general pattern of relative Soviet disinterest in the region. From Moscow's perspective, Latin America was simply too far from the Soviet Union and too near the United States to justify sustained involvement.

Chronic lack of concern meant that throughout the Soviet Union's entire seventy-three years of existence, it never developed a coherent policy toward Latin America. Neither did it evolve a clear-cut concept of its national interests there nor effectively define long-term or even short-term goals. Instead, bilateral relations and responses to specific situations formed the basis of the USSR's relations with Latin America. By and large, Soviet policy was either passive or reactive at best. In most important instances, the initiative for Soviet involvement came from the Latin American side, not the other way round. In short, the Soviets were classic opportunists, responding to developments rather than determining them. Even their ability to react was hampered by poor knowledge of the region and a tendency to lag behind the course of events. One of the best examples of this weakness was the Brezhnev government's slowness in grasping the significance of the Nicaraguan Revolution.

Yet despite the passivity and frequent ineptitude of USSR policy in Latin America, U.S. diplomats often exaggerated the threat of Soviet subversion in the region. This practice, which reached absurd levels during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, was given "scholarly expression" in such works as G. W. Sand's *Soviet Aims in Central America*.¹ Only in the period from 1928 to 1935 did the Stalinist leadership, utilizing the Comintern, call on Latin American Communist parties to engage in militant activities against existing governments. This well-known campaign ended in disaster for both the Communist parties and Soviet policy and was never repeated. Following World War II, during all the major Latin American revolutions, the Soviet Union gave direct support only after the revolutionaries had come to power on their own.²

Finally, while the question of Soviet involvement in Latin American revolutions is open to debate, it is clear that these activities never constituted a serious threat to the United States. Even the military help given to Cuba (except during the period of the missile crisis) was not so much a threat as a challenge or a nuisance to the United States. The tendency to inflate the threat of Soviet support for Latin American revolutions was a product of the cold war. Now that this struggle is over, all ideological justification for such exaggeration has also disappeared.

The three books under review here represent significant contribu-

1. Published by Praeger in Greenwood, Conn., in 1989.

2. Some scholars have maintained that the Soviet government provided aid to the Salvadoran Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (FMLN) in the early 1980s, but this argument requires more evidence and greater clarification. It is already clear that the Soviet Union was never the main source of assistance to the Salvadoran rebels.

tions to the process of rethinking of Soviet policy in Latin America. All are well-documented and thoughtful analyses, and each holds special interest for Russian, U.S., and Latin American scholars in the field.

Ilya Prizel's *Latin America through Soviet Eyes: The Evolution of Soviet Perceptions during the Brezhnev Era* offers a detailed review of Soviet perceptions of Latin America during the Brezhnev years. Prizel analyzes the views of leading Soviet scholars, journalists, and politicians on Latin America, paying special attention to domestic politics (the Catholic Church, the military, and national liberation movements), Latin America's position in global politics (particularly the role of the United States in the region), and Soviet-Latin American relations. Prizel outlines the evolution of Soviet perceptions of Latin America and the development of differing Soviet approaches. Unfortunately, the case studies on Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina are overly schematic and less stimulating than the author's more general observations. Prizel's study is nonetheless a gold mine of information for U.S. and Latin American readers who cannot read the Soviet materials in the original.

Another shortcoming of *Latin America through Soviet Eyes* is its underlying assumption that "because there are very few Soviet specialists on Latin America, the role of these scholars in policy formulation is significant and . . . changing Soviet perceptions, as reflected in the Soviet scholarly and journalistic communities, have a profound impact on official thinking in the USSR and on its policy formulation" (pp.ix-x). This assertion is too general and far too simplistic. A unified view of Latin America never existed in the Soviet Union, and hence there could be no single source of influence on official thinking and policy-making. Moreover, under Brezhnev major decisions were often made with little reference to the perceptions and recommendations of the experts. Soviet intervention in Afghanistan is only the most notorious example of a policy ordered by a few leaders at the very top without serious analysis of the situation or consultation with specialists. Some evidence, as yet insufficiently confirmed, suggests that certain decisions on El Salvador were made in a similarly ad hoc manner. Clearly, the link between perception and the formulation of foreign policy in the Brezhnev years is complex and requires further research.

The collection of essays edited by Wayne Smith, *The Russians Aren't Coming: New Soviet Policy in Latin America*, further enriches understanding of Soviet-Latin American policy. Although the collection concentrates on the perestroika years, it also provides valuable insight into earlier developments. Two contributions are of particular importance: the article by Aaron Belkin, James Blight, and David Lewis, which compares perceptions of the 1962 missile crisis in the United States, the USSR, and Cuba during the 1960s and the 1980s; and Wayne Smith's elegant overview of Soviet policy in Latin America. There is a serious flaw in Smith's piece, however: its overconcentration on the role of the Communist Party of the

Soviet Union (CPSU). In fact, two currents always coexisted in Soviet-Latin American policy, that of the Central Committee of the CPSU and that of the Foreign Ministry. The former stressed cooperation with regional Communist parties, while the latter concentrated on state-to-state relations. These two currents emerged during the first period of Soviet Latin American policy (1917–1928). Under Stalin and to certain extent under Nikita Khrushchev, the Central Committee's line prevailed. In the wake of the Cuban missile crisis, however, this approach began to lose relevance and finally disappeared during Gorbachev's last years. Smith's failure to devote sufficient attention to the Foreign Ministry's line of thinking diminishes the value of his overview.

The Russians Aren't Coming deserves particular attention because it includes not only contributions by U.S. scholars but also the works of Soviet researchers and political figures. Thus along with studies by Thomas Weiss, Ilya Prizel, and Donna Rich-Kaplowitz, the reader will find official statements explaining the new Soviet policy by Valery Nikolayenko (then head of the Foreign Ministry's Latin American Department) and Karen Brutents (a high-ranking representative of the CPSU Central Committee). Also contributing worthwhile essays are George Mirski and Kiva Maidanik, leading scholars from the prestigious Institute of World Economy and International Relations, and Sergo Mikoyan, longtime editor of *Latinskaya America*, the leading Soviet scholarly journal in the field. Perhaps equally significant are the comments by Cuban researchers Julio Carranza Valdés and Estervino Montesino Segui, who offer their perceptions of Soviet-Cuban relations and Cuban policy in Central America. In sum, *The Russians Aren't Coming* provides a multifaceted analysis of some of the most controversial and debated issues of Soviet policy in Latin America.

In *Soviet Relations with Latin America, 1959–1987*, Nicola Miller wisely does not attempt to review Soviet-Latin American policy in general, concentrating instead on case studies that focus on Soviet ties with Cuba, Chile, Central America, and a few other countries in the region. This sound approach demonstrates that Miller has grasped the essence of Soviet policy in the region, which was never general in nature because it always evolved on a case-by-case basis. The value of Miller's analysis is further enhanced by her efforts to place Soviet actions in Latin America in a broader global context. Of particular interest is Miller's discussion of all the key problems involved in Soviet policy toward Cuba. An entire book could be written in response to Miller's analysis, but in this short review, it is perhaps better to concentrate on the questions about the Soviet-Cuban connection that Miller and others do not treat.

The first issue that needs clarification is whether or not Mikhail Gorbachev's program of perestroika required a fundamental change in relations with Cuba. Certain observers have charged that the Soviet Union's reluctance to force reform on the Castro regime contradicted the princi-

ples of “New Thinking” in foreign affairs. This interpretation is erroneous, however. Gorbachev’s overriding concern was to reinvigorate Soviet socialism by means of limited reforms from above. He did not plan on introducing drastic changes in relations with the fraternal socialist countries, and he surely expected that in time those countries would accept, support, and emulate the reforms being undertaken in the USSR. At the same time, Gorbachev was firmly committed to the principle of freedom of choice and rejected the so-called Brezhnev doctrine that had prohibited significant national experiments with socialism in the political sphere. Consequently, when events in Eastern Europe took an unexpected turn, Gorbachev refused to intervene. Although he recognized that Castro was far from happy about many aspects of perestroika, Gorbachev accepted Fidel’s “free choice” and his desire to apply the Cuban model of socialism.

This reasoning explains why the changes in Soviet policy toward Cuba were slow and late in coming. Strictly speaking, they began only in late 1990 and early 1991. The role of political and strategic considerations was far smaller than that assigned to them by Cole Blasier.³ Economic forces were the most important consideration. On the one hand, both the Soviet and Cuban economies were afflicted by severe crises at the beginning of the 1990s that disrupted supplies and made further Soviet aid to Castro difficult. On the other hand, the logic of the transition toward a market economy required ending subsidies and basing Soviet-Cuban trade on world prices.

During the Gorbachev era, the highest levels of Soviet and Cuban leadership were committed to “maintaining friendship” in the political sphere. This dimension of the relationship collapsed only after the failure of the coup in August 1991 and the end of the attempt to save socialism through perestroika. Yet even the disintegration of the USSR did not completely terminate the Soviet (now Russian) relationship with Cuba, nor did it eliminate all ties based on mutual advantage. Thirty years of close relations between the two countries had produced a number of interlocking structures, especially in the economic sphere. Cuba continues to depend on Russian supplies of oil and other goods. And the countries of the former Soviet Union will continue to need Cuban sugar and nickel for some time to come. This limited or residual interdependence creates a shaky foundation for further interchanges at a considerably reduced level.

The works of Prizel and Miller and the collection edited by Smith provide the general reader as well as the specialist with the basis for a broad understanding of the Latin American policy of the former Soviet Union and offer insights on the era of perestroika. But the rapid flow of events has put new issues on the scholarly agenda. Specialists in the field

3. See Cole Blasier, “Moscow’s Retreat from Cuba,” *Problems of Communism* 40, no. 6 (Nov.–Dec. 1991):91–99.

must now contemplate a new problem: how to anticipate future Russian policy toward the region.

In the short run, one can say relatively little in response to that question. Russian Latin American policy is still being formulated, and many other issues appear to have higher priority. Moreover, much will depend on Russia's domestic situation, the success of Boris Yeltsin's government, and the fate of his reforms.

In the long run, however, Russia's policy in Latin America may be determined by whether the country manages to become a part of the "First World" or sinks into the ranks of the "Third World." Either outcome will have significant consequences for Latin America. If Russia can weather her current crisis and emerge into the "First World," her ties with the region can be reinvigorated and Latin America may find a strong and valuable economic partner. But if Russia's economic difficulties become chronic and the country must struggle to catch up with the more prosperous countries, other developments may ensue. In this case, Russia would share a number of problems with some Latin American countries, which might provide a basis for political rapprochement. In economic terms, however, a struggling Russia might become a competitor for credits and aid that Latin American countries need.

There is a third alternative, of course: Russia may retain its unique and often uncomfortable position between the First and Third worlds and, like the two-headed eagle, gaze simultaneously in both directions. In these circumstances, Russia's Latin American policy will be uneven and difficult to predict. In such a case, Russians will base their actions on perceived self-interest and domestic needs as well as on relations with privileged partners in other parts of the world.

Whatever the outcome, it is almost certain that Latin America will remain somewhere near the bottom of Russia's list of foreign-policy priorities, although definitely above Africa. Yet given even this low standing, Russian diplomacy will continue to take an interest and a role in Latin America.