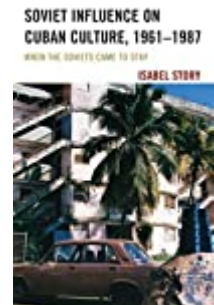


Isabel Story. *Soviet Influence on Cuban Culture, 1961-1987: When the Soviets Came to Stay.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019. xiii + 231 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4985-8011-3.



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To date, there is very little scholarship available on what the Cuban-Soviet relationship, outside of high politics, looked like before the Soviet Union fell apart. While Cuban and Soviet historiography as separate fields have exhibited greater appreciation for citizens' agency within often rigid political systems as a consequence of the cultural turn, this development remained limited in literature on Cuban-Soviet relations. Moreover, there are few who have approached Cuban-Soviet relations with a bicultural approach, giving both Cuba and the Soviet Union more balanced attention.[1] Isabel Story's *Soviet Influence on Cuban Culture, 1961-1987: When the Soviets Came to Stay* is a welcome addition to this understudied field. The book evaluates the cultural interactions and repercussions of the two countries' relationship, from the moment it was formally reestablished in 1961 to 1987.

The main thrust of the book is an examination of Cuba's cultural policy post 1959 (as expressed by both the government and Cuba's intellectuals), its role on the development of Cuba's national and in-

ternational identity, and its articulation through comparison with the Soviet Union. While previous literature argued that Soviet influence was an undeniable imposition upon Cuban culture, Story utilizes a more nuanced understanding of "influence," and is careful not to overstate the impact of one country upon the other. The words she uses to describe Soviet "influence" in Cuba are continued reminders of this approach: "overlap" (p. 139); "resonate with" (p. 140); "reminiscent of" (p. 140); "converge" (p. 141); and "analogous" (p. 150), just to name a few within a ten-page span of the book. Rather than claim direct causation between the Soviet and Cuban experiences, Story brings attention to the intellectual and artistic parallels of two revolutionary societies.

The first four chapters provide a strong contextual foundation of the complexities of cultural policy in both the Soviet Union and Cuba. Chapter 1 briefly sketches the two countries' historical relationship, outlining major political events whereas chapter 2 examines the various definitions of socialist realism and its use in both countries. The

third chapter looks at Cuba's experimental phase of revolution, from 1959 to 1975, while the fourth chapter describes the period 1976-86, under which Cuba's government responded defensively to failures in the 1960s to develop "clearly identifiable revolutionary Cuban forms and styles of national expression" (p. 93). These four chapters establish the parallel experiences of revolution in both societies (albeit at different periods in global history), where each country's government loosened or tightened control over revolutionary culture in response to failures or successes in economic and cultural development.

Arguably the most groundbreaking material of Story's contribution lies in chapters 5 and 6, where she explores the development of Cuba's revolutionary culture as it drew both explicitly and implicitly from the Soviet model. Story uses Cuban theater and plastic arts as her two case studies, revealing the ways in which Cubans interacted with cultural policy, the idea of "revolution," and the Soviet Union at different moments in Cuba's revolution. She follows the movement of both formal and informal theater groups (such as the Teatro Escambray and Teatro Nuevo), as well as the development of the various art schools' curricula. Story argues that "culture ... frequently acted as spaces in which the revolutionary government and [Cuban] cultural practitioners could define their differences and articulate their own definitions of Revolution and socialism and debate the developing national identity" (p. 196). In this way cultural activities, rather than high politics, provided an important space to debate the nature of the Cuban-Soviet relationship.

Those debates also included how much (or how little) to involve the Soviet Union in Cuba's own revolutionary culture. For example, Cuban artists and performers increasingly avoided connections to Soviet schools or models throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, due to a generalized anti-colonial drive in the arts as well as the fear that either Soviet experts or Cubans trained in the Soviet

Union would "impose the doctrine of high Stalinist socialist realism" (p. 131). Story's examination of theater and plastic arts reveals a more fluid relationship between the two countries, while highlighting the two countries' tendency to disagree as a result of the tensions produced by conflicting international and national agendas, an aspect that is only now being increasingly explored in Cuban and Soviet historiography. Story's research highlights both the flexibility and the durability of the Soviet symbol abroad as an "alternative" path of development (whether economic, intellectual, or cultural), even as it was reformed to meet Cuban needs.

Story's primary sources predominantly consist of the popular press, where contemporary Cuban authors drew historical parallels between the two societies themselves, though rarely discussed physical interactions at length. Interpersonal relationships between Cuban and Soviet citizens looked like is still relatively unknown, and perhaps further incorporation of interviews mentioned by Story in the introduction would help illuminate such exchanges or interactions. Story's case studies reveal the importance of considering both countries' perspectives equally, where Cuban responses to Soviet policies or models change the narrative of Soviet influence on the island. Her case studies also underscore the interplay of international and national influences in cultural production, a phenomenon that is especially important in Cold War history, where the international and national were so inextricably linked.

The connection that Story describes between two strands of internationalism (one expressed as "socialist brotherhood" and the other through anti-colonial movements in the then-called Third World) provides insight into the different experiences of socialism in the Cold War. Story shows how Cuba's commitment to the global South set it apart from the Soviet Union, and how these two forms of internationalism were able to coexist. It would be interesting to know more about how Rus-

sian experts working in Cuba mentioned throughout the book understood their own role within Cuba's distinctive project, and if their own views or practices ever came into conflict with Soviet cultural policies back home.

Story narrates the trajectory of socialist revolution and socialist realism in Russia with finesse and draws nuanced comparisons between Russia and Cuba's experience of revolution. For example, she offers the clarifying observation that both revolutionary societies valued art and cultural production as educational material to help all citizens reach socialism, an observation that has in the past been construed as evidence of Cuba's wholesale acceptance of the Soviet model rather than as evidence of a more generalized desire to create a unified, national revolutionary culture. Her use of both Russian- and Spanish-language sources in her research is a rarity in the field. The book also provides a unique opportunity for Soviet historians to consider what the transfer of revolution abroad looked like and the imbrication of cultural production in that process. Those interested in the Cuban-Soviet connection will be indebted to this work for the incredibly difficult task that Story has taken up—revitalizing the historical study of the two countries' complicated relationship.

Note

[1]. For works on Cuban-Soviet relations that show greater attention to both countries' contributions to the relationship, please see the following works: Mervyn J. Bain, *From Lenin to Castro, 1917-1959: Early Encounters between Moscow and Havana* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013); Bain, *Moscow and Havana 1917 to the Present: An Enduring Friendship in an Ever-Changing Global Context* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019); Bain, *Soviet-Cuban Relations, 1985 to 1991* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007); Anne Gorsuch, "'Cuba, My Love': The Romance of Revolutionary Cuba in the Soviet Sixties," *American Historical Re-*

view 120 (2015): 497-526; Jacqueline Loss, *Dreaming in Russian: The Cuban Soviet Imaginary* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014); and Hugo Palmarola and Pedro Ignacio Alonso, "Tropical Assemblage: The Soviet Large Panel in Cuba," in *Beyond Imported Magic: Essays on Science, Technology, and Society in Latin America*, ed. Eden Medina et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 159-80.

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