



Marc Becker. *The CIA in Ecuador.* American Encounters/Global Interactions Series. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. Illustrations. xi + 317 pp. \$104.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4780-1035-7.

Reviewed by David M. K. Sheinin (Trent University)

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Commissioned by Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

Twenty-five years ago, the historian Gilbert M. Joseph appeared at the annual meeting of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) with a small group of his students. He set off a small academic bombshell that some SHAFR members still remember. At the height of the rightward, neoliberal political shift in Latin America, Joseph questioned what historians of US foreign relations were writing about inter-American ties. During the 1980s, US diplomatic historians had begun regularly to learn foreign languages, to read the historical literatures from the countries they were studying, and to spend long hours in archives outside the United States. Even so, Joseph and others were concerned that the field of US international relations was not sufficiently grounded in Latin American historical processes. Joseph pushed the field in that direction with the publication of *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (1998), coedited with Catherine C. LeGrand and Ricardo D. Salvatore, and with his work coediting the longstanding American Encounters/Global Interactions series published by Duke University Press.

Marc Becker's path-breaking book appears in that series. It may well be the best example yet of an approach to US foreign relations by way of Latin American historical processes. However, *The*

CIA in Ecuador is also a reminder of why Joseph's appearance at the SHAFR conference was so intellectually jarring; the historical literature on US-Latin American ties often remains mired in two solitudes. Works extensively grounded in primary and secondary works in more than one language and methodologically, empirically, and theoretically based on both a mastery of the literatures of US foreign relations and Latin American historical processes remain uncommon. Becker notes that *The CIA in Ecuador* was not written to address diplomatic history, US national security problems, or what he calls the intricacies of intelligence gathering. It is, however, part of what Joseph imagined twenty-five years ago as a terrific approach to US foreign policy and its mechanics by way of a leading scholar of Latin America interested in answering questions about Ecuadorian social history.

Becker is a foremost expert on the histories of Latin American/Ecuadorian Indigenous peoples and leftist movements. In Ecuador as elsewhere, police surveillance records are often by far the best archival sources on the history of the Left. Becker relies on a 2017 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) document dump to explain Ecuadorian political activism in the 1950s. The book, then, is by an authority on the Ecuadorian Left examining CIA materials to explain the Ecuadorian Left

and its impact on society. Becker is unconcerned about US-USSR relations and finds the cold war peripheral to problems at hand. While he recognizes limitations to how the CIA understood Ecuadorian communism—their primary focus of attention—Becker makes a strong case for the immense value of the document trove. The CIA chased its tail obsessively over unverified fantasies of a communist movement that was much smaller and less of a menace than US Americans imagined. Even so, Becker organizes most of his chapters around the tail chase to relay what surveillance obsessions can tell us about Ecuador.

A chapter on the "almost pathological urge" of US operatives to find the "Moscow gold" supposedly funding Ecuadorian communism reveals absurd contradictions. These include news of Soviet largesse juxtaposed with reports of Communist Party penury and ongoing struggles to raise money at "benefit dances, raffles, and parties" (pp. 54, 55). The documents also reveal divisions in the party that, until now, were poorly understood and confirm Becker's notion that communists were better organized and more effective in Guayaquil than elsewhere in the country. At times though, despite Becker's stated objectives, the book does a better job charting how US intelligence functioned than explaining key events in the trajectory of the Ecuadorian Left.

In 1950, for example, a strike at the La Industrial textile factory in Quito led to similar actions at other plants and plans by some for a general strike. The analysis focuses on the death of Mariana Carvajal, the daughter of a factory worker; efforts by Quito police to locate Communist Party member Nela Martínez for having allegedly absconded with funds raised for Carvajal's family; workers' defense of Martínez; and the CIA's efforts to smear Martínez's political organizing work by falsely accusing her of having stolen the money in question. The key finding of this section is that the CIA was complicit in the arrest of Martínez by local police on a trumped-up charge, even as CIA op-

eratives routinely concluded that communist activity in Latin America remained low. In fact, Becker reasons that this was one of several tactics the CIA used to justify their ongoing surveillance of communists. Though the details are new, none of this will surprise anybody familiar with CIA operations in Latin America during the cold war. But the significance of the strike to Ecuadorian historical processes is lost in the case of the missing money. Becker never places this case (and many others) in larger Ecuadorian contexts of cold war labor actions, leftist political movements' connections to organized labor, or the implications of this case for other US interventions in Latin American labor protest.

In the end, as presented by Becker, this and other episodes of CIA surveillance in the 1950s give the impression of a Communist Party distant from working people. Was that true? Becker concludes that the document cache that he has mined so effectively challenges established wisdom that the 1950s marked a turn toward the political Right. "Rather than a decade dominated by conservatives, the 1950s witnessed the emergence of mass popular movements." Marginalized groups provided leadership for those movements incorporating "Indigenous peoples, women, workers, and students." (p. 250). I have no reason to doubt that conclusion. If anybody understands those movements, it is Becker. However, this book will leave many questions unanswered about how those movements functioned in relation to marginalized groups the author identifies.

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