

Becker, Marc. *The FBI in Latin America: The Ecuador Files*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Marc Becker's *The FBI in Latin America* simultaneously tells the history of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) surveillance in Ecuador and of the failures of Ecuadorian socialist and communist parties to gain a larger voice in national politics in the 1940s. Becker focuses on the period between 1940 and 1947, when J. Edgar Hoover directed the Special Intelligence Service (SIS) to provide the FBI with information to prevent subversive activities in the Americas. Taking place mostly during the Second World War, the SIS tasked agents with looking for fascist threats to the hemisphere, even though, as Becker argues, they were frequently concerned more with anti-communist intelligence gathering than with threats from Germany, Italy, and Japan. *The FBI in Latin America*, however, is not merely a history of U.S. foreign policy or one of espionage. A historian long interested in indigenous politics, Marxist thought, and revolutionary movements in Ecuador, Becker wants to use FBI sources to tell the history of the Ecuadorian left, a group of political dissidents who often destroyed their own sources to survive periods of intense police and military repression. While Latin American historians have traditionally looked to subvert national narratives through social histories "from below," he wants to read foreign policy archives against the grain, "for what they divulge about leftist struggles for a more equitable and just world" (p. 4). From this perspective, he traces the history of communist and socialist politics in relation to the rise (and fall) of conservative President José María Velasco Ibarra after "La Gloriosa," a democratic revolution in May 1944 that the left thought could have led to a broader social revolution.

These intertwined histories of political ineptitude, false hopes, and institutional failures are at times comedic and other times tragic. Becker meticulously details the history of the 45 SIS agents in Ecuador, many of whom operated clandestinely as representatives of U.S. corporations, like General Motors or Firestone, rather than as agents of the U.S. government looking to overthrow dangerous political regimes. In almost comedic fashion, they arrived with little knowledge of Ecuador's history, not speaking Spanish, and struggling to distinguish communism and fascism, despite the fact that the international communist movement, following the Popular Front strategy coming from the Soviet Union, was a U.S. ally during Second World War. Their reports were often useless, with Becker even noting one three-page account about the province of Tungurahua having stood out for its lack of intelligence gathering: "The communiqué was largely limited instead to basic historical, geographic, and economic information that would have been of interest to a traveler through the region, including provision of housing and entertainment options" (p., 44). As well-educated elite white men in the United States, SIS agents frequented the urban establishments of Ecuadorians with similar social status. Generally oblivious to the conditions and political aspirations of women, rural workers, and the indigenous, their notes failed to provide a thick description of any fascist or communist threats across the country. Instead, as Becker convincingly concludes, they point to the FBI's desire to protect U.S. economic interests more than to combat the spread of the most radical factions of the Ecuadorian Communist Party (PCE) and the political left more generally.

These reports help tell the successes and, as was more often the case, the failures of socialism and communism in 1940s Ecuador. Although Becker only mentions some of the touchstones of the nation's history before 1940 in passing, his ability to intertwine U.S. foreign policy and Ecuadorian history shines in the second half of *The FBI in Latin America*, particularly in the wake of "La Gloriosa." Looking to replace the repressive liberal President Carlos Alberto Arroyo del Río in the 1944 presidential election, communists and socialists supported Velasco Ibarra, who staged a coup just before the election and established a government antithetical to the

social reforms that his supporters on the left wanted. The growing ideological chasm between them is the foundation for the political tensions described in the second half of the book. In the mid-1940s, Ecuador had more members of the PCE in its government than any other Latin American country. Accordingly, Becker asks, in language typical of many Marxist historians, “Why was the PCE unable to leverage these factors to its advantage?” (p. 158). Ultimately, he determines that collaboration with democratic and populist governments, like Velasco Ibarra’s, fragmented the political left, with its leadership abandoning the popular mobilizations of the streets for backroom negotiations with a national government not interested in class reform. It was, for Becker, a lost opportunity: “Although at that point in Ecuador’s history 70 percent of the population embraced leftist sympathies, socialist leaders, due to a lack of vision, political experience, sophistication, and the vanity of its leaders, had allowed liberals and conservatives to gain control of the assembly” (p. 197). These conditions endured, even after the military overthrew Ibarra Velasco in 1947, leaving socialists and communists in an even more precarious state once Cold War paranoia took over the U.S. State Department and foreign interventions in Latin America once re-emerged as a defining feature of U.S. foreign policy not only in Latin America but now across the globe.

Much like Greg Grandin in his *Empires Workshop: Latin America and the Roots of U.S. Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan, 2006), Becker casts the United States as an imperial power looking to protect its economic interests, even during President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy, when SIS agents traveled across Latin America without any intention to stage a coup. By telling the history of Ecuador’s left in the 1940s, he places the origin of Latin America’s Cold War nearly a decade earlier than what historians usually acknowledge, with “La Gloriosa” and Velasco Ibarra’s rise to power, not the military coup deposing Guatemala’s President Jacobo Árbenz in 1954.

The strengths and weaknesses in *The FBI in Latin America* both come from the book’s narrow focus. As Becker excitedly points out in his preface, the research for this book was the result of an unexpected discovery at the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland. Looking for information about peasant organizations, he instead found the FBI files about the SIS. Looking at Ecuador specifically gives readers a fascinating window into the inner workings of FBI intelligence gathering as well as the daily operations and internal debates of communists and socialists in Latin America. Yet, it also leaves bigger questions about the SIS that Becker points to but does not directly address. For instance, in October 1943, there were only 21 agents assigned to Ecuador, but Latin America was home to 583. The FBI was less concerned with Ecuadorian politics than it was with Japanese immigrants to Peru and Nazi infiltration in Mexico, Brazil, Chile, and Argentina. Accordingly, I wonder whether Becker’s conclusions can be applied to the countries where there were more SIS agents and where a more systematic intelligence-gathering operation possibly could have been implemented. His deep reading of State Department documents, nonetheless, should peak the interests of historians who use similar sources. *The FBI in Latin America* paints a picture of U.S. foreign policy during the Second World War that would be of use to undergraduate courses on U.S.-Latin American relations. Finally, as an effective window into the conflicting dynamics between democracy and dictatorship within Latin American populism in the middle half of the twentieth century, it would also work well in Latin American history courses.

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