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Marc Becker. *The CIA in Ecuador*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-4780-1035-7 (cloth, \$104.95); 978-1-4780-1138-5 (paper, \$27.95).

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The CIA in Ecuador is not about the CIA in Ecuador. Rather, Marc Becker has read through many of the recently declassified CIA documents, now available at the CIA's "CREST" (the CIA Records Search Tool) on-line site, and from them has written a history of Ecuadorian Communists in the 1950s.¹ There is almost no exiting scholarship on the history of Latin American Communists and Communist Parties for this period.²

During the Cold War, the CIA conducted global surveillance of Communists. Even in undersized Ecuador, CIA agents usually wrote several reports every month on Communist activities. Ecuadorian Communists' record keeping was not very good: they usually never bothered to keep files, and sometimes they destroyed anything written down lest this information be used against them by government officials. Declassified CIA surveillance documents are arguably the best source of information on Ecuadorian Communists in the 1950s.

These records have their limits. While they are at least easily accessed on-line, the documents have been redacted, sometimes heavily, and there are sometimes large and puzzling gaps in the inventory.

And, of course, the CIA had an agenda. CIA agents routinely exaggerated the extent of the threat of Communism in Ecuador, both because the agents were anti-Communist true believers, and because their continued employment depended upon locating and cataloging a serious communist menace in Ecuador.

There have never been many Communists in Ecuador, and the 1950s, the decade covered in this volume, were an especially sleepy time for Ecuadorian Marxist-Leninists. The CIA claimed different numbers for active Ecuadorian Communist Party members, bouncing between a high-end guess of 5,000 to the probably more realistic estimate of around a thousand or so (out of a national population of around 2.75 million in 1955).

The *Partido Comunista del Ecuador* (PCE, Ecuadorian Communist Party) drew nearly no interest in the polls. Most people in Ecuador were not allowed to vote, but those that could seemed not to notice Communist Party candidates. The 1950s decision of the Ecuadorian Communist Party leadership to follow a peaceful electoral path failed utterly. While the CIA

¹ Instructions on how to access the CIA's CREST site for declassified documents can be found at: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/collection/crest-25-year-program-archive>. The site is located at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom>.

² A summary of historiographical trends for the history of Latin American Communists and Communist parties can be found in, Gerardo Leibner and James N. Green, "New Views on the History of Latin American Communism," *Latin American Research Review* 35:2 (March 2008): 3-8.

was convinced that Ecuadorian Communists would pursue violent means, they did not. Ecuador had many coup attempts in the 1950s, but the Communists did not participate in any of these, as Becker shows.

Aside from its scant membership, the key problem for the Ecuadorian Communist Party was their lack of funds. The CIA was sure that Moscow was generously bankrolling the PCE, but Becker carefully shows that even the CIA's own evidence demonstrated that the PCE never had any money. Few members paid their Communist Party dues.

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Communist Party meetings often focused on the desire for money, with leaders encouraging fellow Communists to show more enterprise in raising funds, for example by more aggressively hawking the weekly (usually) Communist newspaper *El Pueblo* (The People). *Guayaquileño* (people from Guayaquil, the largest city in Ecuador) Communists even tried a raffle, in which the prize was a beautifully hand-stitched kimono. But a local right-wing group printed up fake raffle tickets and ruined it. On another occasion, when a Communist died and bequeathed a nice house to the party, members considered using the sales money in real estate speculation. This effort went nowhere.

Drawing chiefly upon the CIA surveillance reports, Becker provides an exhaustive history of Ecuador's Communists in the 1950s, taking a deep dive into an array of episodes. In Guayaquil in July 1953, there was a fire at a Communist newsstand. The blaze partially damaged some of the floor and part of one of the walls. Someone set off a stink bomb at the movie theater screening the anti-Communist film "Iron Curtain." Becker is not sure if Communists were responsible, in the end leaning toward blaming three rowdy students in the balcony who might not even have been Communists.

Becker provides day-by-day accounts of the three Communist congresses held in Ecuador in this period. Hundreds of people attended each of these meetings. Acrimony reigned. One member denounced and chastised another for spending too much time trying to sell the Party newspaper. Some Communist leaders appear to have used their positions to pilfer money from Party accounts, or at least stood accused of this. Most of the time spent at the congresses, and nearly all the energy, went into trying to kick other members out of the Communist Party. Accusations flew. Some Party leaders may have been drunks, some could be rude, others might have sometimes been less than fully committed Communists. Becker weighs the evidence, although he does not always offer definitive conclusions on these and many other lesser controversies.

Ecuadorian Communists certainly hated imperialists and capitalists, but evidently not nearly as much as they hated other Ecuadorian Communists. Becker details the bitter fights between members, anger fueled by personal grievances, jealousy, or disrupted romantic relationships (for example, two Ecuadorian Communists had a longing for the same attractive French Communist). The only issue that Ecuadorian Communists apparently could agree upon was that the worst of the worst were the deeply despised Ecuadorian socialists. The Ecuadorian left, as Becker reminds us, was badly fractured.

The United States' obsession with a Communist threat in Ecuador was completely delusional. It was an amazing waste of time and resources to have people spend their careers following around the handful of Ecuadorian Communists and then writing up these lengthy reports on their comings and goings. It is hard not to wonder what actual good might have been done instead in Ecuador with all these resources and human effort expended by the United States.

Those looking for great detail on Ecuadorian Communists in the 1950s will find it in *The CIA in Ecuador*. Readers seeking a book on CIA operations in Ecuador should refer to Philip Agee's *Inside the Company: CIA Diary*, or for wider coverage, Tim Weiner's *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA*.³

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³ Philip Agee, *Inside the Company: CIA Diary* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1976); Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).