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**Kristian Gustafson and Christopher Andrew. "The Other Hidden Hand: Soviet and Cuban Intelligence in Allende's Chile." *Intelligence and National Security* 33:3 (2018): 407-421. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2017.1407549>.**

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**K**ristian Gustafson and Christopher Andrew rightly state that the presence of U.S. intelligence during the Salvador Allende government is well known and well documented, whereas the role of Cuban and Soviet intelligence in Chile is understudied. Their article is a welcome publication for two reasons: an analytical one for presenting a study of Soviet and Cuban intelligence, and a methodological one for combining primary sources, especially Soviet archival records and written memoirs by key persons, and documentation about Cuba's involvement and interviews of Cuban intelligence officers.

Of course, the principal economic, social, and political actors and processes were basically Chilean, as the authors also admit. A country with a democratically chosen left-wing government trying to follow a socialist itinerary became a Cold War theatre as well. U.S. intelligence tried to influence and support the oppositional forces, their Soviet and Cuban counterparts tried to support the government coalition.

The guiding line in this article is a discussion about the consequences of this polarizing support and the efforts of the American and Soviet-Cuban intelligence to neutralize the efforts of one another and get access to informants within the Chilean officer corps. This middle-class closed organization proved to be impenetrable. In general, Gustafson and Andrew's detailed account of these conflicting interests of the three foreign intelligence actors indicates not an overwhelming influence in terms of results. Their judgement is that their activities "likely accelerated, breakdowns in the ruling coalition and even the trend towards violence which triggered the military coup. The current literature agrees this as being a result, at least in part, of American covert actions, and it is logical to extend the argument to the actions of the Cubans and Soviets based on the existing evidence" (417).

The larger part of their contribution is an analysis of the role of the intelligence of the ‘Communist Block.’ They argue that the Soviets and the Cubans did not act as a homogeneous alliance and that they had different expectations and preferences. The leadership of the Soviet Union considered the Allende government to be a nice experiment, but not to have geostrategic importance. They supported the Moscow-oriented Communist Party during Allende’s government, and after the Pinochet-coup in 1973 they and their European allies received Chilean Communist leaders and cadres in exile. Gustafson and Andrew argue that Cuba’s commitment went further, was more intense, and had to do with the personal security of Allende. The authors also remark that Cuba’s support to the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* (MIR, at the far Left), the socialist party, and the communist party weakened the government coalition and maybe induced political violence.

Perhaps the only somewhat weaker point in this excellent article is fact that the two authors underestimate the divergencies between the Soviet and Cuban efforts and do not incorporate the Argentinean and Peruvian diplomacy. Gustafson and Andrew rely for their analysis of the Cuban intelligence operations on several sources, especially on Tanya Harmer’s groundbreaking study on Allende’s government.<sup>1</sup> As my own research focuses on Cuba’s formal and informal diplomacy with respect to the Latin American Left, I can perhaps contribute by clarifying the reasons and the modus operandi of Cuba’s long-time political investment in Allende’s government.<sup>2</sup>

My first comment concerns the nature of Cuba’s diplomacy and intelligence in Chile and the entire Latin American and Caribbean region. While interviewing Fidel Castro’s veteran officers and about thirty retired elite intelligence officers, minister councilors and ambassadors, I could observe the different levels of amity between Latin American, European, Russian and Chinese visitors in Cuba. Visiting Latin Americans have a more accented body language and adapt relatively quickly, but even native Spanish speakers have difficulties to understand street Cubano. Walter Ulbricht, the leader of the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED, the Communist Party of the German Democratic Republic), had strict convictions about etiquette and the behavior of a petit bourgeois. He was not fond of the hugs and the loud voices of his Cuban visitors and was especially wary of *barbudos*. For him, Che Guevara was a messily dressed radical and an iconoclast.<sup>3</sup>

Many of Cuba’s political alliances with leftist governments and their leaders were based on personal friendships with Fidel Castro. He also chose Cuban diplomats who would probably be appreciated by these leaders and would become ‘friends of the president,’ even before the establishment of formal bilateral relations. I make these comments to illustrate that Cuba’s intelligence and deep knowledge in the Latin

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<sup>1</sup> Tanya Harmer, Tanya. *Allende’s Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Here I draw on Dirk Kruijt. *Cuba and Revolutionary Latin America. An Oral History*. (London: Zed Books, 2017). A shortened version of the interviews has been published as Luis Suárez Salazar and Dirk Kruijt, *La Revolución Cubana en Nuestra América: El internacionalismo anónimo* (Panama City and Havana: RUTH Casa Editorial [e-book], 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Kruijt, 67.

American and Caribbean region were no match vis-à-vis the more formal Soviet and Eastern European intelligence officers.

My second comment is about Cuba's intelligence structure. Gustafson and Andrew use different acronyms that all refer to the same structures, headed by Manuel Piñeiro, whose second-in-command during the seventies was Ulises Estrada (pseudonym of Dámaso Lescaille). Piñeiro oversaw Cuba's foreign intelligence between 1959 and 1992 and was succeeded by his (then) first Vice-Chief Arbesú who retired in 2013. Piñeiro always oversaw the consecutive successor organizations, working with the same functionaries. He built up the Cuban intelligence and security apparatus, whose legal disguise was initially called the Technical Vice-Ministry (Vice-Ministerio Técnico, VTM) of the Ministry of the Interior (MININT). When VTM was split into several directorates, Piñeiro became the Chief of the Directorate-General of Intelligence (DGI), that was split between the DGI and the new Directorate General of National Liberation (DGLN), again controlled by Piñeiro. In 1975, DGLN was transformed in the Departamento América, still operating under Piñeiro but now a civilian department attached to the Central Committee. All these successor organizations operated completely autonomously because they were created with the consent of Fidel Castro who wanted a swift and agile organization without bureaucracy, "functioning as his eyes and ears."<sup>4</sup> Piñeiro lived largely in the shadows of power. As a member of the Central Committee, his real influence in state affairs was based on his relationship of confidence with Fidel; he was his fiercely loyal political operator. According to several of his deputies at the department, he was one of the very few who could say 'no' to the commander-in-chief.

Developing respectful long-term and friendly relations and a deep knowledge of the local political situation were the ground rules. To give some examples: Cervantes, who also had advisory experience in Portuguese speaking Guinea Bissau and Angola, was the in-house expert for Brazil for more than thirty years. After the re-establishment of diplomatic relations, he became the political councilor at the Cuban embassy in Brasilia. Over decades he developed a personal friendship with labor leader, and later President, Lula. Abreu, also a member of the Central Committee, was in charge of the relations with Central America and the Armed Left in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua for more than thirty years.

Underlining the analysis of Gustafson and Andrew, my third comment is that in matters of foreign affairs and intelligence, especially with respect to Latin America, Cuba had strong other convictions and intentions than the Soviet leadership. In 1970, Piñeiro headed a ten-person delegation to the Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries. Ulises Estrada was the deputy delegation leader. The trip took three months; the mission visited the entire Socialist Block except for the German Democratic Republic. Here are Estrada's reminiscences:

It was the 'delegation of the padlock of the chastity belt.' Sexual relations were prohibited. We had to be careful with drinks. The core of the trip was about political intelligence. In every country they spoke about their structures and objectives. But there was no mutual understanding because there was no coincidence in positions. When we were talking about the struggle against imperialism, they had one vision and we had another one (...). In all countries there was some anti-Soviet touch (...). In Hungary they took us to where the Soviet tanks had killed I don't know how many people, in 1956 (...). Now, the political discussions were bad. My relations with the Soviets were always bad. When I went to the Soviet Union, I always had disputes with my counterparts. Because, firstly, I could not tell

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<sup>4</sup> Kruijt, 86.

them what we were doing. They knew something, but we compartmentalized or misinformed them.<sup>5</sup>

My third comment is thus that Cuba had also much more to gain from a socialist regime in Chile than the Soviet Union. Cuba's investment in Allende and the government coalition was deeper. In Latin America, Cuba was isolated in a diplomatic quarantine. Cuba's membership of the Organization of American States (OAS) was suspended in 1962, under strong pressure from the United States. All Latin American countries ruptured their diplomatic relations with Cuba, apart for Mexico.<sup>6</sup> But in the early seventies the situation changed. In some countries reform oriented or leftist governments took office. This coincided with Cuba's turn towards a more pragmatic diplomacy, creating alliances not only with the revolutionary Armed Left like in the sixties, but also with other nationalist-reformist forces: in Chile (the Allende government, 1970-1973), in Peru (the government of General Velasco, 1968-1975), in Panama (the government of General Torrijos, 1968-1981). In Panama, Castro appointed Hernández, the VTM Section Chief in charge of Central America at the time, as 'friend of the president' in 1969, until the formal establishment of diplomatic relations in 1974. In July 1972 formal relations were re-established with Peru. But the very beginning of an extended series of diplomatic relations in Latin America and the Caribbean began in Chile, in December 1970, severing the OAS cordon sanitaire. For Cuba, building and maintaining good or excellent relations with Allende was a lifeline.

Allende's daughter Beatriz had been a member of the Chilean branch of Guevara's *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) and Allende had personally accompanied the three Cuban ELN survivors on their way home. Immediately after Allende's victory, Beatriz (married to Fernandez Oña, one of Piñero's officials at the Chile desk) visited Havana and asked for Cuban assistance to bolster his security detail. Castro and Piñero sent three Cuban specialists, one of them being Beatriz's husband.<sup>7</sup> In Cuba, Piñero created in Havana a special task force of 21 persons, headed by Estrada, to report to Castro daily. In 1971, Castro made a long trip to Chile, Peru, and Ecuador. But his principal objective had been Chile. He made speeches across the country and explained that he had come to "learn about the Chilean process." But in private he expressed his worries about the strength of the 'counter-revolutionary forces,' inspected the defense infrastructure of the embassy and told Piñero to prepare for the worst.

Gustafson and Andrew rightly remark that the Cuban embassy were also aiding and training the far-left MIR and conclude that such serious intervention which was not in Allende's favor, eventually contributing to Allende's ultimate downfall. As far as I know, the Cubans provided training and small quantities of arms to both the Socialist and the Communist Party as well to the MIR for armed resistance. But their first objective was to provide security to Allende. Indeed, in 1972 Allende asked to stop assistance to the MIR. Here again is Estrada's version:

Fidel instructed me to leave as soon as possible for Chile and to tell Allende on his orders that if we could not help the MIR we also would suspend our aid to the socialists and

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<sup>5</sup> Kruijt, 97.

<sup>6</sup> Bolivia, Chile, and Uruguay broke their diplomatic relations in 1964 after explicit U.S. admonition. Canada (until 1990 only an observer of the OAS) never interrupted its diplomatic relations with Cuba.

<sup>7</sup> Harmer, 52, 54.

communists. We wouldn't help anybody. He insisted: "See how you tell him, but that is be our position" (...). The day after our arrival, we were welcomed by Allende (...) After a short introduction I continued saying that Fidel had decided to withdraw our assistance aid to the socialists and communists because everyone was going to find out that we had suspended our aid to the MIR and that was going to leave Cuba in a very complicated political position. Allende interrupted me and told me that he knew that this would be Cuba's position. And he added: "Tell Fidel that it's okay to give help to the MIR, but all what that organization does wrong will be the responsibility of Fidel."<sup>8</sup>

In August 1973, Estrada was sent to Santiago as second-in-command within the embassy, in charge of security and contingency plans for the defense of Allende:

Everything that we did in Chile happened with the agreement of Allende. We were instructed by the commander-in-chief [Castro] to be of help in whatever way he would like or agree. You could not do anything in Chile unbeknownst to Allende. We trained the socialists and the communists, and we provided arms to both parties. In Chile, Luis Corbalán and Carlos Altamirano, [the senior leaders of the Communist and the Socialist Party], didn't believe in a coup d'état. [But Allende did.] We prepared a plan for the defense of the residence of Allende and in La Moneda [the Presidential Palace]: shooting positions, weapons, etcetera (...). On 11 September 11 at 10.00 o'clock in the morning [Beatriz] Allende called. She told Luis Fernández Oña: her dad said that we not could move out of the embassy (...). I called Samuel Riquelme [Communist Party]: a coup was ongoing. He said that it was impossible. I also called Carlos Altamirano and told him the same thing. He replied: "Ulises, please, I am told that you are sick. Take rest. In Chile there cannot be a coup". On the afternoon of 11 September, the military called the embassy to tell us that Allende was dead, that he had committed suicide (...).<sup>9</sup>

Between 1973 and 1975, Estrada remained in charge of a task force to support the Chilean resistance movement. In the 1980s, Cuba tried to generate a united guerrilla movement, an umbrella organization between the MIR and the *Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez* (FPMR), then the armed branch of the Chilean Communist Party.<sup>10</sup> The effort failed.

All these comments do not affect the high quality of Gustafson and Andrew's article. They only corroborate my observation that during the Allende years not only the global context of the Cold War prevailed. Latin American geopolitical interests were also present, with the Cuban concerns and maybe also Argentinean and Peruvian diplomacy, two countries with frontier problems with Chile that normalized and intensified their relations in the last two years of the Allende government. And of course, the involvement of Cuba that,

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Ulises Estrada (Havana, 21 and 28 October 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> The Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez (FPMR) was designed and shaped in Cuba, with the assistance of Estrada (interview with Luis Rojas Nuñez, Havana, 20 January 2012); see Suárez and Kruijt, 440 ff. About the history of the FPMR, see Luis Rojas Nuñez. *De la rebelión popular a la sublevación imaginada. Antecedentes de la historia política y militar del Partido Comunista de Chile y el FPMR 1973–1990*. Santiago de Chile: Ediciones LOM, 2011.

although strongly supporting the Allende government coalition, also allowed for the possibility of a future guerrilla force in the event of a coup d'état.

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