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Vanni Pettinà. "The Shadows of Cold War over Latin America: The U.S. Reaction to Fidel Castro's Nationalism, 1956-59." *Cold War History* 11: 3 (August 2011): 317-339. DOI: 10.1080/14682741003686115. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682741003686115> .

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Review by **Alan McPherson**, University of Oklahoma

In this article, Vanni Pettinà attempts to revise our understanding of the U.S. response to the Cuban Revolution by adopting what he calls a "global perspective" (318). This perspective sees great significance in the Soviet encouragement of national liberation movements in Latin America in the 1950s and particularly recasts Washington's response as confused by the progressive united-front strategy of Fidel Castro yet hostile to anything smacking of the intersection of the Cold War and decolonization.

U.S. postwar administrations worried increasingly in the late 1940s and early 1950s about Soviet attempts to take advantage of unrest in the colonial world. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) identified this problem as "the main future challenge to western hegemony" (318). The launch by George Malenkov and then Nikita Khrushchev of "Peaceful Coexistence" strategies toward decolonizing movements set off alarm bells throughout the U.S. government, especially at the CIA.

The Dwight Eisenhower administration became especially concerned with Soviet gains in Latin America because of two specific overtures that the Kremlin made toward Latin American governments, especially those leaning toward social democracy or radicalism. The first of these overtures was the offer of massive economic aid to Latin America by Khrushchev starting in 1956, which forced Washington to revise its aid levels to Latin America, which had declined to a measly 1 percent of total aid under President Harry Truman. The second overture was explicitly political—the first was implicitly so, as Pettinà recognizes—and advanced a "Democratic or United Front of National Liberation" strategy, or a temporary alliance with non-communist but leftist or progressive

movements, especially those identified with liberating governments from their European or U.S. patrons. This turn by the Soviets left Washington suspicious of any movement on the left, assuming that it could be easily co-opted by the Kremlin. Such Cold War/decolonization fears led Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to conclude that Guatemala's Jacobo Arbenz had to be overthrown in 1954. In Cuba, things were more complicated. Castro was certainly radical in his nationalism, but he distanced himself from the Cuban communist party, the Partido Socialista Popular (P.S.P.), for example by excluding the P.S.P. from the April 1958 general strike against the Fulgencio Batista regime. But after mid-1958 the communists adopted Castro as the leader of the revolution, and the U.S. policymaking establishment too easily concluded that they would control the iron-willed leader. Thus the perception of a developing world about to be overrun by Soviet wiles colored Washington's response to what was a more indigenous revolution.

This analysis, while in no way false, nevertheless adds relatively little to what we already know. Pettinà claims to be working against “two main perspectives” in the historical understanding of U.S.-Cuban relations in the late 1950s, both of which he calls “local” (317, 318). The first is the perspective that U.S. policymakers opposed Castro because he threatened U.S. economic hegemony, and this article certainly steers clear of U.S. economic interests to focus on political concerns. It probably goes too far in this direction, largely ignoring the events of 1959 that very much did threaten U.S. investments—the slashing of rents and utility rates, the agrarian reform—and that sent U.S. businessmen running to the White House in a panic.¹

The more problematic straw man is the second “local” perspective—Washington's inability to differentiate between “progressive nationalism and communism” (317). Pettinà's evidence and analysis, however, point exclusively to this concern as a local one. First, he spends over four pages tracing Washington's growing discomfort with “losing” the decolonizing world to the Soviets, but Latin American is not ostensibly within that category. True, sometimes the CIA or other agencies spoke broadly of the “Third World,” and they may have lumped Latin American states in with decolonizing countries, but none of the author's citations in those pages show Latin America being explicitly included. If anything, Washington in the 1940s and early 1950s saw Latin America as an area relatively distinct from Europe, Africa, and Asia, safe from Soviet attack, and largely under the diplomatic and economic control of the United States. The more directly relevant part of the article, which follows, is about Washington's specific concern about Latin America turning to communism. To be sure, that concern was real. None of Pettinà's evidence, however, demonstrates that that concern reflected worries over decolonization. Washington worried instead about the Soviets' two specific overtures toward the region. Equally problematic is that the most systematic evidence of such

¹ Alan McPherson, *Yankee No! Anti-Americanism in U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 58-59.

thinking in the article comes from CIA analyses. The author should be congratulated for having read new documents from the agency released through the Freedom of Information Act. But the deep concern over Soviet overtures in the world or in Latin America was not generally reflected among the policymakers who counted more than the C.I.A.—the Secretary of State and the President. If anything, the release of CIA global analyses blurs a picture that was relatively clear, by focusing unduly on more obscure bureaucratic analyses of Soviet influence while local and economic ones still prevailed for Washington and Havana.

In other words, the argument about concerns over Soviet backing of “national liberation” struggles in Latin America is somewhat overstated because what Washington worried about was the mingling of wide-eyed nationalists such as Castro with more programmatic and pragmatic local communists such as the P.S.P. leadership. Almost all the evidence that Pettinà advances on Cuba is about potential ties between the Castro’s 26th of July Movement and *local* communists. Within this still-relevant “local perspective,” the challenge, rather, is to assess whether Washington simplified the evidence before it. It certainly does seem so, that the CIA and others projected events from Eastern Europe onto the Americas. Paul Nitze, for instance, talked of Soviet “mechanisms” in Latin America but did not specify what these were (326).

Besides, to say that concerns about the Cold War blinded the United States to the complexities of Cuban politics is nothing new. *Of course* Washington was concerned with Soviet meddling in Cuba, and that was an extension of their concern over *any* communist meddling. Scholars such as Thomas Paterson and Richard Welch (not cited by Pettinà) identified this paranoid Cold War mindset years ago.² Other scholars have even seen any U.S. response as relatively irrelevant given the unrelenting drive for independence of Castro and his crew.³

There are other frustrating aspects of this article. Nothing seems to be known about the amount of Soviet aid sent in 1956 and after, which countries accepted it, how long it lasted, and what it built—or not—thus making it difficult to take seriously Washington’s response. Pettinà himself admits that this “economic offensive” was “probably ineffective from a material point of view,” but does not offer any details (324). So it remains difficult for the reader to discern whether the Eisenhower administration’s concerns were appropriate or overkill. There is also little sense of how the united front strategy worked: did the P.S.P. get specific instructions from the Kremlin to ally with Castro? Was it free to interpret Cuban events in its own way? Finally, the article also has several errors,

² Paterson, *Contesting Castro: The United States and the Triumph of the Cuban Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Welch, *Response to Revolution: The United States and the Cuban Revolution, 1959-1961* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

³ Alan Luxenburg, “Did Eisenhower Push Castro Into the Arms of the Soviets?” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 30 (Spring 1988): 37-71.

including dozens of grammatical mistakes, probably due to insufficient editing of a non-native English speaker. Editors also missed Pettinà calling the Point Four program “Four Point” and Yale historian Gil Joseph “Joseph Gilbert.”

This criticism does not condemn a more global view of U.S.-Latin American relations during the Cold War. Far from it. Several historians have done fascinating work on Cuba-Soviet relations at this crucial juncture, much of it from non-U.S. sources.⁴ But a global view should not blind us to the primacy of local factors for revolution, especially in Latin America. The irony would be that a global view emphasizing U.S. fear of the Soviets would distort events on the ground in the same way that the CIA’s own obsessively Moscow-focused worldview distorted events.

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⁴ See, for instance, Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002); James Blight and Philip Brenner, *Sad and Luminous Days: Cuba’s Struggle with the Superpowers after the Missile Crisis* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Daniela Spenser, “The Caribbean Crisis: Catalyst for Soviet Projection in Latin America,” in *In from the Cold: Latin America’s New Encounter with the Cold War* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008), ed. Gilbert Joseph and Spenser, 77-111.