

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

h-diplo.org/reviews/

No. 472

Published on 16 July 2014

H-Diplo Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Patrick J. Iber. “Who Will Impose Democracy?": Sacha Volman and the Contradictions of CIA Support for the Anticommunist Left in Latin America.” *Diplomatic History* 37:5 (November 2013): 995-1028. DOI: 10.1093/dh/dht041. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/dh/dht041>

URL: <http://h-diplo.org/reviews/PDF/AR472.pdf>

Reviewed by **Ernesto Semán**, University of Richmond

Is it possible to reveal, through the biography of a little-known Cold-War political foot soldier, the complex forces and competing worldviews that shaped the modern Western Hemisphere after World War II? Patrick Iber's detailed study of the actions of Sacha Volman offers an emphatic yes. A U.S. emissary in the region, Volman's involvement with global operations spanned two decades. This period defined U.S. foreign policy in Cold-War Latin America as ambivalently promoting social democracy in the early years of the postwar, and much less ambivalently cracking down on the movements for social reform that it timidly helped to create.

A glance at the wondrous paths of Volman's life is irresistible in itself. A Romanian fighter against Nazi and Soviet occupations in the early 1940s, Volman escaped Stalinist Bucharest packed in a wooden box in the belly of a British plane in 1946, in order to become a U.S. activist in the European labor movement in 1948, a staunch supporter of the anticommunist left in Latin America in 1955, and the improbable black monk behind short-story writer and political conspirator Juan Bosch's rise to power in the Dominican Republic in 1963. All this was funded by or coordinated with the CIA. Volman is one of a set of eccentric figures who populated the actions of the U.S. in the postwar years, filibusters serving as activists serving as spies serving as a blueprint for the most exciting Cold-War literature.¹ A common theme ran through their lives: they were looking for a cause, and for adventures. And cause and adventures they found in Latin America, in the

¹ Probably, the most memorable character in this category is Serafino Romualdi, a native Italian serving alternatively and simultaneously as AFL Representative to Latin America, State Department officer and CIA agent. See Kim Scipes: *AFL-CIO's Secret War Against Developing Country Workers: Solidarity or Sabotage?* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2010).

fight against the broadly-described totalitarian threat and in favor of the expanding power of the United States in the region. Sadly, their cause and their adventure led to the suffering of many.

Since 1945, U.S. foreign officials, labor diplomats, and the expanding intelligence apparatus had developed a permanent relation with democratic and progressive movements in Latin America that signed up for the fight against the 'totalitarian threat.' This relation coalesced in the mid-forties with the U.S. support of the Caribbean Legion, a group of Latin American leaders determined to overthrow dictatorships in the region. Highly interventionist (and not particularly effective), they met their nemeses in the dictators Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic and Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua. Many of the progressive leaders who sought support for their actions in the United States emerged from this 'Legion', including the Cuban Carlos Prío Socarrás, the Costa Rican José Figueres, and the Dominican Juan Bosch, the figure Volman would join later in his political life. They were social-democratic and nationalist in their political and economic views, and many of their parties joined the Socialist International once it was created in 1955. A central quest of the author is to elucidate the ill fate in Latin America of social democracy along European lines: moderate political systems in which conservative and progressive sectors agreed on guaranteeing individual liberty and property rights, advancing social rights, preventing extremism and aligning with the United States in the Cold War.

As Iber shows, even if the discourse and actions of the democratic left were much further to the left than postwar American liberalism, they received various forms of support as long as they "were useful to the United States as critics of Communism from a left wing perspective" (997). Over the two decades after 1945, the U.S. helped these groups by creating think tanks, funding political campaigns, financing several publications among unions and political parties, training labor leaders in the region and helping to organize labor and political organizations. Most of the time, help came in the form of covert support, a central fact stressed by Iber to show how the U.S. endorsement of progressive regional partners was weaker and much more contingent on their anticommunism than those leaders wanted to believe at the time.

It was in the early 1950s that Volman, who came from New York, got involved in the region as secretary of a regional office of the International Center for Free Trade Unionists in Exile (ICFTUE), an aggressively anticommunist brand of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). In 1955, he created a think tank, renamed the International Institute for Labor Research (IILR) in 1957, a CIA-funded effort to make "the experience of Eastern European suffering under the Soviet yoke the synecdoche of the Cold War" (1004). Global circulation of ideas has never been free of the interference of power relations. But this case shows, in particular, the unique asset that the Volmans of the Cold War possessed, besides their spirit of adventure: they brought to postwar Latin America the anti-totalitarian rhetoric of Eastern Europe, recasting in this apparently simple act debates about the left, the place of the U.S., and the magnified threat of a Communist take-over.

They published high-quality propaganda, “both anticolonial and antitotalitarian” (1004). They advocated for liberal democracy and modernization. But more importantly, Volman, first from New York and then from Mexico and Costa Rica, devoted his efforts to creating liberal labor activism, promoting unions sympathetic with the American cause, and training Latin American leaders and activists in anticommunist and ‘democratic’ methods. He conceived his mission as the creation of liberal progressive forces that would overcome the power of tyrannies and oligarchies—oligarchy being the operative word against which all populist, liberal, and communist projects positioned themselves. From today’s vantage point, something that immediately stands out in Iber’s study is the centrality of the labor question in defining the nature (and limits) of democracy as a legitimate and inclusive form of modern politics vis-à-vis the perceived traditionalism of Latin American political structures.

The most influential actions of Volman, and the center of Iber’s analysis, took place in the Dominican Republic after the assassination of Trujillo in 1961. There, as the country tried to build democracy almost *ex-nihilo*, Volman had in front of him a case study for the functionalist approaches to social change and a field of experimentation for his (and American liberalism’s) main concerns: how to create a “democratic consciousness”(1014) so the population would not trade its freedom for the immediate benefits offered by authoritarian leaders, but rather embrace a form of social-democratic politics. The Kennedy administration judged that the anticommunist left was too weak to take power. But Volman personally negotiated with local powers to guarantee that Bosch could compete in the 1962 presidential election. He then helped to lay the groundwork for his political return after years in exile. Volman created a political training school for peasants. He helped to build an alliance with unions and became involved in changing the focus of the Bosch campaign from the anti-Trujillismo which all candidates shared to a denunciation of social injustice in which he excelled. After a brief campaign and against the odds, Bosch won with 58.7 percent of the vote, with a strong performance in the countryside and among the urban poor of Santo Domingo. It would be an exaggeration to deduce from Volman’s presence that the Kennedy administration supported Bosch -- the U.S. Embassy was widely perceived as preferring the more conservative Viriato Fiallo (1012). Rather, Volman’s involvement in Bosch’s triumph seems to be the combination of his personal will and the U.S. acceptance of his determination

Later events tragically confirmed the scant tolerance of the U.S. for social-democratic experiments. Unemployment rose to 30 percent at the beginning of Bosch term but started to decline with the beginning of large spending projects. With Volman’s help, Bosch advanced the agrarian reform program promised during his campaign. The U.S. ambassador exerted pressure to cancel the confiscation of large estates, leaving the initiative weakened at birth. The pace was slower than what many demanded. Yet it seemed to accelerate after the first months. Still, it is an overstatement to talk so much about the ‘early’ or ‘later period’ of the administration: Bosch spent more time campaigning for the presidency than in government: he was ousted by a nationalistic military coup after only nine months in office. The U.S. waited a few weeks before finally recognizing the new

dictatorship, in exchange of the improbable promise of restoring the democracy that the same military junta had just overthrown.

Iber shows how, in the Dominican Republic and other parts of Latin America, U.S. support for a progressive left conflated “democratic politics” with “pro-Americanism” (1008), paving the slippery road that led these forces from being called the ‘Democratic Left’ to being dubbed the ‘Anticommunist Left.’ The rhetorical operation under which the two expressions became interchangeable was anything but innocent. The stress on the Anticommunist component made it not only malleable for the purposes of the U.S. foreign policy in the region, but also ensured, as Iber argues in one of his central points, that “much of its work was easily appropriated by the political forces that deposed it”(997). It is not surprising, in this context, that the military junta that ousted Bosch re-used Volman’s anticommunist propaganda material in its repressive crusade, while targeting Volman as the Communist *eminence grise* of the administration that they had just removed.

The article provides new insights into the complex relationship between the U.S. and democratic movements in Latin America, such as the implications of covert U.S. support and the need to explore how domestic and international coalitions failed to serve as the basis of social-democratic regimes. In the Dominican Republic (but clearly not only there), the combination of anticommunism with social democracy “contributed to legitimating the antireform framework that led to rightist violence” (997). These two points call into question a third claim made by the author that, against usual approaches, “at times... the U.S. created limited opportunities for anticommunist social democracy” (996). The suffocation of the Bosch experience, the use by the new dictatorship of the same anticommunist rhetoric, the U.S. recognition of the antidemocratic regime, that regime’s struggle against Bosch’s return and the decision of the Johnson administration, in 1965, to invade the country with 21,000 Marines and Army troops so to avoid the charge of being soft on Communism—these facts all underscore the meaninglessness of that initial and ephemeral U.S. support for social democracy and the pervasive overriding power of the discourse, and economic and military resources of its anticommunist crusade.

The regional context, besides, helps to put Volman’s experience in perspective. As social and diplomatic historians have stressed, once the perception of the totalitarian threat became common sense, all players rearranged their priorities, and American foreign policy came to adopt a particularly repressive idea of democracy for Latin America.² U.S. foreign policy publicly supported elites and economic groups that upheld the oligarchic system that the same American officers decried. U.S. intelligence deployed old and new technologies to undermine the legitimacy of reformist movements, including those that the U.S. timidly supported. Against populist movements, U.S. labor diplomats actively

² For the role of the U.S. in defining the nature and limits of democracy during the Cold War in Latin America, see Greg Grandin, “What Was Containment? Short and Long Answers from the Americas,” in Robert J. McMahon (ed), *The Cold War in the Third World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2013).

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promoted increased productivity as the best way to improve living standards, and even more actively discouraged redistribution of wealth, under the idea that resulting social unrest would only lead to authoritarian movements. By the time of Volman's crusade for Bosch, American officials, labor leaders, and intelligence officers had already, by denouncing ties with the Soviet Union, orchestrated the overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala and Cheddi Jagan in British Guiana, another leader who, like Cuba's Fidel Castro or Colombia's Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, was inspired by liberal democratic ideas proclaimed by the U.S., only to find that the U.S. turned into the most vitriolic opponent of the democratization of social and political rights.

Of course, manufacturing the approval of the repression of progressive change was a complex historical process, and a collaborative endeavor in which national and international factors should be analyzed separately. But with the story of Volman and the shadows of his tragic fate in the history of the Dominican Republic, Iber offers an insight into the particular workings of U.S. foreign policy in the region. If the history of U.S. actions in Latin America has taught us anything, it is that in most cases during this period, U.S. attempts to curb the authoritarian features of social reform ended up undermining social reform wholesale, and advancing far more tragically authoritarian options than those it had aimed to avoid in the first place.

The reality of the U.S. in the region is properly captured in the tense coexistence of the words "impose" and "democracy" in the article's title. Given the fate of social democracy in the region, the question about who would promote "democracy" in the region is still unanswered, and a few hints suggest that the task has been more in the hands of popular movements that embraced some liberal principles independent of, and often against, the United States. As for who would "impose" regime change in Latin America, regardless of the democratic will, the case of the Dominican Republic, as many others in the region, leaves few doubts about the answer.

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