

## [H-Diplo Article Review 692 on “Reading the Cuban revolution from Bogotá, 1957-62.”](#)

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### Article Review

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**Robert A. Karl.** “Reading the Cuban revolution from Bogotá, 1957-62.” *Cold War History* 16:4 (Fall 2016): 337-358. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2016.1218848>.

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Review by **Tom Long**, University of Reading

Was the Cuban Revolution a Cold-War event for Latin America? In retrospect, Cuban revolutionary Fidel Castro and his band of *barbudos* seem to have brought superpower competition to Latin America’s doorstep—if it was not there already. The dominant interpretation long had been that the toppling of erstwhile U.S. ally Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista signalled a radical shift in how the Western Hemisphere related to the structures of global confrontation that had emerged in Europe and Asia in the late 1940s. Did Latin Americans see the Cuban Revolution that way at the time?

In his recent article, Robert Karl addresses that question from a Colombian perspective. In doing so, Karl sounds a note of caution about the growing trend toward a Latin Americanization of the Cold War—or perhaps a Cold War-ization of Latin American history. Local dynamics and historical interpretations dominated early Colombian impressions of Cuba’s revolution; the Cold War took a bit longer to arrive. Though Fidel Castro was a ‘ghost’ haunting Colombian politics from 1957-1962, his spectre was not initially one of Soviet-backed intervention. Instead, Karl shows how the Cuban revolution was a mirror for Colombia’s own incipient democratization rather than a refraction of the Cold War. Recent Colombian experiences, notably *La Violencia*, the toppling of Colombian dictator Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, and Colombia’s own democratic pact, were the most important factors that shaped how political elites and the press viewed events in Cuba.

The article highlights two phases in Colombian perceptions. In the first, from 1957 to the middle of 1960, Cuba served as screen upon which Colombians projected the aspirations and struggles of Colombia’s own resurgent republicanism. Colombia had ended its dictatorship through social protest

and (evanescent) unity between the long-feuding Liberal and Conservative Parties in a National Front. This framing created support for Cuba's anti-dictatorial struggle, but also some scepticism regarding its violent means. Batista's fall was seen as almost inevitable; one more brutal strongman was following the well-trod path toward obsolescence recently travelled by other failed authoritarians in the hemisphere. The struggle Colombians saw in Cuba and elsewhere was between democrats and dictators, with the latter group bearing more relation to fascist enemies of the Second World War than to Soviet General Secretary Josef Stalin. Fidel Castro was perceived to be a champion of democracy. In Colombian eyes, the fall of neighboring dictators made Colombia's own democracy safer against the conspiracies of Rojas Pinilla with Venezuela Pérez Jiménez and other strongmen.

Castro's triumph was greeted warmly, as was a goodwill tour of Columbia by Cuban emissaries. The honeymoon did not last long. Initial Colombian criticism of Castro's revolution focused on the executions of the revolution's enemies—an excess that was contrasted with Colombia's more mature Senate trial of its own deposed dictator. The press, especially Bogota's Liberal *El Tiempo*, grew more hostile when Castro began shuttering newspapers. The defining feature of the period, Karl says, was “blanket opposition to authoritarianism” (347).

Before long, the Cold War lens grew more salient, initiating a second phase. Opinions hardened following a series of events in mid-1960. These reflected growing domestic political divisions; there was no unified adoption of a Cold-War mind set. Contestation, including rural violence, surrounded the 1960 Colombian election, revealing cracks in the National Front. Conservatives rallied in their opposition to the Cuban revolution and its supporters, linking electoral violence to Castro's July 20 speech which declared that “the Andes would be the Sierra Maestra of the Americas” (352). The Soviet pledge to defend Cuba awakened concern, but it was the shadow cast by Castro's nationalizations that spurred the right into action. The Conservative-business alliance formed the Center for Social Studies and Action (CEAS) to influence the press, including the blunt use of advertising favors and boycotts. CEAS pushed the Colombian government to break diplomatic ties; Liberal President Alberto Lleras Camargo resisted. The Cuban revolution was more divisive for Colombia's center-left, contributing to the emergence of a dissenting Liberal faction. Ultimately, it was perhaps less Castro than Soviet Chairman Nikita Khrushchev who brought the Cold War to Colombian politics—specifically with his July 1960 threat to use Soviet missiles to defend Cuban independence. If Conservatives had more quickly condemned Castro for his economic and political model, many Liberals joined the condemnation when the threat of nuclear conflict came into focus.

The key figure on the Colombian side was President Lleras, whom Karl sees as a late and reluctant Cold Warrior. Lleras's primary prism for viewing Colombian foreign relations was inter-Americanism. Lleras played a foundational role in creating space for regional accords within the United Nations system in 1945 and shaping the inter-American system at the Pan-American Union and Organization of American States in subsequent years. Lleras returned to Colombia as the first president of the National Front. Even after Cuban-Soviet links deepened, accompanied by U.S. hostility, Lleras viewed Cuba through the lens of inter-Americanism. He also turned there for solutions—to norms of consultation, practices of multilateralism, and the commitment to non-intervention. Only after coming to believe that Cuba was provoking unrest in Colombia did Lleras truly see the Cuban Revolution through the Cold War lens. As tensions grew, Castro denounced Lleras as a traitor, leading the Colombian president to cut ties. Even then, though, Lleras hoped that inter-American norms could block unilateral U.S. intervention to topple Castro. Only with its 1962 vote to exclude Cuba from the

inter-American system did the Colombian government embrace containment.

Karl writes well and peppers the article with fascinating anecdotes; the piece also includes several editorial cartoons that illustrate the Colombian mood. It draws heavily on Colombian sources, including printed foreign ministry reports, the national archives, and major periodicals. Karl also carried out research in the Eisenhower Presidential Library and the U.S. National Archives, though his treatment prioritizes the Colombian vision. Largely as a matter of focus, the United States is minimized in the Colombian reading, especially during the first phase. One question that deserves more consideration is how the U.S. approach in the early days of the Cuban Revolution—brief uncertainty about the possibility of coexistence—may have provided space for the domestically oriented framing of Cuba in Colombia. In the second phase, how did growing U.S.-Cuban hostility interact with the growing Conservative-Liberal divide?

The article advances the appreciation for Latin American agency, which is increasingly prevalent in historical and international relations literature.<sup>[1]</sup> More directly, recent scholarship emphasizes a distinctive Cold War in the region. Tanya Harmer has argued for the existence of an “inter-American Cold War” in which competing regional visions and forces were often more influential than outside actors.<sup>[2]</sup> Hal Brands likewise recognizes the importance of local dynamics on the left and anti-communist right, but places these more explicitly in relation to global conflict, at least from the late 1950s. Aaron Coy Moulton, conversely, depicts an earlier start to the Cold War in the Americas, with leagues of dictators and legions of democrats locked in an ideological and political struggle connected to the global scene. William Booth sees many of the transformative inter-American institutions of the early post-war years, in which Lleras was profoundly involved, as guided by Cold-War logic. In Colombia, Juan Salgado has argued that Gaitán’s murder and the violence it provoked signaled the coming of the Cold War to Andean nation.<sup>[3]</sup>

Karl offers more of a friendly corrective than a refutation of the recent trend of emphasizing Cold War dynamics—especially the early Cold War—in Latin America. Karl’s take is closer to that of Renata Keller, who emphasizes how the experiences of the Mexican Revolution colored perceptions of Castro and Cuba in 1959.<sup>[4]</sup> These were more important, especially initially, than U.S. pressure or fear of the Soviets; Karl concurs. As he notes, “to subsume Latin Americans’ myriad struggles for domestic and international equity under the rubric of the Cold War is to overemphasise the superpowers’ causal role, and to obscure the local, national, and regional modes by which Latin Americans interacted with one another and with the world” (338). That is true and largely coincides with the best work of the scholars cited above. More difficult, however, is balancing those “local, national, and regional modes,” especially in perceptions and formations of national interests, with the underlying asymmetries and deeper structures of international power, which often exercised influence in subtler ways.

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*International Studies Review*, *Latin American Research Review*, *The Latin Americanist*, and *Foro Internacional*.

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## Notes

[1] Tom Long, *Latin America Confronts the United States: Asymmetry and Influence* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), Christopher Darnton, "After Decentering: The Politics of Agency and Hegemony in Hemispheric Relations," *Latin American Research Review* 48:3 (2013), Max Paul Friedman, "Retiring the Puppets, Bringing Latin America Back In: Recent Scholarship on United States-Latin American Relations," *Diplomatic History* 27:5 (2003).

[2] Tanya Harmer, *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

[3] Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War: An International History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Aaron Coy Moulton, "Building Their Own Cold War in Their Own Backyard: The Transnational, International Conflicts in the Greater Caribbean Basin, 1944-1954," *Cold War History* 15:2 (2015); William A. Booth, "Review of Mexico's Cold War: Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution," *Cold War History* 16:3 (2016); Juan Sebastián Salgado, "La Guerra Fría Llega a América Latina: la IX Conferencia Panamericana y el 9 de Abril," *Análisis Político* 26:79 (2013).

[4] Renata Keller, *Mexico's Cold War: Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).