

## Martín Baña

**Tobias Rupprecht. *Soviet Internationalism after Stalin: Interaction and Exchange between the USSR and Latin America during the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 334 pp. ISBN 978-1-107-10288-0.**

*Martín Baña. Address for correspondence: Centro de Estudios de los Mundos Eslavos y Chinos, Avenida Presidente Roque Sáenz Peña 832, Piso 4º, Oficina 404, 1035 Buenos Aires, Argentina. martinbana@yahoo.com.ar.*

Tobias Rupprecht's *Soviet Internationalism after Stalin: Interaction and Exchange between the USSR and Latin America during the Cold War* is a remarkable example of how to renew the study of internationalism and the Cold War. Abandoning the traditional approaches of Western historiography, which focus on diplomatic affairs between the major powers, Rupprecht is interested in culture and the exchanges between the USSR and Latin America. Through an impressive survey of primary sources (including travelogues, press, poetry, film, music, among many others) and secondary literature (in more than four languages) the historian reviews the opening up of the USSR to the world from the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party until the disintegration of the Soviet regime. Throughout its pages, the book confirms its central hypothesis: that Soviet campaigns carried out in Latin America after Joseph Stalin's death broke with isolationism. Furthermore, Rupprecht points out, the Soviet elite was quite successful in their objective of convincing their audiences, both at home and abroad, that the Soviet model was a viable alternative to capitalism.

The structure of the book is thematic as well as chronological. Rupprecht frames his research within the perspective of transnational studies, studying the exchange between the USSR and Latin America as an "entangled" history. In that sense, it proposes a decentralized global history in which Europe and the United States remain if not marginalized, then at least displaced. Moving beyond interpretations that saw the Cold War in bipolar terms and through diplomatic conflicts, the book describes a "multipolar" and cultural history of that conflict (p. 9). Rupprecht explores with originality this connection between the "Second" and "Third" Worlds. This allows seeing past the failures of the USSR's attempt to integrate into the world, an image that has traditionally dominated Western historiography.

One of the central ideas of the book is related to a very strong theme within Soviet studies, discussed by, among others, Stephen Kotkin (1995), Sheila Fitzpatrick (2000), and Michael David-Fox (2006): the problem of modernity. In line with David-Fox and his notion of "entangled modernities," Rupprecht demonstrates that in its internationalism the Soviet elite emphasized modernity rather than communism (p. 39). The USSR was no longer seen as the beacon of world revolution but as the model of a modern, multicultural, technologically advanced, and anti-imperialist state. It was contact with the "backward" Latin America that allowed a double evaluation: On the one hand, the Soviet elite confirmed the superiority of their regime. On the other,

Latin American intellectuals and students were able to keep the hope of getting out of their backward situation by following the Soviet path. In the end, both parties confirmed the modern character of the USSR.

If the USSR expanded its contact with the outside world and especially with Latin America, the impact was reciprocal. The “exoticism” that Latin America could represent was not linked to “cultural imperialism” (p. 78) but rather to a certain admiration for landscapes and cultures. At the same time, the recognition of “poverty” and “backwardness” in these countries helped to criticize the place of the United States in the region and, furthermore, to emphasize a guiding role for the USSR. This is why the author can argue in chapter 4 that South American travelers, students, and artists in the USSR did not (unlike Western travelers of the 1920s) criticize it much but rather expressed admiration. This allows discussing the exaggeration of the comments of early travelers to the USSR: they could no longer explain how a system with so many flaws could survive so long. One explanation must be sought in the support of the Third World and its contribution to the self-affirmation of Soviet identity. Thus, Rupprecht argues, contact with the rest of the world did not accelerate the disintegration of the USSR, but quite the opposite.

Two more significant ideas are developed with fine quality. On the one hand, it is observed that “post-Stalin internationalism” was in tune with the political and cultural changes opened by the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union since, as in other areas, it recovered elements of the 1920s. In this sense, internationalism took its roots in the 1920s, but with an important change: it was neither aggressive nor imperialist, but inclusive and confronting only the U.S. It did not expect to overthrow governments violently but to show a path of peaceful progress. Internationalism was not geopolitical imperialism but rather a conviction shared by political and intellectual figures (as chapter 4 shows, the name chosen for the University for Third World students was “People’s Friendship”). In fact, as Rupprecht points out, it is there where the traits of genuine internationalism remain (p. 236). On the other hand, the author questions the traditional image that associated socialism with isolationism and global exchange with free market and liberal democracy. By recuperating the cultural, economic, and intellectual exchanges between the USSR and Latin America, the author shows that this circulation was in tune with what was happening around the world. Thus, the USSR participated in a global trend rather than in a national strategy.

Finally, Rupprecht presents an image of the USSR that is far from the negative view in which it used to appear in Cold War histories, not only in Hollywood but also in academic papers, especially in those written from a liberal perspective. In line with other colleagues, for example Vladislav Zubok (2007), the author shows how the URSS presented itself as a “people’s friend,” always adopting a defensive rather than offensive attitude in its competition with the U.S. (p. 209). In that sense, the USSR is depicted as a regime that improved the lives of foreigners who passed through it, rather than the contrary.

These contributions should be considered alongside some problems that, however, do not reduce the overall quality of the book. In some sections the author seems

to paint an idyllic picture of exchanges between USSR and Latin America, especially when he recounts the opinions of Latin American students (p. 288), ignoring the opinions of communist militants who were disillusioned with the USSR (they tended to see the failure of communism rather than the advances of modernization). On the other hand, although the author does a generally very good job clarifying concepts, one important concept is used less assiduously—"Global South." While it is clear from other studies how this concept fits South Africa and Argentina, for example, it remains less clear if it is appropriate for describing regions like Mexico and the Caribbean. Finally, two minor errors: *Cueca* (p. 97) is not only an "Argentine" musical style but a broadly Andean one (and is in fact more closely associated with Chile, where it has been consecrated as a "national style"). Secondly, the Mexican writer Juan Rulfo appears as "Rolfo" (p. 109).

Tobias Rupprecht's book is designed to be a reference not only for those interested in cultural studies of the USSR but also for those interested in the Cold War, internationalism, the scope of the transnational perspective, and cultural studies of Latin America in the twentieth century. This is no small thing for a single book.

#### REFERENCES

- David-Fox, Michael. 2006. "Multiple Modernities vs. Neo-Traditionalism: On Recent Debates in Russian and Soviet History." *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 55(4):535–555.
- Fitzpatrick, Sheila, ed. 2000. *Stalinism: New Directions*. New York: Routledge.
- Kotkin, Stephen. 1995. *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Zubok, Vladislav. 2007. *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.