


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Cuba, Soviet Oil, and the Sanctions that Never Were: An Archival Investigation of Socialist Relations

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## Abstract

In the winter of 1968, tensions between Cuba and the Soviet Union boiled over as the Cuban leadership's mouthpiece, *Granma*, accused the Soviet Union of imposing oil sanctions on the island in order to subjugate it. Those accusations went on to become inscribed into the historiography of Soviet–Cuban relations. This intervention into that historiography is two-fold: on the one hand it uses recently declassified documents from the Soviet archives to show that there were no oil sanctions on Cuba, but rather a continuum of logistical and infrastructural challenges that created delays and tensions in the relations between these two socialist allies. On the other hand, the article contextualises the relationship within the capitalist institutions of exchange that in effect mediated it, finding in these not only part of the reason for the setbacks and tensions, but also a wider framework for better understanding the Soviet–Cuban economic relationship.

**Keywords:** Soviet–Cuban relations; socialist economy; global capitalism; oil

The Soviet–Cuban relationship has received surprisingly little sustained academic attention. Cuba, perhaps justly, has been the subject of endless studies, erudite, partisan, sober, conspiracy-laden. This small Caribbean island is unique in casting an outsized shadow over both the Western world and the Global South. In the Eastern bloc it remains the subject of an enduring romanticised memory. It was the arena over which the world came closest to almost existential destruction in 1962. Yet only an exceedingly small body of work exists that uses primary sources to investigate a relationship that made possible Cuba's astonishing standing in the global imaginary and, more historically speaking, its past geopolitical import. Most of the work on that prominent relationship was written during the heyday of the Cold War; lack of access meant very little was documented on the basis of archival evidence. Meanwhile, a growing Soviet archival cache has yet to be investigated; Soviet approaches and motivations continue to be guesstimated. So it is notable that, in the context of this general evidentiary gap, we should know with a startling

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exactness the moment the Soviets brought Castro to heel: the year was 1968, and the occasion was a well-timed oil delivery slowdown to materialise for the Cubans their abject dependence on Soviet good will.<sup>1</sup> This is the event, we are regularly told, that tamed the Cuban Revolution and augured its turn to a more conservative socialist predisposition: its ‘sovietisation’. Textbooks and summaries on the Cuban Revolution, encompassing a range of interpretive proclivities, seem to agree on this important historical pivot.

Today, it is Jorge Domínguez’s account, in his synthetic and seminal *To Make a World Safe for Revolution*, published in 1989, that has cemented this interpretation as historical fact. It is also the most elaborate and subtle in both the story it tells regarding the alleged oil sanctions and the conclusions it draws. The key role of the oil sanctions is to serve as a narrative-driven deduction, a conclusion needed to resolve a plot point that had been building up over the deteriorating circumstances of 1967. This plot resolution is then stretched temporally to create a series of links through time that explain Cuba’s messy and contradictory disposition to respect both Soviet authority and policy positions while maintaining near-full autonomy, a bounded freedom that Domínguez renders through the Gramscian notion of hegemony: ‘the cultural, moral, and ideological leadership over allied and subordinate groups’.<sup>2</sup> In Domínguez’s telling, 1968 was a crisis year in which the Soviet oil slowdown amounts to a blackmail of the island and acts as a political boiling point leading to the stabilisation of a new settlement. In his own words, ‘[r]elations between the two governments deteriorated in the 1960s, reaching a crisis in 1968, when the Soviet Union looked for substantial changes in Cuban policies. Angry over many Cuban domestic and foreign policies, the

<sup>1</sup>This narrative has ensconced itself firmly in any number of textbook narratives on Cuba. Examples are Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 287–8; Luis Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba: A History* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2014), pp. 102–3; Geraldine Lievesley, *The Cuban Revolution: Past, Present and Future Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 16; Carmelo Mesa-Lago and Jorge F. Pérez-López, *Cuba’s Aborted Reform: Socioeconomic Effects, International Comparisons, and Transition Policies* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005), p. 9; William O. Walker III, ‘The Johnson–Nixon–Castro Years: Superpower Containment of Cuba’, in Soraya M. Castro Mariño and Ronald W. Pruessen (eds.), *Fifty Years of Revolution: Perspectives on Cuba, the United States, and the World* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2012), p. 209–10. And it continues to feature prominently in the very latest scholarship, for example in the overview provided in Radoslav Yordanov, ‘Cuba and the Soviet Bloc: Searching for the Last Guardians of Socialism’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 56: 4 (2021), p. 1185. The interesting volume on the cultural relations of the two allies establishes the oil-for-submission interpretations as ‘facts’ on its timeline: Jacqueline Loss and José Manuel Prieto (eds.), *Caviar with Rum: Cuba–USSR and the Post-Soviet Experience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 18. The CIA operated under the same assumptions: see CIA, ‘Cuba: Implications of Dependence on Soviet Oil’, General CIA records, 1 Feb. 1982: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP83B00225R000100030001-7.pdf> (accessed 26 April 2022). I am not the first to observe the historiographical importance of the oil sanction narrative; Mervyn Bain too noted it in his critique of the Sovietisation thesis in ‘Havana and Moscow in the 1970s: “Sovietization” in an Era of Détente’, in Emily J. Kirk, Anna Clayfield and Isabel Story (eds.), *Cuba’s Forgotten Decade: How the 1970s Shaped the Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), p. 25. This article aims to complement the critique by disabling one of the fundamental narrative components of the ‘Sovietisation’ thesis.

<sup>2</sup>*The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916–1935*, ed. David Forgacs (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 423.

USSR imposed sanctions on Cuba. Cuba backed down, and the hegemonic relationship was subsequently rebuilt.<sup>3</sup>

Domínguez's dramatic plot is fully assembled from contemporaneous articles from *Granma*, the official newspaper of Cuba's Communist Party since 1965, and indeed the story has been circulating almost from its inception as an open Cuban accusation on the pages of *Granma*. A historiographical excavation shows how unquestioned that questionable source base went for decades. Through the 1980s scholars had already been citing Domínguez's earlier version of this story, his 1978 *Cuba: Order and Revolution*, which had quickly established itself as an authoritative text on Cuba.<sup>4</sup> In Jacques Lévesque's influential and unique study that same year, *The USSR and the Cuban Revolution*, the oil sanctions serve the same watershed moment in the plotting, ushering a third act (literally Part III) in which disenchantment turns to accommodation.<sup>5</sup> Writing contemporaneously, and speaking more directly to the political economy of Cuban dependence on the Soviet Union, Kosmas Tsokhas and Cole Blasier made echo of this narrative plot.<sup>6</sup> They drew on the work of Communist journalist K. S. Karol, but also on that of RAND Corporation analysts Leon Gouré and Julian Weinkle, both of whose works used Cuban representations in *Granma* to argue that 'Moscow resorted to veiled economic sanctions, mainly in the form of irregularities and delays in the delivery of strategic items to Cuba'.<sup>7</sup> Gouré and Weinkle's vague formulation is interesting, as it points to an initial reticence to specify the nature of the

<sup>3</sup>Jorge I. Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 4. The longer version is on pp. 72–7. This narrative resolution, which winds up the third chapter on 'Cuba's Challenge to the Soviet Union in the 1960s', then leads to an inexplicable temporal leap in the next chapter that explains the 'Reestablishment of Soviet Hegemony' from 1975 to 1985. The centrality of the oil sanctions comes into relief whenever Domínguez needs to shorten the master narrative, for example in the summary he offered in 'The Nature and Uses of the Soviet–Cuban Connection', in Eusebio Mujal-León (ed.), *The USSR and Latin America: A Developing Relationship* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 162–3.

<sup>4</sup>For example, Mark N. Katz, 'The Soviet–Cuban Connection', *International Security*, 8: 1 (1983), p. 103, citing Jorge I. Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978). See also Maurice Halperin, *The Taming of Fidel Castro* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981); W. Raymond Duncan, *The Soviet Union and Cuba: Interests and Influence* (New York: Praeger, 1985).

<sup>5</sup>Jacques Lévesque, *The USSR and the Cuban Revolution: Soviet Ideological and Strategic Perspectives, 1959–77* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1978), pp. 134–5. The original French text is two years older: Jacques Lévesque, *L'URSS et la Révolution Cubaine* (Montreal: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1976). A Russian perspective that repeats the oil sanctions as a watershed is from the former Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs official Yuri Pavlov, *Soviet–Cuban Alliance 1959–1991* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994), pp. 89–90. Pavlov became involved in Latin American affairs at the ministry only in 1982, when he was made ambassador to Costa Rica. He was in no position to know what happened in 1968, and seems to have adopted the sanctions narrative after his move to the United States following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which he replicates without attribution, sources or explanation in the text, i.e. with the same matter-of-factness as all other Western accounts.

<sup>6</sup>Kosmas Tsokhas, 'The Political Economy of Cuban Dependence on the Soviet Union', *Theory and Society*, 9: 2 (1980), p. 325; Cole Blasier, 'COMECON in Cuban Development', in Cole Blasier and Carmelo Mesa-Lago (eds.), *Cuba in the World* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979), pp. 246–7.

<sup>7</sup>Leon Gouré and Julian Weinkle, 'Cuba's New Dependency', *Problems of Communism*, 21: 2 (1972), p. 73; K. S. Karol, *Guerrillas in Power: The Course of the Cuban Revolution* (New York: Hill & Wang,

'sanctions' among RAND analysts in these early stages of the storyline's establishment. Likewise, Edward Gonzalez, another RAND analyst, described in 1971 a similar set of vague economic pressures not involving oil that economist Carmelo Mesa-Lago, citing Gonzalez and mentioning Cuban remonstrations, had transformed two years later into a policy of 'restricting ... oil supplies to Cuba'.<sup>8</sup>

Unencumbered by the need to answer to later historiographical readings, it was Karol in 1970 who perhaps best contextualised Cuban accusations against Soviet oil delivery operations. Karol's seminal volume on the first decade of the Cuban revolution paralleled E. H. Carr's formative work on the first decade of the Bolshevik revolution; both were deeply read, lived and journalistic, and both offered analytical departures free of interpretational sedimentation that can obscure as well as clarify.<sup>9</sup> A Polish émigré living in France, Karol established 1968 as a watershed year in the revolutionary direction of Cuba as well as in Castro's rapprochement with the Soviets. He also noted *Granma's* veiled accusations over Soviet oil deliveries, but restrained himself from interpreting Soviet intentions on the basis of Cuban alarmism, and saw no connection between these accusations and Castro's later friendly overtures to the Soviet Union, including the Cuban leader's unexpected – if limited – rhetorical support for Soviet repression of the Prague Spring that August. Karol instead contextualised the accusations in the mobilisational domestic politics of Castro's speeches at the beginning of that year, a time when he was attempting to intensify labour participation in agriculture while steeling the population for a possible break with their main economic partner.<sup>10</sup> Later in the text, as it was in time, Karol documents the steps Castro took toward renewing the friendship with the Soviets, which he attributes exclusively to Cuba's internal difficulties and to Castro's distress over the international revolutionary situation – never, in other words, to a successful application of Soviet economic pressure, for which the only evidence was Cuban fear and outrage expressed on the pages of its propaganda platform.<sup>11</sup>

While this historiographical excavation has moved from 1989 backward to the first analyses of Cuba's accusations over oil, there remains one outlier of note. Writing at the very time in the late 1980s when Domínguez entrenched this narrative, Nicola Miller's work has been the most sceptical of this interpretation. Miller hedged her bets, as ever forced to guess at opaque motivations, but meaningfully gestured to the source of the sanctions interpretation and implied its problematic,

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1970). The RAND Corporation was a public–private think tank established by the Douglas Aircraft Company in 1948 to provide analysis for the US military.

<sup>8</sup>Respectively Edward Gonzalez, 'The Relationship with the Soviet Union', in Carmelo Mesa-Lago (ed.), *Revolutionary Change in Cuba* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), pp. 93–7, and Carmelo Mesa-Lago, 'The Sovietization of the Cuban Revolution: Its Consequences for the Western Hemisphere', *World Affairs*, 136: 1 (1973), p. 11.

<sup>9</sup>Karol, *Guerrillas in Power*; E. H. Carr, *A History of Soviet Russia*, 14 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1950–78).

<sup>10</sup>Karol, *Guerrillas in Power*, pp. 439–40. See also Carmelo Mesa-Lago, *Cuba in the 1970s: Pragmatism and Institutionalization* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), pp. 18–19, who reported the accusations in the context of a continuum of tensions, but without accepting them at face value.

<sup>11</sup>Karol, *Guerrillas in Power*, pp. 490–550, covering the last chapter of the book titled 'The Reckoning'.

undependable nature.<sup>12</sup> Miller's focus on the Soviet Union may well have sensitised her to the many dysfunctions of Soviet logistical and infrastructural competence, particularly when conveying commodities to the other side of the world while continuously expanding those deliveries, leading her to conclude that in pressuring the Cubans after the delays and cutbacks in oil deliveries, the Soviets may have been 'making a virtue out of necessity'.<sup>13</sup>

This article will document the economic relationship between the two uneasy allies from their post-Cuban Missile Crisis reconciliation in 1963 all the way to the late 1960s. It will reconsider that relationship in light of an imperious capitalist world economy that demarcated and defined it at every turn, and of the vast restructuring of the island's economy. The archival investigation in this article finds no support for Cuban accusations of a politics of economic pressure, and no evidence for the current historiographical consensus that the Soviets tamed their Caribbean allies through such means. While setting the record of this event straight, it seeks also to contribute to an ongoing reconsideration of Cold War categories, moving beyond Cold War-era understandings of Soviet power characterised as a mirror-opposite superpower and by notions of hegemony that serve better to describe US power in the world. Importantly, it does not argue that an absence of oil sanctions made the relationship frictionless, nor does this article have anything to add to the well-established sources of political tension that were no doubt part of the dramatic Cuban accusations directed at the Soviets. It seeks instead to relocate the very real economic sources of this tension to the larger institutional workings of the global economy, while offering Latin Americanists a more accurate, archive-based idea of the economic relationship than that implied by the oil sanctions narrative – one often too readily accepted.

The sources for this article come from recently declassified collections from the Soviet Gosplan (Gosudarstvennyi planovyi komitet, the country's economic planning agency) and the Ministry of Foreign Trade at the Russian State Archive of the Economy (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv ekonomiki, RGAE), as well as from documents at the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii, RGANI), which holds the records of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. What these archives show first and foremost is the extent to which the language, rationale and function of those documents are not easily translatable into the categories and modes of interpretation Western analysts of Cuba and the Soviet Union used for evaluating that relationship. These Western observers in fact often modelled their analysis on the United States and its relationships in Latin America and beyond, an interpretive choice more or less prescribed by a paradigm – the Cold War – that assigned the flattening term 'superpower' to two countries with vastly different power capacities, political goals and ultimately conditions of political possibility. The realities expressed in these documents from Moscow are not always amenable to the terms of discussion Western analysts used at the time. The operative assumption in this particular case is that the Kremlin routinely coerced others as the United

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<sup>12</sup>Nicola Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America 1959–1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 104–5.

<sup>13</sup>Explained in an extended, perceptive conjecture, in *ibid.*, pp. 108–10.

States did so often in the post-war period, that is, through the application of economic pressure. The documents delineate a different contour of power: the Soviets operated under a radically different understanding of their economic capacity, and therefore in a very different political universe from the one US officials not only navigated but often generated. This article, hence, offers an unabashedly Soviet perspective on events, the benefit of which, beyond anything to do with petroleum, will be to begin a reconfiguration of how we think and write about the Soviet Union and its relationship to Cuba and to Latin America more generally.

The stress on economy in this reconfiguration of historical interpretation is not incidental. Cold War interpretations depend on implicit assumptions of economic autonomy – even preponderance – that inhere in the superpower concept but are really reflective only of US economic power. This sense of weight and autonomy is comparatively absent in a socialist world dependent on Western-made institutions for international exchange and hungry for Western technology and the currencies to buy it. Despite the levelling notions intrinsic to the Cold War paradigm, this dependence and hunger were unidirectional, a lopsided terrain of tremendous political significance. This article thus aims not just to make a discreet correction, but to call into question the Cold War categories with which we continue to interrogate the Soviet–Cuban relationship and to begin to draw the contours of the political-economic sensibilities that ruled it. In stressing Soviet bureaucratic momentum, Cuba’s lurching, uneven development, and the capitalist institutional architecture within which both parties acted, the article proposes an outline of the economic relationship that can serve future research among Latin Americanists as a base point of historical instinct when thinking about the Soviet–Cuban political relationship, Soviet affairs in Latin America, and socialist political economy more broadly.

The article will proceed in three acts: the first will detail the economic relationship as it evolved from the post-Cuban Missile Crisis reset in 1963 until the eve of the crises of 1968; the second act focuses more closely on the oil relationship and the sanctions that weren’t; finally, a short third act shows that logistical problems continued as before, even if they were not politicised and hence disappeared from historical narratives.

### ***Setting the Scene: The Economic Relationship***

It was December 1966, and the Cuban negotiator was making a statement of mind-numbing obviousness in the office of a Soviet deputy minister of trade. In determining its trade with Cuba, the Soviets should not decide solely from trade considerations, or the balance of payments, the Cuban trade negotiator admonished, ‘but also take into account the political side of things’. Cuba finds itself in a special situation, he continued, and helping her through increasing deliveries of Soviet goods is not so much a commercial as a political question.<sup>14</sup> The deputy minister’s response was, of necessity, equally unenlightening. The Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Soviet government determine the volume of deliveries to Cuba from political considerations, he replied. So far so

<sup>14</sup>RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 1136, l. 127.



obvious. With these considerations in mind, the Soviets offer the widest possible variety of goods, he continued, and offer credit on the most privileged terms. If we traded with Cuba on strictly commercial terms, he counterfactualised, then clearly we wouldn't have given the kind of help we have extended to Cuba over the last four to five years. But at the same time, the Soviet deputy minister admonished in turn, we can act only according to the capacities of the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup> An odd exchange, this one. Why were these two seasoned, high-ranking negotiators, comrades in arms against capitalism and imperialism, stating such obvious positions? Did the Cuban suspect that the Soviets were approaching their Cuban allies through crass economism? And how exactly could a small island of 8 million people take the Soviets to such material limits that their political commitment might be put in doubt, even if briefly, even if as part of a negotiating strategy?

Of all Soviet trade partners it is empirically fair to say that Cuba was by far the most privileged, the object of a degree of solicitude the Soviets bestowed on no one else, at least in the 1960s. So why the mistrust? Why the haggling? Why the need for reassurances? Part of the answer is that their relationship continued to be mediated in important ways by rules, practices and institutions made in the West. Over time, nevertheless, several dynamics became apparent. Much of the Latin Americanist and Cold War literature on the relationship notwithstanding, the speed of Cuba's political repositioning was not followed by that of its political economy. That repositioning was more tortuous, deliberate and contradictory, suggesting that already in the 1960s the international built environment entrenched economic practices in ways the 'second world' could neither replicate nor overcome. In fact the very category – 'second world' – hardly does justice to the realities its leaderships navigated. At the very least, the category needs to be historically situated, rather than understood as an always existing systemic object.

Cuba had not so much chosen the Soviet Union as had been slowly, deliberately driven to its tentative embrace.<sup>16</sup> It took the US leadership a year and a half from Castro's victory on the first day of 1959 to decide this was a revolution it would embargo, a year and a half until the United States decided it would neither buy the island's sugar nor sell the island oil. And neither did the Soviets rush to welcome the new revolutionary state, taking almost a year to send a KGB agent and even longer to send Anastas Mikoyan, First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev's top diplomat and trade guru.<sup>17</sup> But then, neither had the Cuban revolutionaries rushed to Communist Russia, preferring instead to win over the US public and rejecting any material help from the Soviets. Then in the summer of 1960 the United States

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.* The protagonists are Cuban Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade Benigno Regueira and Soviet Deputy Minister of Trade Mikhail Kuz'min.

<sup>16</sup>Here I follow the argument in William M. LeoGrande, *Cuba's Policy in Africa, 1959–1980* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of International Studies, 1980). I have told this story briefly in Oscar Sanchez-Sibony, *Red Globalization: The Political Economy of the Soviet Cold War from Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 207–15, which documents CIA director Allen Dulles hopefully declaiming a year into the revolution 'that in the long run the Russian concentration on Cuba would become apparent to the world and that this would be a development favorable to the US', on p. 209.

<sup>17</sup>The most detailed account of the Soviet Union's first, hesitant steps toward the Cuban revolutionaries is Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *'One Hell of a Gamble': Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997).

began implementing that well-worn, futile tactic, the economic blockade.<sup>18</sup> Events seem to speed up from this point: the Soviet sugar purchases, the seizure of US oil refineries in Cuba, Castro's conversion to Marxism–Leninism, his long speech at the UN and the awkward hug with a jubilant Khrushchev, the farcical Bay of Pigs invasion, the sobering Operation Anadyr, the Soviets' deployment of missiles, bombers and personnel to Cuba, leading to the grand finale of October 1962: the Cuban Missile Crisis, the most dangerous of the twentieth century. After that near thermonuclear disaster everyone breathed again. In 1963 Cuban resentment smouldered, the Soviet politburo began to reassess the island's impulsive leader, the US president was assassinated. And all sides grappled with the fact that Cuba was to be communist for the foreseeable future. In the context of the Cold War, this coping took a material turn: it occasioned a vast infrastructural restructuring in Cuba.

The reset button for the Soviet–Cuban relationship was Castro's trip to the Soviet Union in the summer of 1963. This coincided with the tail end of the economic crises in the last years of Khrushchev's tenure, as well as the 1962/3 breakdown of the Cuban economy. Soviet–Cuban bilateral trade seemed to have reached the zenith of its possibilities in Cuba's 1961 economic reorientation following US aggression, and there it stood for three years until minds turned from Cold War brinkmanship – and subsequent recriminations – to the building of institutions, infrastructure and ultimately states. The year of Khrushchev's overthrow, 1964, was the first full year in which this political reorganisation bore fruit, with trade growth of 15 per cent.<sup>19</sup>

The problems facing Cuba largely drove those first years of Soviet–Cuban commercial relations. In the face of US economic aggression, the Cubans had to overhaul the built environment of their economic life. They did this in a necessarily ad hoc manner, benefitting from the global circularity of technological diffusion. From 1961 to 1964, Cuban effort had gone into maintaining as much as possible of the environment built under US hegemony through Soviet technology. This Soviet technology, in turn, had its origins in the important transfers of US technology during the 1920s and early 1930s and World War II. If the first technological objects to break down in the early years of the revolution were cars and trucks, by 1964 it was the US, French and British trains of Cuba that were in dire need of repair and spare parts. But as the Cubans reported to the Soviets, they had by then been waiting for spare parts for five to six years.<sup>20</sup> Like much of the rest of the island's built environment, their railway was based on the US system, which

<sup>18</sup>An excellent account of US policy is in Lars Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: United States and the Cuban Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). On the futility of sanctions on Cuba, see Omar Sanchez, 'The Sanctions Malaise: The Case of Cuba', *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis*, 58: 2 (2003), pp. 347–72.

<sup>19</sup>The year 1964 was also seen by the Cubans themselves as pivotal, the beginning of a second Cuban Revolution, as reported in the documents of the Wilson Center Digital Archive collection on 'Cuban Foreign Relations': <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/82/cuban-foreign-relations>. For example, 'Synopsis of Reference Material about a "New Stage" of the Cuban Revolution, Compiled by the Embassy of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in Cuba', 28 Feb. 1964, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, TsKhSD [subsequently RGANI], f. 5, op. 49, d. 757, ll. 17–19, r. 9125. Translated for CWIHP by Gary Goldberg: <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117075> (URLs accessed 29 May 2022).

<sup>20</sup>RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 91, ll. 1–2.



could be made to work with certain Soviet diesel locomotives.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly the Soviet response to this particular need was not to showcase its alternative modernity, but rather to offer steam locomotives.<sup>22</sup> As Cuban trade representative Armando Pérez Pinto pointed out, these would represent a technological step backward for Cuba, which despite its quasi-monocultural economy was one of the richest Latin American countries and had a close experience of advanced technologies from the United States.<sup>23</sup> The Cubans had wanted diesel locomotives, but they had not specified this in their initial request, and the Soviets had read into their request an exoticised backwardness that matched Cold War discourse and US representations, but bore little resemblance to lived reality in the island. The overhaul of Cuba's built environment would require a certain readjustment of Soviet imaginaries.

That January of 1964 was the month in which the Soviet–Cuban material relationship was negotiated. What both sides envisioned was far from a covenant ushering Cuba into a Communist world economy. Rather, it was explicitly a plan to reintroduce Cuba into the world economy it had been excommunicated from. The goal: the island's industrialisation and the attainment of a 10-million-tonne *zafra* (sugar harvest) by 1970. As Deputy Minister of Trade Mikhail Kuz'min stressed to his Cuban counterpart Raúl Maldonado, there were two complementary priorities at that moment.<sup>24</sup> One was to get the island's nickel industry back and running as soon as possible so the Cubans might earn some hard currency, especially as world production of stainless steel, nickel's main application, was ramping up at the time. The other was to reach an agreement to regularise the purchase in third countries of products and technologies the Soviets did not have available for sale to Cuba. At that moment, that meant the Soviets would be looking to buy parts, materials and equipment in the West for the Cuban nickel industry. Cuban specialists, Kuz'min advised, would have to visit the different departments of the Foreign Trade Ministry in order to assist in that endeavour. But January 1964 was a seminal moment incubating the new relationship in the latest long-term trade agreement that replaced the hastily signed 1960 agreements.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Sanchez-Sibony, *Red Globalization*, pp. 126–7 records other instances of similar technological circularities. More can be found in RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 91, ll. 55–7, documenting a May 1964 request for Soviet spare parts to repair Cuba's US car fleet, and perhaps to set up a factory for US carmaker-compatible spare part factories.

<sup>22</sup>The production of steam locomotives in the Soviet Union ended in 1956 with Khrushchev's decision that February to modernise the railway system and introduce a new class of diesel locomotives based on US models. See John Westwood, 'The Modernization of Soviet Railways Traction in Comparative Perspective', in Jeremy Smith and Melanie Ilic (eds.), *Khrushchev in the Kremlin: Policy and Government in the Soviet Union, 1953–1964* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 190–201.

<sup>23</sup>Pérez Pinto had instead suggested that the Soviets buy locomotives or spare parts for Cuba in Italy, France, Belgium or some other country: RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 91, ll. 3–6. A week later he would somewhat indignantly turn down the Soviet offer, saying that the steam locomotives would not arrive until after the sugar harvest anyway, which is what the trains were needed for: *ibid.*, ll. 9–11. These negotiations took place in January 1964.

<sup>24</sup>RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 91, ll. 14–17.

<sup>25</sup>The agreement was signed on 21 Jan. 1964, and can be found in RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 165, ll. 24–5. A useful synopsis of it, and of the first four years of the economic relationship, can be found in Robert S. Walters, 'Soviet Economic Aid to Cuba: 1959–1964', *International Affairs*, 42: 1 (1966), pp. 74–86.

One of the most interesting features of the agreement itself is the inclusion of language that left no room for uncertainty about the generosity of the Soviet Union. It enshrined a refrain habitually heard during negotiations between the two countries when it committed the Soviets to buying Cuban sugar ‘notwithstanding the fact that the Soviet Union is in a position to produce a sufficient amount of sugar to meet the demand of its population and for export’.<sup>26</sup> Another of its features is perhaps less interesting, but bears repeating in the context of a historiography that continues to deny one of the communist world’s basic rhetorical tenets of commerce: the essentially liberal dogma that trade should be ‘based on the principle of the international socialist division of labour and the advantages that both countries can derive from the correct application of this principle’.<sup>27</sup> As well as a face-saving statement of the advantages the Cuban economy brought to the table, it was also a statement of purpose for the new direction in the political economy of the island, which rather than diversifying would now concentrate on intensifying its comparative advantage.

Castro himself negotiated the agreement with both Khrushchev and Khrushchev’s Minister of Foreign Trade, Nikolai Patolichev, in his second visit to the Soviet Union. The tonnes of sugar he committed to this new arrangement were exorbitant, but in keeping with Cuba’s plan to bet the island’s development on the *zafra*. This was a return to Cuba’s traditional political economy as commodity exporter, and quite at odds with the precepts of dependency theory then in fashion around the Global South, which advocated for the institution of import substitution industrialisation. Castro committed Cuba to delivering 2.1 million tonnes of sugar in 1965, 3 million tonnes in 1966, 4 million tonnes in 1967 and 5 million tonnes over the following three years. This last number was high, Castro admitted, and the Soviets could decide to maintain imports at 4 million tonnes should they wish, but he wanted it included in the agreement because of the mobilisational significance it would have for the Cuban people.<sup>28</sup> The Soviets in turn committed themselves to a price of US\$0.06 per pound over the next five years.<sup>29</sup> Khrushchev had in fact offered a price 30 per cent higher than the one the Cubans were happy to take – 8 cents vs. the 6 cents agreed upon.<sup>30</sup> In exchange, Khrushchev proposed continuous renegotiations in order to follow fluctuations in the international price. In other words, Khrushchev proposed a commodity agreement similar to those the Soviets regularly signed elsewhere. Perhaps Castro, more in tune with the fluctuations of Cuba’s economic lifeblood, had foreseen the predictable drop. Whatever the case, Castro’s hopes for this exchange, expressed in his meeting with Patolichev, were telling. He thought the stability of the exchange would be the most revolutionary event of the last five years both in Cuba and Latin America, as other sugar-producing countries might demand a similar agreement from the United States, and could perhaps even become an example for governing the exchange of other commodities, such as cocoa or coffee. Castro hoped also that

<sup>26</sup>RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 165, ll. 24–5. All translations from Russian are mine.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup>RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 91, ll. 18–20.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.* 1 pound (lb) = 0.454 kg. We have retained imperial units for consistency with the archival sources.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.* This was not as imprudent as it seems, but actually wiser from the Soviet perspective than the agreement that was reached.

it would allow Cuba to balance its trade with the Soviet Union and pay off its debt, but, more crucially, it would increase trust in Cuba among capitalist countries and become the foundation upon which the island would once again come to participate in global commercial and financial exchange. Even the United States might end its embargo, Castro fantasised.<sup>31</sup>

Castro's newfound dreams of capitalising his revolution with the direct financial participation of Western imperialists themselves ran into very socialist-world problems of logistics and infrastructure (see Fig. 1). From the beginning contracts failed to be fulfilled on time. By the end of the year, the Cubans had listed 54 commodities the Soviets had not supplied in sufficient quantities, and complained that Soviet foreign trade departments were not fulfilling contracts on time.<sup>32</sup> Most worrisome, Soviet oil was being delivered much too irregularly, leading to problems in Cuban refineries. The Soviets blamed strong storms around Black Sea ports for the delays, leading to oil tanker congestion there.<sup>33</sup> This issue commands some attention, as it bears directly on the oil sanctions allegedly imposed four years later. Although delays certainly would have reminded Cuban leaders of their dependence on the Soviets, there is no evidence that these were deliberate acts of coercion. On the contrary, documents show oil delivery delays to be endemic and the Soviets apologetic for them. As this article will document, the extent to which the Soviets remained solicitous of Cuban demands was extraordinary, and there is no evidence to show significant variations in the way the state organs managing these material exchanges went about their work. The fact of the oil delays by themselves is no evidence of Soviet coercion, nor of later Cuban compliance with Soviet dictates in the early 1970s.<sup>34</sup>

A plainspoken exchange at the end of 1964 between Kuz'min and Maldonado illustrates the pervasive, longstanding and logistical nature of these delays – which were in effect the main subject of a majority of Cuban–Soviet routine trade conversations throughout the 1960s. At the end of the year of reconciliation, 1968, between the two countries, Soviet export fulfilment to Cuba was 70 per cent, Maldonado reproached Kuz'min, stressing all the while the importance of these undelivered goods to the success of Cuba's own sugar harvest. Furthermore, despite earlier Soviet promises to systematise third-party purchases for Cuba, none were planned for 1965.<sup>35</sup> Kuz'min in turn took issue with Maldonado's assessment, pointing out that the Soviets had fulfilled Cuba's original demands, but had had a harder time keeping up with the inflation in Cuban requests throughout the year. Now it was Maldonado's turn for an explanation: the quick and steady decrease in the price of sugar throughout the year meant decreasing hard-currency

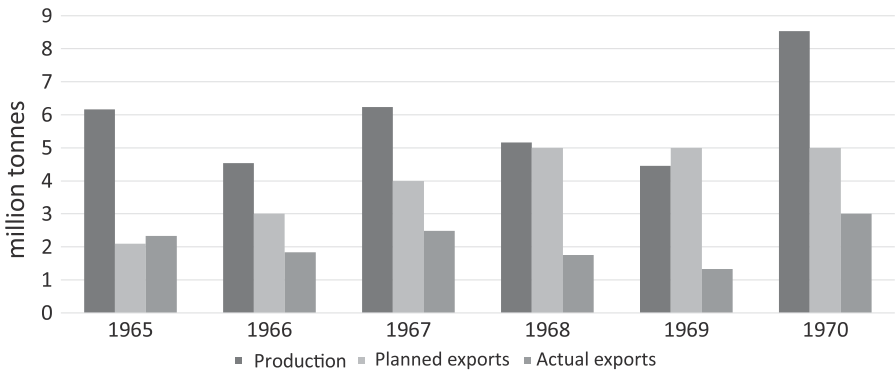
<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup>RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 91, ll. 97–8.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, ll. 99–102.

<sup>34</sup>It is difficult to square Piero Gleijeses' documented and generally accepted premise of Cuba's radical independence from the Soviet Union in foreign policy, in *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), with Domínguez's borrowed thesis (in *Cuba: Order and Revolution*) on the ease with which the Soviet Union could and did use oil as a weapon to change Castro's foreign policy positions.

<sup>35</sup>RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 91, l. 108.



**Figure 1.** Cuban production and exports of sugar (in million tonnes)

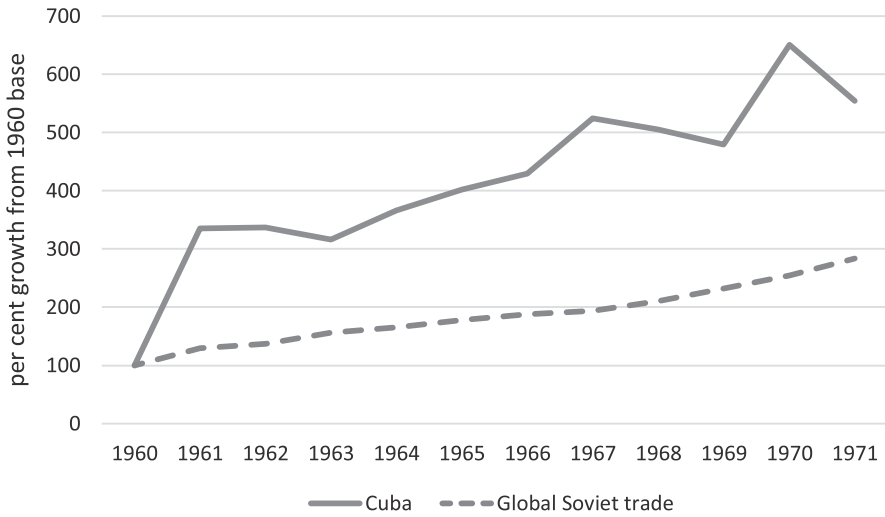
Source: Sugar production totals taken from Jorge F. Pérez-López, *The Economics of Cuban Sugar* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), p. 49, table 8. Actual exports are from the *Vneshniaia torgovlia SSSR za ... Statisticheskii obzor* series for each year published in Moscow by Vneshtorgizdat (All-Union Foreign Trade Publishing House). The planned exports correspond to those negotiated in the 1964 agreement (see note 25).

revenues, which forced the Cubans to shift their purchases to the Soviet markets.<sup>36</sup> But ultimately what comes across from this exchange is a degree of Soviet solicitude that seems improbable in relations with other countries, as in Kuz'min entreating Maldonado for understanding, and perhaps for Cuba to reduce some of its orders: 'We treat Cuba with the greatest attention and do everything in order to satisfy Cuba's demands. If we still cannot fully satisfy a Cuban request for some Soviet goods, it is not because we do not want to do this, but because we ourselves experience difficulties with these goods and simply do not have them in stock.'<sup>37</sup> It was still early times in the Cuban–Soviet economic relationship; infrastructures and practices had not yet been regularised and institutionalised. This would be the work of decades.

Kuz'min and Maldonado's talk illustrates also the forces that drove the intensification of the material relationship in this alliance forged of hegemonic ostracism (see Fig. 2). The new compact had been arranged in the frothy heights of a sugar price bubble. But after the international price came down in the spring of 1964 towards the 6 cents of the Soviet–Cuban agreement, it continued a swift decline for a year, finally oscillating at around 2 cents for much of the rest of the decade (see Fig. 3). Rather than the revolutionary harmony of sugar producers of which Castro had daydreamed, the institutionalisation of the new relationship occurred in the context of this precipitous drop in sugar prices and a prolonged slump, which is to say, in a sudden evaporation and then sustained drought of Cuban hard-currency reserves: despite the notional stability of planned pricing, a continuous, ever-expanding substitution of hard-currency goods for Soviet ones would characterise Soviet–Cuban exchange for the rest of the decade. Kuz'min and Maldonado's comradely squabble was to be repeated month after month, year in

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, I, 107.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, I, 106.

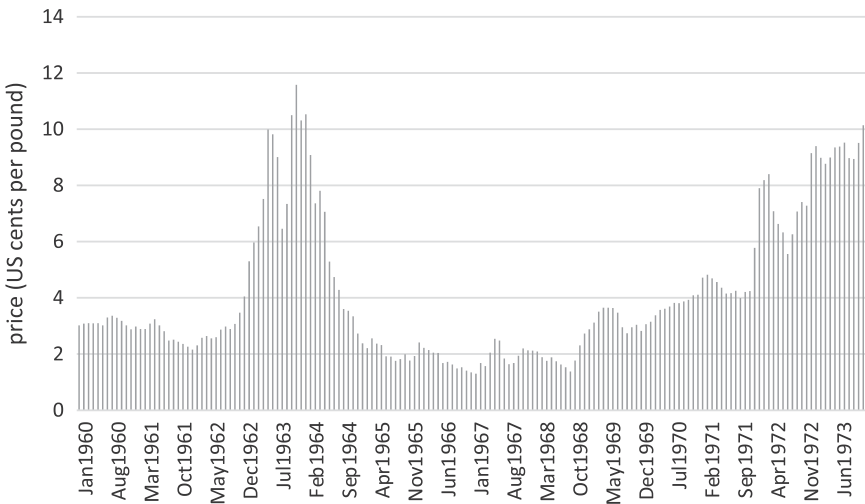


**Figure 2.** Soviet trade growth with Cuba and globally, 1960-71 (1960 = 100)

Source: Constructed from the *Vneshniaia torgovlia SSSR za ... Statisticheskii obzor* series for each year published in Moscow by Vneshtorgizdat.

year out, and through the many crises of the capitalist world economy of the 1970s and first half of the 1980s.

To organise that transition to a more ordered exchange, the Cuban government employed a two-pronged initiative. First, it created a delegation headed by Deputy



**Figure 3.** International Sugar Agreement (ISA) average daily prices, 1960-73 (in US cents per pound)

Source: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), 'Free market commodity prices, monthly, January 1960-December 2017', retrieved from <https://unctadstat.unctad.org/wds/TableViewer/tableView.aspx?ReportId=28768> (accessed 29 May 2022).

Minister of Foreign Trade Benigno Regueira to travel around the Soviet Union and look for Soviet goods that could replace those they purchased formerly for hard currency. They looked high and low at firms and research institutes, and by the end of July 1965 had identified some 300 new products they could use as substitutes.<sup>38</sup> ‘Cuba has reduced revenues in hard currency, and moreover, political difficulties’, Regueira told Patolichev, recalling the West’s recent refusal to sell Cuba several types of goods, going so far as to break signed contracts.<sup>39</sup> As large Western conglomerates had already been doing for a few years, the Cuban government now wanted Patolichev to inscribe Cuba’s needs into the 1966–70 five-year plan the Soviets were preparing at the time. This was no abject surrender, however, but a triangulation over which the West continued exercising its financial gravity. When the Soviets offered to open an account in the name of the Soviet Bank of Foreign Trade for Cuba to purchase materials and equipment for its nickel industry directly from Soviet enterprises, the Cubans objected, arguing that purchases made through Cuban foreign trade organisations should be made by Cuban entities such as the Central Bank of Cuba, lest it lose its reputation in the capitalist world as creditworthy – a status the bank enjoyed at that moment but had not always in the past.<sup>40</sup>

The second initiative entailed a Cuban proposal for the kind of long-term, list-based exchange plan the Soviets routinely negotiated with other countries. The Cuban leadership had resisted just such a commitment in the past – plus or minus a broken commodity agreement.<sup>41</sup> But by the end of 1965, after two years of trying and failing to engage the capitalist economies and international markets in the range and volume of trade they had at first conceived of, they finally relented. However half a year later, and despite the fact they initiated the proposal, the uncertain Cubans were still not ready for negotiations.<sup>42</sup> Coming up with a list should have been simple enough for Cuba; their exports to the Soviet Union consisted of sugar, nickel, tobacco and ethanol. But Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, the powerful head of the Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria (National Institute for Agrarian Reform, INRA) informed the Soviets that Cuba would have proposals ready for requests for Soviet natural resources – which made up 65 per cent of Cuba’s Soviet imports – and transportation equipment only at the end of 1966. More general machinery and equipment lists would be ready only in the summer of 1967.<sup>43</sup> Although the initiative came in 1965, and the well-practised Soviets had quickly geared up for it, the plan would come to cover only the three years from 1968 to 1970 – and it would be signed only in the spring of 1968. Closing on a decade into its revolution, Cuba was still disorganised, and its allegiance to socialism had not overcome its commitment to the US dollar.

In the summer of 1966 the Cuban government was ready to leave behind the improvisation with which it had handled the economic reconstruction of the island.

<sup>38</sup>RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 606, ll. 91–104.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, l. 102.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, l. 118.

<sup>41</sup>RGAE, f. 4372, op. 81, d. 1783, l. 55.

<sup>42</sup>Even announcing their lack of preparedness came late; in June 1966 the Soviets were still expecting that list any time then, per a report to the Central Committee in RGANI, f. 5, op. 58, d. 276, ll. 57–8.

<sup>43</sup>Rodríguez announced the Cuban delay in July: RGANI, f. 5, op. 58, d. 276, ll. 156–61.



They said as much to a Gosplan delegation visiting Cuba to celebrate National Revolutionary Day on 26 July.<sup>44</sup> And in the midst of the continuing trough in sugar prices, a dangerous new prospect for Cuba was approaching: the end of Soviet aid commitments by 1969/70.<sup>45</sup> The Cuban government became concerned about how these commitments would develop after 1970. They wanted to move away from the extemporisation of their first near decade of revolution; they now wanted 'to reposition the development of the Cuban economy on a science-based footing, and to provide conditions for increasing production and developing exports of finished industrial products'.<sup>46</sup> Nikolai Baibakov, Gosplan's powerful chairman, wanted the Rodríguez delegation to negotiate this new, rational, more ordered exchange in a visit to Moscow in January 1967.<sup>47</sup> But the relationship between these two allies could not be scheduled to the designs of their respective states; it could not be rendered so easily amenable to planning. The year 1967 plunged their best intentions into a familiar chaos.

### ***The Second Act: Soviet Oil and the Unplanned-ness of Socialism***

That the Soviet Union was inordinately, expressly generous in its material relationship with Cuba is obvious not only in the aid and trade numbers, which we have long known about, but in the degree of access Cuban negotiators had to the highest echelons of the Soviet state, as the archives in Moscow show.<sup>48</sup> Requests were made directly to the Soviet Union's ministers, whose mobilisational power was never absolute but was nevertheless substantial within the Soviet system. Their delegations routinely met with politburo members, who, if the Party archive documents declassified so far are anything to go by, received more reports on Cuba than on almost any other single country not in crisis at any given moment. This attention and generosity was built into the bureaucratic relationship, and was not easily swayed by the political expedience of the moment.

But this did not mean the Soviets expected to continue financing trade deficits forever. Both parties, in fact, assumed that their negotiations should always strive toward the reduction of the Cuban trade deficit and its attendant debt to the Soviet Union. This was, for example, the routine argument the Soviets made to the Cubans against the latter's habit of selling as much sugar in capitalist world markets as they could before selling the rest to the Soviets. They argued, both externally to the Cubans and internally among themselves, that not only would those sales depress international prices and therefore undercut Cuba's own efforts at maximising hard-currency earnings, but that sales to the Soviets would bring

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<sup>44</sup>RGAE, f. 4372, op. 81, d. 1783, l. 51.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, l. 52.

<sup>48</sup>Minister Patolichev regularly met not just with Cuban ambassadors, but with Cuba's trade representatives as well, which in relations with most other countries was the task of bureaucrats lower down the hierarchy: for example RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 3003, l. 28 and l. 76. As per his own words, Cuban Ambassador Carlos Olivares had access to the Soviet minister 'at any time': RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 1706, ll. 59–60.

down the deficit and perhaps pay down the debt.<sup>49</sup> Or, as Patolichev told Cuban Foreign Trade Minister Marcelo Fernández Font, ‘the main thing for socialist countries is to search for a way to satisfy mutual interests and needs’.<sup>50</sup>

It was on this understanding that the main Soviet powerbrokers dealing with external economic relations – Baibakov, Kuz’min and Semen A. Skachkov, head of the Gosudarstvennyi komitet po vneshnim ekonomicheskim sviaziam (the Soviet aid agency) – informed the Central Committee in October 1966 that trade in most Soviet items for the years from 1967 to 1970 had been negotiated and planned to be at the level of 1966 or at a slight increase.<sup>51</sup> Another report in the same month informed the Central Committee that Rodríguez had indicated that the Cuban government was then inclined to increase the volume of imports by some 25 per cent over the next four years, from the current 400 million rouble territory of the last two years to about 500 to 520 million roubles.<sup>52</sup> This meant growth at a steady, healthy rate, and nothing like the jerky, lurching progress of the past. That was the plan; that was the understanding. It was not what happened. By the end of 1967 Cuba had notched up 524 million roubles worth of imports, covering in one year the distance planned for four years. Soviet deliveries continued a spasmodic, erratic path into 1970, when the tally was 650 million roubles.

In truth the year of 1967 had started in the usual way, whatever the Cuban resolution to move the relationship away from improvisations. In January Fernández brought to Patolichev a litany of complaints about Soviet non-fulfilment. Cuban requests were not fully satisfied in corn, lard, condensed milk, asbestos, paper, cotton, fertilisers, trucks, oil, sodium carbonate and a few other items. The total was some US\$150 million that they were counting on importing from the Soviet Union.<sup>53</sup> And so it continued for one more year. Requests that went above and beyond the negotiated lists, particularly when they encompassed deficit goods and hard-currency products like corn and flour, had to be decided by the Central Committee; and the Foreign Trade Ministry then had to expend difficult entrepreneurial effort to find supplemental resources to send to Cuba within a tight and grasping domestic system. ‘In the middle of the year it is extremely difficult to find additional resources for export’, Kuz’min warned the Cuban trade representative in June – as officials had done regularly for years.<sup>54</sup> In the summer of 1967 these resources were about to get stretched to the limit.

But before proceeding to what happened between the summer of 1967 and the summer of 1968, it is worth stopping to consider some of the specificities of the oil and economic sanctions story in light of the history we have covered so far. One precise number in particular seems important to this story: 20 per cent.

<sup>49</sup>For example as per an internal report from the Foreign Trade Ministry to the Central Committee from 23 Feb.1967, RGANI, f. 5, op. 59, d. 347, ll. 20–1.

<sup>50</sup>RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 1706, l. 160.

<sup>51</sup>RGAE, f. 4372, op. 81, d. 1783, l. 53.

<sup>52</sup>RGANI, f. 5, op. 58, d. 276, l. 157.

<sup>53</sup>RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 1706, ll. 160–3. He also noted with undisguised disappointment, though quite correctly, that multilateral trade within the Soviet-led Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA, also known as COMECON) was developing much too slowly.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, l. 76. This was a fairly standard formulation often expressed in the face of sudden demands by any of the Soviet Union’s trade partners, a routine response aimed at lowering expectations.

Sometimes this figure is deployed to describe the ‘scheduled petroleum allotment’ withheld from Cuba.<sup>55</sup> Sometimes 20 per cent is the reduction in the sugar import quota the Soviets allegedly maintained with Cuba.<sup>56</sup> In archivally recovering the Soviet–Cuban economic relationship, this article aims not only to retrieve the – likely more accurate – numbers the Soviets used to understand the situation, but to further understand the context within which they functioned. In this sense the idea of sugar quota reductions as part of some kind of Soviet economic statecraft is particularly insidious. It is not just that there is no evidence for it, the main problem is that the implicit politics in that number is almost the exact opposite of the nature of the Soviet–Cuban relationship. Throughout this and all other crises, year after year and contrary to any suggestion of quota manipulation, documents show the Soviets pleaded with Cuba to consider delivering more sugar to Soviet markets. It was Cuba that decided what it exported to the Soviet Union; the very notion that the Soviet Union may have constrained its sugar quota from Cuba is ahistorical.

The 20 per cent cut in oil shipments is sometimes represented differently and more modestly, if also contradictorily: as a deliberate slowdown in the rate of growth of deliveries. Documents from Moscow render this as unintelligible as the sugar quota datum. There were neither negotiated increases, nor steady flows that could be slowed.<sup>57</sup> There was, by contrast, something verging on logistical chaos and abrupt bouts of Cuban alarm accompanied by precipitous, impracticable requests for more oil. As late as February 1967, an internal report informed the Central Committee that the Cubans had so far asked for only an additional 5 per cent more oil for 1968 over what had been agreed for 1967, bringing the total to 4 million tonnes from 3.8 million tonnes.<sup>58</sup>

The context of the urgency and disorder evident in Cuba’s growing energy requests was a relationship marked, on the Cuban side, by a zealously guarded independence and an abiding distrust. That summer the Soviets had sent Castro a letter condemning his policy of exporting revolution throughout South America, and telling the Cubans that should it all end in military conflict, the Cuban leadership would ‘take responsibility on themselves’.<sup>59</sup> Unbeknownst to the Soviets, Castro had received a cable from the Cuban embassy in Moscow alleging that the Soviets had information on an intervention against Cuba but had chosen not to share it with Cuba. When the politburo sent Aleksei Kosygin to the island in June 1967, he was received rather frostily, he reported to his East European comrades two weeks later, as if he were a private citizen. From the airport Castro

<sup>55</sup>For example Pérez, *Cuba*, p. 287.

<sup>56</sup>For example Martínez-Fernández, *Revolutionary Cuba*, p. 102.

<sup>57</sup>Unlike the more derivative literature, the numbers Domínguez provides in *To Make a World Safe for Revolution*, pp. 72–3, following *Granma*, are roughly consonant with the Soviet documents.

<sup>58</sup>RGANI, f. 5, op. 59, d. 347, l. 19.

<sup>59</sup>We do not have the letter. But Kosygin relayed its content in a rather frank tone to party leaders in Budapest on 12 July 1967. See ‘Kosygin’s Report on Trip to Cuba to Meeting of Communist Party First Secretaries, Budapest, Hungary, 12 July 1967’, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, KC PZPR XIA/13, AAN, Warsaw. Obtained for Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) by James Hershberg and translated for CWIHP by Jan Chowaniec: <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115803> (accessed 29 May 2022).

drove him around the island until 4 a.m., in order to satisfy the Soviet technocrat that, despite Havana's dilapidated appearance and Kosygin's initial impression, Cuba's economy was being managed competently in trying circumstances. When confronted two days later with the cable, Kosygin responded sententiously: 'A week ago I was in Moscow and I know all state documents. I am officially telling you that this is a provocation.'<sup>60</sup> Time proved Kosygin honest, but Castro and his comrades never quite believed the Soviets. Nevertheless the frank exchange cleared the air, and Havana sent Kosygin off as warmly as he had been received coldly. The episode showed two undercurrents in the relationship that would repeat themselves in 1968: firstly, no amount of distrust seemed to affect either Cuban economic demands or Soviet economic solicitousness; and, secondly, Castro and the Cuban leadership were clearly going through a very fraught period in which distrust in the Soviets could easily turn into accusations of conspiracy, a smouldering fire that would flare again at the beginning of 1968.

Meanwhile the economic agencies continued with their rhythms. In August 1967 a series of Cuban state officials would pass through Moscow with demands of increasing urgency for more oil. On 3 August they handed in a new oil delivery schedule requesting that 150,000 tonnes of the oil scheduled for 1968 arrive in December.<sup>61</sup> Two weeks later President Osvaldo Dorticós sent a more entreating letter, arguing that unless the Soviets sent oil, work in industrial and agricultural enterprises would have to be partly suspended, and the government would be forced to take very strong measures in rationing petrol for transport, which, as he emphatically noted, would be bad from both an economic and a political point of view.<sup>62</sup> This was followed up by a visit from the Cuban ambassador in Moscow to the deputy chair of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, in an attempt to put pressure on government bodies other than those that traditionally handled these requests.<sup>63</sup> As the foreign trade ministry had reported to the Central Committee, the Cubans had requested more oil at the beginning of the year. The Soviets had satisfied these requests, but the Cuban ambassador was now reporting that the Cuban government had again underestimated the amount of oil needed. Even at the Presidium, it turned out, the Soviets knew the refrain: the request will take some time to study so as 'to determine which of our economic organisations has saved the necessary amount of fuel, or to which organisations we must reduce previously scheduled deliveries, since, as the ambassador knows, all fuel in the USSR is distributed among consumers strictly in accordance with the country's economic plan', so resolving this issue in the middle of the year would be

<sup>60</sup>This account of Kosygin's trip to Cuba is taken from the above report to party leaders, which includes the quotation: *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup>RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 1706, ll. 68–71.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, ll. 66–7. In this letter, and as part of a new negotiating strategy, Dorticós gives two variants for bringing forward to 1967 deliveries scheduled for 1968: 150,000 tonnes of crude for December and 22,000 tonnes of gasoline for August, or 77,000 tonnes of fuel oil and 20,000 tonnes of diesel for November and December and 42,000 tonnes of benzene for October and August.

<sup>63</sup>Ambassador Olivares in fact reported that he had already spoken with the deputy chair of the Council of Ministers, which was the major decision-making body of the state, Patolichev, and the deputy minister of foreign affairs: *ibid.*, ll. 63–5.

difficult.<sup>64</sup> By 23 August Patolichev delivered the good news. Although the energy situation was very tight, he prefaced pointedly, his ministry had found 90,000 tonnes of oil products they could send before the end of the year. They would be shipping the benzene in a few days and had already acquired a tanker to send the rest. And with a final diplomatic flourish: given the importance and urgency of the delivery, they had removed these products ‘en route to another country’, his deputy declared.<sup>65</sup>

This did not satisfy the insistent Cubans. Over the subsequent months, the archives in Moscow record an interesting divergence in Soviet and Cuban perceptions of Soviet oil delivery plans. A report to the Central Committee in October shows that, while the Cubans had by then once again raised their demand for petroleum from 4 million tonnes before the summer to 4.45 million tonnes, the Soviets had already planned to acquiesce somewhat and increase oil crude deliveries to Cuba by roughly 10 per cent from the previous year, taking the haul to 4.2 million tonnes.<sup>66</sup> The ministry would carry out negotiations with the Cubans on the basis of these plans, which the Council of Ministers had approved at the end of September.<sup>67</sup> When those negotiations came that December and January, the new Cuban ambassador seemed to be guided by the original plan from a year ago, which had anticipated no changes in the volume of deliveries and remained at the 3.8 million tonnes mark.<sup>68</sup>

January came with those thinly veiled accusations from Castro, as reported in *Granma*, that did so much to seed the sanctions thesis among later scholars. That winter was also the nadir of a relationship that had been, as those same scholars rightly note, deteriorating over the previous year. Without access to Cuban archives, it will continue to be difficult to ascertain why the Cuban leadership decided to make such public and misleading accusations. The Cubans may have believed them to be true, as they seem to have believed the conspiracies that Kosygin had gone to Cuba to refute; or it may all have been part of a negotiating strategy. The long-in-the-planning trade negotiations for the three-year trade agreement that were supposed to do away with the improvisational governance of the past – and which had initially been planned for 1966 – were finally happening.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, ll. 59–60.

<sup>66</sup>RGANI, f. 5, op. 59, d. 347, l. 179. Delivery of oil products was originally planned to be reduced by half, although the Cubans were now requesting double the amount.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, l. 180. The report also noted that the Ministry of Foreign Trade would consult with Gosplan on the possibility of satisfying all of Cuba’s requests.

<sup>68</sup>RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 1706, ll. 1–2. While making these plaintive demands for more oil in December 1967, the Cubans simultaneously announced, to Soviet chagrin, that drought in the island would cut sugar deliveries from an already reduced 3 million tonnes to 2.7 million tonnes: *ibid.*, ll. 3–5. By May 1968 the Cubans had announced that they would be able to deliver only 2 million tonnes, in RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 2321, ll. 17–18. The final tally ended up at 1.75 million tonnes, a full million tonnes less again.

<sup>69</sup>The Soviets noted a similar pattern with respect to aid agreements, where they observed ‘long delays in the signing of contracts for equipment and materials, design work and the secondment of specialists’: RGANI, f. 5, op. 58, d. 276, l. 19. In light of this evidence, reports from the propaganda entity Radio Free Europe – later uncritically repeated – that the Soviets delayed the signing of an annual trade agreement ‘by a month’ and increased the interest rate of their aid seem rather implausible. A month-long delay in signing an agreement would have been immaterial to the flow of Soviet goods into the island, and incomprehensible as a way of

It is in this context that Cuban expressions of disappointment and resentment took the form of economic accusations. In fact, rather than conveying these sentiments through more traditional diplomatic channels, the Cubans chose Patolichev for a target, sending him a sharply worded letter that ended up on Leonid Brezhnev's desk and as the General Secretary's business rather than his minister's.<sup>70</sup>

In his 'state of the union' address to the Central Committee in April, Brezhnev summarised the degeneration of the relationship, and did so through a list of events that confirms current scholarly understandings. It started with differing ideological conceptions, with particular emphasis on the 'many Vietnams' formulation of the only just deceased Che Guevara, which promoted a revolutionary push in Africa and Latin America.<sup>71</sup> We have known for some time now that the Soviets disapproved of this foreign policy approach, which they considered adventurous and against Soviet interest in the relaxation of international tensions; indeed they had told Castro as directly as they knew how the previous summer (see above). For Brezhnev, Cuba's role was not to be the tip of the socialist spear, but rather that of socialist showcase; its 'most weighty contribution ...', he told his colleagues, 'would be the successful construction of socialism in Cuba itself, her successes in the development of the economy and further cultural advance'.<sup>72</sup> Kosygin had managed to briefly reverse the deterioration of the relationship with his June 1967 trip. However Cuban criticisms of Soviet foreign policy and political economy continued, soon aggravated by Cuba's snub of the 50th anniversary celebration of the Russian Revolution in October and the Escalante affair, in which the Castro administration purged Communists presumed to be too close to the Soviet Union. But in his briefing to the Central Committee Brezhnev gave pride of place to the letter Patolichev received, finding in it a 'sharp tone' and 'an absurd accusation' about Soviet attempts to constrain the Cuban economy. Brezhnev sounded bewildered and not a little indignant with the Cuban leadership; but he preached patience: 'It would be incorrect to condition the support of the victories of the Cuban revolution, of the task of socialism in this country [i.e. Cuba], on even very serious mistakes and twists of the Cuban leaders.'<sup>73</sup>

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signalling displeasure, especially in light of the fact that Cuba delayed much-needed long-term trade negotiations for two years to begin with. The introduction of this piece of highly speculative information into the canon of Soviet–Cuban relations initially generated by Radio Free Europe was by Edward Gonzalez, 'Castro: The Limits of Charisma', *Problems of Communism*, 19: 4 (1970), pp. 12–24.

<sup>70</sup>I have so far been able to locate neither the note nor the Soviet response in the Soviet archives, although the Soviets referred to it often and with some outrage during the winter and spring of 1968 in conversations with Cubans at all levels. Brezhnev highlighted the letter during a Central Committee Plenum, in 'Secret Speech by Leonid I. Brezhnev CPSU CC Plenum, "About Current Problems of the International Situation and the Struggle of the CPSU for the Cohesion of the World Communist Movement"', 9 April 1968, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, RGANI, f. 2, op. 3, d. 95, ll. 64–9. Obtained and translated for CWIHP by Sergey Radchenko: <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115813> (accessed 29 May 2022).

<sup>71</sup>Che Guevara, 'Vietnam and the World Struggle for Freedom', *Tricontinental Magazine*, 16 April 1967: <https://faculty.chass.ncsu.edu/slatta/hi216/documents/chetricontinent.htm> (accessed 29 May 2022). Che Guevara died on 9 Oct. 1967.

<sup>72</sup>Secret Speech by Leonid I. Brezhnev'.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.* According to Brezhnev, Castro turned down any notion of discussing these disagreements 'at a high level'.



The point here is not that Brezhnev's speeches are a more credible source than *Granma's* pages. But serious analysis should give at least equal weight to each, which is to say not very much weight at all. In this instance, however, evidence in the routine collaboration between the two allies empirically supports Brezhnev's claims. It is unlikely that the Soviet leadership was tacitly trying to send a message that Castro somehow put together; no doubt as archival access increases in Moscow and Havana, more information may become available. But a thesis of this sort is so far without archival support, and furthermore would not be consonant with the kind of information we do have, and certainly not in the form earlier analysts presented. As argued earlier, not only were the numbers in those Western analyses all wrong, and not only would sanctions be a radical departure in Soviet international behaviour, but the archives have shown that there were no steady, predictable increases to apply a sanction to. There were unexpected Cuban demands, and Soviet attempts at accommodation. Failures within this erratic context could be politicised at any time, as they were by Castro in 1968, but the archives show that they happened consistently both before and after that episode of politicisation. The evidence presented here, however, does more than disprove the coercion thesis: it renders material the political function – that of socialist showcase – Brezhnev reserved for Cuba, as expressed so succinctly to his colleagues. This was the political assignment Foreign Trade Minister Patolichev had been tasked with carrying out. So when he delivered the news to the Cubans in January 1968 that he had found the extra tonnes of diesel, heating oil, fertiliser and assorted other hydrocarbon derivatives the Cubans demanded, he too understood himself to be executing an extraordinary effort.<sup>74</sup> 'We do not maintain such rates of growth with any other socialist country', he assured them.<sup>75</sup> Is it any surprise he too was bewildered that his sales pitch about Soviet munificence was met only two weeks later with a sharp-toned letter? And with all this, the Soviets still reported to the Cubans that the agreed-upon delivery of oil and oil products that unhappy February was on time – despite the frosts, they added.<sup>76</sup>

### **Denouement: The Continuities of Political Economy**

The timeframe of the sanctions thesis never did make much sense. The argument always relied on a certain fuzziness of historical time and consequence. The sanctions presumably occurred in 1967, together with a litany of disagreements, and tensions burst open in the acrimony of the first two months of 1968. Soviet pressure failed to deter the Escalante affair, but the same effort to discipline Castro allegedly attained its psychological consummation between February 1968 and Castro's declarations on the military intervention in the Prague Spring in August. Narratives then spurt into a quick rush to the mid-1970s, when a more quiescent

<sup>74</sup>Even if he admitted it fell a bit short of satisfying the sudden and improvised Cuban requests, in RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 2321, ll. 1–3.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup>*Udivlenie* (surprise, astonishment) is the word Kuz'min used to describe Patolichev's reaction in a meeting with Cuba's Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade Germán Amado Blanco on 19 Feb. 1968, in *ibid.*, ll. 6–8.

Castro can be found institutionalising a Sovietised political economy in the island, and cooperating more fraternally with Soviet foreign-policy goals.<sup>77</sup>

In terms of oil, however, the only thing that seems to have changed was the accusatory tone of Cuban suspicions and anxieties. The delays and logistical confusion never did relent. Not political calculations, but Cuban infrastructural deficiencies were the main delaying agents through 1968, as the island reorganised the governance of its ports.<sup>78</sup> The next year the Soviets came to anticipate that they would not even be able to match the 4.2 million tonnes of petroleum they delivered the year before, and negotiated to deliver 3.9 million tonnes, while arranging for an extra 400,000 tonnes to be delivered from Egypt – to obvious Cuban displeasure.<sup>79</sup> If the Soviets had learned anything, it was to anticipate unpredictable Cuban demands for more.<sup>80</sup> This rather more meaningful readjustment of oil deliveries, however, seems to have gone unnoticed by analysts, perhaps because there was no overarching political narrative to slot it into. In July 1970, in the midst of the (relative) failure of the 10-million-tonne *zafra*, the Cubans were again expressing their anxiety in ministries across Moscow over oil delays.<sup>81</sup> Disagreements over the pricing of oil and its shipping between Cuban and Soviet organisations were such that they had to be taken to arbitration for resolution.<sup>82</sup> On the issue of sugar, we have long known that the Cubans continued to keep the Soviets guessing about deliveries as prices, opportunities and setbacks fluctuated elsewhere in the world – without any of it changing any political sense of dependence or independence within an imaginary spectrum of Soviet economic hegemony whose boundaries were never delineated. The tensions created by an exchange of oil, sugar and other commodities mediated by the institutions of the capitalist world were never sublimated into any kind of alternate world of socialist exchange, creating continued tensions that were never overcome.

For the truth is that oil delays had always been unrelated to any Soviet politics of economic pressure. However, conditionality has always been an elementary tool of US foreign policy. Nothing like that effect of preponderance ever really became part of the Soviet foreign policy arsenal. Had the sanctions happened as is surmised by scholars and etched into the narrative of Cuban history, the policy would have been a departure from established Soviet foreign policy practice. The reasons were commonplace to socialist political economy. In fact Cuban interlocutors alluded to them at the height of the crisis. The year 1967 had seen an intensification of

<sup>77</sup>Except, of course, that Gleijeses found he did not in his two volumes on Cubans in Africa, *Conflicting Missions and Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976–1991* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

<sup>78</sup>As Umberto Castillo, head of the port administration agency, explained to the Soviet trade representative in Havana in June 1968, in RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 2321, ll. 20–5. The Soviets would soon be sending experts to help.

<sup>79</sup>Cuba had recently retooled its refineries for Soviet and Romanian oil, and the introduction of a new petroleum type entailed more work: *ibid.*, ll. 68–71.

<sup>80</sup>As in the 14 Nov. 1969 exchange between Kuz'min and Amado Blanco, in which Kuz'min warned at the start of negotiations for exchange lists for 1970 that they would not be able to budge beyond their negotiated quantities, especially in some fundamental resources that included oil: RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 3003, ll. 95–102.

<sup>81</sup>As they had in 1969: for example *ibid.*, ll. 35–8.

<sup>82</sup>RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 3664, ll. 48–9.

work on the *zafra*. The Castro government was mobilising greater labour resources from the cities, even as new tractors and machinery were being introduced from the Soviet Union. The amount of time sugar mills were at work was extended, even as the capacity of other factories was increased.<sup>83</sup> This acceleration of energy-intensive work had caught the Cuban state somewhat unprepared, and put sudden new demands on a system of exchange with the Soviet Union that preferred a more deliberate tempo of assessment and action. Meanwhile, the wider, hegemonic system of US dollar economic exchange that had exerted a steady wrenching force on the relationship shut auxiliary avenues for quickly fixing the deficits and frustrations of rapid economic development in the island nation. Any illusion Castro had had in 1964 of using the Soviet Union as the vehicle that would take the island back to the global economy had more or less been deflated by the late 1960s.

Research in the Cuban archives will one day elucidate why the Cuban leadership misread Soviet policies and intentions at that particular moment – or, less charitably, why it chose to misleadingly dramatise them. The material relationship, however, continued its friction-laden path of logistical problems, infrastructural deficits, capital building, miscalculations and fast development. The Soviets continued to insist that Cuba pay down its debt with deliveries of sugar, and that demanding resources in the middle of the year was likely to deliver only partial results. As they did in the 1966 meeting that began this story, and in the 1967–8 meetings on oil deliveries that caused the discord at the story's centre, Soviet officials continued to argue that there were limits to the Soviet Union's economic capacity. Cuban officials for their part continued making demands as if there were not, and continued being frustrated at the deliberate pace with which the Soviets reacted. And they persisted in charting an independent course for the island that the Soviets never meaningfully challenged, and that is still the core of its politics.

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### Spanish abstract

En el invierno de 1968, las tensiones entre Cuba y la Unión Soviética se elevaron considerablemente en la medida de que el portavoz oficial del liderazgo cubano, el periódico *Granma*, acusó a la Unión Soviética de imponer sanciones petroleras en la isla con el fin de subyugarla. Esas acusaciones quedaron inscritas en la historiografía de las relaciones soviético-cubanas. Esta intervención historiográfica tiene un doble propósito: por un lado utiliza documentos recientemente desclasificados de los archivos soviéticos para mostrar que no hubo sanciones petroleras sobre Cuba, sino más bien existió un continuum de retos logísticos y de infraestructura que generaron retrasos y tensiones en las relaciones entre estos dos aliados socialistas. Por otro lado, el artículo contextualiza la relación dentro de un marco de instituciones capitalistas de intercambio que de hecho mediaron esa relación, lo cual explica no solo parte de las razones de estos obstáculos y tensiones,

<sup>83</sup>RGAE, f. 413, op. 31, d. 1706, ll. 61–2.

sino también un cuadro más amplio para entender mejor las relaciones económicas entre ambos países.

**Spanish keywords:** relaciones soviético-cubanas; economía socialista; capitalismo global; petróleo

**Portuguese abstract**

No inverno de 1968, as tensões entre Cuba e União Soviética transbordaram quando o porta-voz da liderança cubana, o jornal *Granma*, acusou a União Soviética de impor sanções petrolíferas à ilha para subjugar-la. Essas acusações se inscrevem na historiografia das relações soviético-cubanas. Esta intervenção nessa historiografia é dupla: por um lado, usa documentos recentemente liberados dos arquivos soviéticos para mostrar que não houve sanções petrolíferas a Cuba, mas sim uma continuidade de desafios logísticos e de infraestrutura que criaram atrasos e tensões nas relações entre esses dois aliados socialistas. Por outro lado, o artigo contextualiza a relação dentro das instituições capitalistas de troca que de fato a mediarão, encontrando nelas não apenas parte da razão dos retrocessos e tensões, mas também um quadro mais amplo para melhor compreensão da economia soviético-cubana.

**Portuguese keywords:** relações soviético-cubanas; economia socialista; capitalismo global; petróleo

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