

LATIN AMERICAN MATERIALS IN THE COMINTERN ARCHIVE*

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Abstract: With the collapse of the Soviet Union, restrictions on archives in Russia have diminished markedly. Some of the repositories have potential interest for Latin Americanists, including the Comintern Archive. This research note discusses the objectives of the archive and the types of material it contains. A list of the major collections relevant to Latin America is followed by comments on how to use the archive and websites that will facilitate research in Russia. Also provided are bibliographic references to academic studies on Latin America based on Comintern materials.

Scholars of modern Latin America will want to know about the archival bonanza occurring in Russia. Since the Boris Yeltsin government included public access to state archives in its reformist agenda, the once-secret archives of the Soviet Union are steadily being opened. Scholars now know that the Soviet government saved vast amounts of documentation in reasonably well-organized repositories. A decree passed by the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation in June 1992 declared that all state documents are to be made available thirty years after their date of origin, except for certain military and personal records that may remain sealed for an additional twenty years (see Kennedy-Grimsted 1994, xxxii). The impact of this decree has been mixed, as some archives continue to follow their own policies on admission and access. Nevertheless, the amount of newly available materials is enormous, and the evidence they contain ranges from interesting to profoundly revisionist.¹

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1. For initial expectations surrounding the opening of Soviet archives, see Miner (1995, 19–21). Examples of pathbreaking studies on Russian subjects based on materials from Soviet archives include Pipes (1996), Radzinskii (1996), Figes (1996), and Saarela and Rentola (1998).

THE COMINTERN ARCHIVE

Because the international agenda of the Soviet Union was axiomatic, the opening of Russian archives represents a distinct opportunity for Latin Americanists. An archive of particular interest is the Comintern Archive, located on the third and fourth floors of the Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Recent History (Rossiski Tsentr Jranienia I Isucchenia Documentov Noveishi Istori, or RTsKhIDNI). It is located at Bolshaya Dmitrovka (formerly Pushkinskaia Ulitsa), 15, just a few blocks off Red Square in Moscow.² Formerly called the Central Party Archive, the RTsKhIDNI was nationalized in August 1991 and opened to investigators four months later. The Comintern materials, which constitute one of the largest of the two hundred archival collections in the RTsKhIDNI, contain the internal documentation and international correspondence of the Third International (1919–1943). The size of the holdings typically reflect the Comintern's strategic priorities. For instance, the collections on China, Germany, and Italy are quite large. The collection of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) is one of the largest, with more than five thousand folders. The collection on the International Brigades in Spain is also sizable, more than three thousand files. Yet the materials on Great Britain are surprisingly few, despite the importance of England in Moscow's global outlook. Soviet policy makers never considered Latin America as significant as other regions in the world, but the Latin American collections are substantial, well over two thousand files and hundreds of thousands of pages.

The nature of the material in the archive derives from the specific mission of the Comintern. Founded under the guidance of V. I. Lenin in 1919 to serve as the directorate of international communism, the Comintern insisted that Communist party affiliates keep the headquarters closely informed of their activities. Affiliates had to respond to Comintern queries, send written reports, and submit archival documentation. Comintern officials used these materials to monitor the affiliates' activities and determine future action. Once intermediary offices were founded in the late 1920s, correspondence typically went through them, as with the South American Bureau in Buenos Aires or the Caribbean Bureau in New York City. Other materials were exchanged directly with Moscow, especially in the early years.

The kinds of evidence in the archive vary greatly. Documents from central collections such as the Comintern Executive Committee and the Latin American Secretariat shed light on the structure of the Comintern at the highest levels, the thinking of its leaders, and their approach to Latin America. Collections from individual countries further elucidate the nature

2. Daniela Spenser-Grollová of Mexico has written a brief description of the Comintern Archive in the context of the Mexican materials in Spenser-Grollová (1995). For another recent analysis of the archive, see Studer and Unfried (1997).

of relations between Moscow and Latin America, although these collections may be more valuable as sources of local history. Parties forwarded information on their own activities, local economic conditions, political campaigns, and labor movements. While some Latin American collections are limited more to local affairs, others contain significant international correspondence. For instance, the materials from Central America, Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, Ecuador, and Peru tend to focus on local affairs. But the collections of other countries that played regional and administrative roles, like Cuba, Argentina, Mexico, and Venezuela, will afford researchers more international material. These may include correspondence with representatives of the Profintern, the Communist Youth International, the Regional Secretariats, the central offices of the Comintern, and other Communist parties in Latin America, as well as materials from the Budget Commission of the Comintern.³

As with any documentary source, the Comintern materials must be read with an eye toward the unique conditions under which they were created. Both the Comintern and the parties wanted something out of their relationship with one another. The parties wanted international support and ideally a willing and wealthy patron. The Comintern sought allies in the international battle against capitalism and fellow defenders of the Russian Revolution. At times these objectives functioned in unison, but at others they worked at cross-purposes. For instance, the initial strategy of the Comintern to foment immediate global revolution coincided with local affiliates' desire for power. But as the Comintern shifted its focus in the late 1920s away from global revolution and toward defense of the regime in Russia, local parties were judged more on their public stance toward Russia and less on their own political endeavors.

To remain in the Comintern's good graces, a local party had to be keenly aware of these strategic internal shifts, which were closely related to changes within the Russian Communist Party. Central to international communism was the rise to power of Joseph Stalin in the latter half of the 1920s and the consequent hard turn to the left with the show trials, purges, and executions. Fortunately, conditions in Latin America did not reach the extremes of Russia, but events in Russia impacted communist movements in Latin America by inciting factionalism, investigations, and a turnover in leadership. If a party wanted something from Moscow, such as money, its leaders had to be astute enough to frame their request in the parlance that Comintern officials wanted to hear at that time.

Receiving material aid from the Comintern was never easy for Latin American parties. In accordance with its Marxist doctrine, the Comintern adhered to the notion that the industrial workers of Europe were the engine

3. The descriptions of the each of the respective Latin American collections were aided by correspondence from Victor Jelfets and Kimmo Rentola.

of global revolution. Thus Latin America simply lacked priority. Not until the Sixth Congress in 1928 did Comintern leaders announce “the discovery of Latin America.” Even then they tended to consider Latin America less as a revolutionary front in its own right than as a weapon against U.S. capitalism via an attack on U.S. imperialism. With the onset of the Popular Front in 1935, anti-imperialism gave way to a strategy of collaboration with nonradicals to combat fascism.⁴ Variations on this rule occurred, however, as can be seen in the contrasting examples of the Brazilian uprising in 1935 and the formation of the Chilean Frente Popular that same year. The documents in the archive thus reflect the constant shifts in Comintern strategy, in part through changes in the discourse of correspondence.⁵

CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM OF THE COMINTERN ARCHIVE

Documents in the archive are grouped according to three units of classification: a *fond* is a main collection; an *opis* is a catalog or section within a fond (the plural is *opisi*); and a *delo* is an individual file (files are *dela*). A single delo can hold more than a hundred pages of material. Russian archivists have not yet compiled an inventory specific to Latin America. We compiled the following list based on catalogs in the administrative offices of the Comintern Archive.

Fond 17: The Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union

Opisi 128 and 137: The International Departments, 1944–1953, catalogued by year and country. Materials after 1953 are found in other archives (see our subsequent pointers on Internet sources for information on other

4. We should point out that our portrayal of the Comintern’s approach to Latin America is open to revision. Our description can be characterized as “standard” in that it reflects the current state of historiography (see the following note for citations). Our description also reflects the content of the documentation that we examined in the Central American and Peruvian collections. Nonetheless, Victor Jelifets has informed us that his 1998 dissertation shows that the Comintern had articulated an “American Plan” in the early 1920s (much before the traditional “discovery” in 1928), which included Latin America. When this plan failed around 1921, the Comintern left Latin American affairs to the local office in Buenos Aires, which was later joined by the Caribbean Bureau in New York City. A consensus has been reached, however, that a party’s retention of healthy ties with officials or representatives of the Comintern depended largely on awareness of ideological shifts in the Comintern and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

5. Four recent studies of the Comintern based on new materials from its archives are Narinsky and Rojahn (1996), Rees (1999), Adibekov, Shahnazarova, and Shirinya (1997), and McDermott and Agnew (1997). Older but essential sources include Degras (1956–1965), Lasic and Drachkovitch (1973), Carr (1953), and Drachkovitch (1966, pt. 3). Latin Americanists may be particularly interested in Caballero (1986), Clissold (1970), Cerdas-Cruz (1993), and the memoirs of Eudocio Ravines (1951), a Peruvian communist who rose to high ranks in the Comintern. They were published in Spanish as *La gran estafa* (Mexico City: Libros y Revistas, 1952).

archives). Also of interest in other archives are the materials on the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in which the appointments of Comintern representatives to different countries were discussed.

Fond 492: The Amsterdam Bureau Collection

Two opisi. Contains some material on Latin America, catalogued chronologically.

Fond 495: The Executive Committee of the Comintern

Opisi 2, 18, 20, and 24. The leading bodies of the Communist International (CI). Opisi 20 and 24 are catalogued by country; Opisi 2 and 18 are catalogued chronologically.

Opisi 79 and 101: The Latin American Secretariat, 1921–1935, 294 files.

Opisi 73 and 74: The Secretariat of the CI Secretary General, Georgy Dimitrov, 1935–1944, catalogued by country.

Opisi 17 and 102: The Secretariat of the CI Secretary for Latin American Affairs, Dolores Ibarruri, 1937–1944, catalogued by country.

Opisi 184: CI cipher telegrams to and from various Communist parties.

- Opis 29: The Communist Party of Brazil, 1921–1940, 144 files.
- Opis 67: The Communist Party of Ecuador, 1925–1936, 19 files.
- Opis 87: The Communist Party of Puerto Rico, 1931–1937, 17 files.
- Opis 104: The Communist Party of Colombia, 1923–1938, 101 files.
- Opis 105: The Communist Party of Cuba, 1919–1938, 177 files.
- Opis 106: The Communist Party of Chile, 1921–1941, 72 files.
- Opis 107: The Communist Party of Venezuela, 1925–1939, 65 files.
- Opis 108: The Communist Party of Mexico, 1919–1940, 231 files.
- Opis 111: The Communist Party of Haiti, 1929–1936, 8 files.
- Opis 112: The Communist Party of Guatemala, 1923–1932, 10 files.
- Opis 113: The Communist Party of Honduras, 1929–1934, 7 files.
- Opis 114: The Communist Party of Costa Rica, 1929–1936, 7 files.
- Opis 115: The Nicaragua Workers' Party, 1927–1935, 3 files.
- Opis 116: The Communist Party of Panama, 1927–1936, 15 files.
- Opis 117: The Communist Party of Paraguay, 1928–1938, 10 files.
- Opis 118: The Communist Party of Peru, 1923–1938, 42 files.
- Opis 119: The Communist Party of El Salvador, 1929–1935, 13 files.
- Opis 122: The Communist Party of Bolivia, 1925–1937, 4 files.
- Opis 131: The Communist Party of Uruguay, 1920–1939, 58 files.
- Opis 134: The Communist Party of Argentina, 1918–1938, 269 files.

Fond 500: The Caribbean Bureau

Opis 1: 1930–1936, 19 files.

Fond 503: The South American Bureau

Opis 1: 1925–1935, 62 files.

Fond 517: Sen Katayama's Personal Collection

Opis 1: Contains portions of material from the Panamerican Bureau in Mexico from the early 1920s and also materials of the first seven Congresses of the Comintern and the Plenums of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, items that do not appear in the individual country collections.

Fond 533: The Communist Youth International

Seven opis in total. Some material catalogued by country; other materials, such as the documents of the Executive Committee, are catalogued chronologically.

Fond 534: The International Red Trade Union (the Profintern)

Opis 1–7: 1920–1938, catalogued by country. A collection of potential great interest to Latin Americanists because it was through labor unions that the parties commonly tried to build their links with the masses. This collection includes documents from the 1928 Latin American conference and correspondence from Profintern representatives in Latin America.

Fond 539: International Red Aid (Socorro Rojo Internacional)

Opis 3: 1923–1941, catalogued by country.

Fond 542: The Anti-Imperialist League (Brussels)

Opis 1: 1923–1935, 102 files.

Fond 545: The International Brigades in Spain

Opis 1: 1936–1945, 3,365 files.

Fond 552: The Trotskyist Internationals

Opis 1 and 2: 1930–1940, 286 files.

Fond 575: The Cominform

Opis 1: 1947–1956, catalogued by country.

In addition to the collections listed above, Latin Americanists might be interested in three other collections for which we lack specific numerical references. They are Lenin's personal collection, the collection of his Secretariat, and the Kresintern collection, catalogued by name and in chronological order.

The Comintern Archive is reasonably user-friendly. The archivist in charge of Latin American materials, Svetlana Rozental, holds an advanced degree, speaks Spanish, and is exceptionally helpful. The director of the RTsKhIDNI is Kyrill Anderson, an English-speaking historian studying the United States. Known for his commitment to open access to archives, he has collaborated with a group of North American and Russian scholars working on the records of the Communist Party USA. Anderson is currently overseeing a project to microfilm materials from the RTsKhIDNI. It should be noted, however, that Victor JEIFETS, a Russian scholar who has examined many of the Comintern's collections, has reported that since 1995, some materials have been closed again to scholars. These include the Secretariats of Piatski, Dimitrov, and Manuilski (the first two have greater potential interest to Latin Americanists). Also reportedly off-limits are the coded correspondence between the Communist parties and the central office of the Comintern. The reasons for these restrictions are not known.

A major difficulty in conducting research in the Comintern Archive is getting to the front door. Visas can be difficult to obtain, language barriers can hinder travel, and Russia can be expensive (*The New York Times* listed Moscow as one of the five most expensive cities in the world for business travelers). Prospective researchers might want to hire a translator, especially at the beginning stages of a research trip. Although Spanish will suffice in Svetlana Rozental's office, the staff members who actually take requests and retrieve materials speak only Russian. Translators advertise their services in English-language newspapers, such as the *Moscow Times*, for around five dollars per hour.

The internationalism of the Comintern is nowhere more evident than in the various languages of the documentation. Fortunately, a large portion of documentation has been translated into multiple languages to be accessible to the diverse peoples who comprised many Comintern committees. Most documents arriving from Latin America are in Spanish or Portuguese, as are those being sent to Latin America from Moscow or the bureau offices in New York and Buenos Aires. But it is not uncommon to find such materials in German, French, Russian, or English. For instance, all the correspondence with the Communist Youth International (KIM) representative in Latin America in 1919 and 1921, A. Stirner (Edgar Woog), is in German. Comintern representatives communicating from the local parties typically wrote their reports in their native languages. Some material—notably in the Cuba and Argentine collections—can be found in Czech, Polish, and Yiddish as well. Certain documents internal to the Comintern can

only be found in Russian. These items tend to be exchanges between officials at the upper levels of the bureaucracy. Photocopying is available at the archive but costs a dollar per page. Microfilming is more reasonable at thirty cents per page, but filming can take months. Films are therefore usually carried back to the researcher by a colleague returning later from Russia.

The Comintern Archive remains relatively unused by Latin Americanists as yet. A handful of scholars have researched the materials on Mexico, Cuba, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, and Central America and have produced an array of publications.⁶ The materials for Bolivia, Venezuela, Colombia, Chile, and Paraguay have been examined as well.⁷ An excellent opportunity to see the kinds of material contained in the Comintern Archive is to peruse the collection of Communist Party USA documents assembled by a group of international scholars in 1995. These same scholars recently completed a follow-up narrative history based on these materials (see Klehr, Earl, and Igorevich 1995 and Klehr, Haynes, and Anderson 1998).

The Internet can provide valuable information on Russian archives.

6. One of the first scholars from "the West" to gain access to the Comintern Archive was Jürgen Mothes, a German historian who passed away suddenly in Peru in 1996 (see Mothes 1996). For other articles by Mothes in German, see Mothes (1993, 1994, 1997). Russians Victor JEIFETS and Lazar JEIFETS have done significant research in the archives on the subject of Russian relations with Latin America. Unfortunately for Latin Americanists, most of their work is in Russian. An accessible piece is a brief study on one of the Comintern's first agents in Latin America, Michael Borodin (see JEIFETS and JEIFETS 1994–1995). Work by these authors will appear in Spanish in the future. For references to their myriad publications, see the bibliography. Another early entrant into the archives was a Brazilian journalist who in 1993 researched the 1935 uprising in Brazil (see Waack 1993). Barry Carr has also conducted research on the Cuban materials (see Carr 1996, 1998, and 1999). Daniela Spenser-Grollová covered the documentation on Mexico (1998). The English translation was also published in 1998. She is also working on a four-volume series based on materials from the Mexican collection. Jussi Pakkasvirta (1997) used materials in the Costa Rican and Peruvian collections. Erik Ching examined the materials on Central America in Ching (1998, 1995) and two forthcoming articles. Silvia Schenkolewski-Kroll, an Argentine working at Bar Ilan University in Israel, has examined the Argentine materials. She presented some of her research in a 1997 article and has written a manuscript on the subject (n.d.). A Russian researcher, Vera Kutéichikova, used some Comintern materials in an article about Trotsky in Mexico originally published in the Russian journal *Latinskaya Amerika*. She translated and published this research as a three-part series in *Memoria* (see Kutéichikova 1994, 1997, 1998). Readers might also be interested in two special issues of *Memoria*, no. 21 (Mexico City) and *Latinskaya Amerika* (Moscow). These two March 1999 issues report on research conducted in the Comintern Archive. Another publication of interest is a collection of the documents about Latin America and the Comintern published in Russia (see Kalmykov et al. 1998). Although this item is in Russian, it is one of the first publications of Latin American documents from the archive.

7. In addition to reviewing various other collections, Victor and Lazar JEIFETS have examined the materials on Colombia and Venezuela. Victor JEIFETS told us that Klaus Meschkat of Hanover University has also examined the documents on Colombia and that a group of researchers from Santiago examined the Chilean materials. We do not know who specifically has looked at the Paraguayan documents. One Latin Americanist who has visited the archive is Cole Blasler, formerly of the Hispanic Division of the U.S. Library of Congress.

Of particular interest is the Archeobiblio Base maintained by Patricia Kennedy Grimsted in collaboration with the Federal Archive Service of Russia and the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam (<http://www.iisg.nl/%7eabb/#>). It provides a brief description of dozens of national and local archives in Russia, including the RTsKhIDNI, and identifies contact persons, addresses, phone numbers, and hours of operation. Another site from the International Institute (<http://www.iisg.nl/ftp.html>) offers references to recently published guides to Russian archives. A site titled "Archives of the Soviet Communist Party and the Soviet State" (<http://www.chadwyck.inter.net/mfcat/mf212.html>) describes a coordinated microfilm project between the Hoover Institute and the State Archival Service of the Russian Federation. A similar site with a message from Kyrill Anderson about microfilming initiatives can be found at <http://www.idc.nl/Scripts/Abstract.idc?Collection=178>. A site with brief news updates can be found at <http://www.utoronto.ca/serap/news.htm#Getty>. It includes an account on financial difficulties at the RTsKhIDNI from J. Arch Getty at the University of California, who is closely associated with archival activities in Russia. A postgraduate student at Canterbury Christ College in the United Kingdom maintains a homepage with links to all the sites just mentioned at <http://www.canterbury.u-net.com/page13.html>. A final site of potential interest is that of a private company offering to conduct research in Russian archives for a fee (<http://www.aha.ru/rusarch>). We know nothing about the quality of the service or the qualifications of the research personnel. Prices seem to be a few hundred dollars per investigative endeavor. Given the difficulty and expense of traveling to Russia, more such companies may emerge in the future.

The Comintern Archive promises to be an invaluable source of evidence for the history of communism and radical movements in Latin America during the interwar period. One of the archive's primary contributions is the preservation of materials or copies of them that likely would not have survived in Latin America, given that most parties conducted their affairs under conditions unfavorable to the preservation of documents.

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