

The Soviet-Cuban Relationship – An Empire of the Second World?

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'In effect, one might say that the sovereignty of Empire itself is realised at the margins, where borders are flexible, and identities are hybrid and fluid. It would be difficult to say which is more important to Empire, the center or the margins. In fact, center and margin seem continually to be shifting positions, fleeing any determinate locations.' – *Empire*, Hardt and Negri⁶⁷

Introduction: The World Today and the World That Was

In 2024, on Ukrainian Independence Day, Soviet-born historians such as Sergey Radchenko among others lament the devolution of Russian society into “militant imperialism”.⁶⁸ Indeed, the old spectre of imperialism haunts almost any writing on contemporary Russian foreign policy. The reasons for this are obvious – the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has re-inscribed the public memory of conflicts such as the Great War in trench lines across the country, a visible and shocking sight to modern audiences who believed such brutal contest over territory and influence lay in the past wars between empires, and not our present.

In Central Asia, too, we see the echoes of the imperial past. The US, EU, and Russia jostle in turn to shut down or hugely expand the trade routes that support the Kremlin's coffers,⁶⁹ another iteration of the 19th century's Great Game which this time plays a little differently - with microelectronics, energy, and sanctions as its pieces. The repetition nearly strays into outright imitation; Western observers watch anxiously as Russia receives delegations from the Taliban,⁷⁰ as they watched Russia's forays in that Central Asian country with equal anxiety in the early 19th century.

If the nature of contemporary Russian foreign policy is shocking to those Western observers outside Russia's immediate sphere, then it urgently raises questions about the continuity of aggressive foreign policy and imperialist ambition through and from the USSR into the modern day. It is worth recalling, after all, that all of the leaders in the current

⁶⁷ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, 2000, p.39

⁶⁸ Sergey Radchenko, 'On Ukraine's third independence day at war, what does the future hold for its people?', *The Guardian*, 24 August 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/aug/24/ukraine-third-independence-day-war-future-panel-verdict>

⁶⁹ Barbara Moens, Leonie Kijewski and Suzanne Lynch, 'EU targets Central Asia in drive to stop sanctioned goods reaching Russia', *Politico*, 8 May 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-aims-central-asia-sanction-circumvention-russia-war/>

⁷⁰ Kirill Krivosheev, 'Why Is Russia Legalizing the Taliban?', *Carnegie*, 13 June 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/06/taliban-russia-terrorism?lang=en>

Russian State Security Council hail from the Soviet system,⁷¹ and not the brief liberalisation of the 90s and 2000s. The case could readily be made that the methods and worldview of the current Russian elite were formed in the Soviet security and academic system, with, seemingly, only a thin artifice of any international socialist utopian mission. However, to cast a denunciation of continual, inherent imperialism backwards onto all Soviet policy is not a foregone conclusion. It would be simplistic in the extreme to claim that the first and most powerful Marxist Communist state was simply a mask for imperialist and expansionary ambition that continues unchanged to today. Instead, it invites a critical reading of Soviet Foreign Policy, using imperialism as a framework, to identify the continuities in policy and ideology, but also complexities and breakages.

Why then choose the Soviet relationship with Cuba for such a task? One of the most contradictory, complicated, and opaque alliances in the history of the Cold War could surely not be the firmest basis for such a study. Why start from the periphery, when the most vivid acts of the Soviet Union's imperialism occurred in the centre? The answer again unites present conditions with the past. Today, analysts and policymakers once again concern themselves with Russian designs across the Global South. From the very largest players such as China and Iran to the most unstable regions in the Sahel, the dynamics of trade agreements, defence pacts, the deployment of Russian troops through Wagner and other outfits, or the complex ties with regimes in Syria or Venezuela, all echo the playbook of the Cold War in the Third World. In this way, our contemporary world demands a closer look at the previous iteration of the same game of power blocs, and there is no richer example than Cuba.

To guide our thoughts, we will focus on one thread of the tapestry: the degree of imperialism within the Soviet-Cuban relationship. This complicated question goes to the heart of how the Soviet Union operated in peripheral or non-contiguous areas, how its aims changed and were changed by its local partners and the regional context, and whether our more modern theories of imperialism can be grafted on to the history of the international socialist project. Through it, we may be able to glimpse at any continuities through to today's global contests, or instead see a different and perhaps lost philosophy in Moscow's foreign policy.

⁷¹ The composition of the security council can be found at the Kremlin's own website, see <http://en.kremlin.ru/structure/security-council/members>

Literature Review

The central problem of this essay is whether the Soviet-Cuban relationship can be defined in terms of imperialism. To do this, we need a number of robust theories of imperialism with which to frame our subject. In this task, we are aided by two books, a mere decade apart, but with radically alternate views of imperialism which were shaped by their time period. Momson's *Theories of Imperialism* is an invaluable aid for cataloguing the different frames of thought on the subject from the 19th century to the end of the Cold War.⁷² Through it, we see the development of imperialist theory in both the West and in the Socialist and later Soviet literature. It is a key text not only because of this clarity, but also, being published in 1982, it describes the theoretical understanding of imperialism that was contemporary to the Soviet-Cuban relationship itself. In this way it will serve not simply to imprint a modern concept back onto the actions of leaders and states in the past, but to illuminate how they might have conceived of imperialism in their own time.

From Momson's book we can pull three concepts to shape our thoughts moving forward. First, Momson describes the foundational theories of Marxists such as Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg that imperialism was an inherent part of the capitalist project and, thus, the defeat of capitalism at the imperial periphery would hasten its downfall worldwide.⁷³ This is key to understanding the perspective of socialist thinkers during the Cold War, when thinking about peripheral regions such as Latin America.

Second, we see the continuation of this thought in the Moscow Conference of Communist Parties (which included Cuba) in 1969, which published 'Imperialism imposes economic treaties and military pacts on countries which limit their sovereignty; it exploits them by means of capital export, unequal trade relations, manipulations of prices and exchange rates, credits and various forms of so-called aid.'⁷⁴ We will return to this definition when looking at how the Soviet system dealt with Cuba's mostly sugar-based economy.

Thirdly, Momson introduced various 'new' (for 1982) perspectives on Imperialism, which placed the local actors in the periphery in centre-stage and queried the underlying drive for imperialist expansions in general. Intro, 'It was not a matter of consciously aiming to build new empires or enlarge existing ones; what took place was rather a cumulative process of preventative annexations and...measures intended to protect and stabilise the colonial possessions they already had.'⁷⁵ When it comes to Cuba's almost-

⁷² Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Theories of Imperialism*. Phoenix ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982

⁷³ Momson, *Theories of Imperialism*, p31 for Lenin, p. 42 for Rosa Luxemburg

⁷⁴ Momson, *Theories of Imperialism*, p.57

⁷⁵ Momson, *Theories of Imperialism*, p.100

unique influence over Soviet foreign policy, this alternate viewpoint on the drivers of imperial expansion will prove immensely relevant.

Empire provides us with a different tool. Attempting to update the theoretical framework of imperialism for the post-Cold War world and the unipolar moment in the early 2000s, Hardt and Negri dissolve the previous, state-based iterations of imperialism into a framework that emphasises the capital, economic, and more implicit dynamics of power in the modern world.⁷⁶ While it may seem strange to try and utilise a critique of modern capitalism on the subject of two socialist states, *Empire* provides a more modern understanding of imperialism which raises different questions of our subject.

Firstly, *Empire* posits that modern imperialism can be itself ‘anti-territorial’, in that from a capitalist perspective its goal is to expand markets and movements of capital, regardless of any previous boundaries on a map, and absorb those areas into its new system. It is worth considering whether the international socialist project of the Cold War could be similarly conceived, as a de-territorialising force that could either spontaneously or intentionally be deployed to new areas and absorb them into the socialist international system, to the exclusion of others.⁷⁷

Secondly, *Empire* gives a gloomy reading of the nationalist liberation movements of the 20th century, which the authors suggest did little more than re-orient the power into the hands of the revolutionary elite, while the wider country falls victim to the forces of the world economic order, being ‘offered up, hands and feet bound, to the new bourgeoisie.’ We will see later whether Cuba may demonstrate a similar tendency in its own historical trajectory, except in a socialist, rather than capitalist context.⁷⁸

We have our set of frameworks, ready to be applied to the relationship, and now we need to illuminate the facts themselves. Three books, all released in a cluster around the end of the Soviet Union, give us a multi-dimensional view. Nicola Miller’s *Soviet Relations with Latin America* from 1989 gives a comprehensive, well researched perspective from the West just at the end of the Cold War.⁷⁹ It thus maintains the urgency and detail of describing an ongoing foreign policy issue from the Western perspective, without lapsing into the fatalism, triumphalism, or retrospection regarding the Soviet Union that often colours later works.

From the same time, Ilya Prizel’s *Latin America Through Soviet Eyes* compliments Miller’s work by focusing directly on the nerve-centres of Latin American policy within the

⁷⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000.

⁷⁷ *Empire*, xiii

⁷⁸ See *Empire*, p.133, ‘The Poisoned Gift of National Liberation’ for the most concise version of the thesis.

⁷⁹ Nicola Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America, 1959-1987*, Cambridge, New York, 1989

Soviet system, how knowledge and perceptions of Latin America grew and changed during the span of the Cold War. Prizel also described how in many ways the expertise and understanding of Latin America was so limited in the Soviet halls of power..⁸⁰ Prizel himself avoids Cuba directly in this book, focusing on the broader region instead, but by merely describing its outline in the region, Prizel's book still illustrates the importance of the Soviet-Cuban relationship.

Lastly, Yuri Pavlov's account offers a unique perspective. Pavlov was a long-time diplomat in the Latin American region for the Soviet Union and wrote *The Soviet-Cuban Alliance* in 1994 from his new home in the United States.⁸¹ While also a scathing condemnation of the Soviet socialist project, Pavlov does provide inside insights into the relationship which cannot be found elsewhere, particularly on the rationale behind some decisions from Moscow and the general zeitgeist of Soviet policy in different eras and under different leaders.

How to Found an Empire? Early Cuban-Soviet relations and economics

The first and most important deconstruction of imperialism is as an economic system. Throughout either Momson's work or *Empire*, there is an understanding that a base economic imbalance, deliberately reinforced, is necessary for any imperialist relationship. Indeed, it is frequently argued in these works that the very origins for imperialist enterprises arise first from a need for undeveloped markets from which to extract cheap materials and labour, and to whom to export higher-value goods, resulting in a form of calcified economic bondage which then sustains the imperial centre.⁸²

Can we apply such a model of relations to the Soviet-Cuba relation? To do so, we must examine the beginning of Soviet-Cuban economic and political exchange, as this would form the basis of the relationship going forward.

Soviet-Cuban relations had a slow, unsteady beginning. Despite the Cuban Revolution concluding in 1959, it was not until 1960 that the Soviet Union began to initiate serious

⁸⁰ Ilya Prizel, *Latin America Through Soviet Eyes: The Evolution of Soviet Perceptions During the Brezhnev Era 1964-1982*. Soviet and East European studies 72. Cambridge England, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990

⁸¹ Yuri I. Pavlov, *Soviet-Cuban Alliance 1959-1991*. New Brunswick, 1994

⁸² Momson points out that the understanding of imperialism as a core component of capitalism was a significant development from Marx, who considered the economic periphery to be marginal to the capitalist process and thus revolution. Rosa Luxembourgh argued strongly that expansion into new undeveloped markets was a necessity of the capitalist process, and between her writings and Lenin's, Marxist thinking came to conceive of colonial and imperial holdings as ripe targets for socialist agitation, to damage the core machinery of capital. Momson, *Theories of Imperialism*, p.40

relations. The man for the task was Aleksandr Alekseyev, who was sent to Cuba under the guise of a Soviet state journalist to strike up a connection with the new Cuban leadership.⁸³ Alekseyev would form a close rapport with Castro and feature as a central go-between, and later as a formal Ambassador,⁸⁴ in the early Soviet-Cuban relationship. Alekseyev's first success, however, was the organising of an economic mission to Cuba led by Minister of Trade Anastas Mikoyan, who in 1960 landed in Havana to conclude the first Soviet-Cuban trade agreement.⁸⁵ Pavlov recounts the agreement, provided for increased purchases of Cuban sugar on a regular long-term basis. The Soviet government committed itself to buying, at prices 50% higher than the world market, 425,000 tons of Cuban sugar in 1960 and 1 million tons annually for the following four years. The Soviet Union accorded to Cuba a 100 million dollar long-term, low-interest credit for importing machinery and materials and agreed to render technical assistance from 1961 through to 1963.⁸⁶

Even in this earliest agreement, the dynamics of the relationship were broadly set. Cuba's economic contribution would come in the form of sugar deliveries, already its main crop export which had been processed primarily with American investment and machinery,⁸⁷ and in return the Soviet Union would provide credit lines and infrastructural technology. The arrangement may initially strike a reader as classically predatory economics, given the immediate focus on the export of vast amounts of labour-intensive and low-value crop yields at fixed prices in exchange for more advanced goods – a classic trade architecture of colonial economies.

However, two wrinkles make any easy accusation of early imperialist exploitation more difficult. The first, of course, is that the Soviet Union was paying above-market rates for the sugar, thus essentially granting Cuba implicit debt-free funding through the exchange, hardly a predatory practice. The second is that there was no reason to doubt the sincerity of the Soviet desire to aid the new regime in economic modernisation and move up the value chain of production.⁸⁸ In fact, the entire package from 1960 was not exceptional by Soviet

⁸³ Pavlov, *Soviet-Cuban Alliance*, p.5

⁸⁴ Pavlov, *Soviet-Cuban Alliance*, p.34

⁸⁵ Piero Gleijeses, 'Cuba and the Cold War, 1959 – 1980' in eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, *The Cambridge History Of The Cold War, Volume II: Crisis and Détente*, 2010, p.329

⁸⁶ Pavlov, *Soviet-Cuban Alliance*, p.8

⁸⁷ Miller well describes the persistent difficulties in merging the new Soviet machinery with the previous Western processing plants, an issue that continued to plague Cuban exports well into the 1980s. Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America*, p.100

⁸⁸ Pavlov outlines in detail the basic strategy of Soviet industrial aid, which genuinely sought to balance Cuba's economy through increased and diversified industrialisation, a policy which, if it had succeeded to the initial expectations, would have changed and normalised the pattern of trade with the Soviet Union itself, Pavlov, *Soviet-Cuba Alliance*, p.74

standards, and broadly followed the framework that Khrushchev's government had exercised elsewhere in the developing world.⁸⁹ Khrushchev himself was influenced by Lenin's writings on the importance of national liberation and anti-colonial and anti-imperial movements in the fight against Western capitalism,⁹⁰ writings we previously saw in Momson's work, and Cuba, despite the initial hesitation of the Castro regime to declare a socialist state or move decisively against American firms and interests in the country,⁹¹ fitted well within this framework.

To strengthen Cuba's economy after its revolution would weaken both the explicit economic hegemony of the US in the region, and the implicit power it held by co-opting countries into its economic and political sphere. The first agreement was a marked success, tripling the trade relationship from 160 million Rubles in 1960 to over 500 million within 12 months.⁹² The huge increase in trade bucked the trend of the Soviet Union in Latin America, which continually struggled to adapt its economic offerings to other countries in the region, leading to relatively paltry numbers that were dwarfed by the Soviet economic exchange in Asia and even Africa.⁹³

Machinery and credit lines for development were welcome, but a key component of Soviet exports into Cuba came in the form of oil, which the Castro government quickly realised was of vital importance.⁹⁴ The Cuban dependence on Russian oil was so central to the relationship that it lasted well beyond the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁹⁵ It was near-total dependence on Soviet oil that would later lead to the strongest leverage Moscow held over their often-rookie Cuban ally.

By 1962 the Cuban Missile Crisis naturally dominated not only the Soviet-Cuban relationship, but the world stage. This essay does not have the capacity to unpack those hectic few months, but we can draw some outcomes relevant to our story, particularly in the economic sphere. Within the many folds of the crisis came the enforcement of strict US sanctions regime on Cuba's economy – a move in apparent retaliation for capital seizure and

⁸⁹ Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America*, p.73

⁹⁰ Pavlov, *Soviet-Cuba Alliance*, p.7

⁹¹ Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America*, p.59

⁹² Pavlov, *Soviet-Cuba Alliance*, p.14

⁹³ The mismatch in economies that led to the weak trade with Latin America came primarily from the fact that the Soviet Union was able to produce many of the raw goods and materials closer to home, which weakened any argument for a more extractionary economic policy. Separately, the high dependence on US-and Western machinery in the few capital-intensive industries in Latin America made integration with the Soviet economy that much harder, see Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America*, p.19

⁹⁴ Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America*, p.74

⁹⁵ Mervyn J. Bain, "Havana and Moscow, 1959–2009: The Enduring Relationship?" *Cuban Studies* 41 (2010), 126-142, p.126

nationalisation of US business assets in Cuba, but in reality a part of a much broader front of aggression by the US against the new Cuban government.

The sanctions effectively closed Cuba's export and import markets from the West almost entirely. With a previous reliance not only on sugar and other exports to the US for revenue, but of Western machinery for maintenance, this severely threatened the viability of Castro's socialist economic project. The Soviet Union provided the way out – a revised economic agreement which hugely expanded the core elements of the 1960 agreement, with a longer timeframe. This new 1961 agreement promised to cover all shortfalls in sugar exports to the US by increasing purchases by the Soviet Union, and implicitly reinforcing the absolute reliance of Cuba on the Soviet Union for economic viability.⁹⁶

The Imperial Leash? Trade Relations and bringing Cuba to heel

*'The relationship between the former Soviet Union and Cuba was, and is, a strange one. A macabre role-playing game for which it might be fitting to speak of colonialism. It was not a union where both parts fed off each other in an equivalent manner.'*⁹⁷

We have outlined the basic economic arrangement of the Soviet Union and Cuba from the early years of their relations, and now let us examine how those trade relations resulted in an imbalance of influence and, ultimately, a growing imposition of Moscow's will into Cuba by the beginning of the 1970s.

While the economics of the relationship appeared solid and fitting into the Soviet Union's basic framework for the nurturing of like-minded movements in the Third World, the overall Soviet-Cuban relationship is perhaps best known for the uneasy balance between firebrand revolutionary spirits in Cuba and more hesitant, even reluctant, strategists in Moscow. As Ilya Prizel put it, Cuba 'relentlessly browbeat Moscow over its failure to fulfil its internationalist duty by supporting "wars of national liberation" throughout Latin America'.⁹⁸ Indeed, in the two short years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, the disagreements over the strategy of armed revolution in Latin America necessitated the calling of a general Communist Party conference, held in Havana, but presided over by delegations from Moscow.

⁹⁶ Pavlov, *Soviet-Cuban Alliance*, p.14

⁹⁷ Gertrudis Rivalta Oliva, 'Fnimaniev! Fnimaniev!', in eds. Jacqueline Loss and Jose Manuel Prieto, *Caviar with Rum: Cuba-USSR and the Post-Soviet Experience*, New York, 2012, p.173

⁹⁸ Ilya Prizel, *Latin America Through Soviet Eyes*, p.9

Indeed, we can see in the recently released CIA report on the 1964 Havana conference⁹⁹ the contradictory pressures on Soviet policy in Latin America at the time. Not only was Cuba inciting significant anger from the ‘official’ communist parties in the region through its militarist actions, often without their local consent, there was also the unhelpful position of China, which, already embroiled in the vicious ideological backbiting of the Sino-Soviet split, joined Cuba in criticising Moscow’s lack of ambition and action in the region.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, Moscow’s own withdrawal of the missiles following the missile crisis had deeply wounded not only its relationship with Cuba, but also its reputation elsewhere in the region. Trying to impose some discipline on what it hoped would be subordinate socialist movements, the Havana Conference included a joint communique which was heavily drafted from Moscow.¹⁰¹

Despite these efforts, the agitation from Cuba did not cease. In 1966 a speech by Castro criticising the Soviet Union’s reticence to react to US actions in Vietnam or support more direct revolutionary activities. This necessitated a public response in *Pravda* by Georgi Arbatov, foreign policy advisor to Brezhnev.¹⁰²

By 1967 and 1968 the acrimonious rhetoric, and, from Moscow’s perspective, rogue attitude of Cuba had gone far enough. Their previous attempt in 1964 to bring Cuba to heel had failed,¹⁰³ and more direct action was necessary. In February 1968, the Soviet Union turned to a harder playbook. ‘Professing difficulties with oil supplies, the Soviet government informed Havana of its inability to continue to increase its oil deliveries instead, Moscow increased its sales of oil to Brazil. This coincided with the virtual suspension of Soviet arms deliveries and a freeze on technical assistance to Cuba.’¹⁰⁴

From basic economic and technical needs to its sovereign defence, these measures were seen by the Cuban leadership as potentially the beginning of an existential threat to the

⁹⁹ ‘Study Entitled “The Havana Communist Party Conference of 1964”’, from Paul Eckel, released under JFK Assassination Records 2018, file number 104-10338-10020, accessed via https://www.archives.gov/research/jfk/release?_ga=2.152377087.711994437.1725375574-1677140161.1700831748#note, 29-08-2024

¹⁰⁰ For a general overview of the escalation in rhetoric from the Chinese side against the Soviet Union, see John Gittings, *Survey of the Sino-Soviet Dispute: A Commentary and Extracts from the Recent Polemics 1963-67*, Oxford University Press, 1968

¹⁰¹ This assertion is emphasised in the Summary of the CIA report, see ‘Study Entitled “The Havana Communist Party Conference of 1964”’, CIA, p.1

¹⁰² Pavlov, *Soviet-Cuban Alliance*, p.87

¹⁰³ Ilya Prizel, *Latin America Through Soviet Eyes*, p.155

¹⁰⁴ Pavlov, *Soviet-Cuban Alliance*, p.89

country. They exploited the weakness inherent to Cuba's un-diversified economic structure, as the cessation of oil imports would paralyse Cuban sugar production.¹⁰⁵

The shift in rhetoric from the Cuban side followed not long after, and Castro exploited the suppression of the uprising in Czechoslovakia as a vector to make at least the veneer of peace with Moscow.¹⁰⁶ The economic and political relationship was not to return to its earlier form, however. A bad sugar crop in 1970 hammered the Cuban economy and led to a total failure to fulfil Cuba's side of the extant economic pacts. The "drift of history" of the political economy of the relationship, as Kosmas Tsokhas wrote in 1980, was trending in only one direction.¹⁰⁷ Castro acknowledged the primacy of the Soviet Union among the international socialist states, and a flurry of new economic institutionalisation was enacted from the Soviet Union. New, higher trade quotas were mapped and as usual, negotiated above global market rates for Cuban exports, and including ever more aid for industrialisation and economic relief from the Soviets.¹⁰⁸

More impactful, however, was the creation of a Cuban economic GOSPLAN under the close advice of Soviet bureaucrats in Cuba, which modelled it on the Soviet Union's own domestic JUCEPLAN. Secondly, Cuba would become a member of the Council of Mutual Economic Aid, CMEA, in which Moscow chaired and managed its economic aid relationships with other socialist and friendly regimes.¹⁰⁹ This "institutionalisation" of Cuba's economy within the wider socialist bloc, increasing its dependence on Moscow economically even further, is generally considered to have occurred intertwined and in parallel with the harmonisation of Cuba's rhetoric and foreign policy, with the notable exception of Angola, for the rest of the 1970s.¹¹⁰

Applying the Models – Finding a Framework for Soviet-Cuban Imperialism

By 1972, a mere twelve years after the first Soviet-Cuban economic agreement, Cuba was firmly, and in many ways irretrievably within the Soviet economic and political sphere. Now that we have seen the uneasy trajectory of Soviet-Cuba relations, how can we apply our models of imperialism? Returning to the first models in Momsen proposed by early Marxists, we can rule out a strategy on Moscow's part to found an extractive imperialist relationship

¹⁰⁵ Kosmas Tsokhas, 'The Political Economy of Cuban Dependence on the Soviet Union' *Theory and Society* 9, no. 2, 1980, p. 325

¹⁰⁶ Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America*, p.91

¹⁰⁷ Kosmas Tsokhas, 'The Political Economy of Cuban Dependence on the Soviet Union', p.320

¹⁰⁸ Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America*, p.92-94

¹⁰⁹ Bain, Mervyn J. "Cuba-Soviet Relations in the Gorbachev Era." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 37, no. 4, 2005, p.772

¹¹⁰ Miller, *Soviet Relations with Latin America*, p.91

based on exploiting economic underdevelopment for the profit-gain of the imperial centre¹¹¹ – not only was Cuba’s sugar and weak nickel mining output largely unnecessary for the Soviet economic project, the economic agreements throughout the decade gave Cuba very favourable pricing. The exports from Cuba were hardly cheap, either in the official pricing or in the political, policy, and materiel cost to support the Caribbean nation. The over-paying for Cuban sugar reached an eye-watering 11 times the world market price by 1985, when the dollar value of the trade relationship was at its highest.¹¹² Secondly, the economic development assistance to advance and diversify Cuba’s industries was, as we learned even from the highly-critical Yuri Pavlov, genuinely intended¹¹³ and, as we learned from Miller, quite within the framework of supporting Third World countries elsewhere.¹¹⁴

With this in mind, we can reject the model of imperialism espoused by Rosa Luxembourg, Lenin, and the soviet socialist theory contemporary to Nikita Khrushchev’s career. But what about later models from the socialist side?

Let us return to the concise definition presented at the 1969 Moscow Conference of Communist Parties: ‘Imperialism imposes economic treaties and military pacts on countries which limit their sovereignty; it exploits them by means of capital export, unequal trade relations, manipulations of prices and exchange rates, credits and various forms of so-called aid.’¹¹⁵ Certainly, much of this could apply to Cuba. At around the same time as this assertion was published, it had become obvious that not only was Cuba’s economy unable to function outside the Soviet system, owing to the level of sanctions and embargoes enforced by the US, but even moderate pressure on Soviet deliveries of assistance and oil threatened the underlying stability of the country’s entire economy. From this imbalance, it is reasonable to conclude that Cuba’s sovereignty, previously expressed by not only its rejection of US hegemony in Latin America, but equally by its uncompromising adherence to revolutionary socialism, against the wishes of Moscow, had been severely curtailed.

However, the 1969 definition describes a relationship deliberately conceived of treaties and exploitations being “imposed” by design on the subject. It would not be fair to the evidence we have to claim that the level of restraint the Soviet Union chose to exercise over Cuba by the end of the 1960s was the intent all along. On the contrary, the initial

¹¹¹ See Momson, *Theories of Imperialism*, p31 for Lenin, p. 42 for Rosa Luxembourg

¹¹² Bain, Mervyn J. “Cuba-Soviet Relations in the Gorbachev Era.”, p. 777

¹¹³ See Pavlov, p.7

¹¹⁴ See Miller, p.73

¹¹⁵ Momson, *Theories of Imperialism*, p.57

low-stakes interaction with Cuba and lingering reluctance to use hard measures to reign in the firebrand regime do not chime with a long-term project of calculated imposition.

It is here that we witness the conceptual break in imperialist theory between the socialist understanding of imperialism from Marx, succinctly stated in the 1969 proclamation, and that of *Empire* in 2000. The first intellectually relies on a sort of original sin, the *desire* by capital to subjugate and calcify economic relationships at the periphery from the beginning, with the self-conscious understanding that such relationships are profit-seeking and exploitative, whether enforced in colonial outposts or in modern international trade through unequal (but very much intentional) trade treaties.

Empire's contribution posits a different starting point – that the structure of imperialism is a *result* of an increasingly globalist capitalist system, and does not require desire, pre-meditation, or even intent. Instead, the competitive and predatory urges within global capital create exploitative relationships which can be entirely parallel and even contrary to the distinct will of any country's rulers. Even revolutionary leaders who seize the sovereignty of their nation away from extractive colonialism are as constrained, and thus undermined, by the base-physics of international capitalism as ever.¹¹⁶ It is, simply "A new logic and structure of rule - in short, a new form of sovereignty. Empire is the political subject that effectively regulates these global exchanges."¹¹⁷ Our argument is derivative of this, although applied backward to the international socialist project rather than onto the Unipolar moment of the 2000s. In short, the desire to create an alternate world of economic development, the Second World, also created a bounded, sometimes exclusive system of relations between the socialist states, in which their prior unequal economic development led to the symptoms, if not the ideological disease, of classic imperialism. These symptoms, such as the threat of economic destruction through the withholding of oil in the late 60s, are indistinguishable from the worst elements of imperialist coercion and subjugation, but that does not mean they derive from the same impulses or logic.

Our "new logic and structure of rule" of the Second World is not profit-seeking, as the Soviet Union never profited from its relationship with Cuba in real terms, but it still could be predatory, stifling, and, in order to better discipline itself, move decisively against the sovereignty of Cuba. This sovereignty was not undermined by the gradual privatization of national resources, companies, or laws as in *Empire*'s view. Indeed, throughout this entire

¹¹⁶ *Empire*, p.113

¹¹⁷ *Empire*, xiii

story, the Soviets never owned any major extractive enterprise of national resource in Cuba¹¹⁸. Instead, sovereignty was fatally undermined by the modalities of the Cold War itself, which again and again forced countries in the Global South into negotiations with one path of security and economic development or another. For some countries, oscillating between these systems was the most profitable and secure way of navigating the era, for others, their ideological commitment or history meant they were subject to one, and in the case of Cuba, almost exclusively to one alone. It was, in the same way as *Empire* describes the mono-order of global capital of the early 2000s, simply that Cuba could only navigate within the laws of physics of the Second World it found itself in - laws which were contoured around the gravity of the Soviet Union as the preeminent economic power. For some writers after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Second World, such as the highly critical Yuri Pavlov, this had always been a highly unnatural state of affairs, sustained only by the architecture of the Cold War, and Cuba was destined to return to negotiating with its prime interlocutor - the United States.¹¹⁹

In developing this thesis, we must not infantilize our subjects. It is naïve to think that from Moscow, the binding of Cuba into the Soviet Union's Second World was at every point unconscious, hesitant, or not calculated on subordinating the sovereignty of a peripheral people for the benefit of the centre. Similarly, the Cubans were continually conscious of these trade-offs and the systems in which they navigated. They themselves were deeply steeped in the Marxist, critical understanding of economic development, the same intellectual tradition from which Hardt and Negri developed *Empire*, and they conducted these negotiations between the First and Second World fully conscious of its structure.

Indeed, we need only to look at Castro's own words to see our thesis made manifest:

How can one compare the relations we have with the Soviet Union and those that existed with the United States? The Soviet Union has given us easy payment terms, has helped us obtain credit elsewhere, and has had the greatest consideration for us in financial matters. With reference to the United States... they owned the Cuban economy... the Soviets don't own a single mine in Cuba, a single factory, a single sugar mill So that all the natural resources, all the industries, all the means of production are in our hands We depend on the Soviet Union . . . just like other

¹¹⁸ Kosmas Tsokhas, 'The Political Economy of Cuban Dependence on the Soviet Union', p.328

¹¹⁹ Pavlov, Soviet-Cuban Alliance, iii

countries have relations of interdependence, and I don't think there is a country in the world that escapes this. ¹²⁰

Conclusion – The Lingering Questions in the Soviet-Cuban Relationship

*‘Generations of Cubans grew up with our Soviet older brother at our side, living proof that we could be a great country, powerful and industrialised, without having to give in to capitalism and inequality... While we could only dream of traveling the cosmos or of nuclear energy, they had already mastered both. And for the inhabitants of a tiny island in the shadow of the almighty Yankee Empire, that meant a lot. Even if it was only, as the psychologists (or was it the economists?) would say, of symbolic value.’*¹²¹

There are three areas of the Soviet-Cuban relationship that our primarily economic analysis has, for reasons of focus and brevity, been unable to adequately account for. The first and most salient is of course ideology. The international socialist dream was first and foremost an ideological project, and we have seen this explicitly in the motivations of economic aid and political support in early Soviet intervention in Cuba. Ideology also must have a role in resolving the contradictions of our findings. We have posited that the Second World formed its own architecture of economic relations which, although being profit-agnostic and stemming from a capitalist-critical ideological framework, exhibited in practice aspects of imperialist subjugation. We have not, however, had the scope to unpack how this contradiction was confronted or assimilated by the socialist thinkers and leaders of the time. Given that some of the most heated polemics of the 1960s, both in the Sino-Soviet split and in the critical speeches from Cuba hinged explicitly on accusations of ideological betrayal and inconsistency,¹²² this is an area ripe for further enquiry.

The second area is the military. The Cold War was, after all, a war, and Cuba’s revolutionary government is neatly described by Piero Gleijeses as being driven by “self-preservation and revolutionary idealism”.¹²³ These two objectives manifested themselves in the Missile Crisis and the large Cuban interventions in Angola and Ethiopia, neither of which this essay had the scope to cover but both of which could benefit from the

¹²⁰ Kosmas Tsokhas, ‘The Political Economy of Cuban Dependence on the Soviet Union’, p.328, quote taken from F. Mankiewicz and K. Jones, *With Fidel. A Portrait of Castro and Cuba*, New York, 1975, p. 176.

¹²¹ Jose Miguel Sanchez Gomes (Yoss), ‘What the Russians Left Behind’, in *Caviar with Rum*, p.213

¹²² For China, see John Gittings, *Survey of the Sino-Soviet Dispute: A Commentary and Extracts from the Recent Polemics 1963-67*; For Cuba, Ilya Prizel describes the white heat of the rhetoric, and the use of political newspapers to publish it, *Latin America Through Soviet Eyes*, p.15.

¹²³ Piero Gleijeses, ‘Cuba and the Cold War, 1959 – 1980’, p.342

lens of imperialist theory. Angola and Ethiopia in particular layer further complexities onto our thesis of a Second World system, being both potentially a “de-territorialising” (as *Empire* would espouse) expansion of international socialism out of Cuba across the world, and, confusingly, are both episodes that have ambiguous and contradictory evidence of Soviet proxy-management, intent, and coordination.¹²⁴ Lastly, we have not been able to chart the deployment or integration of Soviet military units on the territory of Cuba itself, which is often the most visible and visceral evidence of imperialism abroad.

Third, and well-illustrated by the quote at the start of this section, is the social aspect of any imperialist project. Recalling those last chapters of Momson which criticise the “one-eyed” nature of Marxist imperialist theory, in which the desires and agency of the local actors are elided, we have ourselves constructed a similarly limited window of thought. We have not been able to examine either the interactions of the Cubans and the Soviets in Cuba, nor the many Cuban students who studied in the Soviet Union over the period. The dialectic of these interactions is key to any more complete understanding of any imperialist project. Thankfully, these themes are not unexamined and continue to excite academic interest.¹²⁵

Lastly, and returning to our starting point, what can our analysis teach us about the modern face of Russian imperialism? If our objective was to draw continuities in the story of Cuba, these are relatively straightforward. In October 2024, Russian state media reported that Cuba has signalled to the Kremlin its desire to become a partner country of the BRICS organisation.¹²⁶ In fact, in February 2024, it reported the visit of senior Russian security official Nikolay Patrushev to Cuba.¹²⁷ One can digest these bulletins in two ways – as the continued, but vastly reduced tail-end of a process that began in 1959, an echo of the deeply interdependent relationship we described in this essay, or, as more signs of a global divergence, as another attempt to construct a Second World which exists parallel to Washington’s economic and security architecture.

In this latter frame, our questions of past imperialism gain new vitality and importance, not only in Russia’s own foreign policy, but in its developing alliances. Can we

¹²⁴ See Piero Gleijeses, ‘Cuba and the Cold War, 1959 – 1980’. Gleijeses posits that the Soviets had no knowledge or coordination of the initial Cuban deployment in Angola, and while they supported the intervention in Ethiopia, it is also not clear the level of coordination.

¹²⁵ See *Caviar with Rum* and, more recently, Jacqueline Loss, *Dreaming in Russian: The Cuban Soviet Imaginary*, 2013

¹²⁶ See, “Cuba officially applies to join BRICS as partner country”, 8 October 2024, <https://tass.com/world/1853313>

¹²⁷ See, “Top Russian security official arrives in Cuba for security consultations”, 26 February 2024, <https://tass.com/politics/1751875>

see parallels to our 1960s trade deals in China's Belt-and-Road diplomacy, its investments in the Global South, and the attendant criticisms of "debt-trap diplomacy" from Western onlookers? How different are these economic models from those in the Second World of the Cold War, and with what aims? What new architectures might the BRICS, Belt and Road, Shadow Oil Fleet, or Central Asian trade networks hint at, that the (although rightful) focus on the bloody invasion of Ukraine might be obscuring, or even accelerating? Again, these questions and those above implore us to look to the structures, and not just conflicts of the past, which may again be imprinting themselves on our present.

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