

III.

SOVIET POLICY IN THE CARIBBEAN BASIN

This section traces the history of Soviet involvement in political crises in the area by focusing on five cases: (1) the rise and fall of the regime of Gustavo Arbenz in Guatemala in the early 1950s; (2) the coming to power of Fidel Castro in Cuba and the development of close Cuban-Soviet ties in 1959-62; (3) the revolution in Nicaragua, the establishment of Sandinista power in 1979, and the subsequent development of Soviet-Nicaraguan relations; (4) Soviet attitudes towards the guerrilla war in El Salvador; (5) Soviet relations with the Bishop Regime in Grenada.

In each of these cases, more or less radical political and social change (the term "radical" is used with some reservation in the case of Guatemala) in the region, mounted by forces to varying degrees hostile to the United States, was deemed by US policy-makers and opinion leaders to constitute a threat to US security because the local actors were either Soviet proxies or were rapidly moving to establish friendly relations with the Soviet Union.

It is difficult to determine just what Soviet attitudes and policies were in these instances, given that the principal Western and Soviet sources of information are all parties with interests at stake in these events. Nonetheless there is a body of scholarly work on the subject sufficient to suggest that US concerns about Soviet threats in the region have been consistently exaggerated. The Soviets have generally been interested in exploiting opportunities to accelerate the decay of US hegemony and to expand their own influence. But they have never had a consuming interest in the area, given their other more compelling preoccupations elsewhere. Moreover, with one notable exception (the Cuban Missile Crisis), they have demonstrated considerable caution in the face of the substantial risks associated with confrontational behaviour in this region.

Soviet gains (for example Cuba and, with some reservations, Grenada and Nicaragua) are to a considerable extent a consequence of US hostility towards left wing nationalist governments, a hostility which is in large part a product of mistaken assessments of Soviet influence over these groups. That is to say, US concern about the Soviet threat in the Caribbean, when translated into pressure against reformist and revolutionary regimes, had the character of self-fulfilling prophecy.