

Operation MANUEL

When Prague Was a Key Transit Hub for International Terrorism

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This work examines several aspects of the cooperation between the Cuban and Czechoslovak secret services in the 1960s. The Cuban Revolution caused a fundamental redefinition of ideological boundaries, which, among other things, brought geographically remote areas closer to each other. The island in the Caribbean became dependent on the assistance of Eastern Europe, with which it had formerly had no political, economic or cultural ties. Due to the suspension of air links with countries on the American continent, the connection with distant Prague became completely indispensable for Cuba. From 1962 to 1969, as part of Operation MANUEL, more than 1,000 people were transported from Cuba to various Latin American countries via Prague. After the withdrawal of missiles from Cuba, this logistical assistance was one of many concessions made by the Soviet bloc in order to keep the island in its sphere of influence. With the aid of declassified documents, this study reveals the reasons for Czechoslovakia's participation and the forms that it took. Attention is also paid to the negative consequences that this involvement had for Czechoslovakia, including a threat to security and harm to the country's reputation. In order to better understand both the nature and importance of this operation, the last part of the study addresses some of the main individuals dispatched through Prague.



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Introduction

One of the most important events of the Cold War was the 1959 Cuban Revolution, which brought substantial changes to ideological boundaries. The installation of the Castro regime seriously disrupted the U.S.'s sphere of influence in the Western hemisphere and created a major security threat for Washington over the next decade. Despite facing an economic blockade, the Cuban regime demonstrated remarkable vitality in the years that followed. The survival of its "socialist" model would not have been possible without the help of Soviet bloc countries, which subsidised the island economically, intervened in military matters and exported distinct pedagogical and cultural models to Cuba. The success of the *Barbudos* from Sierra Maestra aroused the interest of Eastern Europe in hitherto neglected Latin America, and this was accompanied by reflections on forming stronger connections with the continent. On the other hand, today's Cuba retains many aspects of this Soviet era and is very far from shedding those cultural features as relics of the Cold War.¹ The ideological affinity of the period, thus, managed to overcome both geographical and cultural boundaries.

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At the time of the Cold War, Czechoslovakia was not only one of the most economically developed countries in the Soviet bloc, but unlike other countries in Eastern Europe, it had maintained close relations, including a wide network of embassies and trade with Latin America in the interwar period. Therefore, in the 1950s and the early 1960s, Prague helped open the way for other Communist states whose positions in Latin America were not so strong. In the early years of the Cuban Revolution, Czechoslovakia became a major mediator of the Soviet influence on the island. One pillar of this assistance was the supply of investment units and weapons. Of equal importance was the intense cooperation between the Czechoslovak and Cuban secret services.²

This study examines the cooperation of these two secret services in returning Latin American nationals from Cuba to their home countries. In October 1962, Cuba faced a blockade as a result of the Caribbean crisis, and air links with the island were suspended. One of the few ways to leave was the air route between Havana and Prague. With the consent of Czechoslovakia, from 1962 to 1969, more than 1,000 per-

sons were transported via Prague, including dozens of radical left-wing terrorists. These transfers were carried out under the name Operation MANUEL.

The first part of this study deals with the launch of that operation and the form of the Czechoslovak involvement. The second part considers Operation MANUEL as a security threat for Czechoslovakia and analyses the extent to which Prague's participation affected its international status. The greatest attention, however, is paid to the third part of this work, which deals with some of the transferred persons. Identifying these individuals enables us to better understand the nature and importance of Czechoslovak assistance.

The first person to inform the wider public about the existence of Operation MANUEL was Czech historian Prokop Tomek, who, on the basis of declassified archival documents, published a pioneering study in 2002.³ This publication has since been cited in several Czech and foreign works but only a very limited number have occupied themselves with critically analysing the actual documents. An exception is the book *Fue Cuba* by Argentinian historian Juan Bautista Yofre.⁴

This study seeks to show that recently declassified documents from secret police archives in Eastern Europe are excellent sources for analysing the issues of the global Cold War. I draw on documents from the Security Service Archives (*Archiv bezpečnostních složek*), which is part of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů) in Prague.⁵ This includes thousands of pages of documents from the volumes of the First Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior (Intelligence Department).

Launching Operation MANUEL and the Form of Czechoslovak Assistance

The close cooperation that existed between Czechoslovakia and Castro's Cuba resulted, among other things, in the establishing of an air link between Prague and Havana. In April 1961, weekly flights began along a route that went through Bermuda and Santa Maria (Azores). These flights later increased to twice weekly. This was the first air route between Latin America and the socialist camp. The British magazine *Flight International* wrote of the launch of this connection: 'The new political alignment between Cuba and Czechoslovakia is emphasized

not only by the new CSA service but by the reduction in frequency of Cuban traditional Atlantic service between Havana and Madrid from once-weekly to once-fortnightly. From Gander to Havana the new CSA route will pass over Bermuda, thus avoiding US territory and airspace; CSA is using a Britannia because neither its Tu-104As nor its Il-18s are regarded as suitable for transatlantic services.⁶ An Aeroflot connection between Havana and Moscow was officially set up a year later.

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The link to Prague proved to be indispensable for implementing Cuba's plan to promote its revolutionary model abroad. Cuba's goal was to support the revolutionary struggle in various parts of the world with a view to fragmenting the forces of capitalist states. The attitude of Eastern European states towards the so-called armed struggle was not strictly negative. On the contrary, this was an extraordinarily complex issue. After Krushchev's decision to remove Soviet missiles from Cuba, the island's inhabitants were furious. Logistical assistance with transporting people from Cuba was one of many concessions offered by the Soviet bloc in order to keep Cuba in its sphere of influence.⁷ Involving Czechoslovakia, which maintained regular air links with Havana, was seen as ideal since this would allow Moscow to pass on the security risks.

On 17 December 1962, Carlos Chaín Soler ("Justo"), the deputy chief of Cuban Intelligence, contacted Zdeněk Vrána ("Velebil"), the head of the Czechoslovak delegation in Havana to seek his help in getting home seven Venezuelans who had undergone guerrilla training in Cuba. Vrána accepted the mission, and the Venezuelans left the island the following day. In Prague, they turned over false passports and, using their real documents, continued their journey through several transit countries without ever receiving a stamp that might reveal a stay in a Communist country.⁸

That was the inconspicuous beginning to the operation which was soon given the name Operation MANUEL.⁹ However, this first transfer was also not without complications. A telegraph from the Havana mission about the group's arrival in Prague came one day after they flew in. In the meantime, the Venezuelans had found accommodation at Hotel Internacional; from there, they contacted the Cuban embassy, which finally relayed the message through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of the Interior of Czechoslovakia. The threat of the operation's disclosure was, thus, present from the very outset. The

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Czechoslovak side responded with a strong recommendation that the Cubans send an intelligence worker to Prague as a contact person who would help them ensure the smooth running of the operation.¹⁰

We should keep in mind that Operation MANUEL was initially seen as a way to help the Cuban intelligence service rather than a way to support revolutionary movements. The precise aims of the Cubans were not clear to the Czechoslovaks for a long time. It may also be presumed that Moscow itself did not have detailed information available to it on the subject. It was only via interviews conducted with those passing through Prague that the Czechoslovaks were able to generate a picture of the tasks being undertaken by revolutionary organisations. Accessing this information was the main benefit of the operation for Czechoslovakia.

The Czechoslovak role was based on the simple fact that Latin American nationals who had completed their stay in Cuba would not have been able to return to their homelands without this assistance. Czechoslovak secret services were only responsible for the leg from Cuba to these Latin American states. The journey to Havana was not in their remit and, according to the documents available, the Czechoslovak intelligence service does not appear to have had information about these transfers. During the first stage of Operation MANUEL, the Czechoslovak approach may be described as mechanical. The aim was to follow instructions and simultaneously push the Cubans to improve their operations.

The assistance was, then, of a purely technical nature. It consisted mainly of passport check-in services at the airport. The Latin American nationals journeyed from Cuba to Czechoslovakia using false passports. This effectively meant they had travelled to Cuba as Cubans. They continued onwards from Prague using their official documents without receiving any stamp that might have disclosed their stay in Czechoslovakia.¹¹ Another form of Czechoslovak assistance was the arranging of accommodation.¹² The First Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior arranged stays in Prague hotels such as Internacional, Splendid, Centrál and Centrum. In some exceptional cases, persons of special interest were not allowed to come into contact with Czechoslovaks. Clandestine apartments were used for these individuals, especially Valentina in Prague-Holešovice and Venkov in the municipality of Ládví south of Prague. The Czechoslovak side never gave any instructions about these activities and nor did it provide any funding.¹³ The

Cubans financed the entire operation from their own resources, and this included the accommodation at Prague hotels.

Consequences for Czechoslovakia

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From the very beginning, Operation MANUEL was accompanied by tensions between the Cubans and the Czechoslovaks and by serious shortcomings that threatened its secrecy and therefore that of the participants themselves. In addition to ongoing problems with the adjustment of passports, unannounced arrivals of groups or individuals – for whom the denotation *paracaidista* (paratrooper) became usual – were typical in the early months. Another major weakness was the frequent lack of preparedness of the people passing through the country. In the winter, few participants in the operation were equipped with warm clothing. Instead, they brought correspondence, promotional materials or spirits and cigars from Cuba.¹⁴

As the number of people coming through Czechoslovakia grew, the scope of the difficulties and disclosures increased and so too did the plans of Western states to eliminate the entire operation.¹⁵ According to information from the Czechoslovak mission in Buenos Aires, the Argentinian authorities had already obtained information about the travels of Latin American nationals to Cuba soon after the very first transfers.¹⁶ At the time, they had been paying increased attention to Czechoslovakia's activities in the country. In April, an espionage scandal culminated in Czechoslovak's plenipotentiary being labelled *persona non grata* while several Czechoslovak workers were expelled.¹⁷

In addition, several agents from enemy intelligence services attended training in Cuba. The defection of these Cuban intelligence agents was another great safety concern for those passing through Prague. In the spring of 1964, an officer named Vladimir Rodríguez Lahera ("Victor"), who had been briefed in detail about Operation MANUEL, emigrated from Cuba to the U.S. Once there, he began working for the CIA and provided them with much information. The Cubans tried to conceal the affair from Prague, however Czechoslovak intelligence services learned about the desertion by accident a year later from Salvadorean national Roque Dalton, who had been sent by his party to the Prague editorial office of *World Marxist Review* magazine.¹⁸ As a result, the Cubans must have lost substantial credibility in the eyes of the Czechoslovak state. The Czechoslovaks later found out that in

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April 1965, a Dominican national who passed through Prague in April 1964 had given the Americans a list of his compatriots participating in Operation MANUEL.

The second half of the 1960s was characterised by the marked dissatisfaction of the Soviet bloc and Latin American Communist parties with Cuban policies. Among the ways that this manifested was their ever-declining involvement in selecting recruits for training. Of the people dispatched within Operation MANUEL, the share of Communist Party members dropped gradually while the number belonging to radical far left groups rose. The Czechoslovak leadership took note of increasing disclosures, which raised doubts about the usefulness of further participation in the operation. In April 1967, for example, Jerónimo Carrera, a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Venezuela, revealed that six members of his party had been murdered in the previous four months; moreover, four of them had been part of Operation MANUEL.¹⁹

However, the Czechoslovaks chose to maintain some degree of benevolence towards these Cuban policies. A statement issued in January 1967 expressed the view that ‘the Czechoslovak intelligence service has no right or means to assess Communist parties’ objections to the operation.’²⁰ At the time, there was no way to escape the trap of “brotherly” aid. Since the Prague and Moscow connection alone could be used for the operation,²¹ it was decided in January 1967 that terminating this assistance would have serious security implications:

If we stop our participation in the operation, the participants will then fly through Prague as normal passengers and receive instructions from Cuba’s mission in Prague, which cannot ensure the dispatches, as well as from the Czechoslovak intelligence service with its expert and technical capabilities. The fact that the dispatches will be carried out by the Cubans will not diminish Czechoslovakia’s responsibility and vulnerability as a hub for the transport of Operation MANUEL participants to Latin America. The lack of expertise will, in fact, substantially increase our vulnerability.²²

Besides the practical issues, the political stakes were also taken into consideration:

Completely stopping the operation is not feasible because this could only be achieved by cutting off all direct air links from Czechoslovakia to Cuba while banning Cuban intelligence

agents from working at the local embassy. This would be seen as a hostile action towards the Republic of Cuba. Even simply refusing to provide further assistance to Operation MANUEL would lead to an abrupt cooling of relations with Cuba, and not only in terms of the Ministry of the Interior, but overall, since it would be interpreted as a refusal to assist the national liberation movement in Latin America.²³

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Just a few months later, the Czechoslovak leadership was again forced to deal with the possible termination of the operation. In the summer of 1967, Cuban's subversive activities in Latin America became a topic of discussion at a meeting of foreign affairs ministers of the member states of the Organization of American States (OAS). The session was observed by all countries across the continent due to the intensification of guerrilla activities in Bolivia, Guatemala and Nicaragua. The Venezuelan government led the complaint against Castro's policy, claiming that troops trained in Cuba had been involved in the murder that March of Julio Iribarren Borges, the brother of the foreign affairs minister and guerrilla troops had landed at Machurucuto in May with the aim of deposing President Raúl Leoni. That landing of the revolutionaries had been suppressed with much bloodshed. The guerrilla troops came armed with AK 47 weapons that were later found to have been provided to Cuba by Czechoslovakia.²⁴ Venezuela subsequently tightened its visa regime for citizens of Czechoslovakia and applications had to be approved by the Ministry of the Interior on an individual basis.²⁵

Criticisms of the Cuban line of armed struggle grew louder in Prague in connection to the possible deterioration of relations with Brazil. Good relations with that country were fundamental for Czechoslovakia because Brazil was its most important Latin American business partner. The first official complaint concerning Czechoslovak authorities' aid to subversive Brazilian elements was communicated to the ambassador in Rio de Janeiro on 17 October 1967. The involvement had come to light during the interrogation of guerrillas captured in clashes in the Caparaó mountain range back in April.²⁶

In addition, it had been discovered that some prominent representatives of the military opposition such as Admiral Cândido da Costa Aragão had reached Cuba via Prague. The Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called on the Czechoslovak embassy to deliver written documents to refute these claims, adding that the continuation of such

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practices would have a negative impact on inter-relations. The Czechoslovak side replied that Prague was an international transport hub that could be freely used by any passenger. In fact, the statements of captured persons do not prove the involvement of the Czechoslovak authorities in these transfers.²⁷

Between 1968 and 1969, there was a significant increase in the number of arrests of people who had passed through Prague. This was undoubtedly due to the already established familiarity of foreign intelligence services with the operation. In August 1969, an anti-Czechoslovak campaign took off in Brazil based on the testimony of an arrested member of the MR 26 guerrilla group of José Duarte dos Santos. According to his testimony, he had been returning from Cuba via Prague where a Czechoslovak citizen had given him counterfeit documents containing a false name.²⁸

In October 1969, the Czechoslovak government sent its first official protest to Havana about Prague being used as a transit hub for “elements” who were trained in Cuba and dispatched to Brazil to carry out subversive activities there. The reason for this unexpectedly sharp response was an incident in Minas Gerais where an attack on the national bank led to the arrest of several people who were found to be carrying false documents that had been issued by Czechoslovak authorities.²⁹

At the time, it was also obvious that for the ruined Cuban economy, existing financial support for subversive activities was no longer sustainable. The success of Latin American guerrillas had been minimal, and under the influence of the new pro-Soviet orientation, Havana began to direct its attention to establishing business and diplomatic relations with Latin American countries.³⁰ Cuba made a final decision to terminate Operation MANUEL on 06 March 1970. The official reason given was the reorganisation of the Ministry of the Interior and the burden on workers to harvest the sugar cane. The real reasons, however, were primarily related to the change in the orientation of Cuban policies.³¹

Throughout the entire period of Operation MANUEL from 1962 to 1969, a total of 1,179 people were transported. Most of them were from Venezuela (236), Argentina (177), the Dominican Republic (122), Guatemala (100), Colombia (79), Peru (76), Brazil (48), Ecuador (41), Paraguay (38), El Salvador (36), Honduras (35), Haiti (35) or Panama (28). These figures are only of an indicative nature. The total number of people

who journeyed from other countries in Latin America to Cuba and back via Prague cannot be calculated. Under Operation MANUEL, the Czechoslovak intelligence service was only responsible for the transit of some of the people who returned from Cuba. The number transported was therefore many times higher.

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Participants

In the Security Service Archives – and volumes 80723/101–109 of *I. správa StB* (the First Directorate of State Security) specifically – we can find the real names of the people who passed through Czechoslovakia in Operation MANUEL together with their nationalities, arrival and departure dates, places of accommodation and the routes these “Manuelistas” took to return to their home countries. These documents also include the false names appearing in the passports which they used to travel from Cuba. In some cases, this information is supplemented with records of contact made between Czechoslovak intelligence workers and members of the group. It is therefore clear that the Czechoslovaks knew the real identities of the vast majority of the people who passed through Prague. However, the Cubans seldom made information about these persons’ past or possible future activities available to the Czechoslovak side.

The range of people who came through Prague was very diverse in both intellectual and political terms. The majority of participants in Operation MANUEL were young people. They were mostly students; those without a formal education formed only a small constituency. Approximately one-sixth had positions in parties or national liberation organisations. About half of one percent were Cuban agents engaged in verifying the options for travel to Cuba and back.³² Among those being transferred were also a large number of women, many of whom were travelling with their children.³³

During the seven years of Operation MANUEL, the Czechoslovak intelligence service transported a variety of notable people. Jesús Alberto Márquez Finol, known as “el Motilón,” was part of the first transfer of Venezuelans in December 1962. This high-ranking member of the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) went on to found the very active Nguyen Van Troi cell in 1964.³⁴ In the autumn of 1963, a group of Venezuelans passed through Prague after taking part in the hijacking of the ship *Anzoátegui* in February the same year. In December, they

were arrested. Articles published subsequently in Venezuela criticised the Czechoslovak support of these terrorist groups.³⁵ Another two hijackers of the vessel were dispatched through Prague in late February 1964.³⁶

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In January 1964, Carlos Nicolau Danielli, one of the founders of the Brazilian Communist Party, was also transported as part of Operation MANUEL.³⁷ That February, Fabio Vázquez Castaño, a Colombian travelled via Czechoslovakia on the same count; Castaño would establish the National Liberation Army (ELN) guerrilla group a few months after returning to his homeland. The Czechoslovak intelligence service expressed a number of reservations about his behaviour during his stay.³⁸ At the end of the month, Maxmiliano Gomez Horacio, the leader of the Maoist Dominican Popular Movement (MPD), was also flown out through Prague.³⁹

Between 28 April and 02 May, John William Cooke, the main theorist of the Peronism revolutionary movement and his wife, Alicia Eguren stayed in Czechoslovakia. According to the contact records, “Mendoza” (the name Cooke used when travelling from Cuba) had very ‘bourgeois manners.’ At the same time, Eguren was ‘very lively; she liked to assert her own opinions and didn’t like to let MENDOZA speak even though she was probably his subordinate; MENDOZA was forced to reproach her on several occasions for not letting him finish what he was saying. [...] She showed great interest in Czechoslovakia and bought several books about the country as well as a Czech language textbook and a Czech-Spanish dictionary. Both of them expressed the wish to visit at least one Czechoslovak castle and they were therefore taken to see nearby Kokořín.’⁴⁰

In mid-July 1964, the Czechoslovak intelligence service transported Wismar Medina Rojas, a member of the Armed Forces of National Liberation (FALN) who had led the hijacking of the *Anzoátegui* in February 1963. Rojas had stayed in Cuba for 19 months, and Havana delayed his departure. The reason for the delay was, he believed, precautionary following the publication of information in the Venezuelan press about his planned arrival. According to those reports, Rojas was heading to Venezuela in order to assassinate the country’s president. He remained in Czechoslovakia for three weeks, spending all of that time reading and studying documents in a secret apartment. According to the contact records, he was very modest, disciplined and independent. He bought a Spanish textbook and used it to learn Czech.⁴¹

The transfer in August of Baldemiro Castro, a revolutionary from the Dominican Popular Movement is also worth noting. Castro would be shot during fighting in July 1965. The contact records about him note: ‘The level of politics and abilities did not in any way befit the founder and leader of the MPD. He had minimal orientation skills, and even after a week’s stay, he wasn’t able to walk or travel around Prague independently. He was extremely talkative, however.’⁴²

Between April and October 1964, Tamara “Tania” Bunke, a famous Cuban agent of German origin stayed in Czechoslovakia intermittently.⁴³ Czechoslovak intelligence service representatives accommodated her in a house in Ládví close to the city centre. The archival materials reveal that the Cubans paid special attention to Operation TANIA.⁴⁴ The details of her stay, preparation of documents and creation of a cover story for her future South American mission were taken care of in Prague by the agent Juan Gómez Abad (“Diospado”) and also, after June, by Ricardo Benítez. Since the Cubans were preparing her transfer with Czechoslovak assistance (in the form of extensive documentary work), Prague was informed in great detail about “Tania,” which was not the case for many other persons.

January 1965 saw the arrival in Prague of Herbert José de Souza, an important Brazilian sociologist and member of the national liberation organisation’s Popular Action (Ação Popular) group.⁴⁵ As part of Operation MANUEL, de Souza would be dispatched again in November 1967.⁴⁶ In mid-January, the Czechoslovak intelligence service transferred Jacob Rosen, an American of Jewish origin and the leader of the pro-Chinese Progressive Labour Party.⁴⁷ He was followed later in the month by Carlos Rodríguez Paredes, an important representative of Ecuador’s labour movement who was also headed from Cuba to his homeland.⁴⁸

Alípio Cristiano de Freitas, a priest and member of the Brazilian Peasant Leagues, arrived in Czechoslovakia in March 1965.⁴⁹ His appeared in Prague again at the end of April.⁵⁰ Among the Manuelistas who came in June, we find the name of Jaime Bateman Cayón, a Colombian guerrilla leader who would create the 19th of April Movement (M-19) in 1970.⁵¹ In early October 1965, Diógenes José de Carvalho Oliveira from Brazil stayed in Prague. After returning home, he went on to co-found the Popular Revolutionary Vanguard (Vanguarda Popular Revolucionária) through which he participated in a series of terrorist attacks. In October 1968, he was involved in the murder of the American soldier Charles Chandler. According to the contact report, Oliveira

was very discreet and his demeanour was serious.⁵² As part of Operation MANUEL, he travelled through Prague again in May the following year.⁵³ In mid-December, the Argentinian Alicia Eguren was dispatched again.⁵⁴ Her son, Catella Pedro, travelled through Prague in mid-March 1966.⁵⁵

Although his stay was not part of this operation, it is worth mentioning that Ernesto Che Guevara, the icon of the armed struggle, resided in Czechoslovakia between March and July 1966 after returning from an unsuccessful mission to Africa.⁵⁶ Guevara lived in Ládvi,⁵⁷ staying in the same house where Tamara “Tania” Bunke had been accommodated.⁵⁸ For him, this was, above all, a period of impatient waiting for a suitable moment in which to launch another South American mission. It is likely that it was during this stay in Czechoslovakia that the site of Bolivia was chosen. Che Guevara devoted much of this time to writing economic and philosophical papers. His entire stay was organised by the Cuban station. Czechoslovak intelligence services had no idea who he was.

This view is borne out by events in 1970 when, during the visit of the then Czech foreign minister Ján Marko to Cuba, Fidel Castro expressed an interest in locating the house where Che Guevara had lived for several months. Prague headquarters responded that it would need information about the name under which Che Guevara travelled, the date when he came to Czechoslovakia and who had arranged his stay in Prague: ‘The First Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior was not informed about Guevara’s stay in Prague and therefore Guevara could not have been accommodated under his own identity in any buildings of the Ministry of the Interior.’⁵⁹ The Czechoslovak intelligence service also recommended that any information about a possible stay by Guevara remain strictly confidential: ‘The publication of this fact could be the basis for a wide anti-Czechoslovak campaign in Latin America, and in some states, it might contribute to the deterioration of relations and our embassies’ activities in these countries.’⁶⁰

In early July 1966, the poet Otto René Castillo was dispatched from Cuba. After returning to his native Guatemala, he went on to join the guerrilla struggle of the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR) where he was chief of propaganda and education. A few months later, he was captured by government troops and tortured to death.⁶¹ In mid-September, two Brazilians, Alfredo Nery Paiva and Hermes Machado Neto, also travelled from Cuba; both would enter the guerrilla war in the Caparaó

mountain range on their return home.⁶² Among the Manuelistas who flew out in October 1966, we may also find the name of Lorgio Vaca Marchett, a Bolivian. Once back in his homeland, he joined the guerrilla group led by Ernesto Che Guevara. He died in March of the following year.⁶³

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While all this was transpiring, the First Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior became aware of the expanded efforts of Cuban intelligence to influence revolutionary movements elsewhere in the world. Operation MANUEL now no longer restricted itself to Latin American nationals. During the first quarter of 1967, three groups of a total of 12 Iranians flew to their homeland through Prague; they were returning after completing eight months of guerrilla training in Cuba. The Cubans arranged their travel under the code name Operation RAMADAN.⁶⁴

In response to the increasing complaints from Latin American governments that Czechoslovakia was involved in transporting guerrillas, a Czechoslovak intelligence report from 1967 expressed sharp criticisms about the “quality” of the people travelling through the country: ‘While in the early years, people of good quality and ability who were devoted to the revolutionary movement predominated, it is now becoming more and more evident that people of lower intelligence are passing through, and to a large extent, they are also those for whom a paid journey to Cuba via Europe is probably a significantly stronger motive than interest in the revolutionary struggle. Further arrests of participants can therefore be expected.’⁶⁵ In the last years of Operation MANUEL, it was almost exclusively left-wing radicals who travelled through Prague. Many of them would die in the armed struggle or be murdered in captivity.

In the second half of January 1967, the Czechoslovak intelligence service transported Mario Gutiérrez Ardaya, a Bolivian who joined the Ñancahuazú guerrilla group. He died in the conflict in September the same year. The list of Manuelistas that January also featured a Dominican, Altagracia del Orbe, who was an important figure in the fight against the government of Trujillo.⁶⁶ The month of March saw the transit of Heliodoro Portugal, a Panamanian who would be assassinated in 1970 by the Torrijos regime.⁶⁷ Midway through the month, two members of Revolutionary Peronist Youth, Pedro Fabian Sandoval and Juan Carlos Arroyo, also appeared in the Czechoslovak capital. In 1977, the first would be imprisoned and murdered after the military dictatorship took hold; the second has been missing since 1976.⁶⁸ In late

March, the Guatemalan anthropologist and FAR member Aura Marina Arriola Pinagel also departed from Cuba.⁶⁹

Not long after, in April, the main representatives of the Argentinian Revolutionary Armed Forces, Miguel Alejo Levenson, Marcelo Kurlat⁷⁰ and Carlos Osatinsky,⁷¹ were seen in Prague. Later that month, a Guatemalan named Julio Ruben Landa Castañeda was also dispatched; he would assassinate the U.S. ambassador the following year. Another arrival from Havana was Carlos Porfirio Miranda García, a Peruvian who subsequently served in the ELN in Bolivia.⁷² In the middle of July, Alicia Eguren and Gregorio Levenson, the chief voices of revolutionary Peronism, arrived in Czechoslovakia.⁷³ August saw the dispatch of Diego Montaña Cuellar, a major Colombian politician.⁷⁴ The following month, the poet Roque Dalton once again featured among the Manuelistas. Dalton died in 1975 during the guerrilla war in El Salvador under circumstances that remain unclear.⁷⁵

In January 1968, Jaime Sotelo Ojeda, a member of the Chilean Socialist Party member, was transferred from Cuba. Ojeda was to become part of the Group of Personal Friends (GAP), the private presidential guard of Salvador Allende. He was murdered shortly after the coup in 1973.⁷⁶ In February, his compatriot Raul Zamora also flew through Prague – an ELN member, Zamora was killed during the conflict in Bolivia's Teoponte region in the summer of the following year. Other arrivals in Czechoslovakia that February included Ricardo Lets Colmenares, the Peruvian general secretary of the Revolutionary Vanguard, and his wife, María Luisa Raigada. They were followed in March by Felix Marmaduke Vargas Grove, also a Chilean Socialist Party member who would later be part of the GAP. In 1974, he too fell victim to the military regime.⁷⁷ Oscar Terán, who later ranked as an important Argentinian thinker, was another key name on the list.⁷⁸ The end of the month saw the arrival in Prague of Italla Nandi, a Brazilian who would become a famous actress.⁷⁹

The Manuelistas who came next in April included Emilio Mariano Jáuregui from Argentina. Jáuregui would be murdered by police during a protest against Nelson Rockefeller's visit in June the following year. That murder spurred the so-called *Cordobazo*, a massive wave of protests that ultimately led to the downfall of the government of Onganía.⁸⁰ Within the groups of Argentinians arriving in May was Eduardo Streger, who became a member of the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP). Streger went on to organise an unsuccessful assassination

attempt against then president Jorge Rafael Videla in 1977.⁸¹ Late May also brought the arrival of Norma Arrastito and Fernando Abal Medina, a married couple with Christian leanings who were hard-line left-wing Peronist militants. Soon after their return home, they founded the guerrilla organisation Montoneros.⁸² In late June, Teodoro Palacio Hurtado was also dispatched. Hurtado was a militant in the Panamanian group Vanguard of National Action (VAN), which after the coup that October, fought against the dictatorship of Omar Torrijos. In December 1970, Hurtado was arrested and murdered.⁸³ Manuel Toledo, a member of the Socialist Party of Uruguay, was another Manuelista who came in mid-July. In 1972, he was imprisoned, and six years later, died in a military hospital.⁸⁴

In early October, Francisco Ramón Peguero, one of the founders of the Dominican Popular Movement, came to Prague.⁸⁵ In mid-November, a member of the Brazilian urban guerrilla organisation National Liberation Action (ALN), Ísis Días de Oliveira, also passed through the city. The Brazilian would be captured and killed in 1972.⁸⁶ Her transfer was followed by that of two Sandinistas, Oscar Benavides Lanuza and Henry Ruiz. Ruiz became a member of the National Directorate of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN).⁸⁷ The group of early December arrivals included Marcelo Aburneo Verd and Sara Eugenia Palacio, a husband and wife from Argentina and their two children. After their return, they were active in the Revolutionary Armed Forces. They were arrested in 1971 and have since been missing.⁸⁸

In the scheme of things, the transfer of ten Eritreans appears to be a curiosity. This group flew from Damascus to Prague on 05 December 1968 using Syrian passports; they were bound for Cuba where they would be trained. After completing the guerrilla training and returning to Ethiopian Eritrea, these guerrillas went on to provoke armed conflict in the region. The Czechoslovak intelligence service learned accidentally about their transfer, which was not part of Operation MANUEL and therefore secured entirely by the Cuban mission. One member of the group tried to divulge the operation at the Swiss embassy in Prague and then travel on to Western Europe. After disclosing his intentions, however, he was arrested and the Cubans deported him back to Damascus via Moscow.⁸⁹

The group dispatched in January 1969 included Adilson Ferreira da Silva, a member of the Brazilian terrorist group Palmares Armed Revolutionary Vanguard (VAR-Palmares); in July that year, he would take

part in a bank robbery in Rio de Janeiro.⁹⁰ A few days after his transfer, his compatriot, the famous scriptwriter Augusto Pinto Boal, flew out as part of this operation.⁹¹ Humberto Ortega, who later became a long-serving defence minister in Nicaragua (and is Daniel Ortega's brother), was a Manuelista that February.⁹² Among the notable Argentinians transported that month was Miguel Alejandro "Julián" Levenson, whose role as the co-founder of the Revolutionary Armed Forces has been alluded to.⁹³ In March, Otto César Vargas, the general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist Party (PCR) of Argentina⁹⁴ and Alicia Eguren (also described above) were dispatched.⁹⁵

Conclusion

Operation MANUEL tells us a great deal about the ties between Latin America and Eastern Europe at a time when these regions stood on opposite sides of a boundary based on spheres of influence. This area of study still requires extensive research. Besides being an attempt to understand the global links between various leftist groups, the present work has aimed mainly to highlight the consequences of participating in this operation for Czechoslovakia. That country's support and benevolence towards Cuban policies were born out of the Soviet desire to maintain strong political and economic ties with Cuba.

Outside of receiving information from the individuals who passed through the state, Czechoslovakia did not profit directly from its involvement in Operation MANUEL. Instead, the Czechoslovak participation had a significant influence on perceptions of the country in non-socialist nations. The fact that this small Central European country became established as a relatively well-known "brand" in Latin America during the Cold War was not only due to its status as the Soviet bloc's most economically developed state or its ability to build on positions acquired in the region during the interwar period. An equally important factor was the negative attention given to countries that stood at the opposite end of the ideological spectrum to most Latin American governments. Czechoslovakia was viewed as a centre for Communist organisations, a supplier of arms to subversive groups and a hub for the transport of guerrillas.

In total, 1,179 people were dispatched as part of the operation that took place between 1962 and 1969. These people included Venezuelans (20%), Argentinians (15%), Dominicans (10%), Guatemalans (8.5%),

Colombians (6.7%) and Peruvians (6.5%). Those who passed through Czechoslovakia were a diverse mix of individuals ranging from illiterate peasants and hill people to young leftist students and intellectuals to professional Communist officials and agitators. An important contingent consisted of experienced guerrilla commanders and organisers. In this context, it is not an exaggeration to claim that in the 1960s Prague became a key transit hub for international terrorism.



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Notes

- 1 See Jacqueline Loss (2013), *Dreaming in Russian: The Cuban Soviet Imaginarity*, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- 2 See Hana Bortlová (2011), *Československo a Kuba v letech 1959–1962*, Praha: Univerzita Karlova v Praze, Filozofická fakulta.
- 3 Prokop Tomek (2002), 'Akce Manuel,' *Securitas Imperii: sborník k problematice bezpečnostních služeb* 9, pp. 326–333.
- 4 Juan Bautista Yofre (2014), *Fue Cuba. La infiltración cubano-soviética que dio origen a la violencia subversiva en América Latina*, Buenos Aires: Sudamericana. Yofre's work relies on an impressive number of documents, including those drawn from Czech archives. The quality of this study is, however, compromised by the fact that he does not always proceed as an impartial investigator in his interpretations. In this regard, certain conclusions of the former chief of the SIDE secret service, closely linked with the government of Carlos Menem, are not only controversial, but also misleading and inaccurate.
- 5 This institute was established by the Czech government in 2007 with the aim of analysing documents from the Nazi and Communist totalitarian regimes and making them accessible. The archives also contain documents from the former state secret police and intelligence service. In recent years, the vast work of digitalising the archives has been taking place. These rich archives concerning Latin America have yet to be a focus for scholarship.
- 6 'New CSA Service to Havana' (1962), *FLIGHT International* 81 (2753), 11 January, p.73.
- 7 See James G. Blight and Philip Brenner (2002), *Sad and Luminous Days: Cuba's Struggle with the Superpowers after the Missile Crisis*, Lanham and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield.
- 8 Archiv bezpečnostních složek (ABS) (1963), 80723/011, 'Zpráva z Havany č. 262 ze dne 20. prosince 1962,' 03 January.

- 9 The phrase “Operation MANUEL” appeared in documents of the First Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior for the first time on 25 January 1963; it was the code name for the arrangement of visa-free travel for Latin American nationals arriving in Prague from Havana.
- 10 ABS (1962), 80723/100, ‘K vysílání skupin z Havany přes Prahu do LA,’ 27 December.
- 11 ABS (1963), 80723/019, ‘Schůzka s Vilou dne 31. května 1963,’ 07 June.
- 12 ABS (1964), 80723/100, ‘Rozbor a návrhy pro další obsahové a organizační řízení akce Manuel,’ (circa May); ABS (1964), 80723/019, ‘José Luis Ojalbo – záznam ze schůzky dne 26. 8. 1964,’ 28 August.
- 13 ABS (1967), 80723/100, ‘Stížnost Brazílie na čs. vměšování při dopravě partyzánů z Kuby do LA,’ 07 November.
- 14 ABS (1963), 80723/100, ‘Výpis ze zprávy do Havany č. 135 ze dne 29. 5. 1963,’ 03 Jun 1963.
- 15 Irregularities were typical of Operation MANUEL. The numbers of guerrillas passing through Prague increased from 92 in the first six months of the operation to 155 in the first six months of 1964. From the start date of 18 December 1962 to 04 June 1963, 92 people were transported via Prague. A further 106 people had been dispatched by the end of that same year. In the first half of 1964, there was a large increase in transfers. By 11 June, 155 people had been flown out. During the first year-and-a-half of the operation, a total of 353 persons were transferred.
- 16 ABS (1963), 80723/011, ‘Justo,’ 09 January.
- 17 Michal Zourek (2014), *Checoslovaquia y el Cono Sur 1945–1989. Relaciones políticas, económicas y culturales durante la Guerra Fría*, Praha: Karolinum, pp.60–64.
- 18 ABS (1965), 80723/100, ‘Záznam,’ 12 May. Dalton worked in the editorial office from 1965 until April 1967. During his stay, he wrote his most famous work, *Taberna y otros lugares* (The Tavern and Other Places). It is partly set in the Prague restaurant U Fleků. In 1969, the work won the prestigious Casa de las Américas literary award
- 19 ABS (1967), 80723/100, ‘Záznam,’ 12 April.
- 20 ABS (1967), 80723/100, ‘Spolupráce československé a kubánské rozvědky,’ 11 January.
- 21 Connections provided by the airlines Mexicana de Aviación and Iberia were not suitable from a safety standpoint.
- 22 ABS (1967), 80723/100, ‘Spolupráce československé a kubánské rozvědky,’ 11 January.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 ABS (1967), 80723/100, ‘Stížnost Brazílie na čs. vměšování při dopravě partyzánů z Kuby do LA,’ 07 November.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 ABS (1969), 80723/113, ‘Využití případu José Duarte dos Santos k protičeskoslovenské kampani v Brazílii,’ 28 August.
- 29 ABS (1969), 80723/113, ‘Praha,’ 08 October.

- 30 ABS (1969), 80723/100, 'Informace o akci Manuel,' 14 July.
- 31 See Tanya Harmer (2013), 'Two, Three, Many Revolutions: Cuba and the Prospects for Revolutionary Change in Latin America, 1967–1975,' *Journal of Latin American Studies* 45 (1), pp.61–89.
- 32 ABS (1964), 80723/100, 'Rozbor a návrhy pro další obsahové a organizační řízení akce Manuel,' (circa May).
- 33 For example, one Venezuelan national who was flown out in January 1969 travelled with her four children. ABS (1969), 80723/109, 'Havana,' 22 January.
- 34 ABS (1963), 80723/011, 'Zpráva z Havany č. 262 ze dne 20. prosince 1962,' 03 January.
- 35 ABS (1964), 80723/102, 'Výpis ze zprávy č. 95 z Caracasu,' 09 January.
- 36 ABS (1964), 80723/102, 'Záznam o kontaktu s venezuelskou skupinou,' 10 March.
- 37 ABS (1963), 80723/102, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 23 January.
- 38 ABS (1964), 80723/102, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 15 February.
- 39 ABS (1964), 80723/102, 'Záznam o navázání kontaktu se skupinou Dominikánců vedenou Martinezem Perezem,' 05 March.
- 40 ABS (1964), 80723/103, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 21 May .
- 41 ABS (1964), 80723/104, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 17 August .
- 42 ABS (1964), 80723/104, 'Záznam o navázání kontaktu s dominikánským příslušníkem,' 29 August.
- 43 Several works are devoted to Tamara Bunke's stay. Yofre (2014) makes use of Czech archival documents. One publication that draws especially on personal testimony is Ulises Estrada (2005), *Tania la guerrillera y la epopeya sudamericana del Che*, Melbourne, Nueva York, La Habana: Ocean Sur.
- 44 The information about Tamara Bunke's time in Prague is contained in volume 80723/300.
- 45 ABS (1965), 80723/105, 'Záznam o kontaktu s dominikánskou skupinou,' 18 January.
- 46 ABS (1968), 80723/108, 'Havana,' 27 November.
- 47 ABS (1965), 80723/105, 'Záznam o kontaktu s příslušníkem USA,' 20 January.
- 48 ABS (1965), 80723/105, 'Záznam o kontaktu s Manuelem Martinezem Rodriguezem,' 24 February.
- 49 ABS (1965), 80723/105, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 03 March.
- 50 ABS (1965), 80723/105, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 15 June.
- 51 ABS (1965), 80723/105, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 23 June.
- 52 ABS (1965), 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 12 October.
- 53 ABS (1966), 80723/106, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 04 May.
- 54 ABS (1965), 80723/105, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 16 December.
- 55 ABS (1966), 80723/106, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 16 March.
- 56 For details about this stay, see Michal Zourek (2012), 'Kde se nachází Che? Tajný pobyt Che Guevary v Československu,' *Dvacáté století/The Twentieth Century* 1, pp.61–80.
- 57 The house was an inconspicuous double-storey villa surrounded by a large estate in the Ládví municipality about 10 kilometres south of Prague. From the end of the World War II, the villa was owned by the Ministry of the Interior, which used it from the 1960s to meet the needs of the intelligence

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service.

58 The two did not live in the villa at the same time, as has been stated erroneously by certain sources.

59 ABS (1970), 80723/112, 'K informacím naší rezidentury z Havany č. 74 a 75 doporučují zaujmout toto stanovisko,' 09 November.

60 Ibid.

61 ABS (1966), 80723/106, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 18 July.

62 ABS (1966), 80723/106, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 21 September.

63 ABS (1966), 80723/106, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 14 October.

64 ABS (1967), 80723/100, 'Návrh na zařazení do svodky,' 23 February.

65 ABS (n.d.), 80723/100, 'Spolupráce československé a kubánské rozvědky - aktualizace zprávy ke dni 1 November 1967,' .

66 ABS (1967), 80723/107, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 25 January.

67 ABS, 80723/107, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 13 March.

68 ABS (1967), 80723/107, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 20 March.

69 ABS (1967), 80723/107, 'Havana,' 29 March.

70 ABS (1967), 80723/107, 'Havana,' 07 April.

71 ABS (1967), 80723/107, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 19 April.

72 ABS (1967), 80723/107, 'Havana,' 24 April.

73 ABS (1967), 80723/107, 'Havana,' 09 June.

74 He was accompanied by his wife, Carlota Cuellar. They were accommodated at the university residence hall where their daughter, a student in Prague, was living. ABS (1967), 80723/107, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 24 August.

75 ABS (1967), 80723/107, 'Havana,' 08 September.

76 ABS (1968), 80723/108, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 05 February.

77 ABS (1968), 80723/108, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 18 March.

78 ABS (1968), 80723/108, 'Havana,' 16 March.

79 ABS (1968), 80723/108, 'Havana,' 23 March.

80 Jáuregui was returning from Cuba with his wife who was seriously ill and had to be treated in Prague. ABS (1968), 80723/108, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 16 April.

81 ABS (1968), 80723/108, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 21 May.

82 ABS (1968), 80723/108, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 01 June.

83 Ibid.

84 ABS (1968), 80723/108, 'Havana,' 16 July.

85 ABS (1968), 80723/108, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 09 October.

86 ABS (1968), 80723/108, 'Havana,' 12 November.

87 ABS (1968), 80723/108, 'Havana,' 20 November.

88 ABS (1969), 80723/108, 'Havana,' 04 December.

89 ABS (1968), 80723/112, 'Zaškolování Eritrejců na Kubě,' 06 December; 'Žádost o pomoc při zajištění rezervace u letecké společnosti Aeroflot v Praze,' (1968), 16 December .

90 ABS (1969), 80723/109, 'Havana,' 08 January.

91 ABS (1969), 80723/109, 'Záznamy o kontaktu,' 13 January.

92 ABS (1969), 80723/109, 'Havana,' 05 February.

93 ABS (1969), 80723/109, 'Havana,' 12 February .

94 ABS (1969), 80723/109, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 12 March.

95 ABS (1969), 80723/109, 'Záznam o kontaktu,' 20 March.

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