

Arms for Arbenz

Czechoslovakia's Involvement in the Cold War in Latin America

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Abstract *This article introduces an under-researched historic problem about the relationship between Czechoslovakia and Guatemala during the protracted Guatemalan Revolution (1944-1954). Czechoslovak relation with Guatemala were already established during the interwar period when the (relatively) small central European country became an important purchaser of Guatemalan coffee. Such commercial interests helped create official diplomatic channels sealed in 1936 with the signing of a commercial agreement that facilitated the Guatemalan purchase of Czechoslovak-made arms. Following WWII, bilateral relations were not renewed; however the new democratic regime of the President Arévalo retained the interest to do so. In the same spirit, Arévalo's successor, Jacobo Arbenz, sought to rehash his country's relationship to Czechoslovakia and managed to achieve that goal on the diplomatic level which resulted in the 1954 Czechoslovak arms deal. Unfortunately, this normalisation occurred at the time of mounting pressure from the US against Arbenz. So, the weapons purchased from Czechoslovakia played a significant role in the collapse of the democratic state in Guatemala and formed the basis of the US intervention pretext.*

Keywords: Cold War; Guatemalan Revolution, Czechoslovakia-Guatemala, United States-Guatemala, arms sales, Jacobo Arbenz

Introduction

The sale of arms from Czechoslovakia to the regime of Jacobo Arbenz, President of Guatemala, is one of the few examples when two small states played a certain and important role in the events of the Cold

War. At first, it seemed to be an ordinary arms deal, not so much different from what Czechoslovakia had done during the interwar period. However, in the 1950's, world politics had diametrically changed and this trade played a decisive role in ending the Guatemalan Revolution, better called the Guatemalan Spring in 1954, and that end led to the fall of Arbenz himself.

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The Genesis of Relations between Czechoslovakia and Guatemala

In order to understand why both states decided to make such a deal a turn back to the interwar period is needed because it was then that the foundations for further cooperation were laid. In 1918, just before the end of WWI, Czechoslovakia succeeded and gained independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The new central European republic was looking for new markets where it could buy commodities and sell its merchandise. The Czechoslovak government soon became interested in Latin America; among which, Guatemala and the entire Central America region, were key.

The first important act of the newfound Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Czechoslovakia was to establish a consulate in Mexico City at the end of 1922.¹ The consulate also retained authority for relations with Guatemala; however this was not sufficient for the Czechoslovak colony, which had formed there at beginning of the 20th century. To satisfy its consular needs and to supervise and arrange commercial trade, the Czechoslovak government contemplated establishing another representative office directly in Guatemala. They therefore welcomed the initiative of Rudolf Zrnovský, Czechoslovak businessman and resident of Guatemala for several years, who offered himself (1922) as a possible representative.² His effort was also supported by the consulate in Mexico City and the Consul General, Vladimír Smetana, in his letter to the MFA spoke of the economic importance of the representative offices in Latin America. Throughout all of 1922, Czechoslovakia exported to Mexico products to the value of 16 million (KČS); in the first half of 1923 (with the established consulate) it had already reached some 12 million (KČS). Towards Central America Czechoslovakia exported merchandise to the value of one million (KČS) and in the first half of 1923 (without representative offices there) it was a half million (KČS). This implies that without official support, it was difficult to increase Czechoslovak exports.³

These arguments acted as an impulse for the MFA to create an honorary vice-consulate in Guatemala City, however Zrnovský was a quite controversial figure—he was involved in a failed colonisation project in Guatemala and was deemed unacceptable for some Czechoslovak emigrants. For these reasons he was not inaugurated in his position until late 1927.⁴ While in office, his problems persisted and the Czechoslovak government decided to change the status of its representative office in Guatemala to honorary consulate and, as its head, appointed another and more renowned emigrant businessman, František Krafka, in 1930.⁵

The 1930's were a very important time in the relations between Czechoslovakia and Guatemala. Mutual commerce flourished; especially Czechoslovak importation of coffee and exportation of textiles, crystal and leather products. Unfortunately, in 1933 Hitler assumed power in Germany and he introduced a new economic approach towards the Latin American states. The system was called *Ausländer Sonderkonten für Inlandszahlungen* (ASKI), named after the virtual currency ASKI Marks. In a simplified way, the Germans paid for coffee in Guatemala with this virtual currency which the Guatemalans were able to use only in shops with German goods. The main benefit was that they could buy merchandise with a discount of 25%.⁶ This system almost eliminated business competition from Europe and Guatemala maintained, apart from Germany, strong trade relations only with the US. For example, in 1934 Germany imported 44% of Guatemalan coffee, the US 22% and Czechoslovakia a mere 4.5%.⁷

This situation, and the lack of activity of the Czech government, were criticised in 1936 by the Czechoslovak Minister in Mexico City, Vlastimil Kybal, who published several articles about the difficulties of commercial trade in the Central America in various newspapers at home.⁸ Thanks to his efforts Czechoslovakia sealed a new commercial treaty in October 1936 with Guatemala, which facilitated mutual trade and acquired similar benefits as the US.⁹

The change was swift and significant. Czechoslovakia once again became a key importer of Guatemalan coffee and a considerable exporter—the amount of Czechoslovak exports to Guatemala rose nine times in 1937 compared to 1935.¹⁰ Many famous Czech companies had agents in Guatemala, for example the famous shoe company Baťa and the arms firm Zbrojovka from Brno. The agent of the latter was no one else but Czechoslovakia's Honorary Consul, František Krafka, and

it is probable that he personally arranged the most important deals between the two countries in the interwar period. The Guatemalan government was interested in Czechoslovak arms for its army mainly because of their excellent reputation in Latin America. In 1936, Guatemala bought some 4000 rifles from Zbrojovka. These weapons were based on the Mauser system, called model 24.¹¹ One year later another 50 light machine guns ZB model 30 were purchased.¹²

Sadly, this commercial renaissance did not last more than two years because Czechoslovakia fell under German influence thanks to the Munich Agreements (30 September 1938) and later under German commandship when the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was created (16 March 1939). This meant the end of commercial activity between Czechoslovakia and Guatemala together with the severing of diplomatic relations. WWII signified profound changes in both countries, the official Czech government resided in London, and Guatemala suffered a revolution. In 1944, the old dictator, Jorge Ubico, who had governed the country from 1931, was deposed and substituted by a new democratic regime and a new president Juan José Arévalo.

It was the new Guatemalan president who was interested in the restoration of diplomatic and commercial relations with Czechoslovakia and he made some important courtesies to that end. For example, Guatemala still recognised the commercial treaty of 1936 even though it had not been ratified.¹³ Nevertheless, Czechoslovakia was not, at this time, capable of an appropriate response. At the end of WWII it did not maintain sufficient diplomatic capacities and in the years directly after the war, it suffered a coup d'état.¹⁴ In February 1948, democracy was replaced by communism and Czechoslovakia attached itself to the USSR; the latter fully governed the foreign relations of the former. This implied that no direct diplomatic relations were established, no new commercial treaty was arranged, and some sporadic actions like the commercial mission of representatives Landa and Hermann in 1949 practically fell in vain.¹⁵ That is why the restoration of the relations between Czechoslovakia and Guatemala had to wait for the new Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán.

Arbenz's Search for Arms

Jacobo Arbenz was an important revolutionary figure in Guatemala since 1944. In the government of Arévalo he acted as Defence Minister and was favourite to replace him in office. In the elections of 1950 he

won 64% of the vote and entered office the next year.¹⁶ His predecessor had started some important reforms and transformed the country into a democracy, a fact supported by the free and fair presidential elections in 1950. As president, Arbenz, it seemed, had two choices: to continue with modest reformism or to take more radical approach. He opted for the second choice and in his inaugural message he highlights themes like constructing an independent and diversified economy and agrarian reform.¹⁷

Arbenz was not specific, but it was clear that his policy would be directed against the monopolies of three North American companies: La Empresa Eléctrica (which produced 80% of the electricity in Guatemala); International Railways of Central America (IRCA); and the United Fruit Company (UFCO – a real colossus company, the second largest owner of railways and singly the largest company in the world in the cultivation and exportation of bananas).¹⁸ These companies each had disputes with the previous government of Arévalo, but this time the situation was far tenser and UFCO, for example, sponsored a campaign in the US media against Arbenz and his government. The companies were also supported (although indirectly) by the US Department of State, which observed Guatemala with growing anxiety. Their main concern was the question of communism and its influence in the country. There existed communist parties in Guatemala but they were not in Congress and when the official party was established (Partido Guatemalteco de Trabajo, PGT) in 1952, it had only 4 representatives out of 58 seats.¹⁹ On the other hand, it was Arbenz who tolerated communist activities in Guatemala and he drew close friends and advisors from them. One of these was his closest political friend, José Manuel Fortuny, the secretary of PGT. Furthermore, many communists were employed in high-level positions in the civil service and educational bureaucracy.

Perhaps, counterfactually, the communist threat would not have been taken so seriously, but at the beginning of the 1950's the international ideological struggle was all-encompassing; states had to choose a side. The USSR gained atomic military power in 1949, the Korean War was on and the US was living through an era of mass hysteria and heightened fear of communism, intensified by McCarthyism. Consequently, the CIA prepared (1951) an operation against the Guatemalan leadership called PBFORTUNE (PB was a code for Guatemala and FORTUNE was an optimistic name for the operation).²⁰ This operation was

eventually halted in 1952 by the State Department because President Harry Truman decided to not stand in the forthcoming election. The officials also did not want to end the Good Neighbour Policy which the US followed since the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. This resulted in a halt until a new president would be inaugurated in 1953.²¹

Luckily for the CIA – and their planned operation – the newly elected president was Dwight Eisenhower who had heavily criticised Truman’s Administration for its “soft” approach to the communist threat. As Secretary of State he chose John Foster Dulles and, as head of the CIA he appointed his brother Allen. Both were supportive of the covert operation in Guatemala.²² Final approval was issued in September 1953 when the CIA orchestrated a similar action in Iran against the Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh. The new operation was called PB-SUCCESS because it took the useful parts from the first operation.

Arbenz was not naive and knew, or at least suspected, a move against him from the US. He was not so sure about the form of such a move: it could be a direct assault (improbable), the US could use one of his regional adversaries like Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza or could authorise a covert operation.²³ It was clear however, that if the US were to opt for a direct military operation Arbenz would have to strengthen the Guatemalan armed forces. The condition of the Guatemalan army was, in fact, tragic. War materials and equipment were functional, but old and obsolete. The main problem was the lack of spare parts and ammunition. For example, Guatemala had only four planes and none of them could fly. They lacked replacement parts. Guatemala’s infantry was in need of ammunition and grenades. In 1953 soldiers had to dismantle cartridges that did not fit their rifles thanks to their calibre and had to file used cartridges.²⁴

This poor condition of the Guatemalan army was the result of an embargo imposed by the US in 1947. The reason was Guatemala’s hesitation about signing the Rio Treaty (Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance). It stated that an attack against one is to be considered as an attack against them all, known as the Hemispheric Defence Doctrine. For the US, it was *the* essential document against the spread of communism over the American continents. Guatemalans hesitated because of their claims over Belize. But, for the US, it was evidence of growing communism influence in the country. For this reason, the US not only refused to sell weapons to Guatemala but also blocked its efforts to buy them in Latin America and West Europe.²⁵

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Enter Czechoslovakia

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In 1953, when Arbenz sensed an acute threat from the US and their allies, he was desperate to find a country to sell him sufficient military materials. He tested the states of Latin America (Mexico, Argentina) and Western Europe (Great Britain, Italy), but the US blockade was successful and Guatemala was refused support. This was the pivotal moment when he turned to the Eastern bloc and to one country in particular; an old trading partner that had sold arms to Guatemala in the past. This was, of course, Czechoslovakia.

There were several reasons for Arbenz to beseech Czechoslovakia for military materials and support:

First, as noted above, Guatemala had tense economic relations with Czechoslovakia in the interwar period. After WWII however, the situation changed and Czechoslovakia emerged as Guatemala's most significant commercial partner among the states in the Soviet orbit. In 1952, Guatemala exported to Czechoslovakia merchandise worth some 8.5 million (KčS). In comparison, Hungary traded to the some of only 6 million (KčS) while trade to Poland, China and the USSR was labelled as insignificant.²⁶ In 1953, Czechoslovakia exported to Guatemala goods to the value of 18.7 million (KčS), and imported coffee to the value of 1.8 million (KčS).²⁷ In short, Czechoslovakia was an important trading partner for Guatemala.

Second, the Czechoslovak military firm Zbrojovka had sold some arms to Guatemala in the past: rifles in 1936 and light machine guns in 1937. Thanks to the US embargo the Guatemalan army was forced to use these weapons in late 1953. It was only logical to ask the Czechoslovak government for ammunition.²⁸

Third, it is important that Czechoslovakia was not in NATO or under the influence of the US; therefore it was logical to assume that they would not be politically restrained in selling military materials to Guatemala.

Fourth, Czechoslovakia was well known among Guatemalan communist and personal friends of Arbenz like José Manuel Pellecer (Congressman) and José Manuel Fortuny. Both had visited Czechoslovakia and were called friends of Czechoslovakia. Fortuny's visit in Prague was more important; he visited the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and some syndicate organisations.²⁹ He made important contacts while there and he probably persuaded Arbenz to try to purchase ammunition from Czechoslovakia.

It was also Fortuny who was dispatched by Arbenz to make such an enquiry.

Finally, there was one peculiar reason—Arbenz’s lack of understanding of the larger context of foreign relations in the world of the 1950’s. Sure, Arbenz was desperate but also very naive when he thought that purchasing arms from a country in the Soviet orbit would be tolerated by a US convulsing with fear from communism. He also miscalculated the reaction in Latin America when he thought that neighbouring states accept such a deal. Arbenz did not help himself. On the contrary, he produced arguments to his adversaries, who used the arms deal against him.

*Arms for
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Arranging the Arms Deal

Even when Arbenz had decided to purchase military materials from Czechoslovakia he could not be sure about the outcome. As indicated above, after WWII Czechoslovakia maintained a reserved position towards Guatemala. Arévalo had wanted to normalise diplomatic relations and arrange a new commercial treaty, however, Czechoslovakia did not respond to such efforts. Arbenz wanted the same because Czechoslovakia was an important ally for him in diversifying and ensuring the independence of Guatemala’s economy, but he approached Czechoslovakia more intensively and often invited representatives from the Czechoslovak mission in Mexico to Guatemala for dinners and discussions. Nevertheless, Czechoslovakia maintained its reserved position until mid-1953. It is legitimate to ask why.

Several explanations are apparent; first, the USSR did not fully endorse deeper Czechoslovak relations to Guatemala and Czechoslovak foreign relations were under heavy influence from Moscow. This is confirmed by the disgraceful absence of Czechoslovak representatives at the inauguration of Arbenz, despite being invited. The Czechoslovak Minister of Foreign Relations cancelled his attendance on learning that the Soviet Ambassador has excused himself.³⁰ Also, it is now known that Czechoslovak representatives in Mexico consulted every move with their Soviet counterparts.³¹ Thus, it is possible that the USSR under Stalin blocked the normalisation of the relations between Czechoslovakia and Guatemala. It may be only coincidence but the situation and the Czechoslovak posture towards Guatemala markedly

changed after Stalin's death on 05 March 1953 and his Czechoslovak follower, Klement Gottwald, on 14 March 1953. This is in line with the revisionist Cold War historiography which suggested that Stalin had no intention to spread communism. He did so only in Eastern Europe to create a buffer zone and better protect the USSR from possible attack. He did not want to collaborate with the countries of the Third World and certainly not in Latin America because he did not want to provoke the US in their own "backyard."³² This theory is also confirmed by Fortuny who observed larger flexibility of the USSR towards the Third World after the death of Stalin.³³

A second reason can be attributed to the February Revolution in Czechoslovakia. The overthrow of democracy and the emergence of the communist regime were accompanied by purges in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the beginning there was a lack of properly skilled officials, which meant that the ministry and offices abroad may have been full of amateurs incapable of normalising relations with Guatemala. When the younger generation took over (for example the new general secretary of the communist party Antonín Novotný was inaugurated in 1953 and soon became very passionate about almost everything about Guatemala) the situation changed.

In 1953 there was a breakthrough in the relations between Czechoslovakia and Guatemala because the former – all of a sudden – normalised relations with Guatemala and together they planned a new, deeper economic relationship to be formalised with the formation of a Czechoslovak Consulate in Guatemala City and a Guatemalan Mission to Prague. None of this was to bear fruit however, because Arbenz, surprised by the sudden change in Czechoslovak attitudes made the rushed decision to purchase arms from Czechoslovakia.

There had existed some enquiries in the era of Arévalo and Arbenz, during the dinners with Czechoslovak representatives had often asked about the possible sale of weapons but it was in late 1953 when the Guatemalan president presented his first serious request. He sent Fortuny, his closest friend and a man known in the communist world to Mexico City to the Czechoslovak Mission. Fortuny came to Mexico in November and his first steps were to the Soviet Embassy. There he provided information about Arbenz's troubles with military material and his efforts to purchase weapons from Czechoslovakia. Soviet Ambassador Antipov recommended that he arrange things directly with the Czechoslovaks. Fortuny then went to the Czechoslovak Legation:

Fortuny informed me that Guatemala is endangered by an invasion from the ODECA [Organisation of Central American States] countries ... Arbenz believes in the Guatemalan army and relies on the people but there is lack of weapons. Guatemala bought arms right before the war [WWII] or directly after it in Czechoslovakia, mainly rifles that are the main armament of the Guatemalan army. But there is a shortage of ammunition to the extent that the army received an order not to use live cartridges during exercise ... Therefore, Arbenz is using Fortuny as a middle man in the effort to obtain arms from us.³⁴

Fortuny was invited to Prague where he may present Arbenz's petition to the leading figures of the Czechoslovak government. He negotiated with Prime Minister Viliam Široký, President Antonín Zápotocký and with Minister of Defence Alexei Čepička.³⁵ The most important meeting was with Antonín Novotný, the new General Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSČ), on 14 November 1953:

(t)o the secretariat of the UV KSČ³⁶ came the General Secretary of the Guatemalan Labour Party comrade Manuel Fortuny. He was received by comrade Novotný in presence of comrade Baramová.³⁷ In the name of the Communist leadership and in the name of the President of the Guatemalan Republic, colonel Jakub Arvenz [sic] asked our party and government for a shipment of arms and ammunition for their army in the value of approximately two to two and a half million dollars ... It is necessary to give c. Fortuny an answer if we agree and in the case we do, he will give us the list of needed goods and it will be sent here an official representative of the [Guatemalan] government, the Minister of Agriculture, mister Alfonso Martinez who will settle the details.³⁸

The Czechoslovaks did not give a straight answer to Fortuny because they had to consult this issue with the Soviets. Novotný then sent a letter to the Central Committee of the Soviet Union Communist Party:

Comr.[ade] J. M. Fortuny is in Prague expecting our answer, but we anticipate that such thing we can decide only on the base of a mutual agreement with you, therefore we ask you to adopt an attitude in this matter.³⁹

Ultimately, the Czechoslovaks had two messages for Fortuny: they no longer possessed the ammunition he asked for, however they were willing to sell arms to Guatemala, so Arbenz should send Martínez to

settle the details.

Alfonso Martínez was another close friend of Arbenz. He was not a member of the communist party, but Arbenz trusted him enough to send him to Prague to arrange the purchase of weapons. He spent twenty days in Prague in early 1954. Sadly, there are no records of his negotiations with the Czechoslovak government about the weapons except for this short notice:

The business negotiation in Prague was managed truly in the spirit of mutual understanding and friendship. A. M. [Alfonso Martínez] proclaimed that for the first time he does not have to look for catches in the propositions of the second party like during the negotiations with English, American, French or Italian companies. Despite of the geographical distance and difference of the regime he felt that he was among real friends. That he stated in both interviews with c. Široký and in the negotiations with c. Dvořák.⁴⁰

Despite scant information about the talks themselves, the results are well known. The Czechoslovaks realised that they did not have the arms Fortuny had asked for, but came up with a solution. They decided to sell to Guatemala old German weapons that had been left in Czechoslovakia at the end of WWII and had been refurbished by the Czechoslovak army. The contents of the purchase were rifles, machine guns, grenades and also heavy weapons such as anti-tank cannons, anti-aircraft cannons and mortars; everything with corresponding ammunition. In total, the Czechoslovaks sent some 2000 tonnes of arms⁴¹ for an army of 12000 soldiers who should use them from 10 to 15 years in peacetime.⁴²

Weapons from Czechoslovakia as a Pretext for Invasion

As the Guatemalans were negotiating weapons from Czechoslovakia, the CIA and US State Department were carefully preparing their operation against Arbenz. Their first real test became the Pan-American Conference in Caracas. It was crucial that this conference approve the tabled anti-communist resolution, which could legitimise the operation in Guatemala. It was so important that even the Secretary of State Dulles travelled to Caracas in March and presented the resolution himself. In the end, it was approved, but with less enthusiasm that Dulles had anticipated. For John and Allen Dulles it was clear that operation PBSUCCESS needed tweaking in order to be more acceptable for Latin

America publics. Sadly for Arbenz, it was he who provided this boost.

The Dulles brothers were, by April 1954, so desperate to prove to the public that Guatemala was a communist country that they decided to make a clandestine operation and plant some cases of weapons on the Central American coast. They also prepared a propaganda campaign to persuade the public that these arms came from a Soviet submarine.⁴³ However their intentions failed because the press was simply disinterested in this story.⁴⁴

Therefore, when on 15 May 1954 a Swedish ship named *Alfhem* arrived at Puerto Barrios in Guatemala full of arms from Czechoslovakia it not only caused horrors but also relief for the Dulles brothers.⁴⁵ One CIA official called it a blessing in disguise.⁴⁶ On 16 May, Allen Dulles presided over a meeting of the Intelligence Advisory Committee where several officials from the State Department and the US Army were present and Dulles released his information about the arms and proclaimed that with so many weapons one can occupy the entirety of Central America up to the Panama Channel. A similar message was conveyed to the advisors of Eisenhower the next day. Unanimously, the supported Operation PBSUCCESS.⁴⁷

John Dulles delivered the opinion of the State Department on 17 May. In the memorandum it was noted that the arms shipment was part of a Soviet plan to conquer the Americas. He also exaggerated the quantity of the arms to imply that Guatemala could triple its army and conquer its neighbours.⁴⁸ The *Alfhem* incident also caused a great turmoil in the American press. Journalists began to write about the menace of communism in Guatemala and how the Guatemalan Army supported by the arms from the USSR could endanger the hemisphere, the Panama Canal and create a new Korea in America.⁴⁹ The *Washington Post* proclaimed that 'the threat of Communist imperialism is no longer academic; it has arrived.' The *New York Times* speculated that the communist weapons would travel on their way using 'secret jungle paths' to communist groups in other Central America countries. The same hysteric reactions appeared in the US Congress. Democratic congressman John McCormack argued that '(t)his cargo of arms is like an atom bomb planted in the rear of our backyard.' William C. Lan-taff thought that if 'Paul Revere were living today, he would view the landing the Red arms in Guatemala as a signal to ride and warn the Americas of the present acute danger of Communist infiltration in Latin America.'⁵⁰ On 19 May Eisenhower delivered a speech where he

stated that the arms could create a communist dictatorial regime in Guatemala.⁵¹

Things went from bad to worse for Arbenz as the other Latin American states piled on. On 19 May Nicaragua interrupted diplomatic relations with Guatemala. This was no surprise because the dictator, Somoza, was a regional ally of the US. Other reactions were more unexpected. Somoza organised a meeting of foreign ministers from Latin America to discuss the threat of communism in Guatemala. The first one who accepted was José Figueres, President of Costa Rica and, until then, a supporter of Arbenz. Another state, Cuba, mobilised its army, navy and police forces to face the communist threat. Haiti expelled two Guatemalan representatives. Costa Rica and Panama recalled their ambassadors from Guatemala – officially for ‘consultations.’⁵² Also Honduras, before the coming of *Alfhem* was reluctant to support the PBSUCCESS, signed a mutual security pact with the US.⁵³

Mexico changed its mind. It was one of the two states that did not support the resolution against Guatemala at Caracas. However President Ruiz Cortines, in an interview with US Ambassador White, expressed his disillusionment about the Guatemalan purchase of arms:

The President seemed very much impressed at the furtive way the shipment had been made and observed that if Guatemala could not get any arms from the United States or Mexico or another countries and needed arms for its own defence, it could have bought the armament in perfectly normal and above-board way but doing it as they had had naturally caused one to feel that the transaction was not just normal, proper one.⁵⁴

When White told the President about the extent of the military material brought to Guatemala, Cortines noted that such big transport is even more suspicious.⁵⁵

The arms shipment from Czechoslovakia provided the US with a much needed pretext for direct military actions in and against Guatemala. This shipment was used as evidence that Guatemala was a communist country and it assisted the US to legitimise their campaign in the eyes of Latin America governments. Consequently, the CIA gave the green light to a group of Guatemalan rebels in exile to invade their homeland. Between 17 and 18 June, rebel commander, Castillo Armas, supported by the US travelled from Honduras to Guatemala with 150

guerrilla fighters. After ten days of fighting the Guatemalan army had lost the will to fight and the deeply depressed Arbenz resigned to his post without consulting his cabinet.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The so-called Guatemalan Revolution presented one of the few examples of Czechoslovakia's direct involvement in Cold War Latin America. It was the military material shipped from Czechoslovakia that contributed to the end of the democratic experiment in Guatemala. It is true that it was made possible only thanks to the shift of the foreign policy of the USSR following the death of Stalin and the Soviet communist leadership approval, but it was left to the Czechoslovak government to arrange the deal. It was also the common commercial history between Czechoslovakia and Guatemala and the good name of Czechoslovak weapons in Latin America that attracted Guatemalan President Arbenz when he was seeking arms from beyond the US' sphere of influence.

The arms shipment from Czechoslovakia was a tragic decision for Arbenz as he became the architect of his own demise. His perpetual fear of US intervention and his naive approach to international relations during the Cold War forced him to pursue such a purchase; a purchase that was, in the end, used by the US – in a typical negative feedback cycle – as evidence of the communist danger in Guatemala. It also affected his position between the Latin America countries. Even when he tried to explain that Guatemala could buy arms elsewhere, the governments in Latin America found the quantity and the secret manner in which the arms were obtained deeply suspicious. Ultimately, nobody protested against the guerrilla invasion sponsored by the US and Arbenz found himself in international isolation, a point that continues to plague Guatemala's regional and international position today.

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Notes

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