

East Germany and Colombia:

A too-close relation?

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Introduction

For the German Democratic Republic (GDR), economic ties were a key factor in its diplomatic relations with Colombia in South America.¹ Both countries signed a Treaty of Exchange and Trade, in 1955, the GDR established additionally a Trade Mission in that country's capital, Bogotá, amidst the Cold War. In 1936, current President General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla visited arms factories in Hitler's Germany as a low-ranking officer. During the time of German territorial expansionism, Colombia also gained territories to the detriment of its neighbors Perú and Venezuela – latter in 1955, as President, General Rojas was strengthening his country's diplomatic ties to the GDR.

In 1959, members of Colombia's Parliament visited East Berlin and, subsequently, encouraged their government to establish official diplomatic ties to the GDR, an importer of Colombia's coffee and bananas (remarkably, bananas were usually a scarce product in the GDR internal market).² In exchange, Colombia imported machinery and other manufactured products from the GDR. Colombia, Argentina, and Brazil were East Germany's main trade partners in South America. In 1979, the GDR's Foreign Minister, Oskar Fischer, paid an official visit to Colombia. There were political consultations in Colombia with the visit in 1985 of the Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Bernhard Neugebauer, and in 1987 with Gerhardt Korth, Director for Latin American affairs in the Foreign Ministry.³

1979:

Corruption Scandals and the Visit of the GDR's Foreign Minister Oskar Fischer

Already since 1977, the mass media in Colombia criticized several biddings for public infrastructures in the Department Antioquia (Capital Medellín), which basically favored the GDR's offers to the detriment of other competitors, although most of the time, the quality of the GDR products did not reach the expected standards.⁴ The reason for these convenient negotiations was the 6,5 percent interest rate – lower than the international market's standard rate of 8 percent – that the GDR offered to finance those purchases. The reduced rate was part of trade agreements between both countries and a major reason that companies from other nations were very frequently excluded from those biddings and that the GDR was mostly favored.⁵

1 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1716/13 Republik Kolumbien. Außenminister Julio Londoño. Gesprächsempfehlungen.

2 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1718/13. Dossier. Bilaterale Beziehungen DDR-Kolumbien.

3 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 2347/13 Informationsmaterial. Beziehungen DDR-Kolumbien. Stand Juni 1988.

4 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1718/13. Solicitan investigar licitación. Para equipos de OO.PP., Salud y Educación, por valor de 3,6 Millones de dólares, El Colombiano, 08.01.1979.

5 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1718/13. Arenas, Ismael. Reabren Conflictiva Licitación Mundial, El Tiempo, 30.5.1979.

In the middle of those media scandals, the GDR's Foreign Minister Fischer visited Colombia in September 1979. He met with his counterpart Diego Uribe.⁶ Since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1973, the bilateral relations had been strengthening.⁷ Oskar Fischer's next stop was Nicaragua, which was ruled by the communist leader Daniel Ortega during that time.⁸ Three months before, Colombia's Foreign Minister Uribe had protested against US suggestions of military intervention in Nicaragua during a session of the Organization of American States (OAS). Colombia's current President Julio Turbay had visited the GDR as Senator in 1974.⁹ Now, he was hosting the GDR's Foreign Minister in the Presidential Palace. Fischer also met with the economic minister Cesar Gaviria, who would eventually serve as Colombia's President during the 1990–1994 term and later as General Secretary of the OAS.¹⁰

Foreign Minister Fischer used to visit Latin American countries on his way to the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) in New York.¹¹ Despite the aforementioned media scandals, the GDR enjoyed a good reputation in Colombia. This was the effort of several GDR Parliament Delegations that used to visit Colombia – visits during



The GDR's Foreign Minister Oskar Fischer with Colombia's President Julio Turbay in 1979; Source: MfAA ZR 1718/13

which Colombia's Communist Party (CCP) reinforced this good relation. Despite their ideology, Moscow and East Berlin used to support states that persecuted communists, for example, General Velasco Alvarado in Perú¹² or Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Colombia was not the exception. During the visit of 1979, Fischer held a speech at the University Jorge Tadeo Lozano, founded by his counterpart Diego Uribe himself. Fischer declared that the GDR was one of the ten most industrialized countries in the world despite having been an agricultural region of the former German Empire (1871–1945). He said that the GDR was producing even more than the whole of Germany in 1936.¹³

⁶Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1718/13, Pressemitteilung der Außenminister Kolumbiens und der DDR, 21.09.1979.

⁷ Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1718/13, Colombia y la RDA se identifican ..., El Espectador, 22.09.1979.

⁸ Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1718/13, Gespräche O. Fischers in Kolumbien beendet, ND, Freiheit Halle, 22.09.1979.

⁹ Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1718/13, Kolumbiens Außenpolitik festigt die Unabhängigkeit, 18.09.1979.

¹⁰ Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1718/13, Wolf, Dieter, Kolumbiens Staatsoberhaupt empfing DDR-Außenminister, 21.09.1979.

¹¹Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1718/13, Mayor intercambio con Colombia busca la RDA, El Tiempo, 21.09.1979.

¹²Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1718/13, Hans-Jürgen Fink, Staatliches Komitee für Rundfunk, Die DDR-Außenpolitik in Lateinamerika, Redaktion Monitor, 21.09.1979.

¹³Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1783/13, Vortrag des DDR-Außenministers Oskar Fischer an der Universität „Jorge Tadeo Lozano“ in Bogotá am 20.09.1979.

Colombia was a key country for the GDR's diplomacy with its 3,3 percent of South America's industrial production. East-Germany was considering using this nation to expand the Peace Policy of the Warsaw Pact“ in the neighboring countries – for instance, by sponsoring the nationalization of foreign companies (in fact Venezuela had nationalized the oil and iron industries in 1975). On the other hand, President Julio Turbay, whose ancestors immigrated from Lebanon to Colombia, officially recognized, for the first time, the right of Palestine to its own territory. According to GDR reports, the East Berlin diplomacy was conscious of a certain anti-American“ attitude in Colombia's population.¹⁴ Two months after Fischer's visit, both countries signed an agreement of cooperation between their main state-owned radio stations (Staatliches Komitee für Rundfunk beim Ministerrat der DDR and Colombia's Radio Difusora Nacional).¹⁵

Colombia's Approach to Communist Countries

Despite Colombia's official anti-communist ideology, the GDR, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania and the Soviet Union (USSR) participated in the industrial yearly exhibition in Bogotá with their own stands. Further evidence of cooperation with communist governments is that the USSR had established diplomatic relations (without embassies) with Colombia already in 1935. Moreover, Colombia criticized Cuba's 1964 exclusion from the Organization of American States.¹⁶



Foreign Minister Oskar Fischer and the Head of the GDR's Liberal Party, Dr. Manfred Gerlach (left), in talks 1979 with Colombia's Economic Minister, future President and General Secretary of the OAS Cesar Gaviria (right).

Source: MfAA ZR 1718/13.

gilio Barco, an engineer who had been Ambassador to the US and whose wife was a US-citizen.¹⁸ Barco appointed Colonel Julio Londoño to the position of Foreign Minister. Colonel Londoño was a hardliner concerning the boundary conflict with neighboring Venezuela, whose mass media labeled him as a highly controversial Minister. He

Although a traditional intermediary country between the US and Latin America,¹⁷ Colombia had plans to strengthen political ties to communist countries from 1986 onward. This had the acquiescence of that time's newly elected President Vir-

¹⁴ Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 2334/13, Länderkonzeption Kolumbien. September 1980.

¹⁵ Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 2347/13, Informationsmaterial Republik Kolumbien, Beziehungen DDR-Kolumbien, Stand Juli 1990, Abteilung 5 UA 53 Referat 531, Länderkurzinformation Republik, Kolumbien.

¹⁶ Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1720/13, Abt. Lateinamerika, Dossier zwischen den sozialistischen Ländern (außer DDR) und der Republik Kolumbien (Stand: November 1978), Berlin 11.12.1978.

¹⁷ Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1718/13, Pressemitteilung der Minister für Auswertige Angelegenheiten, 21.09.1979.

¹⁸ Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 2335/13, Präsidentschaftswahl in Kolumbien.

aimed at pursuing the protectionist foreign policy of former President Turbay (1978–1982) when he was Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs – for instance, by criticizing the US’s repressive anti-drugs policy since they thought that the US was intervening in the domestic affairs of Colombia.¹⁹ In contrast, Londoño was enjoying a good reputation in communist countries: for example, the GDR’s Foreign Minister Fischer received a very positive description of his new Colombian counterpart, and the Cuban comrades “agreed to state publicly that Colonel Londoño helped decisively in the defense of Cuban interests in the region. Thus, Colombia became one of the closest political dialogue partners for East Germany. The GDR’s Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Bernhard Neugebauer reported about Colonel Londoño to his superior Oskar Fischer: During your official visit of 1979 in Colombia, the GDR issued a reciprocal invitation that has not yet been concreted. Foreign Minister Londoño has shown interest since ... 1986 to take this invitation seriously”.²⁰

Comparable to the Hugo Chavez conspiracy in Venezuela that started in the early 1980s, several Colombian nationalist military officers began that time to gather, one year after the visit of the GDR Foreign Minister. But they did not influence the Colombian political system.²¹ At the time (1980) the hardliner Colonel Londoño was leading negotiations without results to set the sea boundary to Venezuela, representing his country on behalf of the Foreign Ministry, where he started his diplomatic career as a delegate of the Armed Forces. Colonel Londoño was an autodidactic specialist on international law and Venezuela’s border issue. In 1986, he was appointed Foreign Minister and had been serving as Ambassador to Panama, then ruled by the dictator General Manuel Noriega.²² A US-led military intervention would topple Noriega just a few years later in 1989 because of his participation in drug-trafficking.

There are further traces of a closer relationship between Colombia and the communist nations. In 1986, a USSR delegation was in Bogotá for political consultations under the leadership of Vladimir Kasimirov. He represented the Latin America division of the USSR’s Foreign Ministry.²³ A few months later, in April 1986, Dr. Günther Blum – the first GDR Ambassador to Argentina –, Max Zeuske of the University Wilhelm-Pieck among others founded the GDR-Colombia Friendship Society in Berlin.²⁴ Also in April 1986, President Barco and Colonel Londoño received Alexandru Mokanu, a leader of the Supreme Soviet. The meeting lasted for over two hours.²⁵ Two months later, and contrasting to the two-hour talk with the aforementioned Soviet guest, President Barco had a twelve-minute conversation with US President Ronald Reagan at the end of the annual meeting of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Apparently, it was the US that took



*Colonel Julio Londoño,
Colombia's Foreign
Minister and good
friend of the GDR.*

*Source: PAAA MfAA
ZR 1716/13.*

19 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 2336/13, Höltge, Lass: Telegramm an B. Neugebauer, Bogotá 25.01.1990.

20 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1716/13, Neugebauer, Bernhard: Schreiben an Oskar Fischer, 01.09.1989.

21 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 2334/13, Länderkonzeption Kolumbien, September 1980.

22 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1716/13, Kurzbiografie des Außenministers Londoño.

23 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1714/13, Vermerk über Gespräche in der Sowjetischen Botschaft, Bogotá, 10.02.1986.

24 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 2332/13, Kray, C-Telegramm an Gen Brasch, an ZK und an Dr. Korth, 11.04.1986.

25 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1714/13, Löhn, Heinz, Vermerk über eine Information des Botschafters der UdSSR in Kolumbien Gen. Romanov, zu Gesprächen des Stellvertreters des Obersten Sowjets, Alexandru Mokanu, mit Kolumbiens Staatspräsident Dr. Barco sowie mit dem Außenminister Londoño, Bogota den 13.08.1986.

the initiative for the gathering, since President Barco was initially not in favor of such a meeting. During the UN General Assembly, President Barco insisted on his country's re-establishment of diplomatic ties with Cuba. Colombia could not stay in the same group with the dictators Augusto Pinochet (Chile) and Alfredo Stroessner (Paraguay), both of whom were heads of the only Latin American countries without diplomatic relations to Cuba.²⁶ President Barco was not necessarily pro-Reagan, despite his links to the US.²⁷

The Friendship of Foreign Minister Londoño with the Communist Bloc

The GDR considered Colonel Londoño a consistent representative of Latin American interests on behalf of the US²⁸. According to the GDR Ambassador to Colombia, Heinz Loehn, Colonel Londoño provoked "an invitation for himself to Moscow for political consultations in January 1987 during a meeting with the Soviet Ambassador."²⁹ A new delegation of the Supreme Soviet visited the Department Goajira in Colombia – on the border with Venezuela – at the end of March 1987, almost four months before a very dangerous military escalation between Colombia and Venezuela. This escalation had been due to a Colombian warship patrolling waters in the Gulf of Venezuela – near the area that the Soviet delegates visited – that both Colombia and Venezuela claimed as their own. Previously, the Soviets had conversations with President Barco and Foreign Minister Londoño and declared their opposition to any foreign military intervention in communist Nicaragua.³⁰

Exactly on the day that the Soviet delegation arrived in Colombia, on March 24, 1987, the GDR Ambassador Loehn confirmed in a letter to Foreign Minister Londoño that his counterpart Fischer was visiting Colombia for a second time since 1979. Fischer's visit would have taken place³¹ 7 to



The GDR Embassy in Bogotá. Source: PAAA MfAA ZR 2343/13

9 September 1987, one month after the beginning of the aforementioned military escalation in the Gulf of Venezuela.³² But the GDR Minister had to cancel the visit last-minute due to pre-existing obligations.³³ In contrast to that programmed visit of the East-

26 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 2336/13, Kray, Paul, Telegramm an Korth /Sieber, USA-Besuch Barcos, Bogotá 3.10.1986.

27 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 2332/13, Löhn, Heinz, Schreiben an G. Korth, Abt. Lateinamerika Bogotá, 8.12.1986.

28 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1716/13, Republik Kolumbien, Außenminister Julio Londoño Gesprächsempfehlungen.

29 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 2332/13, Löhn, Heinz, Schreiben an B. Neugebauer, Bogotá, den 07.01.1987.

30 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1720/13, Declaración Conjunta Soviético-Colombiana sobre la Visita de la Delegación del Soviet Supremo a Colombia.

31 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1716/13, Londoño, Julio, Schreiben an Heinz Löhn, Bogotá 10.04.1987 and PAAA MfAA ZR 1720/13.

32 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1716/13, Löhn, Heinz, Telegramm an Neugebauer und Korth, Bogotá, 21.04.1987.

33 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 2337/13, Neugebauer, B., Telegramm an Botschafter Kray, Bogotá, 30.06.1987.

German Foreign Minister to Colombia, the West-German Foreign Minister, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, visited Venezuela and commemorated during his speech of April 8, 1987, the beginning of the relations between Venezuela and the Hanseatic Cities Hamburg, Bremen and Lübeck in 1837.³⁴ Despite this, Colonel Londoño visited two other communist countries in June 1987: Czechoslovakia and Poland, where Londoño signed a Cultural Agreement.³⁵

1987: Military Conflict with Venezuela in the Gulf of Venezuela

In July 1986, Venezuela's Ambassador to the GDR, Rodolfo Molina, visited the Wilhelm-Pieck-University in Rostock at the GDR's Baltic Sea coast because he was searching for documents about the border issue between the GDR and West Germany in the Bay of Lübeck. Molina had taken an interest in this issue because it was comparable to the borderline controversy between Colombia and Venezuela in the Gulf of Venezuela.³⁶ On August 9, 1987, the Colombian Armed Forces sent a missile corvette equipped with a helicopter to patrol a disputed area in the Gulf of Venezuela. This occurred one year after the talk between the Delegate of the Soviet Supreme Alexandru Moku, President Barco and Foreign Minister Londoño;³⁷ eight months after the self-initiated invitation of Colonel Londoño to Moscow; two months after Colonel Londoño's visit to Poland and Czechoslovakia and four months after the visit of the Soviet Delegation to the Department Goajira at the Gulf of Venezuela, the geographic point at which the military escalation took place. Colombia and Venezuela had not demarcated the boundary in their waters due to discrepancies after various negotiations, one of which, as previously mentioned, the GDR's good friend, Colonel Londoño, had conducted in 1980. Venezuela, with its lesser military experience, sent all armament possible to the Gulf of Venezuela to deter the larger neighboring country from war. Around one million Colombians were living in Venezuela as immigrants at the time, which posed the threat of cooperating with a possible Colombian military action. The GDR Ambassador to Bogotá, Heinz Loehn, declared about the military escalation of August 1987 that Colombia kept the beginning of the conflict away from the mass media [...] There were official declarations only when President Barco decided, to avoid a military conflict, to withdraw the Colombian warship. As I informed, the issue was provoked [...] But Colombia reached its aim of internationalizing the affair [...] In political circles there is a whisper [...] that Foreign Minister Londoño acts as a *Ministro Delegatorio* – that means, he takes on functions of the President“.³⁸

One month after the beginning of the conflict of August 9, 1987, the GDR Foreign Minister Fischer was supposed to be in Colombia for his second visit since 1979, which did not materialize. According to Norbert Walkowitz of the GDR Embassy in Colombia, the Liberal Party of Colonel Londoño supported a radical solution to the border problem with Venezuela.³⁹ Meanwhile in Berlin, Gerhard Korth, the Director for Latin American

34 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 2254/13, Presse und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, Nr. 36, S. 301, Besuch des Außenministers in Venezuela und Costa Rica, Bonn, 14. April 1987.

35 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 2332/13, Kray, Paul, Schreiben an G. Korth, Bogotá, den 29.6.1987.

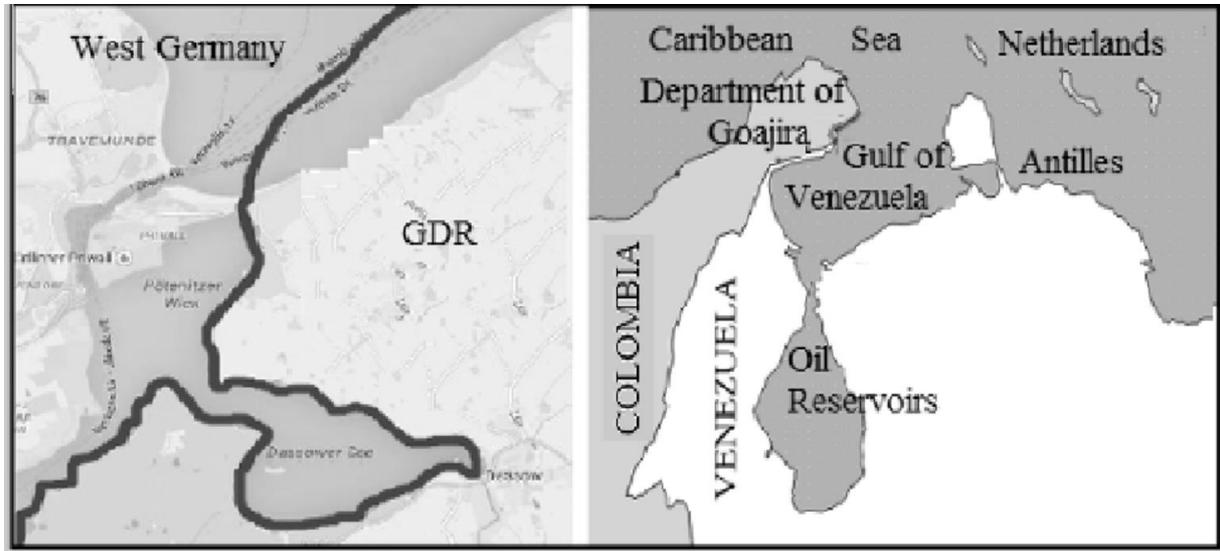
36 Vgl. PAA A, MfAA, ZR 2158/13, Prof. Dr. sc. K-Ch. Göthner, WPU Rostock, Gesprächsvermerk über den Besuch des Botschafters Molina D. am 3.7.1986 an der Sektion Lateinamerikawissenschaften, 18.7.1986.

37 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1714/13, Löhn, Heinz, Vermerk über eine Information des Botschafters der UdSSR in Kolumbien Gen. Romanov, zu Gesprächen des Stellvertreters des Obersten Sowjets, Gen. Moku, mit Kolumbiens Staatspräsidenten Dr. Barco sowie mit dem Außenminister Londoño, Bogotá, den 13.08.1986.

38 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 2332/13, Löhn, Heinz, Schreiben an G. Korth, Bogotá, den 17.09.1987.

39 Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1721/13, Walkowitz, Norbert, Einschätzung des gegenwärtigen Standes des Grenzkonflikts zwischen Kolumbien und Venezuela am Golf von Venezuela, 05.03.1985.

affairs in the Foreign Ministry, had a conversation with Colombia's Chargé d'Affaires two days after Colombia withdrew the warship from the Gulf of Venezuela. Mr. Korth declared his concern about the conflict and pledged a peaceful solution.⁴⁰ Some months later, Colonel Londoño canceled his visit to West Germany. He was supposed to meet West Germany's Federal President, Richard von Weizsäcker, in West-Berlin, a city that



Left: The boundary between East and West Germany on the Bay of Lübeck that served as a model to Venezuela's proposal of a border line directly on the shore. Right: The Department of Goajira in Colombia at the Gulf of Venezuela, the place that the Soviet Delegation visited only a few months before the military escalation between Colombia and Venezuela in August 1987.

the GDR rejected as belonging to West Germany.⁴¹

Conclusion

For many reasons, Venezuela was not successful in setting its boundaries with its neighboring countries. Exceptions were the negotiations with the US (Puerto Rico), in which Venezuela gained maritime territory, and the delimitation with Brazil that recognized the allotment of some squared kilometers to Venezuela. Both of these cases occurred in the 1970s when Venezuela's democracy was flourishing. But regarding former British Guyana and Colombia, Venezuela's diplomacy was ineffective. At the end of the 19th century, the British Empire had annexed Venezuela's territory in the Essequibo River, in Venezuela's East, after a controversial trial. In fact, the US and Britain had been ready to go to war because of this issue.⁴² After its independence from Great Britain, the Cooperative Republic of Guyana was established in 1966. As Cuba's new ally, Guyana inherited the annexed Venezuelan territory and kept claiming it as its own. Cuba even encouraged successfully his good friend Venezuela's nationalist" President Hugo Chavez to neglect the territorial issue with Guyana. Additionally, Venezuela had lost a large area west of the Orinoco River to Colombia after a treaty in 1941. During that time of World War II, Germany, Japan, and Italy were expanding their territories in Europe, Africa, and Asia. Simultaneously, Colombia was expanding its territory in South America (between 1922 and 1941), becoming a riverside country at the strategic Amazon and

⁴⁰Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1714/13, Nitsche, Peter, Vermerk über ein Gespräch des Leiters der Abt. Lateinamerika G. Korth mit dem Geschäftsträger a.i. Kolumbiens Adolfo Cuentas am 21.8.1987, Berlin, den 25.08.1987.

⁴¹ Vgl. PAAA MfAA ZR 1716/13, Löhn, Telegramm an B. Neugebauer und G. Korth, Bogotá, 14.01.1988.

⁴² Desmond Morton: A short History of Canada. Third Revised Edition, Toronto 1997, p. 136.

Orinoco rivers, to the detriment of Perú and Venezuela. Colombia's President, General Rojas had visited some weapon factories in Hitler's Germany in 1936 as a low-ranking officer, and 1955 – as President – he signed a trade agreement with the GDR. Curiously, General Rojas showed repeatedly apparent respect for both German dictatorships of the 20th century.

The image of Colombia in Venezuela was that of a country of serious diplomacy with excellent relations to the US and an experienced military. In contrast, Venezuela saw itself as a less experienced country regarding its diplomacy and military. It was almost unknown in Venezuela that the controversial Colonel Julio Londoño, could have had such harmonious ties to the USSR and the GDR. As a hardliner in the sea-border issue, he presented a real challenge to Venezuela's diplomacy and military. The sensation during the military escalation in 1987 was that Venezuela was isolated in its face-off with a more experienced country – especially militarily – that had fairly won" Venezuelan territory in 1941 and was backed by its traditional ally: the US, a country with which Colombia supposedly cooperated in combatting international drug trafficking.

The declassified documents of the GDR diplomacy, however, show that the relations between the US President Reagan and his counterpart Barco were not as close as believed, but rather that Colombia criticized the US' repressive drug policy, and Colombia had close ties to the Communist Bloc and even to Panama's dictator Manuel Noriega, who was captured by the US after a military intervention in 1989 because of his involvement in drug trafficking issues. Not many people could have imagined that, in March 1987, there would be a delegation of the Supreme Soviet some kilometers away from Venezuela, where a military escalation occurred only four months later. Additionally, only a few people were aware that the GDR Foreign Minister Oskar Fischer was supposed to arrive in Colombia almost one month after that provoked military escalation with Venezuela started. It could have represented a symbolic gesture of a GDR approval of Colombian strategy to gain maritime territory and destabilize Venezuela, a country that had good relations with Washington and Bonn and whose state-owned oil company, *Petróleos de Venezuela S.A.*, was purchasing oil refineries at that time in the US and West Germany, the rival countries of the USSR and the GDR respectively.