

# SOVIET HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES\*

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INASMUCH AS SCIENTIFIC CRITICISM AND POLEMIC ARE OF THE GREATEST significance for the development of every branch of historical science, including, of course, the study of Latin America, I should like to offer a few thoughts on this subject.

\* Translated by Russell H. Bartley from the final chapter of M. S. Al'perovich's recent study, *Sovetskaia istoriografiia stran Latinskoï Ameriki* [Soviet historiography of the Latin American countries] (Moscow: Izd-vo "Nauka," 1968), pp. 72-79. The translation has been edited by the author and is published here with his consent. The translator, in turn, has found it stylistically necessary to deviate from the Russian text at a number of points. The resultant changes, however, in no way alter the sense of the original statements. The reader, for his part, is reminded that Al'perovich here addresses himself primarily to Soviet scholars. While these remarks also concern American scholars and scholarship, no effort has been made to shape them to the sensitivities of an American readership. The entire final chapter of Al'perovich's study, together with another historiographical essay by the same author, appeared recently in Spanish translation under the title, *Historiografía Soviética Latinoamericanista* (Caracas: Publicaciones de la Escuela de Historia, Facultad de Humanidades y Educación, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1969).

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Al'perovich has also collaborated in the preparation and editing of the following surveys: *Ocherki istorii Braziliï* [Essays in the History of Brazil] (Moscow, 1962); *Ocherki istorii Chili* [Essays in the History of Chile] (Moscow, 1967); and *Ocherki novoi i noveishei istorii Meksiki 1810-1945* [Essays in the Modern and Recent History of Mexico, 1810-1845] (Moscow, 1960).

Soviet historians of Latin America, just as scholars in other fields, attach great significance to the views of specialists everywhere—be they their colleagues in the USSR or abroad; be they Marxists or non-Marxists. Even if we hold different philosophical and methodological positions than our opponents, we are always ready to lend an attentive ear to critical observations. Disagreement with the world view or general historical conception of one or another of our foreign critics by no means prevents us from recognizing the correctness of his views on given problems, provided that the viewpoint in question is convincingly argued and scientifically demonstrated. Even though we reject any questioning of the basic conceptions advanced by us, we are still able to accept admonitions and to seek a kernel of reason in otherwise totally inadmissible criticisms.

Hence, we, as Soviet scholars, feel that if the insulting tone occasionally used by some of our critics is abandoned, then a part of the basic assertions which they make is in some measure valid. It appears in particular that the reproaches sometimes directed at Soviet historians in the sense that many of their works carry a definite mark of sketchiness, of cliché, of an insufficiently differentiated approach to different countries and social phenomena, of stylistic dullness and uniformity, and so on, are in a number of cases true and without a doubt merit attention.

Of course, all of these shortcomings arise from suitable causes and, in the first place, from the fact that the study of Latin America is one of the youngest branches of Soviet historical science. Unfortunately, the field does not yet dispose of an adequate number of qualified specialists, nor does it have long-standing scientific traditions. This explains a great deal, particularly the fact that scientific debates among Latin Americanists occur relatively less often than among many of their colleagues who study other historical problems.

Apropos of this, it should be noted that it is sometimes asserted abroad, with absolutely no foundation, that in general Soviet scholarship on Latin America is devoid of differing evaluations or viewpoints on any given problem. This assertion, of course, in no way corresponds to reality. As seen from our modest book, "Soviet Historiography of the Latin American Countries,"<sup>1</sup> scientific debates, arguments and polemics are sustained in the USSR on a series of problems in Latin American history. But it is essential to keep in mind that, because of a lack of scientific specialists, the number of researchers studying any, even important and significant problems, is still extremely limited, and it very often happens that an exceedingly complex and important question is studied by a single specialist alone. It is natural that such a situation, symptomatic of temporary growing pains, so to say, in no way favors the elaboration of diverse approaches and evaluations. One can be certain, however, that as Latin American studies are expanded in the USSR, debates on current and controversial problems will play an ever greater role.

Moreover, one cannot but note that many criticisms directed at Soviet Latin Americanists from abroad do not, to our view, benefit science, nor do they favor the elimination of those shortcomings which undoubtedly exist. At the same time, they disorient foreign readers who are unable to familiarize themselves firsthand with the content of criticized works. This is explained by the fact that observations of this sort do not comply with the elementary requisites of scientific polemic.

It seems to us that criticism proves useful and constructive only when it is of a fully objective and comprehensive nature, absolutely honest, devoid of all preconception and tendentiousness; when it is, in short, specific, reasoned and conclusive. In the contemporary world, where there exist different social systems and where a sharp class and ideological struggle is taking place, scientific polemic can hardly be productive if scholars of different persuasions and views are going to perceive their task solely in terms of "exposing" their opponents or ideological adversaries as adherents to an alien world view. In order to demonstrate the erroneousness of any given scientific conception, one must not label its author "Marxist" or "anti-Marxist," but rather present persuasive arguments which refute his point of view and specifically show wherein lies its incorrectness.

In this regard, foreign critics of Soviet works on the history of Latin America do not always act in such a manner. Unfortunately, specific objections and an essentially serious debate of issues are often replaced by general discussions about the fact, they say, that all of these works are written from a Marxist position; that their content and conclusions are subordinated exclusively to political ends and tied to current problems of the contemporary age; that Soviet Latin Americanists seek by means of their investigations to promote the triumph of communism throughout the world; that in their scientific activities they are governed by the decisions of the twentieth and other congresses of the CPSU, by documents of the international communist movement, and so on and so forth.

But in fact, to confront (directly or indirectly) Soviet scholars with this sort of "accusation" is to force an open door. For do we really hide the fact that we are Marxists and that we consider it our task to promote the achievement of a great goal—the triumph of world communism? Is it really unnatural that the decisions of the highest governing organs of the communist party and of international communist meetings constitute important reference points for communists and for people who share their ideas? Is a growing interest in the historical past of those countries where, in our times, there unfolds a powerful revolutionary movement and there occur profound social shocks and other important changes really unnatural? It goes without saying, however, that in studying the history of the Latin American countries, by no means do we attempt to mold it forcibly into some predetermined scheme of the world

historical order; rather, on the basis of facts, we try to reconstruct an objective picture of the historical development of countries, such a picture being indispensable for the explanation and correct interpretation of contemporary events. Only a profound, comprehensive investigation and scientific analysis of the salient features of the previous development of any given country make it possible to understand completely the essential processes which are going on there today and to give a sound prognosis for the future. In this sense, of course, history and the present are closely linked together. But the study of history is in no way subordinated to political considerations; rather, to the contrary, the objective analysis of the historical past constitutes the scientific basis of contemporary politics.

It seems to us, therefore, that our foreign opponents ought not to reduce scientific polemic to a persistent underscoring of the methodological aims of Soviet Latin Americanists and of their ideological motives; rather it would be more expedient to direct such polemic to the essential questions and around specific problems of Latin American history, should the elucidation of these questions and problems provide grounds for debate.

The patently biased, one-sided approach of some foreign critics to the historical works on Latin America published in the USSR arouses decided objections. How is it possible, for example, to agree with J. G. Oswald's assertion that Soviet works on the history of Mexico published in the 60's actually differ little in level from the works of the 20's?<sup>2</sup> Our own historiographical writings on the study of Latin America in the USSR, and particularly of Mexico, graphically testify to the groundlessness of this statement.<sup>3</sup> In passing, Thomas P. Thornton, compiler of the volume *The Third World in Soviet Perspective*, who is in no way disposed to overrate the quality of Soviet literature on the problems of Latin America, Asia and Africa, nevertheless notes that the level of scientific output published since the mid-50's is much higher than that published in previous years.<sup>4</sup> Even Oswald himself, in his latest article, recognizes "important changes which have taken place in Soviet literature on Latin America" over the past decade.<sup>5</sup>

It should be observed that no one can give an accurate, comprehensive appraisal of Soviet scholarship on Latin America by arbitrarily seizing from among existing scientific works the first publications encountered, passing over in silence others of far greater significance. Thus E. B. Richards, enumerating the books about Latin America published in the USSR since 1957, fails to note many important monographs and survey works, yet under the rubric of books he brings in the titles of a series of popular brochures, abstracts of candidates' dissertations, and so forth.<sup>6</sup> Further, in criticizing two works by Soviet authors on the development of Marxism and of the labor movement in the Latin American countries, he states that their basic theses are also typical of many other

works, which he subsequently lists. In this extensive list, however, one finds primarily works bearing no relationship to the stated theme, and even articles by foreign authors published in the journal *Problems of Peace and Socialism*, issued, as is known, in Prague (Czechoslovakia).<sup>7</sup>

In a collection of statements by different historians published in the US on the Monroe doctrine,<sup>8</sup> the "Soviet viewpoint" is illustrated by an excerpt from S. A. Gonionskii's brief article, "The Unburied Corpse of the Monroe Doctrine,"<sup>9</sup> which treats not so much of the doctrine itself as of its application and contemporary articulation. Meanwhile, in 1959 a detailed monograph was published by the Soviet scholar N. N. Bolkhovitinov, in which light is thrown on the origin, nature and historical significance of the Monroe doctrine and on other related questions.<sup>10</sup> Yet, for some reason, the compiler of the collection chooses to ignore this work, even though it is fairly well known in the US.<sup>11</sup>

Still another example of extremely loose treatment of facts is an article by J. G. Oswald that came out in 1965 and in which considerable space is given to polemicizing with Soviet historian L. IU. Slėzkin, who, a short time before, had published an answer to a previous article by Oswald.<sup>12</sup> Oswald accuses Slėzkin of ascribing to him a view of the Mexican historian Ortega y Medina. But the sentence in question is given in Oswald's article with neither quotation marks nor a reference to the source,<sup>13</sup> so that naturally it is perceived by the reader as belonging to the author. At the same time, while it contains certain of Ortega y Medina's expressions, its general idea is totally different. Ortega y Medina states that to his view foreign authors—Soviet and North American—consider that the Mexican revolution cannot serve as a model for Spanish America.<sup>14</sup> Oswald ascribes this thesis to Soviet historiography. The question is, just who has distorted whose idea?

One could cite still other examples of an analogous sort, but this is hardly necessary.

In demanding objectivity and honesty of critics abroad, we must at the same time recognize that our own criticisms of bourgeois historians have not infrequently fallen short of the mark. It is most urgent, therefore, to increase the exactness, conclusiveness and scientific level of this criticism.

The response abroad to Soviet works on the history of Latin America, especially their favorable evaluation by progressive historians, testifies to the fact that, despite existing deficiencies, Soviet scholarship on Latin America is coming into its own internationally. Without running the risk of exaggeration, it can be said that in volume of published scientific scholarship in this field, the USSR lags behind only the US (not counting, of course, the Latin American countries themselves). Yet it must be recognized that this quantitative lag is still very substantial. As for the qualitative side of the matter, Soviet scholarship on Latin America is favorably distinguished by its methodological, ideo-

logical and theoretical level, as well as by its successful elaboration of a scientific periodization of the history of the Latin American countries and of such problems as their socio-economic development, the class struggle, the formation of nations, and the national-liberation movement.

In recent times, the study of Latin American history in the USSR has acquired a more concrete and profound nature, and the scientific level of research has been raised. However, along with the obvious achievements and the relative improvement of the situation in this branch of our historical science there still exist many gaps and unresolved problems.

For Latin America is a vast continent constituting one of the principal areas of the national-liberation movement; it comprises more than twenty states (not counting the numerous American, English, French and Dutch colonies), with a population amounting to some 250 million persons. Considering these proportions, the number of published works, especially monographs, does not yet correspond to the growing demands. Many important problems of the modern and recent history of the Latin American countries have hardly been researched. Questions relating to the historical fortunes of the native Indian population have been only feebly raised. General surveys of the history of such major countries as Venezuela, Colombia and Peru are lacking. The history of Guatemala, Nicaragua and the other countries of Central America, Ecuador, Bolivia, Uruguay, Guiana, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Puerto Rico and the other islands of the West Indies is scarcely studied at all.

A further refinement of research on the history of Latin America is exceedingly desirable. At a certain stage in the development of Soviet historiography of the Latin American countries, the composite study of given problems on a continent-wide scale was inevitable, primarily because of the inadequate treatment of these problems in Marxist literature. Of course, such general themes are needed even at present, but the broad statement of a problem, while entirely natural and justifiable in a number of cases, conceals within itself the notorious danger of sketchiness. For each of the Latin American countries has its own historical peculiarities which require special analysis in each individual case.

An immediate task of Soviet historians is the preparation of general surveys, first on the history of all the major states of Latin America, and, in the longer run, of those which remain. By outlining common features of the historical development of the Latin American countries, by revealing general trends and characterizing their effects, historians must show in what specific forms they have manifested themselves in connection with the different historical fortunes of peoples and states.

The study of the historical preconditions, course and nature of the popular revolution in Cuba and its influence on other Latin American countries, as

well as the struggle for national independence of the peoples of the young states (Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Guiana) and of the colonies (Puerto Rico and other islands of the Caribbean) is of great import.

The successes achieved in the study of the historical past of the Latin American countries are, of course, still exceedingly modest. However, they testify to the fact that research on the history of Latin America is beginning to occupy a legitimate place among the many other questions of world and national history on which Soviet scholars are engaged.

## NOTES

1. Al'perovich, *Sovetskaia istoriografiia stran Latinskoï Ameriki*, pp. 17–64. [Indeed, scholarly polemic among Soviet Latin Americanists has not yet developed to any significant degree. Historiographical problems which have elicited divergent views include the social content of Latin American independence, the nature of tsarist responses to the independence movement in Spanish America, and periodization of the Cuban revolution. There are also conflicting views on I. V. Kozorov's analyses of the Mayan writing system. Independence-period polemic has centered primarily on the writings of the late Vladimir Mikhailovich Miroshchinskii (1900–1942), regarded by Russian scholars today as the initiator of serious Soviet scholarship in Latin American history. Their author having passed from the scene, these pioneering contributions to Soviet historiography of Latin America can now be criticized with relative impunity—R.H.B.]
2. J. Gregory Oswald, "México en la historiografía soviética," *Historia Mexicana*, XIV, núm. 4 (abril–junio 1965), 698.
3. Al'perovich, *Sovetskaia istoriografiia*. See also *idem*, "Izuchenie istorii Latinskoï Ameriki v Sovetskom Soiuze. (Kratkii obzor)" [The Study of Latin American History in the Soviet Union. (A Short Review)], in *Latinskaia Amerika v prošlom i nastoiashchem* [Latin America Past and Present] (ed., V. V. Vol'skii *et al.*; Moscow, 1960), pp. 450–463, and *idem*, "Izuchenie istorii stran Latinskoï Ameriki" [The Study of the History of the Latin American Countries], in *Sovetskaia istoricheskaia nauka ot XX k XXII s'ezdu KPSS. Istoriia zapadnoi Evropy i Ameriki* [Soviet Historical Science from the 20th to the 22nd Congress of the CPSU. The History of Western Europe and America] (ed., N. M. Druzhinin *et al.*; Moscow, 1963), pp. 151–170.
4. Thomas Perry Thornton, ed., *The Third World in Soviet Perspective. Studies by Soviet Writers on the Developing Areas* (Princeton, 1964), pp. xi–xii.
5. J. Gregory Oswald, "Contemporary Soviet Research on Latin America," *Latin American Research Review*, I, No. 2 (Spring 1966), 78.
6. Edward B. Richards, "Marxism and Marxist Movements in Latin America in Recent Soviet Historical Writing," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, XLV, No. 4 (November 1965), 578–579.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 582. An English-language edition of this journal is published under the title *World Marxist Review* (London and Ottawa).
8. Armin Rappaport, ed., *The Monroe Doctrine* (New York, 1964).
9. S. A. Gonionskii, "Nepogrebennyi trup doktriny Monro," *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'* [International Life], No. 10 (1960), 82–90.

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10. N. N. Bolkhovitinov, *Doktrina Monro (proiskhozhdenie i kharakter)* [The Monroe Doctrine. Its Origin and Nature] (Moscow: Izd-vo Instituta mezhdunarodnykh otnoshenii, 1959).
11. In particular, N. N. Bolkhovitinov's monograph is characterized in another collection of articles dedicated to the Monroe doctrine as the most important and detailed Soviet study of this problem. See Donald Marquand Dozer, ed., *The Monroe Doctrine. Its Modern Significance* (New York, 1965), pp. 200–201.
12. See L. IU. Slėzkin, "Neobosnovannyi vypad protiv sovetskoi latinoamericanistiki" [A Groundless Attack against Soviet Scholarship on Latin America], *Novaia i noveisbaia istoriia*, No. 1 (1964), 177–178.
13. J. Gregory Oswald, "La Revolución Mexicana en la historiografía soviética," *Historia Mexicana*, XII, núm. 3 (enero-marzo 1963), 355.
14. Juan A. Ortega y Medina, *Historiografía soviética iberoamericanista (1945–1960)* (México, 1961), p. 38.