
REPORTS

ON SCHOLARLY DIALOGUE: THE CASE OF U.S. AND SOVIET LATIN AMERICANISTS

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THE PUBLICATION IN 1960 OF I. R. LAVRETSKII'S "A SURVEY OF THE HISPANIC American Historical Review, 1956-1958," provided U.S. specialists in Latin American history with an abrasive introduction to recent Soviet historical scholarship in the Latin American area.¹ Subsequent reviews by American and European scholars, together with further translations of pertinent Soviet writings, have helped to provide those lacking a knowledge of the Russian language with additional insight into the nature and scope of Latin American studies in the USSR.² At the same time, however, the frequently opposing views of history held by Soviet historians and their western critics have greatly complicated the task of scholarly evaluation. On the one hand, Soviet historical scholarship has often been dismissed as "a branch of politics;"³ on the other, U.S. historians are said to "falsify and distort the historical truth in order to benefit imperialism."⁴ In content and presentation, the Lavretskii article evinces both extremes.

By 1960 the study of Latin American history had only just begun to develop in the USSR and few specialists abroad knew of initial Soviet efforts in the field. Lavretskii's review of the HAHR, therefore, appeared as an historiographical position paper and as such inspired serious misgivings in the minds of many U.S. Latin Americanists. Official demands by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) for a new applied historiography in service to the Soviet state evoked images of politically managed scholarship. Historical facts, U.S. scholars feared, would be molded arbitrarily to fit the practical needs of the CPSU. Indeed, the Lavretskii article stands as "a classic example of such party-line historical writing,"⁵ for it reflects an unscientific attitude that is anathema to serious scholars everywhere.⁶

In the past decade, however, Soviet historians of Latin America have

made marked progress in the scholarly treatment of their field,⁷ and it is no longer acceptable to suggest that their output of historical writing "is neither quantitatively nor qualitatively impressive."⁸ While Soviet Latin Americanists continue to dwell on themes outlined by the CPSU, this does not in itself invalidate their credentials as professional historians. Furthermore, not all Soviet specialists in Latin American history are engaged in party-line research; and of those who are, many investigate other, non-ideological topics, as well. At the same time, themes of historical research delineated by the CPSU are not necessarily irrelevant to the non-Marxist historian. In the words of Charles Gibson, "it is obvious that the topics of Russian historiography, even when handled with the standard Russian formulae of interpretation, are worthy of our western attention."⁹

A more discriminating appraisal of Soviet scholarship on Latin America, therefore, seems to be in order. The Lavretskii article no longer offers the U.S. scholar "a deep insight into contemporary Soviet thinking on Latin American history."¹⁰ Nor does it "demonstrate what Soviet historians are doing in Latin American history," as asserted by the editors of the *HAHR* in February 1961.¹¹ To continue to hold up the Lavretskii article as a paradigm of Soviet scholarship in Latin American history confuses issues which merit elucidation.¹²

In the excerpt which follows, Moisei Samuilovich Al'perovich, a leading Soviet historian of Latin America, appeals both to his Marxist colleagues and to their non-Marxist critics abroad for a serious exchange of views on salient problems of Latin American history. Scholarly polemic, he suggests, may contribute significantly to the elucidation of historical realities, and, consequently, is an object worthy of the historian's attention. Such debate proves useful, however, only when purged of bias and preconception. Serious criticism does not admit of gratuitous epithets, and, Al'perovich adds, should be restricted solely to questions of scholarship.

The coin, of course, has two faces, and U.S. scholars are not alone guilty of representing ideological verbiage as scholarly criticism.¹³ One must not seek to refute an argument, writes Al'perovich, by labeling its author a "Marxist" or "anti-Marxist." The same, we might add, holds for such unscientific qualifiers as "reactionary," "progressive," and "bourgeois."

Interestingly, Al'perovich himself has on occasion had recourse to this type of criticism. He has dismissed the "apologists of Spanish colonialism," for example, as "representatives of reactionary bourgeois historiography," among whose number he includes Lewis Hanke, John Francis Bannon and Ricardo Levene.¹⁴ Similarly, he censures anthropologist A. L. Kroeber by linking him to the "increased efforts of reactionary bourgeois historiography to refute the 'black legend' and to rehabilitate Spanish colonialism."¹⁵ Yet in the case of Woodrow W. Borah, Sherburne F. Cook and Lesley Byrd Simpson,

Al'perovich suggestively discards even the most innocuous of such labels, describing the distinguished Berkeley scholars simply as "professors" and "representatives of the so-called 'California school'" of Latin American history.¹⁶

The point here is not to suggest intellectual duplicity, but rather to underscore Al'perovich's own recognition of shortcomings in Soviet criticisms of non-Marxist historiography. Historical perception derives in large measure from specific societal environments, and rare indeed is the historian who can stand wholly outside his cumulative life experience. Investigative priorities are by definition open to subjective evaluation. Only the investigations themselves can be appraised objectively, and it is to this point that Al'perovich would have scholars of differing persuasions direct their critical attention.

NOTES

1. I. R. Lavretskii, "A Survey of the Hispanic American Historical Review, 1956-1958," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, XL, No. 3 (August 1960), 340-360.
2. See, for example, Jean-Pierre Berthe, "L'historiographie soviétique et l'Amérique latine," *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 21^e Anné, No. 1 (Janvier-Février 1966), 235-236; Roland T. Ely, "El panorama interamericano visto por investigadores de la URSS," *Journal of Inter-American Studies*, VIII, No. 2 (April 1966), 294-317; Nina Godneff, "Un manuel soviétique: Les partis politiques dans les pays d'Amérique Latine," *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 21^e Anné, No. 6 (Novembre-Décembre 1966), 1395-1397; Juan A. Ortega y Medina, "Bartolomé de las Casas y la historiografía soviética," *Historia Mexicana*, XVI, núm. 3 (enero-marzo, 1967), 320-340; *idem*, "Crítica y contracrítica en torno a la historiografía soviética," *Anuario de Historia*, Año V, 1965 (México, 1967), 261-290; *idem*, *Historiografía soviética iberoamericanista (1945-1960)* (México, 1961); J. Gregory Oswald, "Contemporary Soviet Research on Latin America," *Latin American Research Review*, I, No. 2 (Spring 1966), 77-96; *idem*, "The Development of Soviet Studies on Latin America," *Studies on the Soviet Union*, New Series, VII, No. 3 (1968), 70-83; *idem*, "México en la historiografía soviética," *Historia Mexicana*, XIV, núm. 4 (abril-junio 1965), 691-706; *idem*, "La Revolución Mexicana en la historiografía soviética," *Historia Mexicana*, XII, núm. 3 (enero-marzo 1963), 340-357; Edward B. Richards, "Marxism and Marxist Movements in Latin America in Recent Soviet Historical Writings," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, XLV, No. 4 (November 1965), 577-590.

Soviet writings in translation include M. S. Al'perovich, *Historia de la independencia de México (1810-1824)* (México, 1967); Al'perovich and B. T. Rudenko, *La Revolución Mexicana de 1910-1917 y la política de los Estados Unidos* (México, 1960); Al'perovich, Rudenko and N. N. Lavrov, *La Revolución Mexicana, cuatro estudios soviéticos* (México, 1960); S. S. Mikhailov, "The Study of Latin America in the Soviet Union," in *The Third World in Soviet Perspective. Studies by Soviet Writers on the Developing Areas*, ed., Thomas Perry Thornton (Princeton, 1964), 88-102; and Victor V. Vol'skii, "The Study of Latin America in the U.S.S.R.," *Latin American Research Review*, III, No. 1 (Fall 1967), 77-87.

Articles by Soviet historians of Latin America frequently appear in Spanish translation in

Latin American Research Review

the Marxist historical review, *Historia y Sociedad* (México, 1965–). Soviet Latin Americanists have also begun to publish book reviews in the Mexican journal, *Historia Mexicana*.

For a survey of Soviet scholarship in U.S. history, see N. N. Bolkhovitinov, "The Study of United States History in the Soviet Union," *The American Historical Review*, LXXIV, No. 4 (April 1969), 1221–1242.

3. J. Gregory Oswald, "A Soviet Criticism of the *Hispanic American Historical Review*," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, XL, No. 3 (August 1960), 339.
4. Lavretskii, *loc. cit.*, p. 360.
5. Oswald, "A Soviet Criticism . . .," p. 339.
6. For a concise Soviet statement in English on the nature of Marxist-Leninist historical scholarship, see *Social Sciences in the USSR* (Paris and The Hague, 1965), pp. 1–76. This volume was prepared by the USSR Academy of Sciences and published under the auspices of UNESCO.
7. See M. S. Al'perovich, *Sovetskaia istoriografiia stran Latinskoii Ameriki* [Soviet Historiography of the Latin American Countries] (Moscow, 1968), pp. 17–64.
8. J. Gregory Oswald, "Soviet News and Notes," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, XLI, No. 1 (February 1961), 120.
9. Earl J. Pariseau, ed., *Handbook of Latin American Studies*, No. 26 (Gainesville, Florida, 1964), p. 39.
10. Oswald, "A Soviet Criticism . . .," p. 339.
11. "Professional Notes," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, XLI, No. 1 (February 1961), 173.
12. Inclusion of the Lavretskii article in the Conference on Latin American History's recently published, two-volume anthology of essays on the study and teaching of Latin American history is regrettable for this reason. See Conference on Latin American History, *Latin American History. Essays on Its Study and Teaching, 1898–1965*, comp. and ed., Howard F. Cline (2 vols., Austin and London, 1967), I, 144–156.
13. A recent example of such fruitless criticism by a U.S. scholar is Wilbert H. Timmon's review of the Spanish translation of M. S. Al'perovich's monograph on Mexican independence. See *Hispanic American Historical Review*, XLIX, No. 2 (May 1969), 338–339.
14. M. S. Al'perovich, "K voprosu o chislennosti indeiskogo naseleniia Meksiki v kolonial'nyi period" [On the Question of the Size of Mexico's Indian Population in the Colonial Period], *Sovetskaia etnografiia* [Soviet ethnography], No. 3 (1962), 71–72.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 75–79.