

The Latin-American Revolution of 1810-1826

By William Z. Foster

IN A RECENT ISSUE of *Fundamentos*, the theoretical organ of the Popular Socialist Party (Communist) of Cuba, there is the first section of a very important article entitled, "The Freedom Struggles of the Spanish Colonies in 1810-1826." It was written by four Soviet historians—M. S. Alperovich, V. I. Ermolaev, I. P. Lavretzky, and S. I. Semionov. I had to get the second section from the Soviet Union—it could not be had in Cuba. It is a decisive contribution to the study of the great struggle that set free the Spanish, Portuguese (Brazilian), and French (Haitian) colonies 150 years ago. The article, however, confining itself to the Spanish-American struggle, unfortunately does not deal with the closely associated Brazilian and Haitian revolutions; it was originally published in the well-known Soviet journal, *Problems of History*, in November, 1956.

The revolt of the Spanish colonies (and Brazil and Haiti), a century and a half ago, was a vast struggle. It embraced over 19,000,000 people (2,500,000 of whom were in Brazil); it extended over 5,313,000 square miles (besides about 3,288,000 square miles in Brazil); and the revolution-

ary war, bitterly fought, lasted some 16 years. Haiti also played a big part in it. Thus, the movement, whether considered from the standpoint of the population involved, the area covered, or the duration of the armed struggle, was several times as extensive as our revolution of 1775-1783. Of the 16,800,000 population in the Spanish colonies proper, only 3,240,000 were whites, 5,320,000 were mestizos (mixed races), 7,530,000 were Indians, and 775,000 were Negroes—thus, but about 35 per cent of the people involved in the revolution were white.

Despite its great extent, however, this vast movement in the Spanish colonies has been, unfortunately, but inadequately analyzed by the Latin-American Communists. And the bourgeois historians have not helped. There have been only very few general studies made, and these have mostly not been very sound. Wherein these analyses have failed has been chiefly in underestimating the depth and class significance of the movements involved. That is, the tendency has been to pass over the immense struggle as solely a war for independence from Spain, instead of recognizing it for what it was, namely, the beginnings of a bourgeois

revolution, of which the separation or independence feature was only one aspect, although a most important one. Similarly, for many years, the revolution of the thirteen colonies from England was also considered almost solely as a war of independence and was not generally recognized at the time as a social revolution; and it was likewise some 60 years after the event before the "Civil War" of 1861 was given recognition as the second American revolution.

In 1951, I wrote a book, *Outline Political History of the Americas*, in which I summarized the whole Hemispheric Revolution, including that in the Spanish colonies, as follows:

The great American Revolution—in the United States, Haiti, the Spanish colonies, Brazil, and Canada—was fundamentally a bourgeois, i.e., a capitalist revolution. Notwithstanding all its revolutionary shortcomings, it constituted a big step in the establishment of capitalism in this hemisphere. But, as we have already remarked, it was by no means a "pure" capitalist revolution. Many hangovers of feudalism were still attached to it, which prevented it from reaching full capitalist expression in various countries. This was especially the case in the Latin-American countries, where the feudal elements were very strong and where the revolutionary bourgeoisie and working class were relatively weak. This fact has led many writers to conclude, erroneously, that the national liberation struggle in Latin-America

was not a revolution at all, but merely a mechanical breaking off of the allegiance of the colonies from their "mother" countries. (p. 157.)

A number of comrades in Latin-America took sharp issue with the above conception. They were especially influenced in their conclusion by the weakness of the Latin-American bourgeoisie and proletariat in 1810 and afterwards and the decisive strength of the latifundists (big landowners), who have long remained the basic class power in the Latin-American countries. They failed to see, what I extensively pointed out in my book, that the movement, despite its imperfections and wide diversities in the various countries, was, nevertheless, fundamentally a bourgeois revolution. This was evidenced by the nature of the revolution as follows: the separatist movement of the colonies from Spain; the abolition domestically of the monarchy, despite desperate efforts to maintain it (even in the United States); the establishment of 20 individual Latin-American republics, each with its own government and more or less democracy, despite the rigid literacy tests which heavily disfranchised the Indians and Negroes—these states all had democratic forms of government, with constitutions on the United States model; the bourgeois ideology of most of the main leaders of the revolution—Bolivar, San Martin, Belgrano,

O'Higgins, Hidalgo, Morelos, etc.—many of whom were militant Masons and students of the United States and French revolutions; the partial weakening of the bonds between the Church and state; the initiation of a strong movement for Negro freedom from slavery; the unfettering of the merchant capitalists from the strict Spanish controls, and their entry into the world market; and the strengthening of the weak domestic capitalist class. The developing capitalist influence also deeply affected agriculture, the big land-owning interests. Henceforth, the latifundia tended to develop as big capitalist farms producing rice, coffee, cotton, fruit, etc., for the world market, rather than the narrow latifundia whose production and markets had in pre-revolutionary years been restricted feudally and closely controlled by the "mother country," Spain.

A most important feature of the bourgeois revolution, slavery was abolished in the Spanish colonies (before it was in the United States). The dates when the various Spanish colonies did away with chattel slavery indicate the powerful anti-slavery movement that was initiated during the revolution. The following are the years of major limitation or final abolition of Negro chattel slavery in the erstwhile Spanish-American colonies: Chile, 1811; Argentina, 1813; Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and El Salvador, 1824;

Bolivia, 1825; Mexico, 1828; Uruguay, 1842; Paraguay, 1844; Colombia, 1851; Ecuador, 1852; Peru, 1856; Venezuela, 1858. The freed Negroes generally became peons, as were the Indians.

The foregoing developments, as I stressed time and again, were clear evidence of a social-bourgeois revolution, however weak. For a long time, the situation has remained theoretically confused, which has prevented a clear understanding of what had actually happened in the broad Latin-American revolution, and bedeviled the policies in after years of the Communist Parties. Now comes the article of the four Soviet historians. It clears up many hitherto obscure or confused questions about the revolution. These include the degree to which the proletariat, slaves, Indian peons, handicraftsmen, and merchants supported the 1810 revolution; they combat the illusions about the revolution being merely the work of the separatist creole (native-born) landowners; they give a good review of the growing economic crisis before the revolution; they clarify the whole controversial question around the personality of Bolivar, pointing out certain errors made by Marx and others.*

In dealing with the previous studies of the revolutionary question in Latin-America, the four Soviet writ-

* See Marx, *The Revolution in Spain*, p. 170.

ers examine the Foster book, among others. They say that it "is basically correct," and their Marxian analysis goes to prove this statement. One of the basic weaknesses of the article is that it deals only with the Spanish colonial revolution although the Spanish, Brazilian, Haitian, etc., upheavals are inseparably bound up together in time, location, objectives, etc. It is absolutely necessary to see that these several revolutions be linked up as essentially one great movement, and also, in spite of their very considerable weakness in this respect, that they are essentially part of the bourgeois revolution.

The four Soviet writers make very good progress in this respect. After analyzing the course of the revolution in the score of Spanish colonies, they offer a summary of the general result of the revolution at the end of their article, as follows:

The war exercised an enormous influence upon the final development of Latin-America. It led to the liquidation of the colonial regime and the establishment of political independence for all the hispanoamerican countries with the exception of Cuba and Puerto

Rico. It put a finish to the commercial monopolies, the prohibitions, limitations and regulations—all this was ended to create most favorable conditions for the development of capitalist relations in Latin-America and for its incorporation into the world economic system. The indigenous population was liberated from personal tribute and obligatory labor in favor of particular persons of the Church and the State. In the majority of the countries, slavery was abolished and the rights of the Church were limited. In all the hispanoamerican states that just emerged, a republican regime was established. Also of progressive significance were the suppression of the Inquisition, the abolition of the titles of nobility, the stimulus of immigration, etc. In this manner and as a result of the war for independence, there arose partially in practice, proposals of a bourgeois revolution.

The analysis of the four Soviet writers agrees substantially, as they say, with the analysis that I made some years ago in my book, *Outline Political History of the Americas*. This should go a long way to clearing up one of the most stubborn points of major revolutionary history.