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Manuel Caballero

Latin America and the Comintern 1919-1943



LATIN AMERICA AND THE COMINTERN 1919-1943

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de Venezuela*

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*To my brother Francisco Rafael,
whose generosity helped
to make mine a
real youth*

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MANUEL CABALLERO

Abbreviations

ANL (or NLA)	National Liberation Alliance (Aliança Nacional Libertadora)
ASMOB	Arquivo Storico del Movimiento Operaio Brasileiro
COMINTERN (or CI)	Communist (or Third) International (Kommunisticheskii Internatsional)
ECCI	Executive Committee of the Communist International
IC	Internacional Comunista (Communist International)
ICC	International Control Commission
INPRECORR	International Press Correspondence
SSA	South American Secretariat (Secretariado Sudamericano de la Internacional Comunista)
USANA	United States of America National Archives

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Introduction

The history of the Communist International in Latin America has been usually studied as the simple political or even institutional history of the individual Communist parties. That kind of work can be very useful, but it does not lend itself to an understanding of the *differentia specifica* of a Communist Party with reference to any other party. That is, the difference which comes from its international character, its centralized organization and, above all, its ultimate aim – world revolution. To study the Comintern taking this as a point of departure allows the investigator not only to capture more easily its organization on a continental scale, but also facilitates an analysis of the role and the significance of the Communist International in twentieth-century world history.

The leaders of the Third (Communist) International (1919–43) never appeared to believe seriously that a Leninist revolution (a Socialist revolution in their own language) could triumph in Latin America before it did in Europe or the larger Asian countries. The Comintern was created in March 1919 to complete on a worldwide scale the revolutionary process started a year before in Russia. Lenin and his comrades conceived the world revolution as a fire which, having been set alight first in Russia, would spread to Western Europe, fanned by the impending victory of the German revolution (in spite of the failure of the Spartakist uprising of November 1918). In 1920, the Comintern turned its attention to Asia, and some of its leaders expressed the idea that the world revolution might in fact start there instead of in Europe. But the Latin American Leninists were doomed to play the role of ‘supporters’ of the world revolution, to buttress the struggle of the European and Asian revolutionary working classes. If Moscow was the centre of the world revolution, Latin America was on the periphery, perhaps exceeded only by Africa. In the pyramidal world structure of the Comintern, Latin America was located at the bottom.

Nonetheless, the influence of the Third International in Latin America was more pervasive and, in the theoretical realm, more longlasting than in many countries of Europe and Asia, certainly more so than in the United States of America whose working class and Communist Party were destined by the Leninists to lead the Socialist revolution in the whole Western hemisphere. Latin Americans founded relatively important Communist parties much before some of their European and Asian comrades. The Communists launched insurrections in El Salvador and in Brazil in the 1930s, and entered the governments of Cuba, Ecuador, and Chile in the 1940s. All of this took place before similar activities and advances were undertaken or achieved in most European and Asian countries. The slogans of the Third International, its appraisal of the Latin American continent and its revolutionary possibilities, have set the tone for long theoretical discussions on the left and beyond, in a process which led the Cuban Revolution to proclaim itself Leninist, twenty years after the dissolution of the International which Lenin had founded.

Of course, it is easy to attribute such developments to the military, industrial and political influence of the Soviet Union. It is very difficult, indeed, to separate Communism from the Soviet Union. But to explain the former by means of the latter is to ignore the fact that the influence of the October Revolution in Europe, Asia and Latin America preceded the transformation of the Soviet Union into a world power. To say that this influence is due to the attraction of Marxism, particularly among intellectuals, is to ignore that what seduced them was not only Marxism as an explanation of world historical processes but also, and perhaps mainly, Leninism as a theory and a method of bringing about revolution. Leninism is so closely related to the existence of the Communist Party, and the Party to the existence of the Communist International, that to ignore the existence of the latter is to distort the understanding of contemporary world history, particularly between World Wars I and II.

In the same manner, it might be tempting for a Latin American to explain the presence of Leninism in the area by the existence of the Cuban revolutionary government. But that is also an oversimplification, for its influence is previous to 1959, even in Cuba. Moreover, Latin America is the continent which the Soviet Union, understandably, has always had more difficulty in reaching (or 'infiltrating'), in terms of intervening directly in the internal affairs of the individual countries. Before World War II, these difficulties were even greater. Nevertheless, although exaggerated by anti-Communist propaganda, the presence

(not to mention influence) of Leninism in Latin America in the inter-war years was real. This presence was manifested, with differing degrees of success, through the Communist Parties – through the Communist International.

Thus, the history of the Comintern in Latin America is closely associated with the history of revolutionary movements in the area during most of the twentieth century. However, what has been said about the Comintern as a world organization can also be applied to its history in Latin America. That is, the paradoxical situation that in spite of having been the most important international revolutionary organization in this century and possibly in history, it has been so little studied. Perhaps the main reason is that historians are wary either of the secrecy connected with the Comintern's archives in Moscow or of the underground character of most of its activities. A study of this kind must then begin with an analysis of the central points in the history of the International in order to describe how the primary and ultimate aim of world revolution conditioned not only the peculiar inner structure of the Comintern, but also the periodization of its own history. Part One of this work attempts such an analysis, complementing it with chapters which examine the central headquarters of the Latin American Comintern, and its sections active in the southern half of the Western hemisphere.

Part Two deals with the main theoretical problems confronted by the Comintern: the definition of those societies from the Marxist (and Leninist) point of view; the kind of revolution they needed in the context of world revolution; the theoretical aspects of the approach to power, and particularly the protagonists of that process. That the study of these questions follows the formation of the Comintern sections is due to two facts. First, the Comintern did not conceive of itself as a 'loose propaganda association' (Zinoviev), but as a practical tool for exporting the Russian Revolution; thus, its first objective was to provoke revolutions all over the world and then, only then, to develop theories about them. Second, Latin America was not 'discovered' (to use its own expression) by the Comintern until 1928, nine years after its foundation.

Part Three studies the problems related to the main challenge confronted by any political party: the question of power. Chapters 7, 8 and 9 show how the problem was dealt with in practical terms: 'from outside', with the *pronunciamiento* of Prestes in Brazil in 1935; 'from inside', with the class collaboration, National Union policies which eventually flowed into what was called 'Browderism', otherwise self-dissolution.

The greatest difficulty in a study of this kind is in access to the sources, and also in the different circumstances which help to obscure their critical evaluation. These are in turn closely linked to the general problems of working on a subject of contemporary history and moreover, one which is so polemical. Therefore, a detailed commentary on sources precedes the bibliography. In the Appendix, the chief Latin American *dramatis personae* of the Comintern are presented, in short biographical notes.

PART ONE

The World Communist Party

The Communist International in history

The importance of being Third

The First and Second Internationals were not real ones, but a federation of groups and parties. For Lenin, the Third International had to be in earnest – it had to be a real party. It was, and it survived for twenty-four years. Being the Third, it was also the most important.

Just as it is impossible to study twentieth-century history without referring sooner or later to the Russian Revolution, it is also impossible to understand its development without understanding the ubiquitous role of the Communist Party. Even if the Soviet Union had wanted the revolution to remain only a national uprising confined to the boundaries of the ancient Tsardom of All the Russias, the huge extent of its land, not to mention other elements, would have given in any case an international dimension to the process. But the confessed internationalism of the Bolsheviks added a particular dynamism to what, as with all revolutions, was dynamic in itself: the Russian outburst was not only the *Russian* Revolution, but the starting point of world revolution. The Bolshevik Party was not only a Russian party, but the embryo of the World Communist Party. This World Communist Party was named the Communist International (Comintern) and it was not conceived as a loose federation of national parties, but as a single body, centrally organized and, in fact, *one* party.¹

Such a party governing such a country and with such an aim, naturally provoked strong reactions, both positive and negative. On the one hand, its appeal reached the most radical sectors of the working class, the Socialist movement, as well as the colonial peoples; on the other, both the 'bourgeois'² and social-democratic governments had to react against such a movement which so openly confessed to be 'digging the grave' for them.

Given those conditions, it is also almost impossible to understand the