

OUTLINE

POLITICAL HISTORY

OF THE AMERICAS

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POLITICAL HISTORY
OF THE AMERICAS

William Z. Foster



INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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PREFACE

This book is a general political history of the more than three hundred million people who make up the many nations of North, Central, and South America. The historical record of the western hemisphere—the account of its aboriginal peoples, its discovery and exploration, its subjugation by ruthless exploiters, its economic and political growth, its developing cultural life, and its revolutionary struggles for freedom and well-being—constitutes one of the greatest epic dramas in the whole life of mankind. There has long been a need to tell in a connected way this rich and complex story of the New World. Only in the penetrating light of Marxist-Leninist social science can this be done correctly.

A host of books have been written on the history of the various nations that go to comprise the peoples of the western hemisphere. But these works, besides suffering from the basic limitations inseparable from all bourgeois histories, have dealt almost exclusively with the life and progress of single peoples or of limited groups of peoples. Very rarely, if at all, has anything even remotely approaching a co-ordinated history of the hemisphere as such been attempted. In my reading I was able to locate only two such examples. Robert Mackenzie, in his work, *America, A History*, printed in London in 1894, sketched a history of the several countries of this hemisphere, but without in any manner relating them economically, politically, or culturally. H. E. Bolton, president of the American Historical Society, in his small book, *History of the Americas*, published in Boston in 1935, presented a general history of the western hemisphere. But Bolton's little book is simply a collection of brief notes, forming the basis for a series of lectures, and is not a systematic treatment of the subject. This book of lecture notes also suffers from characteristic bourgeois shortcomings, distortions, and superficialities.

The present book is an attempt to fulfill the need for a popular, integrated outline history of the western hemisphere. Such a unified treatment of all the countries of the Americas is necessary because of the geographical, economic, political, and cultural ties which throughout four centuries have bound all these countries together in a closely related history. A general history of the western hemisphere as a whole has become very much needed now because of the growing attempt of United States imperialism to reduce the entire hemisphere to the status of an armed, dominated, and thoroughly controlled Yankee hinterland. It is all the more necessary because of the growing struggles of the many American peoples against enslavement by

aggressive, fascist-minded, war-making Wall Street. If the imperialist menace is to be combated effectively, it is imperative that the many peoples of the western hemisphere should become better acquainted with one another. They must learn to know each other's history, to understand the complex economic, political, cultural, and social forces now at work in and among all the respective countries, and how to build up a strong spirit of democratic co-operation among themselves and with the other peoples of the world.

This book makes no pretense at presenting detailed histories of each of the score of countries making up the three Americas. Nor does it deal minutely with all aspects of the general history of the western hemisphere. Its aim rather is to analyze the broad course of economic, political, and cultural growth and decay, and to trace the general progress of the class struggle—both in the individual countries and in the hemisphere as a whole. The book's central purpose is thus to provide an outline that will make clear the forces that have laid the groundwork for the broad social development now taking place throughout the Americas and by the same token also to indicate the progressive attitude of the peoples towards their problems and their future. This book especially bears in mind the relationship of the peoples and nations of our hemisphere to the most fundamental social process of our times; namely, the developing general crisis and decay of world capitalism, and the birth and growth of world socialism.

On the question of terminology in preparing this book a couple of points need to be made. First, regarding the use of the term "American." In the present book this term is used as applying generally to all the peoples and countries of the western hemisphere. The practice of the people of the United States in reserving for themselves the name "American" is an offense to the other peoples of the Americas, who also rightly consider themselves Americans. Another remark regarding terminology, this time in connection with the controversy over the generic term to cover collectively all those American nations having a Spanish, Portuguese, or French background: In this respect writers have used variously such terms as "Latin America," "Hispanic America," "Afro-America," "Ibero-America," "Indo-America," etc., and they have marshalled strong arguments in support of these terms respectively. In this book the term "Latin America" is used as a general designation, not because the expression is technically correct, but for want of a better term and because of the more general use and acceptance of this term among writers and the peoples concerned.

On the matter of statistics—a word of warning. The book makes no claims to infallibility in this respect. It is a fact that in all the American countries the existing bodies of statistics are highly unreliable. Often they are deliberately distorted, and still more often they are fragmentary and incomplete. This is particularly true where the figures relate to the earlier periods

of western hemisphere history, when few reliable records were kept. Consequently, writers differ widely in their statistical presentations of various problems. Hence, the author of this book has had to use his own judgment in selecting what has seemed to him to be the most authentic statistics in given situations.

The writer wishes to express his thanks to the many men and women who either read and criticized the manuscript of the book, or co-operated in the extensive research and technical work required for its writings. These include James S. Allen, Herbert Aptheker, Marion Bachrach, Theodore Bassett, Erik Bert, Alexander Bittelman, Tim Buck, Victorio Codovilla, J. Colon, Carl Dorfman, Robert W. Dunn, Dionisio Encina, Philip S. Foner, Gilbert Green, Grace Hutchins, Cesar Andreu Iglesias, Blas Roca, Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, Stanley B. Ryerson, Joseph Starobin, Celeste Strack, and Robert Thompson.

New York, January, 1951

TO ESTHER

BOOK ONE

THE COLONIAL PERIOD

I. A NEW WORLD IS FOUND

When on October 12, 1492, Christopher Columbus, the son of a Genoese* weaver, stepped ashore on the island he later named San Salvador,† in the Bahamas, it was one of the great moments in world history. Sponsored by Spain, the discovery of America gave an enormous stimulus to human progress in many directions. It virtually brought the Middle Ages to an end by further undermining decaying feudalism and by speeding up the growth of the young European capitalist system. The coming into civilized man's orbit of two vast new continents, alive with strange civilizations and richly endowed with natural wealth of all sorts, widely expanded his economic and political concepts and gave him a greatly changed outlook upon the world in which he lived. As the immense social drama unfolded in the centuries after the discovery, humanity's conceptions of political democracy, of science, of culture, of intellectual freedom grew and developed in a revolutionary way. Although the growth of the New World also generated and set afoot various dangerously reactionary currents and thereby brought about endless human misery and hardships, basically it has been a profoundly progressive development, relentlessly pushing on those factors which are now bringing the world to inevitable socialism.

Columbus, of course, was not the first to "discover" America—the presence of the Indians here at the time of his arrival being sufficient proof of that. Moreover, there exist many more or less plausible tales about earlier navigators who also "discovered" the western hemisphere, sailing from various countries during the thousand years prior to Columbus' celebrated voyage. Among these supposed discoverers may be listed the group of Chinese priests who are said to have landed in California about the year 458. Besides, there were St. Brendan, sundry Portuguese sailors, seven Spanish bishops, and the Irishman, Ari Marson, adventurers who are rumored to have crossed the Atlantic to the American coasts in the sixth, seventh, and ninth centuries, or thereabouts. Also, it is claimed that Basque fishermen were fishing off the Newfoundland banks as early as the year 1000. It is guessed that Columbus may have learned something from the latter about the fabled America. There are stories too of early African voyagers to America.¹ More authentic than

*Fifteen Italian cities claim to be the birthplace of Columbus.

†Now known as Watling's Island, a British possession.