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William Richardson

“To the World
of the Future”

Mexican Visitors to the USSR,
1920-1940

REES

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Introduction

During the 1920s and 1930s the Soviet Union was a place of pilgrimage for foreigners hoping to see a new world in the process of creation.¹ When faced with Soviet reality, most found that their idealized images were far too optimistic, however, and many of them left the country in moods of dejection and disappointment. Some were appalled at the revived bourgeois way of life that seemed to be encouraged by the New Economic Policy of the 1920s, while others were concerned by the growth of bureaucracy and the apparent eagerness of the government to involve itself actively in the intellectual and aesthetic life of the nation, for example. Communist party politics, which became increasingly bitter and caustic, and indeed more public during the second half of the 1920s, caused many other foreigners to question their ideological allegiance to the new Soviet state. The enthusiasm associated with the Five Year plans revived their spirits, however. Here at last, under the leadership of Joseph Stalin and his associates, the peoples of the Soviet Union were beginning to build a new society. Russia was being transformed from a backward agrarian country into a modern industrial state, new towns were being built in virgin territories, and older cities were being reconstructed at a time when the West was sinking ever more deeply into economic depression. Individualism and privatism were being replaced by collectivism, it appeared, and a new egalitarian, proletarian society would provide a model for the world to emulate.

No foreigners came to the USSR during these first two decades of Soviet power with more enthusiasm than did Mexicans. Mexico had had its own revolution, of course, a social and political revolution of which most Mexicans were proud. It was idealistic and promised substantial positive change in the lives of all Mexicans. Yet already by the 1920s, many Mexicans came to feel that their revolution had been derailed by private interests and *caudillismo*, and those on the left in particular began to look elsewhere for alternatives to what they felt was their failed revolution. It was

to the world's other revolutionary state, the distant and practically unknown Soviet Union, that they turned.

Mexicans on the left were fortunate that their country was the first in the Western Hemisphere to establish diplomatic relations with the new Soviet state, and for much of the 1920s it was the only Latin American nation that had substantial ties with the USSR. The Soviet government had been eager to break out of the "diplomatic blockade" imposed on it by governments unreceptive to its revolutionary propaganda, and Mexico wished to show its own independence and its solidarity with other "progressive" states. Mexicans found visas easier to obtain from the Soviet government, and cultural exchanges were often facilitated by the use of funds available through the Soviet embassy in Mexico City. That embassy, by its very presence, encouraged other groups in Mexico to sponsor visits by Mexicans to the USSR, and many of those Mexicans who traveled to "the world of the future" did so under the auspices, and with the financial support of trade union, party, and friendship society organizations that had equivalents in the USSR. Such institutional contacts were invaluable. The citizens of no other Latin American nation had these advantages, and Soviet interest in promoting Mexican awareness of developments in the USSR could be used quite effectively by Mexicans wishing to learn more about the Soviet experiment. Even during the 1930s, after diplomatic relations had been severed by Mexico, the leftist sympathies of the Lázaro Cárdenas administration ensured that contacts between the two countries would be surprisingly extensive. Both nations were seeking new answers to their problems of backwardness during the 1930s, Mexico more tentatively, the USSR more radically. Looking for "the future," most Mexicans went to the USSR wearing the rosiest of rose-colored glasses and, like so many other foreigners, saw what they wanted to see. In praising the Soviet experiment, they hoped to inspire Mexicans to change their own country, to adopt at least some of the social and economic programs the Soviet Five Year Plans appeared to have made work. Mexicans and Russians saw many similarities in the historical experience of their countries,² and Mexicans in particular were interested

in examining for themselves viable alternatives to models offered by the United States and Western Europe.

This study will explore the ways in which several Mexicans who had first-hand experiences in the USSR interpreted what they saw in the 1920s and 1930s, a period in which Mexico was perhaps most radical in seeking solutions to its problems, and a time when Soviet examples of development and social engineering seemed most attractive. By 1940 Mexican enthusiasm for the USSR had cooled significantly, and as Mexico entered a period of economic consolidation and alliance with the United States in response to threats from a world turned suddenly very dangerous by the widening international conflict, the Soviet experience seemed much less relevant to Mexicans than it had before. This study will attempt to explain why Mexicans viewed the USSR the way they did during these important two decades, and what their views can tell us about at least a significant minority of Mexican public opinion with regard to the Soviet experiment. The travelers selected for this study include artists (Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros), leftist political activists (Vicente Lombardo Toledano and Victor Manuel Villaseñor), writers (Rafael Ramos Pedrueza and José Mancisidor), and establishment politicians (Jesús Silva Herzog and Abelardo Rodríguez). None of them was a genuine expert on the Soviet Union, but they were all struck by what they found in the USSR, and their opinions did make an impact on Mexicans' overall perceptions of Soviet life, politics, and economic development. Through their writings, lectures, and other public appearances, they helped modify the more distant view of the USSR Mexicans had derived from the writings of foreigners, which predominated in a Mexican press notorious for conservative, often reactionary editorial views.

All these visitors were well known in Mexico, and their ideas influenced certain sectors of the Mexican population to think more seriously about the USSR and about what the Soviet experience might mean for their own homeland. To the extent that a new image of revolutionary Russia spread in much of Mexico, it was one derived from the published writings and activities of these men, and not from the translated materials available from the Mexican Communist Party, the Soviet embassy, or in

the reading rooms of such organizations as the Society of Friends of the USSR. The works of these men provided a limited number of sources about the Soviet Union, but they were, importantly, accounts by Mexicans and were appealing as such in ways that foreigners' writings could never be. During the 1920s and 1930s, being a Mexican, the citizen of a "revolutionary" nation, meant seeing the world through different eyes. Their characteristic individualism led Mexicans to believe that no one could interpret the outside world for them better than could their fellow citizens. Most Mexicans were not necessarily enthusiastic about revolutionary Russia, but they were more sympathetic to its aspirations than others in the West.

Mexicans were attempting to define themselves, their national identity, and their revolution in the 1920s and 1930s. How they interpreted the great Soviet experiment varied during these important two decades. As we shall see, in a number of cases, those who wrote about the USSR were also addressing Mexico and promoting their own domestic political agendas. Objectivity was often replaced by advocacy, either of Soviet communism, or of an indigenous Mexican alternative to both communism and capitalism. No other Western visitors could boast of having come from the world's other revolutionary state, and Mexicans were constantly aware of their distinctiveness because of political attacks made on them by conservative political forces in the United States and Europe. Indeed, much of the time they relished that attention. No other visitors to the USSR could reasonably expect their government to consider seriously the idea of adapting aspects of the Soviet experiment to life in their own country, but Mexicans could. This was true during relatively conservative, even authoritarian, presidencies like that of Plutarco Elías Calles, as well as during Cárdenas's, which even those on the previously intransigent left admired. The similarities they saw between the two countries made what they learned immeasurably more relevant to Mexico than to any other nation. In the end, as a result, it was this immediacy felt by the Mexican visitors that provides us with a unique portrait of the USSR, one that has not been adequately evaluated or appreciated before.

Early Visitors: Diplomats and Artists

One of the first Mexicans to visit the new Soviet state was the general secretary of the newly founded Mexican Communist Party (the Partido Comunista Mexicano, the PCM), Manuel Díaz Ramírez. Díaz Ramírez was also the only Mexican to meet Lenin, in 1921, as a delegate to the Third Congress of the Communist International, in Moscow. A devoted communist and a great admirer of Lenin, Díaz Ramírez was impressed with developments in the new Marxist state.³ Other Mexicans were less enthusiastic. A labor delegation representing the semi-official Regional Confederation of Mexican Labor (Confederación Regional de Obrera Mexicana, or CROM) that traveled to the USSR in this period was said by US reporter Carleton Beals to have returned

peddling fantastic stories about being spied upon, robbed, attacked; they were shocked by nudism and the freedom of the marriage relations, and the sad fate of the "enslaved" Russian workers. They sounded like Mr. Hearst on a spree.⁴

CROM officials were consistently hostile to the USSR throughout the 1920s, to a certain extent because they feared Soviet support for local communist trade unions, but such differences of opinion on Soviet conditions would be common during the decade.

The first Mexican to spend a considerable amount of time in the USSR in an official capacity was Basilio Vadillo, Mexico's ambassador to the Soviet Union. Vadillo arrived in Moscow in November 1924, and remained there for four years. In presenting his credentials to Mikhail Kalinin in the Kremlin, Vadillo said he wished to convey to his Russian hosts Mexico's hopes for "deep and unbreakable friendship between the Mexican and Soviet peoples,"⁵ hopes which may have been merely formal, but may have been sincere. He stressed the similarities he felt existed between the two countries, adding that both had created for themselves new and original forms of government, imbued with the spirit of benevolence. Both

nations, he remarked, were attempting to solve the problems of labor, to lessen the contrasts between rural and urban life, and to bring the workers into full participation in public affairs.

On the whole, Vadillo's stay in the Soviet Union was quiet in the extreme. His only appearance of note was through an interview with the government newspaper, *Izvestiia*, which took place shortly after his arrival.⁶ In the interview Vadillo attempted to give Soviet readers some appreciation of the areas in which he felt the political positions of Mexico and the USSR coincided. He mentioned that the name Lenin was well known in Mexico, as were those of the other leaders of the October Revolution. He noted that Mexico shared the Soviet people's respect for the sovereignty of small nations, and that Mexico and the USSR were united in their rejection of imperialist policies. Finally, he predicted that trade between the two countries would grow, and that the other nations of Latin America, out of respect for Mexico and influenced by its example, would themselves soon attempt to establish relations with the USSR. Little more was heard from Vadillo until his departure in 1928.

Vadillo's counterpart in Mexico City, Stanislav Pestkovsky, was much more active. One of his responsibilities, evidently, was to help finance visits by Mexican radicals and leftists to the USSR, and throughout the 1920s, the embassy acted as a channel for funds to reach Mexicans expressing sympathy for the Soviet endeavor. These journeys would be of great value to Mexican communists in providing them first-hand experience with the realities of Soviet life during the years following the Revolution. It was assumed that such knowledge would make them better propagandists for the communist cause in Mexico. For the Soviet government, the reward was always assumed to be political, and never financial — no one in Moscow believed Mexico offered an opportunity to build up the USSR's fund of foreign currency through tourism. But politically, the investment was a wise one. The writer José Mancisidor traveled to the USSR in the mid-1920s, for example, and became a devoted admirer of the Soviet system and the new society it had created. The chess player Carlos Torre competed in an international chess tournament in

Moscow in 1925 and even appeared in "Chess Fever," V.S. Pudovkin's film about the matches. Several Mexican leftists attended the World Congress of Friends of the Soviet Union in November 1927.⁷ Many stayed on to participate in the ceremonies celebrating the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution, and to take part in the Fourth Congress of the Profintern (the Red International of Trade Unions, known in Mexico as the *Internacional Sindical Roja*), which opened in Moscow the following February. For the first time, a significant number of Mexicans were viewing the Soviet Union directly and were beginning to speak and write about the USSR in Mexico. In the process, the Soviet Union was learning about Mexico, and Mexicans about the USSR.⁸

Probably in the long term the most important Mexican visitors to the Soviet Union during the 1920s were Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Rivera's political position during the first half of the decade was determined significantly by his membership in two organizations. The first was the Syndicate of Revolutionary Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers, which he and a number of prominent leftist Mexican artists founded in 1922. The organizers' intent was to promote a radical (to most of them this meant communist) transformation of Mexican life through art, education, and propagandizing in such organs as their newspaper *El Machete*. Rivera's second commitment was to the PCM, which he joined at the end of that same year. For some time communism had been attractive, at least theoretically, to Mexican government and labor union officials, and its influence spread into Mexican society as a whole. By the time Rivera joined the party, however, any broadly based infatuation with the PCM had cooled, and the communist movement in Mexico became one less of politicians, who were increasingly suspicious, than of artists. It was not accidental that in 1923 Rivera, Siqueiros, and Xavier Guerrero, three painters, were elected to the party's executive committee. Like any Comintern-affiliated communist organization, the party required more than a little loyalty from its members, but at this stage of its history in Mexico, it needed well known members more than highly disciplined ones. Adherence to ideology was less vital

than public statements of support for communism — whether spoken, written, or painted on the walls of government buildings.

Rivera was in the Soviet Union in late 1927 and early 1928. He had been invited by Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky to attend the celebrations of the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution along with several other Mexicans, as a representative of leftist groups in Mexico. Rivera was very busy while in the USSR, although less as a political figure than as an artist.⁹ He participated in the Red Square parade in honor of the Revolution in November and made a series of sketches and water colors inspired by what he saw that autumn and winter in Moscow.¹⁰ Rivera and his works were already well known in the Soviet capital because Vladimir Mayakovsky publicized them there after visiting Mexico in 1925.¹¹ Everyone seemed eager to meet him, he renewed his friendship with Mayakovsky, attended productions at Vsevolod Meyerhold's theater, and became acquainted with the film director Sergei Eisenstein.

Rivera arrived in Moscow at the high point of Stalin's campaign against "Trotskyism," and to be sure, one person he wanted to meet in the Soviet Union was the General Secretary. The artist remained ambivalent toward the Soviet dictator, admiring him for his strength and forbearance during the Second World War, for example, and willing to glorify him if it helped him gain readmission to the Mexican Communist Party in the early 1950s, but his impressions of Stalin in 1927 and 1928 were not favorable. He met him for the first time on November 8, 1927, at the opening session of the International Congress of Friends of the USSR, and made a number of sketches of him during his speech to the Congress. In later years Rivera was not charitable toward Stalin in remembering this occasion:

Suddenly a peanut-shaped head, surmounted by a military haircut, decked off with a magnificent pair of long mustaches, rose . . . one hand slipped into his overcoat and the other folded behind him à la Napoleon . . . Comrade Stalin posed before the Stalinists and worshipers.¹²

There is little doubt, however, that Rivera was more impressed by Stalin at the time than he later admitted, after breaking with the Stalinists in the Mexican communist movement.

The Mexican artist was delighted to be offered numerous commissions for work in Moscow, and to find himself the subject of several articles in the Soviet press.¹³ Rivera was hired to do a cover for the journal *Krasnaia niva* (Red Cornfield), and there was talk of his painting some frescoes for the Central Red Army Theater and the Lenin Library. These projects were never realized, however. Soviet writers generally explain this outcome by noting that the climate of Moscow is unsuitable for outdoor frescoes. This may have been the case, but a more compelling reason for the works' not being completed was the arguments Rivera became involved in with Soviet cultural authorities over what the style of proletarian art should be, arguments that would reach the Western press over the next several years. Rivera himself felt that Soviet artists' resentment of his receiving the commissions was the reason he failed to obtain permission to do the frescoes. The full truth about the matter has yet to be determined.

While Rivera would find much to admire about the new Soviet state and its culture, he would never be entirely uncritical of developments there. He was disillusioned at the artistic conformism the Communist Party approved and encouraged, and saddened to learn that many of the fervently revolutionary Russian friends he had made in Paris many years before had either gone into exile again, given up their artistic activities, or been effectively paralyzed by criticism. In an article published in 1932 in the United States, Rivera summarized his views on art in the Soviet Union. He praised those Soviet artists who were truly revolutionary, who had had to adapt themselves to the new social and political reality of their country, yet who also worked to educate the proletariat to appreciate art, and to create something entirely new. Unfortunately, he continued, what had happened in the Soviet Union was that political functionaries in the government had come to be dominated by petit-bourgeois bad taste, the same that had been promoted by pre-revolutionary "academic" artists. He urged genuinely revolutionary artists, those of

the avant-garde, to renew the attack on "academic" art and its bureaucratic, philistine supporters. The bureaucratization of art must be struggled against, Rivera concluded, with "true revolutionary ideology and the true art of the revolution."¹⁴ Even agitation and propaganda, which had been carried out initially with the enthusiasm of "progressive" artists, had fallen into the hands of clerks, and had lost their power and effectiveness as revolutionary tools.

Rivera would forever treasure the memory of his first journey to the USSR, but he nevertheless argued repeatedly with Soviet and Mexican communists about almost everything related to their movements. His disagreements in Moscow foreshadowed problems with the PCM back in Mexico. During the 1930s and 1940s, when Rivera's political beliefs shifted from Trotskyism to a new sympathy for Stalinism, he even so continued to speak out against what he considered retrograde Soviet Socialist Realism. He remembered what he had seen in Moscow in 1927 and 1928 as the end of a heroic period in revolutionary Russian art. He feared then that the future of such art was only in its past, and he found nothing in subsequent Soviet art to ameliorate that uneasiness.

Rivera's trip would provide inspiration for later works, and as the Russian Mexicanist Vera Kuteishchikova has pointed out, echoes of the visit appeared in his painting over the next several decades.¹⁵ His panel in the Secretariat of Education in Mexico City, "La Revolución mundial," was directly inspired by the 1928 May Day parade in Moscow, for example, and many of his Moscow sketches reappeared in his Rockefeller Center mural of 1933, as well as in his "Man at the Crossroads," installed in the Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City in 1934. There is no question that the visit was a highly meaningful experience for Rivera, and that the Soviet embassy in Mexico made a wise choice at the time in agreeing to subsidize his journey to Moscow. Internationally, Rivera was by far the best known member of the PCM, and his prestige was of great value to Mexico's communist movement during the 1920s.

The decision to sponsor the visit by Siqueiros was an even more directly profitable one for the Soviet government. Although he would be expelled from the

PCM for a short time in the early 1930s, Siqueiros remained a devoted communist and friend of the Soviet Union throughout his life, and never flirted with Trotskyism, as did so many Mexican communists in the 1930s and 1940s. Siqueiros arrived in the USSR late in 1927 as the head of the Mexican delegation to the Profintern congress, and for two months he worked in the Latin American section of the organization. He spoke to the congress, to the oil workers of Baku, made public appearances elsewhere in the country, met with Stalin through arrangements made by Mayakovsky, and participated in what is remembered as a frigid May Day parade in Moscow.¹⁶ As Siqueiros and his Soviet biographers have emphasized, he never seriously questioned the correctness of the Bolshevik cause, and found nothing which would compel him to disavow his loyalty to what he saw as the only model for Mexico to follow in reforming itself.¹⁷ That loyalty was constantly tested, of course, beginning with Siqueiros's return to Mexico: he was arrested in Veracruz when he stepped off the ship from Europe, and spent the next several years in and out of prison and administrative exile. Yet it was Siqueiros who would fight with the communists in the Spanish Civil War, who would lead the first attempt on Trotsky's life in Coyoacán in 1940, and who would be awarded the Lenin Peace Prize in 1967. Such long-standing and generally unquestioning dedication benefitted the party greatly over a period of fluctuating membership, purges for disloyalty, and government persecution. Siqueiros was far more loyal to the international communist movement than Rivera ever was.

Even during those periods when they were out of favor with their ostensible comrades, Rivera and Siqueiros remained enthusiastic propagandists for the new society created by the Soviet Union. In Mexico they took advantage of every opportunity to encourage Mexicans to learn from the Soviet experience and to explain how that experience might be applied to the realities of life in Mexico. They remained firm friends of the Soviet people, even as the Soviet political system, they believed, became perverted by Stalinism. Most significantly, and despite their position on the leftist fringe of the Mexican revolutionary establishment, they made admiration for the Soviet Union at least somewhat respectable among that

establishment. Rivera's view of the USSR was a much more measured one than Siqueiros's, but both were committed to better relations between Mexico and the Soviet Union and to presenting a positive picture of Soviet life to Mexicans. Their biases were clear, and their artistic radicalism was paralleled by their political positions on domestic and international issues.

Rámos Pedrueza's Utopian 1920s

The last year of the New Economic Policy (NEP), 1928, was a year in which an impressive number of Mexicans traveled to the USSR. In addition to those already mentioned, the artist Xavier Guerrero arrived in the Soviet Union in 1928 and remained there for some time, studying and traveling about the country. It was also in 1928 that the poet, writer, and historian Rafael Rámos Pedrueza spent six months in the USSR. Rámos Pedrueza was an early admirer of revolutionary Russia, the organizer of Mexico's Society of Friends of the USSR, and a propagandist for the idea of a Mexican literary organization modeled after Proletkult, the highly idealistic, almost utopian "proletarian culture" movement in the USSR.¹⁸

Unlike Guerrero, who had little public to say about his stay in the Soviet Union, Rámos Pedrueza was enthusiastic about everything he found there, and upon his return to Mexico published a lengthy account of his journey entitled *La estrella roja* (The Red Star).¹⁹

It was clear from the book's first few pages that *La estrella roja* was not a rigorously objective account of life in the USSR. The author himself said that no one could be impartial in judging "that gigantic social movement to which is tied the future of humanity,"²⁰ and even *El Machete* (by that time the PCM's official newspaper) added that it was a book "written with passion and faith." It was not the book of a spectator, but of "a combatant in the social struggle."²¹ Rámos Pedrueza believed he was traveling to an almost utopian world, and that was how he depicted

the USSR in his book. The audience for his book, he imagined, would be those members of the intelligentsia and the working class who already had a sympathy for what they knew as "the first workers' state." Although not a major author, Rámos Pedrueza did publish one of the most important Mexican books on the USSR during the interwar years.

Rámos Pedrueza arrived in Moscow, but only after passing through the great European capitals of London, Paris, and Berlin, where his overwhelming impression, he wrote, was of the tremendous extremes of splendor and misery, opulence and poverty, and of a level of exploitation unequalled in the past. The egalitarianism of Moscow was refreshing after the inequalities of the West, but nothing was more striking, he sensed, than the legacy of Lenin. No person in history, Rámos Pedrueza wrote, was comparable to the man who initiated the creation of a new era that would be able to save humanity. Lenin was remembered in the hearts of the workers of the world, his sincerity, willingness to admit mistakes, openness, indefatigable labor, and love for the humble and exploited mixed with his commitment to changing the old world, at whatever cost. He was implacable with the enemies of the emancipating revolution, wrote Rámos Pedrueza, because "he knew that sacrificing the lives of a few delinquents would save the lives of millions of honest workers . . . that severity toward a few would liquidate the exploitation of many."²² Difficult choices had had to be made, and Lenin had never shirked the responsibilities he felt history had placed on him. Mexico's revolution, Rámos Pedrueza might have added, had made many of the same life-and-death decisions, but without the ruthlessness and vision that had inspired Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

As most Mexicans would be, Rámos Pedrueza was impressed with the cultural accomplishments of a Soviet state that had not hesitated to take severe steps to establish the proletarian dictatorship. He met with Commissar of Enlightenment Lunacharsky. He visited kindergartens and state-run elementary schools, and was impressed by the seriousness, self-assurance, and understanding of important social issues expressed by Soviet children. Their teachers were able and committed, allowed the students to work at their own pace, and emphasized the collective in the

classroom and on the playing field. Together, it appeared to Rámos Pedrueza, the teachers and the schools worked to develop the student's personality, to prepare the student for higher education or for manual labor as a proletarian producer who would be useful to the overall collective.²³

Education, publishing, and literature were all possible because of the success of the literacy campaign, Rámos Pedrueza noted. The large number of journals and periodicals, newspapers such as *Pravda*,²⁴ the poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky, and the novels of Leonid Leonov and Demian Bedny were representative of the new burst of creativity made viable by the social and structural changes accompanying the consolidation of Bolshevik power. Soviet theater was innovative, its cinema original and pathbreaking. Soviet culture had reached a level unimagined only a decade before, Rámos Pedrueza concluded,

But the most elevated manifestation of culture is to be found in the spirit of sacrifice, which can be seen in all the details of life: a solidarity that grows broader and more extensive day by day; an impulse to world brotherhood among all the workers; a heroic resolve to accept all forms of suffering on behalf of liberation from ignorance proclaim that a more humane civilization, one superior to that of capitalism, is being born in the Soviet Union.²⁵

This sort of commitment, a willingness to forego individual gratification for the good of society as a whole, was something Mexicans had forgotten, Rámos Pedrueza implied, and was a characteristic of Soviet life that could profitably be adopted in the individualistic Mexico of the 1920s, he believed.

Rámos Pedrueza found that willingness to sacrifice in the Red Army as well. The soldiers' sense of fraternity and comradeship, their commitment to the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, had made it possible for the Soviet regime to survive twelve years in the face of "mercenary" armies paid for by "the capitalists of the world."²⁶ And if the proletarian dictatorship needed an army to defend it, he added, it was fortunate that Trotsky and his comrades had created an institution with the ideals of

the Red Army. Such ideals, Rámos Pedrueza must have felt, were sorely lacking among many of those military officers and men who continued to control Mexico's destiny as the 1920s drew to a close. The Red Army was working for the Revolution. Mexico's army seemed to be working to contain the effects of their country's revolution.

Rámos Pedrueza was particularly concerned with politics and questions of government in his book, and he admitted that he had made an effort to counter certain "mistaken" but often repeated notions prevalent in Mexico about the Soviet system. Bourgeois democracy was a sham, he argued, nothing like the genuine democracy practiced in the system of councils (soviets) set up by the Revolution. The Soviet of Nationalities guaranteed the independence and cultural integrity of the minority nationalities of the USSR. The widespread legends of "red terror" were monstrous falsehoods, he continued: Soviet prisons were hygienic and humane schools for the regeneration of the prisoners. If some prisoners were executed for counterrevolutionary activities, it was done to protect the safety of millions of workers; most political opponents were treated well. Clearly, Rámos Pedrueza was among those many Mexicans on the left who did not foresee the evolution of Stalinism, and he concluded the section of his book dealing with politics by affirming the essential soundness of the "proletarian dictatorship":

The Soviet system has realized the only true democracy possible in the modern era; its constitution gives its citizens greater and more effective guarantees than those proclaimed by capitalist governments; political peace is being consolidated in real terms, and under the hammer and sickle it is an indisputable truth that the betterment of the masses of workers is taking place.²⁷

Rámos Pedrueza was obviously preaching the gospel of Soviet communism, to an audience that knew little about the realities of life in the USSR but was prepared to read his descriptions with amazement and admiration.

In his book, Rámos Pedrueza addressed at length developments in Soviet agriculture and industry before moving on to an overall conclusion. Quoting Stalin as extensively as any communist apparatchik might have, Rámos Pedrueza argued that through electrification, improved education and medical care, and the establishment of cooperatives, the countryside had overcome the suffering and ignorance of the past. In industry, the role played by the unions had ensured the improvement of the standard of living of the workers. The "material force" of the revolution was great, then, but not as great as the moral force behind the Soviet experiment, Rámos Pedrueza believed. The Soviet Union was destroying the evils of capitalism. Women had been emancipated, children were now the only "privileged" class in the USSR, and equality, spontaneity, and sincerity were cultivated in all segments of society. It was an accomplishment, Rámos Pedrueza claimed, that could be appreciated only from outside the Soviet Union:

Drawing away from the Soviet Union, you measure the magnitude of the goodness that you leave there: the revolutionary education, energy, and conscience...a people who work without rest, serious-mindedly, giving completely of themselves, for the emancipation of the world. Everything I observe in capitalist Europe seems antiquated, conventional, passé, like costume jewelry or the "attitudes" of affected actors on some immense stage. I recall the joy, the enthusiasm, the hope that irradiates over the forge of the battle; the Red Army soldiers who sing, the students who laugh, the workers who labor joyfully; and I have the certainty of a person who is leaving a New World to return to the Old World.²⁸

The seventh of November, Rámos Pedrueza believed, marked the beginning of a new era, the birth of a genuine civilization, a turning point in history.

Quite obviously, Rámos's praise for features of life in the Soviet Union could in most cases not stand up to serious examination, and many of his statements were later proved untrue. To show the Soviet government's generosity, for example, Rámos Pedrueza cited the case of Trotsky's exile: "In an imperialist country, Trotsky would have been assassinated; at present he is living in Turkey, enjoying absolute

liberty."²⁹ If he misread the extent of Soviet political tolerance, he also misunderstood the nature of the Soviet command economy: Gosplan (the State Planning Commission), he assured his readers, could "serve as a model, because of its admirable efficiency, in capitalist countries."³⁰ This was the Gosplan, as Soviet critics of the Stalinist planned economy would argue with some justification later, that existed not for the economy, but created an economy that existed for a bureaucratized and authoritarian Gosplan.³¹ Like his idol, Lenin, Ramos Pedrueza believed that sometimes the ends justified the means, that the sacrifice of a few to ensure the survival of the many was acceptable, and that a revolution from above could bring about a positive transformation in human beings and their society.

Ramos Pedrueza included an impressive array of facts and figures in *La estrella roja*, and his book provides an extensive discussion of how things were designed to work, ideally, in the Soviet Union. He made no serious attempt to analyze the reality of Soviet life in 1928, however, or to criticize developments that other Mexicans and foreigners found unsettling. He had come to the USSR as a convert, and he intended his book to be a document in support of the society aspired to by Soviet socialism. There was no doubt that that was the way his book was received and understood in Mexico.

The Messenger of Disillusionment: Ambassador Silva Herzog's Observations

If Ramos Pedrueza was hopelessly optimistic about developments in the USSR, Mexico's second ambassador to Moscow, Jesús Silva Herzog, was much less positive about what he found there when he arrived early in 1929:

Moscow during the first few days I was there made a strong impression on me that was not entirely favorable: the weather was very cold, people were dressed in very

old and worn clothing, transportation was difficult, and above all one observed Muscovites on frozen mornings and afternoons standing in interminable lines in the streets in order to buy a pound of bread. I have to admit that, raised as a petit bourgeois, I was accustomed to a different life.³²

Silva Herzog described himself as an economist in the late 1920s (although he had held a number of other positions during the decade), and when the new Portes Gil government of December 1928 offered him the post of ambassador to the USSR, he saw an opportunity to examine in person and in depth the First Five Year Plan's innovations in industry and agriculture. He accepted gratefully, and by February 1929 he and his family had arrived in Moscow.

Presenting his credentials to Premier Mikail Kalinin, the new ambassador commented that Mexico's revolutionary experience had compelled it to follow with interest and sympathy the construction of a new economic order in the Soviet Union, and he conveyed his nation's good wishes to the Soviet government and people. Because of Silva Herzog's interest in economics, much of his time in Moscow during his first few weeks was spent attempting to expand trade between Mexico and the USSR, but he also met many old Bolsheviks and current government officials, and attempted to do what he could to further good relations with the Soviet government and people. He gave a series of lectures on Mexican agrarian reform at the International Agrarian Institute, and on a trip to Leningrad in July, visited a *kolkhoz* where he was applauded by the farmers. He wrote later that he was surprised and a bit chagrined to be told that the *kolkhozniki* thought that Mexico was a part of the United States, for which they had a great deal of admiration at the time, and that they had applauded him thinking he was the US ambassador to the Soviet Union.

Diplomatic life in Moscow was not particularly rewarding, Silva Herzog soon found, to his disappointment. Of the fourteen foreign embassies in the capital, most were headed by older envoys, and all but the Japanese and Chinese refused to talk seriously about anything more controversial than the weather. There was a constant shortage of foods and medicines (important since Silva Herzog was accompanied by

his wife and four small children), and transportation was a constant headache because of the severely limited number of taxis and the overcrowding of the public transportation system.

In July 1929 the political relationship between the USSR and Mexico worsened substantially. The Comintern had issued a manifesto calling for communists throughout the world to rise up in opposition to the Mexican government because of its bloody suppression of a communist insurrection there. Silva Herzog protested to the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs about the Comintern's anti-Mexican activities, but was told that the Soviet government had no control over the Comintern, which the Commissariat insisted was a separate, absolutely independent entity. The number of Soviet visitors to the embassy dropped, and the ambassador complained of being spied upon by his Soviet employees and by others in the city, all most likely employees of the secret police, he felt. Soon the Mexican members of the staff found it possible to meet socially only with diplomats and the other three Mexicans living in Moscow at the time, and in a short while, because their sympathies lay more with Moscow than with Mexico City, even they refused to have any contact with Silva Herzog. Moscow was not proving to be as rewarding or as interesting a post as the new ambassador had hoped, and he wrote later that he came to feel he was living on another planet there.³³

By November the future of Soviet–Mexican relations looked even more dim, and Silva Herzog asked for a leave of absence to travel to Berlin to study economic conditions in Germany. While there he learned that his government had broken relations with the USSR. Silva Herzog was told that former President Calles had read a copy of the Comintern manifesto and had pressured the current President, Ortiz Rubio, into severing Mexico's ties with the Soviet government. This was not Calles's sole motivation for breaking relations, of course. Mexico had been under pressure from the United States to discontinue diplomatic ties for some time, for example, and Calles's need to placate Mexican communists and their sympathizers was no longer as compelling as it had been earlier in the decade. It must be admitted too, however, that the Comintern's crudely orchestrated international campaign

against the Mexican government infuriated Calles, and he was the politician who mattered most in Mexico in 1930. The Soviet relationship had served its purpose; Calles had been able to show his independence of the United States and to undercut his domestic critics. The times had changed, and Calles believed Mexican policy should change as well.

Silva Herzog admitted that he had not been a great success as an ambassador, but he had spent considerable time studying developments in the country while he was there, and felt he had learned much of value. He sent four reports back to the Secretariat of Foreign Relations in Mexico City during the months he was in Moscow, and in April 1930 he delivered a series of lectures (based on the reports) that were shortly thereafter published by the country's official governmental party, the PNR (the Partido Nacional Revolucionario, or National Revolutionary Party) as *Aspectos económicos de la Unión soviética* (Economic Aspects of the Soviet Union). The book was a serious, carefully analytical account of what Silva Herzog had learned about the USSR, one intended for an audience of centrist politicians, scholars, and figures in public life.

Silva Herzog described the Soviet Union as an immense laboratory for social, economic, and political experimentation. What was taking place in the USSR in 1929, he said, was something new in world history. Russia was attempting to overcome its past as a semi-colonial nation exporting raw materials in order to buy other nations' manufactured goods. Peasants who had lived worse than the peons of Mexico had during the presidency of Porfirio Díaz were seeing their lives transformed. The generation of the First Five Year Plan was sacrificing its well-being for the good of its children and grandchildren. Shortages and rationing, and the misery involved in the construction of the new industrial towns and cities, were counterbalanced by an almost religious devotion to the idea of building the biggest, the best of everything:

The spectacle of lines of people in front of grocery stores is surprising and striking. People wait in an orderly fashion for one, two, or three hours, until their

turn to buy bread, meat or butter comes around, with extraordinary patience and without any sign of protest. Some do it out of fear, others because they are fatalists and are accustomed to suffering; but there are also those who do it out of a spirit of conscious sacrifice, because they believe it is their duty to sacrifice so that future generations will have a life less wretched than theirs. . . . The capacity for suffering of the Soviet people has no limits.³⁴

Such suffering could be observed throughout Soviet society, Silva Herzog found, and to a great extent it was a reflection of the changes in the social structure accompanying the Party's programs of industrialization and collectivization. He wrote to the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs early during his stay in Moscow, for example, that he had found four clearly defined social classes in Moscow: at the top were the foreigners and private businessmen; below them were the upper government functionaries (who lived about as well as the Mexican middle class); next came communist party members, who had some privileges; and last came the rest of society, with ordinary members of the Soviet proletariat living worse than US workers but better than their Mexican counterparts. This inequality in the cities Silva Herzog found unsettling, and what he learned of conditions in the countryside reinforced his concern. He himself saw nothing of the realities of the collectivization drive, but he wrote to Mexico City about rumors he had heard of the alarming extent of bloodshed, assassinations, and arson in rural areas.

The abandonment of the practice of paying approximately equal salaries to Soviet workers and government and party officials, he found, meant that the Soviet Union looked very much like other non-socialist countries in terms of income distribution. Finally, he wondered what the justification was for creating four classes on Soviet steamships, for example — particularly when fourth class on Soviet steamers was evidently much worse than second class on trains in capitalist Mexico.

While Silva Herzog was fascinated with the economic transformation of the country, he was not particularly impressed by its accomplishments. The rapidly expanding bureaucratism of the planners was something he found dangerous, and he

objected strongly to the practice of making planning decisions on the basis of political rather than economic considerations. Leningrad, for example, should not have been given the developmental stress it had received in the First Five Year Plan: ensuring the "proletarian" nature of the city was less important than guaranteeing its economic viability, he said, and continuing to build up its industrial plant was not rational economic planning. The unevenness of economic development struck him much as it did ordinary Soviet citizens. He related a joke about two Soviet citizens meeting in 1933 in their private flying machines somewhere over the new Soviet Union: one asks the other where he is going, and the second replies "Warsaw, to buy a kilogram of butter."³⁵ According to Silva Herzog, the success of the plan was questionable as well with respect to quality of production: while the overall production figures were approximately accurate, he believed, assumptions on quality could not be substantiated. He found, for example, that about eighty per cent of the tractors produced in a new factory were unusable because of poor quality of workmanship. Silva Herzog recognized an endemic weakness in the Stalinist command economy, one that would curse Soviet economic planners for decades to come.

If Silva Herzog judged the USSR's economic development to be unbalanced and not entirely laudable, he found the political system appalling. "The domestic policy of the Soviet government," he wrote, "can be described in three words: propaganda, censorship, and repression."³⁶ Propaganda had been perfected in a way achieved by no other country. Lenin was an icon, and the USSR's actions were above reproach, the Soviet people were told. Censorship was extreme, and repression was energetic and implacable. One worker waiting in line complained about its length, Silva reported, and was sentenced to deportation and four and a half years of internal exile as punishment. A man who reportedly said that German chemicals were superior to Soviet ones was sentenced to ten years in exile.³⁷ The GPU, the secret police, had agents everywhere, but without it, Silva added, the state might not be able to consolidate its power and defend itself from imagined and real enemies. The ideals of the revolution had changed significantly from what they had been. He met Aleksandra Kollontai, the former Soviet ambassador to Mexico, while she was on

vacation from her diplomatic duties in Norway, and asked her if what was happening in the Soviet Union was what Marx had in mind. She answered, he said, without hesitation that conditions were different from what Lenin had had in mind as well, and that the only thing left to do for those like her who had made the Revolution was to write their memoirs.³⁸ As Silva Herzog wrote, he came to believe very soon that

liberty does not exist in Russia. The Bolsheviks do not pretend that their regime is based on liberty, and are frank in [their] opposition to the postulates of the French Revolution. They declare that they have a dictatorship, a dictatorship of the proletariat, a situation they consider indispensable for achieving socialism. It is a system made of iron and its methods of repression are implacable. They do not deny this, and they believe that those who are scandalized by it are typical bourgeois sentimentalists and hypocrites.³⁹

The dictatorship of the proletariat had been transformed, he felt, into the dictatorship of the Communist Party, the dictatorship of the Central Committee, and in the final analysis, into the dictatorship of one man — Joseph Stalin.⁴⁰

Silva Herzog concluded his commentary on contemporary Soviet affairs by comparing post-revolutionary developments in Mexico and the USSR. Early during his stay in Moscow, Silva had written that he sensed a special affinity between Mexicans and Soviet citizens, a unique sympathy that derived from the similarities of their recent experiences. By the spring of 1930, however, he wrote that a Mexican visiting the Soviet Union would feel he was in another world, and that the charge leveled most often by US politicians against Mexico of having adopted "Bolshevik" policies⁴¹ could be said to have absolutely no basis in fact. Despite the political sensitivities of foreign conservatives, it seemed obvious to Silva Herzog that the realization of the promises of the countries' two revolutions were so divergent as to make them entirely different historical experiences:

The Mexican Revolution, with certain restrictions, recognizes private property and tries to stimulate the development of small-property holding; the Russian

Revolution does not recognize private property in the means of production and is trying to abolish it in all its forms. The Mexican Revolution is nationalistic; the Russian Revolution is, at least in theory and tendency, internationalist. The Mexican Revolution accepts and defends democratic principles; defends equality of economic, political, and social possibilities for all classes. The Russian Revolution is anti-democratic, is, at least theoretically, a proletarian dictatorship. The Mexican Revolution accepts the accumulated secular culture of all peoples, while giving preference to the development of a national culture; the Russian Revolution struggles against this culture and that which it calls, disdainfully, bourgeois, and is actively engaged in attempting to create a new culture. Finally, the Mexican Revolution is neither antireligious nor anticlerical, and in the speeches of its highest representatives defends the ideals of Christianity; the Russian Revolution affirms categorically, in conformity with Leninist thought, that all religions are opium for the peoples and is frankly not only antireligious but also atheist.⁴²

Certain of the comparisons Silva Herzog made between the Russian and Mexican revolutionary experiences were not entirely accurate, but on the whole his analysis was a reasonable one.

Silva Herzog wished to make clear that despite all his criticisms of the Soviet Union, he did believe that the Soviet experiment was one of the most important in history, and that the future of all the nations of the world would depend on its success or failure. He had traveled through much of the European part of the country during his months there, and had seen a great deal that was both positive and negative. He stressed that there was much Mexico could learn from the Soviet experience, particularly with regard to the formation of producers' and consumers' cooperatives, the diffusion of culture and education throughout the country by means of radio and cinema, and the reform of the military.⁴³

Returning from the Soviet Union, Silva Herzog was struck with the contradictions he had found there, contradictions between an ideology often utopian and a reality that was just as frequently dismal and appalling. Recognizing the

importance of the Soviet experiment, he also saw the dangers involved in the desires of many Mexicans to emulate it too closely. In Moscow he was a representative of the Mexican government, and his opinions reflected the general mood of the era of the *Maximato* of Plutarco Elías Calles, that period when Calles was officially out of office, but during which he continued to dominate the national political scene in Mexico. It was a time when verbal support for radical social and economic experimentation was replaced by calls for a consolidation of the gains made by the revolution. As an economist and intellectual, however, Silva Herzog approached the Soviet Union from an independent perspective that was honest and untainted by many of the prejudices exhibited by those on the political left or right. His view of the Soviet Union at a special time in its history was probably the most objective of all Mexican accounts produced during the 1920s, and the one most reflective of the overall state of both official and unofficial public opinion in Mexico during the decade. The audience he wished to reach was Mexico, not one or another subgroup within the Mexican population, and in this hope he succeeded.

Leftist Ideals and Realities of the 1930s: Lombardo Toledano and Villaseñor

Diplomatic ties between Mexico and the Soviet Union were broken in 1930, but informal contacts would flourish during the next decade, and Mexicans would continue traveling to the USSR. With Lázaro Cárdenas's election to the presidency in 1934, and in response to his apparent lack of interest in reestablishing relations with the Soviet Union, contacts between Mexico and the USSR were to a great extent carried on through the activities of the PCM and its friends, and were closely tied to the new Comintern policy of the Popular Front (established in the summer of 1935 and continuing until the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939). The Comintern's new program, and Cárdenas's increasingly tolerant attitude, also made it possible for Mexican

communists to visit the USSR openly and to speak and write about what they found there during the period of the Second Five Year Plan. PCM member Hernán Laborde was at the Seventh Comintern Congress, for example, and upon his return to Mexico, spoke about the most recent "triumphs of the proletariat" to *El Machete* and at the celebration held in Mexico City in honor of the eighteenth anniversary of the October Revolution.⁴⁴ He was especially impressed, he said, by the successes of the Stakhanovite movement in mining, manufacturing, and agriculture. Living standards had increased, he found, ration cards had been discontinued, thousands of schools had been opened, and "an avalanche of books" was available. His hope, of course, was that Mexicans would compare these economic advances in the USSR with the achievements of Cárdenas, which seemed motivated more by nationalism than by economic good sense, and come to believe that under a communist government they would have both independence and economic equality.

In 1935, the independent (and sometimes critical) Marxists Vicente Lombardo Toledano and Victor Manuel Villaseñor also traveled to the Soviet Union. They went to examine the economic and political situation there on behalf of the Confederación General de Obreros y Campesinos de México (General Confederation of Workers and Peasants of Mexico), in which Lombardo in particular had been quite active. Upon their return, in November 1935, they gave a number of public lectures about their journey to leftist audiences in the capital. That they were both favorable toward what the Bolshevik Revolution and the First and Second Five Year plans had achieved could be seen in the title of the book in which their collected lectures were published: *Un viaje al mundo del porvenir* (A Journey to the World of the Future).⁴⁵

Lombardo and Villaseñor noted at the beginning of their lecture series that they wanted to help Mexicans learn about a country they still knew very poorly, and each of the talks focused on one aspect of current developments in the USSR. Lombardo gave the first lecture, which concentrated on the country's unique political structure. Lombardo explained to his audience that the Soviet Union, surrounded by enemies (fascists to the west, imperialist-dominated states to the south, and imperialists and counter-revolutionaries to the east), was attempting to develop a new kind of

democracy. It was a democracy more real, more productive, more human than any of the past. It was, indeed, the first genuine democracy in the whole history of human thought and ideas, he concluded, one in which Soviet people were masters of their own fate. The new constitution of 1936 guaranteed "the historic triumph of the proletariat over the capitalist class,"⁴⁶ and the abolition of private property reinforced that victory.

Lombardo spoke also about the resolution of the problem of minority nationalities in the Soviet Union, which he considered one of the principal achievements of the new Soviet regime. Visiting the Caucasus, he found that the Soviet government had been able to provide previously illiterate peoples with alphabets, and had replaced the Arabic script of others with Latin or Cyrillic characters, which would help bring their speakers into the mainstream of Western life and culture. (Interestingly, he was not concerned about their losing access to their written culture as it existed before the Soviet era.) Most impressively, perhaps, the Revolution had brought about the emancipation of Muslim women in the region and had made the change possible through the efforts of the women themselves. Lombardo found the Soviet effort to liberate minority nationalities particularly relevant to Mexico, which he said had still not been able to incorporate the Indians into national life. He recommended a series of steps based on the Soviet model (political autonomy for ethnic groups, cultivation of vernacular languages, programs of collectivization and industrialization), which he said would not only help save Mexico's Indians, but also help rescue Mexico from its fate as a semi-colonial country oppressed by imperialism. Once again, the Soviet Union could teach Mexico important lessons.

Villaseñor was interested particularly in the success of economic development in the USSR, and was determined, he emphasized, to refute what he considered the scurrilous campaign of misinformation carried on by the Hearst newspapers in the United States and their "moral allies" in Mexico. Villaseñor explained that the Soviet Union was still at only the first stage of socialist development, and that the Five Year Plans themselves were flexible, not rigid or dogmatic as they were seen to be abroad.

The plans encouraged true democracy, he said. Discussion and criticism were guaranteed on both the national and local level, and collectivization of agriculture would be successful in bringing democracy to the countryside, by giving the peasants rights equal to those of the workers. Soviet workers had an advantage over foreign workers, he contended, because they understood that their labor contributed to the overall development of the country, that they were working not for private gain but for the collective good of their country and people. As a result, they were able to understand the meaning of the dignity of labor in a way workers in capitalist countries would never be able to.

Villaseñor had particular praise for the preparation and implementation of the Five Year plans themselves. The accomplishments were obvious, he noted, as a new tractor factory in Kharkov, new oil refineries in Baku, new tea fields near Batumi, and the production of the Black Soil region of the Ukraine attested. The plan brought a perfect equilibrium between production and consumption, Villaseñor explained, and was completely antithetical to capitalism, which produced goods most of the population could not afford to buy. The Soviet experience proved to Villaseñor, however, that planning must be "all or nothing," that partial planning could not succeed, and that the kind of economic direction employed in fascist countries (and to a certain extent in Mexico, Villaseñor might have added) was not truly "progressive" planning, but an attack on the interests of the workers, with the aim of conserving the basic capitalist structure of the economy. Soviet planning had made possible a qualitative and quantitative change in history, and Soviet people were changing the world:

For the first time in the history of humanity, the world is presented with the spectacle of a country which consciously dedicates all its energies to the creation of a new organization characterized by cooperation in all areas of social activity. Building socialism is not an easy undertaking, and serious difficulties in its realization have been presented, and continue to present themselves. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding all the obstacles, the Soviet Union continues to march from

victory to victory, and this rapid process of transformation can be explained only by virtue of the creative spirit of millions of persons whose individual objectives converge into a single goal. Shoulder to shoulder, the ranks of workers, intellectuals, and manual laborers, without distinction to sex or race, are attempting to create a flourishing economy that is not a jail where human individuality will be suffocated, but a society in which everyone can find the means for developing personal capabilities through which his activities redound to the collective welfare. Such an effort signifies a fountain of energy and represents an invincible force, constituting the best guarantee for the consolidation of accomplishments already achieved and for the definitive triumph of the historic mission of the Soviet Union.⁴⁷

The Soviet masses were building a new world that would be an example for workers in all lands, Villaseñor believed, and he admired them immensely.

In his second lecture, on conditions of life in the USSR, Lombardo Toledano said that most of the common preconceptions foreigners had about the suffering of the Soviet populace were untrue. In fact, he countered, no one lacked the necessities of life. The basic diet for peasants was borshch with meat, eggs, wheat bread, fruit, and tea, and for urban workers it was just slightly better. It was a diet, he remarked, notably superior to that of Mexican workers or campesinos. The quality of clothing needed to be improved, he admitted, but no one lacked shoes or winter clothing. He added that here the comparison with Mexico was upsetting, particularly in the case of children:

These small or large groups of children [in Mexico] without shoes, working to support their [parents], these children without bread, often abandoned, who suffer from inclement weather during the cold months of winter on the Mexican plateaus — you cannot find such children in any part of the Soviet Union.⁴⁸

Not only were children clothed better in the USSR, Lombardo continued, they were housed better and given access to political, aesthetic, and physical education.

Mexican schools, moreover, educated the young to serve the interests of the bourgeoisie. Soviet schools educated the young to serve the interests of society as a whole, and gave them a political sophistication that most Mexicans could not even comprehend.

If the position of Soviet children was superior to that of their Mexican counterparts, Lombardo continued, so too was the condition of women. Child care and factory kitchens had emancipated women. They could now work and were independent, whereas in Mexico, while women would appear to have legal equality, in fact they did not. They depended on men to the extent that sometimes they were little better off than slaves. On the whole, Lombardo concluded, Soviet social developments were impressive, particularly in comparison with Mexico, but even in reference to the strains caused by the Depression in the United States. This was in no way an honest portrait of Soviet reality, but a vision of what Lombardo had hoped that reality would be. For Lombardo and his leftist intellectual and working-class audience, a vision was apparently enough.

Lombardo and Villaseñor concluded their lecture series by speaking to questions of world politics and the nature of the Soviet experience. They defended Soviet foreign policy, particularly alliances with the capitalist states of the West, by citing the need to defend the world's only socialist state from the threats of fascism. But soon, they predicted, the Five Year plans would make the USSR the world's most industrialized state and give it the strength to withstand alone the combined power of Germany and Japan. And in the end, capitalism would have to be destroyed before its inevitable degeneration into fascism destroyed civilization itself. In its place there would be socialism, with its authentic democratic principles:

True democracy is possible only in a socialist regime where, by virtue of the communal administration of the means of production and distribution, an objective social morality is established that harmonizes individual interests with those of the collective. This organization can be achieved only by abolishing the capitalist regime and by installing the proletarian dictatorship, a transitional stage on the road

to communism; it is a dictatorship with respect to the overthrown capitalist class, which will attempt to regain power by the use of all means of violence; it is a democracy for the masses of workers, in a sense superior to democracy's possibilities at any stage of capitalism.⁴⁹

Much had been accomplished in the Soviet Union, but what was most important was that the USSR had provided "a new way of understanding the universe, a new means of experiencing life,"⁵⁰ and was developing a new humanism inspired by the work of the founder of the Soviet state, Lenin.

In sum, the picture presented by Lombardo and Villaseñor of the Soviet Union was hopelessly idealistic, but one shared by many in Western Europe and the United States during the Great Depression. It was a view typical of Mexican leftists, and indeed of many in the Cárdenas administration. Cárdenas's attempt to reinvigorate the Mexican Revolution after what was seen as a period of stagnation during the *Maximato* meant that Mexicans would be searching once again for foreign models of radical change, and in this respect Mexico's goals differed somewhat from those of the Western democracies. It was equally an indication of how far to the left opinion in the government had moved only two years after Cárdenas became President. The book and lectures do not tell us much about the Soviet Union during the mid-1930s that other works have not, but they do suggest the extent to which many Mexicans continued to see in the Soviet experience a model for their own social and economic development. Lombardo and Villaseñor were constantly and directly comparing their country with the Soviet Union, and in their political activities, their speaking engagements and written work, as well as their negotiations within the government and on behalf of their leftist constituencies during the decade, they were ardent and uncritical in agitating for Soviet-style changes to be made in Mexico.

The Novelist Mancisidor and the Romanticizing of Soviet Social Policies

A year after Lombardo and Villaseñor made their trip, the well known but perhaps not exceptional novelist and short-story writer José Mancisidor⁵¹ visited the Soviet Union (as a "comrade," he wrote), and upon his return published *Ciento veinte días* (A Hundred and Twenty Days), a book about his impressions of "the world of the proletariat." Mancisidor's introduction made it clear that his book was part of a growing tradition in Mexico of praise for the Soviet Union.⁵² It was directed, he wrote, against those calumniators and enemies of liberty who were currently attacking Mexico, Spain, and the USSR, three countries creating a new life and a new world. It would, however, be an honest and sincere book, he promised.

Mancisidor was a close friend of Lombardo Toledano, and while he had never been a member of the PCM, he had been actively involved in the Society of Friends of the USSR,⁵³ and would write a great deal favorable toward the Soviet Union that would earn him significant praise there. Much of Mancisidor's book merely repeated what earlier Mexican commentators had to say; still, he did elaborate on certain issues that had been important to all Mexicans writing about the Soviet Union, with his observations on women, children, and the issue of nationalities being most memorable.

Mancisidor noted early in his book that from the beginning of his stay in the USSR he had been impressed at how "different" women there were. Women on the street were strong, he found. They had frank expressions on their faces, they were secure in their identities, and they were able to handle any obstacles which life might present them. The Soviet woman was "a comrade and friend, a companion with whom one can talk about movies or theater, politics or sciences, without her having to worry about losing her femininity."⁵⁴ She was not "an object of extravagance, nor a motive for amusement, but a human being who thinks, acts, and works for the realization of a social edifice of which she is one of the cornerstones."⁵⁵ Women had

been emancipated by the Revolution, not just in Russia, but among the ethnic minorities as well. In the Caucasus, Mancisidor found, it had been particularly difficult to change women's lives:

In this geographical area, with its feudal economic basis and its Islamic religion working on behalf of social injustice, the Bolsheviks had to struggle not only against the enemies of women, but also against the women's own conscience, deformed by centuries of vassalage in which they knew only inferiority and servitude.⁵⁶

Russian women had been, he implied, in a situation not unlike that of women in Mexico. The new "women's palaces" had given women an opportunity to discuss their status and to prepare the measures that would make it possible for them to live and prosper in a new society. In the Caucasus and elsewhere, indeed throughout the Union, women had become engineers, technicians, doctors, journalists, and even exemplary Stakhanovites. In essence, they were true comrades.

Yet not all women were emancipated, as Mancisidor found in Leningrad. There was still prostitution, for example, a remnant of the capitalist era engaged in by women who had been unable to adapt to the new socialist way of life, Mancisidor was told. He noted that in fact prostitution was no longer necessary. Men were being educated to turn against such exploitation of women, and with legal equality, nursery schools, collective kitchens, and other social supports, women themselves no longer needed to resort to such a humiliating profession.

One issue of great importance to Soviet women at the time Mancisidor visited the USSR was the new legislation outlawing abortion. In November 1920, abortion had been made legal, Mancisidor explained, but because of the dialectical processes taking place in all societies it was never intended to be a definitive program. Conditions in the Soviet Union had changed from what they had been earlier. The successes of the Five Year plans had done away with the need for abortion. Aid to mothers, child care, kindergartens, and the overall level of women's emancipation

meant that now abortion was no longer needed. Mancisidor noted with approval the provisions of the new law: serious punishments for anyone asking for, giving, or assisting in an abortion; four months' paid leave for new mothers, with guarantees of rehire; new hospitals and nursery schools, as well as improved supplies of food for children; and a tightened divorce code. To Mancisidor, the new abortion law provided yet another example of the success of the Soviet system, and because of his sympathy for the regime as a whole, he failed to question whether the promised benefits of the law would be forthcoming. While he would have been skeptical about such promises in Mexico, he accepted their veracity absolutely in the USSR.

If the treatment of women in the Soviet Union was impressive to Mancisidor, so too was that society's attitude toward children, particularly in comparison with Mexico's. Like most of the Mexican visitors to the USSR, he asked to be permitted to visit schools. He was struck immediately by the new mentality exhibited by the children: they constructed buildings out of sand, airplanes out of paper, bridges out of cardboard as if, he said, they were trying out the jobs they would be doing as adults. In the Caucasus, he found children of different nationalities sitting together in class, able to maintain their separate identities but working for the good of their common homeland, he said. They were the offspring of intermarriages between Russians and Turks, Armenians and Tatars, individuals who physically and emotionally constituted a new type of human being, one "with the spirit of humanity produced only among the peoples of the Soviet Union."⁵⁷

This reformation of society through the education of young people impressed Mancisidor particularly at a camp for young "vagabonds and drifters" located outside Moscow. He found the camp to be pleasant, with workshops, a factory, and sports grounds. It was dedicated to the idea that work, education, and decent treatment could regenerate people who had had no place in pre-Revolutionary society. The camp had become a commune, and it included party and Komsomol members as well as a large number of Stakhanovites. The transformation here too was a positive and successful one.

Mancisidor's visit to one school caused him to feel great shame, he reported. In an elementary classroom in Moscow, the children asked him questions about Mexico, and particularly about Mexican children. He recalled that he found it difficult to reply to them, to tell them about his country's abandoned children, about those in need of the basic necessities of life, without homes and ignorant of anything outside their own immediate communities. The Soviet children, he wrote, simply could not understand the conditions of life he had described, that they looked at him with shocked faces. One young girl came up to him afterwards and asked him to "tell the children of your country that we think of them with love and that one day they will be as happy as our own children are."⁵⁸

Mancisidor was sincere in his concern for the poor Mexican children he remembered from home, but it is hard to accept his gullibility about everything told him by his Soviet hosts. Not all Soviet children, needless to say, were as well treated as the ones he met in Moscow, and elsewhere in his book he quoted certain individuals without any attempt at ascertaining how reflective their experiences were of Soviet society as a whole. He repeated verbatim speeches by political figures, to the extent that at times he was only a mouthpiece for the Soviet propaganda of which Silva Herzog had been so critical. A soldier is quoted for example as explaining:

We are the sons of a new humanity, whose grandeur it is impossible to foresee, and our object is not war, not rapine, not gain at the price of the misery of our fellow man, but the creation of human dignity for love, peace, and work.⁵⁹

A young peasant reportedly remarked to him that "it is impossible to describe the joy caused by the creation of a new existence."⁶⁰ Today such comments make us laugh; but like so many others, Mancisidor was seeing what he wanted to see, and not asking questions whose answers might prove embarrassing. Whether he genuinely believed what he wrote is uncertain, but there is no doubt that he was committed to the socialist system that at least laid claim to the utopian conditions he described.

Mancisidor also concerned himself with the industrial and agricultural changes taking place in the USSR, and on his travels through the country he was able to view the results of its "socialist transformation." In Rostov he visited a new agricultural machinery factory, and wrote that he could understand the pride felt by the 22,000 workers of the complex in having constructed the factory themselves, without the help of the foreign specialists who had been necessary during the First Five Year Plan. In the oil fields of Baku, he was gratified to see that feudalism and imperialist servitude had been replaced by the "liberty" of socialism, and that pre-Revolutionary discrimination against Turks and Armenians had been ended decisively. The workers' heady enthusiasm was something he found contagious. He met Aleksei Stakhanov, and learned why his system was superior to the Taylorism of the capitalists. Taylorism, he was told, was capitalist exploitation, the destruction of the human personality. Using Stakhanov's technique, Soviet workers were inspired to work for themselves, not for the capitalist exploiters but for the collective. The Stakhanovites, Mancisidor declared — apparently guilelessly — were the new heroes of the Soviet people.

On the farms similar changes had taken place. Mancisidor admitted that the struggle for collectivization had been "ferocious" in the face of "ignorant resistance,"⁶¹ but out of it, he went on, had come a collective that ensured a greater, more complete individuality than anything offered in the past by capitalism. And the peasantry was being refashioned fundamentally:

The new Russian peasant is cordial, amiable, communicative. He speaks about his life with satisfaction, with a sense of security about it. There is no more of the old "muzhik" bending before the whip of his dominators.⁶²

The advances had been tremendous, and the peasants had developed a sense of responsibility for themselves and for the commune. Their happiness and contentment could be found in their balalaika playing and singing in the evening, and their well-

being in the fresh food that was available for them to eat. The collectivized countryside seemed a land verging on paradise.

Crossing the former Soviet Union's frontier was always an emotional experience. For Mancisidor it signified the difference between the two worlds he had now visited. Entering Poland he saw "a miserable" peasant attempting to till a dry and infertile field, and he remembered the prosperity he had been shown on the Soviet collective farms. From a land of hope, he emerged into a land of tragedy and fear, he wrote in conclusion. However dramatic, this was not a particularly satisfying end to a book that was completely one-sided and at times embarrassingly crude. Yet some of the points Mancisidor made were important ones in the context of what he and many other Mexicans desired for their own country. Like many of his predecessors who had visited the USSR, he was concerned with the emancipation of women, the education of children, the problems of bringing ethnic minorities into the mainstream of national life, and the creation of a prosperous and just society. These were questions that the Cárdenas administration was attempting to address in Mexico as part of its goal of realizing the promises of Mexico's own revolution. Whether or not they could be solved through application of Soviet techniques that worked in reality less well than Mancisidor made them appear to, they were burning questions for Mexicans in the 1930s, and Mancisidor, as a leftist intellectual and prominent writer, made a contribution to the debate about alternative answers. He did not, however, provide Mexicans with anything approaching an honest picture of Stalin's Soviet Union.

Stalinism Condemned: President Rodríguez's Visit in 1938

Interestingly, during the Cárdenas *sexenio*, probably the most leftist of the twentieth century in Mexico, there was very little serious attempt made at establishing

diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. While initiatives were made by both governments, more compelling international political problems, particularly the growing fascist threat in Europe and the political awkwardness of the Cárdenas regime with regard to Mexican conservatives and the United States, precluded closer ties. The fact was that there was still much disapproval of the Soviet Union in Mexico, and conservative members of the Mexican revolutionary family would have criticized stridently any move toward recognition of what many of them felt was a thoroughly despicable regime.

None of the travelers discussed here represented this attitude better than Mexico's interim president of 1932-34, Abelardo Rodríguez, who visited the Soviet Union in 1938, and who published a number of articles as well as a book about his journey when he returned to Mexico. Rodríguez noted in the preface to *Notas de mi viaje a Rusia* (Notes on My Trip to Russia) that while he was in London in 1936-37 he decided he would like to visit the USSR, to see how collectivization had worked in the country and to examine the practical applications of the new "Stalin" constitution. He promised himself that he would travel without prejudices, but from the time he arrived he was horrified at conditions in the country.

The first section of his book discussed "the Stalinist regime," one Rodríguez said had reformed the chains that the Russian people had broken in the Revolution of 1917. Stalin, Rodríguez wrote, had replaced workers' democracy with state bureaucracy, and had betrayed the ideals of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky. The USSR had the world's largest and most servile bureaucracy, its most powerful army, and a formidable and terrible secret police force. The peoples of the Soviet Union, who no longer had the right to strike, to criticize, or to speak freely, had been surrounded by a "circle of iron," isolating them from the outside world, and were allowed to know only what Stalin considered good for them. Stalin's system was very much like fascism, Rodríguez added, but it distinguished itself in being much more brutal and merciless than the dictatorships of either Mussolini or Hitler:

The despotic regime of Stalin feeds off its enslaved people and protects them in order to exploit them better; it gives them "bread and circuses" and diverts them with demagoguery and propaganda that are insidious and constant, aimed at convincing the people that they live in a terrestrial paradise.⁶³

This was not the first-hand picture of the Soviet Union to which Mexican readers were accustomed, and it was a particularly striking one coming from a man who had a reputation as a "progressive" — though certainly not a radical — within Mexico's revolutionary establishment.

Rodríguez was impressed by many of the same aspects of Soviet society noted by his countrymen. One of these was the position of women. But Rodríguez did not have many kind words to say about their "emancipation." What struck him was how much hard work women did in the USSR: on the railroad, for example, he found them doing heavy physical tasks normally assigned to men. He reported learning later that 60–70 percent of heavy farm labor was done by women, and that they were responsible for 40 percent of all heavy physical labor done in the country. Since much of the development of the Soviet economy in the 1930s had been done purely through physical labor, this meant that in the name of emancipation and liberation, women had been sacrificed to the Plan. Women, he found, had been forced into a position of inferiority that was much worse than anything existing before the establishment of Bolshevik power.

Rodríguez saw a number of other problems deriving from the labor into which women were forced. For example, there were still large numbers of homeless orphans. Because of their new occupations, women had no time to care for their children, and a generation was growing up without homes, without family support, care and affection, and above all, without the love of a mother. Prostitution, too, continued to grow, and had attained scandalous levels, Rodríguez reported. Prostitution was the last resort of women who lived in poverty and who had been treated inhumanely by their government. It was not a holdover from capitalism, nor was it a reflection of individual women failing to adapt to the new society, as

Mancisidor had argued. Everyone was exploited in the Soviet Union, Rodríguez claimed, but women worst of all. They were little more than beasts of burden.

Rodríguez concluded early in his stay that labor exploitation was paralleled by economic and political exploitation:

The Soviet regime is not Soviet, but autocratic; it is not a dictatorship of the proletariat, because the proletariat has nothing to do with the governing of the country; it is neither democracy nor socialism, because criticism of the government is punished by death or by exile to the concentration camps of Siberia. The People's Commissariats are not commissariats of the people, but of the autocracy, and are designates of the tyrant. It is a regime, in essence an autocracy, which can be classified as a state monopoly managed by an absolutist bureaucracy.⁶⁴

Rodríguez calculated that workers received only about a fourth or a fifth of the true value of their labor, and that the ruble, in terms of purchasing power on the Soviet market, was worth about five US cents. As producers, the workers were paid little, but prices in stores were high. The workers, of course, were subsidizing the capitalization needed for industrialization, and to Rodríguez, it all resembled the exploitive *tiendas de raya* (or company stores) on the great plantations of pre-revolutionary Mexico. And where did the surplus go? To statues of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin, to a needlessly elegant underground railway in Moscow, to the military, the secret police, the Party, to the bureaucracy of the Soviet tyranny, and to ostentatious building projects like the grandiose Palace of Soviets, typical of ancient autocracies and of totalitarian regimes in modern times.

Rodríguez learned quickly that the USSR was potentially a rich nation, but that its resources were not being used wisely, and that the country was not living up to its possibilities, either in economic or human terms. After visiting a collective farm near the Don River, Rodríguez decided that it too could be best compared to a Mexican hacienda from the age of Porfirio Díaz: the *kolkhozniki* lived in hovels and dressed in rags reflective of their poverty. The overall standard of living was

miserable. What were necessities for workers in Western Europe were luxuries or completely unavailable to Soviet workers. Housing was awful. Only the privileged technicians, specialists, Stakhanovites, and bureaucrats lived well, receiving three, five, even ten times the amount of consumer goods their less fortunate comrades did. There was no egalitarianism in Soviet society, Rodríguez believed. The standard of living had not gone up, nor did everyone suffer equally, and those who protested were jailed.⁶⁵ To Rodríguez the failure of the Five Year plans could be seen by comparing the USSR with Finland: once poor and backward, with few natural resources, Finland had become respectable and prosperous, with satisfied people and an average standard of living much higher than was the Soviet Union's. Finland had succeeded, the USSR had not.

The new class structure accompanying the "industrial and agricultural offensive" bothered Rodríguez particularly. He objected to the special resorts on the Black Sea reserved for those he viewed as members of the privileged "caste," and remembered especially seeing a young mother and her baby traveling third class on a steamship. A storm blew up, but she and her child were denied shelter because she was traveling third class and thereby not entitled to protection from the elements. There seemed to be "no equality, no equity, no justice" in the Soviet Union, nor was there much humanity.⁶⁶

A great deal of this, Rodríguez believed, derived from the perversion of the political system that had taken place under Stalin, and from the deification of Stalin himself. The character, initiative, the voluntary spirit of young Soviet citizens had been reduced to obedience, servility, and adulation of the regime. The most dogmatic phrases of Marx, Lenin, or Stalin had come to be accepted by Soviet workers and students, whether consciously or not, as sacred axioms. Lenin and Stalin, Rodríguez wrote, usurped the places previously held in Russian society by Christ or God. And since the country was isolated from the outside world, Soviet citizens were convinced through the government's propaganda that they lived in a paradise of truth, accomplishment, and glory. Free elections and the Constitution's guarantees of free speech, expression, and assembly were all myths. The purges had

rid Stalin of the last of those loyal to Marxism or Leninism, and had ensured Stalin's absolute power. And beyond Stalin, there was no real government. The Comintern was dominated by Stalin's friends, and its aim continued to be the collapse of all non-communist states. The implacable Stalinist regime was a nightmare.

Rodríguez ended his account of his travels by noting that the idealized Soviet communism of Lenin and Trotsky (with which Rodríguez and so many other Mexicans seemed to sympathize, at least in part) had not been realized. Stalinist communism was not genuine socialism, not the paradise of equality, liberty, and social justice so many had hoped it would be. It had been turned into a grotesque deformation of true communism, Rodríguez believed, the old slavery of Tsarism repeating itself, but disguised by demagogy and propaganda. The communism of Joseph Stalin could in no way be seen as the salvation of humanity. In Rodríguez's eyes, the Soviet experiment had been a failure, and offered only mistakes that Mexicans would be best advised to avoid. His view of the Soviet Union was by far the most critical and most negative of all those discussed here. It was not unlike that of a considerable segment of Mexico's government and of the country's population as a whole, particularly those who, like Rodríguez, had been loyal to the spirit of Calles and the *Maximato*. It was to this audience that Rodríguez's book appealed, and they certainly expected Rodríguez's account of his travels to be received with hostility in the leftist press. No Mexican who had seen the USSR first-hand since Silva Herzog and written about it had expressed such a view of the country. Completing his book on the shores of the Pacific, near Ensenada in Baja California, Rodríguez agreed that the USSR was another world. He, and quite obviously many other Mexicans, hoped it was not the world of Mexico's future, however.

Conclusions

Lázaro Cárdenas showed his independence from his country's Stalinist left by granting Leon Trotsky exile in Mexico in 1936. Most Mexican leftists appear to have been too taken up with strident debates about Trotsky during the next few years to speak or write in much detail about a Soviet Union undergoing the Great Purges. Indeed, Trotskyism became a major topic of discussion in Mexico in the years following 1936. Having expelled himself from the Mexican Communist Party in a semi-comical episode in 1929, by the mid-1930s, Diego Rivera had become fascinated by Trotsky's analyses of Stalinism. It was Rivera who arranged for Cárdenas to permit Trotsky to enter Mexico, and Trotsky and his wife were offered housing by Rivera in Mexico City. Not alone in Mexico in admiring Trotsky and his ideas, Rivera was one of the first of his compatriots to be disillusioned by the exiled Russian revolutionary in the months after his arrival. Personal conflicts exacerbated political differences, and in the end Rivera and Trotsky broke off all contact with each other. Trotskyism, on the other hand, played a continuing role in Mexican life over the next few decades, and Trotsky's ideas proved particularly compelling to those who rejected Stalinism but not communism altogether.

Trotsky's murder in 1940 received widespread, often lurid coverage in the Mexican press, and led to dismissals of significant numbers of influential communists from the Mexican government by Cárdenas and his successor, Manuel Avila Camacho. The Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939 had already created genuine disgust in Mexico, one shared by a number of Mexican communists. By 1940, the Soviet Union's image in Mexico was blemished considerably. Few in the country had anything good to say openly about the USSR, and many who had been great admirers of Stalinism earlier now came privately to reassess their previous commitment to the Soviet dream. Only the highly unforeseen German invasion of the USSR in June 1941 would change the situation, and only then would a generally positive image of the USSR be reestablished in the eyes of Mexicans.

Mexicans who visited the Soviet Union during the first two decades of Bolshevik rule seemed interested in several particular issues. One of these was the position of women, the second was the treatment of children and promotion of their education, the third economic reform (especially with respect to agriculture), and the fourth the creation of a genuine democracy guaranteeing political and social rights. They also admired the sense of civic responsibility they found in the USSR, and the willingness on the part of large numbers of people to sacrifice their own comfort for the good of their children and grandchildren. They found that the Soviet Union promised much, as Mexico's own revolution had, but while the 1920s in the USSR were encouraging, the 1930s could not be, despite the enthusiasm of men like Lombardo Toledano and Mancisidor. For most Mexicans, the social activism of the Cárdenas administration was far more acceptable than the extremism of Stalinism. Few in Mexico believed their country could survive further dislocation of the sort Mexico had lived through between 1910 and 1920 or the USSR had between 1928 and 1932.

What they did not write about also tells us something about how Mexicans saw the world and their own country during these decades. Mexicans were not alone in presenting a distorted view of developments in the Soviet Union in the years following the First Five Year Plan, of course, but it can legitimately be asked why they did not look further into the realities of the human cost of collectivization, for example, or into the atmosphere of suspicion and fear accompanying the Great Purges. Certainly Silva Herzog and Rodríguez were critical of the suffering they heard was taking place in the country, but many of the other visitors discussed in this essay believed that the misery of the generation of the 1930s was justified on the grounds that their descendents' lives would be improved, and that the good of the many did indeed supersede the deaths of the few.

All the Mexicans who journeyed to the USSR hoped to see their own country rejuvenated and set firmly on the road to economic and social modernization. The models of the United States and Western Europe had long been appealing, but seemed to lack answers to many of the problems facing Mexico, particularly in the years following the US Stock Market crash of 1929. Mexicans wanted social reform,

the distribution of land to exploited peasants in the countryside, and the enactment of many of the idealistic promises of the Constitution of 1917. The Soviet Union appeared to provide at least some examples for Mexicans to emulate, and their often distorted view of the country may perhaps be explained by the fact that few other alternatives to capitalist democracy or fascist corporate statism were available. Most of the travelers discussed in this essay hoped to find at least something of value in the Soviet experiment, and even those who criticized it unmercifully wanted a better Mexico than the one they knew — not a Bolshevik Mexico, but one that might be improved by studying, modifying, and applying to Mexico the experiments of another revolutionary nation on the other side of the world.

The interwar years saw a great increase in contacts between Mexico and the Soviet Union. Certainly many fewer Mexicans visited the USSR during these years than did US citizens,⁶⁷ for example, and almost none emigrated there, but knowledge in both countries about the other did grow during the period. Diplomatic contacts aided this exchange in the 1920s, and cultural ties were reflected by the appearance in Mexico of works by Gorky, Mayakovsky, Sholokhov, Fadeev, and Gladkov in Spanish translation, and of works by Mancisidor, Ramos Pedrueza, Germán List Arzubide, and Mariano Azuela in Russian in the USSR. Soviet citizens began to develop an image of Mexico during these two decades, and in Mexico a picture of the Soviet Union became clearer than it had ever been before among urban workers, the middle class, and the upper-class elite. It was not an entirely accurate picture, but the praise so extensive in the works cited in this essay was always balanced by reports in the generally conservative Mexican press, which were usually based on first-hand accounts by foreign newsmen or reprints of reports from foreign news services, and which had little good to say about events in the Soviet Union. For most Mexicans, the truth about the USSR was to be found somewhere between these two normally biased portrayals.

The majority of Mexicans who visited the USSR during the 1920s and 1930s had not gone there to criticize what they found. They expected to be impressed, and in many cases they were. Reading their accounts today, after the collapse of Soviet

communism and in the face of near-civil war in the former Caucasian republics, we might find it difficult not to be cynical about the gullibility expressed in their writings and the faith they had in the goals of the Russian Revolution and the implementation of socialist ideals. The admirers of the Soviet Union criticized neither the social inequalities of NEP nor the step backward from women's emancipation and the sexual revolution symbolized by the Stalinist laws on abortion. For true believers in Marxist revolution, and even when confronted with disturbing evidence of failure and repression, that was their only recourse. They saw an ideal USSR, not the one of reality.

Traveling from one revolutionary society to another, many Mexicans believed theirs had somehow lost its sense of direction. It required an injection of enthusiasm to spur it onward. This seemed as true of Mexico in 1924 as it did in 1930. A number of Mexicans visiting the Soviet Union expected the PCM to be the source of the leadership needed to inspire Mexicans to carry their revolution forward. The descriptions of life in the Soviet Union by these adherents of communism should be understood in his context. Yet not all those who wrote favorably about the USSR may necessarily have wished for a communist-led Mexico. Many had more doubts about Stalinism, for example, than their writings might lead us to believe, and they became more dubious as time went on. Mexican leftists might have been sympathetic toward the USSR on the whole, but in no way did they approve of all they saw there, despite what was suggested in their writings. Still, Mexicans' domestic political stances usually determined how they viewed the Soviet Union, and how Mexicans interpreted the USSR was a fairly good indicator of their opinions on Mexican politics. For most of them, the USSR remained a myth that could be used for their own purposes. In praising Soviet rule, or in some cases condemning it, the Mexican visitors of the 1920s and 1930s were frequently promoting their own political programs and reflecting political discussions and debates taking place in Mexico itself. As a result, their accounts of life in the Soviet Union during those years tell us as much about Mexico as they do about what was the ostensible object of their journey.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Mexico remained fundamentally a capitalist country aspiring toward political democracy, if never quite achieving it. From abroad the country often appeared dangerously leftist, but within Mexico's borders genuine debate about the nation's future continued, and while the national political spectrum may have been shifted to the left after the revolution, conservatives and rightists continued to have a voice that was heard by the government. The discussion about what was the reality of the Soviet Union was also a discussion about the future of Mexico. Despite the fact that we have now heard the citizens of the former USSR declare Soviet communism a failure, it is important not to forget the importance of the Soviet model of the 1920s and 1930s as an image of good or evil throughout the world, and that nowhere was it more important than in a Mexico proud of its revolutionary credentials. Mexicans were certainly aware of the model, as the writings discussed in this essay indicate, and they responded to it in a fundamentally Mexican manner that provides us with a means to understand better the realities of life in both revolutionary Russia and revolutionary Mexico.

Notes

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1. For views of foreigners on the USSR, see M.S. Glazov, *Glazami inostrantsev 1917-1932* (Moscow: 1932), Peter G. Filene, *Americans and the Soviet Experiment, 1917-1933* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967); and one of the most famous of such accounts, André Gide, *Return From the USSR*, tr. by Dorothy Bussy (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), originally published in 1936.
2. See John H. Kautsky, *Patterns of Modernizing Revolutions: Mexico and the Soviet Union* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1975), for a general discussion of these similarities.
3. See Manuel Díaz Ramírez, "Un Mexicano con Lenin," in Mario Gill, *México y la revolución de octubre* (Mexico City: Ediciones de cultura popular, 1975), 109-15. On Mexican communism, see Manuel Márquez Fuentes and Octavio Rodríguez Araujo, *El Partido comunista mexicano (en el período de la Internacional comunista: 1919-1943)* (Mexico City: Ediciones El caballito, 1973), and Marcela de Neymet, *Cronología del Partido comunista mexicano. Primera parte, 1919-1939* (Mexico City: Ediciones de cultura popular, 1981). Very little writing about pre-Revolutionary Russia by Mexican authors exists. A number of members of the Mexican communist movement visited Soviet Russia during the early years of the Comintern, but those who left written accounts were almost exclusively foreigners. See, as examples, Bertram Wolfe, *A Life in Two Centuries* (New York: Stein and Day, 1981) and Manabendra Nath Roy, *Memoirs* (Bombay: Allied Publishers Private Ltd., 1964).
4. Carleton Beals, *Glass House: Ten Years of Free-Lancing* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippencott, 1938), 340.

5. Ministerstvo inostrannykh del SSSR, *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*, v. 6 (Moscow: Izdatelstvo politicheskoi literatury, 1963), 549.
6. Interview quoted in Akademiia nauk SSSR, Institut Latinskoi Ameriki, Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Meksiki, *Sovetsko-meksikanskii otnosheniia (1917-1980): sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1981), 27-28.
7. The list included Rivera, Luis Monzón, José Guadalupe Rodríguez, Pablo Mendez, Lauro Cisneros, Juan Montemayor, Cruz Contreras, and Samuel Rámos.
8. For Soviet views of Mexico during these years, see William Harrison Richardson, *Mexico Through Russian Eyes, 1810-1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988).
9. See Bertram D. Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (New York: Stein and Day, 1963), Ch. 19 ("Journey to the Holy Land") and Diego Rivera, *My Art, My Life* (New York: Citadel Press, 1960), 146-56. See also William Richardson, "The Dilemmas of a Communist Artist: Diego Rivera in Moscow, 1927-1928," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 3 (1), Winter 1987, 49-69.
10. Some of the watercolors are kept in New York City's Museum of Modern Art; several of them, including a portrait of Stalin, were reproduced in *Cosmopolitan* in 1932. For Rivera's description of Stalin, see Rivera, *My Art*, 146-52.
11. On Mayakovsky's visit to Mexico, see William Richardson, "Maiakovskii en México," *Historia Mexicana* 29 #4 (116), 623-39.
12. See Bertram D. Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (New York: Stein and Day, 1963), 386.
13. See Ia. Tugenkhold, "Diego de Riveira: khudozhnik meksikanskogo proletariata," *Krasnaia niva*, 1926 #6. Over the next few years several additional articles appeared in the

Soviet press; for details, and for an expanded account of Rivera's visit and its significance, see Richardson, "Dilemmas of a Communist Artist."

14. Wolfe, *Rivera*, 224.

15. V.N. Kuteishchikova, "El tema ruso en la obra de Diego Rivera," *Gallo ilustrado* (December 19, 1976), 5; see also V.N. Kuteishchikova, "Ia nikogda ne smogu zabyt' . . .," *Latinskaia Amerika*, 1977 #2, 186-90.

16. For a record of his stay in the Soviet Union, see David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Me llamaban el coronelazo* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1977), 229-36. For his speeches at the Profintern Congress, see Iosif Romualdovich Gigulevich, *Sikeiros* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1980), 226-32.

17. Grigulevich, *Sikeiros*, 47.

18. "Rusia Soviet y México revolucionario" (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1922), a theoretical pamphlet based solely on what Ramos Pedrueza had heard about revolutionary Russia and not what he had seen, contained the following assertion, for example: "The Russian Revolution, redemptive like Christianity, luminous like the Renaissance, and just like the French Revolution, contains . . . the new morality and the new conscience of humanity." (14).

19. Rafael Ramos Pedrueza, *La estrella roja: doce años de vida soviética* (Mexico City: 1929).

20. *Ibid.*, 9.

21. *El Machete*, quoted in *ibid.*, 7.

22. Ramos Pedrueza, *La estrella roja*, 29.

23. *Ibid.*, 42.

24. Rámos Pedrueza characterized *Pravda's* editor Nikolai Bukharin as "a formidable theoretician of the proletarian dictatorship, a man of exceptional intelligence and culture." *Ibid.*, 50.
25. *Ibid.*, 52-53.
26. *Ibid.*, 64-65.
27. *Ibid.*, 86.
28. *Ibid.*, 169.
29. *Ibid.*, 86.
30. *Ibid.*, 132.
31. See Nikolai Shmelev and Vladimir Popov, *The Turning Point: Revitalizing the Soviet Economy* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 90.
32. *Una vida en la vida de México* (Mexico City: Siglo veintiuno editores, 1972), 111. On Silva Herzog's life, see Fedro Guillén, *Jesús Silva Herzog* (Mexico City: Empresas editoriales, 1969) and Manuel Aguilera, *Jesús Silva Herzog* (Mexico City: Editorial terra nova, 1985).
33. Jesús Silva Herzog, *Aspectos económicos de la Unión soviética* (Mexico City: Partido Nacional Revolucionario, 1930), 111.
34. *Ibid.*, 48-49.
35. *Ibid.*, 40.
36. Silva Herzog, *Una vida*, 124.

37. Jesús Silva Herzog, *Cuestiones internacionales* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1985), 56.
38. Silva Herzog, *Una vida*, 115.
39. Silva Herzog, *Aspectos*, 65.
40. Silva Herzog, *Cuestiones*, 35.
41. *Ibid.*, 63. The United States was never happy with Mexico's ties to and fascination with the USSR. It refused to let Soviet diplomats traverse US territory on their way to their posts in Mexico City, and had repeatedly, in the 1920s as well as the 1930s, complained both officially and through statements to the press about Mexican "bolshevism" and about what it considered the "undue influence" of "international communism" on Mexico's government. Mexican governments relished this criticism because of its domestic appeal, but later became more concerned about it as they hoped to establish a closer economic relationship with the United States. Above all, Mexicans knew they always had to take into account how actions regarding the USSR would be received by the government of "the colossus of the North."
42. *Ibid.*, 63-64.
43. *Ibid.*, 29.
44. Hernán Laborde, "Los trabajadores triunfan en la sexta parte de la tierra," in Gill, *México y la revolución de octubre*, 140-44.
45. Vicente Lombardo Toledano and Victor Manuel Villaseñor, *Un viaje al mundo del porvenir (seis conferencias sobre la URSS)* (Mexico City: Universidad obrera de México, 1936). Lombardo published a pamphlet entitled *50 verdades sobre la URSS* (Mexico City: 1935), which contained many of the same sort of comments made in the lecture series with Villaseñor. Examples from *50 verdades* include: "the dictatorship of the proletariat . . . is true democracy" (99); "premeditated political propaganda is foreign to the esthetic doctrine

of the Soviet regime" (ibid.); and "no one has imposed on the people of the USSR the perfect discipline in which it lives; the rhythm of their own labor has converted each man and each woman into notes of a great social symphony" (ibid.).

46. Lombardo Toledano and Villaseñor, *Un viaje*, 31.

47. Ibid., 67-68.

48. Ibid., 76.

49. Ibid, 140.

50. Ibid., 155.

51. On Mancisidor, see Alfonso Berrios, "Vida y obra de José Mancisidor," passim in José Mancisidor, *Obras completas* (Xalapa: Gobierno del estado de Veracruz, 1978).

52. *Ciento veinte días* (Mexico City: Editorial México nuevo, 1937). On page 4 of the introduction, Mancisidor wrote, "I hope . . . that [this book] reflects . . . the grandeur of a new life and a new humanity being born there in the world of the proletariat."

53. See Karl M. Schmitt, *Communism in Mexico: A Study in Political Frustration* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 134.

54. Mancisidor, *Ciento veinte días*, 59.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid., 121.

57. Ibid., 181.

58. *Ibid.*, 178.
59. *Ibid.*, 67.
60. *Ibid.*, 109.
61. *Ibid.*, 107.
62. *Ibid.*, 107-08.
63. *Notas de mi viaje a Rusia* (Mexico City: Editorial cultura, 1938), 11.
64. *Ibid.*, 31.
65. *Ibid.*, 93.
66. *Ibid.*, 53.
67. There were, for example, approximately 2,500 US citizens in the USSR in 1929, and in 1931 perhaps 10,000, while the number of Mexicans was certainly no more than a few hundreds; see Filene, *Americans and the Soviet Experiment*, 241.