HELPFUL INTERVENTION?

THE IMPACT OF THE COMINTERN ON EARLY COLOMBIAN COMMUNISM

By Klaus Meschkat

Resumen. Documentos inéditos de los archivos de Moscú Comintern demuestran la intervención de Comintern y sus consecuencias para la orientación política de los militantes revolucionarios en Colombia a partir de los últimos años de la década de los 20 que coinciden con la creación del Partido Comunista en Colombia.

Los documentos muestran que se discutió la posibilidad de un proceso revolucionario en Colombia durante importantes reuniones de Comintern en 1928 y 1929. Además, demuestran cómo los funcionarios de Comintern en Moscú y en la oficina suramericana en Buenos Aires intentaron influenciar al comunismo colombiano. Hay un estudios de caso de dos revolucionarios colombianos excepcionales que recibieron entrenamiento político en Moscú durante los años del estalinismo y llegaron a ser secretarios generales del Partido Comunista de Colombia después de volver al país. La evidencia sugiere que el comunismo colombiano nació debilitado renunciando su propia herencia. Se muestra que ellos debieron someter los principios leninistas en el período a las prácticas estalinistas.

Abstract. *Unpublished documents from the Moscow Comintern archives on the Comintern intervention and its consequences for the political orientation of revolutionary militants in Colombia from the late 1920s to the beginnings of the Communist party in 1930 show that the*

possibility of a Colombian revolution was discussed during important Comintern meetings in 1928 and 1929. Furthermore, they show how Comintern functionaries in Moscow and in the South American Office in Buenos Aires attempted to influence early Colombian communism. Case studies of two outstanding Colombian revolutionaries who received political training in Moscow during the years of rising Stalinism and became general secretaries of the Communist Party of Colombia after returning to their country show what happened to Colombian revolutionaries in the process of joining a world party and submitting to Leninist principles in the period of their Stalinist implementation. The evidence suggests that Colombian communism was weakened by renouncing its own heritage.

Keywords: Colombia, Communist party, Comintern, Revolutionary strategy, Stalinist self-criticism

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Introduction

At the end of the 1920s, Colombia possessed neither a numerous industrial proletariat nor leaders of the working class who could be considered "Marxists" in the sense of a deep understanding of Marxian theory. Nevertheless, there was a Revolutionary Socialist party, a member of the Communist International (Comintern), that aspired to a revolutionary overthrow of the existing order similar to the Russian upheaval in October 1917. Some leaders of this party participated in the first conference of Latin American communist parties, which was held in Buenos Aires in. June 1929. In its debates, the recent strike in the banana zone of Santa Marta (December 1928) was seen as the point of departure for an insurrectional movement capable of conquering state power. Colombia occupied ample space in the discussions. Not only the Colombian delegates but also the representatives of the Comintern were convinced that it was justified to speak of a prerevolutionary situation in Colombia.' This assumption gave rise to special efforts by the central bodies of the Comintern to intervene actively in Colombia. Colombian revolutionaries did not see this as undesirable interference. On the contrary, the entire leadership of the young party requested orientation and organizational assistance from the distant center of world revolution.

This article is focused on Comintern intervention in the early communist movement in Colombia. It is not intended to offer a comprehensive history of the workers' movement or to examine in detail the problems of Colombian society and politics at the end of the 1920s. Rather, it will address the following questions: What lessons were to be drawn from the general programmatic principles of the Comintern for the development of a revolutionary strategy for Colombia? How did the factional fighting in Moscow and the rise of Stalin—with the subsequent elimination of all his opponents—influence the political orientation and actions of Colombian

revolutionaries? What was the role of the Comintern emissaries sent to Colombia? Did the regional structure of the Comintern in Latin America, with an office in. Buenos Aires attempting to cover all the countries of South America, facilitate permanent communication with Colombian communists? Finally, did the education and training of Colombian revolutionaries in Soviet Russia play a significant role in the development of the type of leadership that became dominant in the Communist party? However, before these questions can be addressed it is necessary to make some brief introductory remarks about the economic and political background against which a revolutionary movement could emerge.

At first glance, Colombia was a typical Latin American country, with the majority of the population living in rural areas under miserable conditions, often subsisting from manifestly precapitalist labor. Like other Latin American countries, Colombia was linked to the world market through the export of minerals and agricultural products and the import of British merchandise. Since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, coffee, brought from remote Andean regions to the ports, had been the principal export product. Transport (via railways and steamships on the Rio Magdalena) constituted the first modern sector of the Colombian economy, with the participation of foreign capital and the concentration of capitalist wage work. Additionally, the export economy included economic enclaves directly controlled by foreign capital. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the United Fruit Company controlled an extensive banana zone near Santa Marta on the Caribbean coast. There were also centers of oil extraction, the most important of which was the Tropical Oil Company, a subsidiary of Standard Oil of New Jersey, located in Barrancabermeja. Workers in these enclaves faced "imperialism" in a direct sense: they lived at the mercy of foreign companies that had established exclusive zones of domination with the consent of the Colombian government.

The coffee economy and the foreign enclaves determined the dynamics

of economic development, which increased in the 1920s because of rising coffee prices, the influx of foreign loans, and the US$25 million compensation paid for the loss of Panama. This produced what was called the "Dance of the Millions," resulting in economic leaps accompanied by widespread corruption and waves of social mobilization. The rapid economic development in the 1920s was in sharp contrast to the stagnation of the political system at the end of several decades of Conservative hegemony. Although Colombia was formally a democracy with periodic elections, the relation between the two parties of the ruling elite, Conservatives and Liberals, was still burdened by the heritage of a long period of civil wars at the end of the nineteenth century, in which the Liberals had been militarily defeated. There were several attempts to establish a kind of bipartisan rule or at least to include Liberal politicians in important government functions.' However, the Conservative party tried to perpetuate its domination in every way possible, including electoral fraud. At the end of the 1920s repressive laws against "subversion." made a constitutional change of the government through fair elections extremely unlikely Additionally, there were still Liberal ex-generals who hoped to oust the Conservatives by military action. Their "revolution" meant nothing more than the use of violence to terminate a repressive and unpopular Conservative government. Nevertheless, this limited concept of revolution was the basis for seeking an alliance with radical parts of the workers' movement that sought to follow the example of the Russian October Revolution.

As in other Latin American countries, the early labor movement in Colombia was marked by the tradition of artisan organizations. It was, however, fundamentally different from those of Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil, where Italian, Spanish, and German immigrants brought with them the main tendencies of the workers' movement of that epoch, such as anarchism and the Marxist socialism of the Second International. In Colombia there was

no massive immigration to establish a similar link to European left-wing traditions. The perception of the "social question" was generally marked by social Catholicism with vague reformist ideas. However, there was a growing consciousness that workers' interests were not adequately represented by the traditional parties, and this led to the creation of the first Socialist party in Colombia in 1919. Of course, the upheaval in Russia and the end of World War showed that a victorious fight against a repressive regime was possible. Even before Lenin had been read, there was a glorification of Bolshevism and its leaders. It is reported that during an antigovernment demonstration of artisans on March 16, 1919, the crowd shouted "'Viva la Revolucion!" and ";Viva el Bolchevismo!" (Vega Cantor, 2002, vol. 4: 165). As early as July 1919, visitors to a working-class quarter of Bogota were surprised to find "Bolshevik" street names such as Carrera Trotsky and Calle Lenin (Vega Cantor, 2002, vol. 4: 169).

An entire generation of intellectuals, mostly journalists, writers, and lawyers, welcomed the October Revolution as the beginning of a new era. Their enthusiasm for the Russian example did not necessarily mean that they wished to imitate it by creating a Leninist party in Colombia. In fact, most of these leftists supported the new leadership of General Benjamin Herrera, who had proclaimed a kind of moderate socialism. The most brilliant figure among the intellectual sympathizers of Soviet Russia was Luis Tejada, coeditor of the left-liberal periodical *El Sol,* which was established in 1922. In 1923 Tejada published some reports and reflections concerning the Russian Revolution in *El Espectador.* He emphasized the worldwide importance of Lenin, concluding with a "prayer that Lenin should not die" (Torres Giraldo, 1978, vol. 3: 713-715).

Together with other young Liberals, Luis Tejada joined a group formed by the Russian immigranf Silvestre Savitsky to study Marxism and the Soviet experience.``

The strength of pro-communist tendencies among Colombian intellectuals became visible at the Socialist Conference held. in Bogota on May 1, 1924, parallel to the First National Workers' Congress. These events were marked by a struggle between moderate socialism—which might be apolitical or affiliated with the Liberal party—and revolutionary tendencies with anarcho-syndicalist or Leninist inclinations. Some of the prominent left-wing leaders participated in both meetings. Whereas the Workers' Congress was dominated by moderate trade-union representatives, the Socialist Conference was a platform for radical pro-Soviet intellectuals, some of whom, such as Gabriel Turbay, Jose Mar, and Moises Prieto, later returned to mainstream Liberalism. Gabriel Turbay demanded the construction of a monument to Lenin, who had recently died. The conference declared its affiliation with the Third International and accepted Lenin's 21 conditions.' However, no established communist party existed in Colombia that could meaningfully accept or reject these 21 conditions. The group of intellectuals around Savitsky lacked strong ties with existing workers' organizations, but it called itself the Communist Party of Colombia and wrote to the Comintern headquarters in Moscow to seek recognition.' This was the first attempt by a left-wing group in Colombia to establish relations with the Comintern. The Comintern functionaries in charge of Latin America, such as Jules HumbertDroz and Palmiro Togliatti, were hesitant to give their approval to an unknown. group whose documents did not inspire confidence. The group's most important figures soon disappeared: Luis Tejada died in September 1924, and Savitsky was expelled from Colombia in August 1925. By this time, a new period of workers' struggles had already begun.

THE GREAT STRIKES OF THE 1920s AND THE REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALIST PARTY

The Revolutionary Socialist party, which was accepted as a member of the Comintern at its Sixth World Congress, came into being in the context of

workers' struggles in the second half of the 1920s. Its first leaders were organizers of important strikes in the enclaves of U.S. capital. In the oil extraction zone of Barrancabermeja, where the Tropical Oil Company had established a despotic regime over its 3,000 workers, a strike organized by a trade union whose secretary was Raul Mahecha was declared illegal. Mahecha and other strike leaders were arrested, and 1,200 workers were fired. This strike in October 1924 was a precursor to other great strikes in the U.S. enclaves. These strikes generally followed similar patterns, with modest trade-union demands, sometimes even backed by social-minded government officials, meeting with an. uncompromising attitude on the part of the company and eventually the sending of troops by the Colombian government. The complicity between the Colombian state and "imperialism," personified by the management of foreign companies, was a decisive experience for the political orientation of the Colombian workers' movement in the second half of the 1920s.

When the Second Workers' Congress was held in Bogota in July 1925, there was no longer a majority of moderates. In fact, one could argue that the congress expressed a dominant anarcho-syndicalist mood (Achila Neira, 1991: 241). The congress decided to create a National Workers' Confederation (Confederation Obrera Nacional—CON) with headquarters in Cali. Its first secretary was Ignacio Torres Giraldo. The new organization was not a political party but a coordinating body of the Colombian workers' movement. It proved its usefulness by organizing trade-union solidarity in support of strikes. Beginning in 1929 it also played an active role in anti-imperialist campaigns such as the campaign of solidarity with the Sandino struggle and opposition to U.S. armed intervention in Mexico and Nicaragua (Torres Giraldo, 1978, vol. 3: 813). The CON was affiliated with the Red International of Labor Unions (Profintern) and thus indirectly with the Comintern.

In spite of the fact that the CON was more than a mere trade-union central, those who considered themselves Marxist revolutionaries felt that a political party was needed. Such a party was established at the Third Workers' Congress in November 1926, which was preceded by agitation by some revolutionary leaders of national reputation.' The majority of the delegates were in favor of creating a new revolutionary party. A few anarchists withdrew from the congress, and so did the small group around the publisher of El *Socialists,* Juan de Dios Romero, who wanted immediately to call the new party "Communist." The congress adopted the name Partido Socialista Revolucionario (Revolutionary Socialist party—PSR) but expressed its desire to seek affiliation with the Comintern (Torres Giraldo, 1974, vol. 4: 3-12; Medina, 1980: 99-104).

COLOMBIA IN THE DEBATES OF THE COMINTERN

It was not until the Sixth World Congress that Latin America was explicitly placed on the agenda of an important Comintern meeting. In view of the previous contacts and declarations, it is perhaps an exaggeration to speak of a discovery of Latin America by the Comintern in 1928 (see *Lowy,* 1982; Kheyfets, 2004; Mothes, 1997). However, there was renewed interest in the revolutionary potential of the subcontinent at this time. One important reason was the prospect of a new imperialist war: It was thought that the sharp competition between the U.S.A. and Britain might easily result in an armed conflict. As a stage in the giant struggle between the two major imperialist powers, Latin America became an important area for the global Comintern strategy.

The morning session of the Sixth Comintern Congress on August 16, 1928, was devoted to theproblems of Latin American countries. Jules HumbertDroz, a high-ranking Comintern official,' reaffirmed the semicolonial character of Latin America and mentioned Colombia several

times, primarily as an. outstanding example of the penetration of North American capital, whose investment had increased enormously. Between 1912 to 1928 this investment grew by 6,000 percent, the highest growth rate in Latin America *(Protokoll,* 1928: 104). According to Humbert-Droz, Colombia had a revolutionary mass party with an estimated membership of 10,000[0] who wanted to join the Comintern. This request was accepted despite serious organizational defects. In Humbert-Droz's opinion, a trade-union-based mass movement had simply been transformed into a proletarian party, and there was still no organizational separation between party and trade unions *(Protokoll, 1928:* 117). The task of the Comintern would be to help shape and consolidate the organization and raise its ideological level.

A year later, in June 1929, the First Conference of Latin American Communist Parties took place in Buenos Aires. In the meantime, in Colombia, the new section of the Comintern had been involved in the strike in the banana zone of Santa Marta, which had culminated in the massacre of a large number of strikers by government troops on December 6, 1.928.[11] The Colombian question was discussed in a rather open and controversial manner. Such an open discussion was already inconceivable in Moscow, where Stalin had just removed his last potential rival, Nikolai Bukharin, from the leadership of the Comintern. In fact, Humbert-Droz, who was close to Bukharin, had already lost his influential position in the Comintern apparatus because of a sharp conflict with Stalin. [`Z] His freedom of action was reduced, but he was not fully removed from the Secretariat in spite of having offered his resignation." Deprived of all his power and influence in the Comintern. apparatus, HumbertDroz was sent to the communist conference in Buenos Aires as the official Comintern representative. His report on tactics for the anti-imperialist struggle in Latin America contained an extraordinary piece of political sociology that in a sense anticipated the dependency theories of

the 1960s and 1970s. His basic argument was that imperialism modified the composition and function of social classes, not only the ruling elites (Humbert-Droz postulated the absence of a "national bourgeoisie") but also the working classes in the imperialist enclaves and the large cities.

The communist conference in Buenos Aires discussed in detail who was responsible for the failure of the banana strike. Some of the leaders of the Revolutionary Socialist party were present and provided testimony, among them Mahecha, Moises Prieto, who was general secretary of the executive comntittee of the PSR during the strike, and the French trade-union activist Austin" (= Octave Rabate), who had been in Colombia for several months on a mission for the Red International. The most important PSR leader, Tomas L'ribe Marquez, was absent because he was imprisoned in Colombia.

Concerning the facts of the strike, Mahecha's report was essential, and no one criticized his version of events.[14] According to Mahecha, the strike preparation had been excellent: 32,146 workers were ready for an insurrection that had been carefully planned, including the distribution of arms. The failure of the strike was due only to the "indecision of the comrades in Bogota. They did not give us solidarity for the strike nor the order to start a revolution" (Movimiento, 1929: 121). Prieto did not question Mahecha's presentation of the facts but attempted to explain and justify his own behavior. As to the alliance with the Liberals against the repressive Ley Heroica of the Conservative government, Prieto pointed out that this political line had been proposed and directed by the Profintern delegate Austine (Movimiento, 1929: 112). Austine could not deny that he had indeed recommended a united front with the Liberals, but he admitted tactical mistakes; the correct line would have been to unmask the ambiguities of Liberal politics and seek a complete break with Liberalism (Movimiento, 1929: 128-129). It was not easy for

the official representatives of the Comintern to clarify the problem of the Colombian revolution in view of the differing and contradictory stories and opinions of the PSR leaders. The Comintern had already provided a. general interpretation of the failed strike in a letter that Jules Humbert-Droz himself had drafted in January 1929 but that had not reached the Colombian party before the Buenos Aires conference. `S According to this letter, the strike against the United Fruit Company could have been transformed into a revolutionary uprising—but only under the leadership of a true communist party.

At the Buenos Aires conference "Luis" (Jules Humbert-Droz) justified Mahecha's strategy in the light of the Russian experience (Movimiento, 1929: 93): In Colombia there was a strike committee of 60 comrades, representatives of the different sectors of the zone. This committee was in charge of carrying out a military mission, to prepare the fight and drive it against the police and army; the strikers' logistics, the direction of the logistics cooperative, conducted the strike as a whole and was the superior organ. All the power of the strike was concentrated in its hands and, in a specific moment, the power of the whole region. ... He•e we have a strike committee working as a soviet, transforming itself into the region's soviet. That is not so complicated.

Luis did not recommend that the Colombians create soviets. On the contrary, he demonstrated that they had already created such soviets in the form of strike committees. This reasoning was totally opposed to the way of thinking of the other European Comintern functionary present in Buenos Aires, Austine, who had spent six months in Colombia. He had come not to learn but to teach. true Bolshevik principles that could be applied to any country of the world. His method was to measure the imperfect reality of revolutionary socialism in Colombia against the ideal of a proletarian Bolshevik party (for the

biography of Austine, see Gotovitch and Narinski, 2001: 469-470; Jeifets, Jeifets, and Huber, 2004: 273).

The importance of the Colombian question becomes even more evident when one considers that the Comintern leadership had several private meetings with various Colombian delegates. The records of these meetings show us the perceptions of each other of the main actors. There can be no doubt that Mahecha still enjoyed the full confidence of the Comintern representatives, Humbert-Droz and Victor Codovilla: he was encouraged to write a pamphlet on the events of the banana strike (Russian State Archives for Social-Political History [hereafter RGASPI], f. 495, op. 104, d. 29,1.20). Furthermore, there was a unanimous decision to send him to Europe to attend the next Congress against Imperialism (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 29, 1. 24). Active intervention of the Comintern in the development of revolutionary forces inwColombia, including instructions from the Comintern headquarters, the sending of more qualified advisers, and, of course, material assistance, was demanded by all the PSR leaders present in Buenos Aires. Luis promised that he would recommend measures of support for Colombia to the Comintern immediately after returning to Moscow (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 29, 1. 17).

ATTEMPTS AT COMINTERN INTERVENTION IN COLOMBIA

Soon after his return to Moscow, Humbert-Droz provided a detailed report on the conferences of Montevideo and Buenos Aires to the Latin American Secretariat of the Executive Committee of the Comintern (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 79, d. 54,11. 3-30).[16] Again he demonstrated his respect for Mahecha, whom he considered a true revolutionary and potentially a good communist militant if he were to receive help and instruction (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 79, d. 54, 1. 21).

Humbert-Droz had no chance to implement the kind of helpful intervention he had recommended. Because of the consequences of the elimination of Bukharin and those who were considered close to him, the Comintern apparatus in Moscow was temporarily paralyzed. This was the opportunity for Codovilla to act in the name of the Comintern. Shortly after Humbert-Droz had left Buenos Aires, the South American Secretariat had sent a message to Moscow speaking of an imminent Colombian revolution in July, which might be exploited by North America for its own benefit. To prevent this, Comintern representatives and instructors were urged to travel to Colombia at once (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 29, 1. 26).

In Colombia, there were indeed new attempts at insurrection, intended to form part of a combined revolution in Colombia and Venezuela, at the end of July 1929. However, the date of this revolution was postponed without informing the potential insurgents in the remote regions. El LIIbano, Tolima, was one of the centers of an uprising that was quickly put down by government troops (see Sanchez, 1977). Returning from Buenos Aires, Prieto, still secretary of the PSR, denied that these uprisings could be called a communist revolution. (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 31, 1. 1). In a declaration by the executive committee of the PSR dated July 31, the government was respectfully asked to consider the armed workers not as criminal gangs but as adversaries who could be called to peace talks by offering them effective reforms. "Against the empire of arms, we want the empire of intelligence" (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 31,1. 3). This strange appeal was very far from the general Comintern line of class confrontation, and it was at once rejected in the strongest terms by the South American Secretariat in a telegram that denounced it as an unworthy abandonment of the working masses in their struggle. Some changes of personnel in the central executive committee in September 1929 did not mean the elimination of those who had been harshly denounced. The new secretary, Rafael Baquero, had signed the

unfortunate declaration of July 31, and. Prieto remained as a member of the control commission. Baquero tried to justify his position in a letter to Codovilla, pointing out that the insurrection had been planned by putschist elements behind the back of the PSR's central committee (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 32, 1. 17).

In Moscow, a special Comintern delegation to Colombia was planned in November 1929. The confidential directive for the work of the delegation clearly shows the mechanisms of the planned intervention. The delegation was to work with the party base, local and regional organizations and the workers under their influence, to help them understand the mistakes of the leadership and combat deviant tendencies, reformist as well as putschist. The central committee was to transfer its functions and responsibilities to the Comintern delegation, which would replace it until the next Party congress (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 27,11. 20-23).

The delegation in question was not sent for several months. Meanwhile, the South American Secretariat tried to assert its authority over the Colombian PSR in a conflict about a key person in the PSR leadership, Alberto Castrillon, the party's candidate for the presidential elections of 1930.[17] The Comintern authorities in Buenos Aires and Moscow opposed the candidacy of Castrillon and demanded his withdrawal. After Castrillon had been released from prison, he learned about the hostility against him and reacted with a furious letter to Codovilla (see Kheyfets and Kheyfets, 2001: 28-29). He not only attacked Codovilla and Austine with personal invective but dared to accuse Codovilla and. Humbert-Droz of right-wing deviation. This counterattack was even stronger than the earlier reaction of Prieto, whose exclusion from the party had been demanded by Buenos Aires.'

Castrillon was not removed as presidential candidate in spite of a definitive order in a letter from Codovilla of January 10, based on a telegram from

Moscow (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 38, 1, 1).[19] In an extensive letter from the Latin. American Secretariat of the Comintern in Moscow, written in February 1930, Castrillon was officially condemned: "The Communist International demands of the Colombian proletariat that it should expel Castrillon from the ranks of the party and the workers' movement" (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 38,1. 24).

This was the judgment of the Comintern on a person who was at the time running as the official candidate of its member party in the presidential election of February 1930.[20]

The last months of existence of the PSR, with Rafael Baquero as its secretary, were a period of waiting for the "true" Communist party that was to emerge with the help of the Comintern. Part of this assistance took place in Moscow in the form of preparation of Colombian militants for future tasks in the communist movement.

CASE STUDIES OF TWO COLOMBIAN REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALISTS

The Comintern was not particularly lucky with some of the Colombian comrades who had attended its meetings in Moscow beginning in 1928. Jorge Cardenas, one of the delegates to the Sixth Comintern Congress, was expelled from the PSR after providing support to a conservative presidential candidate in 1930. Neftali Arce, who had been a delegate of Colombia to the Fourth Red International Congress and who had even worked for six weeks in the organizational secretariat of the Comintern, spent the money he had received to travel back to Colombia during a stay of several months in Berlin, leaving the hotel bill to be paid by the Comintern (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 29, 1. 35). And in the accusations against Castrillon there was a reminder that he had been to Soviet Russia in 1928: "The attitude of Castrillon must be more severely condemned, because some time ago he was in Moscow so that he

could raise his political level."[21] However, there was one Colombian comrade whose prolonged stay in. Moscow was explicitly meant to prepare him for a leading role in Colombian communism.[22] Guillermo Hernandez Rodriguez was a PSR activist who, at the age of 20, had been involved in the 1927. Barrancabermeja strike. Invited to Moscow to attend the celebrations for the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution, he also received a more general mandate to represent the PSR in the pursuit of full admission into the Comintern (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 14, 1. 2). In Moscow, besides working with the Latin American Secretariat of the Comintern, he became a student of the famous Lenin School in a period marked by the introduction of Stalinist habits.[23] The manner of dealing with former comrades as suspected deviationists may be seen in a text written by Hernandez Rodriguez immediately after leaving the Soviet Union. When he traveled back to Colombia via New York, he wrote a letter to the South American Secretariat dated March 25, 1930, denouncing one of the PSR leaders of using the same arguments as those already expelled from the party (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 41, ll. 6-8). In the decisive enlarged national executive committee of the PSR in July 1930 that culminated in the renaming of the party, he<appeared as the great arbitrator who had just come from Moscow, enjoying all the prestige of a person who had worked for years in the center of world revolution and was now entrusted. with the task of initiating a new phase of Colombian communism. Unlike Baquero, whose attacks on putschism had denigrated the absent Raul Mahecha in the strongest terms 2[4] he spoke of correcting the putschist line, whose former leaders could, however, participate in the new Communist party if they admitted their errors (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 43,1. 46).

One of the former leaders who could have been accused of having a putschist past was Ignacio Torres Giraldo, who was, however, in Moscow at the time of the meeting. He had come to Soviet Russia in late

1929 as a kind of refugee, having been forced to leave Colombia because of the persecution of PSR activists. However, he felt obliged to write to his comrades in the Sindicato Central Obrero in Bogota (and, through them, to "the revolutionary Workers of the country") to justify his exile, as he had left Colombia without explaining why (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 35,1. 4). He referred to the example of other countries such as Cuba, Mexico, China, and Peru, where the masses were oppressed as in Colombia but, in his view, had formidable revolutionary *organi*zations. "Of what means do they dispose? That is what we have to studv. Mv preoccupation at this moment is just to learn a little, to learn in order to go to Colombia and spread this knowledge" (RGSAPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 35, 1. 5). In spite of his apparent modesty, Torres Giraldo maintained his defiant spirit. In December 1929 he read for the first time the famous letter of the Comintern to the PSR—written almost a year before—in which he was accused of serious deviations. He wrote a statement to the presidium of the Comintern, attempting to put the meaning of his incriminating argument in its true context. "I was judged with condemning appearances but without critical analysis.... I think that my errors are the errors of the childhood of our Colombian movement, errors which, once I understand them, I am the first to recognize and correct" (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 35,1. 3).

Torres Giraldo still had to learn the rules of the game and the prescribed language of self-criticism. He was sent to the Lenin School, and he eventually became aware that in the new era of the Communist Party of Colombia nobody was especially keen to call him back to his country. Certainly he was forced to recognize that a strong formalized self-criticism was inevitable and wrote such a "declaration" dated November 1, 1930 (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 44, 1. 15). His self-criticism certainly implied that Tomas Uribe Marquez was another participant in this erroneous line of thought. The "solidarity" with this "comrade" soon proved to be

problematic; the former leader of the PSR, who had participated constructively in the founding plenum of the Communist party, was nevertheless accused of antiparty activities and expelled from the party in early 1931.[25] This may have induced Torres Giraldo to radicalize his self-criticism; in a five-page article with the ominous title "Liquidating the Past," dated March 1931, he started with the nearly Orwellian motto "We must liquidate all our errors from the past if we want to be worthy of fighting under the banner of the proletariat" (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 50, 11. 1-5). Apart from a kind of sociological explanation of the deficiencies of revolutionary socialism, there is a significant change of language from his previous writings (1. 3):

The line of the party had become an insidious class collaboration under the direction of the bourgeoisie, the agent of imperialism. The Liberal generals, widely using their assets in the party and, thereby, also in the masses, organized the associations with the oil groups of Wall Street, that is to say, they negotiated the insurrection beforehand. Thus, the party was converted into an instrument of the national bourgeoisie sold to the imperialists, and we militants, in positions of leadership, became agents of the bourgeoisie and the imperialists amidst the very ranks of the proletariat.

Torres Giraldo went on to a harsh denunciation of his former comrade Uribe Marquez, who apparently was already considered an open enemy by the new leadership in Bogota (11. 3-4):

According to the declarations of Tomas Uribe Marquez at the plenum of July 1930, these associations were not unknown to elements that then enjoyed the full confidence of the proletariat. Uribe Marquez, himself the axis of the planned insurrection, turned out to have been the tie which linked the politics of imperialism and its agents, the bourgeoisie and the Liberal caudillos, with the revolutionary movement of the masses. So this process of predominance of the petty bourgeoisie in our workers' movement has led us to participate in the

treason and the disgrace of an infamous policy of plotting with the murderers of the proletariat.

He concluded his declaration with a complete condemnation of his own past and an unconditional recognition of the new leadership.
In a letter dated April 12, 1931, the new leader of the Communist party, Hernandez Rodriguez, replied, expressing the satisfaction of the Politburo that comrade Torres Giraldo had begun to recognize the entire putschist policy in which he had played a developmental role as false. However, one issue needed clarification (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 52, 1. 18):

The central committee requests comrade Ignacio Torres Giraldo to define his position before the Latin American Secretariat of the Communist International in Moscow regarding the fight waged against putschist opportunism within the party and, especially, his opinion regarding the expulsion of Tomas Uribe Marquez from the party. If possible, comrade Torres should present copies of his political correspondence with Tomas Uribe Marquez and Maria Cano to the Latin American Secretariat of the C.I., or at least inform them concerning the contents of these letters. The central committee judges that comrade Torres must suspend all types of correspondence with elements expelled from the party.

Torres Giraldo also submitted to this humiliating request. In a letter to the central conunittee he declared that he had not written a single letter to Uribe Marquez since he had left the country and that his correspondence with Cano concerned family matters only. In the same letter he approved explicitly of the expulsion of Uribe Marquez, which he found justified by the declarations of his former comrade at the plenum of July 1930. He claimed to understand the "treacherous contents of the adventurous policy" with which, admittedly, he had collaborated

(RGASPI, f. 495, op. 1.04, d. 50,1. 8).

In Bogota, Torres Giraldo was long considered a danger. This can be seen in. a letter to the Caribbean Office of the Comintern dated. November 15,1932, from the central committee of the Communist Party of Colombia and signed by Gilberto Viera (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 52,1. 46):

We do not know if comrade Torres Giraldo, during the long period of study in the USSR, had succeeded in overcoming the multiple weaknesses and negative aspects of his revolutionary behavior. The "indications" which we have in this regard do not allow us to cherish many illusions about his political transformation, about the Bolshevization of this comrade.

Therefore, the Central Committee considered the return of Torres Giraldo "inconvenient" and requested intervention from the Caribbean Office in Moscow in order to hold him in Russia or, in case he had already left, to assign him another task outside of Colombia.

Apparently, Viera was too quick with his request. In a letter from January 17, 1933, Viera had to admit that Torres Giraldo had written an extensive rectification and had advanced politically in the USSR (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 63,1.5). In fact, Torres Giraldo returned to Colombia by mid-1934 to be elected general secretary of the Communist Party of Colombia. In the meantime, the man who had led the party after its establishment, Hernandez Rodriguez, was under fire for having left Colombia without party authorization during the war between Colombia and Peru. Having applied severe sanctions to the historical leaders of revolutionary socialism, he became himself a victim of a merciless purge and was expelled from the communist movement."

The myth of the October Revolution had an impact on Colombian

socialism from its beginnings. The message was not necessarily delivered via foreign "agitators" such as Savitsky, but the presence of foreigners did have some significance for the spread of revolutionary ideas in Colombia as in other countries of Latin America." Those who opposed the established order usually sought the support and orientation of an organization that proclaimed and represented the revolution on a global scale. This was true, as well, for the rivals of the PSR leadership (especially the group of Juan de Dios Romero and Erasmo Valencia), who unsuccessfully tried to establish direct connections with the Moscow headquarters of the Comintern. Apart from a few anarchists who complained about the persecution of their Russian comrades (see Achila Neira, 1991: 237-239), the protagonists of revolutionary socialism adopted a completely uncritical attitude toward the Soviet Union. Even Maria Cano, in her defiant letters to Hernandez Rodriguez after the July plenum of 1930,[28] never suspected that the discrimination against her had anything to do with Comintern politics in Moscow. She had unlimited confidence in the wisdom of the Comintern as the leader of the revolutionary world movement (Torres Giraldo, 1972: 151). If the Comintern was mistaken in a concrete case, as in the case of the so-called putschists in the PSR including herself, it was because its judgment was based on erroneous information.

There is no written evidence that the Colombian revolutionaries critically questioned what they heard and saw during longer visits to the Soviet Union of the 1930s. We have no testimony from Hernandez Rodriguez concerning his Moscow years, nor do we know what happened to Mahecha during his year of Russian exile in the early 1930s as a worker in the electrical industry (Arango, 1985: 145-146).[29] In *Anecdotario* (2004), an autobiographical account that includes his experience in Russia, Torres Giraldo is fully identified with the Stalinist system (and see also 2005). He even justified the "famous trials held in Moscow from 1931 onwards against

saboteurs and, in general, criminals in the service of imperialism." Here he demonstrated his great esteem for the public prosecutor Vishinsky and told his readers that he often criticized prominent Bolshevik theorists without being treated less cordially (2004: 212-214).

When. Colombian leftists first sought inspiration, orientation, and material help from the Comintern, they hoped to escape the provincialism of an isolated country in joining a worldwide movement for the emancipation of the working classes. Progressive intellectuals could advance from a vague anti-U.S. feeling (for the loss of Panama, among other reasons) to a solid understanding of the significance of U.S. penetration in Colombia and the nature of imperialist enclaves, among other issues. Through the Comintern and its front organizations, such as the Anti-Imperialist League, there were demonstrations of solidarity in favor of Sandino in several Colombian cities, and Colombians went to Nicaragua to join the fight against the U.S. invasion. Theoretical elaborations such as the expositions of Humbert-Droz helped them to gain a deeper understanding of Latin American economic and social transformation processes and to go beyond the political. changes in Colombia at the end of the twenties.

However, these positive aspects of inclusion in an international world of revolutionary thought and action were very soon replaced by submission to the sterile rules of a new state religion called Marxism-Leninism." One of the most negative effects of early Stalinism was the elimination of theoretical work resulting from free discussion. When leading communists such as Bukharin and Humbert-Droz were expelled from their key positions in the Comintern, their important theoretical contributions disappeared as well. After the victory of Stalin, there was a constant demand to transfer to the rest of the world the basic concepts that had been coined for the Russian factional struggle. Even Maria Cano wrote of the "narcotic of social-fascism" that the Colombian bourgeoisie used to stifle the

nascent consciousness of the proletariat (Torres Giraldo, 1972: 168). After the elimination of Bukharin and his followers, all communist parties were requested to respond to an open letter against right- wing deviations, a request that the Colombian party fulfilled (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 30,1.7). The obsession with the dangers of Trotskyism led to a police-like investigation of how Trotskyite literature entered the country (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 52,1.31) and such strange demands as those expressed in a letter of the Caribbean Office of the Comintern to the Communist Party of Colombia on July 1, 1932: "You affirm that no Trotskyite group in the true sense exists. Even if this is so, it is very important that you wage a systematic fight against the counterrevolutionary character of Trotskyism throughout the whole world" (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 48, 1. 14).

Colombian revolutionary socialists were conscious of belonging to a world movement as part of the Comintern. In terms of organization, this meant submission to the decisions of the "higher" body in the Comintern structure. Concretely, this was first the South American Secretariat in Buenos Aires and then, from 1932 on, the Caribbean Office in New York, subject to appeal to the Comintern headquarters in Moscow. During conflicts, the Colombian party had to obey orders even of a purely national character (for instance, who should run for president in the name of the party) despite national majority decisions to the contrary and the deep conviction of Colombian leaders that such a decision was counterproductive or even destructive. The possibility of appeal to the Moscow authorities fostered a tendency to resort to intrigue. This does not mean that the bitterness of factional struggle was imported from. Moscow. One can demonstrate that such attitudes existed in would-be communist groups before their affiliation with the Comintern. But the good conscience of "little Stalins" in the persecution of their closest comrades resulted from the certainty of acting in the name of Marxism-Leninism and participating in the wisdom

that emanated from the center in Moscow.

It is apparent that the most important result of Comintern intervention in Colombia was the introduction of an attitude of unconditional submission to the political line determined in the remote center of world revolution. This attitude was deliberately strengthened by such party rituals as self-criticism, and it can be shown how it took possession of some of the most prominent leaders of Colombian communism. Viera, the head of the Colombian party for decades, learned these habits when he was still a student. Even Torres Giraldo, one of the most experienced and successful leaders of the PSR, who had every reason to be proud of his past as an organizer and a strike leader, was made to see the period of his most brilliant activities in the 1920s as predominantly negative. He admitted his theoretical confusion before he came to Moscow and deplored his previous ignorance of the method of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin (Torres Giraldo, 2005: 34-35).

It was this conviction of inferiority in relation to an omniscient world party that prevented Colombian communists from learning from their own experience. They were forced to believe that an emerging revolutionary movement had to be illuminated, instructed, and transformed according to Bolshevik norms. For instance, the conventional Comintern wisdom taught the necessity of strictly separating trade unions and party. This could not do justice to the CON, a kind of political trade union that proved capable of including Colombian workers in international anti-imperialist solidarity campaigns (one has to go back to the First International, during the period of Marx and Bakunin, to find a model for this kind of working-class cooperation). Again, the famous giras—lecture tours of outstanding revolutionaries such as Maria Cano—proved to be an excellent instrument for revolutionary education and mobilization with the potential to reach nonproletarian sectors of the oppressed classes. These

valuable experiences were pushed aside and depreciated in favor of abstract demands for "proletarianization" according to the contemporary Comintern dogma. In. Colombia as in other Latin American countries, varieties of populism filled the gap that was left open after Communist militants were forced to abandon their own heritage.

NOTES

1. This belief was shared by leading representatives of the Conservative government, especially by Minister of War Ignacio Rengifo, who was obsessed with the danger of communist subversion (see Rojas Guerra, 1985).

2. Enrique Olaya Herrera, for example, served the Conservative government as ambassador in Washington before becoming the first Liberal president.

3. For many details on the early history of the Colombian labor movement, the work of Ignacio Torres Giraldo (1974-1978) is still the fundamental source. For a synthetic view of the formation of the Colombian working class, see Achila Neira (1991). Vega Cantor (2002) links the economic background to the characteristics of protest movements in particular sectors and regions and deals with the history of socialist ideas and socialist organizations. Vanegas (2003) offers detailed information on the socialist movement before the establishment of the Revolutionary Socialist *party.*

4. Savitsky had come to Colombia after failing in a mission that had taken him first to China (see Montana Cuellar, 1973: 131, and Torres Giraldo, 1978, vol. 3: 740). For a synthesis of the available information on him, see Kheyfets and Kheyfets (2001: 8-14).

5. On the Socialist Conference and the Workers' Congress, see Villegas and Yunis (1976: 493-496) and Torres Giraldo (1978, vol. 3: 735-743).

6. Documents in the Russian archives on this first attempt to form a

communist party have been interpreted in a recent essay by Kheyfets and Kheyfets (2001).

7. Achila Neira (1991) and Vega Cantor (2002) demonstrate the existence of an anarchist current in Colombia which has generally been underestimated because of the negative judgments of Ignacio Torres Giraldo, the most important witness of those times.

8. The best-known of these leaders was Maria Cane, a teacher and political activist from Medellin, who received the honorary title "The Flower of Labor."

9. Humbert-Droz was a founder of the Swiss Communist party and worked in the central apparatus of the Comintern from the Third Congress on. He was responsible for the "Latin"-speaking countries (Belgium, France, Italy, and Spain, including Central and South America) until 1929.

10. According to all the available information, this figure is certainly exaggerated.

11. The massacre is a key event in Gabriel Garcia Mdrquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude.*

12. Humbert-Droz protested against the intervention of Stalin in the German party in favor of Thalmann. At a meeting of the presidium of the Comintern executive committee on December 19, 1928, Humbert-Droz was formally condemned (Humbert-Droz, 1971: 317-356).

13. In the archives of Humbert-Droz there are several documents showing how "mobbing" by Stalinist zealots in the apparatus prevented him from preparing for the Buenos Aires conference (see Archives de Jules Humbert-Droz, 1988: 142-144),

14. This is quite remarkable in view of later criticism. In the official history of the Communist Party of Colombia, Medina (1980: 133) sees the appearance of Mahecha in Buenos Aires as one of the most deplorable moments of his political career. He calls Mahecha's intervention incoherent and contradictory, his language sensationalist.

15. An abridged version of this letter appears in the memoirs of Gilberto

Mejia V. (1986: 55-67). Some omitted paragraphs contain sharp criticism of Ignacio Torres Giraldo. The full text may be found in the Moscow Comintern Archives (Russian State Archives of Social-Political History, Moscow [hereafter RGASPI], f. 498, op. 104, d. 24). The letter was written with the help of Guillermo Hernandez Rodriguez, who had been in Moscow working with the Comintern since the end of 1927. (Guillermo Hernandez Rodriguez, interview, March 1989).

16. The report is dated July 12, 1929, so it was written or held during the Tenth Plenum of the Comintern executive, where Humbert-Droz was humiliated and expelled from his position.

17. Castrillon was a trade-union activist who had traveled to Moscow in 1928 to attend the Red International meetings. He participated in the banana strike movement and was captured, placed on trial, and sentenced to 10 years in prison. From prison he addressed the Colombian parliament, explaining the events of the strike (Castrillon, 1974), and requested amnesty. The terms of this request were harshly condemned by the South American Secretariat as unworthy and contradictory to his previous courageous behavior (see Jeifets, Jeifets, and Huber, 2004: 74-75; Kheyfets, 2000: 77-78).

18. Prieto, in a letter to the central committee of the PSR in November 1929, had ridiculed "observers situated in Patagonia" who wanted to guide armies at the other end of the continent, giving orders for combat and even for expulsion. At a meeting of the "Politburo" in January, he called the South American Secretariat incompetent and destructive and asked the PSR to send a direct delegate to Moscow to resolve the problems (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 44, 11.5-6). Prieto himself left the PSR, presumably soon after the January meeting.

19. There were internal debates in a PSR bureau and plenary meeting at the end of January 1930. In spite of the inconvenience of withdrawing Castrillon at the last moment from the presidential campaign, some of those who attended argued that the orders of the Comintern must be

obeyed without criticism (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 44,11. 1-3).

20. In the official history of the party published in 1960, there is not a word about the condemnation of Castrillon by the Comintern leadership. Instead, it is said that the socialist candidature of Castrillon awakened popular enthusiasm, whereas the majority of opportunistic leaders of revolutionary socialism turned away from Castrillon and supported the bourgeois candidate (Partido Comunista de Colombia, 1973: 20).

21. This quotation from. Guillermo Hernandez Rodriguez is taken from the article on. Castrillon in the biographical dictionary of the Comintern (Jeifets, Jeifets, and Huber, 2004: 75).

22. During the internal conversations of Comintern representatives with Colombian revolutionary socialists in Buenos Aires, the future of Guillermo Hernandez Rodriguez ("Guillen") and his return to Colombia were discussed in detail.

23. For a general analysis of rituals at the Lenin School, see McLoughlin, 2003: 85-112, and Kostenberger, 2007: 287-309).

24. See RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 43,1. 12. Mahecha had already been attacked by Baquero in previous communications. In one of his earliest letters as secretary of the party (September 8, 1929), Baquero passed on information "from credible sources" that depicted Mahecha as an individual who had spent most of the sum of 60,000 pesos collected by the workers on orgies and luxury items and had fled from the banana zone when the situation became serious (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 104, d. 33,1. 5).

25. The circumstances of his expulsion are unclear. It is regrettable that the biography written by his daughter contains very little information about the discrimination against Tomas Uribe Marquez after the establishment of the Communist Party of Colombia (Uribe, 1994: 310-312). Uribe Marquez wrote to the Comintern executive on March 8, 1931, criticizing the party leadership and demanding a new intervention from Moscow (RGASPI, f. 495, op. 1.04, d. 52, 11. 5-13).

26. The expulsion of Hernandez Rodriguez and Ines Martell from the

party is beyond the scope of this article. There is rich material in the Moscow archives on these cases as well as on the mechanisms of purges in the young Communist party.

27. Right-wing politicians were obsessed with the danger of subversion and always overestimated foreign interference as a cause of social unrest. Valuable material may be found in the Rengifo Archives of the Centro de Investigaciones y Documentacion Socioeconomica (Center of Socioeconomic Research and Documentation—CIDSE), Universidad del. Valle, Cali (see Rojas Guerra, 1985).

28. One should compare these remarkable letters with the documents of self-criticism that Torres Giraldo wrote in Moscow at the same time. Much later, Torres Giraldo tried to do justice to Maria Cano in a book he wrote shortly before his death (Torres Giraldo, 1972: 149-171; Maria, 1985: 92-101).

29. In the second edition of a book of interviews with survivors of the banana strike of 1928, Carlos Arango published a brief biography of Mahecha based on interviews with his widow and his daughter Luz.

30. There was no "Marxism-Leninism" before Stalin; he created this doctrine to attach the authority of great thinkers to a pseudo-theory legitimizing his rule.

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