

# Communism Confronts the Mexican Revolution

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Daniela Spenser. *Stumbling Its Way Through Mexico: The Early Years of the Communist International*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011. Translated by Peter Gellert. 205 pages. Notes. Index.

Daniela Spenser, the accomplished Mexican historian, has produced an assiduously researched, meticulously detailed, and very nicely written account of the early years of Communism in the Mexican Revolution (1918 to 1922, with a less detailed epilogue carrying events up to 1929). She argues that the Bolshevik international revolutionary project and the Communist International had only a sketchy understanding of Mexico and thus failed to grasp the powerful impact of the country's revolution. That fundamental problem was complicated by the fact that the Mexican Communist party was founded principally by foreigners who themselves did not have a profound knowledge of Mexican society and politics. Other problems included the relative isolation of the foreign Communist International agents sent to foment revolution in Mexico, as well as the early party's lack of resources. Her principal point is that the experience of the Mexican Revolution and the achievement of the Constitution of 1917 gave Mexican workers an investment in the new revolutionary state with which the Communists could not compete in the early years. In the excellent translation by Peter Gellert, the book is a fascinating read.

It's a little irregular to review a friend's book, so I should inform readers of this journal, that in 1995 when I arrived in Mexico with a Fulbright fellowship to study a group of American war resisters who had been among the founders of Mexican communism, my host institution, the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (the Center for Research and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology or CIESAS), assigned me to work with Daniela Spenser who was also doing research on Mexican Communism. We shared documents, I offering her copies of documents in English that I had from the Library of Congress, the U.S. Military Intelligence Division, and the U.S. Bureau of Investigation, while she gave me copies of documents from the Russian archives, principally in English or Spanish. Daniela also shared with me her knowledge of the various Mexican archives in which I was working. Her assistance helped me with the research for what became my Ph.D. dissertation "'Slackers': American war resisters and Communists in Mexico, 1917-1927" (1998). We became friends, though sometimes over the years we argued about our somewhat differing interpretations of the Bolsheviks, the Communist International, and the Mexican revolution. In the end, I think our views have converged, probably because she has convinced me and I have moved in her direction. I might also confess that the translator, Peter Gellert, is a friend with whom my wife and I had shared an apartment in the 1980s and whom I had introduced to Daniela.

Daniela's research during those years resulted in her fine book, *The Impossible Triangle: Mexico, Soviet Russia and the United States in the 1920s*, based on her Ph.D. dissertation earned at the University of North Carolina, as well as many scholarly articles and most recently *Stumbling Its Way Through Mexico*. She has also written a book on the history of the Mexican Communist Party during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40), available only in Spanish; its title translates as Unity at All Costs: the Third International during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (*Unidad a toda costa: la Tercera Internacional en México durante la presidencia de Lázaro Cárdenas*, 2007).

Daniela brings to her scholarship a unique personal history. Born in Czechoslovakia, her parents fled the country in 1968 at the time of the Soviet invasion that crushed the democratic aspirations of the

Prague Spring. Her father, a radio broadcaster, and her mother, a high level interpreter, fled to England where Daniela studied at the university. As a young adult, she came to the United States and went to Florida where she worked for a while in hotels as a waitress. She once said to me, "I saw that I didn't like American capitalism much better than I liked Soviet Communism."

Looking for an alternative to the two, Daniela turned to the developing world. She moved to Mexico's most southern state, Chiapas, where she worked first with coffee coops and later with the Mexican government's state-owned coffee company, becoming an authority on coffee who years later was sometimes called upon as a consultant. In the 1980s, she moved to Mexico City and became a researcher at CIESAS where one of her early books was a history of the Socialist Party of Chiapas (*El Partido Socialista Chiapaneco: rescate y reconstrucción de su historia*, 1988).

In *Stumbling*, Daniela narrates the history of the early Communist Party in Mexico through a series of short biographies, first of the foreign founders—American Charles Francis Phillips, the Indian M.N. Roy, and the Russian Mikhail Borodin—and then of the Communist International's agents in Mexico—Louis Fraina and Sen Katayama. The biographies and the narration are set within both the history of the Communist International and within the economic, social and political history of Mexico. All of this is grounded in Daniela's command of primary sources in Spanish, English, and Russian from Mexican, American and Soviet archives as well as a mastery of the vast secondary literature on Communism.

Daniela's conclusion is that the Bolshevik's early projection of world revolution as a uniform prescription for country's around the world disoriented would-be Communist revolutionaries in Mexico who did not grasp the significance of the profound revolutionary experience and the achievements codified in the Constitution of 1917. Later, the Communist International agents Fraina and Katayama, proved incapable of grasping the complexity of the agrarian movements and the labor movement before the International ended that phase of its attempt to establish a Communist party in Mexico. In the Epilogue, Daniela discusses the International's Bolshevization of the Communist parties, including the Mexican Communists, and their alternating strategy of first attempting to permeate the agencies of the government of Plutarco Elías Calles and then becoming involved in schemes to overthrow it. All of the early attempts to found a Communist Party bore little fruit, and only after Joseph Stalin came to power in the Soviet Union and in the International was a Communist Party successfully installed in Mexico, though that was an altogether different thing than what had been envisioned by the Communists of the teens and early twenties.

A few of the handful of early Mexican Communists no doubt had the idea of creating an independent revolutionary socialist movement. The power of the Mexican revolution and the more distant power of the Soviet revolution made that impossible. By the late-1920s, not only the Communists, but also the more deeply rooted and larger anarchist labor movement had also been effectively suppressed. Other social movements were coopted, often after their leaders had been assassinated. By 1929 Calles had founded a state party and during 1930s Lázaro Cárdenas brought the peasant, labor and popular sectors into the state party which somewhat later was named the Institutional Revolutionary Party. Not until the late 1960s would there again be an independent left movement in the country, but then that too would submerge itself in the late 1980s into the Party of the Democratic Revolution founded by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. It seems that every time Mexico succeeds in creating an independent left movement, either the moth flies into the fire, or the flames flicker and catch the moth.

While beginners in the study of Mexican Communism will still want to start with Barry Carr's *Marxism & Communism in Twentieth Century Mexico* (1992), anyone who wants more detailed information and a more profound and updated understanding of the early years will turn to Daniela's *Stumbling*.