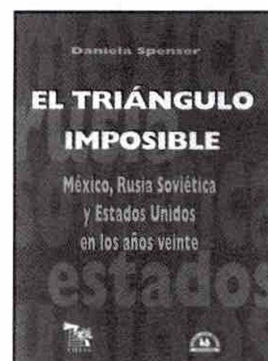


El triángulo imposible
México, Rusia Soviética y Estados Unidos
en los años veinte

(The Impossible Triangle: Mexico, Soviet Russia
 And the United States in the 1920s)

Daniela Spencer

CIESAS, Mexico City, 1998, 269 pp.



Daniela Spencer's book, *El triángulo imposible: México, Rusia Soviética y Estados Unidos en los años veinte* (The Impossible Triangle: Mexico, Soviet Russia and the United States in the 1920s), is a novel contribution to clarifying the events relating to two of the most important social revolutions of the twentieth century, the Bolshevik and the Mexican Revolutions, as well as the role the United States played in each.

With rigorous use of archival materials, the author chronologically delineates the vicissitudes of Soviet policy toward Mexico, trapped between the ideological interests of the Comintern and the state interests of its diplomacy. At the same time, she recounts the difficult balances that the Mexican revolutionary leaders had to strike between the demands of their internal policies, leftist sympathies and the challenges of the relationship with the United States.

The book also expands on the contradictions between those groups in U.S. society who already saw social change in Latin America as an extension of the "Bolshevik plague" and those who,

like Ambassador Morrow, understood the specificity of revolutions in the region as a consequence of endogenous structures and nationalism.

Needless to say, the policies and strategies that were embryonic in the 1920s would become the basis for the policies of these actors when faced with the social changes in Latin America during the Cold War.

Spencer divides her book chronologically into three parts: "The Meeting of Two Revolutions" covers 1917 to 1923; "Diplomatic Disagreements," the second part, analyzes the period from 1924 to 1927; and "Toward the Clash," the third section, probes the period from 1928 to 1930, when relations between Mexico and the Soviet Union were broken. This exposition in blocks describes the policies of each actor, starting with the United States, followed by the Soviet Union and finally Mexico.

Noteworthy in U.S. policy toward the U.S.S.R. is its early opposition to the Bolsheviks, motivated by domestic considerations but above all due to an "ideological allergy" to socialist positions. The author considers that this is due to the all-pervasive presence of ideology in the U.S. at the time. Both actors presented themselves as alternative models for "the salvation of humanity." Later, this position would become more subtle when economic interests began to be relevant in the expanding Russian market at the end of the 1920s.

Initial U.S. policy was equally opposed to what was happening in Mexico. On the one hand, an attempt was made to link the two revolutions ideologically, and, on the other, the revolutionary nationalism of two Mexican leaders was considered unacceptable, particularly that of Venustiano Carranza.

This line of thinking changed with the recognition of Alvaro Obregón in 1923 due to the Bucareli Accords and Mexico's concessions in the area of oil production, foreign debt payments and the non-retroactive application of Article 27 of the Constitution. We agree with Spencer in that, beyond justifications and plotting, the basis for U.S. policy was the desire not to legitimize a precedent of nationalist policy and to create a dam to contain the Mexican example in Latin America.

Spencer argues that from Mexico's point of view, Obregón's decision to establish relations with the Soviet Union was a tactic to make up for the contention stirred up by the Bucareli Accords and to satisfy many defenders of the socialist nations among what she calls "the radical intellectual elite," including people of the standing of José Vasconcelos, Jesús Silva Herzog, Díaz Soto y

Gama and De Negri, among others. Another factor that influenced the decision was the process of moderation the Bolshevik Revolution went through in 1923 with the advent of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the non-class-confrontation policy implemented by the Comintern.

However, the radicalization of Soviet policy, including calls to subversion in Mexico starting in 1928, together with the increasingly moderate line of Plutarco Elías Calles in the last two years of his presidential administration, laid the basis for greater distancing of the two revolutions, leading to a definitive break in 1930. Spencer's book goes into these central hypotheses in a very accessible way, with anecdotes making for easy reading.

The book also has undeniable methodological value for students of twentieth-century postrevolutionary experiences in Latin America. It would be interesting, for example, to study the similarities and differences between the Mexican revolutionaries, on the one hand, and the Cubans and Sandinistas, on the other, vis-à-vis the United States and the Soviet Union. It would also be useful to identify the causes for which the U.S.S.R. took a different position in each case, while the United States adopted a similar confrontational stance. Finally, it would be worthwhile to compare the failures and achievements of socialism in the U.S.S.R., revolutionary nationalism in Mexico, the Sandinista Revolution and Cuban communism.

Another question which is enriched methodologically and theoretically by this book is the current study of Mexico's foreign policy and its relations with the United States. Just as the author does, it is imperative to link up the actions of Mexican foreign policy with the complexities of its domestic situation and with the rise of different groups who claim to represent "national interests." It is also worthwhile differentiating the protagonists in U.S. policy-making toward Mexico, who very often act in an incoherent, contradictory fashion.

Another practical lesson that can be derived from the period of history Spencer deals with is recognition of the fact that Mexican achievements in its bilateral agenda with the United States, even in the context of the existing asymmetry, have not only been made through that unflinching "flexibility" often interpreted by the other side as weakness, but also due to an energetic policy that induces Washington policy-makers to negotiate and not only impose their will.

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