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REVIEWS

Trottskygrad on the Altiplano

By Bill Weinberg

BOLIVIA, NOTORIously LANDlocked AND impoverished, is today at the forefront of forging a post—Cold War anti-imperialism—emphasizing an indigenous vision rather than European ideologies. But it was generations of bitter struggle that culminated in the 2005 election of the Aymara peasant leader and declared socialist Evo Morales to the presidency. As elsewhere in South America, world ideological contests, including the schisms within the socialist camp, played themselves out in Bolivia during the years between the Russian Revolution and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The way they did, however, made Bolivia unique.

Alone on the South American continent, Bolivia saw the emergence of a militant (at times, even revolutionary) labor movement that aligned with Leon Trotsky and his Fourth International, and rejected Joseph Stalin and his Kremlin successors. In Bolivia’s Radical Tradition: Permanent Revolution in the Andes, S. Sándor John explores the roots of this exceptionalism. To his credit, he resists the temptation of mechanistic explanations—but the answer is pretty clearly rooted in sheer oppression.

Faced with a nasty, brutish, and short life in the tin mines of the altiplano (chronic silicosis made for an average lifespan of 40 years), Bolivia’s miners had little patience for the Moscow-mandated line of “two-stage” revolution, which urged subordination to the “bourgeois-democratic” political process until feudalism was dismantled and modern capitalism established. The Trotskyist doctrine of permanent revolution referenced in John’s subtitle, in contrast, emphasized unrelenting hostility to the ruling class and no postponement of the struggle for socialism.

The barbarity of Bolivia’s political class nearly made the ascendance of this doctrine inevitable. The litany of army massacres of striking miners, at irregular intervals for generations, beginning in 1923, makes for grim reading. The labor movement—its program expounded in a fiery 1946 document called the “Thesis of Pulcayo”—was generally in the sway of the Trotsky-aligned Revolutionary Workers Party (POR), rejecting the official timidity of the Bolivian Communist Party and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Left Party (PIR).

John documents the POR’s rise and period of sway over the Bolivian labor movement (from the 1930s through the 1980s) with articles from the left and especially Trotskyist press of the day, in both Bolivia and the United States—rescuing a wealth of information from falling into pre-digital oblivion. The book is illustrated with reproductions of radical art and propaganda as well as period photos. John also offers firsthand interviews with veterans of the miners’ struggle.

The POR and the PIR were both founded in the aftermath of the disastrous Chaco War (1932–5), a senseless and costly conflict with Paraguay, in which Bolivia’s old oligarchic political class lost much credibility—in John’s words, “the death throes of the ancien régime.” More enlightened sectors of this class subsequently began affecting a populist posture, as they sensed the pressure building from below.

Over the generations, this alignment of forces made for situations both Kafkaesque in their complexity and Orwellian in their irony. Beginning after the Chaco War, military and conservative regimes sought to co-opt the workers’ movement—and failing to do so, would resort again to bloody repression. The poorly named Revolutionary Left Party became a willing partner in this strategy, even taking posts in the government’s newly created labor bureaucracy; these same “revolutionary left” bureaucrats then ordered troops to fire on protesting workers in the Potosí massacre of 1947.

In the Popular Front strategy of the war years—when Bolivia was an important source of tin for the Allies—these Stalinists who connived with fascistic regimes joined with Wash-
Huntington in accusing militant miners of abetting fascism.

Yet the Trotskyist POR would itself begin to mirror such ugly compromises following the Bolivian revolution of 1952. This was led by a populist but explicitly anti-Communist formation, the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), whose own right wing had a strong fascistic streak. Denied power through the polls after the 1951 presidential election was annulled by the military, the MNR launched an uprising—which, probably even to the party’s own surprise, was avidly joined by spontaneously formed worker militias, routing the army in a matter of days. John’s interviews with veterans of these militias make for a vivid portrayal of the April 1952 street fighting.

This unanticipated upheaval helped move the MNR to the left, but also led the workers’ movement into a corporatist system of state control. Juan Lechin, leader of the newly formed Bolivian Workers’ Central (COB), closed ranks with the MNR government, taking his Trotskyist followers with him. Over the following decade, the MNR would tilt now to the right, now to the left (with the more conservative party boss Victor Paz Estenssoro and his more progressive protégé Hernán Siles Zuazo revolving in power), while never deviating from Washington’s orbit.

While the POR would finally split over the party’s stance toward the leadership of the National Revolution, even renewed repression against miners would not lead to an overt break between the COB and the MNR until 1964—the same year MNR rule ended with a right-wing coup d’état.

Unfortunately, this dynamic continued even with the reprise of military rule that followed the National Revolution period. In the 1960s, new dictators extended the seesaw strategy of co-optation and repression. Labor’s flirtation with state power was broken under the especially bloody regime of René Barrientos, and the COB was outlawed. After Barrientos’s death, however, a new left-nationalist military regime would rebuild ties to the COB, and elements of the now divided POR. When the most reactionary sectors of the military struck back with the Hugo Banzer coup of 1971, worker militias took to the streets to resist—albeit unsuccessfully.

A final irony concerned Che Guevara’s ill-fated adventure in Bolivia in 1967. Guevara and his French publicist Régis Debray, like the Trotskyists, rejected official Moscow-line timidity in Latin America, calling for armed revolution from the jungles and mountains. Yet, like the orthodox
Stalinists, they rejected the Trotskyists and their ethic of mass workers’ struggle—which they saw as a distraction from the guerrilla foco that they asserted was the true vanguard. This despite the fact that the POR rallied around the Cuban Revolution, with party leader Guillermo Lora traveling to the island to meet with Fidel Castro. And despite the fact that Debray himself had earlier called Bolivia the one Latin American country “where revolution might take the classical Bolshevik form.”

Even if Guevara's formulas were proved inexact and hubristic in the case of Bolivia, the Trotskyists’ failure to grapple with the rural question would prove critical. Following a wave of rural protests, the MNR instituted an agrarian reform in the altiplano to win peasant loyalties—and then used the newly formed peasant militias as a counter-balance to the worker militias that brought the party to power. The brutal Barrientos would continue in this vein, bringing the peasant militias under army control and effectively dividing them from the miners—a point that John does not emphasize.

While some POR militants threw in their lot with peasant land seizures, the party was generally divided on whether and to what degree to support the peasant movement—seemingly due to a dogmatic insistence that the industrial proletariat is always the motor of revolutionary change. This equivocation abetted the divide-and-rule strategy of successive regimes.

John’s book reflects this failure to a degree. He is clear on his sympathy for Trotsky’s ideology, yet refreshingly states: “If solidarity is not to be an empty phrase, it demands critical thinking and learning from experience.” He acknowledges the early influence on the Bolivian left of the Peruvian thinker José Carlos Mariátegui, who sought to merge Marxism and the Andean indigenist tradition. But he ultimately boils it down to the oversimplified dictum (from a 1929 Comintern document) that “in Bolivia, the proletariat is indigenous”—and then moves on.

Indeed the miners and peasants alike were overwhelmingly of Aymara and Quechua ethnicity. This fact was not merely incidental; the indigenous and rural dimension would re-emerge powerfully following Bolivia’s de-industrialization and the concomitant decline of Communism as a global movement.

John’s final chapter notes the virtual dismantling of the mining industry under the IMF-mandated austerity programs of the new civilian governments of the 1980s (including under a now thoroughly domesticated MNR). The sacked miners overwhelmingly returned to the land—becoming peasant colonists in the lowland regions of Chapare and Santa Cruz, which had not been affected by the MNR’s agrarian reform. This opened up a whole new stage of struggle, in which indigenous identity became critical and Morales emerged as a key leader.

The POR still exists, although it has nothing like the power it did in its heyday. John notes that it has recently decried the Morales government’s repression of protesting miners—which was certainly nothing approaching the horrific scale of the past, but is unsettling nonetheless.

John’s Talmudic deconstructions of Trotskyist factionalism can get a little wearying in places, but this is forgivable; it is, after all, what the book is about. Less so, perhaps, given that the title promises an inclusive view of the Andean nation’s “radical tradition” (with only the subtitle referencing Trotsky’s ideology), is the comparatively short treatment he gives the anarcho-syndicalism that preceded Trotskyism’s rise, or the ethno-nationalist “Indianist” movements (his term) that have succeeded it.

These limitations, if revealing, don’t detract from the fact that John has produced an important work that is timely despite its 20th-century context. His original research opens a new window on the highly distinctive and little-studied radical history of a country that is rapidly becoming one of the most geopolitically important on the South American continent.

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