

## IX. Biographical Spots and research.

# Michael Borodin. The First Comintern-emissary to Latin America (Part One)

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Michael Borodin (Gruzenberg)'s mission to the New World was different at many points from the journeys of the first emissaries of the III International to the West European countries, whose main task was to establish contacts with the leaders of the left-wing of the Socialist parties, whom they almost always knew personally since the beginning of the Zimmerwald movement or even before. These first Moscow's envoys orientated easily in the labyrinths of the complex interaction between different factions of the workers' movement and in the political situation in the countries of their destination, since they have lived there during emigration. Borodin was sent to Latin America, the continent which seemed to him „as remote from us as if it were a different planet"(1) „The teacher from Chicago" (as he had introduced himself to some new friends) didn't know much about Mexico, not more than any American resident, interested in politics (and Russian Bolsheviks had been living in the USA some eleven years to the moment).

The Bolshevik leadership gave Borodin two mutual excluding goals in normal

circumstances. At one hand M. M Gruzenberg was appointed by the Soviet government as the general consul of the RSFSR in Mexico (his mandate was signed on April 17th of 1919 by V. Lenin, the deputy of the people's commissar of foreign affairs L. Karakhan and Sovnarkom's secretary L. Fotieva). (2) Borodin had to enter upon negotiations with the government of the Mexican republic with the purpose to establish the alliance between the governments of both republics on the field of maintaining a friendly relationship.."(3) On the other hand, Borodin went to Mexico „with the special purpose of studying conditions there"(4), what meant in practice to evaluate conditions of the mexican workers' movement and the possibilities of its joining the Third International. But anyway, the principal aim of Borodin's mission was, according to his fellow Ch. Phillips (M. Gomez), „to finance and to operate of what we would now call the communist movement in Latin America with Mexico as the centre".(5) The Comintern's missionary had had an unique experience.

### **Borodin's experience as organizer**

He was confident of Lenin, having been known to him since the times of Swiss emigration of the Bolshevik leader, and it

was Lenin who sent the twenty-years-old Borodin to Riga to lead Riga's Bolshevik organization at the beginning of the first Russian revolution. In those days in Latvia „Kirill”, „Yozh” (The Hedgehog) organized workers' strikes, manifestations and meetings. The Latvian Bolsheviks were in the first ranks of those who created their armed groups. „Vaniushin” (Borodin) became the delegate of the Tammersfors Bolshevik conference, took part in the attempts of reconciliation of the contesting social-democratic factions both in Riga where he was a member of the Federative Committee formed by revolutionary parties, and at the whole party's level at the IV Congress of the RSDLP in Stockholm. During his American emigration Borodin was a university student, and then became a teacher at the school for emigrés, worked at Carnegie Institution, being at the same time a publicist, propagandist and organizer in the ranks of the Socialist party of America, constantly keeping in touch with Bolshevik leadership abroad and Lenin. In 1918 he returned to Moscow and after the meeting with Lenin was chosen for a delicate mission: Borodin and V. Vorovsky had to try to obtain the de-facto recognition of diplomatic representations of the Soviet Russia in Scandinavia. At the same time Borodin represented the organizational commission of the Third International in Norway, organized the delivery to the USA of Lenin's „Letter to the American workers” (6) and the delivery of some money to the Russian Soviet Government Information Bureau.

### **Borodin and Latin America.**

Why it was Mexico and not other Latin American country that had become the goal of Borodin's mission? In Argentine, for instance, the International Socialist party (ISPA) was formed yet in January of 1918 and it was trying to play the role of „the continental Comintern”, spreading its influence to the workers' movement of neighbouring Chile and Uruguay. Already in April of 1919 the IIIrd Congress of the

ISPA asked the Comintern for admission and recognition of the party as „the only section of the International in Argentine”, and the decision to send a delegation to Moscow was made.(7) There were at least some important reasons for such a choice. Mexico appeared to be the only Latin American country which didn't break diplomatic relation with Moscow after the Bolsheviks had come in power. (Mexico just held it up for a time).

But the principal reason, perhaps, was that Mexico endured the events similar to Russia's ones: the revolution, the conflict with „the imperialist neighbour” (the USA), and a certain isolation in the world. Moscow considered Mexico as „the Latin American knot of contradictions” and as the natural centre of the continental revolutionary movement. Mexican workers' movement was closely connected to the American one, and that was reinforced by the presence in Mexico of the large group of American socialists, anarchists and IWW members; a lot of Latin Americans lived or worked in the USA. At last, already in 1918 (!) the *Latin American Communist Bureau* was formed in Mexico, consisting of J. Allen, F. Carrillo Puerto, J. Medina, E. Torres and E. Carrasco and this was, according to R. Salazar „a group of convinced and sensible revolutionaries who were working principally to obtain the proletarian unity in Mexico ... and solidarity toward the russian people”(8) In the summer of 1919 Lenin and Zinov'ev received a letter from the Latin American Bureau sent through the Western European secretariat of the ECCI and the *Soviet Polpredstvo* in Estonia mailed from Reval on June 24th (9), already after the departure of Borodin who left Moscow on April 18th accompanied by the secretary of the mexican consulate.

Borodin's mission had a serious diplomatic cover. Karachan appeared to be able to persuade the mexican consul to give Borodin a mexican diplomatic passport ... and even to appoint him as mexican vice-consul in Moscow (!).(10) In Berlin, where

Borodin had delivered the ECCI's directives to the Communist party of Germany which faced some troubles after the assassination of K. Liebknecht and R. Luxemburg and K. Radek's arrest, he visited mexican legation and reported that „he is going to be in Mexico soon”(11) Thus, the forthcoming visit of the Bolshevik emissary, perhaps, was not a secret to the mexican authorities. The way to Mexico proved to be long. According to the Scotland-Yard's information, Borodin attended the International Women's conference for permanent peace held in Switzerland and delivered Comintern's instructions to the leaders of the ECCI's Amsterdam Bureau in Holland as well. After reaching the New World M. Borodin faced serious troubles: „Everything has not been rosy with me of course. There has been plenty of aggravation. Many things did not work out just as I expected..”(12)

### The episode of the Tsarist jewels

He went through a real shock observing the split in the newly born communist movement of the USA and later reported to the Amsterdam Bureau: „...the Communist Party [of America] outheroed Herodius himself. I can conceive of differences principal and otherwise in any Communist Party ...but it is inconceivable that there should be two communist parties. ...this internal fight of communists is suicidal. It helps both the reaction that has the country in its grip and the Old Guard of the Socialist Party." Borodin believed that „the Bureau of the Third" (International) had to interfere and „settle this controversy".(13)

The failure of „the Tzarist jewels" smuggling became another blow for Borodin. This episode looks so much like a detective story that is almost unbelievable. There are different versions of it. M. N. Roy and later Ch. Phillips recalled that the well-experienced Bolshevik conspirator facing difficulties in the diamonds smuggling risked of trusting his suitcase to the fellow-traveller from Austria, and the Austrian promised to deliver it to Bo-

rodin's wife in Chicago. The Bolshevik agent, however, didn't tell him that the diamonds were under the false bottom. Borodin freed himself from the dangerous luggage, but still didn't escape to all the problems, which became the sword of Damocles above his head. The long search on the Antilles resulted in the suitcase's coming back, but it appeared to be ... empty. And only some month later the Austrian faithful to his word delivered the diamonds to Borodin's wife Fanya, who, in return, transmitted the precious cargo back to Moscow. According to T. Draper the diamonds at last were delivered to the head of the unrecognized soviet mission in New-York - L. Martens - but the latter, being unable to sell the precious stones passed it „as the revolutionary to the revolutionary" to the Irish prime-minister E. De Valera as security for a loan of \$20.000. The jewels were returned from Ireland to Russia only in 1948. (14)

The American communist L. Fraina suggested a really fantastic version, having told that it was based on Borodin's own words: the diamonds had been dumped in the harbor of New-York. The Soviet historians for a long time denied even the fact of the diamond-smuggling by the Soviet general consul in Mexico, but recently K. Kasaturov cited Norman Borodin's words: „Before [Borodin's] departure Lenin told ... there is no money for upkeeping of the consulate [in Mexico] and the jewels have to replace it after being sold. Gochran was given necessary instructions, the father received the jewels and a handful of it was sewn up into the slap of his jacket."(15)

The documents which could finally prove the fact of the diamonds smuggling by Borodin aren't disclosed yet. But there are some other like the following extract from the financial report of the Pan American Bureau (the American Agency) of the Comintern: *Received from E. C. Moscow (October, 1920) 2.000 doll. ... from Borrodin (sic!) ... 600 p.s., 3.000 doll...."*(16) On July 17th 1920 Borodin received 2 million

gold roubles in the State Bank of the RSFSR for the Comintern needs (in the name of the People's Commissariat of the Foreign Affairs).(17)

The documents proves that Borodin was one of the most trusted men, allowed by the ECCI and the CC of the RCP/b/'s sanctum - to be active in the financing of the foreign communists.

But the English-speaking Russian, bearing a mexican diplomatic passport with an american visa issued by the U.S. consul in Santo-Domingo stimulated the suspicion of the american authorities even without the diamonds and was detained in New York by the federal agent J. Spolansky. Borodin was given a permission to stay in Chicago for two weeks to visit his family there. He had enough time to visit Martens' employee D. Dubrowsky and to inform him about the problems with the diamonds.(18) In Chicago the secretary of the local socialists A. Germer recommended to Borodin the young R. Mallen, the American socialist of Latin American origin, as an interpreter and assistant. Borodin was advised by one of the old friends to get in contact with the young American radicals fled to Mexico.(20)

### **Borodin and Roy**

This advice became the key to the meeting with M. N. Roy. The date of Borodin's arriving in Mexico has to be defined more exactly. Roy wrote that it was in the early summer when „The Russian Bolshevik leader had secretly come to Mexico, a real Bolshevik in flesh and blood, coming straight from the land of the Proletarian Revolution".(20) Phillips recalled that the Bolshevik missionary appeared in Mexico-City in the beginning of summer of 1919 or even in the end of spring .(21) However, the newly disclosed Comintern archive's documents as well as D. N. Jacobs and L. Holubnuchy's monographs (both based on american archive-materials) let us conclude that „the founding-fathers" of the mexican communism had forgotten some important details since so much time went

by. „Comrade Boradin (sic!) arrived in Mexico soon after the celebration of the National Socialist Congress (22), and having satisfied himself as to the revolutionary nature of the program and organization, he suggested the calling of a Latin American Bureau of the Third International, to make propaganda throughout Latin America, to unify the proletarian movements of those countries and to pave the way for the Social Revolution", - the unknown author of this document named „Introduction to the Manifesto of the Latin American Bureau of the Third International" asserted. Even Phillips (J. Ramirez) himself wrote to the ECCI: „Sometime later [after the National Socialist Congress] and largely through the influence of Manabendra Nath Roy and Frank Seaman (24) (prompted by Comrade Borodin, who had come to Mexico shortly before) the Mexican Socialist Party changed its name..."(25) In Mexico the Comintern's agent and the general consul of the RSFSR got in touch (at first through R. Mallen) with some people who might become his natural allies in the realization of the Bolshevik goals. These men were the Hindu emigrant Roy and the American-Mexican radicals Ch. Phillips and I. Granich (M. Gold). Borodin's choice proved to be irreproachable. Being the activists of the radical wing of the mexican Socialist party these people gave very precious help to Borodin's mission. The Russian Bolshevik's influence, in turn, was decisive on their life.

M. Borodin's mexican mission ceased to be the sealed mystery almost from the beginning. On his deliberate or accidental revealing his incognito, "the mysterious visitor" converted his stay in Mexico into the Polichinelle's secret. Too many people appeared to know about Borodin's arriving. Only the search of the diamonds entrusted to Mallen and Phillips was covered with an aureole of mystery. Perhaps, it was not planned to keep in secret the diplomatic part of the mission. Publicity might even be useful.

(See the second part in the next issue of *The International Newsletter*)

#### Notes

1 Rossijskij Centr Chranenija i Izucenija Documentov Novešej Istorii, Moscow (RCChIDNI) (The Russian Centre for Conservation and Study of Modern History Records), 497/2/1/3

2 RCChIDNI, 2/1/9324/1

3 Sovetsko-meksikanske otnosenija. Sbornik documentov (1917-1980) [The Soviet-Mexican relations. A collection of the documents), Moscow, 1981, pp.9-10.

4 RCChIDNI, 497/2/2/199.

5 Gomez, M.: „From Mexico to Moscow", *Survey*, London (1964), 53, p. 36

6 The first words of the „Letter" refer to Borodin: „A Russian Bolshevik who had taken part in the Revolution of 1905 and who had later spent many years in your country has proposed to me upon himself the delivery of my letter to you."

7 Historia del socialismo marxista en La Republica Argentina. Origen del Partido Socialista Internacional. Informe dirigido a la Internacional Socialista y a todos los partidos socialistas, Buenos Aires, 1919, pp.41, 67

8 Salazar, R.: Las pugnas de la gleba. Los albores del movimiento obrero en Mexico, Mexico, 1972, p. 271. The book was published the 1st time in 1922.

9 RCChIDNI, 2/1/10294/1. Lenin's note to Zinov'ev about this letter was dated in Vladimir Il'ic Lenin, Biograficeskaja kronika, vol. VII, mart - nojabr 1919 g., Moskva, 1976, p. 324. This letter has not been disclosed, unfortunately.

10 Cardenas, H.: Las relaciones mexicano - soviéticas, Mexico, 1974, p. 43.

11 Op. cit., p. 44

12 RCChIDNI, 497/2/1/1

13 Ibid.

14 Draper, T: The Roots of American Communism, N. Y, 1957, p. 240

15 *Latinskaja Amerika*, Moscow (1994), 10, p. 107

16 RCChIDNI, 495/18/66/64.

17 The Russian State Archive of the Economy (RSAE). 2324/16/43/5a. As cited in *Novaja i Novejsaja istorija*, Moskva (1993), 6, p. 154.

18 Jacobs, D. N.: Borodin. Stalin's Man in China, Cambridge, 1981, p. 62; Spolansky, J.: The Communist Trail in America, N Y 1951, p. 172

19 Gomez, M, Op. cit., p. 36.

20 M. N. Roy's Memoirs, Bombay - New Dehli - London - New York, 1964, p. 187.

21 M. N. Roy's Memoirs..., p. 177; Gomez, M.: Op. cit., p. 35.

22 It was held in Mexico-City on 25 VIII - 5.IX.1919.

23 RCChIDNI, 495/108/1/6.

24 This is another of Phillips' alias.

25 RCChIDNI, 495/108/4/8.