

ON EARLY U.S. HISTORY

By William Z. Foster

A first class event in the cultural world is the beginning of the publication of Herbert Aptheker's monumental Marxist-Leninist *History of the American People*. The work, which will cover the entire scope of American history, will comprise a dozen volumes. The first of these, just published, is entitled *The Colonial Era*, (International Publishers, N. Y., 160 pp. \$2.) The other volumes, written around decisive events and periods in our nation's history, will appear from time to time in the near future. The books are designed for popular reading and wide circulation.

The American working class is badly in need of a good general Marxist history, one which will make clear the past of the country, explain the nation's relationship to the rest of the world, and point out definitely where it is heading in the present complex international situation. There are plenty of general American histories, but, for the most part, being capitalist-inspired, they are full of errors, prejudices, and shortcomings. Their authors are interested, mainly, in justifying the development of the prevailing social system and the capitalist class. This is the be-all and end-all of history for the "respectable" historians.

The life of the American people—the question of centuries of Negro chattel slavery, the ever-present butchery of the Indians, the long growth of the trade-crises, the devastating effects of wars and revolutions on

the life of the great masses in the factories and on the farms—these are but of subordinate importance to the orthodox historians in contrast to their prime interest in the financial welfare of the capitalist system. In this respect, the liberal historians, like Parrington and the Beards, differ but in degree from the more reactionary ones, like Fiske or Oberholtzer. In the predominant histories, the life and experience of the Negroes, the industrial workers, and the Indians, is left practically out of the picture. Symptomatically, the liberal historians, the Beards, were particularly short on all three of these mass aspects.

This one-sided history would be ample enough reason why there should be an authentic Marxist history written, but the need is rendered all the greater because monopoly capitalism has set its historians, economists, and other specialists, to work cleaning up its reputation, both at present and historically. How far they have progressed in this respect was made typically evident, among many other glaring facts, in the 1958 New York State elections. In these elections the two candidates for Governor, Averill Harriman and Nelson Rockefeller, are immediate descendants of the financial bandits of the same names who founded their gigantic fortunes. Innumerable broken strikes, slaughtered workers, and corrupted governments, were associated for many years with their industrial empires, but in this election the issue

of their enormous wealth and its noise-some history was hardly raised, except by the Left.

It is no longer "proper," even in liberal circles, to check back on the crimes by which the great monopolies established and maintained themselves. Indeed, it is quite within the range of possibility that Rockefeller, one of the richest men in the world, spouting demagogic platitudes, will be the Republican candidate for President in 1960. In the work of whitewashing the history of the monopolies and their robber-baron founders, those historians who call themselves liberals, like Schlesinger, are hardly to be distinguished from the more conservative brand of historians. The works of these soothsayers of monopoly capital clutter up the libraries of the schools and colleges all over the country. Their brand of history is being pumped into the minds of the American youth. As things now stand, they pretty much have the monopoly upon the writing and publication of American history.

In its hey-day, from 1901 to about 1919, the Socialist Party, although it had many competent writers in its ranks, did very little general history writing. Three of the most important works it produced were Gustavus Myers' *History of the Supreme Court*, and *History of the Great American Fortunes*, and Charles E. Russell's *Stories of the Great Railroads*. In general, for United States history, however, the Socialist Party depended upon the many "muckrakers" of the times, and upon the voluminous works of the popular McMaster.

The Communist Party, in its period from 1919 on, undoubtedly turned

out better historical writing than did the Socialist Party, but its writers did not undertake a general history until Aptheker's *A History of the American People*. Comrade Aptheker is splendidly equipped for doing this huge task. He has had a wealth of writing experience in this field; he is an extremely prolific worker; he is thoroughly grounded in Marxist-Leninist theory and methodology; and he has no peer among American historians. The twelve moderate-sized volumes (each will run about 200 pages) should be bought, read, and saved as they appear. At last, the working class and its allies will not have to depend upon alien class forces for their published versions of American history, but will have a history of their own, fully worthy of the extremely complicated past and present faced by the toiling masses of this country. Aptheker's historical book fulfills a long-felt need.

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In *The Colonial Era*, the first volume of his historical work, Aptheker handles the complex matters of American history with his usual skill. He takes us through the many involved movements and situations from the earliest days of colonization to the eve of the Revolution. He portrays the growth of the American people, and the laying of the foundations of the Republic, which brings us right into the beginning of the Revolutionary epoch, the general subject of the second volume in the series.

Hardly had the colonization of the

present area of the United States gotten well under way, at the beginning of the 17th century, when a half dozen European powers—England, France, Spain, Holland, Sweden, and Russia—fell into a scramble with each other for possession of the rich territory. They collided in four major wars and countless minor forays. This dog-eat-dog battle lasted until the third quarter of the 18th century, when England finally emerged the victor, in 1763, dealing a decisive defeat to France in America, by stripping that country of Canada.

Throughout the entire colonial period, the Indians, the original inhabitants of all the American territory, were brutally robbed and slaughtered by all the white invading nations. The various governors and generals considered them as having no valid claim to their homeland, and took the position that the whites should have no moral scruples about pillaging or destroying them with the most savage brutality. But the Indians fought back with magnificent skill and courage. One of the most inspiring aspects of our national history was the fight of the Indian peoples in defense of their homes—an heroic fight, but a losing one. They produced many celebrated warriors, and they fought resolutely until the latter part of the 19th century. The Indian resistance was all the more remarkable because of their small numbers and their primitive weapons, due to the lower stage of their civilization. How effectively they fought was illustrated by the Iroquois, who controlled the northwestern frontier all through the colonial period. Nevertheless, this historic federation of tribes,

as Aptheker points out, numbered only about 16,000 persons in all, which was only a fraction of the numerical strength of the colonists constantly arrayed against them. It is one of the characteristics of bourgeois histories that they invariably give the Indians much the worst of it. Aptheker, however, makes a full and free presentation of the struggle of the Indians a foundation part of his book.

As the English gradually pushed back the other powers, and confiscated afresh from them the land which had been stolen from the Indians, they built up their colonial economic system on a merchantile basis. That is, they erected only such trade and industry in the colonies, and they constructed their governments, churches, etc., to match, so that the whole social mechanism would give to England the greatest possible advantage. In his next volume, Aptheker will deal more fully with the development of industry in the colonies. The English rulers looked upon the colonists as being mere tools in their hands, as though created for their particular welfare. They were the forerunners of the later-day arrogant imperialists who overran whole sections of the world. Aptheker fully documents the colonial development, showing how, from the outset, the colonists necessarily collided with the avaricious English overlords. He points out that the consequent contradictions were of basic importance in leading irresistibly to the eventual revolutionary explosion.

The bourgeoisie in the colonies lived wealthy, indolent lives. The following picture from *The Colonial Era*, might well apply to a Southern planter, a

New England merchant, or a British landlord or bureaucrat: "The rich lived in colonial America as they lived everywhere. A town and country house; thousands of acres; dozens of servants and/or slaves; lavish meals; incessant parties; silks and satins, velvets and pearls; carriages and gold plate; fashionable plays, and music and books; affairs, alliances, intrigues, high and mighty offices; an intense preoccupation with holding on to all this and rationalizing it, and keeping the 'lower sort' in their proper place. These differences were the work and the will of God, else they would not exist."

"Among the free laboring masses of the American colonies," says Aptheker, "life was hard and militancy was widespread. . . . In the cities prostitution was rife, beggars abounded, poor-houses were crowded, slums were already present, and the hundreds who depended on public relief to keep alive had to wear a badge reflecting their degraded status. In the rural areas the plainest fare, the rudest shelter, the coarsest clothing, was the rule for almost all who labored with their hands. And in cities and in farms, the free poor worked as the poor have always worked—very hard and very long."

The bulk of the population were the poor farmers, but there was an incipient working class—laborers, mechanics, sailors, etc. These were paid, slightly better than in England, from 25 to 85 cents per day for 12 hours work or more. Land was cheap, relatively speaking, but the workers—those of them who were free—were paid so little that they had great difficulty in buying any.

The English rulers of America quickly developed various kinds of slavery—white, red, and black—to serve as burden bearers and profit creators. The colonial employers were not a bit slow in imposing these various forms of servitude upon the toilers, but of course, the English had the lead in all such activities. They allowed no scruples to stand in their way. It was difficult to enslave the whites beyond what was customary in England, but the employers—planters, merchants, etc.—nevertheless succeeded fairly well. One of their favorite devices was to force the workers (either "voluntarily" or by kidnapping) to sell themselves into servitude for a term of years, usually seven, in payment for the fare across the Atlantic. These indentured workers were only a degree or two above actual slaves, being sold as so many beasts, beaten at the master's whim, and generally treated as his property. The system lasted right down to, and beyond, the Revolution. For the first century or so in the colonies, the system was very important, not only in the North, but especially on the tobacco, rice, and indigo plantations of the South. In 1683, for example, there were 16,000 indentured workers in Virginia as against 3,000 Negro slaves. The Negro slave system was just getting well under way.

With the Indians, the greedy employers did not do so well in their plans of slavery. They tried hard enough to develop real Indian slaves, and there were numerous such throughout the colonies. But they were relatively few in number, and being on their home ground, it was easy for them to flee to their brethren in the forests and put up a fight. About the

only way that the English and other colonial masters could exploit the body of the Indians, aside from robbing them of their lands, was in the fur trade. The Indians, in return for guns, powder, pots, pans, and other articles that they could not manufacture, virtually became the peons of the unscrupulous whites trading for fur.

It was with Negroes, however, that the employers, particularly the big planters, found it more feasible to enslave the masses, and they succeeded in gathering together a large body of slaves. Africa was not too far off, it had a large population, and the slavers were without mercy or moral compunction. Gathered up from various parts of Africa, speaking different languages, and with different social backgrounds, the slaves were helpless to unite. Aptheker thus portrays their plight: "Once enslaved and brought to America, the African, unlike the Indian, would be in a strange country, would not have his people and his social organization to succor him in flight or in resistance. No, once enslaved in Africa and brought to the New World, he would be literally in chains, in a foreign land, thousands of miles from home, and completely in the power of well-armed, ruthless masters, having behind them the full punitive powers of the state." (p. 16).

The English, who were the greatest of all slave-hunters, built up an enormous slave trade. This extended all over Europe, but especially it applied throughout the whole American hemisphere. By the beginning of the 18th century, chattel slavery was the predominant system in the planting economy throughout the entire American

continent. In the well on to four centuries that it lasted, no less than 65 to 75 million Negroes were seized in Africa, transported as life-long slaves to the Americas, or slaughtered in the course of the bloody traffic. As Aptheker says, "for ferocity it had no peer in the awful annals of human oppression."

There were many slave uprisings, but these were put down with the most implacable terror. The Negro slave traffic was so huge, that it not only provided a working force to the planters in the American colonies, but it also furnished a basic source of trade to the entire capitalist system. This slave trade created one of the bitterest internal disputes in American history, and the greatest war ever fought on American territory. The English overlords in the colonies were alert to force slavery upon the colonies, but the colonial planters, for the most part, did not need much urging. Comrade Aptheker, himself perhaps the leading American expert on Negro history, brings out the full significance of this great crime and all its relations with the other systems of exploitation in the colonies.

"Class struggles among the colonial free manifested themselves on many levels and in many different ways. Ideologically the challenges to the oppressive status quo ran the gamut from attacks upon particular privileges to anarchistic and levelling proposals. Politically, proposals ranged from modifications of certain tax policies to the severing of all connections with Great Britain and the establishment of an egalitarian republic. Organizationally, activities included the strike

of fishermen and the forcible ousting of a Royal governor."

One of the best phases of Aptheker's book, is the authoritative manner in which he handles the many struggles of the people against the exploiters. American colonial history is full of such class struggles, which generally are played down or misrepresented in the everyday run of history. Aptheker, however, deals with the slave revolts of the Negroes; the eternal battle of the Indians against the land thieves; the many strikes and other revolts of the white workers, both indentured and free; and the struggle of the poor farmers against the rack-renters, usurers, tax sharks, and the like. Throughout colonial life, and he well portrays it, there is an intense and rapidly developing struggle of the people against the foreign and domestic exploiters.

The colonists, particularly the lower classes, had to wage a fight on two fronts, against both the ruling English and the growing American bourgeoisie. This fight was at once economic, political, and religious. Aptheker traces it in all its ramifications. He points out that in all the provincial assemblies there were parties of the people, but he does a particularly thorough job in analyzing the political struggle of the churches of New England. This long and continuous fight was essentially political, although it was at all times heavily garbed in religious raiment. The witchhunt of Salem, at the end of the 17th century, was a murderous affair. "The Salem hunt was on, and in one year in that village and others of Essex county, 20 witches (men and women) were executed, 50 others had

confessed, 150 were in prison, and another 200 had been accused." Aptheker shows this whole affair to have been an act of desperation by a declining ruling elite. "Its failure served as a boomerang to its initiators, and helped advance the elimination of the theological tyranny in Massachusetts."

Aptheker outlines many class struggle fights that took place in the colonies. He gives a very good account of the important Bacon affair in Virginia, and especially the struggle for free speech by the printer, Peter Zenger in New York. In his account of all these popular upheavals, Aptheker makes the usually badly distorted pre-revolutionary heroes take on flesh and blood—Williams, Hutchinson, Hooker, Wise, Bacon, Coode, Leisler, Zenger, and many others. The masses had frequent recourse to direct action because there was only such a thinly developed democracy in the colonies.

Throughout the colonial period, Aptheker makes very clear, there was the growth of the American nation in spite of the English ruling class attempts to stunt and abort it. The development of the characteristic classes under colonial capitalism goes on gradually, all-sidedly, and irresistibly. The author does a good job in developing the English revolution as a decisive factor in the growth of the American people and the American Revolution, its ideological and political influences being constantly made clear. He portrays the persistent efforts of the dominant classes in England to stifle the ever-sprouting American forces—industrial, political, ideological, and national. He shows the irresistible

press of all the social factors toward revolution, stripping colonial history of the customary distortions.

In one among many cogent paragraphs, Aptheker puts the matter thus: "In planting colonies, the rulers planted rebellion. The rebellion was organic to the contradictory interests of the colonizers and the colonists. Its seeds were nurtured in the distance between colonists and rulers; in the mixture of peoples that produced a new people as the decades passed; in the separate experiences of the colonists that united them among themselves and increasingly severed them from Home; in the distinct economies of

the colonies that, despite obstructions and restrictions, did develop; in the common feeling of dissatisfaction and exploitation and 'separateness' that, together with everything else, made of them another people."

The whole trend of Comrade Aptheker's book is to lay the basis for a Marxist-Leninist analysis of the American Revolution. This is one of the most written-up subjects in the world, but—from the evidence of this first volume—we can rest assured that Comrade Aptheker will lend it fresh content and meaning. The American Revolution is the subject matter of his second volume.