

The Rise and Fall Of "Jefe Maximo"

By BERTRAM D. WOLFE

In this issue, Bertram D. Wolfe, whose book "Portrait of Mexico" is already off the press and available, continues a series of articles on present-day Mexico with an account of the rise of Plutarco Elias Calles to the position of Mexico's JEFE MAXIMO or Big Boss, and the story of his break with President Cardenas, and fall from power. Next week he will describe the "People's Front" Government of Lazaro Cardenas.—EDITOR.

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"I HAVE proved," said President Obregon in 1924 when handing over his office to Calles, "that the presidential palace is not necessarily the ante-chamber to the cemetery." Towards the close of President Calles's administration, they had the Constitution amended so that "no reelection" was modified to read "no reelection until an intervening term has elapsed." That made Obregon eligible for a constitutional return to the presidency. Was this the beginning of a new Diaz self-perpetuating regime, people asked, or were Obregon and Calles planning to alternate indefinitely in office? The usual uprising was easily suppressed but General Obregon never reentered the national palace as president. On the eve of his inauguration in the course of a great banquet celebration, a young cartoonist, Jose Toral, fanatical Catholic, approached him to "draw his caricature" and then put a bullet through his brain. From then on, Plutarco Elias Calles became the undisputed "Strong Man" of Mexico.

The next four presidents of Mexico were Calles appointees. First he had Congress select Portes Gil for a term of a year as provisional president pending a new election. Then he arranged for the "election" of Ortiz Rubio. At the end of two and a half years in office the latter got into a quarrel with one of Calles's favorites, the Governor of Morelos, whereupon the Jefe Maximo called in the reporters and informed them that the President was resigning because of "ill health"—leaving it to the press to inform the president! The rest of his legal term was filled out by the Calles banker, Abelardo L. Rodriguez, and he was succeeded in office on December 1, 1934, by Lazaro Cardenas, the last Calles appointee and present President—and ruler—of Mexico.

The Last of the Caudillos

When that election took place, Calles had dominated Mexico continuously for more than a decade. He was, erroneously I believe, regarded as Mexico's greatest military man after Obregon: as a general he had never won an important battle. But a strong man he was, beyond a shadow of a doubt. His strength lay in his wealth, in the vested interests he had built up about his person, in his ruthlessness, his organizing ability, his hard-boiled realism and financial genius. Above all, it lay in the fact that with Obregon dead he was the last of the great caudillos produced by the stormy and epic years of revolution. The rest had died violent deaths: Zapata and Villa and Carranza in treacherous ambush, Obregon by an assassin's bullet, innumerable lesser generals in unsuccessful rebellions. Those who had not died had knuckled under, become part of the Calles machine, or gone into voluntary or involuntary exile. On his shoulders was the mantle of the Revolution; he was the inheritor and hitherto the faithful continuator of the Obregon pattern of rule. He had even improved upon

the pattern, invented the ultimate refinement in demagogic devices: a smashing blow at the defeated but ever-provocative Church every time he was engaged in any particularly nefarious acquisition or delivery to American interests of Mexico's wealth. It created much noise and smoke: thunder of ex-communications and smoke of hell-fire: it led to feeble and sporadic rebellions of backward peasants under the leadership of militant clerics: it was the cheapest way to cover up a dubious action, reconsolidate popular support and retain the mantle of revolutionary.

The rule of Calles seemed destined to last indefinitely. Without ceasing to be a reality, he was already becoming a legend. In his palace in Cuernavaca he held court and from there directed the affairs of the nation. To him came presidents and generals, deputies and governors, industrialists and bankers and foreign agents and diplomats. The particular man in the presidential palace had become a mere elongation of his shadow. Calles had made him, named his cabinet and dictated his policies and prescribed his share of the spoils of power, and if he should but quarrel with the least of the "Strong Man's" friends or thwart the most insignificant of his wishes, Calles had shown that he could unmake him again. The "Political Party," now that he had reduced all so-called parties to one, was another elongated shadow of the Jefe. He had created it: all his appointees and government employees had to belong to it and contribute from their earnings to its maintenance. Through it he named governors, senators, deputies; personally made out in advance the lists of those who were going to be elected. After his fall, men were to compare this to Porfirianism: but while he was in power it was the living incarnation of the Revolution and democratic institutions. Now that Cardenas has continued the same practices, the "renovated" Partido Nacional Revolucionario, the same apparatus with a new Jefe is still the incarnation of "revolutionary" procedure. In Mexico press and politicians are ever blind to the defects of the presence in power and voluble to the point of nausea about the crimes of his immediate predecessor, while the one that that predecessor denounced and overthrew is already on the road to "rehabilitation."

Cardenas Gets Call

The "Strong Man" had become more than a dictator: he had become the savior of his people and the ideals of the Revolution. In every emergency they turned to him for counsel, for orders, for direct assumption of leadership. In 1929 during the rebellion of Topete, Manzo and Escobar, Calles returned from his "retirement" to become Minister of War. In 1931 Ortiz Rubio's cabinet resigned and once more the Strong Man took the war ministry. When the peso dropped and silver hit the toboggan, he became head of the Bank of Mexico. Something was always calling Calles out of retirement! The country could never get along without him.

Then the Strong Man made a slight error: he chose the wrong man to occupy the presidential palace. He rightly felt that it was time to install a younger man in the presidency, and he selected one of his faithful and undistinguished subordinates. Lazaro Cardenas was the first president of a new generation. He was only fifteen when Madero initiated the Revolution of 1910. At eighteen he left his job

as printer and village jailkeeper to "take the field" against Madero's assassin, Victoriano Huerta. He saw service under General Obregon, fought against Villa and Zapata, joined the revolt against Carranza, and carried out with efficiency and probity a number of military and political tasks during the Obregon and Calles regimes. At the end of 1933, when he received the unanimous nomination of the Calles-bossed convention of the Partido Nacional Revolucionario, he was only thirty-eight years of age. As all other parties such as the Laborista and the Agrarista had long been merged into the National Revolutionary and the only truly independent organization was the weak and semi-illegal Communist Party, his nomination (barring a successful rebellion) was tantamount to election.

Lazaro Cardenas had always been a faithful and unexceptionable subordinate, yet there was something in his presidential campaign that should have made the Old Man suspicious. With his election assured and automatic he made an electoral tour unprecedented in the history of Mexico: he covered 27,000 kilometers in plane, train, ship and on horseback, reaching innumerable remote villages that had never seen a presidential or even a gubernatorial nominee. It was all very well to put up a pretense of a contest, but the candidate was overdoing it: he acted as if he were determined to see every peasant in the Republic!

Building for the Future

"What do you want?" he asked everywhere.

"Some land. A dam. A school. A street."

The President-to-be made a note of it. "I will attend to it personally."

Calles became a little uneasy. He surrounded the newest creature of his will with a strong cabinet of picked agents. He even put his son Rodolfo there as Minister of Communications. But the cabinet rarely saw the President. After his election as before it, Cardenas kept trotting around the country: arranging for local leaders in the villages to make simple requests; promising to fulfill them, keeping his promises, going back in person to inaugurate the little strip of road, the one-room school-house, the well or tiny dam asked for and promised; building up the local leaders who had made the request; building up a rural political machine and building up the shadow—

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SPANISH Y.C.L. R. ITS PRINCIPLES

(Reprinted from the English Press Release, Generalidad de Catalunya)

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A National Congress of Socialist Youth, which was formed from the amalgamation of the Spanish Socialist and Communist youth organizations, recently met in Valencia, and a program was formulated for the socialist youth of Spain.

The aim of the new organization, as stated by Santiago Carrillo, is the immediate organization of "a new Spain, a Spain that will be respected in the concert of nations. We want a strong democracy of the popular classes.

"We appeal for the collaboration of the Catholic Youth," he continued, "whose spirit and belief we do not combat. Our organization is not socialist or communist, but an independent organization. . . . We want the unity of all youth, not on a Marxist or Communist basis, but on a basis of mutual coincidence, such as the war against fascism and the defence of civilization. We fight for a democratic

ment in blood, explains how the disastrous errors were made possible. As a matter of fact, our author proves more than he intended to in this direction when he

tion—all these things which collectively constitute the content of the People's Front tactic—can only guarantee in advance another defeat of the Chinese revolution.

MEXICO'S STRONG MAN

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presidency into substance. Meanwhile the presidential palace remained vacant: affairs of state continued to be transacted as before by the Strong Man from his palace in Cuernavaca.

The uneasiness of Calles continued to grow. He wheeled one of his biggest guns into action: he gave orders to his governors to sharpen to the utmost the war with the Church. His governors closed churches and inaugurated "Socialist Education." Armed bands of "Red Shirts" appeared in the Capital itself under the direction of Garrido Canabal, former Callista Governor of Tabasco, noted anti-clerical, now Minister of Agriculture. Soon there would be a new revolt of Cristeros, clericalised peasants fighting for Mexico to be governed by "Christ, the King." Then Cardenas would have to call the Strong Man into the War Department as Portes Gil, Ortiz Rubio and Rodriguez had done before him, and all would be well. But the President seemed not to notice what was being brewed: mestizo with Tarrascan blood in his veins, he possessed the stoical uncommunicativeness of the Tarrascans: silently and undeviatingly he continued his expeditions around the countryside.

Exit Calles

For six months the mute struggle, the maneuvering for position, continued: then Calles gave the President the opening he had been waiting for. The Jefe Maximo who had been bossing the country in the name of the Revolution, who had been wielding the power based on the pattern invented by Obregon, abandoned one of his two pillars. In a statement to the press he denounced the "marathon of strikes" that was sweeping the country, demanded greater economic peace and progress, declared that the land distribution had gone far enough, that the communal lands were unproductive and economically inefficient, that it was time to consider ways and

means of stimulating agricultural production and stabilizing the countryside. Thus he laid aside for a moment the mantle of Revolution, and Cardenas, waiting his chance, seized it. It was the lever needed to rise from the presidency to actual power.

Within a few days Cardenas rallied great sections of the labor and peasant movements around him, smashed Morones and the Crom, formed a new labor movement with a new labor lieutenant at its head out of the pieces of the old, and then with swiftness and energy that impressed the bandwagon boys, he removed Callista governors, senators, deputies,

generals and cabinet ministers in so clean a sweep that experienced politicians who had been expectantly waiting for the lighting to strike him ran for cover cheering and shouting: "Viva Cardenas! Viva la Revolucion!" Calles hesitated in bewilderment before the unexpected melting away of his forces, and while he hesitated, was lost. When, too late, he began to speculate on the possibilities of a rebellion, Cardenas acted again with an energy worthy of Mexico's Strong Man, and without troubling about Constitutionalism or legal warrant, simply picked up the fallen dictator with a few of his closet friends such as Morones and Leon, put them on an airplane under police escort, and deposited them in the United States. He had already reached an understanding with the American Government, and no demurrer was made about their being dumped over the border. The Strong Man of Mexico was finished: a new Strong Man had taken his place.

POUM DEFENDED IN LABOR PARTY MEET

On Friday evening, February 12th, two hundred members and friends of the American Labor Party (2nd Assembly District, Bronx) came to hear Professor Pedro Fernandez of the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy.

The speaker commenced by saying that he found it difficult to begin because he didn't know what the audience wanted to hear. However he took a chance by making a vicious broadside attack against the Workers Party of Marxist Unity (P.O.U.M.). He evidently didn't know how to close either since his final remarks were devoted to another slanderous attack on the P.O.U.M. Sandwiched in between were the usual apologies for the people's front policies.

In the discussion period, one of the C.P.O. comrades present took the floor in defense of the P.O.U.M. He pointed out that the P.O.U.M. could not possibly be "an agent of fascism" while thousands of its members fought against Franco's mercenaries in the front line trenches. Furthermore they couldn't

be Trotskyites since they had broken, organizationally and ideologically, with Trotsky at the time when he ordered his followers into the Second International. The comrade then briefly summarized the P.O.U.M.'s revolutionary policy and its consequent opposition to the people's front.

If the North American committee is to function as a broad united front for those working class organizations devoted to the struggle against Spanish fascism, then that committee cannot become the instrument thru which certain sections of this united front carry on their bloody reformist campaign against that party in Spain which most closely approximates a revolutionary policy. Many organizations participating in the work of the committee have differences of opinion concerning workers' policy in Spain; others have no opinions on various tendencies within the working class. The committee cannot have pretenses to a united front, while making differences and not common objectives the basis for work.