

# Soviet Stress on History Writing

[A LETTER TO THE EDITOR]

By William Z. Foster

Editor of *Political Affairs*:

A most important development in world culture is the strong impetus now being given in the Soviet Union to historiography. A few months ago it was stated officially that Soviet historians were engaged upon writing a multi-volumed Marxist history of the world, several sections of which were already completed. Now comes the indication of a general stimulation of history writing in the USSR. This information is conveyed in an editorial article in the Soviet magazine, *Problems of History*, of July 1954.\*

The Soviet writers of the article, while giving credit for the vast amount of historical work done in past years by Marxists, declare that, nevertheless, generally speaking the whole field of historiography is being seriously neglected. The result is that this vital area has been largely abandoned to bourgeois historians, who know how, in their numberless historical works, to twist and distort the facts of history into a defense of the capitalist system.

Among the many major historical tasks thus neglected by Soviet writers, the above-cited article lists, "an utterly inadequate" study of the main country of imperialism, the United States, analysis of the development of the general crisis of capitalism, the history of

the two world wars, the history of Social-Democracy and of the Communist International, and the formation of the peoples' democracies in Europe and Asia, etc. To which list might also be added such much neglected questions as Keynesism, the armaments economy, American capitalist hegemony, the "welfare state" and many more.

The Soviet article also deals extensively with Marxist methodology in writing history. The writers warn against such malpractices as stringing together a lot of Marxist quotations in lieu of original study and analysis, erroneous habits of proceeding from generalizations to facts instead of vice versa, inadequacy of research work in many cases, tendencies towards "a modernization of historical events" by projecting the present situation back into the past and making incorrect deductions therefrom, various trends to vulgarize and oversimplify Marxism, etc. Important, too, is the writers' broad conception of what constitutes history—which embraces every field of human thought and activity.

"A knowledge of the recent history of the capitalist countries," says the article, "is of tremendous importance in the Soviet people's struggle for the victory of communism and in the liberation movement of the working people of the whole world." This is why all the great Marxists, from Marx

\* The full text of this article will appear in next month's issue—ed.

on, have been outstanding historians. For only by knowing the major lessons of the past, especially in the development of world capitalism and of the forces of Socialism, is it possible to make a correct analysis of the current economic and political situation and to project a sound forecast of the developing course of events.

It is to be hoped that Communists everywhere will take example from the Communist historians in the Soviet Union, and be stimulated also to tackle some of the many vital, but largely neglected, historical tasks now confronting them. This neglect is all the more to be deplored because Communist parties nearly everywhere have in their ranks numerous Marxist intellectuals and political workers who are quite well qualified for the task of history writing. Of course, there is a lot of detailed and specialized history writing going on, but this, although very valuable, is distinctly not enough. Broader and more general projects must also be undertaken.

Every Communist Party confronts certain basic tasks in this respect, which, short of the grossest neglect, cannot be avoided. Among these are to write, a) a history of the Communist Party; b) a history of the national trade-union movement; and c) a history of the nation itself. Of course, there are many other urgent historical tasks as well, but the above are the absolute minimum. It is, for example, no credit to many Communist parties that they haven't even a worthwhile history of themselves. How then do they expect the youth and newly-recruited workers to know anything about the movement they have joined?

The American Party is by no means

the worst offender. Besides many good historical studies of limited subjects, we have at least a history of our Party. Important Marxist work has been done and is in process on the history of the trade-union movement and much has been done on the history of the Negro people. Now in preparation also is a short history of the United States. But all this is only just a start. Our historians must make a much broader and deeper attack upon this whole question. We must have the best Marxist histories upon every phase of our working-class and national life. There is no country where the Communist Party needs to be more alert against bourgeois distortions and prostitutions of history than in the United States. Here, our whole history, every branch of it, as Comrade Aptheker has so well demonstrated in his *Laureates of Imperialism*, is being systematically rewritten to the glorification of the role of monopoly capital and to the detriment of the working class.

In writing such basically necessary works of history as enumerated above, three elementary considerations, among others, should be borne in mind. First, the writers should deal basically with the main question in hand, and not simply dabble with odds and ends of it. Workers are not professional researchers, and they should not be required to fill in the gaps left by the historian. Second, the history should be written simply, comprising a compilation of the facts and a theoretical explanation of them which will be clear to the inexperienced youth and the broad masses, but which, at the same time, will also contain the deepest Marxist-Leninist conclusions on the subjects. And, third, Marxist historians

must learn to write briefly and compactly. They must not forget that we are living in the age of radio and television and that people are economizing on their times for reading. Marxist historians should also remember that they are writing, not for a few cloistered and highly specialized professors, but for the broad masses. There is nothing so complicated that it cannot be said in a form that the workers and their political allies can readily understand.

Too long the bourgeois historians have had virtually a free hand to miswrite history, to distort the national and working-class traditions, to poison

the minds of the people. But it was not always thus—with the many works of the classical Communist historians, Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin, and in the earlier years of the Second International, of such Social Democrats as Kautsky, Mehring, Plekhanov, Bebel, Gustavus Myers, and many more, who produced historical studies of real importance. Let us hope that the new emphasis upon history-writing in the USSR presages a vastly increased Communist activity in this very vital field in various other countries. This would indeed be an event of world political importance, and another whole row of nails in the coffin of world capitalism.