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Why did he turn?

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CINCO DÍAS EN MOSCÚ: MARIO VARGAS LLOSA Y EL SOCIALISMO SOVIÉTICO

by Carlos Aguirre and Kristina Buynova.

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PEOPLE LOVE TO TALK about writers who once had radical sympathies but drifted rightwards with age. But the political evolution of the Peruvian writer and sometime politician Mario Vargas Llosa has been so startling as to inject life into that tired trope. Although he still describes himself as a liberal, the stances he has taken in recent years have followed a reactionary pattern. In 2018, he celebrated Lula's imprisonment in Brazil on dubious corruption charges, and the following year exulted in the right-wing coup that deposed Evo Morales in Bolivia. Since then he has voiced his support for far-right candidates such as José Antonio Kast in Chile and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and in 2023 was one of a rogue's gallery of right-wing ex-presidents and pundits to back Javier Milei in Argentina. Perhaps the most surprising of Vargas Llosa's endorsements came during Peru's 2021 election, when he described Keiko Fujimori as the lesser evil compared to the leftist Pedro Castillo. This was an especially personal reversal: Vargas Llosa had lost the 1990 presidential election to Fujimori's father, Alberto, and had spent the intervening decades criticising him for his authoritarianism.

Vargas Llosa was a socialist in his student years and like many Latin Americans of his generation had strongly sympathised with the Cuban Revolution, seeing it as a less dogmatic version of socialism better suited to Latin American conditions. While he always harboured concerns over Soviet censorship, for most of the 1960s he also saw communism as a viable alternative to capitalism; the USSR, he believed, 'signified great progress for humanity'. In Vargas Llosa's own telling, his disenchantment with socialism began in 1968 during a five-day trip to the Soviet Union. As he put it in his intellectual autobiography, *The Call of the Tribe* (2018), the visit 'left a bad taste in my mouth'. What he saw was not a model for the socialist future, but 'poverty, drunks sprawling in the streets and a generalised apathy'. Worse still was the claustrophobic intellectual climate: 'If I had been Russian,' he said, 'I would have been a dissident (that is, a pariah) or would have been languishing in the Gulag.' The experience left him 'little less than traumatised'.

It's not clear, however, that Vargas Llosa's brief stay in the Soviet Union really was the dramatic watershed he describes. In *Cinco días en Moscú* ('Five Days in Moscow'), the Peruvian historian Carlos Aguirre and the Russian scholar of Latin America Kristina Buynova draw on Soviet archival materials and Vargas Llosa's correspondence to reconstruct his visit (many of the original documents are included in the book). What emerges from their careful sifting of the evidence is that at the time, Vargas Llosa had a more restrained reaction to what he saw during his visit, and that the trauma he has more recently described is 'a later construction', a rereading of his memories in the light of subsequent shifts in his thinking.

By the time he made the trip, Vargas Llosa had written two novels but was already considered one of the major writers of the 'Latin American Boom'. Both *The Time of the Hero* (*La ciudad y los perros*, 1963) and *The Green House* (*La casa verde*, 1966) had been well received: *The Time of the Hero* had won the Premio de la Crítica Española, *The Green House* had won the Rómulo Gallegos prize. Both had been published by Seix Barral in Barcelona; despite Francoist censorship, publication in Spain was almost a precondition for Latin American writers to achieve wider recognition (indeed, it was part of what consecrated them as 'Latin American' writers). Translation into other languages was another key ingredient in the making of the Boom as a global phenomenon. One of the interesting things in Aguirre and Buynova's account is the scale of the readership Latin American writers enjoyed in the Soviet Union. The print run of the Russian edition of *The Time of the Hero*, published in 1965, was 115,000, a not uncommon figure for a novel in translation. By comparison, the total print run for six editions of the same novel in Spain was 25,000 – and that was for a very successful book; the average print run there was three thousand.

Vargas Llosa had been invited to the USSR by the Foreign Commission of the Soviet Writers' Union, to attend festivities around the centenary of Maxim Gorky's birth. (In *The Call of the Tribe*, he misremembers the event as being in honour of Pushkin.) As Aguirre and Buynova point out, many Latin American writers travelled to the Soviet Union in the 1960s. Some were continuing the tradition of communist pilgrimage – Pablo Neruda, Nicolás Guillén – while others, less closely aligned with the Soviet bloc, were merely curious. Vargas Llosa's case was more unusual in that by 1968 many Western writers were declining these invitations in protest against Soviet censorship, especially after the show trial of Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel in 1966 for 'anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda'. Vargas Llosa himself had been part of the international chorus of protest against the trial, arguing that 'either socialism decides to suppress for ever that human faculty that is artistic creation and eliminate once and for all that social specimen called the writer, or it admits literature to its bosom and, in that case, has no alternative but to accept a perpetual torrent of ironies, satires and criticisms.'

The fact that fewer writers were visiting the USSR perhaps explains why the Writers' Union had enough money to pay Vargas Llosa the royalties he was owed for *The Time of the Hero*. Here Aguirre and Buynova have unearthed another unusual detail: he received half his money in advance and in foreign currency. Most writers had to come to the Soviet Union in person to get their royalties, modest to begin with, in roubles – which also meant they had to spend the money before leaving. This was one of the reasons Gabriel García Márquez, who had toured the Eastern Bloc in 1957, gave for turning down the invitation to the Gorky centenary. 'I prefer to lose the money and not have to go there,' he told a friend. Besides, he added, Moscow was 'the most boring village in the world and Marxism can only go so far'.

Vargas Llosa, then, may have been rewarded for agreeing to visit at all. But Aguirre and Buynova suggest another reason. 'Loyal' communist writers were often not treated particularly well, since their commitment to the cause was taken for granted. But Soviet literary apparatchiks put Vargas Llosa in a different category: he was a bourgeois sympathiser with the Cuban Revolution. They were keen to win over such intellectuals amid the ongoing tensions between Moscow and Havana. (Many Cubans had seen Khrushchev's withdrawal of nuclear missiles in 1962 as a betrayal.)

Whether or not they were trying to court Vargas Llosa, the Soviets certainly arranged a packed itinerary. He arrived in Moscow on 25 May from London, where he was living at the time, and stayed until 30 May in the Hotel Peking, overlooking a statue of Mayakovsky. The days in between were filled with visits to the usual Soviet monuments and cultural venues: the Kremlin, Lenin's mausoleum, the Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy, trips to the Gorky and Tolstoy museums, evenings at the ballet, the theatre and the circus. He also met with Soviet editors and publishers and was taken to a few bookshops, where he complained about the lack of translations of contemporary Soviet writers into English or Spanish. He was apparently appalled by a reception he attended at the home of the Chilean cultural attaché, which degenerated into 'an ordinary booze-up'. But he was mindful of his hosts' feelings: according to a report filed by the translator Tamara Zlochevskaia, who was his minder for much of the trip, Vargas Llosa 'treated everything he saw in Moscow with a thoughtful attention', and 'gave the impression of being a man with a solid personality, progressive in his thinking, audacious in his judgments and declarations'.

Yet Vargas Llosa's discretion seems to have been more than a matter of politeness. Writing up his impressions of the trip three months later in an article for the Peruvian magazine *Caretas* (included as an appendix in *Cinco días en Moscú*), he was rather positive: he observed that 'half a century of socialism has reduced social injustices to an insignificant level compared to a Western country.' His main criticism of Soviet socialism, in fact, seems to have been that it hadn't carried its transformation of society far enough: in private conversations, he reported, mundane material concerns – vacations, housing, acquiring a car – cropped up much more often than political ideas, and Moscow offered the same 'routine, impersonal and monotonous' spectacle as 'any large capitalist city'. Even more unsettling for Vargas Llosa was the 'passionate, disturbing nationalism' he repeatedly encountered, when what he had expected was a universalist internationalism. Surely half a century of socialism 'could have at least partially replaced the idea of nation with that of humanity'.

On this evidence, it might seem as though the encounter with Soviet realities didn't so much destroy Vargas Llosa's leftist ideals as fall short of them. But if the visit to Moscow didn't lead to his break with socialism, what did? His reaction to censorship looms large in Aguirre's and Buynova's account. Even before the trip, Vargas Llosa had voiced concerns on this score, and not only out of solidarity with Sinyavsky and Daniel: his own work had been disfigured in the process of translation. The Russian edition of *The Time of the Hero* had appeared three years earlier, and at some point afterwards he was told that a slew of cuts and changes had been made. Most of them, it turns out, were amusingly prudish, euphemising references to body parts, softening swear words and removing homosexual material. (Aguirre and Buynova include a helpful table showing that 'balls' became 'groin', 'wankers' became 'idiots', and homoerotic scenes were dropped altogether.)

This kind of bowdlerisation was not unusual. Russian editions of García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* also had erotic scenes removed, and the famous passage in Carlos Fuentes's *Death of Artemio Cruz* exploring the multiple uses of the Mexican word *chingar* (most simply rendered as 'to fuck') was cut. But most of the authors only became aware of these changes later, if at all, since Soviet editors and translators didn't consult them. Aguirre and Buynova are very good on the mechanisms of Soviet censorship: it was less a case of apparatchiks with red pencils than a process of creeping, pre-emptive adaptation. Knowing the kinds of thing censors would object to, translators and editors made adjustments in advance, with the result that it is often impossible to tell who was responsible for which changes.

Still, Vargas Llosa was furious when he found out. As he put it in an article from 1967, 'a book of mine appears in a socialist country, in the Soviet Union, with which I feel myself in solidarity ... and it appears without my being consulted, without me even being informed, mutilated by fifty pages.' (The total of the passages affected apparently amounted to more like twelve pages, though Vargas Llosa would have had no way of knowing that.) He took up the issue with his publishers when he met them in Moscow a year later, and was told that the passages in question 'would have offended Soviet readers'. When he asked how editors could be so sure of their judgment, he was told that those running the publishing houses were educated and loved literature: 'How could they make a mistake?'

The mauling of his prose wasn't only, as Vargas Llosa put it, 'profoundly depressing for any writer'; it also had serious political implications. 'I don't want a socialism that, in order to eliminate social injustice, eliminates literature. Because for me, literature is as important as social justice.' Is this elevation of art over political ideals an early indication of Vargas Llosa's subsequent turn to liberalism, his strong attachment to the sovereignty of the writer paving the way for an embrace of the rights of the individual property holder?

Three months after his visit, Soviet tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia. According to Aguirre and Buynova, the August 1968 invasion and Fidel Castro's public endorsement of it were the real triggers for Vargas Llosa's disillusionment with socialism. For him as for many others, both the Soviet and the Cuban variants of state socialism had discredited themselves at a stroke. Distraught, he wrote to Nina Bulgakova, his contact at the Writers' Union, saying that the events had 'affected me terribly ... precisely because I admire and consider myself a friend of the Soviet Revolution'. (Bulgakova replied evasively that 'everything is not as simple as it seems.') In September 1968, he published a piece criticising Fidel's support for the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia – a move that apparently ruffled feathers in Havana. A month later, Vargas Llosa was among several Boom writers who defended the Cuban poet Heberto Padilla against accusations that he was a 'counter-revolutionary'. This was the start of the Padilla Affair, an ugly controversy that signalled the bureaucratisation of Cuban culture and culminated in Padilla's imprisonment in 1971.

The developments of late 1968 darkened Vargas Llosa's mood. That November he sent García Márquez such a depressing letter that García Márquez said he 'had to drink half a litre of whisky to digest it'. In January 1969, Vargas Llosa told the Chilean writer José Donoso that 'I think one still has to support the [Cuban] Revolution, but with gritted teeth, and because everything else is shit.' But from this point on, he increasingly distanced himself from Cuba too, pulling back on his involvement with the Cuban cultural institution Casa de las Américas and continuing to criticise the regime's handling of the Padilla case.

For Aguirre and Buynova, Vargas Llosa's later description of his five-day visit to Moscow was 'a way of fixing in history and memory a heavily symbolic episode that, in this new narrative, allowed for no nuances'. Vargas Llosa's memories are of course his own, but it's true that his rendering of the visit in *The Call of the Tribe* does come across as a predictable ideological fable. The idea that he was 'traumatised' by his 1968 visit is also undercut by the fact that he went back in 1977, as president of the PEN Club, without making much of the experience either way. But this raises some questions. It would be to Vargas Llosa's credit if the sources of his disenchantment with the left were the crushing of the Prague Spring and the worsening intellectual climate in Cuba. Why, then, did he make the Moscow trip seem more decisive than it was? Perhaps by the time he was writing *The Call of the Tribe*, he had come to think that sending in tanks was a reasonable option, so long as they were deployed against the left, as many of his new-found friends on the Latin American right regularly counselled. It may also seem curious that Vargas Llosa turned his Moscow visit into a Cold War fable 27 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. But as the recent evolution of the Latin American right shows, the attachment to anti-communist convictions increases the more distant the memory of communism itself becomes.

There remains the question of when and why Vargas Llosa moved quite so far to the right. His rejection of leftist ideas didn't immediately translate into conservatism. While his personal and political differences with the other Boom writers certainly intensified after 1968 – he ended up punching García Márquez in the face in Mexico City in 1976 – the shift to authoritarian neoliberalism seems to have accelerated mainly since the turn of the century, above all in response to the leftward turn in Latin America known as the 'pink tide'.

But the reinvigoration of the electoral left doesn't fully account for the rightward turn of many former Latin American liberals. Vargas Llosa himself gave what amounts to an explanation during his second visit to the USSR in 1977. In an interview with the journal *Latinskaya Amerika*, he remarked that the richness of the contemporary Latin American novel came from its crisis-ridden context. Taken together, recent works were 'a projection on the formal, symbolic, artistic level of a world that is ending'. Across the region, he said, 'there is a whole old society that is in a period of decline' and 'no one believes in this society today, not even its beneficiaries.' This was already true in the 1960s and 1970s, as agrarian societies gave way to urbanised ones. It applies still more to the post-2000 period, as the neoliberal order of the 1990s – of which Vargas Llosa had been a leading proponent – continues to unravel. The pink tide confirmed its failure, and attempted to chart a new path from the left. Faced with that prospect, Vargas Llosa, beset by Cold War phantoms and still proclaiming his liberalism, has instead gravitated towards the darker scenarios put forward by the right.