

VENEZUELAN REVISIONIST
POLITICAL HISTORY, 1908–1958:
New Motives and Criteria for Analyzing the Past*

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Until a few years ago, Venezuelans and their historians held black and white notions about the regimes that had governed the country after it became a centralized state in the early twentieth century. As Venezuelan historian Santiago Gerardo Suárez pointed out, “The victor writes history.” And indeed, most portrayals of Venezuelan rulers after 1908 were strongly colored by the roles played by leading members of the political parties that emerged triumphant in 1958 when the modern democratic period was ushered in (Suárez 1965, 20). In fact, the most influential works were written by important politicians and others closely tied to political organizations.

Many of the prominent members of Acción Democrática (AD), the Partido Comunista de Venezuela (PCV), and the Unión Republicana Democrática (URD) had been part of the “Generación de ‘28” that had led street protests against dictator Juan Vicente Gómez, who ruled from 1908 to 1935. Those parties along with the social Christian party COPEI (originally the Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente) ended up forming the backbone of the resistance to a subsequent military regime, the one led by strongman Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1948–1958). It is thus not surprising that writers in general, and particularly those identified with these four parties, reached a consensus in which Gómez and Pérez Jiménez were condemned in absolute terms. Accordingly, most writers emphasized the repressiveness of both regimes and also blamed them for retarding economic development by favoring commercial or individual interests over those of the industrial bourgeoisie. Political partiality also characterized works published about the interim administrations of Eleazar López Contreras (1936–1941), Isaías Medina Angarita (1941–1945), and the AD (1945–1948). Thus pro-AD writers justified the October 1945 coup spearheaded by that party by claiming that López and

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Medina were Gomecistas who had rejected authentic liberalization and maintained prevailing policies and structures intact.

One by-product of this highly politicized historiography was the tendency to depict certain conjunctures as dramatic turning points for the country. Specifically, the changes of government occurring in 1936, 1945, 1948, and 1958 were singled out as those determining Venezuela's destiny. Some pro-AD writers picked up a phrase coined by the party's *jefe máximo*, Rómulo Betancourt, and characterized the coup in October 1945 as Venezuela's "second national independence," while others referred to it as "the October revolution" (Sucre Figarella 1980, 238). For the latter writers and pro-leftist ones, the 1948 coup initiated a dark phase when all the advances of past years ground to a halt. Political commentators identified with the four parties of this period played up 1958 as signaling a turnabout not only in regime type but also in all aspects of the nation's development. In highlighting the impact of individual governments, however, these analysts generally failed to recognize continuities in policies, trends, and situations over longer periods of time.

A new historiography emerged in the 1980s that has rejected as politically inspired standard versions of the five governing periods between 1908 and 1958. These revisionist historians argue that "facts are facts" and that a historian's commitment to democracy should not detract in any way from his or her recognition of the objective achievements of dictatorial governments (see Castillo 1990, 205; Zeims 1993, 141–42). Some observers have pointed out that members of the Generation of '28 and others immersed in the struggle against dictatorships have gradually faded from the political scene, leaving younger writers who are more removed from those events in an ideal position to reexamine historical stereotypes (Guzmán Pérez 1983, 19). Other historians reject as "blackmail" the notion that those who research the period need to define themselves as either "pro-democratic" or "anti-democratic" (Blanco Muñoz 1983a, 13). Historian Yolanda Segnini responded to critics of her relatively favorable account of Gómez by arguing that the victims of his regime's repression hold no franchise on insights into those years.¹ In her view, "My principal responsibility as an historian is inquiry: scrutinizing the

1. Victims of Gómez's repressive policies have taken issue with the revisionists writing on that era. Gustavo Machado, longtime Communist leader who was in exile for most of the Gómez period, wrote: "In recent years, a strange tendency has manifested itself to play down the hideous traits of Juan Vicente Gómez [and] to transform [him] . . . into a kind of Biblical patriarch, a loving father of family . . . , an apostle of peace, subduer of *caudillos*, and constructor of awe-inspiring highways. The historical truth that the new generations must know and analyze is that the cunning Juan Vicente Gómez did not possess any of these attributes. As a representative of *latifundismo*, he converted himself into the most insatiable exploiter . . . and drowned in blood the *montoneros*, who attempted [to provoke] a civil war, and instead unleashed a civil war of torture and death against all citizens who dared to dissent . . . [He also] sacked the public treasury in order to amass a colossal, monopolistic, and usurious fortune" (Machado 1980, 10).

sources in order to draw conclusions about . . . the facts even though they militate against 'official history'" (Segnini 1987, 260).²

The effort to reexamine widely held historical interpretations objectively is partly the result of the emergence of history as an academic profession in Venezuela, accompanied by the methodological rigor implied by such a development. The Universidad Central de Venezuela and the Universidad de los Andes founded the first university schools (departments) of history in the 1950s, but it took a generation for the full impact on the profession to be felt.³ This trend has encouraged a search for new historical data. Some revisionists writing on twentieth-century political history have made a concerted effort to disregard "ideologically based" secondary works. Indeed, one biographer of López Contreras decided to rely exclusively on primary sources in order to "avoid converting [his book] into a debate of opinions" (Polanco 1991, vi–vii). Another revisionist historian, Fredy Rincón, spurned "the literature promoted by political parties in order to overcome on the technical and methodological fronts the ideological charge weighing on the [Pérez Jiménez] period." He went on to express faith that such an approach would open new avenues of inquiry and contribute to "the history of Venezuela that is yet to be written" (Rincón 1982, 28). Increased interest in primary sources in turn has given rise to publication of scores of volumes of documents that are facilitating reconsideration of standard historical accounts among historians and the public at large.

Another argument advanced in favor of revisionist history is essentially political. According to this line of thinking, regime comparison is an inevitable by-product of the economic and political crisis of recent years and the resulting loss of prestige of the nation's two dominant

2. One historian who reviewed favorably Segnini's *Las luces del gomecismo* points to the importance of utilizing primary sources in rewriting history: "To the degree to which [historians] search in the Archivo Histórico de Miraflores, they will find a different Gómez, and a different Venezuela embodied there in the cold paper manuscripts in handwriting or typed on a primitive typewriter." See Oldman Botello, "Benemérito Gómez, 55 años," *El Nacional*, 12 Dec. 1990, p. A-6.

3. Germán Carrera Damas, the former director of the Escuela de Historia at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, was instrumental in upgrading professional skills and laying the foundation for revisionist history. Under his influence in the 1960s and 1970s, the Escuela increased the number of methodology courses from one to four, despite resistance from many colleagues tied to traditional approaches, and in 1968 introduced statistical history. Carrera Damas also pointed out shortcomings in Venezuelan historiography: the preference for anecdotal history; the "exaggerated cult of the hero" (particularly in studies of Simón Bolívar); the fragmentation of history into artificial periods; and the neglect of primary sources. At the same time, Carrera Damas credited university autonomy with facilitating the questioning of "official history" and allowing historians to strike out in new directions (Carrera Damas 1985, 24–32). More recently, historian Ali López has pointed out that these problem areas persist, despite "the emergence of a historiography based on a scientific approach . . . that has at least succeeded in alerting . . . [the academic community] about the need for a revision of the historical process in Venezuela" (López Bohórquez 1992, 178–79).

parties, the AD and COPEI. Such deterioration is said to cast new light on nondemocratic governments that were previously held in general disrepute. For instance, one historian has used historical data to show that the mismanagement of public income that facilitated Juan Vicente Gómez's massive accumulation of wealth involved a *modus operandi* that was qualitatively similar to that employed in recent years (Polanco 1990, 451–78). Others have argued that the corruption plaguing Venezuela over the last two decades is more widespread than that under Medina and Pérez Jiménez, even though the graft occurring under the two older regimes helped justify their overthrow (García Villasmil 1982, 17; M. Moleiro 1979, 176). Empirically based comparisons of budgetary priorities and even human rights violations have also reflected poorly on Venezuela's democracy since 1958 (Reyes n.d., 280–82; Blanco Muñoz 1983b, 311; see also Soler Serrano 1993, 31–32).⁴

Many revisionist writers are aware of the far-reaching political implications of their works. Agustín Blanco Muñoz, a social scientist with pro-leftist sympathies who conducted lengthy interviews with Pérez Jiménez and other leading protagonists of the 1950s, has argued that since 1958 the legitimacy of AD and COPEI governments has been predicated on the alleged nefariousness of the previous military regime. Debunking that myth means that AD and COPEI can no longer take for granted the historical justification of the nation's democracy after 1958. According to Blanco Muñoz, the real significance of his books is not that they defend dictatorships but rather that they “expose the poverty of this democracy” (Blanco Muñoz 1983a, 13).

One need not be well versed in twentieth-century Venezuelan history to comprehend the highly charged relevance of the issues being raised by the revisionists. For example, the thesis that nondemocratic governments promoted economic development may have enhanced the attractiveness of the two coups attempted in 1992 during a prolonged recession. In addition, revisionist historians have credited the Pérez Jiménez government with initiating certain state-run projects (including the steel industry and hydroelectric projects based in Guayana, the petrochemical industry, and the national railroad system) that the AD has traditionally claimed as outstanding achievements of its own administrations after 1958. Revisionists have also questioned the assumptions that the takeoff phase of industrialization coincided with the implementation of import-substitution policies by the AD governments of the 1960s and that the “state-plans of the nation” (official guidelines throughout the

4. According to Enrique Ochoa Antich, president of Venezuela's Comisión de Derechos Humanos, human rights violations produced one fatality every twenty days during the early years of the Gómez regime, whereas between 1991 and 1993 the incidence had increased to once every four days. See Ochoa Antich (1992, 32); see also “La democracia viola derechos humanos más que la dictadura,” *El Nacional*, 10 Oct. 1993, p. D-6.

modern democratic period) had no important precedent prior to 1959 (Friedmann 1965, 12).⁵

Revisionists cannot be reduced to a single profile. Many of them, including several who are not Venezuelans, are professional historians who claim impartiality and no concern with the political implications of their work. Others, however, are politically oriented and spell out conclusions that pertain to the nation's current politics. What they all share is their rejection of "official history," which has served since 1958 to bolster the legitimacy of rule based on two dominant political parties. Revisionist works also differ from the traditional approach of older writers favorable to Gómez or Pérez Jiménez in that most of these newer studies uncover and use a diverse array of relevant data.

This article will focus on the portraits of the governments between 1908 and 1958 painted by writers tied to Venezuela's political parties as well as by revisionist historians. Of particular interest here are the perceptions of continuity and change regarding each governing period. The article will then review several important collections of primary material whose recent publication was stimulated by revisionist writing. A concluding section will deal with the methodological and conceptual implications of revisionism and its shortcomings.

THE RULE OF JUAN VICENTE GOMEZ, 1908–1935

Traditional accounts of the administration of Juan Vicente Gómez have been well represented in textbooks and until recently were generally accepted by Venezuelans. These works described his twenty-seven-year dictatorship as among the most ruthless in Latin America and Venezuela as one of the most backward countries in South America (see Clinton 1936; Sucre Figarella 1980, 200). Gómez has been portrayed in these works as enigmatic, isolated from the rest of society, and eventually estranged from even his own family. A leader who rarely gave speeches, appeared in public, or issued written statements, Gómez was said to have ruled from a refuge, his ranch home in Maracay, which one writer described as a "cave" (Velásquez 1979, 310). According to one perspective, in selling out to the oil companies, Gómez betrayed the interests of the nation, including the elite that had originally supported his quest for power. As a result of Venezuela's conversion into a veritable "fiscal paradise for foreign

5. The far-reaching political implications of these favorable accounts of past military regimes can be gleaned from the prologue by former Defense Minister Martín García Villasmil to one of the first books presenting a revisionist view of Pérez Jiménez: "It has been forgotten that the Father of our Nation, the Liberator Simón Bolívar, had to exercise a dictatorship during difficult moments of the Republic. . . . The effort to examine [impartially] the behavior of authoritarian governments . . . can be interpreted as a desire to find by means of the truth the best way to overcome the problems [facing the nation]" (García Villasmil 1982, 16–17).

capital," the country not only forfeited revenue but allowed the oil economy to displace the agricultural economy, with all the dislocations that such a process implied (Rodríguez Gallad 1993, 88). The economic woes of many sizable landholders were aggravated as Gómez suppressed their political base (personified by the regional caudillos), appropriated extensive tracts of land, and monopolized important sectors (Rangel 1974, 289). In short, according to traditional accounts, the nation went from bad to worse during Gómez's lengthy rule, from being an economy controlled by an oligarchy to a dependent economy favoring foreign companies, a single Venezuelan, and his small clique (Rodríguez Gallad 1993, 81–107; Villegas 1993, 511–17).⁶

Four books published by scholars over the last fifteen years have challenged these personal stereotypes, along with the notion that Gómez held back progress (Velásquez 1979; McBeth 1983; Segnini 1987; Polanco 1990). These works stress instead his redeeming characteristics, which are placed in appropriate geographical and historical contexts (see also Reyes n.d., 278–79; Segal 1987, 350; Botello 1993, 13). Ramón J. Velásquez and Tomás Polanco explain Gómez's behavior on the basis of the values and activities that he held dearest: loyalty, hard work, peace, solvency, agricultural pursuits, and family ties. For example, Gómez's aversion to indebtedness is attributed to his cautiousness and conservative mentality, the result of his upbringing in the traditional state of Táchira and his experience in early adulthood in administering his middle-sized farm. This aversion also resulted from Venezuela's traumas in facing the crass intervention of foreign creditor nations, the last incident being the blockade and bombardment of Venezuelan ports by European powers in 1902 and 1903, when Gómez was vice-president. This virtual obsession spurred Gómez to accomplish the remarkable feat of paying off the nation's foreign debt of more than twenty-four million bolívares amidst the Great Depression, and in time to commemorate the centenary of the death of Simón Bolívar in 1930 (Polanco 1990, 492; Reyes n.d., 208). Some historians seeking a more balanced treatment of Gómez contrast this fiscal discipline with the chaotic state of public finances under his predecessor, Cipriano Castro (Segnini 1982, 51). These scholars admittedly have been influenced by the devastating effect of the nation's current mammoth foreign debt, which was incurred mostly during the 1970s (Segnini 1986, 216; Reyes 1985, 343).⁷

6. Revisionists like Ramón J. Velásquez deny that Gómez was detached from or failed to provide opportunities for members of the elite outside a select circle of trusted friends and family members (Velásquez 1979, 231, 275–77). This view of Gómez's close ties with the local elite has been well documented for the district of Duaca in the state of Lara in Yarrington (1992, 219–21; 1994).

7. See the interview with Don Florencio Gómez, "Mi padre hizo por Venezuela mucho más que los políticos," *El Nacional*, 15 June 1993, p. D-22.

Polanco and Velásquez also highlight family and personal loyalties, which were valued highly in nineteenth-century Venezuelan rural society. Polanco attempts to refute the view that Gómez's self-centeredness and fear of being displaced in power eclipsed his concern for family members. In sharp contrast to what has often been affirmed or implied, Polanco denies that Gómez reacted callously to the death of his favorite son, Alí, in 1918. Polanco also contests the claim that a second son, José Vicente, murdered Gómez's brother Juancho in 1922 and that the dictator subsequently exiled the alleged assassin in fear of his intention to usurp power (Sanin 1984, 38–39). Polanco is well aware of the methodological difficulties of analyzing the psychological motives and reactions of a biographical subject whose extreme reticence was typical of his native region. Polanco arrived at these and other conclusions only after consulting a wide variety of primary sources, including personal letters written by Gómez and U.S. diplomatic papers.

The importance Gómez attached to loyalty led to his high regard for General Eleazar López Contreras, who was reliable, straightforward, and apparently unambitious (R. Moleiro 1993, 125). The future president is quoted as saying, "The best policy toward Gómez is not to have one at all" (Polanco 1991, 265; Velásquez 1979, 351). Conversely, Gómez persecuted relentlessly those who betrayed him.⁸ He mounted an espionage network that utilized the telegraph system, the foreign ministry, and even the oil companies to monitor the activities of his Venezuelan adversaries abroad (Rangel 1974, 227; Méndez 1993, 36, 54). Polanco and Velásquez do not deny Gómez's cruelty toward his political foes, as did his uncritical defenders, including López Contreras (López Contreras 1955, 13–15; Polanco 1990, 13, 504). These historians note instead that the practice of torture was well embedded in Venezuelan history. As sympathetic biographer Vitelio Reyes observed, Gómez's "sin lies in not having overcome a preexisting stage [of development]" (Reyes n.d., 278–81). While state reliance on torture was becoming increasingly outdated worldwide, it continued to be employed in Venezuela. Velásquez presented in *Confidencias imaginarias de Juan Vicente Gómez* a fictitious interview with Gómez in which the author ingeniously reconstructs the era while the protagonist defends his record on human rights. The fictional Gómez employs the rather ingenuous argument that political prisoners were assigned to high-way construction crews to instill in them an appreciation of the value of hard work. Velásquez also points out that Gómez refrained from some of the more hideous techniques of torture and execution employed by several of his predecessors (Velásquez 1979, 323–24).

The same contextual focus employed by Polanco, Reyes, and Velás-

8. For an account of Gómez's paternalistic attitude toward friends and enemies by a leading Venezuelan historical novelist, see Herrera Luque (1978, 418–19, 427–28).

quez (in Acosta Espinosa 1993, 52–53) can be used to explain the opposition of emerging middle sectors that favored government interventionism and deficit spending and were thus unimpressed by Gómez's famous fiscal accomplishment in 1930 (see Caballero 1993, 305). Likewise, Gómez's personalism based on individual loyalties was incompatible with the growing complexity of Venezuelan society and the development of new social classes that could only be brought into the system by interest-group representation in decision making, preferably within a democratic framework. In short, one logical conclusion of the relativistic approach followed by many of the revisionists is that if a negative verdict is to be reached on Gómez, it should be less for his unsavory personal qualities and more for remaining behind the times.

Yet some writers who stress Gómez's positive historical role view his twenty-seven-year rule as marking a fundamental break with the past.⁹ Until then, Venezuela was even more fragmented and subject to continuous internal warfare than its Latin American neighbors. Gómez established a centralized state that, according to revisionists, has been altered in form but not in substance over the years (Segnini 1987, 264; Dávila 1992, 59).¹⁰ The cornerstone of state-building was his formation of a national army. Angel Zeims's (1979) monograph describes the basic components of the military reforms undertaken by Gómez: professionalizing military officers, including offering scholarships for study abroad; centralizing command; and standardizing equipment, uniforms, and instruction. On the negative side, Zeims shows how younger professional officers were blocked in their aspirations to ascend in rank by the old guard of largely uneducated generals, an impediment that led the lower-ranking military personnel on several occasions to join with students in attempts to overthrow the government (Zeims 1993, 163). At the same time, Gómez's close relations with the more liberal-minded General López Contreras (over the opposition of the old-line officers) demonstrated that the younger professionals' cause was not entirely lost (Méndez 1993, 40).

Gómez's success in centralizing political and military structures depended on his deriving enough revenue from the oil industry to finance the expanded bureaucracy and new projects. B. S. McBeth (1983)

9. Some sympathetic accounts of Gómez, such as Tomás Polanco Alcántara's (1990) biography, view his personalistic style of rule as a holdover from the nineteenth century. In contrast, Segnini (1987) and others credit Gómez with laying the institutional basis for twentieth-century Venezuela. These perspectives are thoroughly explored by Manuel Caballero, who argues that "Gómez is a man of the nineteenth century not because he lived more time in it than in the following one but because he was only able to act and live during that century" (Caballero 1993, 339).

10. The process of centralization really began under the government of Cipriano Castro (1899–1909), at least in terms of eliminating regional caudillos, forming a national army, and imposing "outsiders" as state governors. See Quintero (1989, 116–18).

has rejected the traditional view that the petroleum companies exercised virtual veto power over Venezuelan oil policy and has arrived at a mixed assessment of Gómez's record in the field. According to McBeth, Gómez attempted to maximize government income and showed concern for the welfare of the workers but failed to promote a technically competent bureaucracy capable of monitoring the oil companies, which were always bent on evading their obligations.¹¹ McBeth discusses the pros and cons as well as Gómez's vacillations over creating a national oil refinery (McBeth 1983, 170–71). Evidently this analyst does not share the view that Gómez spurned the proposition, as well as developmentalism in general, out of fear that a large concentration of industrial workers would represent a political threat to his regime (Velásquez 1975, 16).¹²

Gómez believed, along with the positivist intellectuals who supported him, that he had dealt a death blow to barbarism as represented by the regional caudillos and had thus ensured the definitive triumph of civilization in Venezuela. Gómez in fact identified with the enlightened Santos Luzardo, the hero of Rómulo Gallegos's famous novel *Doña Bárbara*. Gómez even offered the celebrated writer the position of senator from the state of Apure, the setting of the novel. Gallegos undoubtedly considered Gómez's personality closer to the barbarism embodied in Doña Bárbara herself. Gallegos turned down the generous offer and opted instead for voluntary exile. The nineteenth-century issue of barbarism versus civilization remains much at the center of the current historiographical debate. Those who defend Gómez equate civilization with establishment of the national state that he promoted actively whereas his detractors point to the dictator's rural origin as symbolic of the ignorance and backwardness that marked his rule.

Historians who view Gómez as a fairly enlightened dictator emphasize the role played by nationalist figures, the most important being Minister of Development Gumersindo Torres, and the positivists who figured prominently in his administrations. Polanco perceives relations between Gómez and Torres as one of great mutual respect (1990, 268, 398–99). An opposing account cites Gómez's decision to remove Torres on two occasions at the behest of the oil companies and describes him as "one sensible voice in a sea of antipatriotism" (Méndez 1993, 36). While revisionists point to the outstanding positivist thinkers who defended Gómez and participated in his government, anti-Gomecista writers belittle their intellectual contribution (M. Moleiro 1979, 58–59).

As implied by the title of *Las luces de gomecismo*, Yolanda Segnini

11. Pro-Gómez writers question the traditional view that the Ley del Trabajo de 1928 was designed to impress foreign observers and remained a dead letter until it was replaced by legislation in 1936 (Reyes n.d., 163; see also Ellner 1993, 96).

12. Betancourt acknowledges that Gómez favored building a refinery in Venezuela but blames him for failing to face up to the oil companies, which resisted the idea (1969, 77).

(1987) takes issue with the view that Gómez's rule corresponded to "dark years" in Venezuelan history in which the nation was "incomunicado and isolated from the currents of contemporary thinking" (Segnini 1993, 224, 227). She traces the institutionalization of cultural activity in the latter years of Gómez's rule, as promoted by the organization Ateneo de Caracas, which was founded in 1931 and included many women (Segnini 1993, 211–24). The Gómez dictatorship's tolerance of the Ateneo was contingent on its avoiding overt political positions. By implication, *Las luces de gomecismo* refutes the notion that the Gómez regime manifested totalitarian tendencies in showing that space was available for competing creeds, at least those of a nonpolitical nature (Segnini 1987, 258). Indeed, the Ateneo's prominent role in Venezuelan cultural life up to the present exemplifies the overall continuity that Segnini believes has existed throughout most of the twentieth century (Segnini 1993, 225, 228–29; 1990, 105).

In June 1993, the airport at San Antonio del Táchira (ten miles from Gómez's birthplace) was renamed in honor of the former dictator. Presiding over the ceremony was Ramón J. Velásquez, himself a native son of Táchira and the interim president of Venezuela. His presence was symbolic in that after subscribing to the traditional anti-Gómez viewpoint, the historian-politician reexamined his opinions and wrote *Confidencias imaginarias de Juan Vicente Gómez*. The lively and emotional debate that ensued in the press and elsewhere demonstrates that Gómez the political figure still polarizes Venezuela strongly. Although revisionists of recent years represent a spectrum of positions on Gómez ranging from unequivocally critical (Zeims) to sympathetic (Polanco), their works have transcended the traditional dichotomy of extremes that depict Gómez as either the incarnation of barbarism or the champion of peace and progress who saved Venezuela from perpetual anarchy.

THE INTERIM PERIOD BETWEEN DICTATORSHIPS, 1936 TO 1948

After the Gómez regime ended with his death in 1935, two hand-picked presidents governed Venezuela until the military coup of 1945. Both Eleazar López Contreras (1936–1941) and Isaías Medina Angarita (1941–1945) had served as minister of war under previous governments. The detractors of both administrations, specifically pro-AD writers, stop short of portraying either one as nefarious or decadent in the style of Gómez or Pérez Jiménez. The milder treatment accorded them reflects their commitment to democracy and reform, as demonstrated by López's reduction of his own presidential term from seven to five years and the programs of both administrations that won widespread approval, even from the Communist Party. Yet the pro-AD stance toward López and Medina is sufficiently critical to have produced in recent years a strong polemical reaction by revisionists who praise the two presidents and

condemn the AD-sponsored military coup of 18 October 1945. As with revisionist writings on Gómez and Pérez Jiménez, these works make frequent references to the erroneous policies and bankruptcy of the post-1958 democracy in order to strengthen their case for a favorable reevaluation of the two administrations governing from 1936 to 1945.

Certainly, AD writers cannot afford to be too lenient toward López and Medina, given that the basic justification for the 1945 coup was that both presidents were essentially Gomecistas in formation as well as convictions. Only by demonstrating such a heritage can the AD refute the argument that gradual liberalization after 1936 (which López termed "the constitutional thread") was leading to a full-fledged democratic state and thus precluded the necessity of a coup. Indeed, Rómulo Betancourt characterized López as "Gómez's heir," who tolerated democratic liberties in 1936 to buy time when faced with popular pressure but showed his true colors the next year when he resorted to repression, including the exile of forty-seven leaders of the opposition (Sanin 1982, 242; Betancourt 1979, 313).¹³ Betancourt also described the Medina government as "an autocracy in liberal attire" (Betancourt 1969, 161), while another AD politician-writer has attacked Medina for "his lack of resolution in breaking with his Gomecista past" (Morales Gil 1988, 282; see also Carpio Castillo 1971, 45). Some current and former AD leaders have gone so far as to claim that López and Medina perpetrated electoral fraud, thus minimizing the democratic advances ushered in after 1936 (Prieto Figueroa 1978, 39).

It may seem surprising that writers favorable to COPEI, despite their party's roots far to the right of the AD, adhere to the AD's general evaluation of the two administrations and the coup in October 1945 (Suárez Figueroa 1982, 79). Pro-COPEI historians also deny that Rafael Caldera and others who subsequently founded COPEI were allied with the right-wing during these years or were located squarely in the government camp, despite their support for the Spanish Falangists.¹⁴ These writers point to the Caldera group's criticism of López for failing to create a party based on the doctrine of social justice that could have served as a bulwark against communism (Suárez Figueroa 1973, 68–69; Luque 1986, 153–54). Copeyano scholars maintain that during the Medina presidency, Caldera's followers approximated AD positions on the government's oil and agrarian policies, which they considered detrimental to popular and national interests (Cartay Ramírez 1987, 82, 91; Suárez Figueroa 1982, 86–87). Finally, Copeyano writers justify the 1945 coup (as did Caldera and future president Luis Herrera Campíns at the time) on the grounds that it destroyed residual

13. Caldera and other future Copeyanos are generally viewed as having been close allies of President López Contreras. See Peeler (1985, 84) and Carpio Castillo (1971, 34).

14. During his presidency in the early 1960s, Betancourt revised his position on López when he decorated the former president and approved his designation as a *senador vitalicio* (senator for life).

structures dating back to the Gómez era (Cárdenas 1965, 22; Cárdenas 1988, 32).¹⁵ These historical interpretations stressing Caldera's convergence with the AD and opposition to López and Medina from the Left can be viewed as consonant with COPEI's long-standing efforts to refute charges that it is a right-wing party serving the Venezuelan oligarchy.

Most revisionist historians writing on López deny that he was in any way associated with Gomecismo or that he consistently defended conservative interests. In their view, Venezuela was facing a dangerous polarization in 1936 between Gomecistas, who dominated the armed forces and congress, on one side, and the burgeoning popular movement led by left-wing parties, specifically the future leaders of the AD and the PCV, on the other (Sanin 1982, 131–32). López maintained adroitly an equilibrium between these two extremes, thus avoiding civil war and anarchy. In fulfilling his pledge to step down following the expiration of his term and in keeping the Gomecistas at arm's length, López is credited with having founded democracy in Venezuela (Sanin 1982, 131–32, 414). He has also been praised for designing policies that subsequently were attributed to others. For instance, he initiated state planning, albeit in rudimentary form, and halted unchecked concessions to the oil companies, accomplishments generally associated with AD governments (R. Moleiro 1993, 128, 166, 272).

Revisionists writing on this period generally highlight the political influence of Gomecistas after their jefe's death (R. Moleiro 1993, 352, 465) and the deplorable socioeconomic conditions left by his dictatorship. In doing so, these writers emphasize the formidable challenges faced by López and the progress made under his rule. Indeed, the data utilized by many of these pro-López revisionists on specific activities in 1936 in areas like health, education, and oil development contradict the favorable picture of the same sectors presented by pro-Gómez revisionists writing on that era (Sanin 1982, 37, 358, 366; Segnini 1987, 256–58; Yépez Colmenares 1991, 31; Polanco 1976, 126–33; see also Ewell 1991, 735–36). Pro-López revisionists thus seek to confirm the generally accepted view of 1936 as a point of departure when Venezuela truly entered the twentieth century.¹⁶ As Eleazar Díaz Rangel has pointed out, such an interpretation assures López of an enviable place in history for having presided over a process of such profound change and modernization (Díaz Rangel 1990, 131–33).

These revisionists justify López's repressive measures as a necessary response to the excesses of the popular movement in 1936. They blame the leftists for their intransigent stands, such as the general strike

15. Nevertheless, Cárdenas, former Copeyano governor of the Federal District, takes issue with the AD's harsh characterization of the López and Medina governments (Cárdenas 1986, 36–37).

16. This statement was first formulated by renowned writer Mariano Picón Salas, an anti-Gomecista later identified with the López and Medina governments.

with insurrectional implications staged in June 1936.¹⁷ According to these writers, López reluctantly acceded to Gomecista pressure by exiling leftists, but only after he reduced the number of dissidents affected by the decree from four hundred to forty-seven (R. Moleiro 1993, 413; Velásquez 1975, 10; Suárez 1965, 21). Revisionist biographer Rodolfo Moleiro overstates his case, however, in claiming that all forty-seven of those exiled professed adherence to Marxism, which was proscribed by the constitution (1993, 447). He and Polanco both point out that when Betancourt's position as an outsider was reversed in the early 1960s, he as president resorted to far more repressive measures against the insurgent Left (R. Moleiro 1993, 432; Polanco 1991, 274).

The presidency of Medina Angarita from 1941 to 1945 has always been widely acclaimed for the social and political harmony that prevailed and the progressive policies implemented. Thus revisionists have not had to vindicate the historical role of Medina as they have that of López. Unlike the López government, whose democratic opening in 1936 was followed by repressive measures, the Medina years displayed ongoing political tolerance and respect for basic liberties. Medina legalized the AD and later the PCV and also entered into an electoral alliance with the Communists. Among Medina's staunchest defenders over the years have been Communists and former Medinistas, some of whom helped found the Unión Republicana Democrática (URD). Nora Bustamante, a leading revisionist historian, has taken issue with Betancourt's thesis (Betancourt 1969, 161) that Medina's democratic stands were forced on him by the administration of U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt in accordance with World War II foreign policy imperatives (Bustamante 1992, 127–28; see also Fuenmayor 1979, 284). Similarly, Stephen Rabe has challenged Bryce Wood's assertion that oil companies acquiesced to Medina's nationalistic Ley de Hidrocarburos of 1943 as a result of U.S. government pressure. Rabe attributes their decision largely to Medina's negotiating skills (Rabe 1982, 87–93; see also Ellner 1980a, 68–69; Valero 1993, 52).

Recognition of the progress made under Medina bears directly on the verdict on the October 1945 coup. In highlighting Medina's nationalist and democratic commitments, the revisionists implicitly or explicitly question the justification for the 1945 coup. As in revisionist writing on Gómez and Pérez Jiménez, these scholars emphasize the continuity of policies following the termination of Medina's rule and thus show that his government, far from holding back progress, made long-lasting contributions (see Caballero 1988, 115; Ellner 1992, 150–51). According to revisionist Luis Ricardo Dávila, the only significant rupture in 1945 was in discourse, given that the AD's fiery rhetoric condemned in absolute terms

17. Most but not all historians agree that conditions in 1936 were not ripe for the Left to question the legitimacy of the López regime. See Ellner (1988, 33–34).

all Venezuelan governments since Bolívar (Dávila 1992, 52, 63). Even in the realm of style, other revisionists have shown that “*la política de las masas*” that the AD is credited with initiating in 1945 really dates back to the administrations of López (Sanin 1982, 413) and Medina (Bustamante 1985, 205–13; see also Caballero 1988, 87, 116; Herrera Campins 1993, 134–37). Both presidents broke with the detached gentleman-politician approach in making radio broadcasts and mingling with common people in order to legitimize their governments and gain support for their policies. Although revisionists have not yet published works on the *trienio* period of AD rule (1945–1948) that systematically question or minimize its allegedly pioneering achievements, their studies on López and Medina go far toward disputing the legitimacy of that regime.¹⁸

THE MILITARY DICTATORSHIP OF MARCOS PEREZ JIMENEZ, 1948–1958

Analysts of Venezuelan history have traditionally viewed Pérez Jiménez somewhat like Gómez, as having held back economic progress, sold out to foreign interests, and been guilty of inhumane behavior. Unlike revisionists focusing on the Gómez years, however, those analyzing the 1950s have made little effort to vindicate the human qualities of Pérez Jiménez or to question allegations of unethical behavior. The image of ruthlessness and lack of integrity projected in the writings of his adversaries, particularly the victims of his police apparatus, remains mostly unchallenged. Revisionists have nonetheless insisted on qualifying some of these negative characterizations. Blanco Muñoz has pointed out the didactic, if not propagandistic motivation of those who write about the despotism of the period and has criticized the tendency to exaggerate the degree of repression and corruption existing in those years (Blanco Muñoz 1983a, 13; 1983b, 7). Juan Bautista Fuenmayor, former secretary general of the PCV, criticizes his former party in his multivolume history of twentieth-century Venezuela for having dismissed the Pérez Jiménez regime as a simple police state and not appreciating the importance of internal conflicts and other complexities (1981, 62).¹⁹ Finally, historian Ocarina Castillo has demonstrated that the contempt for national culture, particularly the Indian component, displayed by Minister of the Interior Laureano Vallenilla Lanz, Jr., was not entirely shared by Pérez Jiménez and

18. The AD's image as Venezuela's democratic party par excellence is predicated on accepting the legitimacy of the *trienio* government. The democratic credibility of other Latin American parties of the same general orientation, such as APRA in Peru and the Partido Justicialista in Argentina, has been tainted as a result of their leaders' previous alliances with conspiratorial elements in the military.

19. Fuenmayor broke with the PCV because he opposed the party's tendency to side with the AD in allegedly putschist schemes but also because he was less critical of the military government that came to power in 1948.

others in his government who were influenced by Peronism and Nasserism (Castillo 1990, 125–29, 175–76).

Revisionists have focused on industrial policy, particularly in state-run sectors. They credit the Pérez Jiménez government with initiating the nation's most ambitious developmental projects in the Guayana region in steel and hydroelectric power, along with the corresponding infrastructure, while advancing plans for a national railroad system and production of aluminum and atomic energy (Ruiz Calderón 1986). According to this view, the *trienio* government from 1945 to 1948 merely scratched the surface in considering these possibilities (Ruiz Calderón 1993, 42), whereas the post-1958 democratic administrations expanded on the solid foundation laid in the 1950s while retrenching in certain crucial areas (Maza Zavala 1986, 100–101; Fuenmayor 1981, 95). Most important, in opting for state ownership, Pérez Jiménez stood up to national capitalists as well as foreign interests, particularly those of the United States, which had been led to believe that the steel complex would be turned over to the private sector. Two issues that emerge as fundamental in these discussions are the relations of the military government with private local capital on the one hand and with the United States on the other.

Traditional historians have been influenced by the theory upheld by the Venezuelan Left, specifically the AD and the PCV, which characterized the “progressive industrial bourgeoisie” as a natural ally because of its rejection of Pérez Jiménez’s allegedly pro-imperialist policies (see *Noticias de Venezuela* 1955a, 4). According to this view, Pérez Jiménez favored commerce and construction over manufacturing activity, financial and commercial capital over industrial capital, and luxury goods over the traditional industrial sector, which stagnated between 1948 and 1958. Industrialists also feared that a small clique of military officers headed by former Minister of the Interior Luis Felipe Llovera Páez would use its influence in high government to displace them in strategic sectors of the economy (M. Moleiro 1979, 183).²⁰

Over time, the theory of the “progressive national bourgeoisie” has lost favor among important sectors of the Left in Latin America (Ellner 1988, 25–31). This trend has undoubtedly influenced scholars and others who have called for a reevaluation of the historical role played by Pérez Jiménez. For example, rather than lauding business leaders for participating in the final stage of the struggle against Pérez Jiménez, historian Manuel Rodríguez Campos labeled them “opportunistic” and traitorous because after they had supported the regime and reaped extraordinary profits for so many years, they turned on Pérez Jiménez merely because of a downturn in the economy and without having endured the

20. According to Domingo Alberto Rangel, Llovera Páez “turned out to be a better businessman than a soldier” (1966, 33–34, 43).

“hardships that other sectors suffered” (Rodríguez Campos 1991, 264–65). The industrialists protested that Pérez Jiménez refused to subsidize national production or ban the importation of cars and other products. These interventionist policies, the hallmarks of the import-substitution approach, are now considered tantamount to doles for big business and responsible for the economic woes that afflict Latin America (Blanco Muñoz 1983b, 209–10). Thus in retrospect, Pérez Jiménez’s anti-interventionism does not appear ill-advised. Finally, Ocarina Castillo has challenged the generally accepted view that Pérez Jiménez was inflexibly antiprotectionist (Ewell 1984, 109–10; Rincón 1982, 102), as was claimed by the entire opposition that at the time harshly attacked the Treaty of Commercial Reciprocity of 1952 with the United States (Castillo 1990, 144–45; see also Salazar Valencia 1993).

Revisionist and traditional historians present two conflicting versions of Pérez Jiménez’s relations with the United States. The conventional view, as reflected in several recent studies by U.S. scholars (Hellinger 1991, 96; Rabe 1982, 120–32), places the government of Pérez Jiménez in the context of the heyday of the cold war and emphasizes his staunch anticommunism, which naturally endeared him to Washington. Historian Stephen Rabe pointed out that U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles wanted to hold up the Venezuelan regime as a model for the rest of the continent but met with resistance from some Eisenhower administration officials who were reluctant to heap unqualified praise on a non-democratic regime (Rabe 1988, 176).

Historians upholding the contrary position differ among themselves in degree. Pro-Pérez Jiménez writers claim that the regime clashed head on with “economic imperialism” (Capriles Ayala n.d., 193). Juan Bautista Fuenmayor termed Pérez Jiménez and his close advisors as naively anti-U.S. in that they were unprepared to face the short-term negative consequences of economic nationalism and thus were forced to back down and accommodate foreign interests (Fuenmayor 1981, 57, 73). Renowned Venezuelan economist D. F. Maza Zavala, who subscribes to the revisionist approach, argues that the Pérez Jiménez regime was “less subordinate and more independent” than governments after 1958 (1986, 104). Revisionist historians have also analyzed in depth the discourse of the Pérez Jiménez regime, baptized as the “Nuevo Ideal Nacional,”²¹ and have underscored its nationalist content and implications for autonomous development (Castillo 1986; 1990, 61–138; and Rincón 1982, 29–78). Apart from doctrinal challenges to U.S. hegemony, revisionists attribute ten-

21. In the words of revisionist historian Fredy Rincón, the Nuevo Ideal Nacional (NIN) was a “militarist tendency that proposed a model of development with a clearly technocratic and developmentalist orientation based on the authoritarian exercise of power” (Rincón 1982, 25). The NIN served as an ideological underpinning for the ambitious plans of state-run industry, which was justified on the basis of national security imperatives.

sions in U.S.-Venezuelan relations to specific plans embraced by Pérez Jiménez in two areas: the state-run projects involving heavy industry in Guayana, the petrochemical plant in Morón, and the national railroad system (Fuenmayor 1981, 73, 88);²² and his proposal made in Panama in 1956 of a hemispheric Marshall Plan to be financed by 4 percent of all national budgets, a scheme that the U.S. vetoed throughout the 1950s.

Curiously, many of the revisionists were or are leftists, including Maza Zavala, Blanco Muñoz, Fredy Rincón (who belonged to the *Movimiento al Socialismo* at the time he wrote *El nuevo ideal nacional*), Orlando Araujo (1969), and Simón Sáez Mérida (1991). Some have been influenced by the blurring of positions along the left-right spectrum following developments in Eastern Europe, a trend that also casts new light on the ardently anticommunist Pérez Jiménez.²³ These leftists have acknowledged their indebtedness to the much-revered Communist leader Salvador de la Plaza, who belonged to a dissident faction of the Communist movement (different from that of Fuenmayor) that objected to the PCV's unswerving opposition to Pérez Jiménez (Rincón 1982, 103–4; Blanco Muñoz 1983a, 15; Maza Zavala 1986, 100, 104). De la Plaza expressed to comrades his profound bewilderment as to why a seemingly "right-wing dictator" would implement far-reaching plans with such radical implications as those in the Guayana region.²⁴ De la Plaza clearly disagreed with the PCV's disparagement of Pérez Jiménez's state-owned projects in heavy industry (see *Noticias de Venezuela* 1955a, 8). After 1958, he warned of the democratic government's intentions to terminate these plans, as shown by its elimination of the scholarship program that facilitated study abroad in designated fields (de la Plaza 1962, 57–58; 1980, 51). Yet de la Plaza stopped short of praising Pérez Jiménez and made few references to the leader by name in his writings. This approach testifies to the stigma attached to extending praise of any kind to the dictator, especially because of the numerous victims of the regime's repressive policies, a long list that included de la Plaza himself.²⁵

A notable achievement of the revisionists is that they have overcome the aura of emotional intensity and partiality that surrounded discussion of the period. Yet their basic conclusions regarding the advances made under the Pérez Jiménez regime are hardly novel. In the 1968 elections, Pérez Jiménez's followers, who had launched a congressional slate

22. Although railroad construction during the period was practically nil, mere advocacy of it was bold in countering the notion (favorable to automobile interests) that trains had become obsolete. The AD government after 1958 scrapped the project (Maza Zavala 1986, 100).

23. Personal interview with Simón Sáez Mérida, secretary general of the clandestine AD in the 1950s and the *Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria* in the 1960s, Caracas, 11 Mar. 1993.

24. Personal interview with Arturo Cardozo, longtime historian of the Venezuelan Communist Party (the PCV), Caracas, 18 June 1983.

25. De la Plaza's *Partido Revolucionario del Proletariado* (Comunista) was hardly a pro-Pérez Jiménez party, as has been asserted at times. See Ellner (1980b, 13).

headed by the general himself in Caracas, invoked these same accomplishments and even pledged to carry through with the national railroad plan that was dropped after 1958.²⁶ Perhaps the difference is one of emphasis. Supporters of Pérez Jiménez tend to boast of such accomplishments as the mammoth public works projects undertaken by the dictatorship, its firm position on the long-standing border dispute with Colombia, and physical safety on the streets. Revisionist scholars, in contrast, focus mostly on state-run industries and official doctrine.

Several methodological stumbling blocks mar the basic argument that the tangible results of military rule outstripped the accomplishments of the succeeding democratic governments (Blanco Muñoz 1983a, 7). These comparisons are based on unequal time spans and dissimilar levels of public revenue. Furthermore, no consensus exists as to which administration deserves credit for a number of significant achievements. A case in point is the state-run basic industry of the Guayana region. The plans for hydroelectric development in Guayana date back to 1949, which led to groundbreaking for the first stage of the Macagua plant on the Caroní River in 1956 and its completion in 1961. Fifty miles upstream is the much larger Guri Dam, which was begun in 1963. The construction of the nation's only steel plant, the Siderúrgica del Orinoco (SIDOR) also overlaps the two periods, although estimates differ as to what portion of the work was done during each of them (Alexander 1982, 513; Ruiz Calderón 1993, 50). Thus when Pérez Jiménez advocates and AD leaders credit their respective causes with having harnessed the region's immense potential, it is not easy to determine who is closer to the truth.

As some revisionists have pointed out, recognizing the outstanding accomplishments of the Pérez Jiménez regime corrects the simplistic traditional view that the government of that period was utterly nefarious. But those favoring Pérez Jiménez go much further by claiming that his government was superior on all fronts to the democratic ones in power since 1958. Their line of reasoning is deceptive in that the administrations after 1958 explicitly rejected the dictatorship's priorities, which were skewed in favor of ostentatious construction, particularly in the capital. Indeed, the Betancourt government openly expressed its preference for less dramatic public works in the provinces.²⁷

Examination of the overlaps before and after 1958 demonstrate greater continuity during these years than has been recognized by tradi-

26. See "Respalda por esta obra cumplida con la cual se inició en Venezuela la era de las grandes realizaciones," *El Universal*, 27 Nov. 1968, p. 22.

27. The relative contributions of different governments throughout the modern period is still much at issue in Venezuela. For instance, one advertisement claimed throughout the 1993 presidential campaign, "The AD deserves credit for most of the *grandes obras* in Venezuela." Several regional studies have challenged the notion that the Pérez Jiménez regime neglected the provinces, an imbalance allegedly corrected by Betancourt, particularly in the Guayana region (Friedmann 1965, 12). See, for instance, Muñoz Villafuerte (1992).

tional historians. For instance, although the *Corporación Venezolana de Guayana* (CVG) was previously credited with first planning the infrastructure and urban layout in the region, revisionists have shown that the CVG followed in the steps of a precursor, the *Oficina de Estudios Especiales* (OEE), which was established in 1953 under Llovera Páez (Ruiz Calderón 1993, 46). In discussing the OEE, the revisionists also point to the important role played by Lieutenant Colonel Rafael Alfonzo Ravard, who became the first president of the CVG in 1960 and the first president of the nationalized oil industry in 1976 (Castillo 1990, 139–40). To take another example, writers defending neoliberalism inadvertently acknowledge continuity after 1958 when they attribute the nation's current economic ills to state interventionism and particularly state-run industry, which they date back to the Pérez Jiménez regime (citing specifically the telephone, steel, and petrochemical sectors) (Ball 1992, 287–88).

Revisionist writers have also examined the *Nuevo Ideal Nacional* (NIN) in great detail in order to demonstrate that Pérez Jiménez was committed to an ambitious program of industrial development. This analysis corrects the old notion that the NIN was devoid of meaningful content (Betancourt 1969, 693–94; Avendaño Lugo 1982, 243). The approach may also be designed to debunk the traditional view that Pérez Jiménez, like Gómez before him, was indifferent to the fate of the nation or that he held back progress. Even so, rhetorical support for industrial development is not particularly noteworthy in Venezuela, where preference for agriculture over industry has been generally absent from twentieth-century political debate due to the weakness of the oligarchy and other landed interests. What was significant about the NIN was its pioneering advocacy of state-run basic industry as a means of propelling growth and ensuring national security. In emphasizing this more audacious thrust of the Pérez Jiménez regime, revisionism makes its greatest historiographical contribution while placing in perspective the bleaker aspects of the period, as sketched by traditional historians.

REVISIONIST WRITING AND PRIMARY SOURCES

Revisionist writers have stressed the importance of using original data as a means of countering preconceived notions that obstruct the writing of objective history. Indeed, the emergence of revisionism has stimulated the search for primary sources and their publication in book form. Several important collections of such materials have been released in recent years, although they were not necessarily designed to promote reinterpretation of the historical role of Gómez, López Contreras, Medina Angarita, or Pérez Jiménez. Many of the compilers of these volumes are revisionists or share their concerns in being extremely critical of current democratic governments (albeit from distinct ideological perspectives)

and are convinced that reexamination and comprehension of the past is imperative in order to overcome Venezuela's current political malaise.

The following series of invaluable historiographical contributions were inspired to some degree by revisionist thinking or represent a reaction to it.

El pensamiento político venezolano del siglo XX

These one hundred volumes (averaging about five hundred pages each) cover the period from Cipriano Castro (1899–1908) to Rómulo Gallegos (1948). The thirteen volumes on the years under Castro and Gómez were published in 1983 by the Comisión para la Celebración del Bicentenario del Natalicio del Libertador Simón Bolívar. Headed by Senator Ramón J. Velásquez, the commission relied mainly on contract personnel. In 1985 the commission was transformed into the permanent Oficina de Investigaciones Históricas y Políticas of the national congress. In its early years, one of its main researchers was revisionist historian Fredy Rincón. After the staff was greatly expanded, the office was placed under the direction of Manuel Beroes, who holds similar views on the Pérez Jiménez period. The Oficina gives priority to unpublished documents and other material of limited circulation, although some of the entries in the collection had been previously published and widely read, such as annual presidential addresses to congress as well as numerous journalistic articles. The search for documents has taken the staff to repositories throughout the greater Caracas area, some of them virtually abandoned. On each period, the Oficina consults a group of academic experts, and it has achieved an admirable balance in selecting material corresponding to the various political parties.²⁸ Beroes is convinced that the soon-to-be released part of the collection on the military dictatorship of 1948–1958 will stimulate inquiries into what he claims is the least studied and understood period in twentieth-century Venezuelan history.²⁹ He also underlines the importance of including documents from the Oficina de Estudios Especiales on the Guayana region and other development plans. To date, Beroes and the other nine historians on the staff (all of whom share revisionist assumptions regarding Pérez Jiménez) have resisted pressure to limit their volumes for the years 1948 to 1959 to important speeches, ministerial *Memorias*, and documents of the clandestine opposition. Beroes has commented that the sheer voluminousness of the material that

28. Personal interview with Fredy Rincón, staff researcher of the Oficina de Investigaciones Históricas y Políticas of the national congress, Caracas, 13 Oct. 1986.

29. Personal interview with Manuel Beroes, director of the Oficina de Investigaciones Históricas y Políticas of the national congress, Caracas, 9 Feb. and 20 Oct. 1993.

the Oficina has uncovered exposes the superficiality of traditional works on the period, which only scratched the surface of primary sources.³⁰

In its scope and ambitiousness as a project, *Pensamiento Político siglo XX* differs from previous collections of documentary material such as those of Bolívar, the period of José Antonio Páez, and the *Pensamiento Político Venezolano del siglo XIX* (first published under the direction of Ramón J. Velásquez in 1961). For example, in contrast to the compilation on the nineteenth century (fourteen volumes mostly on the writings of six renowned political analysts), the documents published in *Pensamiento Político siglo XX* are based on the work of hundreds of individuals and institutions. The *Pensamiento Político siglo XX* is also unique in that its stated objective is to promote pluralism by representing fully the positions of all parties and ideologies in order to allow readers to reach their own conclusions.

Revisionists and other historians who have published pathbreaking works on the twentieth century have praised these volumes as invaluable tools and have also cited them extensively as sources (Caballero 1988, 75; 1993, 360; Polanco 1991; R. Moleiro 1993). The Oficina is exploring coedition with other institutions of several collections of primary sources that have already been prepared, including a sixteen-volume history of organized labor and volumes on individual political parties, the guerrilla organization Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional, the Catholic Church in Venezuela, and business groups.

Academic Publications

In 1972 the Instituto de Estudios Hispanoamericanos at the Universidad Central de Venezuela created the Proyecto Castro-Gómez, which became its exclusive focus of research for more than a decade. Selection of the period from 1899 to 1935 grew out of a general sense among scholars and Venezuelans that it was necessary to go beyond stereotypes in order to understand those years that, for better or worse, shaped contemporary Venezuela. As Elías Pino Iturrieta, a prominent historian who worked with the Instituto, observed, “Gomecismo is a legacy that molds our contemporaneity” (Pino Iturrieta 1986, 12). After left- and right-wing insurgent threats of the 1960s subsided, the consensus was that Venezuela had achieved enough political stability that conclusions favorable to past dictatorial regimes would not detract from support for democracy. Moreover, a kind of nostalgia for those years manifested itself, as exemplified by a popular television series on the life and times of Gómez that avoided the typical negative portrayal of the dictator.³¹ The Instituto created a

30. Ibid.

31. The series, entitled “Gómez y su época,” was written by the renowned José Ignacio

data bank and collected more than sixty thousand letters, telegrams, and other written materials from the period. It also published two volumes of letters addressed mostly to Gómez (IEH 1985–1986) and a newspaper index (Hirshbein 1978). At that time, revisionist historian Yolanda Segnini (also a member of the Instituto) was conducting her research for *Luces del gomecismo* (Segnini 1987; see also L. C. Rodríguez 1983).

Finally, *Tierra Firme*, a journal of history, was founded in 1983. It has adhered consistently to revisionist views of the eras from 1908 to 1958. Two special issues (numbers 15 and 41) were dedicated to the Pérez Jiménez period, while another (number 38) dealt with Medina Angarita.

Primary Sources on Pérez Jiménez Published by Ediciones Centauro

The growing general sympathy for Pérez Jiménez and reevaluation of the period that cast him in a more favorable light (particularly the works of Agustín Blanco Muñoz) stimulated the publishing efforts of José Agustín Catalá, longtime director of Ediciones Centauro.³² Over the years, Catalá has published scores of volumes of original documents and other primary material as a vivid reminder for Venezuelans of what things were really like during those years (Rodríguez Iturbe 1984, 11; Catalá 1985, 18–19). Catalá himself defied the military government in 1952 by publishing the *Libro negro*, which presented the AD's stance toward the dictatorship. Centauro reissued the *Libro negro* in 1982, along with nine other books containing original material on the 1948 coup, the subsequent resistance movement, and the repression, including *Poesía en la resistencia* (Salazar Martínez et al. 1982).³³ Catalá considered these works comparable to the testimony of survivors of the Jewish Holocaust, who were determined to educate the younger generation in order to make sure that “it will never happen again.”³⁴ Although Centauro's documentary publications have vindicated the position of all four parties during the period,

Cabrujas and featured a leading cast that included Rafael Briceño as Gómez. In this context, Herrera Luque published his best-selling novel *En la casa del pez que escupe el agua* (1978), which depicts the decadence of the period and implies, in contrast, that Gómez was a national savior. Personal interview with Aristides Medina Rubio, main editor of *Tierra Firme*, Caracas, 16 Feb. 1993; and personal interview with Manuel Rodríguez Campos, chief coordinator of the Fundación Polar's *Diccionario de Historia de Venezuela*, Caracas, 2 July 1993.

32. Personal interview with José Agustín Catalá, Caracas, 22 Oct. 1993.

33. I discuss much of this literature in Ellner (1985). I have refrained here from making reference to the polemical interchange between Catalá and Pedro Estrada, head of the secret police force (the Seguridad Nacional, or SN). In an interview conducted by revisionist scholar Blanco Muñoz, Estrada accused the famous publisher of having collaborated with the SN and betraying fellow party militants in the process (Blanco Muñoz 1983b, 161–65). The credibility of this statement, however, must be weighed against Catalá's premier role in publicizing the political crimes of the Pérez Jiménez regime, for which Estrada himself was directly responsible. For Catalá's response, see Catalá (1983, 27–42) and Rivero (1985, 419–22).

34. Personal interview with José Agustín Catalá, Caracas 22 Oct. 1993.

they have especially enhanced the image of Catalá's AD, the first party to be persecuted fiercely by the dictatorship. In recent years, however, Catalá has become more critical of the AD for the failure of its current leadership to uphold the party's glorious tradition of self-sacrifice and firm opposition to corruption. Catalá also argues that political leaders in general and those of the AD in particular are ignorant of the nation's recent political history and have kept younger party militants in the dark about earlier struggles.³⁵ His publications can thus be viewed as directed against those who have betrayed the AD's former ideals, which go back to the hardship of underground existence, particularly in the 1950s (see, for instance, Catalá 1990).

Publications of the Fundación Rómulo Betancourt

The goal of the Fundación Rómulo Betancourt is to publish some forty volumes of material related to the former president, now located in his mammoth personal archive. To date the foundation has issued three volumes of correspondence, telegraph messages, publications, and other material from the late Gómez period (Betancourt 1988; 1990; 1991) as well as three volumes of newspaper articles that Betancourt published between 1937 and 1939 in *Ahora* in a column entitled "Economía y finanzas" (Betancourt 1992). The foundation was originally directed by Betancourt's widow, the late Renée Hartmann, and his daughter, Virginia Betancourt. It is currently directed by political scientist Luis José Oropeza.

This project is the most ambitious of a host of publications undertaken by Centauro and others to bring to the attention of Venezuelans original material on AD heroes, particularly party martyrs of the 1950s like Alberto Carnevali (1989), Valmore Rodríguez (1988), Wilfrido Omaña (Catalá 1979), Antonio Pinto Salinas (Catalá 1980), and Luis Hurtado (n.d.) among others (see also Acuña 1989; Alexander 1990). Many of those involved in these publishing efforts, including a number of prominent AD members on the executive board of the Fundación Betancourt, believe that promoting Betancourt's image as a champion of democracy and incorruptibility will serve as an inspiration and a guiding light during the current difficult times.³⁶ These virtues were embodied in the "Betan-

35. *Ibid.*

36. Personal interview with Naudy Suárez Figueroa, former researcher at the Fundación Rómulo Betancourt, Caracas 22 Oct 1993. AD members on the board of the Fundación who were extremely critical of the party's current leadership (although from various programmatic perspectives) included historian Rubén Carpio Castillo, politician and intellectual Marco Tulio Bruni Celli, former presidential candidate Luis Piñerua Ordaz, governor of Sucre Eduardo Morales Gil, and Betancourt's widow, Renée Hartmann. In February 1989, the Fundación's research director, Aníbal Romero, also an outspoken critic of the AD's "populist" leadership (identified with Carlos Andrés Pérez), organized a symposium entitled "Rómulo Betancourt: Historia y Contemporaneidad." The comments of all thirty-five

court Doctrine,” which opposed diplomatic recognition of dictatorial regimes, and were exemplified by his release of exhaustive data on his personal finances as proof of his moral integrity (Bruni Celli 1980, 316–21; Catalá 1981). Like Catalá, foundation board members have grown disenchanted with the AD’s dominant leadership over the years, especially its ethical conduct, as Betancourt himself had before his death in 1981. Thus on the one hand, they seek to counter revisionist history and the growing popular regard for previous nondemocratic regimes. On the other, they concur with revisionists in their extremely critical assessment of the nation’s current leadership and their interest in publishing documentary material on twentieth-century political history as a means of illuminating the path that should be taken.

CONCLUSION

Correcting exaggerated notions and biases about major historical figures—a stated objective of revisionism—has set the stage for transcending the personalism that has long characterized Venezuelan political studies. Most Venezuelans, including historians, have overstated the role of national leaders like Gómez, Pérez Jiménez, Betancourt, Caldera, Jóvito Villalba, Gustavo Machado, and others who have ruled the country and have been *jefes máximos* of political parties. Throughout the twentieth century, various political analysts have urged going beyond this narrow personal focus. For instance, Rómulo Betancourt in his early years criticized in a celebrated pamphlet the limited vision of anti-Gomecistas who ascribed the nation’s malaise to the sinisterness of Gómez rather than placing his rule in a broader context (Betancourt 1985). Similarly, during the military dictatorship of the 1950s, Communist leader Salvador de la Plaza acknowledged certain significant advances in the national economy, even though he avoided praise or even mention of Pérez Jiménez.

Recent political changes in the country have encouraged new perceptions of various national leaders. Since the late 1980s, decentralization and the emergence of outstanding regional leaders have undermined the

participants were published. The volume’s recurring theme is the need to study Betancourt’s life history and assimilate his ideas in order to find ways out of Venezuela’s current political crisis (Fundación Rómulo Betancourt 1989, 13, 23, 378–79, 464). Another harsh critic of the AD’s established leadership, former education minister Luis Manuel Peñalver, argued that this symposium and other efforts to study and recreate the historical struggles against dictatorships had great relevance for the 1990s, particularly because they encouraged strengthening democracy within the AD. Specifically, Peñalver referred to the movement within his party to implement a system of primaries for selecting party leadership, to eliminate clientelistic practices and corruption, to ensure the autonomy of the Tribunal de Ética vis-à-vis the party’s national leadership, and to examine the party’s social democratic ideology. According to Peñalver, these proposals promise to help reaffirm the party’s original principles, the “best homage that the AD could pay to Rómulo Betancourt.” See two articles by Peñalver: “El verdadero homenaje,” *El Nacional*, 7 Mar. 1990, p. A-4; and “¿Refundación democrática?” *El Nacional*, 8 Jan. 1993, p. A-4.

concentration of power in the hands of a few and the system of presidentialism. This altered political landscape is conducive to new historiographical approaches such as regional history and writing history from the bottom up, which is the antithesis of the elitist focus based on the personalities of a handful of powerful individuals at the national level.

Revisionism also represents an important step away from personalistic historiography. Revisionist writers foster appreciation of the complexity and multidimensionality of political history, in contrast with the simplism of the elitist approach. First of all, revisionists have explored new areas and thus have shed light on less-known actors and neglected aspects of the period, such as cultural associations under Gómez (Segnini 1987) and basic industry under Pérez Jiménez (Castillo 1990, 143–50). Revisionists have also questioned prevailing stereotypes of rulers promoted by writers who have dwelled on the avariciousness and cruelty of Gómez and Pérez Jiménez. Moreover, revisionists have utilized and even unearthed valuable material that will serve as useful tools for historians, including diplomatic papers (Polanco 1991; Valero 1993) and biographical compendiums (Segnini 1990). Finally, a number of revisionists have directed institutional efforts that are also facilitating reconsideration of historiographical assumptions. Examples include Arístides Medina Rubio (*Tierra Firme* and Editorial Tropykos), Fredy Rincón and Manuel Beroes (Oficina de Investigaciones Históricas y Políticas), Agustín Blanco Muñoz (Cátedra Pío Tamayo of the Universidad Central de Venezuela), Manuel Rodríguez Campos (the Fundación Polar's *Diccionario de Historia de Venezuela*),³⁷ Nora Bustamante (Archivo de Miraflores and the publication of its *Boletín*), and Ramón J. Velásquez (Fundación para el Rescate del Acervo Documental Venezolano).

Revisionists are making another major contribution in stressing continuity between two antagonistic governing periods rather than reinforcing the previous abrupt cutoff points in historiography. Revisionists have demonstrated that the antecedents of many important policies—such as state planning, state development of basic industry, and the policy of “no more concessions”—preceded the years that are generally considered their starting points. In addition, the revisionists point out that such baneful practices as repression and corruption outlived dictatorships and have even intensified during the more recent democratic period.

Revisionists are establishing continuity and linkages with regard to the years following the period they are covering but not for preceding years. In this respect, revisionists dealing with Gómez, López, and Pérez Jiménez are emulating pro-AD writers on the *trienio*, who argue that 1945

37. The *Diccionario's* entry for Pérez Jiménez balances references to the underground resistance to the regime with a discussion of its positive achievements, which included SIDOR, hydroelectric projects, the national railroad plan, and cultural activity (see Fundación Polar 1988, 3:94).

marked a sharp and dramatic break with the past. Thus revisionists writing on Gómez stress the anarchy and “barbarism” that prevailed at the outset of the twentieth century and that his rule allegedly ended (as Gómez’s positivist apologists argued at the time). Similarly, most revisionists who write on López cite the claim that Venezuela entered the twentieth century in 1936 and in doing so highlight the progress made under his government.

Works on Gómez and particularly Pérez Jiménez emphasize their economic achievements. This focus serves as a corrective to traditional writing on both periods stressing political repression. An important issue lurking behind revisionism is the relationship between regime type (specifically democracy versus dictatorship) and economic development. Political scientists writing on Latin America in recent years have been greatly concerned with this correlation (O’Donnell 1973; Remmer 1985), yet few revisionist scholars have addressed the issue. Salvador de la Plaza was perplexed by the unlikely phenomenon of a ruthless, unpopular dictatorship in the 1950s undertaking bold, progressive initiatives on the economic front, but he failed to deal with this point in his writing. Maza Zavala and Fuenmayor have been more explicit in viewing the regime’s political framework and outlook as an impediment to the success of economic policies with far-reaching implications (Zavala 1986, 100; Fuenmayor 1981, 60–61). Two reasons for this limitation can be offered. First, a repressive dictatorship lacking popular support is less likely to be able to withstand the political and economic pressure exerted by powerful interests at home and abroad. Second, the discourse of most military dictatorships and the *Nuevo Ideal Nacional* in particular places developmental objectives in a military or geopolitical context rather than in a social context emphasizing human needs. For example, the national railroad system was conceived as a means for deploying troops to potential trouble spots, such as the Colombian border. Such calculations can easily conflict with the goal of overcoming underdevelopment and raising the general standard of living.

Not all revisionists come close to presenting a more evenhanded treatment of their subjects. Indeed, some works systematically defend the chosen subject’s historical role (for instance, R. Moleiro 1993; Bustamante 1985). On the whole, however, revisionism has manifested a concern for objectivity and professionalism that represents an advance over years of politically inspired or influenced historiography. Revisionism has also filled important lacunae in such areas as economic policy and development, military transformation, and official discourse and thus will undoubtedly set the terms for future writing on Venezuelan twentieth-century political history.

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