

The Incas of Peru

By CECIL CARROLL TUCKER

THERE is a happy tendency among modern historical researchers to subject ancient systems of government to an emotional analysis. This is perhaps caused by the pressure of our need for accurate knowledge of the past to assist us in determining present courses of action. The sighing for the "glories that were Greece" is no longer in vogue. The attitude has become, "Let us read history to learn lessons."

With a sympathy of treatment that is truly touching, Clement Roberts Markham, a historian of the old school, relates the saga of the Incas. He tells of their music, poetry, and drama, of their beautiful religious mysteries, of their arts and architecture, and of their government. Their system of government inspired Markham's intense admiration. It was a Utopian socialism, he said, in actual working order. It was a benevolent despotism under rulers whose genius for government "far surpassed that of the Spaniards who conquered them."

Guinness, a later writer, is less sanguine. He realized the socio-economic implications of a totalitarian regime. The Inca rulers extirpated poverty—"but at what a cost!" The people were treated like children—and children they remained. They were the property, body and soul, of the state. Their labor and persons were conscripted by the state at the discretion and whim of the rulers. Personal initiative did not flourish under such a system. The great body of the population was conditioned to be satisfied with a full stomach, the worship of idols, and reasonable protection from physical violence.

If a book could be written containing, on one side of the page, Max Hirsch's "Socialism, the Slave State," and on the other side, the history of the development of the Inca civilization, the deductions of Hirsch and the facts of the history would exhibit a striking parallel. Certainly there remained no virility in a people who, themselves numbering more than eight millions, could be subjugated by a band of one hundred eighty Spaniards.

There were extenuating circumstances, of course. The Spaniards rode the first horses the Incas had ever seen. And it must have been terrifying to the Incas to see a cannon—a beast that could come apart into two pieces, and was, moreover, "apparently able to control thunder and lightning." Yet the North American Indians were introduced to firearms—the awkward way—by their invaders, but through the stubbornness of their resistance, they acquired firearms and became proficient in their use. Only internal decay could explain so easy a conquest as that of the Incas of Peru.

The facts substantiate the deduction. The Inca civilization was rotten to the core. At the time of the Spanish conquest, the Benevolent Despot was directing, from his luxurious quarters in the nation's capital, the resistance against armed insurrection promoted by the Inca version of

the Crown Prince. Revolutions can be inspired by hatred of oppression, or desire to enjoy the fruits of privilege. In this case it was probably both. To the Inca rulers were not only the power and the glory, but also two-thirds of the produce of the nation's industry.

A "system of land-tenure" might more exactly be called a "system for distributing the products of labor." The one involves the other. In Peru, under the Incas, the State was the absolute owner of the land. All cultivated land (the extent of which was vastly increased by elaborate systems of terracing and irrigation) was divided into three parts. The produce of one-third went to the support of the royal line. Another third supported the religious system. To the producers was returned the remaining third.

The State was also the absolute owner of the people. It decided what production should be carried on, and selected the producing personnel. The State undertook the education and training of the producers. It carried out large-scale colonization of loyal subjects in provinces of doubtful party regularity, for purposes of espionage and consolidation. The State directed scientific research, and designated the scientists. It is true that a remarkable degree of knowledge had been acquired. The surgical operation of trepanning was practised. Silver and gold were extracted from the ore. Ruins of public buildings contain blocks of stone weighing up to 150 tons, which had been moved several miles from, and raised hundreds of feet above, the quarries from which they were hewn. But a great portion of the labor was wasted in preparations for defense against internal and external aggression, and in the carrying on of empirical conquests.

Unless its foundations be laid in justice, the social structure cannot stand. The monuments remain, but the Empire has crumbled. According to Sarmiento de Gamboa, mouth-piece of the Spanish viceroy Don Francisco de Toledo, the tyranny exercised by the Incas over their people provided the justification for the seizing of those lands by the Spanish Crown. Whether the three gentlemen who sat around a table in Panama and planned the conquest of Peru were motivated by pity for the natives, by a pious desire to substitute monotheism for idolatry, by a lust for gold, or by mixed feelings, cannot be stated with certainty. At any rate, the despoilers of that remarkable civilization found conditions badly in need of mending. And so the cycle completes another turn.

Five hundred years before the Spaniards came, the rich Peruvian plateau was the seat of another highly-cultured race, the Yuncas. The Incas, then in the vigor of their barbarism, overran this civilization. The size of the Yunca capital city of Chan Chan gives an index both to the character of the conquered civilization and to the power of the conquerors. It was larger than Manhattan, being over fourteen miles long and over five miles wide.

The Spanish conquest of Peru was yet a step in advance, despite its attendant evils. The Catholic Church, through its Spanish military arm, planted, in the ruins of a rotting civilization, the seeds of progress.