

AN INTERVIEW WITH NATALIA K. DENISOVA

PHD IN PHILOSOPHY BY THE COMPLUTENSE UNIVERSITY OF MADRID

WINNER OF THE 4TH RESEARCH PRIZE TO DOCTORAL THESES “FERNANDO SERRANO MANGAS”

Natalia K. Denisova is Russian, but only according to her surname, because she uses Cervantes’ language in her everyday life. She speaks and writes Spanish with such fluency that her accent is only noticeable in some consonants. She intones energetically and her light blue eyes show curiosity and eagerness to explain her great passion for philosophers, thinkers and historians from Spanish America, who she feels special devotion for. “Speaking Spanish is being able to express myself in a language that is concise, beautiful and clear; it is being able to write about those peculiar events, difficult to be acquainted with, that took place during the Spanish Empire and that seem non-existent if they are not told”, she assures.

Natalia has studied in Spain, Russia, Mexico and France. However, Madrid has been her main research location. She has a PhD in Philosophy by the Complutense University of Madrid and a degree in Judicial and Social Sciences.

Apart from the very well-known Pizarro, Hernán Cortés or the Incan Garcilaso, Natalia considers that there are many other chroniclers, thinkers, travellers and soldiers that are testimonies of the period, and that is why she has included their biographies in the work, *Filosofía de la historia de América: los cronistas de Indias en el pensamiento español*, which was awarded the 4th Research Prize to Doctoral Theses “Fernando Serrano Mangas”, organised by the European and Ibero-American Academy of Yuste Foundation.

We spoke to Natalia in Guadalupe (Cáceres) during the 3rd International Symposium for Young Researchers: Extremadura and America, held in October 2019; an activity that coincided with the delivery of the award.

• Why did you decide to produce this dictionary with chroniclers of the Indies?

When I began reading books on Spanish America, I became aware of the great amount of characters involved in the expeditions and voyages to the New World and that all of them had something to say. In order to organise this information I began to make small individual cards and the director of my thesis gave me the idea of creating a catalogue or a reference work. It seems incredible, but here wasn’t an updated publication that could answer “who”, “where” and “what” he/she did at the time of the discoveries. My book attempts to unify this information and show the diversity of existing visions on events that occurred from 1492 to 1700. In my opinion, the chronicles are not



canonical texts. They have to be compared, extended and questioned, but we can never denigrate what these people narrate just because they are conquerors or clergymen or because it is not well-known nor prestigious. There was a time, for instance, in the twentieth century where Hernán Cortés was denigrated; he was considered insane, which is unacceptable, especially within the field of History. The inertia that these extreme visions generate is damaging. The task of renewing the vision of that time without falling into the exaggeration of elevating some characters and denigrating others remains. The vision of the Spanish American 16th and the 17th centuries needs to be widened, revising the idea of “colony”, so popular at both sides of the Atlantic, but anachronistic and “ahistorical”. I hope that the dictionary, which includes the section of the research carried out on each chronicler, helps to not only complete the visions of the time, but also to renew present historiography.

- **How did you know about the Research Prize to Doctoral Theses “Fernando Serrano Mangas” organised by Yuste Foundation?**

By chance. I was looking for information on symposia and I found Yuste Foundation’s website and the information on the Prize. When I read the requirements I considered I had many options and I presented this research project. When the Director of the Foundation, Juan Carlos Moreno, called me I was delighted; I am very proud to have won this acknowledgement from such a prestigious institution.

- **How long have you worked on the project?**

Around five years, four of which I spent exclusively reading and gathering information. The book includes more than 300 chronicler-characters that played a relevant role during the 16th and 17th centuries. My thesis is actually more than 800 pages long, but the edition published by Yuste Foundation is more user-friendly so that it may reach a wider public.

- **Which novelties does your publication offer in comparison to what has already been published?**

Much has been published about the chroniclers and about Spanish America. However, my book is the first dictionary that attempts to cover the period from 1492 to 1700 as well as the West Indies, that is, Spanish America. Another difference is its structure, which includes the biographical portraits of each character and his/her written works, whether these are letters, documents or chronicles and, finally, where the originals are found. Finally, there is a section that compiles the research or writings carried out on each chronicler. I



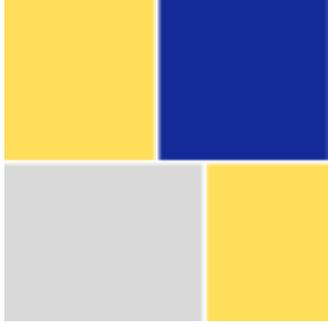
consider my book important for historiography because it allows us to know about the vision that existed on each relevant character throughout history and see how it has changed regarding the same character over the years. Whoever likes Spanish or Spanish American history will find in-depth information of the time. On the other hand, I attempt to continue the compiling tradition that began during the Renaissance period of keeping and having record of works that existed and where these could be looked up.

- **You present the book as a solution to bring the world of viceroalties closer to the public in general. Why is this period so unknown?**

Even though much research has been carried out on this period, only the affirmations made by three or four chroniclers on viceroalties and not on “colonies” transcend. “Viceroalty” is a term employed in 1492 referring to the territories discovered, but it is not used because it was replaced by the word “colony” as its synonym, in spite of the fact that “colony” is a term that came up during the 17th century. How can a historian possibly apply such an anachronistic term to refer to a historical event that took place long before and that has nothing to do with the reality in question? Viceroalty and colony are not synonyms; the political, institutional and organisational structure and even the territorial planning was different. Those studying Spanish America and Spain, coming from any subject-matter, have to explain this issue and carry out a critical review. It is time to explain the viceroalty’s positive contribution that, whether we like it or not, bore fruit and led to the independence and the creation of many countries in only approximately three centuries.

- **From the point of view of History’s scientific development, chroniclers have been labelled as liars or accused of plagiarism and this book intends to correct these errors, how?**

Simply explaining that the work written by each person has a strong personal baggage that includes his/her interests, preferences and phobias. One cannot call those who did not intend to write chronicles, but rather letters or other documents, liars. When chronicles are recovered and made publicly accessible in the 19th century a great mistake is made as everything told is believed. Instead of comparing the texts to reach a middle ground and study different interpretations, historians hold a single text and disseminate the perspective of a single author. This extreme positivism ended long ago. As far as plagiarism is concerned, this originates from the great mistake of judging literary styles and old texts from today’s perspective. If we apply the notion of the copyright to that period we would be left with no writers or chroniclers. It is



necessary to stress that there has not been a more literate empire than the Spanish one. People were clearly aware of the need to keep a record of what occurred, they wanted to leave a trace, and that is why they described what they saw and did. A civil servant did not only work, *verbi gratia*, with laws, but could also write verses or write stories. This was the case of some conquerors. It goes without saying that in Spanish, writing is essential in culture.

- **Is there any woman chronicler?**

Surely, but more research ought to be carried out in this sense; it is still a pending issue. There are many examples of the decisive role of women at the time. Isabel Barreto, for instance, Álvaro de Mendaña's widow, who led the expedition to Solomon Islands, superseding her husband and her brother, Lorenzo Barreto. In any case, whether there are written testimonies or not, women's role was decisive. Progress would have been impossible without their contribution. I believe there wasn't any open discrimination; instead, each one played the role that best suited him/herself at the time.

- **What projects are you currently working on?**

On the one hand, I am still doing research on chroniclers from the 16th and 17th centuries, because I have only compiled information of the most influential and known so that their role in history may be acknowledged and revised. There are many other unknown characters that could extend this dictionary.

On the other hand, I am working on a new personal research project about a forgotten area: Spanish-Asia or the Philippines. Spanish-Asia is another term that is not used and is not accepted at the moment. This is a very interesting area because it is where the character of the institutions that travelled from Spain to America and from Spanish America to the Philippines is discovered, as this area depended on New Spain, that is, Mexico. The role of the viceroyalty of New Spain is decisive in Asia, because it managed and protected this part of the empire. The presence of Spain and New Spain in the Philippines brought a great transformation about as far as commercial, international and political relations with China, Japan and other countries are concerned. It is interesting to note that already in the 17th century, Manila's Galleon brought debate on the policy of open commerce or the introduction of taxes on products from China that damaged products produced in Manila considerably. As we are able to see, this is the conflict of interests that is still in existence with the Brexit or with Donald Trump.