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Review/Reseña

Monica A. Rankin. *¡México, la patria!: Propaganda and Production during World War II*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009.

What's Propaganda Got to do with it? Rethinking the Meaning of the 1940s in Mexico

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Monica A. Rankin combed through thousands of documents in over a dozen archives in Mexico and the U.S. to produce this comprehensive history of World War II propaganda in Mexico. *México la patria* details the objectives of governmental and non-governmental propaganda agencies and carefully describes the specific propaganda texts that they produced—from posters to radio series. Rankin analyzes the way that propaganda producers engaged shifting concepts of *la patria*, the nation, as they juggled competing ideologies of post-revolutionary nationalism, fascism,

Americanism, and modernization. She argues that, "Between 1933 and 1945 Mexico evolved from a society deeply divided over its revolutionary past to become a nation more united around the government's industrialization and economic modernization policies" (294). Mexican public opinion shifted dramatically during the early 1940s, Rankin contends, and it moved in the direction promoted by major wartime propaganda campaigns.

By fleshing out the themes of these propaganda campaigns and evaluating them in historical context, Rankin's study exposes some of the connective tissue that links the revolutionary-nationalist and anti-American Mexico of the late 1930s with the pro-industrial and developmentalist Mexico of the 1950s. By providing a comprehensive view of the objectives and texts of wartime propaganda, the book contributes to our understanding of the 1940s as a foundational decade for the postwar "Mexican Miracle." In this way, it contributes to the reassessment of the importance of the 1940s in Mexican history that has been underway for the last 15 years (Niblo, Moreno).

While Mexican historians have turned increasingly to sub-national studies with a focus on everyday life, *¡México, la patria!* looks at centrally produced media messages and their potential impact on Mexican "public opinion" writ large. The massive scale and cost of wartime propaganda—hundreds of millions in 2011 dollars—provides a good justification for a study of this kind. In addition, Rankin offers a comprehensive view of official propaganda that would not be possible from a sub-national perspective. However, without evidence about audience responses to propaganda, the author cannot determine whether these messages drove public opinion, reflected opinion formed for other reasons, or ultimately had little impact. The author also lacks information about the way that people interacted with, and made use of, official messages in their everyday lives (including making counter-hegemonic readings of those messages). Rankin is aware of these limitations, however, and is careful to state that her propaganda analysis can only provide "clues" about public opinion (6).

Although Rankin's study focuses on propaganda production, two of the most compelling findings she presents are about public responses to the

war. First, she notes an observation about wartime anti-Americanism reported by members of the Mexican Coordinating Committee of the U.S. Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA), the U.S. propaganda agency for Latin America. The head of the motion picture division recorded that at the beginning of the war, Guadalajara movie audiences generally booed or hissed U.S. symbols, such as the American flag, shown in newsreels. By the end of the war, however, the same movie audiences remained silent (175). This is a striking change that suggests a steep decline in the public expression of anti-Americanism, whether it was influenced by propaganda, the progress of the war, or other factors.

Second, Rankin analyzes a collection of 847 letters sent to President Avila Camacho in response to Mexico's declaration of war on Germany in May 1942. She finds that most letter writers made explicit reference to the Revolution, which was recalled in terms of self-sacrifice, national unity, freedom and democracy (149-152). According to Rankin, many citizens made a connection between Mexico's revolutionary fight against dictator Porfirio Díaz and the fight against Hitler and totalitarianism more broadly. She observes that it was not until after receiving hundreds of letters from the public that government propagandists began to incorporate the Revolution into their campaigns as a symbol of democracy and means of promoting national unity, sacrifice and modernization (251). In this case, then, popular sentiment seems to have shaped government propaganda, although that does not mean that influence did not also flow in the other direction.

The first chapter, covering the period 1933-1940, examines the special-interest propaganda campaigns that began in Mexico in response to the rise of fascism in Europe. Rankin looks at the complex way that propaganda was intertwined in domestic conflicts between Left and Right, and how it changed in the period before the Spanish Civil War, during the Civil War, and during the years of increasing German aggression from 1938-1940. She finds that pro- and anti-fascist propaganda production went hand-in-hand with a deepening of ideological differences that dated back to the Mexican Revolution. One point of confusion in the chapter is Rankin's decision not to mention the 1938 Oil Expropriation until chapter

two. Without a discussion of Mexico's need to sell oil to Germany following the Expropriation, the reader is left without an explanation for the government's hesitance to denounce the Axis officially during the period 1938-1940.

Chapter two looks at the diplomatic cooperation between Mexico and the U.S. during the period 1940-1941, and the organizational development of the OIAA. Rankin covers the diplomatic thaw that occurred as the U.S. and Mexico officially settled the Oil Expropriation conflict and recognized the importance of close economic and strategic ties in the face of increased German and Japanese militarism. Rankin argues that during these years the OIAA developed a "blueprint" for propaganda in Latin America emphasizing the importance of commercial ties and working through private industry and commercial media.

Chapter three explores the wartime propaganda produced by the Mexican Oficina Federal de Propaganda (Federal Propaganda Office), later the Comisión Coordinadora de Propaganda Nacional (Coordinating Commission for National Propaganda). Although Rankin does not make this claim, there is some indication that the OIAA served as the blueprint for the Mexican propaganda agency. The agency operated print, radio, and cinema divisions that eventually cooperated closely with the OIAA, and used a range of media to reach both urban and rural Mexicans. Early propaganda themes included national unity, sympathy for the U.S. and other Allies, productivity, and industrialization.

The fourth chapter provides a comprehensive and detailed review of OIAA propaganda production in Mexico for the years 1942-1943. Rankin tracks how the agency's message changed from an emphasis on U.S. military strength at the beginning of the war, to an argument towards the end of the war that support for the U.S. in wartime would bring prosperity to Latin America after the war. Rankin discusses how the OIAA used U.S. corporations to penetrate and shape Mexican media and promote U.S. consumer culture (and postwar consumer goods). Based on the OIAA's own research and her parallel analysis of Mexican government propaganda, however, Rankin argues that Mexicans did not ultimately identify with the

“American way of life” promoted by the OIAA, but chose to celebrate their own cultural products and national heroes.

Chapter five describes the Mexican government’s need for propaganda to encourage acceptance of wartime developments such as the military draft and the deployment of Squadron 201. This period also witnessed the shift of propaganda production from the Coordinating Committee for National Propaganda to the Secretaría de Educación Pública or SEP (Ministry of Education), with a consequent shift in focus to literacy and education as means of achieving productivity and modernization. As mentioned earlier, this was the period when Mexican propagandists began to incorporate public understandings of the Mexican Revolution as a symbol of the fight for democracy and a metaphor for Mexico’s participation in World War II. Rankin also explores the increased cooperation between Mexican propagandists and the OIAA beginning in late 1942. One outcome of this cooperation was the influential wartime radio program, *Interpretación Mexicana de la Guerra* (Mexican Interpretation of the War), which presented both OIAA and Mexican nationalist propaganda in the guise of an independent news program.

In chapter six Rankin traces the transformation of wartime propaganda after 1943, when it became clear that the Allies would win the war. Both the SEP and the OIAA began to focus on setting the groundwork for the postwar period. While OIAA propaganda shifted from emphasizing American strength to a focus on sacrifice and America’s lack of imperialist designs on Latin America, Mexican propaganda developed an agenda of import-substitution industrialization for postwar prosperity.

In conclusion, *¡México, la patria!* offers a clearly written and thorough history of wartime propaganda in Mexico. Rankin offers persuasive evidence that wartime propaganda articulated what would become a broader shift in Mexican politics between 1940 and 1960 away from the social justice and revolutionary nationalist orientation of the Cárdenas era toward the “vague notions of political democracy and economic growth” that accompanied the rise of the “Mexican Miracle” (298). Overall, the author is careful not to overstate the implications of her analysis or make claims about the causal effect of propaganda campaigns.

While her study cannot tell us how people made sense of these manipulative messages in their everyday lives, it does give us a detailed analysis of what those messages entailed and why and how they flooded Mexico through almost every conceivable channel of communication during the early 1940s.

Works Cited

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