

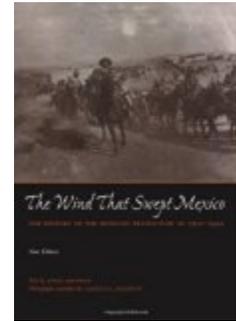
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Anita Brenner, George R. Leighton. *The Wind that Swept Mexico: The History of the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1942*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996. iii + 310 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-292-79024-7.

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Published on H-LatAm (April, 1999)



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Happily, the University of Texas Press has kept in print in its original edition this classic volume that explicates the Mexican Revolution and its aftermath through 1942. Originally published in 1943, this analysis has a lucid 106-page text written by Anita Brenner augmented by 184 splendid and compelling historical news photographs assembled by George R. Leighton. The current “new edition” of this pictorial history is printed on non-acidic paper, is a sturdy paperback, and has a reset text and image plates remade from prints at the New York Public Library. Therefore the narrative typeface is easier to read and the photographs have an enhanced clarity and crispness not found in the original edition published by *Harpers* during World War Two. Originally the narrative appeared as a series of articles in *Harper’s Magazine*. During the early 1970s there was some thought by the author and the press that the text should be emended to bring the story of the revolution up to date. However, they came to the conclusion that they should not to make this change.

Anita Brenner (1905-1974) was born in Aguascalientes, Mexico of immigrant Latvian-Jewish parents and was educated in the United States. She was a true multinational, participating actively in the Mexican, American, and Jewish communities and in art, literature, and politics. Her extraordinary life has recently been documented by her daughter, Susannah Joel Glusker, in a biography entitled *Anita Brenner: A Mind of Her Own* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998). Brenner’s colleague, George Leighton, assisted her in assembling from

a variety of sources the memorable images that help to illustrate *The Wind that Swept Mexico*. Some of the original prints were cleaned and rephotographed by the distinguished photographer Walker Evans.

When Brenner’s book was published in 1943, it was the first English-language work to present a general account of the several phases of the history of the Mexican Revolution, one of the greatest of this century. Indeed, at that time there were no complete accounts in English or Spanish. In well-chosen prose and captivating images the reader is transported into that era and perceives the story of that civil strife from the perspectives of the disadvantaged—the poor, the peasants, laborers, and women. The ten years of the civil war and the subsequent twenty-two years of “further struggle” are recounted vividly. She begins the account with the end of the eight-term presidency of Porfirio Diaz, whom she likens to Germany’s Kaiser or Japan’s Mikado.

The book carries an underlying message. Brenner’s initial sentences convey that “we are not safe in the United States now [1943] and henceforth, without taking Mexico in account; nor is Mexico safe disregarding us. This is something that Mexicans have long known, with dread, but that few Americans have had to look at. We are interdependent for two reasons. The first is geography. The second is what has been happening in Mexico since 1910” (p. 1). Likewise, she documents the land owning Americans—the Guggenheims and William Ran-

dolph Hearst—as well as the Mexican Madero family that controlled vast haciendas in northern Mexico. Brenner traces the backgrounds and activities of major Mexican revolutionaries: Venustiano Carranza, Doroteo Arango (aka Francisco “Pancho” Villa), Emiliano Zapata, Alvaro Obregon, and Lazaro Cardenas. *Los grandes problemas nacionales* (a treatise similar to Rousseau’s *Contrat social*), Zapata’s *Plan de Ayala*, battles along railroad rights-of-way, Mexico City as a military “No Man’s Land,” and the Constitution of 1917 are among the topics considered. “Mexico for the Mexicans” and the economic distances between the “haves and the have-not-yets” are recounted. The new government was fundamentally a military dictatorship, but social changes under the Calles administration, particularly the establishment of the Confederacion Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM) as a national labor federation, set the post-revolutionary stage in Mexico.

The construction of hydroelectric and flood-control dams, roads, schools, hospitals, railroads, the Pan-American Highway, and oil refineries began but was compromised by the Great Depression. President Cardenas is portrayed as a man of the people and his popular decision to expropriate foreign-owned oil fields and refineries on 18 March 1938 is seen as a turning point in the struggle between the companies (especially Rockefeller’s Standard Oil that dominated the industry), union labor, and the Mexican government. The “good will program” [the Roosevelt administration’s “Good Neighbor Policy”] and World War Two, with the resulting inrush of capital and war production during the early 1940s, are also characterized. She wrote that “the government’s position as banker, exporter, buyer, marketer, importer, producer, and promoter, with all the ramifications of these activities, gave it ultimate power over production and prices, but without particular institutions or bureaus or laws set up for that purpose” (p. 73).

The last part of the volume, the “Photographic History of the Mexican Revolution,” is accompanied by Leighton’s short essay and 184 powerful images, beginning with a formal portrait of President Porfirio Diaz. Among the highlights are pictures of the U.S. Army’s expedition under General Pershing versus Pancho Villa, the deaths of Zapata and Carranza, Villa’s “retirement,” and the presidency of the one-armed Alvaro Obregon. There are also images of the subsequent cry for land and guerrilla movements, notably the *christeros*, whose slogan was “Christ is King.” The Laguna cotton district

lands, owned by United States, Spanish, British, and German companies in Coahila and Durango, held originally by 130 owners, were expropriated and redistributed to 31,000 peasant families.

Nonetheless, Brenner uses the book as a political podium and attempts to educate the American public and the Roosevelt administration about the “ongoing” conflict in Mexico by pointing to possible parallels with the Spanish Civil War. She also observes that “the Mexican people ... are not convinced that they have any real stake in this war [World War Two]. They sympathize with us because we are in danger, and our strength is awakening great admiration. But they fear their alliance with us” (p. 105). She concludes that “our standing, influence toward the kind of world we want to live in, and even our safety, depend how many of us clearly grasp the question put in the Mexican story and how honestly we apply its meaning. In the history of the American Revolution, there was a flag, much like the Mexican flag, with a serpent on it, and four living words that tell the record of both peoples, Don’t Tread on Me” (p. 105).

Brenner’s essay is an astute piece of propaganda as well as a document about the history of the Mexican Revolution and the subsequent socioeconomic struggle through 1942. It is a significant work for anyone who wishes to understand the Mexican point of view in United States-Mexican foreign relations and is valuable for scholars of Latin American studies—anthropology, history, economics, literature, folklore, political science, and psychology, among others. The photographic images alone are worth the price of the volume.

Readers who wish to know more about the era of the 1930s and 1940s may wish to read two books recently published. Friederich E. Schuler’s *Mexico Between Hitler and Roosevelt: Mexican Foreign Relations in the Age of Lazaro Cardenas, 1934-1940* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998) and Maria Emilia Paz’s *Strategy, Security, and Spies: Mexico and the U.S. as Allied in World War II* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997) are notable works that employ recently declassified archival documents from the United States and Mexico. Both books have been reviewed for H-NET Reviews.

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**Citation:** Charles C. Kolb. Review of Brenner, Anita; Leighton, George R., *The Wind that Swept Mexico: The History of the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1942*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. April, 1999.

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