

Monica A. Rankin. *¡Mexico, la patria! Propaganda and Production during World War II*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. xiii + 366 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-2455-1.

Reviewed by Andrae Marak (California University of Pennsylvania)

Published on H-LatAm (May, 2011)

Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo



Unity through Production in Postrevolutionary Mexico

Monica A. Rankin's *¡Mexico, la patria!* sets out to explore the ways in which from 1933 to 1946 the Mexican government, oftentimes in alliance with the U.S. government, used film, print, and radio propaganda to promote industrialization and forge a culturally unified nation, two disparate goals that some Mexican elites believed would reinforce one another. For her examination, she uses a broad, but flexible definition of "propaganda": namely, any message disseminated via film, radio, or print aimed at large audiences meant to mold popular opinion or instill loyalty. Rankin rightly notes that it is much easier to evaluate the intended effects of propaganda than to assess its actual reception by the general public. As a result, much of this book reads as an institutional history rather than a cultural history. But even without solid evidence of popular reception of government-issued propaganda, Rankin provides cogent insights into the ways that government officials thought that it might be received, providing us with a telling picture of their vision of Mexico as a nation.

Rankin breaks down the propaganda efforts into three major phases. The first (1933-41) occurred prior to Mexico's WWII alliance with the United States. This period reflected the sharp ideological polarization leading up to the election of Miguel Ávila Camacho (1940-46), as leftist and rightist factions and their foreign counterparts took advantage of the situation. Specifically, pro-

fascists confronted anti-fascist groups. Prior to the onset of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, propaganda reached a limited audience. This changed in 1937 with the establishment of the Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP), a leftist artist organization closely allied with the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), which produced a series of posters that attempted to rally support against fascism, Falangists, and Nazism. One event that underlines the ways that leftist propaganda meshed with the postrevolutionary state's attempts to promote a unified mestizo culture occurred when the TGP pounced on a report by the German government that denied Aryan status to a German immigrant's Mexican wife because she was thought to be part indigenous. Pro-fascist propaganda, in contrast, appeared in the pages of many of Mexico's leading newspapers, such as *Excelsior* and *El Universal*, and was supported by many Catholics and members of Mexico's business community and the middle class who disliked President Lázaro Cárdenas's (1934-40) anti-clerical and pro-labor policies.

The second phase (1941-43) aligned with the time that Mexico allied itself with the U.S. war effort. The United States created the (subsequently named) Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA) under the direction of Nelson A. Rockefeller to create cultural understanding between the United States and Latin America and to advance the interests of U.S. businesses, which were suffering as a

result of decreased wartime trade with Europe. Mexico stood to benefit from the pro-business arrangement as well, as the United States agreed to purchase Mexico's excess mineral production, improve Mexico's highways and rail infrastructure to facilitate Mexican exports sector, and invest in Mexico's mass media as a means of enhancing wartime propaganda. By 1942, when Mexico entered the war, most Axis propaganda had been effectively eliminated from Mexican newspapers, and as a result Mexico's Federal Propaganda Office (OFP) was replaced with a promotion of Mexico as a strategic producer of wartime goods. Rankin rightly notes that the U.S. settlement—in 1941—of the conflict over Mexico's 1938 oil expropriation did more to win Mexican goodwill than any propaganda campaign, U.S. or Mexican. Moreover, Ávila Camacho's use of ex-president Cárdenas to prepare Mexico's defenses after Mexico sided with the Allies shored up his support from the Left even as he moved to the Right. But she understates the fact that Ávila Camacho had just won a presidential election that had further divided Mexicans along partisan ideological lines. His embrace of pro-Allied propaganda, which promoted increased industrial and agricultural output by tying production to patriotism, served the domestic purpose of uniting effectively, as Rankin demonstrates, the Mexican business community, the rural agrarian sector, industrial workers, and Catholics, the very groups that had bitterly opposed one another in the run up to the election. In fact, Ávila Camacho was hesitant to use revolutionary rhetoric and themes in the propaganda of the time because they might have reopened the factional wounds of the revolution itself. To its surprise, his administration discovered that evoking the Mexican Revolution "as a symbol of democracy" actually promoted unity (p. 251).

Rankin focuses quite heavily on the multiple divisions—printed propaganda, radio, theater, cinema, and conferences and competitions—of the OFP during the second phase. Although this part of the book becomes somewhat repetitive, her work on the Printed Propaganda Division and the posters put out by the Ministry of Education are especially welcome since the reprints will work well in the classroom. "My spirit speaks for my race," "Defended by her sons," and "Why do we fight" are excellent examples of the incorporation of *mestizaje* and *indigenismo* themes aimed at promoting unity, patriotism, and modernization. Also welcome is her attempt to

measure the public's response to the propaganda. Rankin is careful not to overstate her evidence, given that the government had a difficult time measuring the impact of propaganda. She provides some alternative explanations for increased public support, such as the natural tendency to rally around the flag after being attacked, in this case German attacks on Mexican shipping. She provides suggestive evidence that many Mexicans, at least those who were literate, found the propaganda to be persuasive. Letters of support written to Ávila Camacho spanned social classes, professions, and geographic locations.

The third phase (1944-46) promoted the Mexican military as heroes and then shifted focus from winning the war to preparing for post-WWII economic prosperity. When Allied victory in WWII was assured, Ávila Camacho decided to mobilize Squadron 201, the famed Aztec Eagles, even though he thought that it might provoke popular resistance. Instead, the air squadron, which saw combat in 1945, emerged, with the help of propaganda, as a symbol of national honor and indigenous pride. The Mexican propaganda worked well in tandem with U.S. aims at postwar economics. The United States wanted to ensure that Mexico would remain a viable market for its exports, but it also wanted to reassure Mexicans that it did not plan to impose its culture on its neighbor. Meanwhile, Ávila Camacho wanted to use the nascent wartime industrialization as a launching pad for increased postwar industrialization. The postwar political pact that paved the way for the Mexican Miracle, a thirty-year period of 3 to 4 percent economic growth with minimal inflation, would be based on making available the consumer goods that Mexicans had learned so much about from U.S. propaganda, even as the rural sector lost its revolutionary place of importance.

Rankin's book is a welcome addition to the field of postrevolutionary Mexican studies. And although there is little that is new in the first two chapters, she makes use of a wide range of U.S. and Mexican primary sources in the remainder of the book. Her argument that Ávila Camacho's WWII propaganda set the stage for Mexicans' support for import substitution industrialization and the Mexican Miracle is convincing. Hopefully, her study will serve as a basis for future studies that seek to broaden our understanding of the ways in which propaganda was received at the local level.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Andrae Marak. Review of Rankin, Monica A., *¡Mexico, la patria! Propaganda and Production during World War II*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. May, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32059>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.