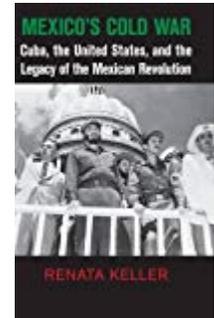


Renata Keller. *Mexico's Cold War: Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 296 pp. \$103.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-07958-8.



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In Mariano Azuela's bestselling novel about the Mexican Revolution, *Los de Abajo* (*The Underdogs*) (1915), the revolutionaries who set out to eradicate the corruption and decadence of the Porfirian government themselves become just like their sworn adversaries. The irony of *Los de Abajo* is that exactly what Azuela wrote came true: what grew out of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-20 morphed from a revolution of the people—or so goes the myth—into an amorphous party dictatorship. The protagonist in Azuela's novel ruminates on the carnage around him, exclaiming, "How beautiful the Revolution is, even in its savagery!"[1] Renata Keller's study of Cold War Mexico examines as a whole how the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) navigated the ins and outs of such a contentious period, both domestically and internationally. For many PRI officials, the brutality that the party enacted to "save" the nation in the mid-twentieth century due to external and internal dangers was in fact a continuation of the party's legacy, and even perhaps beau-

tiful in the face of real and imagined Communist intrusion, no matter how savage.

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 shook the PRI to its core. Party officials feared a second Mexican Revolution inspired by the recent revolution in Cuba. The changes in Cuba generated a wave of public support to challenge the supposed revolutionary and democratic underpinnings of the PRI. Students, artists, intellectuals, and even former leftist president Lázaro Cárdenas challenged the conservative and quasi authoritarian aspects of the government, which still lauded the egalitarian and democratic aspects of the Mexican Revolution, while at the same time suppressing railroad strikers and massacring protesting students. Entrenched at the top and refusing to adjust to the changing times, the PRI came to fear the same elements of Mexican society that had decades before helped initiate the Mexican Revolution: *los de abajo*.

Although the PRI feared change, the government had the difficult task of supporting the

Cuban Revolution to maintain hemispheric appearances. Keller notes that this tepid support forced a wedge between the PRI's own revolutionary mythos and the more Communistic foundations of the Cuban Revolution. It was clear that Mexican officials were concerned about the real possibility that Cuban agents had infiltrated Mexican institutions and student organizations.

Events in Cuba sent a tidal wave throughout the world, but Mexico felt the repercussions perhaps the most. Caught between Cuba and the Soviet Union on one side, and the United States on the other, Mexicans of all stripes had to choose a side. The Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 emboldened leftists to show their solidarity for the Cuban people in the face of imperialist aggression. The Mexican government, however, threatened to revoke the citizenship of anyone who left to support the Cubans. Conservative backlash, supported by prominent business interests and the Catholic Church, prompted the government to escalate repression against any group it deemed dissident and threatening to the ruling party. Such a radical reaction to a show of solidarity verified that the PRI had no actual plan regarding how to accommodate the requests and grievances of the Mexican people. Instead, threats, violence, and repression followed.

President Adolfo López Mateos attempted to maintain the delicate balancing act that safeguarded the Mexican government while protecting hemispheric solidarity. He could not politically afford to end the relationship. Due to domestic issues, a break with Cuba would further alienate leftists. However, he also understood that for diplomatic purposes he had to appease the United States, and also emphasize his supposed friendship to Fidel Castro so as not to appear to be beholden to the United States.

If López Mateos had attempted to, at least fleetingly, appease various groups by playing them off each other, President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz took a decidedly different approach and used

the full force of state repression to make his position clear. After claims of Communist infiltration in student groups and in the government, the PRI went on high alert for all subversive activities that could remotely be construed as Communist and anti-government. The truth was not always clear, and sometimes even fabricated, but PRI officials believed it was better to be safe than sorry.

The internalized fear that developed over the course of the 1960s resulted in the PRI lashing out against the people in a dirty war it constructed to quell relatively imagined demons in its midst. As Mexico approached the opening of the 1968 Olympic Games, student unrest signaled to the world that the country and the ruling party had not achieved Third World success and modernization. The PRI, as Keller argues, "needed an excuse for violence" as the student protests grew louder and the party's own irrational fears mounted (p. 211). Perhaps party leadership knew that it had strayed too far from the tenets of the Mexican Revolution decades before, and the volcanic eruption of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre was bound to happen as repression replaced compromise and democratic change. Decades later, President Díaz Ordaz still maintained that Cuba and other Communist influences played a role in the student protests, and that the government had no choice but to protect the original tenets of the Mexican Revolution through a justified use of force. Party mattered more than the Mexican people.

The PRI's own paranoia about the groups it was leaving behind in the revolutionary narrative—students, the poor, rural Mexicans—created actual rural insurgencies and urban guerrilla movements that preceded and followed the 1968 student protests and subsequent massacre. Had the PRI only slowly accommodated these groups over time, it would never have grown into a paranoid party dictatorship, and it never would have faced a revolution like the party so feared it must prevent at all costs. Although the movements in the late 1960s and 1970s quickly petered out or were

crushed by the government, it is important to note that a general dissatisfaction and apathy prevailed with the Mexican people. Los de abajo remained subjugated by the power of the PRI and the effects of the Cold War on the Mexican nation.

As is the case with many things in Mexico, there is the official version of events, and then there is the popular version belonging to los de abajo. Keller uncovers the truth of the middling ground, bringing together government documents, student accounts, US intelligence briefings, and everything in between. Cold War hysteria greatly influenced events in Mexico, a country torn between promoting its own revolutionary legacy and maintaining its staunchly conservative and anti-Communist leanings in the wake of a radical revolution in its own hemisphere. The real and perceived threat to the PRI forced the party to entrench itself even deeper into authoritarianism instead of allowing the party to reassess its revolutionary past and future. Keller gives a clear and concise detailing of a tremendously complicated and multifaceted topic that complicates the internal history of the Cold War in Mexico. To protect the continuation of the Mexican Revolution, PRI officials believed they had no choice but to turn toward savagery.

Note

[1]. Mariano Azuela, *Los De Abajo: Novela De La Revolución Mexicana* (1915, repr., Mexico: Botas, 1944), 143.

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