Mexico was a nation in flux following the 1910 to 1920 revolution. Daniela Spenser’s excellent biography, *In Combat: The Life of Lombardo Toledano*, paints a comprehensive picture of labor and political leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano’s life from 1894 to 1968, especially as someone who searched for a solution to Mexico’s issues through a particular combination of Catholic ethics and Marxism. Beyond this, she illustrates how he played an integral role not only in twentieth-century Mexico but more broadly in Latin America and Europe as well.

Spenser’s biography of Lombardo Toledano is now available to English-language readers after being available first in Spanish in 2018. In this work, she pushes back against glorified accounts of his life, instead proposing a more objective account of the individual. Her work, therefore, applies a critical lens to his life. Spenser argues that Lombardo Toledano was at once both a colorful and a contradictory person who used his positionality as a member of the progressive intellectual elite to sway the masses toward him and away from his opponents.

In five parts, Spenser depicts central themes over the course of Lombardo Toledano’s life: the development of his ideology, his political and labor campaigns, his involvement in World War II, conflicts he encountered following the war, and
the way he navigated the Cold War. She begins with his upbringing at the turn of the twentieth century in Teziutlán, Puebla, as the son of an industrialist. He first engaged with Christian morality while in law school but later fused it with socialism after traveling outside of Mexico and working for the Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM, or Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers). In the second section, the author focuses on Lombardo Toledano’s various “crusades” whether by spreading the gospel of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, cultivating working-class unity through the Confederación de Trabajadores de México (CTM, or Confederation of Mexican Workers), or uniting the working classes of Latin America through the Confederación de los Trabajadores de América Latina (CTAL, or Confederation of Latin American Workers). Then, Spenser delves into the period of World War II, when the labor leader initially targeted fascists, then shifted toward combatting Latin American elites. In the fourth part, she details how Lombardo Toledano continued to defend and promote the Soviet Union in the postwar era both in Latin America and in Europe. In the fifth and final section, Spenser situates the reader firmly in the Cold War, when Lombardo Toledano stood by communism and strong states—in Mexico, the Soviet Union, and elsewhere—amid surveillance and resistance all the way up to his death in 1968.

Throughout, Spenser consistently reiterates that Lombardo Toledano claimed to be progressive and to support the struggle of the working-class masses and yet sought top-down institutions that were controlled by the few while asserting that they represented the many. Spenser notes how one such institution was the Mexican government itself, and that unlike Karl Marx, Lombardo Toledano never believed in the disappearance of the state. Rather, he acted “as if the state were the highest form of human organisation and the best agent of the emancipation of the working class” (p. 54). She demonstrates how this stuck with him from the 1930s all the way into the Mexican student movement of the late 1960s. Spenser explains that “Lombardo took on the defence of the state, whose sovereignty he believed was challenged, covering up the tragedy that engulfed Mexico in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco” (p. 382).

Spenser makes clear that Lombardo Toledano saw the world in dichotomies, particularly in terms of protagonists and enemies. He believed that the postrevolutionary Mexican state should represent the working class as he believed the Soviet Union was doing. If the working classes and the states that spoke on behalf of them were Lombardo Toledano’s protagonists, his enemies changed over time depending on the historical context. Before and after World War II, Lombardo Toledano denounced imperialism, which he saw as perpetuated by the United States. During the war, the leader was very vocal against fascism, yet Spenser explains how he “painted fascism with a broad brush. Everything and everyone fit into his definition,” including anyone who opposed the Mexican state or labor movement, as well as the pro-Catholic National Synarchist Union, and even Leon Trotsky, as he was against Joseph Stalin, whom Lombardo Toledano admired (p. 156).

Spenser could have easily confined her biography to the limits of the Mexican nation, but as Lombardo Toledano’s life took place beyond its borders, so too does her book. She depicts how he was shaped by transnational influences. His family was one of migrants from Turin in northern Italy, as well as from Sephardic Jewish descent. Later in life, he rooted himself in the political left after a trip to South America “enabled him to meet left-wing activists and Argentine socialist and communist trade unionists” (p. 50). The relationships he built there would continue to be fostered through the CTAL. Similarly, his trip to the Soviet Union in 1935 not only sparked but also sustained an interest in and connections to the nation and more broadly to Europe.
In Combat is a book that will undoubtedly receive critique from supporters of Lombardo Toledano, but there is no doubt that Spenser has written a tome that will be cited for years to come. This work will prove useful not only to scholars interested in Lombardo Toledano himself but also to those who seek to learn more about postrevolutionary Mexico, Latin American labor movements, and even the transnational influence of the Soviet Union.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55856

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