



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.



Reviewed by Fernando Calderón (University of Northern Iowa)

Published on H-Diplo (January, 2017)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Every so often a book is written and published that will most certainly make a significant contribution to the existing historiography of a particular field. Renata Keller's book *Mexico's Cold War: Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution* is a case in point. The book not only fills a vacuum in Mexico's Cold War history, which is understudied and in desperate need of revision, but also challenges our understanding of one of the most complex trilateral relationships in the Western Hemisphere. Keller pushes back against a deeply entrenched narrative put forward by a wide range of scholars who underemphasize Mexico as a major actor during the Cold War or diminish the extent of systematic state violence its society witnessed in comparison to the rest of Latin America.[1] To counteract this portrait, Keller appropriately places Mexico as an influential political player in the region. Keller points out that Mexico, unlike other countries in the Western Hemisphere, defied the United States in 1964 when it refused to suspend its diplomatic relationship with Cuba. By maintaining a close, but a guarded relationship with Cuba, Mexico garnered substantial political leverage to negotiate foreign policy with its neighbor to the north. By preserving good relations with Cuba, the Mexican government hoped to temper Fidel Castro's potential intentions of fomenting

revolution in Mexico, as he sought to do in parts of Latin America and Africa. The success of the Cuban insurrection and the rapidly growing social disillusionment in the Mexican regime's pledge to implement the promises of its own revolution petrified the political establishment, who feared their citizens would attempt to emulate their Cuban friends or tempt the Cubans to support a new revolution in Mexico. Consequently, Mexico's decision to continue engaging Cuba had both domestic and foreign implications and meant that the country was no longer insulated from the global Cold War ambiance.

Keller boldly and provocatively claims very early in the book that in Mexico, the Cold War began when the Cuban Revolution intensified the preexisting struggle over the legacy of the Mexican Revolution (p. 5). Keller does not provide an exact date, which is smart because, as she demonstrates throughout the chapters, the Cold War in Mexico was a process that witnessed different levels of domestic and foreign intensity. I know several colleagues would argue that the height of the Mexican Cold War corresponded with the rise of rural and urban guerrilla movements in the late 1960s or early 1970s and the regime's adoption of an anti-subversive campaign similar to the ones popularized by military dictatorships in South America. But, as Keller demonstrates,

the Cuban Revolution threatened the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) hegemony with its own brand of revolutionary discourses years before the rise of powerful armed resistance movements.

The book proceeds in chronological order. Fittingly, the first chapter provides a concise explanation of the Mexican Revolution and its institutionalization. The heart of the chapter deals with the challenges the Mexican government faced from people and organizations both within the country and from the United States and Cuba. US intelligence collected by Keller demonstrates that early on the US government worried about Mexico's brand of revolutionary nationalism. By the 1950s, the involvement of the CIA in Mexico's domestic matters had become increasingly visible and the first steps to adequately prepare Mexico to deal with communist conspiracies were implemented by the United States.

Chapter 2 focuses on Mexico's and Mexicans's response to the Cuban Revolution. In the advent of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista's ousting and the revolution's triumph, Mexico witnessed a crisis in its own institutionalized revolution. Keller analyzes how the regime exploited the legacy of the Mexican Revolution to inform its domestic politics and foreign relations to protect its legitimacy. Here, Keller fills a major void in our understanding of Cuban-Mexican ties. The historiography tends to assume that Mexican interest in Cuba and solidarity with its people and cause commenced with the advent of the 1968 student movement in Mexico City and continued to mushroom in the 1970s. Keller debunks this belief by explaining that beginning in the early 1960s massive mobilizations surfaced across the political spectrum that sought to assert their political authority through the creation of new organizations and revolutionary currents.

The remaining chapters tend to fall under a common theme: the pressures of a global Cold War atmosphere. Keller demonstrates how, after the 1968 student movement, Mexico entered a new Cold War phase. Mexican society witnessed the intensification of state-created communist conspiracy theories and the persecution of alleged subversives, who were hunted down by counterinsurgency units in the same manner as in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Uruguay. These conspiracies, she demonstrates, were fabrications created by the Mexican state to placate the United States and to rid the country of dissent. Unlike in other countries, Cuba did not support armed revolutionary movements in Mexico, to avoid compromising their relationship with their best

ally in the region. In the end, had urban guerrillas received support from Cuba their attempt at a revolution would have still floundered because they lacked popular support.

The book is the product of diligent research. Keller constructs the book's narrative by drawing on an array of archival materials from Cuba, Mexico, and the United States. Spending countless hours in the General Archive of the Nation (AGN) in Mexico City and laboring through numerous volumes of state intelligence documents proved to be fruitful. Keller put to use documents from the National Security Directorate (DFS), which contains spy documents and other relevant materials. According to Keller's findings, early on the Mexican government intentionally concocted far-fetched conspiracies to justify their actions against domestic agitators. While a comprehensive counterinsurgency plan was not in place until the 1970s, as early as the 1960s the Mexican regime was already tinkering with anti-subversive language and playing well the politics of fear game against its citizenry. For Cuba, Keller brings together a wealth of state documents and employs them in a manner that sheds light on the complicated relationship between the Mexican and Cuban governments. US cables between Mexico and the State Department and offices in Mexico City bring some clarity to the complex inner workings of intelligence services.

Mexico's Cold War is a much-needed work that rattles our understanding of American, Mexican, and Cuban foreign relations. It wrestles with preexisting narratives and newly declassified documents to build a deftly analytical evaluation on a topic that for too long has been in need of revision. Keller achieves her goal of including Mexico in Cold War studies. Alongside Keller's book, newly released as well as future publications on student radicalism, indigenous issues, and informal markets in Mexico will reshape the manner in which we understand the Mexican *Guerra fría*. The book is a must-read for students of history, international relations, and political science and those interested in Third World politics. Keller has most certainly made her mark in Latin American Cold War studies.

Note

[1]. Jorge G. Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left After the Cold War* (New York: Vintage Press, 1994); and Ben Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

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

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

Citation: Fernando Calderón. Review of Keller, Renata, *Mexico's Cold War: Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. January, 2017.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47313>



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