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**Between Two Revolutions  
Cultural Relations between Mexico and Cuba**



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## Between Two Revolutions: Cultural Relations between Mexico and Cuba\*

*Amelia M. Kiddle*

**Abstract.** - This article examines the role that Revolutionary Mexican foreign policy played within Mexican and Cuban society through an analysis of the 1938 voyage to Havana of the *Brigada Mexicana* and the 1939 visit to Mexico of Colonel Fulgencio Batista. These goodwill missions contributed to Mexican and Cuban state formation. In the Mexican case, the goodwill mission created domestic support by providing evidence of international support for the oil expropriation of 1938, and in the Cuban case, it provided legitimacy to the Batista regime by demonstrating affinity with the Mexican Revolution. While visiting Mexico in 1939, Batista witnessed the commemoration of the Constitution of 1917. Although he may not have been influenced to emulate its radical content in the Cuban Constitution of 1940, the two documents came to carry tremendous symbolic weight in the populist politics of both countries.

Keywords: Goodwill; Foreign Relations; Cultural Relations; Mexico; Cuba; Lázaro Cárdenas; Fulgencio Batista.

**Resumen.** Este artículo examina el papel que la política exterior del México Revolucionario jugó en las sociedades mexicana y cubana a través de un análisis del viaje de la *Brigada Mexicana* a La Habana en 1938 y la visita de Fulgencio Batista a México en 1939. Estas misiones de buena voluntad contribuyeron a la formación del estado en México y Cuba. En el caso mexicano evidenció el apoyo internacional a la expropiación petrolera de 1938, y en el caso cubano dio legitimidad al régimen de Batista por su afinidad con la Revolución mexicana. Durante su estancia en México, Batista presencié la conmemoración de la Constitución de 1917. Aunque eso no le influyó a emular el contenido radical de

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este documento en la constitución cubana de 1940, las dos llevaban peso simbólico en la política populista de ambos países.

Palabras clave: buena voluntad; relaciones exteriores; relaciones culturales; México; Cuba; Lázaro Cárdenas; Fulgencio Batista.

The Mexican and Cuban governments exchanged goodwill missions in 1938 and 1939 that contributed to the strengthening of diplomatic, cultural, and commercial relations between the two Caribbean countries. In 1938, the *Brigada Mexicana* arrived in Havana, dazzling the port city with artistic and military displays. The visit coincided with an enormous popular demonstration held on July 12 at the stadium *El Polar* in support of the Mexican oil expropriation. Colonel Fulgencio Batista repaid this visit the following year with a military mission, one of the highlights of which was a speech to a joint session of Congress the evening of February 10 in which the Cuban strongman announced his loyalty to the Spanish Republic and plans to “nationalize” the Cuban sugar industry. Employing a heavy dose of nationalist symbols and populist rhetoric, these two high-profile goodwill missions gave the Mexican and Cuban governments the opportunity to demonstrate that they had secured international support for the reform programs they were in the process of adopting. The ample publicity they received at home helped to legitimate the governments and their programs in the eyes of their citizens. The Mexican and Cuban goodwill missions of 1938 and 1939 were both diplomatic and domestic exercises in state formation.

President Lázaro Cárdenas and Col. Batista ushered in far-reaching reforms to the institutional and cultural landscape of Mexico and Cuba during the late 1930s, and the parallels between the two leaders’ populist political styles are clear.<sup>1</sup> Both men sought to build strong multi-class popular support, although in Cárdenas’s case, the end game was the empowerment of the Mexican people and the fulfilment of the goals of the Revolution, whereas in Batista’s case, efforts to meet the demands of the popular classes that emerged following the overthrow of the Machado regime and the 1933 Revolution were channeled into support for Batista’s personal political career. Nevertheless, contemporary observers noted the similarities between the rhetoric the two leaders employed, and historians have consistently credited both men with

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Knight, “Populism and Neo-populism in Latin America, Especially Mexico”: *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 30: 2 (1998), pp. 223-248.

creating the “architecture” of the Mexican and Cuban states.<sup>2</sup> In addition to coincidences of strategy and style, the two leaders purposely strove to increase commercial, diplomatic, cultural, and military relations between their governments in order to fulfill their aims. This article analyses Mexican and Cuban diplomatic correspondence and periodical sources, and demonstrates that the goodwill missions of 1938 and 1939 provided Cárdenas and Batista with the opportunity to engage in state-building through the performance of foreign relations. It also suggests that in witnessing the commemoration of the Constitution of 1917 the Cuban strongman may have learned from his experience in Mexico, influencing his emphasis upon the creation of the Constitution of 1940, enabling him to better channel the demands of the popular classes into support for his regime.

Although governments in Latin America and elsewhere had long employed cultural relations in the pursuit of diplomatic goals, the years between the First and Second World Wars represented a period in international relations when cultural internationalism achieved more widespread acceptance and was taken up by governments worldwide.<sup>3</sup> In Latin America, governments dedicated scarce resources to the pursuit of cultural relations through inter-American conferences, the Pan American Union, the League of Nations and its associated technical bodies, including the International Labour Organization, as well as bilateral initiatives to increase the ties between the friendly nations of the Americas.<sup>4</sup> Like other governments of the region, the Revolutionary leaders of Mexico had long engaged in cultural diplomacy, for example, sending a tremendous delegation to the centenary of Brazilian

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<sup>2</sup> For succinct summaries, see Robert Whitney, “The Architect of the Cuban State. Fulgencio Batista and Populism in Cuba, 1937-1940”: *Journal of Latin American Studies* 32:2 (2000), pp. 435-459 and Alan Knight, “Cardenismo. Juggernaut or Jalopy?”: *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26: 1 (1994), pp. 73-107.

<sup>3</sup> Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, Chapter 3. For a discussion of the definitions of cultural relations, cultural diplomacy, and public diplomacy, see Kenneth A. Osgood / Brian C. Etheridge (eds.), *The United States and Public Diplomacy. New Directions in Cultural and International History*, Boston: Brill, 2010, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Fabián Herrera León, *La política Mexicana en la Sociedad de Naciones ante la Guerra del Chaco y el Conflicto de Leticia, 1932-1935*, Mexico City: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2009; Fabián Herrera León, *México en la Sociedad de Naciones*, Mexico City: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2014; Dafne Cruz Porchini, *Arte, propaganda y diplomacia cultural a finales del cardenismo, 1937-1940*, Mexico City: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2016.

independence in 1921,<sup>5</sup> and Venustiano Carranza had also aimed extend Mexico's relations with Latin America, in what is known as the Carranza Doctrine.<sup>6</sup> These earlier efforts continued to influence Mexico's relations with the region, particularly Central America, where Mexican governments sought to play the role of a middle power, mitigating U.S. imperialism.<sup>7</sup> However, the Cárdenas government made cultural relations with Latin America a cornerstone of its so-called *Política del Buen Amigo*, aptly named as a play on the Roosevelt administration's Good Neighbor Policy.<sup>8</sup> Mexico's relations with Cuba in particular had always been significant, but these took on new meaning in the context of the Good Friend Policy, as is evident in the expansion in cultural relations between the two countries during this period.<sup>9</sup> The Mexican

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<sup>5</sup> Mauricio Tenorio Trillo, "A Tropical Cuauhtémoc. Celebrating the Cosmic Race at the Guanabara Bay": *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 65 (1994), pp. 93-137.

<sup>6</sup> Mark A. Gilderhus, "Wilson, Carranza, and the Monroe Doctrine. A Question in Regional Organization": *Diplomatic History* 7 (2007), pp. 103-116; Douglas W. Richmond, *Venustiano Carranza's Nationalist Struggle*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Buchenau, *In the Shadow of the Giant. The Making of Mexico's Central America Policy, 1876-1930*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> On the *Política del Buen Amigo* see, Amelia M. Kiddle, *Mexico's Relations with Latin America during the Cárdenas Era*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016. On the Good Neighbor Policy see, Bryce Wood, *The Making of the Good Neighbor Policy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1961 and Fredrick B. Pike, *FDR's Good Neighbor Policy. Sixty Years of Generally Gentle Chaos*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> This has most recently been examined for the Cold War period in Renata Keller, *Mexico's Cold War. Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015, but it is true from the eras of Cuban Independence and the Mexican Revolution forward. See Manuel Márquez Sterling, *Los últimos días del presidente Madero. Mi gestión diplomática en México*, Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1958; Luis Chávez Orozco, *Un esfuerzo de México por la independencia de Cuba*, Mexico City: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1930; Salvador Morales Pérez, *Espacios en disputa. México y la independencia de Cuba*, México: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1998; María Margarita Espinosa Blas, *La política exterior de México hacia Cuba, 1890-1902*, México: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2004; Leticia Bobadilla González, *La Revolución cubana en la diplomacia, prensa y clubes de México, 1895-1898*, México: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2001; Enrique Camacho Navarro / María Margarita Espinosa Blas, *México y Cuba. Del Porfiriato a la Revolución. Diplomáticos, diplomacia e historia política (1900-1920)*, México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2008; Raquel Tibol (ed.), *Julio Antonio Mella en el Machete. Antología parcial de un luchador y su momento histórico*, Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Popular, 1968; Olga Pellicer de Brody, *México y la revolución cubana*, Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1972; Carlos Tello Díaz, *El fin de una amistad. La relación de México con la Revolución cubana*, Mexico City: Planeta,

government's Estrada Doctrine – so named for Foreign Minister Genaro Estrada, who had promoted it in 1930 as the Mexican government's commitment not to intervene in the internal affairs of another nation by withholding diplomatic recognition in the event of regime change – had directly benefitted Cuba during the Revolution of 1933 that ousted dictator Gerardo Machado, and as the Cárdenas government sought international solidarity for its domestic and international policies, including the right of non-intervention, Cuba became a likely supporter.<sup>10</sup> But, while the Mexican government's motives for closer relations with Cuba may have been fairly clear, the Cuban government, and Batista in particular, also saw this relationship, and its pursuit through very public acts of sympathy to be of potential usefulness. The history of Cuba's foreign relations are understandably predominantly focused upon its relations with the United States, and its relations with other countries are also often analyzed through this prism in triangular studies, but this article shows that, besides the Cuban government's foreign policy goals vis-à-vis the United States, bilateral cultural relations with other countries, in this case, the Revolutionary Cárdenas government could also serve domestic state-building purposes.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the goodwill missions of the *Brigada Mexicana* to Havana and the visit of Fulgencio Batista to Mexico, are evidence of the mutually constitutive role that Revolutionary Mexican foreign policy played both within Mexican and Cuban society.

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2005; Christopher M. White, *Creating a Third World. Mexico, Cuba, and the United States during the Castro Era*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Felicitas López Portillo, *Cuba en la mirada diplomática mexicana. De Fulgencio Batista a Carlos Prío Socarrás, 1933-1952*, Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2008, pp. 43-52. On the Estrada Doctrine see, Salvador Diego-Fernández, *La Doctrina Estrada*, Mexico City, 1939.

<sup>11</sup> See, Irwin F. Gellman, *Roosevelt and Batista. Good Neighbor Diplomacy in Cuba, 1933-1945*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1973; Vanni Pettinà, *Cuba y Estados Unidos, 1933-1958. Del compromiso nacionalista al conflicto*, Madrid: Cataratá, 2011; Robert F. Smith, *The United States and Cuba. Business and Diplomacy, 1917-1960*, New Haven: College and University Press, 1960. Notable exceptions include Christopher Hull, *British Diplomacy and U.S. Hegemony in Cuba, 1898-1964*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013. Julio Portillo, *Venezuela-Cuba. Relaciones diplomáticas, 1902-1980*, Caracas: Editorial Arte, 1981.

## The Brigada Mexicana and the Homenaje México

The 1938 visit of the *Brigada Mexicana* to Cuba represented the cross-germination of support for Mexico's Spanish Civil War policy, its oil expropriation, its Revolutionary philosophy, and interest in its military and artistic achievements. The goodwill mission coincided with a manifestation in favour of the Mexican oil expropriation and the Cárdenas government's Spanish Civil War policy called the *Homenaje México*, which was organised in large part by segments of the Spanish colony in Cuba.<sup>12</sup> Mexico's minister to Cuba, Octavio Reyes Spíndola arranged for the enormous goodwill mission to coincide with the *Homenaje*, which occurred at *El Polar* on June 12, 1938.<sup>13</sup> The delegation included the Brigada Artística Popular Mexicana, which travelled to Havana by sea, an art exhibit organized by the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios (LEAR), and a military mission under the direction of Colonel Ignacio Beteta, who arrived as part of the goodwill flight of three military airplanes.<sup>14</sup> On July 12, President

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<sup>12</sup> For documents relating to the homage and an album of signatures of those Cubans who supported the expropriation, see Mexico, Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Galería Presidentes, Lázaro Cárdenas del Río (LCR), Caja 1073, Expediente 577.1/7.

<sup>13</sup> Octavio Reyes Spíndola was the son of Rafael Reyes Spíndola, the founder of the Porfirian newspaper *El Imparcial*, and considered himself a journalist, like his father. See Octavio Reyes Spíndola's personnel file, Mexico, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) Archivo Histórico Genaro Estrada (AHGE), Expediente 26-25-7. Octavio Reyes Spíndola was considered by foreign correspondent Betty Kirk to be the "Red Knight of the Foreign Office"—the diplomat who did the most to promote the Revolution in Latin America. Betty Kirk, *Covering the Mexican Front. The Battle of Europe versus America*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1942, p. 200. The reference to Kirk's impressions of Reyes Spíndola was found in, Roderic Ai Camp, *Mexican Political Biographies, 1935-1981*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1982, p. 251.

<sup>14</sup> Ignacio Beteta was the brother of Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs Ramón Beteta. He had served militarily during the Revolution and participated in the cultural effervescence associated with its reconstructive phase. A noted watercolourist, later in life his oeuvre would be exhibited in the United States, as well as in special exhibitions at the Museo de San Carlos. During the Cárdenas presidency, Beteta published an historical and social analysis of the Revolutionary Army, and served as Special Assistant to the President and head of the Departamento Autónomo de Educación Física until its dissolution at the beginning of 1940. See the catalogue of the exhibition held October 5-20, 1964 produced by the Pan American Union, Ignacio M. Beteta, Washington: Pan American Union, 1964; Alfonso de Neuvillate y Ortiz and Raúl Salinas de Gortari, *Gral Ignacio M. Beteta: XXV aniversario de acuarelista*, Museo de San Carlos, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes octubre 25-noveiembre 27 1977, México, D.F., Mexico City: Museo de San Carlos/INBA, 1977; and, Jaime Torres Bodet, *The artist, gral. Ignacio María Beteta*, Mexico City: s/n, 1964. Also see, Ignacio M. Beteta, *El ejército revolucionario. Visión histórica y social*, Mexico City: PNR, 1936 and Ignacio M. Beteta, *Mensaje al ejército nacional*, Mexico City: DAPP, 1937, as well as the *Memoria del*

Cárdenas addressed the crowd of 15,000 supporters at the stadium via radio, and his speech was broadcast throughout the region.<sup>15</sup>

A huge crowd had amassed at Havana harbour the morning of June 11 to meet the arrival of the *Brigada Mexicana* that had travelled to Cuba aboard the Ward Line's *Orizaba*. A delegation from the Mexican embassy, as well as representatives of the many labour organizations, aid societies, and cultural groups that were sponsoring the homage to Mexico, received the mission.<sup>16</sup> Havana's municipal band entertained the crowds while customs agents cleared the artists, inspecting their instruments, paintings, photographs, and *trajes típicos*. The brigade numbered eighty and included two musical trios, the Trio Nacional and the Trio Acapulco, a nine-person Mariachi band, directed by Silvestre Vargas, and a twelve-person dance troupe directed by Felipe Obregón and Ignacio Acosta.<sup>17</sup> Miguel Chejade Balzac, of the Mexican newspaper *Excelsior*, which covered their sojourn and the *Homenaje México* for home audiences, accompanied the mission.<sup>18</sup>

The members of the *Brigada* hit the ground running, performing that afternoon at the Municipal Palace at a reception offered by the mayor of Havana, where the Trio Nacional played their well-known hits "Guadalajara" and "Jalisco" for the first time on Cuban soil. At the offices of the newspaper *El Mundo* the musicians and dancers performed and gave interviews to reporters who were glad to provide the mission with positive publicity in anticipation of the *Homenaje*. That evening, the *Brigada* went to the radio station Carbó y Autrán (CMCY) where the program *Radiario Nacional* was broadcast. Salvador Massip, former Cuban Ambassador to Mexico and President of the *Sociedad de Amigos del Pueblo Mexicano*, reflected upon the role of folklore in promoting

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Departamento de Educación Física, and the agency's magazine, *Educación física*, both published by the DAPP, as well as Departamento de Educación Física, Programa de trabajos que desarrollará el propio departamento durante el año 1937 tanto en su acción directa como en la que efectuará ligada con las demás secretarías y departamentos de estado, Mexico City: DAPP, 1937; Departamento de Educación Física, Compendio de ejercicios de orden cerrado tomados del reglamentario del arma de infantería, Mexico City: DAPP, 1939.

<sup>15</sup> "Discurso del presidente de la República agradeciendo la solidaridad del pueblo cubano": Tampico, Tams., 12 June 1938, Palabras y documentos públicos de Lázaro Cárdenas, Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1978, vol. 1, pp. 311-312.

<sup>16</sup> "Vibra de Entusiasmo la Habana con la Presencia de la Embajada de Arte": *El Mundo*, 12 June 1938.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> "Visitó a El Mundo la Embajada de Arte Mexicano ayer tarde": *El Mundo*, 12 June 1938.

fraternal relations among peoples,<sup>19</sup> and then members of the mission performed for the studio audience and the thousands of listeners in Cuba and in neighbouring countries who CMCY's signal reached.<sup>20</sup>

Over the course of the following two weeks, the members of the *Brigada Mexicana* kept up the same hectic pace. They provided the entertainment for the spectacular homage at El Polar held the following day, performing for a crowd of 100,000. At the Hotel Nacional, the eighty members of the mission donned traditional clothing and exhibited Mexico's *trajes típicos*. At the Mexican Embassy, the *Brigada* performed during a ceremony where Reyes Spíndola bestowed a Mexican flag upon the Sociedad Amigos del Pueblo Mexicano on behalf of the Confederación de Trabajadores de Mexico (CTM), and the following day they entertained the diplomatic corps during a special reception hosted by the Minister. They attended a polo match in honour of Beteta's military mission, and represented the arts at a presidential reception for the Mexican airmen. The evening of June 21 they added to the ambiance at the Colegio Nacional de Arquitectos during the opening of the art exhibit organized by the LEAR. Finally, on the eve of their departure for Mexico, they performed in a farewell ceremony organized by the Federación Estudiantil Universitaria at the Stadium *Universidad*. Reyes Spíndola thanked the crowd for the wonderful hospitality they had showed the artists, who danced the *jarabe tapatío*, performed traditional and popular music, and dressed in their *trajes* one final time.

On the whole, the mission received a tremendous reception in Havana and its performances met with widespread acclaim in the press. Newspapers from many different perspectives reported on the *Homenaje* and the Mexican Embassy piggy-backed its own propaganda campaign onto it, providing its efforts with more credibility and legitimacy. The positive coverage of the *Brigada* in turn provided home audiences with evidence of Cuban solidarity with President Cárdenas's political project.

One conservative-leaning Cuban publication took pains to point out that the *Homenaje México* was distinguished by the fact that it had been spontaneously organised by the Cuban people, rather than the Cuban government.<sup>21</sup> This distinction was important because the Cuban government, like most Latin American governments, officially remained silent on the issue of the expropriation. A proposed bill congratulating

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<sup>19</sup> El folklore, cordial y romántico de un pueblo hermano, cumple su alta misión de fraternizar los sentimientos de Cuba y de México. "Vibra de Entusiasmo."

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> "Homenaje fraternal de Cuba a México": Finanzas (Havana), 11 June 1938.

Cárdenas on the expropriation had actually been prevented from passing the Cuban House of Representatives by opposition forces who simply did not turn up to vote on the motion, denying it the quorum necessary to pass.<sup>22</sup> The popular character of the celebration at El Polar and the tremendous reception of the *Brigada* demonstrate the divergence between popular and official government reactions to the expropriation and Mexican foreign policy more generally, while glossing over the existence of this divide for home audiences.<sup>23</sup>

The Mexican government's oil expropriation had particular relevance for Cuban society, as the Batista-backed government of Laredo-Brú formulated its own policies on the production and consumption of petroleum products for the island nation.<sup>24</sup> It had long been accepted, though unproven, that Cuba must have oil deposits akin to those of other Gulf countries. Although seepage and some small-scale discoveries suggested this was the case, Cuba was not destined to become the home of the next *El Ébano*, as much as both the interested oil companies and the Cuban government would have liked. Hope sprung eternal, however, and caused the Batista government to walk a very fine line between cultivating the support of consumers, who relied upon high-priced imported petroleum products, fomenting oil exploration and training Cuban workers in the highly technical petroleum industry, and attempting to lay the groundwork for adequate national benefit through regulation for when they hit pay dirt. In this period, this meant not antagonizing the very companies the Cubans hoped would help them exploit their anticipated oil wealth. This led Batista and President Laredo Brú to prevent gasoline distributors from engaging in perceived collusion and price gouging in 1937, but pass a new oil law in May of 1938 that neither provided for the creation of a state oil company nor the establishment of Cuban-owned refineries. In the immediate wake of the Mexican expropriation, the Cuban government declined to enter into a commercial agreement with Mexico that would have bartered sugar for "hot" Mexican oil, effectively gambling on their future oil wealth, and condemning Cuba to continued dependence upon the U.S.'s oil empire.

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<sup>22</sup> Eric T. Gettig, *Oil and Revolution in Cuba. Development, Nationalism, and the U.S. Energy Empire, 1902-1961*, Georgetown University, 2016 (Ph.D. diss.), p.165.

<sup>23</sup> On the Latin American reception of the Mexican oil expropriation see, Amelia M. Kiddle / María Cecilia Zuleta (eds.), *La expropiación petrolera Mexicana en la prensa de Latinoamérica. Antología documental*, Mexico City: PEMEX, 2014, which contains a selection of articles from Cuba, as well as the other Latin American republics.

<sup>24</sup> The role of oil in Cuban nationalism, and the relationship with Mexico in this period, is described in detail in Gettig, "Oil and Revolution in Cuba": Chapters 1-3.

An essential element of Cárdenas's foreign policy was that he aimed to secure his accomplishments with support from Latin America. This certainly included helping the newly nationalized oil industry to find new markets for Mexican oil and stave off financial ruin, but these efforts were supported more broadly by the government's work to promote its success in the region. Just as the Mexican government produced films on the expropriation, as well as numerous books and pamphlets that shored up the Mexican position in the diplomatic and trade disputes that followed from the expropriation,<sup>25</sup> Reyes Spíndola received funding from the DAPP to produce a short film about the *Brigada Mexicana*. The *Brigada's* activities were widely reported throughout the Americas, increasing the positive propaganda value of the special embassy.<sup>26</sup> As a measure of the effectiveness of this strategy, diplomats from El Salvador to Panama wrote the Mexican government to extend their congratulations on the outstanding homage.<sup>27</sup> Needless to say, the sum of \$1,293 Cuban pesos raised at the *Homenaje* (and paralleled by other fundraising efforts in the region) to benefit the Mexican fund for the indemnification of the expropriated oil companies was helpful too.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to the moral and material support the homage and its publicity provided the Mexican government, the expression of Cuban (and broader Latin American) support for the Mexican oil expropriation served an important domestic purpose as well. The activities of the *Brigada Mexicana*, as well as mobilizations that took place throughout Latin America in support of the oil expropriation were reported extensively in the Mexican press, reflecting and in turn influencing the Mexican reception of the expropriation.<sup>29</sup> Workers, students' groups, and Leftist political parties in the region made their approval of Cárdenas's gesture well known, and the majority of articles describing the Latin American reaction focused on the response of these progressive social groups. The manifestation at *El Polar* and Batista's subsequent visit to Mexico were especially significant in demonstrating the

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<sup>25</sup> Kiddle, *Mexico's Relations*, Chapter 4.

<sup>26</sup> Reyes Spíndola to SRE, 9 June 1938. SRE, AHGE, III-1248-8.

<sup>27</sup> See the correspondence from El Salvador and Panama responding to newspaper and radio coverage of the homage and the special embassy. SRE, AHGE, Expediente III-1248-8.

<sup>28</sup> "Dan a Conocer la Liquidación del Homenaje al País Mexicano": *Hoy* (Havana), 18 August 1938.

<sup>29</sup> These conclusions are based on the clippings collection at the Mexican Biblioteca Miguel Lerdo de Tejada (BMLT), Archivos Económicos (AE), Petróleo – Expropiación (O08075-O08145), as well as the excellent selection of clippings found at PEMEX in the Hemerografía de la Expropiación Petrolera.

legitimacy of the expropriation and hence that of the Cárdenas government's overall reform program.

Reports of the solidarity events held in Latin America were received with great interest in the Mexican press. In a front-page article that hailed Mexico as the vanguard of the autonomy of America, *Excélsior* described a meeting that the Juventud Universitaria de Chile held in support of the expropriation.<sup>30</sup> Even more common, however, were articles that described the letters of support and sympathy received from individuals and unions throughout the region. Whereas some were reprinted from Latin American newspapers, many were forwarded through diplomatic channels to the Mexican government, often addressed to President Cárdenas himself. In one example, the Cuban communist leader Juan Marinello congratulated the Mexican President.<sup>31</sup> Even more commonly, these messages were sent to the CTM. Vicente Lombardo Toledano was famous among workers' groups throughout Latin America, and in Cuba in particular, where he supported the formation of the Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba (CTC). Out of solidarity with Mexican workers, and oil workers in particular, several unions forwarded him their congratulations. In articles such as "Los obreros zapateros de Cuba nos felicitan por el caso petrolero," Mexican readers learned that the expropriation had widespread support from workers in the rest of Latin America.<sup>32</sup> *La Prensa* reported that not a single day went by in which the CTM did not receive letters or telegrams regarding this historic event.<sup>33</sup> These articles were so numerous that instead of publishing them individually, the Mexican papers began to run articles that printed the messages of several organizations together at one time.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> "México, poderosa vanguardia de la autonomía de América": *Excélsior*, April 10, 1938, 1.

<sup>31</sup> "Felicitación al Sr. Presidente Cárdenas": *El Universal* (Mexico City), March 29, 1938, p. 9. Also see "Una felicitación al Presidente de la República": *El Universal*, April 19, 1938, p. 9; "Felicitación al gobierno del Sr. Gral. Cárdenas": *El Nacional*, April 19, 1938, p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> "Los obreros zapateros de Cuba nos felicitan por el caso petrolero": *La Prensa*, April 7, 1938, p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> "Felicitaciones de los obreros extranjeros por la expropiación": *La Prensa*, May 23, 1938, p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> "La CTM sigue recibiendo adhesiones de todo el mundo por la expropiación del petróleo": *La Prensa*, April 17, 1938, 19. This article mentions letters the CTM received from *Crítica* in Argentina, the Sindicato de Choferes Particulares in Cuba, and the Confederación de Trabajadores Chilenos. These letters of sympathy were also reported in "Mensajes a la CTM del proletariado del mundo": *La Nacional*, April 17, 1938, 8. The support of the Federación de Trabajadores Textiles del Perú, the Sociedad de Auxilios Mutuos de Motoristas y Conductores de Lima, Peru, and the Federación Local del

Like the *Homenaje México* and the reports of the tremendous reception of the *Brigada Mexicana*, these letters served to shore up domestic support for the expropriation among workers and other social groups that needed and wanted reassurance from abroad regarding Mexico's expropriation. Although it has been argued that the expropriation divided Mexico's already fractured left, leaving it prey to conservative attack,<sup>35</sup> the domestic reception of the Latin American reaction to the expropriation served to create points of unity for those on both the Left and the Right of the political spectrum. The diplomatic efforts that went into the voyage of the 1938 goodwill mission were part of a coordinated effort to demonstrate foreign approbation of the Cárdenas government and thereby consolidate domestic support for his reform program.

### **Fulgencio Batista Goes to Mexico City**

Towards the end of 1938 Fulgencio Batista began to employ similar methods in an effort to consolidate his position in Cuban politics. Batista was not the Cuban head of state. Although Federico Laredo Brú was President, it was widely acknowledged that Batista was at the helm. Before undertaking a voyage to Washington, D.C. in November 1938, Batista had never before left the island, but as the *Washington Post* put it, "having firmly established a dominant position at home, the head of the Cuban army [was] anxious to widen the sphere of his activity."<sup>36</sup> He was also eager to ally himself, in the eyes of a Cuban population that was clamouring for change, with the popular politics of his closest neighbours, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Cárdenas, who several contemporary observers, including Frank Tannenbaum and U.S. Ambassador Josephus Daniels, attempted to point out, was merely engaged in creating a New Deal for Mexico.<sup>37</sup> During his visit to Mexico, Batista argued for special

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Trabajo de la Ciudad de Tulúa, Departamento del Valle del Cauca, Colombia was reported in "Colombia y Perú respaldan al gobierno": *El Universal*, May 20, 1938, p. 9.

<sup>35</sup> Alan Knight, "The Politics of the Expropriation": Jonathan C. Brown / Alan Knight (eds.), *The Mexican Petroleum Industry in the Twentieth Century*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992, p. 117.

<sup>36</sup> "Batista Steps Out": *Washington Post*, February 8, 1939.

<sup>37</sup> This comparison was made at the time in Gilberto Flore Muñoz, *The New Deal and the Six Year Plan*, Mexico City: PNR, 1937, and has been analyzed in Tore Olsson's *Agrarian Crossings. Reformers and the Remaking of the US and Mexican Countryside*,

relations between Cuba, Mexico, and the U.S., a so-called “joint axis” of the three countries, which he said were united by the same ideals and social aspirations.<sup>38</sup> Of course, the three countries’ interests were not united and, as the concerns voiced regarding his visit by U.S. businesses and the Cuban politicians who supported them demonstrates, this was popularly understood at the time. The power differential between the United States and its closest Latin American neighbours meant that the commercial bases of Cuban and Mexican development were predicated upon the two countries’ efforts to wrest from foreign control their most significant and symbolic commercial sectors: sugar and oil. Although the Cuban government had taken no part in the organization of the *Homenaje México*, the Mexican example of economic liberation through expropriation was significant.<sup>39</sup> Liberal Cuban Senator, Dr. J. M. Casanova organized a subsequent homage to both the U.S. and Great Britain on July 4 because he was concerned that Cubans had alienated their primary business partners by honouring the Mexican expropriation.<sup>40</sup> He also did his best to sink the proposed commercial treaty between Cuba and Mexico because Cuba had traditionally maintained a trade imbalance with Mexico that he did not wish to exacerbate.<sup>41</sup> Despite this imbalance, the fact remained that the fate of the Cuban economy was determined each year by the U.S. sugar quota, which happened to have been reduced one day before the *Homenaje*

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Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. Tannenbaum’s *The Mexican Agrarian Revolution and Peace by Revolution* appeared in 1929 and 1933, and although his interpretation of Cárdenas, Mexican Democrat wouldn’t appear until 1952 his support was influential in the period in question. Daniels’s, *Shirt-sleeve Diplomat* appeared in 1947, and his interpretation of the events unfolding in Mexico City clearly swayed Roosevelt.

<sup>38</sup> “Batista, In Mexico, Urges Solidarity”: *New York Times*, 4 February 1939.

<sup>39</sup> “There were no government officials at the meeting, although several Senators, leaders of the minority group in Congress and members of the Republican Party attended” and “Mexico is Hailed by Cuban Throng”: *New York Times*, 13 June 1938. Although one Cuban exile in Mexico wrote to Cárdenas to point out that Batista had not been behind the homage in Havana, and had actually opposed it at the time, the colonel ultimately benefitted from its success. Carlos Duque de Estrada to Cárdenas, 16 February 1939, AGN, LCR, Caja 1073, Expediente 577.1/7.

<sup>40</sup> Reyes Spíndola to SRE, 6 July 1938. SRE, AHGE, III-1248-8. Also see the letter of the president of the Cámara de Comercio, Industria y de la Propiedad de Pinar del Río to the President. Dr. Eduardo Donéstevez to Laredo Brú, 15 June 1938, ANC, Fondo Secretaría de la Presidencia, vol. 98, Exp. 10.

<sup>41</sup> “Cuban urges Recall of Mexican Envoy”: *New York Times*, 12 June 1938. Also see the editorial in the *Diario de la Marina*, 7 June 1938.

*México*.<sup>42</sup> Meeting the demands of the Cuban *clases populares* would require breaking the back of the sugar monopoly, and although Batista had promulgated the *Líneas Básicas del Programa del Plan Trienal* in 1937 in an attempt to address the social and economic challenges resulting from foreign control of the sugar industry,<sup>43</sup> push-back from business interests would ensure that anything short of outright expropriation, such as that Cárdenas had instituted in the oil industry (and Fidel Castro would decree after Batista's ouster), would be lacking. During his 1938 speech to the Cuban nation, Cárdenas had called for an end to "economic imperialism,"<sup>44</sup> and in his message to the Mexican Congress Batista declared that Cuba "planned to 'nationalize' the sugar industry, which is the base of Cuba's economy, as oil and minerals are the base of Mexico's."<sup>45</sup> Whether he ever had any intention of doing so is unclear, but his use of anti-imperialist rhetoric is significant. It is well known that Batista would instead eventually shed his populist sheep's clothing and reveal himself to be a dictatorial wolf. The Mexican example he witnessed during his 1939 visit provided him with some of the political and symbolic tools that would enable him to maintain his grip on power, if not indefinitely, at least for the next two decades.

As head of the Cuban army, Batista was officially invited to come to Mexico by Cárdenas's Secretary of Defence, Manuel Ávila Camacho. The mission had a martial air – Batista's liner was greeted by gunboats, and Col. Ignacio Beteta, who had gained Batista's friendship during his stay in Havana, accompanied the visiting dignitary on the presidential *tren olivo* from Veracruz to Mexico City.<sup>46</sup> Ávila Camacho met him at Buenavista station, the Cuban strongman paid a visit to the Ministry of Defence immediately upon his arrival in Mexico City, and he toured military schools during his journey.

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<sup>42</sup> Cuba's quota for 1939 was reduced from 1,939,546 short tons, raw value, to 1,962,771. "Reductions Made in Sugar Quotas": *New York Times*, 11 June 1938.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Whitney, *State and Revolution in Cuba. Mass Mobilization and Political Change, 1920-1940*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001, pp. 151-165.

<sup>44</sup> "Mexico is Hailed".

<sup>45</sup> "Batista Promises Nationalizing Aim": *New York Times*, February 12, 1939.

<sup>46</sup> See Beteta's letter of thanks to Cuban President Federico Laredo Bru, June 19, 1938, Cuba, Archivo Nacional de Cuba (ANC), Fondo Presidencia, Caja 98, Número 35. For US Ambassador Josephus Daniels's report of Ignacio Beteta's speech welcoming Batista to Mexico in 1939, see Daniels to Hull, February 3, 1939. United States, National Archives Records Administration (NARA), Record Group 59 (RG 59), 033.372/13.



President Lázaro Cárdenas (R) and Colonel Fulgencio Batista (L) are pictured together with Octavio Reyes Spíndola (Centre) during Batista's 1939 visit to Mexico.

The itinerary also had all of the trappings of the visit of a foreign head of state.<sup>47</sup> Foreign Minister Eduardo Hay hosted a luncheon for him at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Cuban embassy held a swish evening reception for government officials and the diplomatic corps, and the Ministry of Education gave a luncheon in his honour at the base of the pyramids of Teotihuacán, where mariachis played in his honour. Later that afternoon, the dignitaries returned to the capital for a polo match at Instituto Politécnico Nacional, where they were also treated to a folkloric presentation of the jarabe tapatío and other national dances.<sup>48</sup> Batista and his entourage also toured some of the revolutionary government's proudest accomplishments – hydro-electric projects and other public works, as well as and the collectivised sugar industry of Morelos. It was, as the New York Times put it, “a 10-day fiesta.”<sup>49</sup>

Batista's visit to the Zacatepec sugar mill in Morelos was of particular note in the Cuban periodical coverage of his visit to Mexico.<sup>50</sup> The cornerstone of Batista's Three-Year Plan was the Sugar Coordination Law, which “permanently established a new system of profit sharing between workers, colonos, and mill owners according to a sliding scale that moved with the price of sugar.”<sup>51</sup> The state also shared in the profits, which it would use to fund Batista's promised social welfare initiatives. The plan differed greatly from the *ejidos* created by President Cárdenas in the homeland of Zapata, which have been of intense scholarly interest since their establishment.<sup>52</sup> The coverage of Batistas's visit astutely

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<sup>47</sup> The same Cuban exile mentioned above objected to Batista “playing the role of president” during his visit. Also see, “Otro viaje y un consejo”: Cuba Nueva, 30 January 1939.

<sup>48</sup> For the invitation and itinerary see, AGN, LCR, Caja 1073, Expediente 577.1/7. It was pyramids in the morning and polo in the afternoon for the Cuban strongman, who surely benefitted from Mexico's burgeoning tourist infrastructure. Martinis were undoubtedly consumed later that night. Dina Berger, *The Development of Mexico's Tourism Industry. Pyramids by Day, Martinis by Night*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. There is also some indication that the trip was not all business – after his return to Cuba, Batista wrote to ask the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to track down the names of two women who appeared on his arm in a photograph he forwarded of his return trip through Puebla. Roberto Martínez Farías (ENAI) to SRE, AHGE, 21 April 1939, III-172-25.

<sup>49</sup> “Mexico Will Fete Batista Lavishly”: New York Times, February 2, 1939. For the projected itinerary of the visit see, SRE, AHGE, III, 172-25.

<sup>50</sup> “Batista aprecia de cerca, los beneficios y las desventajas de la nacionalización de la industria del azúcar en México”: El País, 8 February 1939.

<sup>51</sup> Gillian McGillivray, *Blazing Cane. Sugar Communities, Class, and State Formation in Cuba, 1868-1959*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2009, p. 242.

<sup>52</sup> Armando Bartra, *Hereditarios de Zapata. Movimientos campesinos posrevolucionarios en México*, Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1985; Arturo Warman, ... Y

discussed one of the contradictions that would come to be seen as one of the downfalls of the arrangement in subsequent decades.

“Those who plant the cane and those who mill it are, in reality, the owners, but the Bank [Banco Comunal de Crédito Ejidal] administers and purchases the mill’s production, sends it to market, and manipulates everything related to the milling. The details of their financial dealings are not known to the public.”<sup>53</sup>

Although Batista, and his right-hand man and former Minister of Agriculture and Finance, Amadeo López Castro (who was clearly the second ranking dignitary in the delegation, as listed in the diplomatic correspondence surrounding the visit), marveled at the mill that had reportedly cost 13,000,000 pesos and may have been the most modern in Latin America, the structure of ownership and labor contrasted markedly with the organization of the Cuban sugar industry, and they had no intention of emulating the Mexican model.

The Cuban papers described the organization of labor in the mill (372 workers in three turns), and the annual production of the mill (35,000,000,000 kilograms of sugar).<sup>54</sup> In a speech at a luncheon given by the Governor of Morelos in Cuernavaca, Batista eulogized the revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata, whose cry of “Land and Liberty” he said pervaded the “spirit of America.”<sup>55</sup> Although the *Diario de la Marina* may have worried that Batista would “Transplant the Mexican Revolutionary Program in Cuba,” these concerns were unfounded.<sup>56</sup> When Batista spoke of the “nationalization” of the sugar economy in the Chamber of Deputies later in the visit, what he envisioned was a “state-sponsored and mediated process of capital accumulation,” not expropriation and collectivization.<sup>57</sup> The Sugar Coordination Law was

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venimos a contradecir. Los campesinos de Morelos y el estado nacional, Mexico City: Centro de Investigaciones Superiores de Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1976.

<sup>53</sup> “Batista aprecia de cerca, los beneficios y las desventajas de la nacionalización de la industria del azúcar en México”. Also see, “Vista el Coronel Batista un ingenio en Cuernavaca México”: *El Avance*, 8 February 1939, which appeared alongside an image of President Cárdenas and an article that headlined, “Carece de toda influencia el comunismo en la nación mexicana”: *El Avance*, 8 February 1939. On the history of the sugar industry, see Ana María Chávez Galindo / Lucero Jiménez Guzmán, *Los cortadores de caña de azúcar en el estado de Morelos*, Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1988.

<sup>54</sup> “Visita el Cor. Batista a Morelos”: *El Mundo*, 9 February 1939.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> “Expresó el Coronel Batista la gratitud del pueblo Cubano al de México, en su contestación al discurso del Luis Rodríguez, quien surgió trasplantar a Cuba el programa revolucionario de México”: *Diario de la Marina*, 10 February 1939.

<sup>57</sup> Whitney, *State and Revolution in Cuba*, p. 161.

effective in providing nationalist protection for Cuban *colonos* and mill owners. By 1959, Cubans held almost 70 percent of the sugar industry, and *colonos* provided 94 percent of cane to Cuba's sugar mills.<sup>58</sup> However, popular memory of the two presidents and their plans are markedly different. The sugar *ejido* Batista toured may have "exacerbated the exploitation of rural people" in Morelos, securing the place of both capitalist development and authoritarianism in the sugar zone.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, Cárdenas was remembered fondly by its members, who continued to invoke his name decades later.<sup>60</sup> By contrast, although sugar workers saw their situation improve after the Coordination Law, they reserved their praise for union leader Jesús Menéndez, rather than identifying with Batista.<sup>61</sup> Although both Batista and Cárdenas's political projects were corporatist in nature, Batista did not share Cárdenas's revolutionary intentions.

Batista's visit to Mexico did however, provide an opportunity to harness some of the Revolution's symbolic power for his own purposes. It enabled him to demonstrate Cuban solidarity with the Mexican Revolution, currying favour with domestic supporters of Cárdenas and his championing of the Spanish Republic and organized labour. During his speech in the joint session of congress the evening of February 10, Batista reviewed for his audience the history of Cuba's own revolution – the overthrow of the Machado regime – and stated that the principles of the Revolution of 1933 would be written into a new constitution that July.<sup>62</sup> The Sunday after his arrival in the Mexican capital, Batista had stood on the balcony of the presidential palace and watched as 15,000 organised workers marched to celebrate the anniversary of the promulgation of the Constitution of 1917.<sup>63</sup> Drum and bugle corps headed the parade that included workers and *campesinos*, theatre

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<sup>58</sup> McGillivray, *Blazing Cane*, p. 243.

<sup>59</sup> Gladys I. McCormick, *The Logic of Compromise in Mexico. How the Countryside Was Key to the Emergence of Authoritarianism*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016, p. 46.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1. McCormick argues that this may have been in part because of Cárdenas's role in propelling the leadership of Rubén Jaramillo, who would lead the agrarian rebellion against the authoritarian government into the future. Also see, Tanalís Padilla, *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata. The Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of the Pax Prísta, 1940-1962*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

<sup>61</sup> See, Louis A. Pérez, Jr. (ed.), "Ángel Santana Suárez. Cuban Sugar Worker": William H. Beezley / Judith Ewell (eds.), *The Human Tradition in Latin America. The Twentieth Century*, Wilmington: SR Books, 1987, p. 87.

<sup>62</sup> "Batista Promises Nationalizing Aim".

<sup>63</sup> "Mexican Workers March for Batista": *New York Times*, February 6, 1939.

workers and public employees, who marched from Av. Juárez and Calle Madero to the *zócalo*. It was reported that “The national colors were borne by marchers, but were outshone by the red and black union banners.”<sup>64</sup> Organized by Lombardo Toledano and the CTM,<sup>65</sup> the parade employed the methods and symbols that are familiar to observers of contemporary celebrations of Independence and the Anniversary of the Revolution.<sup>66</sup> Commemorations of the proclamation of the Constitution of 1917 have not received extensive treatment in the literature on Mexican festivals, but given the centrality to Mexican society of the constitution, as the document that promised the fulfilment of the goals of the revolutionary process that began in 1910, this is surprising.<sup>67</sup> Celebrations of national holidays used rhetoric and symbolism to provide legitimacy to the government and emphasise the sacredness of revolutionary heroes and proclamations, and the same logic certainly governed commemorations of this most important document.

Mexican allegiance the Constitution of 1917, and the demonstrated symbolic power of its commemoration, may have solidified Batista’s intention to draft a new constitution that year. Upon his return to Havana, he promised the ten thousand Cubans who gathered to welcome him home that a constituent assembly to provide a new constitution for the republic would be held that year.<sup>68</sup> The document eventually produced became the Cuban constitution of 1940. As Louis Pérez has argued, “Batista’s political position was firmly established and could only be enhanced further by identifying himself with a new constitution, one incorporating the reform measures of the previous decade.”<sup>69</sup> Like

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Public workers actually asked for Monday off in recognition of their participation in Sunday’s march. Francisco Patiño Cruz, *Federación Trabajadores Estado to Cárdenas*, February 4, 1939, AGN, LCR, Caja 1073, Expediente 577.1/7.

<sup>66</sup> David E. Lorey, “Postrevolutionary Contexts for Independence Day. The ‘Problem’ of Order and the Invention of Revolution Day, 1920s-1940s”: William H. Beezley / David E. Lorey, *¡Viva Mexico! ¡Viva la Independencia!*. Celebrations of September 16, Wilmington: SR Books, 2001, pp. 233-248.

<sup>67</sup> On its negotiation, see E.V. Niemeyer, Jr., *Revolution at Querétaro. The Mexican Constitutional Convention of 1916-1917*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974.

<sup>68</sup> The *New York Times* noted that the crowd was much smaller than the 50,000 who gathered to celebrate his return from the United States the previous November. “Cuban Reception to Batista Mixed”: February 17, 1939. By contrast, Mexico’s ENAI reported that the reception was “sin precedente.” Martínez to SRE, 16 February 1939. SRE, AHGE, III-172-25.

<sup>69</sup> Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba. Between Reform and Revolution*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015 (1988), pp. 219-220.

President Cárdenas, who reorganized the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR) in 1938, creating the more broadly-based Partido de la Revolución Mexicana (PRM), in recognition of the need for institutional bases of support for his populist political style, Batista institutionalized his attempt to meet the demands of the popular classes brought out by the Revolution of 1933. In one of the great ironies of Cuban history, Batista's success in creating allegiance to the constitution of 1940 would provide one of the elements of his eventual undoing: when Fidel Castro and the other members of Batista's opposition called on him to step down after 1952, they did so by insisting upon the "restoration of the democratic and reformist Constitution of 1940."<sup>70</sup> Batista's institutionalization of his politics in the Constitution enabled him to achieve power in the 1940s, and hang onto it until it led to his eventual downfall in 1959.

The Mexican Constitution of 1917 had provided the juridical bases for the Cárdenas government's oil expropriation decree, as well as the agrarian reform that made the creation of the collectivized Zacatepec sugar ejido possible. These actions represented two of the most radical examples of the fulfilment of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, and Batista had already shown in the Petroleum Law and the Sugar Coordination Law of 1937 that he did not intend to either create either a state-run petroleum industry or embark upon the collectivization of sugar production on the island. The inspiration he found in the Mexican Revolution, and the Constitution of 1917 was therefore more in its symbolism than its content, but the demonstration of affinity between the Cuban and Mexican governments in 1938 and 1939 through the goodwill missions of the *Brigada Mexicana* and Fulgencio Batista nevertheless played an important role in creating domestic support for both regimes, demonstrating the importance of cultural relations in this period.

## Conclusion

In his annual report on Cuba for 1938, the British Ambassador at Havana discussed Cuba's increased relations with Mexico. Batista's allegiances are divided between the United States and Mexico, he summarised, but "the consensus of opinion appears to be that the Mexican connection

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<sup>70</sup> Nicola Miller, "The Absolution of History. Uses of the Past in Castro's Cuba": *Journal of Contemporary History* 38: 1 (2003), p. 147.

would always be sacrificed in favour of U.S.-Cuban relations if it came to a decision.”<sup>71</sup> Although this analysis is essentially correct, and the Mexican-Cuban alliance in this period was mostly symbolic and rather short-lived, both Cárdenas and Batista gained significantly from its pursuit. By organizing the *Brigada Mexicana* and the visit of Fulgencio Batista, and publicising what was evidently significant Cuban popular support for the Cárdenas government’s attempts to incorporate the masses into the political process and ensure the economic sovereignty of the nation, the government provided the Mexican people with much-needed reassurance that the reform process that was under way in their country warranted international approval. The reflection of this international backing was, in turn, evident in the consolidation of nearly unanimous domestic support for the oil expropriation. When Batista officially opened Cuba’s presidential race in December of 1939 and announced his candidacy at the National Theatre, declaring his commitment to the popular classes and his pledge to gain the “respect of the world” in his foreign relations, his speech was interrupted by an audience member who shouted, “He’s like Cardenas of Mexico!”<sup>72</sup> The Machiavellian colonel, who stated that he was honoured by the comparison, must have felt that his efforts to associate himself with the popular Mexican president had paid off. Batista would use the populist style Cárdenas epitomised to rather different ends once he achieved power the following year, but in the moment, the spectator who had called out to the presidential candidate had every reason to hope.

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<sup>71</sup> United Kingdom, National Archives, Foreign Office (FO) 371/22750.

<sup>72</sup> “Presidential Race Opened by Batista”: New York Times, December 11, 1939.