



Camisas, escudos y desfiles militares.

Los Dorados y el antisemitismo en México (1934-1940)

(Shirts, Coats of Arms and Military Parades.
The Gold-Shirts and Anti-semitism in Mexico
[1934-1940])

Alicia Gojman de Backal

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Sad were the days when people tried to build a nation, attempting to overcome the inertia and obstacles of the past, when rationality was confronted with the passions and the subjectiveness of personal points of view. Many and varied elements intervened in the construction of the future, elements that counterposed traditions with the modernity that imposed itself despite everything. Ideas, values, prejudices were all immersed in the networks of political control and in the social and political manifestations based on different ideologies.

Sad were the days in which the lack of policy definition had an impact on the emergence of movements, even movements that could be considered very negative for society. With a state weakened by its own contradictions and by the lack of its own political project, proposals emerged that were

allowed to develop on their own and no equilibrium was achieved in their actions which, far from reaching stability, fostered the crisis. And we must speak of crises when the values that form the basis of a humanist culture are forgotten or pushed to one side.

Alicia Gojman de Backal unfolds her knowledge and—why not?—her feelings to tell us a controversial story in which the most minimal rationality found itself confronted with the most irrational prejudices. Mexico did not escape xenophobia, as can be seen first in the persecution of the Chinese and then anti-semitism, with the distress it caused for those who lived through it.

As the author points out from the beginning, the book's topic is a personal matter because she heard and experienced close up part of a history that led her to become a historian and perspicacious observer of the Jewish question. This is the basis of her sensitivity and awareness of being very close to what she narrates in her book on three levels: Europe and the rise of Naziism; World War II and the persecution of the Jews; and, lastly, Mexico and ultra-right movements in the international context. All these levels are interrelated in the description of the defense of an identity that survived the pogroms and other manifestations of irrationality. They are elements that allow us to familiarize

ourselves with a history that is not always told because it goes against the official version and because of fear about difficult-to-explain phases that unfortunately had repercussions in Mexico's social and state organization.

It was the crisis or the lack of a political project that was behind the nationalist campaign sponsored by the Pascual Ortiz Rubio government of 1930 to 1932. The campaign did not manage to penetrate society and was victim of the unfettered power of Plutarco Elías Calles, who, even though he proclaimed the end of the age of *caudillos* or strongmen, himself became one in his attempt to maintain power behind the scenes, contrary to the development of the very institutions that his government had contributed to creating.

We should mistrust nationalist campaigns, but Ortiz Rubio found no other way to slow the economic crisis that was spreading through Mexico after the United States' Black Thursday in 1929. It was a mistake to suppose that the crisis could be met with an attack on what were presented as "foreigners'" businesses, although they were really the shops and small workshops owned by immigrants who had made Mexico their new home. But the ideological factor was definitive because the nationalist campaign was aimed above all at Chinese- and Jewish-owned businesses, although immigration restrictions involved other groups such as those from the Middle East, including Turks and Arabs, indistinguishable to Mexicans.

The story Alicia Gojman tells actually becomes several stories: the stories of immigrants, colonizing projects, international espionage, Latin American nationalism, European fascism and Naziism, international readjustments on the eve of the world conflagration, oil interests, the reconstruction of Mexico after a revolution with huge social costs, different styles of governing by presidents as close together in time as they were far apart in conceptions of statesmanship (like Pascual Ortiz Rubio and Lázaro Cárdenas) and, at the center, that unfortunate organization that was Mexicanist Revolutionary Action, led by Nicolás Rodríguez.

In 1929, there were 30,116 foreigners in Mexico City's Federal District, and between 1929 and 1930, 33,329 more entered the country. Despite allowing their entry, the Ortiz Rubio administration propitiated ambivalent situations: for example, in an attempt to defend native Mexicans from foreign competition, it allowed the expulsion of 250 Jewish merchants from the La Merced market. The president's actions jibed with the general atmosphere of the time; as early as 1925 the *El Universal* daily had spoken of "the flood

of Jews our country has been subjected to"; *El Universal* cited the figure of 10,000 Jewish immigrants, while *Excelsior* spoke of 100,000. This false information is an important example of the kind of rumor-mongering that intensifies in crisis periods.

And in this disheartening atmosphere of a country broken apart after a revolution, with grave economic and political problems, came the nationalist campaign: it promoted food products being made with domestic ingredients, clothing being labeled with its place of manufacture, remembering that the best tobacco was Mexican tobacco, people not buying foreign magazines and newspapers, preferring medicine made in Mexico and, in addition, practically making it high treason to send money abroad. That was how, on June 1, 1931, the "Great Nationalist Demonstration" was organized by the General Committee of the Nationalist Campaign, the Confederation of Chambers of Industry, the Confederation of Chambers of Commerce, the French Chamber of Commerce and the Mexico City government's Department of Transportation. The day was declared a day of rest for Mexico City's Federal District government and school employees (although it should be remembered here that many of them were already on strike because, since the government's coffers were empty, they had not been paid in several months).

The nationalist campaign continued under Abelardo L. Rodríguez's presidency, another weak administration that allowed any group with power to do what it liked. Under Rodríguez, demonstrations against Jewish and Chinese merchants continued throughout the country. It was the perfect time for reactionary organizations to proliferate; in 1931, Mexicanist Revolutionary Action had already been founded, preceded by the "Pro-Race Committees," claiming a membership of 40,000. In 1935, the Anti-China and Anti-Jewish Leagues were founded; later the Mexican Nationalist Union was founded, and, in 1937, the Mexican Nationalist Legion. Similar organizations also opposed Chinese and Jewish individuals and groups, organizations like the Spanish Anticommunist Association, or the Falange, willing to support the struggle of Francisco Franco. The list of nationalist committees and leagues in Gojman's book is overwhelming and, even though it does not specify how many members they actually had, it is still an important indicator of the growth of the Mexican right.

The declaration of principles and the pamphlets of those who soon came to be known as "Gold-Shirts" because of the

color of their shirts and coat of arms is something no reader should miss if he/she wants to know just how far foolishness mixed with ignorance can go. Suffice it to mention the exaggerated allusion to their supposed values —race, homeland, family, morality, progress, order and civic duty— to distrust them. The association's ideals, summarized by the author, "called for the unity of Mexicans who had been engaged in a permanent struggle against one another; demanded that the divisions among parties be ended and a fight for the Mexican homeland be waged, for the land that belonged to them as Mexicans. According to this creed, the homeless Jews who had been forced to live outside their own land were breeding irreconcilable hatred toward the rest of humanity and, to survive, had organized themselves to exploit and dominate all the peoples of the earth, from a very advantageous position" (p. 212).

During Cárdenas administration, things began to change. It should not be forgotten that Cárdenas' first important action was to highlight the distance he took from the Supreme Chief (Plutarco Elías Calles), seeking out the support of the organized peasants and workers. As the author rightly says, his government was based on three ideologies: liberalism, fascism and communism. Lázaro Cárdenas was a pluralist; this can be seen in his defense of the Spanish Republic, the asylum he granted to Leon Trotsky, his ideology in favor of self-determination for all peoples, and his respect for foreigners, not to mention the dissemination of free, obligatory, socialist education.

The first two years of his administration were marked by "a profound collective depression and the loss of faith in the political institutions created by the revolution, which gave rise to social criticism, violence and uncertainty" (p. 74). Threats of rebellion, strikes and social conflicts were common between the time of Calles' expulsion from Mexico and 1938 and 1939 when right-wing groups acquired particular importance after the expropriation of Mexico's oil industry which, among other factors, was the justification for General Saturnino Cedillo's rebellion. By that time, the Nazis were identified in Mexico by their exaggerated violence and their expansionist pretensions, strongly linked to German interests. Several German representatives were detected in Mexico and Ernest von Merck, who was close to the rebel general, was among the most talked about.

The Cárdenas administration maintained that the doors of the country were open to all foreigners who, without any sort of humiliating superiority complex, "nor antisocial,

selfish privileges, come to our country to foster agriculture, industry, science and the arts" (p. 113). However, just like that of the United States (remember the 1924 restrictive policy, even though Roosevelt sought a solution to the problem of the thousands of refugees), his policy was ambivalent.

In that context, Vicente Lombardo Toledano began to use the term "popular front" to refer to the unity of the government and antifascist groups against imperialism and the reactionaries. This was the root of the strong social alliance that served as a protective shield around Cárdenas and the Cardenist project.

On November 20, 1935, during the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution, the "Gold-Shirts" participated in the parade. But together with other similar organizations, they ended up in an open confrontation with the Popular Front, among whose contingents were the Mexican Electrical Workers Union, the League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists, the United Confederation of Mexico and the Proletarian Defense Committee. At about two in the afternoon, drivers who belonged to the United Front of Drivers tried to block the "Gold-Shirts" who were on horseback. The fully documented incident was a singular fight between automobiles and horses that included the use of bombs, pistols, knives and rocks, and resulted in dozens of wounded. The "Gold-Shirts," claiming the clash had been a provocation by the Communists, took over the offices of the Mexican Communist Party on Tacuba Street in retaliation and shot up Lombardo Toledano's house. These kinds of disturbances continued in other parts of the country until Cárdenas decided February 27, 1936, to expel General Nicolás Rodríguez from Mexico. From abroad, Rodríguez engaged in all kinds of attempts to bring down the Cárdenas government, paradoxically a government of Mexico's great nationalist president.

The author dedicates an interesting chapter to Mexican society's reaction to Mexicanist Revolutionary Action, in which she explains that fortunately many groups both in the capital and the rest of the country opposed its ideology and forms of action. Even foreign legations expressed their disagreements in different documents. The Jewish community, for its part, organized and created the Israelite Chamber, making contact with President Cárdenas and the representative of the Jewish Congress. They also sought the support of U.S. Jews against anti-semitism and in 1937 published the newspaper *La Verdad* (The Truth) which

joined other publications oriented toward countering the anti-semitic campaigns fostered by the conservative papers *Omega* and *El Hombre Libre* (The Free Man), sometimes augmented by commentators in well-established papers like *Excelsior* and *El Universal*.

The United States tried with all its might to stay out of the European war that had broken out in September 1939, the year that Mexico stopped the oil sales that it had begun to Germany after expropriating its oil companies. The context of the war allowed Cárdenas and the following president, Manuel Ávila Camacho, to pursue a singular policy with regard to war refugees, which eventually led them to review the country's policy toward foreigners.

However, conditions were not always so very favorable and the number of times that Cárdenas had to reverse his intentions of supporting foreign immigration, particularly that of Jews, is widely documented. The great Mexicanist historian Friedrich Katz reminds us of a polemic that has still not been resolved regarding a denial of admittance of Jews during Cárdenas' administration. Katz justifies the denial on two grounds: first, because, having to choose among

people forced to emigrate, the president was right in opting for the Spaniards over the Jews because of the difficulties receiving both groups would bring; and second, because "some low-level officials of the Mexican government, particularly in the Foreign Relations Ministry, still showed anti-semitic tendencies and tried to limit the access of Jews to Mexico" (p. 13). This reminds me of the metaphor of the serpent's egg, and I still think it was very serious that even Cárdenas could not destroy these tendencies.

This book stirs our consciences and shows us that there are moments in our history that we Mexicans must not forget if we aspire to respecting the freedom of others to decide their ideology, religion and customs. Alicia Gojman de Backal's book exposes a chapter of intolerance in Mexico that must not be forgotten; only by remembering is it possible to overcome the past and build the present.

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