

The U.S., Nazi Germany, and the CIAA in Latin America during WW II

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I visited the Rockefeller Archive Center in December 2008 for almost two weeks in order to conduct research for my book about the relations between Nazi Germany and Colombia. One of the research goals was to find out what role the U.S. played in those relations. The Roosevelt administration was suspicious of all kinds of German activities in Colombia and not only gathered information about Germans and Germany, but also took measures and created policies to undermine them. I wanted to find information not only about the German activities in Colombia, but also about the actions and measures taken against the Germans and about the persons and institutions responsible for those measures. Although I found very little about Colombia, what I did find was that the office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA), led by Nelson A. Rockefeller, conducted a series of anti-German activities in Latin America in general, and some specifically in

Colombia. The following is a description of the fields of action that show the broad scope of actions undertaken by the CIAA. The cases cited will focus mainly on Colombia.

It is important to note that this report is based solely on CIAA documents, which represent the way the CIAA saw itself and the way it saw Latin America and Germany, and no other documentation has been introduced in order to verify or refute the information herein presented. Therefore the documents present, for example, a very positive perspective, constantly acknowledging success. It is also important to keep in mind, for instance, that there is an immense bibliography that points to the fact that the Nazi threat in Latin America was a myth, partly created by the U.S., and therefore some information about Nazi Germany might not be correct. Here is a summary of what I found that might be of some interest to other researchers and let's not forget that the CIAA undertook a series of tasks that might be compared to other American agencies or institutions.

One of the hypotheses of my research affirms that the struggle for influence between the U.S. and Germany as they sought to penetrate Colombia had various sides: the struggle for political influence and markets, but also psychological warfare, or propaganda. But what I want to introduce here is an example of a broader topic, namely that WWII gave the U.S. the perfect opportunity to occupy broader roles and spaces in Latin America. The war made possible an American penetration like never before. During WWII, Nazi Germany disappeared from Latin America and the U.S. came in. The CIAA is a case in point and that is exactly the context in which it was established. All this is a good example of infiltration in that it eliminates the competition, the enemy.

The establishment of the CIAA, according to one of its reports, was in direct correlation with Germany and the Germans in Latin America. Latin America had already been important in several ways in the Nazi blueprint for domination. For Nazi Germany,

Latin America was important because of its raw materials, as a market for German products, and a destination for German immigration. Most of the Germans were in organizations directed from Berlin. Economic penetration had been interlocked with propaganda programs designed to arouse antagonism against the U.S. that were disseminated through German firms, schools, cultural centers, press agencies, motion pictures, radio stations, and other societies.

During Rockefeller's visit to Latin America in 1938, he noticed how German immigrants had stayed on the continent, married locals, established businesses, and acted as agents and distributors of German products, while Americans came only for business, were not permanent settlers, did not interest themselves in the countries in which they lived, and did not assimilate with the local population. According to Rockefeller, the newer immigrants became the nucleus of Nazi penetration; the new generation of Germans assumed the ascendancy over the older and more conservative group; and loss of European markets for Latin America made it imperative that steps were taken. The fall of France in the spring of 1940 spurred the creation of the CIAA in August of the same year.

Before looking at the many tasks in which the CIAA was involved, let's take a look at what Rockefeller called the "philosophy" of his organization. Since the U.S. needed Latin America for economic and military reasons in order to secure their support, "each individual Latin American must believe the 'U.S. Credo' [and] each individual Latin American must not believe the 'Axis Credo.'" According to Rockefeller, the first one was founded in truth and therefore was in the best interest of Latin Americans; the other one was based on falsehood. But also each American citizen must believe the "Latin American Credo". The efforts of the U.S. government and of the CIAA were to be dedicated to the task of strengthening the "U.S. Credo" and weakening the "Axis Credo" in the minds of the

Latin Americans. Simultaneously the “Latin American Credo” was to be demonstrated to the Americans. The task consisted of convincing Latin Americans of accepting certain principles as their own: “I believe that my best interests are linked with the U.S. ... I believe that my best interests will be harmed by the Axis ... I believe that the U.S. is going to win this war, although it will be a difficult struggle ... Therefore I am supporting the U.S. and stand ready to cooperate with the Americas and to make additional personal sacrifices along with the American people so that I can help the U.S. win the war and establish a better world.”

The task was, according to Rockefeller, to make each individual believe in the “U.S. Credo” and not to believe the “Axis Credo.” Through the first one, people should believe that the best interests of the people of Latin America were linked with the U.S. because of its way of life and the Good Neighbor Policy, because they would acquire a better standard of living, greater personal security, and more individual freedom. The “Axis credo,” on the other hand, would bring subjugation and oppression and was a threat of world domination.

A good example of the vision that the CIAA had is the report “A Hundred Years of German Ambitions in Latin America,” which deals with “the German imperialistic ambitions in their true perspective” and is “a compilation of statements by Pan-German leaders from 1846 to 1918”. The report states that “German conspiracies for the conquest of parts or of all of South America are by no means solely the outgrowth of Hitlerism....”

The main justifications for the creation of the CIAA, according to the CIAA itself, were the danger of Axis aggression, the work necessary for the defense of the hemisphere, and construction of hemisphere solidarity. The CIAA knew that security for the U.S. also meant prosperity in Latin America and promoted cultural understanding and sympathy.

Another report says clearly that from its inception the CIAA had two important fields of operation: the economic and the psychological one.

In the economic field the CIAA was concerned with the commercial, financial, and economic situation of the other American republics, and with bringing together government agencies and private concerns. It is interesting to note that the plan was to eliminate companies from trade during the war and after. The anti-German position of the CIAA was clear from the very beginning, developing a program for the elimination of Axis control over airlines. Among the first activities was an exhaustive study of the German airlines that revealed that a large number of airlines were owned by Axis interests, which resulted in their elimination and the compilation of a voluntary blacklist of agents and sales outlets identified with Axis interests.

The U.S. had begun to pay attention to this problem as early as 1939, when a series of conferences were held and the State Department had some success in eliminating Axis control over an airline in Colombia. Beyond this however, no great progress had been achieved because of the division of authority between the various interested agencies and departments, and because of lack of funds needed to replace the Axis interest if the latter were eliminated. The CIAA's investigation showed the various dangers to the hemisphere posed by the activities of German and Italian airlines in the dissemination of anti-U.S. propaganda; as an important means of communication between the Axis governments and their sympathizers; through their control of strategic bases, which would be of value in the event of an Axis invasion; and as medium of training German personnel on Latin American terrain. The eventual elimination of the Axis airlines brought forward the problem of the lack of pilots, mechanics, and engineers, so the CIAA initiated a program to train such

personnel and even provided certain transportation expenses to Latin American students to travel to the U.S.

The Proclaimed List of Certain Blocked Nationals resulted from a study made by the CIAA in collaboration with the Department of State and Commerce, which was started in September 1940. The CIAA justified its actions as being instrumental in elaborating that list because "...a substantial source of revenue for Axis powers in Central and South America was money derived from the anti-American representatives of United States business in those countries." Another report says that one of the most important operations was to study how many American businesses were in the hands of anti-American business, concerns that were contrary to the best interests of the American republics. Some of them used to sell European products, but with the beginning of the war they became representatives of U.S. products. Five thousand firms were under consideration until the Proclaimed List was made up. A total of one thousand firms were selected because they were making profits on American goods and thus were supporting Nazi organizations. The list forced companies to change their representatives, cutting off one of the major sources of income for Nazi interests in Latin America.

Also, the CIAA sought to persuade American firms to buy Latin American goods and to provide loans through the Export-Import Bank to various countries. The CIAA also complained that one of the greatest difficulties was stimulating American entrepreneurship in Latin America.

Contact with and support of the local elite were integral. In order to stimulate trade among the American republics, on May 14, 1941, Rockefeller announced the establishment of the Colombian National Council, the eighth of twenty-one councils established by the Inter-American Development Commission. The council, with a total of five members,

included members of the Colombian political and economical elite. It was headed by Mariano Roldán, minister of the National Economy and chairman of the Instituto de Fomento Industrial, and the vice-chairman Roberto Michelsen, general manager of the Banco de la República.

The so-called Communications Division started with a study of the entire communications system of the hemisphere: radio and telegraph systems, largely owned by Nazi groups. It had the task of increasing technical facilities of communication in order to attain mass coverage in several countries; improving the quality of the material to be communicated; counteracting the dissemination of ideas unfavorable to hemisphere defense; and developing and spreading ideas favorable to the interest of the U.S. together with those of the American republics. Rockefeller knew that “propaganda consists of stimuli [original underlined]; and the entire process of employing certain media to convey the stimuli in order to bring about the desired response is what is known as psychological warfare.” With the maintenance of economic stability, political independence, and a sense of security, Latin America would be able to withstand the Axis propaganda and what Rockefeller called “the intellectual imperialism of ideas [that is] just as serious a threat ... as the possibility of a military invasion.” The CIAA tried to “answer to all propaganda lies that [were] being spread about what [was] going on in Europe and the U.S.”

All cultural activities were, according to the CIAA, forms of propagation of friendship or of enmity, as well as another medium of communicating between the peoples and of strengthening bonds. The CIAA itself had no competitors in the information field at the start and began a dissemination of information to counteract the Axis propaganda program, which was transmitted through their radio, news columns, and subsidized press. The method consisted of thoroughly informing the public of what was taking place in the

U.S. and abroad. Of course, nothing could threaten the war effort, and the information materials were selected if they were favorable. It also initiated a program of activities on the radio, in art exhibitions, concerts, motion pictures, and the press to further promote understanding and friendship between the Latin American countries and the United States.

One good example of another function of the CIAA is the press releases that were used to refute German propaganda. For example, when the Berlin Institute for Business Research stated in June 1941 that the Good Neighbor Policy failed because the U.S. could not afford to absorb Latin American surpluses resulting from the loss of European markets, the CIAA released a statement quoting figures and data.

We know that the Germans in the 1930's started an ambitious plan of short wave radio that the U.S. didn't have. So from the beginning, the CIAA was aware that the European broadcasting stations were operating with much more power than the American ones, and that those based in Berlin, Rome, and London had superior equipment, thus delivering a stronger signal. Of the twelve short wave stations operating from the U.S., ten were at a loss, while two were financed by private subscription and little or no profit incentive existed. Berlin and London covered the densely populated areas while U.S. stations tried to cover all of Latin America without coordination of physical equipment.

An example of the CIAA's success in radio penetration can be found, for example, in a report of the Coordination Committee activities. It conducted surveys in Colombia, one of which was conducted in Cartagena from November 8th to December 19th, 1944, in order to evaluate how successful the locally transcribed programs were. The conclusion was that they "enjoy relatively great popularity in Cartagena." Out of the 100 programs listed in the survey from the ones locally transcribed by the CIAA, seven were well placed because they came in the fifth place, fourteenth, nineteenth, twenty-second, twenty-seventh, thirtieth, and

thirty-seventh. The same survey deals with short wave programs and reports a greater success. Ninety programs are mentioned in the survey and one by the CIAA ranked in first place; others came in the third place, seventh, ninth, tenth, eleventh, thirteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, twenty-fourth, and twenty-sixth. The report also states that *Cromos*, a very popular magazine in Colombia, published a leading article written by the Committee's Director of Information.

A report states that by 1943, the CIAA had developed the following objectives: an increase in U.S. production of features pictures, short subjects and newsreels *about* the U.S.; eliminating Axis-sponsored and -produced pictures from exhibition throughout the hemisphere; and persuading producers that it was unwise to distribute in the other Americas pictures that created a bad impression of the United States and its way of life. The CIAA even went to motion picture industries and persuaded them not to sell to houses that showed Nazi films.

Movies were very useful in several fields and were the most direct approach to the widest audience because of the high illiteracy rate. They were useful, for example, in furthering other aspects of the CIAA program like health and sanitation. As a new conception of relations, Rockefeller proposed to take into account when making films the cultural problems of peoples in Latin America.

The CIAA saw itself as very successful in "...revitalizing U.S. newsreels going to Latin America into one of the most effective media for the propagation of the inter-American idea and hemisphere solidarity, [which] represents a high-point in the administration of our entire psychological warfare program." The CIAA was well aware of the important and costly efforts that Germany spent in Latin America during the 1930's trying to influence public opinion and be active in preparing and distributing newsreels.

The propaganda newsreels were distributed free or at a nominal charge and received state subsidies as well as extensive distribution. On the other hand, the CIAA was also aware of the minor treatment by American producers to newsreels although these started to circulate in Latin America in 1936. Producers made no particular effort to obtain special Latin American subjects for their reels and contented themselves with occasional stock shots of fiestas, carnivals, and earthquakes. Exported newsreels revealed North America as a nation of people who were utterly and completely publicity-mad, showing them as polar bear bathers or flag pole sitters. German newsreels were carefully planned, stressed military might, showed enthusiastic and vigorous youth, and prosperity and happiness. Special newsreels editions were regularly shipped to German embassies, where frequent private showings were arranged for specially invited influential officials. The CIAA started early in 1941 to work on a newsreel program and during the war became a success because the CIAA started close cooperation with the United States newsreel companies.

Specific examples of in the field of culture and science are the next ones: the CIAA backed a dispatch of ten archeological expeditions, including field surveys in Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile and other countries; was involved in scientific projects such as the training of 200 meteorologists of the Latin American republics in a school set up for that purpose in Medellín, Colombia; microfilmed scientific articles from American journals and supplied them on request to libraries and individuals; prepared detailed maps of Latin America to make them available to U.S. agencies and officials in Latin America; and published a series of pamphlets on American education that were distributed in Latin America.

Some other fields of activities come to the fore when one reads the CIAA documents. Under the heading "Axis Radio Tactics," the CIAA reported regularly about the

contents of the short wave radio programs broadcast from the Axis countries. These reports give a summary of Axis contents in their radio programs and a good idea of what their propaganda was like. For example, the U.S. exerts an imperialistic pressure and constructs military bases for the purpose of guaranteeing control of Latin America. Attacks on American culture were broadcast stating the lack of culture of the American people, talking about racial prejudices in the U.S. like the lynching of black people in the South, Wall Street plutocracy and avarice. When the Rio conference took place in January 1942, for instance, the broadcasts were directed at wrecking the conference. After the Rio conference, Berlin thought that Latin America surrendered to the U.S. and that “Roosevelt no longer needs to play the comedy of the Good Neighbor,” adding that “he is trying to construct a barrier of blood in Latin America.”

Under the heading “Analysis of Publications in the other American Republics,” several publications, both newspapers and magazines, were scrutinized by the CIAA. *El Siglo*, one of Colombia’s most important newspapers, is according to a report unfriendly to the U.S. but ambivalent because sometimes it attacks the Axis. But even *Veritas*, a rather local and small publication released in a small town called Chiquinquirá, Colombia, caught the CIAA’s attention. It was reported that it was a Catholic weekly from the Franciscan Community that identified Russia and her allies with the “...forces of evil and the Axis with those of Good,” while suggesting that Great Britain and the U.S. were wicked.

The heading “Clippings from Newspapers of other American Republics” shows an interest in the local press. Reading the report headings, one can easily see the topics that were relevant to the CIAA: politics, agriculture, coffee, education, of course 5th column activities, aviation, finance, industry, high cost of living, church, foreign affairs, labor,

mines, press, public service, radio, rubber, shipping, trade, transportation, travel, war and government - the most diverse information from Latin America.

Another field was the “Political report” in which the political situation of a country was analyzed, along with the political parties, their leaders, political events, etc. For example, a report about the fifth column in Colombia stated that it was very strong, supported by 3000 Germans - typical of so many other U.S. reports during the war. Or they also talk about how American or anti-American the parties or persons were.

If we look at the context in which the CIAA was created and their fields of action, we easily realize that, beyond the declarations of solidarity and cooperation with the Latin American countries and the nice speech of friendship, the aim was clearly to collect information, exert influence on the U.S.’s behalf, and eliminate all types of German influence in the area, and the vacuum void thus created would be filled with Americans.