

WAR, CULTURE, AND PROPAGANDA: NELSON A. ROCKEFELLER AND THE U.S. "INFORMATION PROGRAM" IN LATIN AMERICA DURING WORLD WAR II

GHI-sponsored panel at the Latin American Studies Association conference, San Juan, Puerto Rico, March 15–18, 2006. Organizer: Uwe Lübken (GHI). Participants: Gisela Cramer (Universidad Nacional de Colombia), Christof Mauch (GHI), Catha Paquette (California State University, Long Beach), Ursula Prutsch (University of Vienna).

This panel was to some extent a continuation of a cooperative effort that started in August 2005 with an international workshop on "Nelson A. Rockefeller's Office of Inter-American Affairs, 1940–46," sponsored by the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) in Tarrytown, NY. The main objective of this workshop was to draw together a group of scholars working on the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA), in an attempt to reappraise a U.S. government agency that, despite developing and implementing a truly massive program to win Latin America's "hearts and minds" during the Second World War, has received surprisingly little attention until fairly recently. Drawing on various fields of expertise, including U.S. cultural diplomacy and inter-American affairs, the history of the United States and Latin America, art history, communications, and film studies, the RAC's participants focused on those components of the OIAA's programs that related directly to efforts to influence public opinion in Latin America and in the United States.

Due to the generous support of the GHI, some of the scholars present at the August 2005 meeting were now able to present their ongoing research to a larger forum, the annual conference of the Latin American Studies Association. Despite the fact that the panel on "War, Culture, and Propaganda" had to compete with a number of key events, not to mention the allure of the Caribbean beachfront, it drew a sizeable and supportive audience.

Following a brief introduction by Christof Mauch, Uwe Lübken's "Playing the Cultural Game: The United States and the Nazi Threat to Latin America" explored the policy context that gave rise to the OIAA's culture and propaganda programs and that shaped both the contents and the organizational format these programs would assume. The rhetoric employed during the war years stressed the importance of cultural interchange and understanding for inter-American relations. But since these programs were largely a result of U.S. security concerns, Lübken concluded, they were quickly abandoned after the war.

Catha Paquette's paper on "Wartime Politics of Culture: U.S. Government Arts Programs in Mexico and the United States," presented in Paquette's absence by Christof Mauch, focused on the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) as one of the major instruments to carry out the OIAA's programs in the field of the fine arts. She highlighted the ways in which MoMA modified its aesthetic orientation, institutional policies, and practices in response to pressures generated by foreign policy concerns.

Gisela Cramer's case study "The United States, Argentina, and Mass Communications During World War II" explored the OIAA's strenuous efforts to use radio as a means to reach and influence Argentine audiences, an endeavor that culminated in the establishment of a secret radio station in neighboring Uruguay. She analyzed the difficulties U.S. propagandists encountered in this part of the hemisphere where an increasingly hostile government restricted U.S. broadcasting activities and highly competitive radio markets severely limited the agency's operational options.

Brazil was undoubtedly the country where the OIAA's programs were the most extensive. In her contribution on "Nelson Rockefeller's Office of Inter-American Affairs in Brazil," Ursula Prutsch presented a wide range of activities, including large-scale health and sanitation projects, cultural exchange and media initiatives, and programs assisting the extraction of raw materials. Apart from highlighting the massive scope of the OIAA's activities, she discussed how these meshed with ongoing state-building processes.

In the subsequent discussion with the audience, various commentators raised the point that these papers and other findings would invite a historical reappraisal of the agency, and suggested a number of further avenues to explore.

Gisela Cramer