The Residual Image of Mexican Exile: Their Country of Refuge in the Minds of the German-Speaking Emigres After the Second World War

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Abstract

Mexico was an important site of exile for leftist emigrants from Germany during the Second World War. Paul Merker, the only member of the German politburo living outside of Europe during the war, Hannes Meyer, the former director of the Bauhaus, and Anna Seghers, the internationally-known German novelist, are only a few examples of their larger community. During their time in Mexico, the German-speaking exiles were wholly focused on Europe and the destruction of their homelands. They dedicated themselves to the fight against Hitler, developing local cultural infrastructure to organize conferences, publish books and periodicals, and maintain an international antifascist network. Their community was prolific. Its most representative product is *El libro negro del terror nazi en europa*, a 1943 collection of essays and images. This book marks a climax of the collaboration between the exiles and the Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP), a workshop of Mexican antifascist printmakers founded in 1937.

After the war, the exiles, still focused on Europe, returned and participated in the establishment of the German Democratic Republic. It was only in that moment that they began to focus on Mexico, once more directing their gazes across the Atlantic Ocean--this time to their adopted country. My paper explores this sequel to the exile community in Mexico, using as evidence Seghers’ writings and the letters exchanged by Meyer and TGP founder Leopoldo Méndez. The personal documents of the exiles (now held in the archives of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin and the Deutsches Arkitechturmuseum in Frankfurt) allow for a better understanding and analysis of importance of Mexico for this significant exile community. The emigres lived in Mexico for only a few years, but it affected the rest of their lives. Considering the persistence of Mexico in the minds of the exiles provides a sense of the profound impact of Mexico and its artists on the German-speaking emigres and evokes critical questions about the nature of exile, itself.