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Articles

The Movement that Sinned Twice: The *Cristero* War and Mexican Collective Memory

By Consuelo S. Moreno

*Abstract: Many scattered occurrences in Mexico bring to memory the 1926-1929 *Cristero* War, the contentious armed struggle between the revolutionary government and the Catholic Church. After the conflict ceased, the *Cristeros* and their legacy did not become part of Mexico's national identity. This article explores the factors why this war became a distant memory rather than a part of Mexico's history. Dissipation of *Cristero* groups and organizations, revolutionary social reforms in the 1930s, and the intricate relationship between the state and Church after 1929 promoted a silence surrounding this historical event. Decades later, a surge in *Cristero* literature led to the identification of notable *Cristero* figures in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, these occurrences continue to be scarce, and nonetheless, continue to create controversy in Mexican society.*

When the *Cristero* War began in 1926, six years after the most violent phase of the 1910 Revolution had ended, Mexico saw the blood of its citizens shed once again. In a conflict about religious liberties, *Cristeros*, faithful followers of the Roman Catholic Church, took arms against the government to defend their religious convictions. Three years later, the rebellion ended when the State

and Church came to a mutual accord. Yet, in a country in which more than two-thirds of the population practice Catholicism, and where the government's attitude towards the Catholic Church and religion is often the most important part of its program, this war is not identified as part of Mexico's history. Yet, even though the "...actions of the Church have been of greatest importance..."¹ social, civic, moral, and political factors have deliberately ostracized the *Cristero* legacy in the country.

The roots of the Church-State conflict dated back to the beginning of the colonial era and even caused a few violent outbreaks in the nineteenth century. In 1917, however, when the revolutionary forces provided the country with a new constitution, the contention between the two deepened. The Mexican Revolution that had begun in 1910, as an effort to topple President Porfirio Díaz's government, which had been in power for the last thirty years. After his resignation and several failed attempts to lead the country by various individuals, the armed struggle ended with a new constitution promulgated at Querétaro in 1917. This document contained a strong anticlerical component manifested in numerous provisions.² The new state hoped to imitate and reinstate the anticlerical ideals of the 1857 Constitution. This charter included provisos that permitted the state to take control over jurisdictional, financial, and educational matters that had been administered by the Church since colonial times and in the decades after independence.³

During the subsequent years, the strife between the State and Church intensified when several violent attempts and clashes erupted between both institutions. In February of 1921, a dynamite

¹ Richard Blaine Mccornack, "Attitudes towards Religious Matters in Mexican School History Textbooks," *The Americas* 15 (January 1959): 235.

² Peter Lester Reich, *Mexico's Hidden Revolution: The Catholic Church in Law and Politics Since 1929* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 11.

³ Juan González Morfin, "Clericalismo y anticlericalismo en la Constitución de 1917: Un acercamiento al problema a través de los debates del constituyente," *Anuario de Historia de la Iglesia* 27 (October 2018): 438.

explosion destroyed the front entrance of the Archbishop's palace in Mexico City. Four months later, the archiepiscopal residence in Guadalajara experienced a minor bomb attack, too. By November of that same year, an explosive device was placed by the image of the idolized Virgin of Guadalupe at the Basilica, damaging the altar, but not the idol. The Church believed such attacks were encouraged by the government and blamed Juan M. Esponda, a government employee, for the assault at the Basilica. Although Esponda was placed on trial, he did not face any charges due to lack of evidence.

Two years later, the dispute heightened when the Church consecrated a monument to Christ the King on a tall mountain-hill in the state of Guanajuato. According to the government, such action violated article 24, which condemned any outdoor public worship as an infringement to the constitution. Although the Church contended that it did not break the law, President Alvaro Obregón considered it a blatant provocation. Consequently, he expelled Archbishop and Apostolic Delegate Ernesto Filippi and deported any foreign clergymen who were involved. Obregón proceeded to file formal charges against several Mexican bishops and fired all government employees who had participated in the religious act.⁴

After these occurrences in July 1926, with the intent of regulating the Church's influence over the country, Plutarco Elías Calles, a deeply anticlerical president, stated that thirty-three articles of the 1917 Constitution relating to religion had to be fully observed. If not, violators—including civilians and officials who did not enforce the law—ran the risk of receiving severe state sanctions and even incarceration. Of the thirty-three, articles 3, 24, 27, and 130 proved most burdensome to the Catholic Church and created greater animosity between the State and clergy.⁵ Article 3 forced all public and private schools to provide secular instruction. Article 24 forbade any religious practices or ceremonies in public

⁴ David C. Bailey, *¡Viva Cristo Rey!: The Cristero Rebellion and the Church-State Conflict in Mexico* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001), 37-38.

⁵ Lester, *Mexico's Hidden Revolution*, 12.

domains, outside of temples or homes. Lastly, articles 27 and 130 specifically targeted the Catholic Church; the first prohibited the Church to hold any property or organize charitable groups, and the second gave the state the right to decide on the number of priests each state had through a registration process. It also promoted the deportation of clergymen and nuns who appeared as a threat to the revolutionary government.⁶

On July 31, in response to these anticlerical articles and their enforcement, the Mexican clergy decided that the time had come to protest. Archbishop José Mora y del Rio, head of the Episcopal Committee in Mexico, with approval from Pope Pius XI, opted to cease all religious acts and close down temples across the country. The Church, he stated, could not "...function in accordance with the sacred canons."⁷ The Episcopal Committee did not have the freedom to call to arms, and along with ecclesiastical and secular bureaucrats used "...surreptitious evasions and nonenforcement of the anticlerical laws and sometimes political statements..." to oppose the government's mandates.⁸

As a result, the Church benefited from lay organizations that had militant liberty to pursue their institutional goals. These objectives sought to substitute the political regime for one more lenient to the Church. Hence, when several of these groups, including the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty (known as LNDLR for its Spanish initials), the Association of Catholic Mexican Youth (ACJM), and the *Unión Popular* (UP) rebelled against the government, the Episcopal Committee did not halt such actions and insinuated that the bishops condoned the movement.⁹ Along with other *Cristero* insurgents, these organizations established armed movements across the country. ACJM members began collecting ammunition, and the LNDLR

⁶ Lester, *Mexico's Hidden Revolution*, 11-12.

⁷ Bailey, *¡Viva Cristo Rey!*, 81. Pages 81-83 detailed the state's initial approach to the Church's protest.

⁸ Lester, *Mexico's Hidden Revolution*, 5.

⁹ Bailey, *¡Viva Cristo Rey!*, 98.

started to raise an army to fight the government's anticlericalism. On the other hand, the UP tried to abstain from any violent actions, but by the end of the year its president, Anacleto González Flores, opted to form an alliance with the LNDLR and support the armed movement.

Raising their voices to the cry of “¡Viva Cristo Rey!” (Long live Christ the King!), by late 1926 *Cristero* insurgents had appeared in rural areas in western-central Mexico, particularly in the states of Colima, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Nayarit.¹⁰ Then, after a bloody two-year struggle that resulted in 60,000 federal and 40,000 *Cristero* casualties, in 1929 government and clerical leaders “...agreed to a truce because they saw [that] the long-term institutional interests of Church and State... [laid]... in stability rather than in continued violence.”¹¹ The Church feared losing popular support if the war did not stop and if its religious services were not restored. Likewise, the government feared an internal political dispute because Calles and his successor, Emilio Portes Gil, had received pressure from the United States government to end the *Cristero* conflict. The U.S. worried about the economic interests that were threatened by the conflict, and urged by American oil companies, sent Ambassador Dwight Morrow to encourage and assist in the peace arrangements (*arreglos*). The *arreglos* transcended into a *Modus Vivendi*, a peaceful coexisting agreement between both institutions for decades to come. From this point on, the “...the national leaders of the Church and State showed moderation and restraint in their dealings with each other.”¹²

Creating a National Identity

How can occurrences like the *Cristero* War become part of Mexico's national identity? Scholars agree that cultural artifacts

¹⁰ Jean A. Meyer, *The Cristero Rebellion: The Mexican People between Church and State, 1926-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 71.

¹¹ Reich, *Mexico's Hidden Revolution*, 15.

¹² Lester, *Mexico's Hidden Revolution*, 17.

such as "...flags, songs, monuments, medallions and uniforms...[that] may surge from wars, foreign invasions, revolutions, or migrations..."¹³ help build the nation's identity through intellectuals, artists, and politicians who promulgate these artifacts within the citizenry. Although the *Cristero* War gave rise to such articles, the impact of the war on Mexican identity and historical memory has been minimal when compared to other events that have taken place on Mexican soil.

Since the early 1800s, political elites as well as the general population have identified a number of cultural elements to boost the Mexican national character. For instance, during the thirty-five-year reign of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911), high government officials established February 5 and May 5 as holidays; the former celebrated the proclamation of the 1857 Constitution, and the latter the Battle of Puebla, where rag-tag Mexican troops won a significant battle against the French invaders. Then, starting in 1883, Independence Day celebrations took a new appearance. It became the first national holiday attended by provincial citizens as a tourist event in Mexico City. These visitors, along with the city's inhabitants, had the opportunity to observe allegorical representations of the Mexican character through float parades that displayed historical instances like the discovery of Mexico by the Spanish, the country's Independence, and the enactment of 1857 Constitution. By 1905, this holiday's practices became a standard across the nation when workers, teachers, students, athletes, and other civilians participated in them.¹⁴

Intellectuals and artists also played a critical role in shaping Mexican identity and memory after the 1910 Revolution. They worked as state agents to help incorporate the revolution's ideals into historical memory. Pundits turned revolutionary figures, like Francisco I. Madero, Venustiano Carranza, Emiliano Zapata, and

¹³ Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis, *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.

¹⁴ William H. Beezley, *Mexican National Identity: Memory, Innuendo and Popular Culture* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2008), 61-97.

Pancho Villa, became “...vehicles for reinforcing... [Mexican]...culture” into national heroes that conformed to the values of a society, like nationalism, masculinization, and patriarchal attitude, in a country that had been divided by the Revolutionary War.¹⁵ The patriotic celebrations that define Mexican identity, like the combined September 2010 celebration of the Independence Day bicentennial and the Revolution’s centennial, continued to evoke these historical figures. In addition, other cultural artifacts that alluded to the Revolution, such as *corridos* (folkloric songs) and uniforms like those worn by *soldaderas* (the stereotypical revolutionary female soldiers) assisted in creating and promoting the Mexican character during these celebrations.¹⁶

Yet, just like the *Cristero* War, Mexican historical memory has pretty much ignored a number of events related to the country’s long-standing Church-State conflict, such as the 1857-1861 War of the Reform. This bloody conflict marked a turning point in Mexico’s history, as the country underwent a dramatic political and social transformation with the enactment of the 1857 constitution that separated Church and State. Even though liberal President Benito Juárez emerged as a distinguished patriotic hero from the struggle, the war itself lacks recognition.¹⁷ As both wars face national neglect, further scholarly works are needed to understand what circumstances repress the historical memory of the War of Reform, the *Cristero* War, and other such occurrences.

¹⁵ Ilene V. O’Malley, *The Myth of the Revolution: Hero Cults and the Institutionalization of the Mexican State, 1920-1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 113.

¹⁶ Andrea Becerril, “Fiesta Efímera, el bicentenario de la Independencia,” *La Jornada*, September 18, 2010, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2010/09/18/politica/013n1pol>.

¹⁷ Erika Pani’s prologue in Pablo Mijangos y González, *La Reforma* (Mexico City: Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2018), 11.

Forgetting los *Cristeros*

Many noteworthy cultural elements such as leading figures, songs, and martyrs that could have left an imprint in Mexican historical memory emerged from the *Cristero* War. Yet, the war did not become a recognized national event by the State or its citizenry. Some of the underlying factors for this rejection included the disintegration of *Cristero* organizations, the enactment of revolutionary social reforms, Church-state relations after 1929, and the violent nature of the *Cristero* movement.

For instance, one such leading *Cristero* figure was Enrique Gorostieta, a presumed atheist general who had fought along General Victoriano Huerta during the Revolution. Although Gorostieta's recognition revolved in the belief that while being an agnostic (because of his peculiar request to receive a competitive pay and life insurance in case he perished in battle to lead the *Cristero* army), he had fought for the *Cristero* cause with his life. In 2011, however, his descendants publicized a series of letters he had written to his wife Gertrudis during the war in which he stated that although he was not a Catholic fanatic, he was in fact a believer.¹⁸ At the height of the war, he worked closely with the LNDLR, and suggested that the armed struggle should continue even if the Church and State came to an agreement and public worship was restored. On June 2, 1929, he was killed by federal troops while he rested at a *hacienda* in Michoacán. After his death, the LNDLR praised him as hero who had conducted himself in a selfless manner during the rebellion,¹⁹ and a *corrido* composed after his death captured his wartime audacity and further added to league's sentiment:

“With the ensuing peace and treaty
Given under this General's hand.

¹⁸ Bertha Hernández, “Enrique Gorostieta: El ¿Ateo? Qué Se Convirtió en *Cristero*.” *La Crónica De Hoy*. February 28, 2016, <http://www.cronica.com.mx/notas/2016/947408.html>.

¹⁹ Bailey, *¡Viva Cristo Rey!*, pages 263-265 described Gorostieta's last days.

He became a private and distinguished citizen
Working for the nation's good.
And as leader of the rebel forces
Whose cry was 'Long live Christ the King!'
With his valiant and dedicated soldiers [who]
Demanded a reform to the law."²⁰

The *corrido* portrayed the general as a guide to all the *Cristero* insurgents who fought against the government in the name of Christ. It also classified Gorostieta as an outstanding citizen who should be recognized among the Mexican population for his goodwill towards the nation and his effort to amend the Calles Law, but contrarily to the lyrics, Gorostieta never received such national recognition.

On the other hand, some *corridos* projected *Cristero* actions as shameful in a burlesque manner. Federal troops, for instance, "...extolled their own cause in lyrical verse, denouncing the religious crusaders as cruel, villainous miscreants..."²¹ The "*Corrido de la Contestación a las Estupideces del Bandido Rito Betancourt*" (Ballad of Response to the Stupidities of the Bandit Rito Betancourt) is an answer to Bentacourt's 1927 *corrido*. In it, he called *Cristeros* fanatics and holy women (*beatas*) and questioned the *Cristeros*' masculinity, a characteristic highly esteemed by Mexican men.²² To contest such allegations, the *Cristeros* responded by signing the following verse from the ballad:

"If true men you would be,
and if valiant laddies,

²⁰ Texas Politics - The Legislative Branch,
<http://www.laits.utexas.edu/jaime/cwp5/crg/english/gorostieta/index.html>.

²¹ Stephen Andes, "Singing for Cristo Rey: Masculinity, Piety, and Dissent in Mexico's *Cristero* Rebellion," In *Mexico in Verse: A History of Music, Rhyme, and Power*, edited by Stephen Nuefeld, Michael Matthews, and William H. Beezly. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015), 183.

²² *Ibid.*, 182.

then come out to meet,
who's really your daddies.”²³

With the intent to defend their manhood and cause, a *Cristero* from Huejiquilla in the state of Jalisco wrote the *corrido*. Through the lyrics, they advised their opposers that if they were to come to their encounter, they will know who the real “daddy” is, affirming that in the question of masculinity and war-time courage, the rebels took the lead. Such ballad reflected the constant ideological battle that accompanied the war, when the *Cristeros* were not fighting with bullets and guns, they were fighting to present their movement in a compelling manner.

Despite being a prominent tool to spread the war's popular events or vent hatred among the Catholic rebels and Federal troops, *corridos* about the *Cristero* rebellion disappeared from Mexican memory for various decades. The state's efforts to instill a new secular culture that steered away from what it perceived as Catholic fanaticism helped root out these songs from the popular mainstream. During the early 1930s, for instance, the state instituted events that came to be known as cultural Sundays. In rural Sonora, citizens did not attend Sunday religious services anymore, but instead gathered in their town's square to view anticlerical plays such as “Death to Religion,” listen to speeches that denounced the Church as a problem, and sing state-promoted songs like the “Socialist Hymn” and the “Iconoclast Hymn.” As a result, *corridos* that exalted the *Cristeros* and the Catholic Church lost popularity to state hymns among the citizenry because “[a]nticlerical propaganda penetrated into the most remote backwaters...” of the country.²⁴

Radio broadcasting proved to be a more powerful tool to promote the state's ideals and deny pro-*Cristero* *corridos* their part in Mexican national identity. The revolutionary government, aware of the influence that radio would have over Mexicans, worked

²³ Andes, “Singing for Cristo Rey,” 183.

²⁴ Adrian A. Bantjes, *As If Jesus Walked on Earth: Cardenismo, Sonora, and the Mexican Revolution* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 200), 16.

arduously to get this device into the hands of its citizens during the early 1920s. The Ministry of Public Education (SEP) broadcasted jazz, fox-trots, and popular Mexican music that correlated with the revolution's principles and not with any religious concepts. This programming touched on technological advances, the history of the revolution, the Spanish language, poetry, and hygiene in rural communities.²⁵ Radio, thus, became a tool for the government to continue its secularization campaign and eradicate religious fanaticism in the country.

While the state's effort to create a secular society resulted in the loss of *Cristero corridos* during the mid-twentieth century, in 1973 Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History began to search for those forgotten songs. The institute managed to recover nine *corridos* to record on vinyl "through the intrepid work of scholars who ventured into the sierra...[of Jalisco and Zacatecas]... to record local musicians playing songs unknown out of their immediate region."²⁶ Other *Cristero*-inspired *corridos* had to be recovered from cities in the U.S. like Los Angeles and San Antonio that had served as refuge for Mexicans who escaped the State-Church conflict in 1926-1929. While in exile, many of these emigrants sought the means to support the *Cristero* movement economically. These actions produced pro-*Cristero* print media, speeches, films, and photography, and *Cristero*-inspired *corridos* miles away from the heart of the conflict.²⁷

As recollections of *Cristero* cultural elements like *corridos* had to be recovered decades after the war, leading figures that could have been identified as patriotic martyrs also failed to receive recognition in historical memory once the struggle ended. Jesuit priest Miguel Pro stands out among these individuals due to his controversial public execution on November 23, 1927, ten days

²⁵ This paragraph is based on Justin J. Castro's, "Sounding the Mexican Nation: Intellectuals, Radio Broadcasting, and the Revolutionary State in the 1920s," *The Latin Americanist* 58 (September 2014): 3-30.

²⁶ Andes, "Singing for Cristo Rey," 186.

²⁷ Julia G. Young, *Mexican Exodus: Emigrants, Exiles, and Refugees of the Cristero War* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 63-77.

after the failed assassination attempt of ex-President Alvaro Obregón. At the height of the conflict, Pro actively supported the *Cristero* cause by providing rebels with spiritual guidance, ammunition, and food, actions that turned him into an enemy of the state. After being arrested several times for subversion, Obregón's attempted murder marked a turning point for Pro when he was accused of the attack. Without a proper trial and a hurried police investigation, Pro and other men were found guilty of attempting to kill Obregón. A firing squad in Mexico City's central police station executed Pro and the others. Several important national newspapers published the execution's photographs, and they showed Pro in a Christ-like posture moments before being shot. *El Universal Grafico*, was one such newspaper. It printed a special edition ten days after the attempt, displaying several of these photographs and detailing the men's last minutes of life. It provided a detailed account of how the bodies had been impacted by the bullets and the order in which the men had been executed.²⁸

The images of Pro caused an immediate uproar in Mexico and turned him into the symbol of the *Cristero* struggle across the country; his public death created a sense of empathy towards the Catholic militants who suffered under the anticlerical policies of the state. After the war ended, however, his legacy did not carry through. The government did not seek to clarify events that led to his execution during his funeral or the subsequent anniversaries of his death. In 1935 a rumor based on an article from New York's *Daily Eagle* newspaper spread in Mexico. The foreign newspaper recounted the story of a man who affirmed that Pro's remains had been exhumed during a secret midnight ceremony in one of Mexico city's hotels.

Decades later, the Jesuit society discredited the alleged clandestine gathering and exhumation. They declared that Pro's body had remained in the original place of burial until 1980, when

²⁸ Mauricio Mejía Castillo, "Jugamos a los dados y me tocó matar a Obregón," *El Universal*, November 11, 2017, <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/colaboracion/mochilazo-en-el-tiempo/nacion/sociedad/jugamos-los-dados-y-me-toco-matar-obregon>.

they decided to relocate the remains to the temple of *La Sagrada Familia*. Fifteen years after the *Daily Eagle*'s publication, Jesuit leaders sought to revive Pro's memory during the 1950s by turning him into a martyr. The Church, however, rejected the petition because Pro had resorted to violent means to defend Catholicism. To contest the Church's decision, the Jesuits gathered testimonies that depicted Pro as a pious man and a human rights activist who helped Catholics keep their faith during hardship and under great suffering. These efforts were ultimately successful, and Church officials finally recognized Pro as an activist for human rights and democracy during the late 1980s.

Despite this progress, Pro's identity shift reflected the country's resistance to accept *Cristeros* into national memory. His character as a human rights activist has been highlighted by the Church and through the establishment of charity houses and a human rights center bearing his name. Meanwhile, his career as a *Cristero* militant has been ignored by the Church and in national memory. Using this identity change too, the Jesuit Society achieved its goal and Pro was beatified in 1988. He became a Catholic martyr that November 10. Nineteen years later, in 2007, Pro's saintly image transcended into a Jesuit film production titled *Padre Pro: Father Miguel Pro, Martyr of the Lord*. The movie depicted Pro's endeavors and commitment to a pacifist orientation during the conflict, thus sustaining his integrity as a humanist and not as a *Cristero*.²⁹

As the memory of leading *Cristero* figures, *corridos*, and martyrs disintegrated, the Church's actions as the conflict came to an end and thereafter further corroborated to the attenuation of the war's memory. First, the decision to end the war came from the Church's high clergy and state officials, neither of which took into consideration the *Cristero* rebels who "...organized and [continued to] carr[y] out the *Cristero* resistance movement..."³⁰ perceiving

²⁹ My analysis of Father Pro is based on Marisol López-Menéndez, *Miguel Pro: Martyrdom, Politics, and Society in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016).

³⁰ Reich, *Mexico's Hidden Revolution*, 28.

the *arreglos* as betrayal. In 1930, for example, lay groups spread leaflets condoning violence as a method to defend the Catholic faith. This type of behavior jeopardized Church-State relations, and to avoid such actions clergymen advised Catholics to abstain from attending meetings in which the *arreglos* could be criticized in an effort to maintain amicable relations with the state.

Then, shortly after the *arreglos* were signed, the Church moved to decimate the LNDLR and restructure the ACJM to demonstrate a good-faith desire to cooperate with the government. The Church pressured ACJM members to restructure their organization and sought to end relations with the LNDLR. After clerical persuasion, the ACJM expelled its most extremist members and agreed to join *Acción Católica Mexicana* (ACM), a moderate lay Catholic organization founded by Father Miguel Darío Miranda in 1931. The LNDLR, on the other hand, changed its name to *Liga Defensora de la Libertad* (LNDL) to drop any religious connotation per Church demands. Nevertheless, it continued to be a threat to the *arreglos* because radical members like the league's president, Rafael Cenicerós y Villareal, could damage the integrity of the *arreglos* by continuing the call to arms. By 1932, through "...clever maneuvering, the episcopate...won a tangible victory..." when the LNDL suspended all activities. The Church and the "...Pope himself held the organization [LNDL] in very low esteem, [and] a last hope for legitimacy was scattered."³¹

As the Catholic lay organizations that had actively participated in the conflict disbanded, they lost their legitimacy and it became somewhat of a taboo in Mexican society to talk about them. As one historian put it, "...nobody wanted to talk about a movement that sinned twice, once for being defeated and again for being anti-revolutionary..."³² The Church refused to deal with any controversial questions about the violent acts committed by *Cristeros* during the war, and Apostolic delegate Leopoldo Ruiz y

³¹ Miguel Palomar y Vizcarra, August 10, 1932, in *Lara y Torres, Documentos*, 774-75, quoted in Reich, *Mexico's Hidden Revolution*, 29.

³² Matthew Butler, "Cristeros y agraristas en Jalisco," *Historia Mexicana* 52 (October 2002): 493. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25139443>.

Flores declined to aid the LNDL in raising funds to cover the war debt. Consequently, silence began to form around the conflict. Neither the LNDL leaders, the reorganized ACJM, or other organizations sympathetic to *Cristeros* had enough political or social clout to share their accounts of the conflict.³³

Additional unsuccessful pleas from the *Cristeros* to the Church became another issue that contributed to the disintegration of the *Cristero* memory. Many *Cristeros*, like Colonel Jose Maria Gutierrez, lost their lives between 1929 and 1950 to government troops and anti-clerical individuals who sought revenge. On February 14, 1930, forty-one ex-*Cristeros* were executed at San Martín Bolaños, a city in the state of Jalisco. The fact that the majority of the assassinated individuals had held high positions in the LNDLR during the war, proved to be worrisome for the ex-rebels. Some of the organization's leaders refused to apply for the granted amnesty after the war and went into hiding instead. The LNDLR petitioned Ruiz, once more, to intervene and protect those *Cristeros* whose lives were in danger, but Ruiz, once again, declined the request. Execution of these men took place and both the State and Church "...showed little or no interest in investigating the problem."³⁴

As many of the *Cristeros* lost credibility and their lives, politicians, intellectuals, and artists worked arduously to reprehend any religious customs during the 1930s and early 1940s. One of the most energetic such state-led campaigns proved to be the secular educational reform that the Church and *Cristeros* had longed to end in previous years. It had been launched during the 1920s by presidents Obregón and Calles, both of whom hoped to "...pragmatize Mexican culture along the lines of that of United States, [because] they regarded central and southern Mexico as the sick lethargic consequence of Spanish oppression and Catholic obscurantism."³⁵ The educational reforms intensified efforts in the

³³ Reich, *Mexico's Hidden Revolution*, pages 17-53 detail post-*arreglos* activity among the lay organizations.

³⁴ Bailey, *¡Viva Cristo Rey!*, 294.

³⁵ Vaughan and Lewis, *The Eagle and the Virgin*, 11.

country's rural regions where indigenous communities adhered strongly to the Catholic faith.³⁶ The government sent trained teachers supplied with textbooks that diffused the Revolution's anticlerical ideals. In this manner, the state's intellectuals had the power to promote their goals in communities and leave out what proved challenging to the government, like the *Cristero* War.

By the end of the 1930s the educational endeavor had reached 720,000 students, and approximately 12,500 rural primary schools. The reform created a pantheon of patriotic heroes who had participated in the wars of Independence and had fought in the 1910 Revolution by incorporating them in primary and secondary education. To this day, historical figures like Miguel Hidalgo and José María Morelos, prominent figures in the independent movement, and key individuals from the Revolution like Villa and Zapata, are remembered in schools across Mexico. Meanwhile, neither the Church nor the State sought to integrate the leading figures of the *Cristero* rebellion into the national memory.³⁷

Although the state's social revolution mainly targeted a change in the educational system, the government also launched a cultural revolution to root out fanaticism, thus eliminating any opportunity for *Cristero* memory to survive. In the early 1930s, Sonora, Tabasco, Veracruz, and Michoacán became known as the "laboratories of the revolution." A strong supporter of this crusade was Sonora's governor and son of President Calles, Rodolfo Elias Calles. Governor Calles, along with other revolutionaries, believed the clergy needed to be under the state's control, he only allowed thirteen priests to officiate in Sonora between 1931-1932. To ensure the success of the cultural revolution, Calles limited worship and destroyed religious symbols.³⁸ The state's iconoclastic

³⁶ Mary Kay Vaughan, "Nationalizing the Countryside: Schools and Rural Communities in the 1930s," in *The Eagle and the Virgin*, 158.

³⁷ Pages 109-153 of Gilbert M. Joseph and Jürgen Buchenau, *Mexico's Once and Future Revolution: Social Upheaval and the Challenge of Rule since the Late Nineteenth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013) detail the educational reforms undertaken by revolutionary leaders after the 1920s.

³⁸ Bantjes, *As If Jesus Walked*, 3-21.

cultural revolution's accomplishments manifested in states like Michoacán. In Ario de Rayon, a northern town in the state, revolutionary women's leagues formed in the mid-1930s to help women "...flex their intellectual muscles against Catholicism..."³⁹ These organizations aimed to reconstruct the role of women in small towns, and steer them away from church activities. During this time, religious icons like *La Purísima*—a women's special saint—were burned at the church altar. One night after the town's temple had been purged from its saints, revolutionaries experienced "...surroundings differently, men approached their wives and girlfriends and invited them to dance before the altar."⁴⁰ Although these types of anticlerical acts did not specifically target the repression of the *Cristero* memory, it did enforce a strong revolutionary sentiment in towns where Catholicism had once been the ruling party.

Artistic endeavors also accompanied the cultural revolution. Celebrated artists like Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Frida Kahlo, and María Izquierdo used paint and brushes to boost this movement. Walls in national buildings, such as the *Escuela Nacional Preparatoria*, government offices, and universities were transformed into murals that embraced Mexican identity as defined by the state. These murals aimed to capture the attention of the people and sought to instruct literate and illiterate alike (in a nation where only 25 percent of the population could read).⁴¹ Some artists, like Rivera, focused on social issues within the country in his paintings. He aimed to convey "...the religious passion of a secular annunciation of revolutionary brotherhood..."⁴² and his work *Priest with the*

³⁹ Marjorie Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán Peasants, and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 91.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁴¹ Justin J. Castro, "Sounding the Mexican Nation," 6.

⁴² Desmond Rochfort, "The Sickie, the Serpent and the Soil: History, Revolution, Nationhood, and Modernity in the Murals of Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros" in *The Eagle and the Virgin*, 45.

Exploiters explicitly illustrated this sentiment as it portrayed colonial clergy plundering Native Americans. In other paintings, Rivera highlighted the Revolution's ideals. His *Liberation of the Peon* and *The New School* depicted *mestizo* Mexicans freed from exploitation and drudgery as they assumed new roles as educated citizens, who would gain knowledge of their culture and attain greater presence in the national political arena.⁴³

The aggressive actions committed by *Cristeros* also ensured that the 1926-1929 rebellion would disappear from Mexican historical memory. One of the most controversial and violent acts committed during the war was the derailment of the La Barca passenger train. On April 21, 1927, a group of *Cristeros* led by Priest José Reyes Vega attacked that train in Jalisco. The attack caused much commotion in the country as *El Informador* (an independent newspaper based in that state) informed that approximately 450-500 *Cristero* rebels derailed the train. A three-hour shootout then followed, during which *Cristero* soldiers failed to distinguish between the boxcars that contained federal troops and those with passengers. After extracting the valuables from the train and leaving the injured inside, *Cristero* troops set the boxcars on fire. *El Informador* did not provide a total count of the dead but it did state that women and children perished in the attack.⁴⁴ The next day, General Joaquín Amaro, Minister of War, stated that not even the most disastrous events of the Revolution compared to the attack. As a result, the General affirmed that an energetic campaign against the rebels would be redirected towards the state of Jalisco.⁴⁵

The following year, the assassination of president-elect Alvaro Obregón on July 17, 1928 shocked the nation. José de León Toral, a Catholic extremist, killed the president-elect during a garden banquet in Mexico City. Though it is questionable whether

⁴³ Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire*, 9.

⁴⁴ "Fue Asaltado el Tren Directo Que Salió de Esta Ciudad para México" *El Informador*, April 21, 1927, <http://hemeroteca.informador.com.mx/>.

⁴⁵ "El Gral. J. Amaro se halla en Jalisco" *El Informador*, April 21, 1927, <http://hemeroteca.informador.com.mx/>.

Toral had any ties to the *Cristero* movement, he had worked closely with nun Concepción Acevedo de la Llata, popularly known as Madre Conchita. Acevedo de la Llata had allowed Toral and other Catholic militants into her home after the closure of temples in 1926, and suggested that the only way the Catholic Church could be freed from its difficulties would be with the death of Presidents Calles and Obregón.⁴⁶ The conspirators began to manufacture bombs and discuss plans to kill Obregón, and Toral decided to execute the task. The police apprehended Toral after Obregon's murder and he confessed to borrowing the weapon from one of Madre Conchita's friends. She and Toral were arrested, with Toral receiving the death sentence while Madre Conchita received a twenty-year prison punishment.

Cristeros also launched an aggressive campaign against the teachers sent by the SEP to the rural areas of the country. Abiding to their religious beliefs, they opposed the state's secular education by mutilating, raping, and killing these individuals.⁴⁷ These aggressions became more evident after the war, particularly between 1934 and 1938 when the *Cristeros* attempted to revive their movement in the so-called *La Segunda* (the Second) uprising. The rebels aimed to end the government's social reforms, including the secular education program, that had been enforced by then-President Lázaro Cárdenas. As a result, school attendance dramatically dropped when parish priests instructed parents to remove their children from school. In towns like Contepec, Michoacán, for example, *Cristeros* and their followers took the matter more seriously and lynched the teachers sent by the SEP.⁴⁸ On May 15, 1935, a few days after the national celebration of the day of teacher, President Cárdenas stood before the nation to honor

⁴⁶ "La Inspección General de Policía de la Capital a Conocer Sus Investigaciones Sobre el Asesinato del Sr. Presidente Obregón" *El Informador*, July 31, 1928, <http://hemeroteca.informador.com.mx/>.

⁴⁷ Marjorie Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire*, 125.

⁴⁸ Enrique Manzo Guerra, "The Resistance of the Marginalized: Catholics in Eastern Michoacán and the Mexican State, 1920-40," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 6 (2008): 109-33. www.jstor.org/stable/40056628.

the fallen teachers. In his speech, he stated that fanaticism and ignorance had taken the lives of those teachers who wished to better the cultural and financial conditions of the Mexican people, but that their efforts were officially recognized and admired. He continued affirming the death of these individuals was going to become an important factor as he continued to fulfill the Revolution's responsibilities with the nation.⁴⁹ This type of violent attacks prevented the expansion of *Cristero* legacy throughout the country, because instead of halting the effort to spread secular ideals throughout the country, their actions created an impetus for the continuity of the revolution.

Cristero Resurgence

While the *Cristero* War did not have much of an impact on Mexico's historical memory when the conflict ended, several motion pictures and works of literature had appeared by the late 1940s in an attempt to fill this void. These works, however, illustrate contradictory views about the *Cristero* War. The 1947 Mexican film *Sucedió en Jalisco* ("It Happened in Jalisco"), for instance, showcased one family's struggle during the *Cristero* rebellion. Two brothers, Felipe and Policarpo, the first a government official and the latter a *Cristero*, had to overcome their political differences to unite their family, which had been deeply affected and divided by the war.⁵⁰ Fourteen years later, Antonio Estrada's novel *Rescoldo* related the events he lived during *La Segunda*. The novel described the contentious sentiment that Mexicans had towards the war through the eyes of a child. The youngster hoped his *Cristero* father would overcome the federal

⁴⁹ "Tuvo Especial Celebración en el País el Día del Maestro" *El Informador*, May 15, 1935, <http://www.hndm.unam.mx/consulta/publicacion/visualizar/558a34597d1ed64f16a42a48?anio=1935&mes=05&dia=16&tipo=pagina&palabras=maria+rodriguez+z+murillo>.

⁵⁰ *Sucedió en Jalisco*, YouTube video, 1:36:28, posted by "MrAngelo," May 16, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQW-QEuj8Kw>.

troop's aggressions while also shedding light on the transgressions committed by *Cristero* rebels.⁵¹ Around the same time, starting in 1960, academic works about the *Cristero* War began to appear. Alicia Olivera's book, *Aspectos del Conflicto Religioso de 1926 a 1929: Sus Antecedentes y Consecuencias* analyzed the friction within the state's political leaders, Obregón and Calles, and between the Church and the LNDRL, but avoided an exploration of the war's origins.⁵² Her work, however, served as the base for French historian Jean Meyer's *The Cristiada: The Mexican People's War for Religious Liberty*, an unprecedented analysis of conflict that showcased the *Cristeros* in a favorable light. Published in 1973, the book began as a doctoral thesis encouraged by a Jesuit priest who advised him to investigate a topic that had seldom been studied.⁵³ Meyer's work proved to be academic success at the time of its publishing and celebrated by Catholic readers. His achievement was credited to the research based on the country's rural sectors. Yet, scholars have repeatedly criticized *The Cristiada* for portraying the conflict "...100% in favor of the *Cristeros*."⁵⁴ Meyer's work did not assign responsibility to any clerical figures or institutions while portraying the government as a cruel oppressor that committed a political error by applying Calles' anticlerical laws, and underplayed the role of the LNDLR in the war.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Arias Urrutia and Ángel Rescoldo. "Los Últimos *Cristeros*: Una Novela Extraordinaria," *Revista Intercontinental de Psicología y Educación*, 62 (July-December 2010), 107.

⁵² Damián López, "La Guerra *Cristera* (Mexico 1926-1929): Una Aproximación Historiográfica," *Historiografías* 6 (Spring 2011): 41.

⁵³ Luis Arturo, "Jean Meyer, la Cruzada por México: Los Católicos de Estados Unidos y la Cuestión Religiosa en México," *Estudios De Historia Moderna y Contemporánea De Mexico* 36 (December 2008): www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0185-26202008000200011#notas.

⁵⁴ Jean A. Meyer, *La Cristiada*, (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1973), 7, quoted in López, "La Guerra *Cristera*," 43.

⁵⁵ López, "La Guerra *Cristera*," 42.

The *Cristero* Rebellion had remained a controversial issue in Mexico. Few historians had attempted to seriously examine this event, and translating foreign academic works on this subject did not appeal to Mexican publishing houses.⁵⁶ By the 1990s, however, post-revisionist historians produced academic works that considered both the religious and political factors, and not just popular roots as Meyer and Olivera had. During this time, Jeannie Purnell and Matthew Butler challenged Meyer's findings, and proposed that the *Cristero* movement had not been a homogeneous endeavor. Rather, each participating locality had individual motives that moved them to engage in the rebellion. Purnell explained that trying to provide a structural analysis of the *Cristero* War could be problematic, while her field research in communities near Los Altos, Michoacán demonstrated that local history and its specific cultural background motivated *Cristero* rebels to join the movement without taking class, ethnicity, or level of religiosity into account.⁵⁷ Butler's findings, meanwhile, placed the religious context as the source of the *Cristeros*' impetus. He illustrated the Catholic faith as the result of social circumstances and interpreted the struggle as complex and problematic.⁵⁸ In 2001, Moisés Gonzales Navarro, a Mexican scholar, authored *Cristeros y Agraristas en Jalisco*. Although his work presented a deep social analysis of the war, it proved troublesome to categorize as a contribution to *Cristero* studies. The book, "despite its title...tells very little about *agraristas*, [and] much less about *Cristeros*."⁵⁹ Unlike Gonzalez, other historians began exploring the conflict in regions that had not received much attention from scholars like Campeche, Guerrero, Colima, and Hidalgo. One such historian was Julia Preciado Zamora, who in *Por las faldas del Volcán de Colima: Cristeros, Agraristas y Pacíficos* examined the

⁵⁶ López, *Miguel Pro: Martyrdom, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, xvii.

⁵⁷ Jennie Purnell, *Popular Movements and State Formation in Revolutionary Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 9-10.

⁵⁸ López, "La Guerra Cristera," 41-43.

⁵⁹ Matthew Butler, "Cristeros Y Agraristas En Jalisco," 494.

underestimated role of the population who remained neutral during the war in Colima in 2007. Julia G. Young also took up this task in her 2015 *Mexican Exodus; Emigrants, Exiles, and Refugees of the Cristero War*, by considering the impact of the *Cristero War* in the United States as many Mexicans fled the war's violent atmosphere to American cities.⁶⁰

While historians revisited the *Cristero War*, a fashion dispute a few years earlier, in 2007, further demonstrated popular disapproval of the *Cristero* legacy. Designer María del Rayo Macías Díaz proposed a formal evening dress for Miss Mexico, Rosa María Ojeda, to wear in the Miss Universe beauty pageant. That dress depicted some of the war's violent scenes, the Virgin of Guadalupe, *Cristeros*, and some of the Catholic priests who had taken up arms. The dress caused an uproar in Mexican society. Some viewed it "as an anachronism,"⁶¹ and stated that other cultural items that did not involve violence provided a better representation of Mexico to the world.⁶² Although the designer declared that the dress did not intend to exalt the *Cristeros*, it was replaced in the official contest by one that illustrated typical Mexican fruits. The switch demonstrated the nation's unwillingness to integrate the *Cristero War* into Mexican historical memory in contemporary times.

In addition, and by the time the controversial Miss Universe dress had captured the public's attention, government officials had moved to foster the *Cristero* legacy. In the early 1990s, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari "...made common cause with the Catholic Church... [and] restored diplomatic

⁶⁰ Young, *Mexican Exodus*, 186.

⁶¹ Arturo Cruz Bárcenas, "Protesta Desafía a Pasarela de Concurstantes a Miss Universo," *La Jornada*, May 21, 2007, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2007/05/21/index.php?section=espectaculos&article=a18n1esp>.

⁶² F. Camacho, E. Montano, A. Jiménez, A. Vargas, and J. Balboa, "El Traje Cristero, Revanchismo de la Derecha, afirma Lorenzo Meyer," *La Jornada*, April 15, 2007 <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2007/04/15/index.php?section=espectaculos&article=a09n1esp>.

relations with the Vatican for the first time since the revolution.”⁶³ Then, in 2000, Vicente Fox became the first candidate from *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN, a Catholic-based political party that had existed since 1939) to win the presidential chair, and toward the end of his term, the Church sought to revive the *Cristeros*’ memory and turn it into a socially acceptable issue in Mexico. It converted renowned *Cristero* militants, like LNDLR leader Anacleto González Flores, to *beatos* on November 20, 2005 at the Jalisco Stadium in Guadalajara.

The beatification, however, proved controversial because it took place during the presidential term of a PAN official; one scholar has argued that the act, far from being a religious action, appeared to have been an effort to present the *Cristeros* as political saints, if not as martyrs.⁶⁴ The date chosen by the Church for this occasion—November 20—further corroborates this argument. That day marks the anniversary of the beginning of the 1910 Revolution. By commemorating and beatifying the Catholics who rebelled against the revolutionary government during the *Cristero* War on November 20, the Church attempted to substitute the remembrance of revolutionary heroes for religious icons.

Church officials have employed this tactic on other occasions, as illustrated by the immense popular devotion of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who replaced Tonantzin, the Nahuatl goddess of the Tepeyac, with the fervent following she currently enjoys. In 1531, Juan Diego, a presumed Indian in colonial New Spain, as Mexico was then known, claimed to have had a vision in which a virgin named Guadalupe told him to build her a temple in the same place where Tonantzin’s temple had once been. However, academic literature questions Juan Diego’s existence and the veracity of such events. The lack of primary sources narrating the events, and the ambiguity of those that do exist create an open

⁶³ Joseph, Buchenau, *Mexico’s Once and Future Revolution*, 181. This paragraph recalls from pages 117-196 in which the authors recount the Revolution’s influence on society, politics, and economy from 1932 to 2000.

⁶⁴ La Redacción, “Beatos De Ultraderecha,” *Proceso*, September 05, 2004, <https://www.proceso.com.mx/193107/beatos-de-ultraderecha>.

argument when evaluating Juan Diego's experience.⁶⁵ By the eighteenth century, nonetheless, a successful evangelization effort to highlight the virgin's mestizo features had taken place. Consequently, the Church employed the Virgin of Guadalupe as a political saint and icon of transculturation between the natives and Spaniards to promote a popular religious belief.⁶⁶ When independence concerns began to arise in the Spanish colony in the late 1790s, the Virgin's alleged apparition in New Spain's soil inspired colonials, like fray Servando Teresa de Mier, to believe in Mexico's sovereignty not just in a political aspect, but on a religious level as well. In a 1794 sermon, Mier, stated that "...New World owed nothing to the Old, not even Christianity,"⁶⁷ and the Virgin's apparition reinforced his assumptions. When the Wars of Independence began, insurgent priest Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla used banners portraying the dark Virgin to announce the death of Spaniards and independence of Mexico, leading her to become an enduring national symbol for the ensuing centuries.

Seven years after the beatification of the thirteen *Cristeros*, an additional effort to renovate the *Cristero* War came from Hollywood. In 2012, *For Greater Glory* presented a romanticized view of Mexico during the 1920s through a one-sided narrative of the war in favor of the *Cristeros*. In the English-speaking film, Mexican producer Pablo José Barroso cast well-known Hollywood actors, like Andy Garcia to play General Gorostieta—who united and trained *Cristero* soldiers—Eva Longoria as Tulita, Gorostieta's faithful Catholic wife who encouraged him to take the lead of the *Cristero* army, and Peter O'Toole, as beatified priest Cristóbal Magallanes. While the film became a box-office hit in Mexico, after its release critics expressed their disappointment not only for the misrepresentation of Mexico's language and scenery, but for its

⁶⁵ Stafford Poole, C.M., *Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol*, (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1997), 1-14.

⁶⁶ Javier García González, "Guadalupe, Modelo Perfecto De Inculturación," *Preseitas* 2 (July 2014): 214.

⁶⁷ Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 207.

failed attempt to historically recount the *Cristero* War. Jean Meyer declared that "...the Hollywood screenwriter totally deformed the facts and characters."⁶⁸ The struggle was depicted as a typical western drama, where Calles' disdain for the Catholic Church was amplified and he was characterized as a cruel oppressor. Meanwhile, *Cristero* figures were portrayed as sensitive, just, and celestial-like creatures. Overall, even though the film failed to accurately present the historical events of the war, it did succeed in reviving the *Cristero* memory outside the academic world. Generations of men, women, and kids that had not been exposed to war, had the opportunity to obtain a glimpse of the struggle.⁶⁹

After the Revolution, the unstable relationship between the Church and State paved the way for the *Cristero* War, forming a critical event in Mexico's history that has been dismissed in national memory. Even though cultural artifacts that emerged from the war could have been appropriated and celebrated as national history, when the war broke out the *Cristeros* were not only defending their religious ideals, but their place in national memory. Aside from Hollywood's misconstrued effort to inform about the *Cristero* War, new generations of Mexicans who learn about this war have been informed by transitional family memories that "...hold a deep historical meaning for..." them.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, there is a part of society that does not count on family memories to remember this war, and the sources available in the country are scarce and many times distorted. Ninety-three years have not been enough for Mexican society to reconcile their loyalties with the State and Church to openly discuss this war. And, despite the recent efforts to ingrain the *Cristero* War as an integral part of Mexican identity, the conflict remains controversial and avoided.

⁶⁸ Charles Homan, "Two Thumbs Up," *New Republic* 243 (March 2012): 6-8.

⁶⁹ Hugo Hernández, "Cristiada; Reseña de un Culebrón Hollywoodense," *Letras Libres*, April 19, 2012, <https://www.letraslibres.com/mexico-espana/cinetv/cristiada>.

⁷⁰ Young, *Mexican Exodus*, 175.

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The Movement that Sinned Twice

- “Tuvo Especial Celebración en el País el Día del Maestro” *El Informador*, May 15, 1935,
<http://www.hndm.unam.mx/consulta/publicacion/visualizar/558a34597d1ed64f16a42a48>.
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History in the Making