



Popular violence and 'lay religion' in centre-west Mexico during Mexico's Cristero war (1926-29)

Mark Lawrence
University of Kent

ABSTRACT

This article suggests that the Cristero insurgency of 1926-29 was a form of lay religious violence inimical not only to the Mexican Revolution but also to the interests of the Catholic civilians and hierarchy the rebels claimed to represent. By the same token, Cristeros shared with their Revolutionary enemies a habit of plebeian vigilantism which was informed by economic and politico-religious mobilisation underway since 1910. Focusing on the mestizo and indigenous populations in the states of Zacatecas, Durango and Jalisco, this article shows how the external conflict presented by the Church-state crisis of 1926 was used as a pretext for localised disputes concerning land and pillage. The Cristiada of 1926-29 thus deserves to be understood as part of the pattern of popular protest over land, property and autonomy which had been unleashed by the onset of the Mexican Revolution in 1910. This article concludes with an explanation of the military and political relevance of the Cristero conflict today.

KEYWORDS

Cristero, Defensa, Ejido, Mexican Revolution, Indigenous, Aurelio Acevedo, Catholicism, Vigilantism, Lay Religion

CITATION

Lawrence, M. (2023). Popular violence and 'lay religion' in centre-west Mexico during Mexico's Cristero (1926-29). *Historical Encounters*, 10(2), 84-94.
<https://doi.org/10.52289/hej10.208>

COPYRIGHT

© Copyright retained by Author
Published 21 December 2023
Distributed under a [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License

Introduction

The period 1910-40 was tumultuous in Mexican history. The armed phase of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) was followed by fragmented attempts by Revolutionary politicians to assert Federal control and modernisation in the face of military rebellion, resistance to social reform, two major religious revolts known as the Cristiada (during 1926-29 and a more dispersed effort during 1932-40), and ongoing, albeit often unacknowledged, agency from Mexico's indigenous populations. The Cristero revolt was a popular convulsion made in protest against President Calles's enactment of the Mexican Revolution's anticlerical constitution of 1917. It was ultimately the most violent and divisive episode in Mexico between the 1910 Revolution and the ongoing Narco Wars. Mexican clerics suspended worship on 31 July 1926, one day before the implementation of a federal law regulating the internal affairs of the Catholic Church. The so-called Calles Law applied the penal code to non-juring priests, bringing the secular public sphere of the state into the private sphere of orphanages, schools, and asylums to ensure they displayed no religious icons or concealed chapels. The Catholic hierarchy's response meant that churches remained nominally open yet without any religious services. Religious practices became a private matter in areas of Federal government control, as most of the Church hierarchy and priesthood refused to support the Cristero rebels openly. But religiosity was openly flaunted in areas controlled by the Cristero rebels (Meyer, 2007).

For most of the twentieth century this religious civil war was sidelined by Mexican scholarship in part because of its 'historia broncina' ('statue history' or focus on political and military elites) approach to the past, and in part because neither the Catholic hierarchy nor the post-Revolutionary state (1940-2000) welcomed inquiries. The gruelling conflict was by some measures the bloodiest episode of twentieth-century Mexico, and it offered little glory either to the patricians of the Revolution or to the equivocations of the Catholic Church. Civil wars, to quote an eminent political scientist, "often refuse to speak their name", being instead euphemised as "troubles", "emergency" or "violence" (Kalyvas, 2006, p. 17). The fact that militancy came disproportionately from lay Catholics (both through political mobilisation and force of arms) and footsoldiers of the Revolutionary state (militia, conscripts, and candidates for land redistribution known as 'agraristas') gave the Cristiada a plebeian and localised quality which for several decades received little serious coverage in official history. The actual fighting, while scattered, was bloody and terrible. Balladeers wrote *corridos* about the conflicts. These beloved folk songs told tall stories via a familiar and comfortable medium for the locals¹. Catholic apologists within and without Mexico catastrophised the Cristiada as a collective martyrdom, or as a form of sacred history forced upon the faithful as a result of the extremist, even satanic, anti-clericalism of the incumbent president Plutarco Elías Calles (McCullough, 1928). This view exonerated the Catholic hierarchy from the atrocities and counter-atrocities, placing the blame squarely with the Federal government, and allowing Mexican bishops and the Vatican to pose as peacemakers once the armistice known as the 'Arreglos' was agreed in June 1929. Secular writers, for their part, dismissed the Cristiada as an aspect of fanaticism or, in the case of Marxist historians, the result of a false consciousness bred into the rural proletariat by the counter-revolutionary alliance of priests and landowners. The religious revolt was a last gasp of a reactive defence of traditional values threatened by economic modernisation and the unfolding of the revolutionary state (Lawrence, 2020).

These binary interpretations were challenged from the 1970s, thanks to the pioneering work of historian Jean Meyer and the breakthrough of regional studies. In part this academic interest conforms with a wider reappraisal of right-wing movements stretching back to the popular royalism of Latin America's independence wars (Echeverri, 2018). Jean Meyer argued that the Cristero revolt had wide-ranging plebeian support, which was at odds not only with the Mexican Revolution's appeal to the masses but also with a lukewarm Catholic hierarchy (Meyer, 2009). More recently, regional historians have stressed how vertical transactional power relationships dictated local allegiances in favour of or against the Cristeros, often surpassing the importance of faith, class, or ethnicity (Guerra Manzo, 2015; Brewster 2003). The very nature of Cristero militancy has been complicated by research into passive acts of economic and Catholic protest,

including the cultivation of miracle stories and lay religious innovations in response to the Church's formal suspension of religious services in protest at the Calles regime's anti-clericalism (Butler, 2008). Amidst this new research, the military history of the Cristero War remains somewhat underdeveloped. This shortcoming can partly be explained by the halo effect of sacred history which, along with an overall tendency for veterans writing memoirs to downplay the horrors of war for the sake of their readers², has clad Cristero military history in the ill-fitting clothes of political, social, and cultural history.

Blending assorted primary and historiographical evidence from the western heartland of Mexico's Cristero War, especially from the archive bequeathed by one of the leading Cristeros, Aurelio Acevedo, this article will argue that Cristero militancy amounted to a kind of self-righteous vigilantism which was spawned by economic and religious mobilisation and inimical towards attempts by Cristero leaders to win over support. Focusing on the mestizo and indigenous populations in the states of Zacatecas, Durango and Jalisco, this article shows how the external conflict presented by the Church-state crisis of 1926 was used as a pretext for localised disputes concerning land and pillage. The insurgent rallying-cry of 'Long Live Christ the King!' (Viva Cristo Rey!) was a performative appeal to material interests far removed from its theological claims. The Cristiada of 1926-29 thus deserves to be understood as part of the pattern of popular protest over land, property and autonomy which had been unleashed in 1910. The material interests motivating opposition to the Mexican state offers parallels to the drugs war underway since 2006 in the former Cristero states of Michoacán, Guerrero, Jalisco and Zacatecas.

The mobilisation of Catholic politics

The Mexican Revolution underway since 1910 had unleashed not only the secularising impulses of land reform (mostly, the ending of the pseudo-feudalistic hacienda system) but also a resurgent Catholicism relying on modern political media and mobilisation in defence of incumbent private property. The liberal Maderista phase of the Revolution (1911-1913) energised the Catholic Party (PCN), especially in rural areas of the west, and lay organisations propounded Social Catholic doctrines. Religious youth activism expanded, the Cristo Rey monument established in Guanajuato in 1923 became a focus of nationwide mobilisation, and a Catholic stoicism flourished amongst young migrants and middle classes in the cities (Weis, 2019). Meanwhile, the pendulum swings of politics and armies during the armed phase of the Revolution kept the land question alive for at least three reasons. Veterans of campaigns demanded land and the intellectual Luis Cabrera in 1912 published an influential plan to produce communal landholdings ('ejidos') inspired by pre-Columbine traditions. All the while the emerging Revolutionary state entrenched its support in the economic and logistical hubs of the cities, allying with urban working classes while rural grievances, with some exceptions (such as the state of Morelos in the wake of the Zapata revolution), went unaddressed (Knight, 1986; López Beltrán, 1987).

The persistence of Mexico's iniquitous land situation thus coalesced with Catholic political mobilisation. In the early 1920s the Catholic newspaper *La Restauración* railed against one of the central policies of the Mexican Revolution, the provision of communal landholdings ('ejidos') to the rural proletariat. Blending classism and racism, the Catholic daily warned against 'Indians and drunks' getting hold of land (González Navarro, 2000). Pleas during the 1920s to Zacatecas large landowners (hacendados) to redistribute land fell on deaf ears. Social Catholic activism supported the creation of smallholdings, albeit either via state purchase of lands or via various forms of leaseholding, sharecropping or emphyteusis from existing hacendados, as well as support for the Raiffeisen system of affordable credit: in other words, anything short of the 'Bolshevik' expropriation beloved of Catholic black propaganda. The first Catholic Workers' Congress, meeting in 1922, offered homilies about the selfish rich and the moral lapses of the poor, but none of this amounted to a concrete programme (González Navarro, 2000). The question of the land thus resonated in pulpits, press and podiums even while any systematic solution was disavowed. As late as 1934, the Zacatecas Cristero leader, Aurelio Acevedo, approved an invective against the Federal government's programme of establishing ejidos. The Federal government, according to

Acevedo, was interested not in helping the rural poor but in nationalising them along with Mexico's natural resources. The deleterious influence of the philosophers and of the spirit of the Enlightenment loomed large on Mexican revolutionaries, whose aim was ultimately to hand the country either to Bolsheviks or to the Anglo-Saxon "enemy of our race", the United States (CESU, ARA 3/4/14-17, Sección Militante Cristero, Subsección LNDLR, CD y CE, Serie: Propaganda, No. 14, 1934 Invective from Cristero propagandists).

The dissemination of counter-revolutionary and xenophobic propaganda sanctified attacks on property deemed suspect, as well as acts of abduction and killing. Cristero violence alienated not only communities in the insurgents' path, but also the rebel authorities in the Cristero capital of Huejuquilla (Jalisco) who were at pains to be accepted as a regime-in-waiting rather than a front for brigandage. In October 1927 the political wing of the Cristero revolt, the National League for the Defence of Religious Freedom (LNDLR), issued its 'Manifesto to the Nation', offering such peace terms as a return to the 1857 Constitution minus its anti-clerical Laws of Reform and a proposal to buy out rather than expropriate large landowners. By the start of 1928, a full year into the organised Cristero revolt, the Cristeros proclaimed the substitution of the Revolutionary Constitution of 1917 with a theocracy based on divine right: "to God, King of the Universe, and to all Civilised Nations of the Earth" (Lombardo Toledana, 1990, pp. 30 & 57; Bailey, 1974, pp. 234-235; González Navarro, 2000, p. 411). The Cristero statelet carved predominantly out of parts of rural Jalisco and Zacatecas was placed in official mourning, puritanism pervaded all culture that was not liturgical, and as much as half of all revenue levied on civilians was dedicated to the war effort (González Navarro, 2001; Bailey, 1974). The Catholic statelet developed its political culture austerely. By 5 June 1928 a political convention ratified the constitution along with war aims in the form of the 'Ordenanza General del Movimiento Cristero' (Hernández, 2008; González Navarro, 2000).

But contested frontier areas were subjected to pillage thinly veiled by claims to create the kingdom of Christ on Earth. The famous cry of 'Viva Cristo Rey!', as Alfonso Gómez-Rossi has recently argued, originated in an affirmation of the recent Papal encyclical *Quas primas* (1925) regarding the eternity of the kingdom of Christ in the wake of the downfall of so many royal houses since the First World War. But in insurgent mouths the cry transcended theology to sanctify acts of violence, to bond the Cristero brotherhood of arms, and above all to affirm the plebeian nature of Catholic counter-revolution vis-à-vis an often-anguished leadership (Gómez-Rossi, 2022). Most Mexican bishops were either neutral or opposed to the Cristero revolt and local priests mostly stayed out of the conflict. As Aurelio Acevedo recalled, "the very Fathers forbade us to fight for Christ, for the religion our fathers taught us and then reaffirmed for us in baptism, confirmation and our first communion" (Meyer, 2007, p. 70). This patriarchal void was in part filled by women, traditionally more devout in religious observance, and foreshadowed by the examples of female agency in Catholic resistance in the Vendée and Spain's War of Independence (Tone, 2007). Cristero activists often cited the counter-revolutionary example of the Vendée as inspiration. For women, who were mainly excluded from fighting roles, giving refuge to the refractory priests was an accessible way of acting against the Revolution. Women also smuggled ammunition and intelligence, sheltered fugitive Cristeros, hid sacred objects, and acted as nurses. (Vaca, 1998; Fallaw, 2013; Schell, 2007).

Cristero men, for their part, enacted the kingdom of Christ in violent ways. The rallying cry 'Viva Cristo Rey!' ushered victims into immortality, as the final words of Cristero militants facing firing squads attested, along with the promise of martyrdom to followers of the cause. A boy attending religious classes in the Cristero capital of Huejuquilla told his mother: "You know heaven, mummy? It's really easy to get there. All you need to do is shout 'Viva Cristo Rey!', and then they kill you" (de la Torre, 2020, p. 107). At the less exalted extreme the cry excused acts of pillage, hence the rhyme "Long Live Christ the King and bring me the best ox!" ('Viva Cristo Rey, traeme el mejor buey!'). A kind of "lay religion", to use Matthew Butler's (2009) phrase, emerged in response to anti-clericalism and secular culture (pp. 271-306). To this day the words carve out a conservative fiefdom in rural areas of Jalisco where the Hollywood-style letters 'Viva Cristo Rey' flaunt the hillsides in a new form of conservative mnemonics. Aurelio Acevedo, resentful of a post-

war Catholic historian's excoriation of the Cristeros as bandits, affirmed a type of lay religion. The Cristeros were not angels, but flesh and blood, yet "there was never a more restrained revolution or armed movement in history" (Lawrence, 2020, p. 26). Cristeros in thought and action resented being called fanatics and instead represented their political positions as a result of common sense and broadly shared intuitions. Since these truths were considered self-evident, they barely required further definition.

Lay religion in action

Aquinian just war theory, along with the Federal anticlericalism collapsing the distinction between criminality and respectability, emboldened Cristero fighters to take to the hills and to target the lives and property of suspected collaborators and beneficiaries of the Calles regime. The paradox of outlawry lay in the military utility of irregular tactics versus the insecurity they generated amongst the civilian support base. As Victoriano Ramírez, charismatic Cristero commander known as 'El Catorce', confided in his campaign memoirs: "we Cristeros suffered fewer losses than the other side because we offered combat in locations of our own choosing, and when these were not ideal, we took to the hills, because all the hills were our refuge" (Hernández Hurtado, 2009, p. 129). But the burden faced by civilians in their path, even when they were in sympathy, gave Cristero authorities repeated anxiety at how their rapacious troops turned communities neutral or even hostile to their cause. At the same time, the inability of the Cristeros to control railways or any reliable external lines of supply made the policy of 'living off the land' logical. To a large degree the rapacity affected predictable targets. As in the religious insurgencies of Napoleonic Europe, Cristeros occupying new settlements burned municipal archives and other public buildings representing state authority (Hernansáez, 2012).

But the burden presented to civilian communities by confiscation and impressment of men of military age was tolerated only when the Cristero side was mostly accepted as the legitimate and preponderate power. Indiscriminate violence against areas known to be loyal to the Federal government was the other extreme of irregular civil war.³ The parts of Zacatecas state bordering the Cristero heartland in Jalisco were subjected to such protracted raids that the pro-government paramilitaries (Defensas) developed a strong morale based on a sense of armed revolutionary citizenship as much as hopes for awards of land as part of the Federal government's agro-military social pact. The gradual militarisation from 1927-29 of the Cristero irregulars under Enrique Gorostieta's supreme command did not alleviate the insecurity in disputed areas of control. By spring 1929 Cristero forces were on the offensive in most parts of the centre-west. But this success was caused largely by the withdrawal of most regular Federal army units to face down an uprising of disgruntled generals headed by Gonzalo Escobar. Revolutionary paramilitaries left behind continued to fight well, resolute in the knowledge that volunteers were more likely to be subjected to Cristero atrocities than conscripts. By the time the Escobar rebellion had been crushed, regular army units returned to bolster the beleaguered paramilitaries and force the Cristeros to agree an armistice largely on government terms (Fallaw, 2012).

The alienation of communities via violence from outsiders was even more developed further north-west in the indigenous regions of the state of Durango. Mexico's indigenous population for a long time was sidelined as being 'apolitical', either as defiant outsiders or as recipients of mestizo state-building (Lynch, 1991). More recent research has shown indigenous agency in revolutions and counterrevolutions, whether as allies of state-building, resisters or as factions in intra-indigenous conflict (de Jesús Torres Contreras, 2009; O'Hara, 2010, pp. 224-242). As Nathaniel Morris has recently shown, the dynamics of the conflict in the indigenous regions were far removed from the Catholic religiosity of legend. The nationwide closure of churches in summer 1926 and the exile of priests had barely any effect in indigenous areas of the Gran Nayar, especially amongst the Tepehuano (O'dam) tribe. Here there were either few or absolutely no priests to exile, and traditional authorities controlled the churches physically and spiritually, keeping them open throughout. Instead, inter-village conflicts during the 1920s and 30s were motivated by issues such as blood feuds, factional conflicts centred on land reform, the question of autonomy versus

the expanding regulation of the Mexican state, as well as general hatred of government schoolteachers. In the Sierra Tepehuana, Cristeros amnestied by the 'Arreglos' of 1929 were even charged by the State with the promotion of 'socialist education' under the Federal government's school reforms in the 1930s. In other communities, however, the same 'conservative' groups that had earlier backed the Cristero rebels once again opposed the compulsory education of their children in government schools, the imposition of revolutionary or nationalist symbols in spaces that represented their political and cultural autonomy, the state's attempts to turn the *costumbre* (traditions) that defined their lives into meaningless 'folklore,' the colonisation of their lands by mestizo settlers, and the support of local *caciques* for all of these threats (Morris, 2020).

The 'lay religion' of the indigenous *Cristiada* therefore amounted to a traditionalising defensive action against the Mexican state, in which tribes sometimes joined the momentum of the Cristero rebels, and sometimes that of the government, according to the needs of protecting their political and religious autonomy. Non-indigenous Cristeros, for their part, understood how the actions of outsiders ended any hopes of winning over non-committed indigenous to the holy cause. In June 1928 Cristero troops marching through the Tepehuano region of Huazamota (southern Durango) were reminded not to steal or kill cattle in their path, "otherwise what has already happened to the maize harvest will happen to meat" (CESU, ARA, 3/4/14-17, Sección Militante Cristero, Subsección LNDLR, CD y CE, Serie: Propaganda, No. 58, 1 June 1928 letter from Juan Capistrano in Zacatecas to Quintanar in Huejuquilla). The pleas fell on deaf ears. Even after the armistice of 1929 armed bands continued to plague the Tepehuano region, creating local food shortages, and poisoning indigenous attitudes towards outside authorities and the stated policy of amnesty of wartime wrongdoers (Lawrence, 2020, p. 144).

Rebel policing of rebel wrongdoing

The activism of lay Catholics and Cristero militants in this wartime environment alienated religious authorities in ways which historians have already observed. Refugee priests striving to be inconspicuous resented the passionate Catholicism of their flocks, knowing that this could invite Federal reprisals or lead to unwelcome theological innovations. The cultivation of popular martyrs led to their pseudo-canonisation by lay religion, displacing the Catholic hierarchy even further (Vázquez Parada, 2012; Butler, 2004). But the Cristero authorities also resented the absence of religious counselling for young fighters on campaign. In spring 1928 one of the elite Cristero forces (Valparaíso regiment) operating in rural Zacatecas was bereft of priests to serve as chaplains. A Cristero activist wrote to the clandestine 'Venerable Episcopal Sub-Committee' in Mexico City pleading for priests to be assigned for the regiment's spiritual and moral needs. Previous appeals had fallen on deaf ears, and local priests shied away from joining the soldiers on campaign. Activist Aurelio Acevedo wrote: "If you do not grant us priests we shall have to lament the irredeemable degeneration of our soldiers to such a degree that they will no longer be a liberation army, but a gang of outlaws with all the attendant characteristics" (CESU, ARA, 3/4/14-17, Sección Militante Cristero, Subsección LNDLR, CD y CE, Serie: Propaganda, No. 45, 17 March 1928 letter from Aurelio Acevedo).

The crisis had been obvious since the summer of 1927. The Federal government, anxious to suppress an insurgency which since the start of the year had escalated to a civil war, resorted to reconcentration mandates in areas permeated by Cristeros. Civilians in affected areas were issued with sometimes as much as several weeks' and sometimes as little as two days' notice to leave, often via unreliable airdrops of leaflets. The risk of reprisal in such front-line areas in Mexico's centre-west intimidated sympathisers with the Cristero cause from displaying open support. The reconcentration measures carried out by the Federal Army were glumly obeyed by Catholics in insurgent zones, with the well-to-do usually securing motorised transport and better lodgings in fortified cities ahead of the mass of the rural poor marching on foot. Anybody caught in the 'free fire' zones after the reconcentration order had expired could be shot on sight (Bailey, 1974). Any priests still present in targeted areas usually followed the reconcentration orders. Far from the fanatical priest-led bands of legend, few priests joined the Cristeros on campaign.

The lukewarm attitude of men of the Church troubled the Cristero leadership. The Huejuquilla authorities informed the commanders of the buccaneering Valparaíso regiment that priests throughout the centre-west were remaining in their own parishes. The only substantial offer of chaplains had arrived from Jesuits based abroad who “had written to us to come and seek martyrdom in Mexico” (CESU, ARA, 3/4/14-17, Sección Militante Cristero, Subsección LNDLR, CD y CE, Serie: Propaganda, No. 91, 1 May 1928 letter from provisional government at Huejuquilla to C-in-C of Valparaíso regiment). Cristero elites’ faith in the correcting and moralising presence of priests appeared to have overlooked two decisive objections. First, priests themselves knew that they would be prominent targets for vengeful Federal forces in operation against Cristeros. In April 1927 foreign press reports of priests being used as human shields on troop trains vulnerable to ambush scandalised Catholic opinion in the USA (*New York Herald Tribune* April 28, 1927). Equally, Cristero combatants often resented the worthiness of priests in their midst. They condemned acts of pillage and blasphemy. They also tended to be easy hostages for Federal authorities to torture and interrogate in the event of being captured. The priest Norberto Reyes in the custody of the Federal authorities wrote to the commander of the Cristero Valparaíso regiment pleading with him to surrender his force. The commander replied that his men would “continue offering their lives for the holy cause”, that all Mexico was against the tyrant Calles, and that he forgave the priest because “he was clearly uttering the words of his captors” (CESU, ARA, 3/4/14-17, Sección Militante Cristero, Subsección LNDLR, CD y CE, Serie: Propaganda, No. 18, undated (1928) letter Valparaíso regiment commanders José Sánchez and Francisco de la Torre to priest Norberto Reyes).

Amidst all the pre-war Catholic homilies about charity and the rights of property, once the insurrection began in 1926, Cristero ‘lay religion’ amounted to confiscation. A kind of Cristero land reform reverted to the ‘divine punishment’ of robbing and expropriating landowners on the government side. Ironically, it was left to the marauding whims of Cristero soldiers to initiate land redistribution at gunpoint. Thus, a Colonel operating in the Valparaíso countryside (Zacatecas) authorised the redistribution amongst local landless labourers of confiscated land. But the rebel commander eschewed any Revolutionary justification: land would be awarded exclusively according to ‘need’, and only because it had been confiscated from absent members of the enemy Defensa Social (CESU, ARA, 3/4/14-17, Sección Militante Cristero, Subsección LNDLR, CD y CE, Serie: Propaganda, No. 38, 25 February 1928 letter from Aurelio Acevedo). Anxieties about cross-infection of Revolutionary concepts commonly excoriated as ‘theft’ colour Cristero correspondence from the region. By April the provisional Cristero government at Huejuquilla (Jalisco) ordered a free corps called the ‘Valparaíso regiment’ to submit to Commander-in-Chief Gorostieta’s formal military structure forthwith, because “it is not categorically forbidden to permit the existence of mobile free corps, knowing how in certain cases these have debilitated the public interest” (CESU, ARA, 3/4/14-17, Sección Militante Cristero, Subsección LNDLR, CD y CE, Serie: Propaganda, No. 56, April 1928 letter from Aurelio Acevedo). The Cristeros, like many religious insurgencies before and since, dissipated the appeal of their stated aims on the experience of their militancy.

Conclusion

The Mexican Revolution, according to a leading expert, “did not claim universal validity and it was not designed for export ... it had no great intellectual founding fathers and was not utopian in any sense” (Knight, 2010, pp. 228-229). The ‘this-worldliness’ identified by Alan Knight also applies to the Cristero counter-revolution of the 1920s and 1930s. Notions of counter-revolution as a conscious political process, as advocated by Joseph de Maistre, or as a ‘lay religion’ encompassing passive resistance, as identified by Matthew Butler, do not fully explain the dynamic generated by violence in front-line areas of the Cristero insurgency. Armed Cristeros invading government-held areas pillaged and even killed according to a mix of self-righteousness whipped up by Catholic mobilisation, opportunism, and the patterns of ‘logical violence’ explained by Stathis Kalyvas. In doing these acts veterans thought they were part of a transcendent order righting wrongs and

making sense of the world. While revolutionaries introduced new principles for organizing society (based on abstract rational ideas), the Cristeros saw themselves as men of action relying on customary sources of political legitimacy, especially religion. As such their 'can-do' attitudes frequently alienated their own political leadership and embarrassed the Catholic hierarchy. They also poisoned attitudes amongst conservative civilian communities in their path, including indigenous regions who learnt to see the Soldiers of Christ as just another outside threat to be channelled or resisted. The Cristiada, discounting the ongoing narco wars, was Mexico's last plebeian revolt. It was hardly surprising that elites in military, clerical and political garb were so keen to agree an armistice over the heads of the Cristero fighters in 1929 and to demonize the second revolt of embittered diehards in the 1930s.

What, then, of the significance of a religious revolt almost a century ago to contemporary affairs? The ending of one-party rule in Mexico in 2000 represented something of a rebound for the Cristero worldview. The victorious campaign of President-Elect Vicente Fox openly flaunted the symbols and imagery of the Cristeros of the interwar period. Neither Mexican Revolutionaries nor Cristeros burdened themselves with too many international comparisons. Yet the military aspects of Mexico's 1920s and 1930s bear comparison to irregular conflicts elsewhere, from the Dutch suppression of holy war in Aceh (Indonesia) to the British Commonwealth defeat of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya. The plebeian and terroristic features of Mexico's holy war sheds light on the low-key civil war ravaging parts of the country today. The narco war underway since 2006 is characterised by militarised policing by the Mexican state, and by a glamourised cult of narco strongmen replete with worship of the *Santa Muerte* and coercive control of populations in their sway.

References

- Bailey, D.C. (1974). *Viva Cristo Rey!: Cristero Rebellion and the Church-state conflict in Mexico*. University of Texas Press.
- Berkovich, I. (2017). *Motivation in war: The experience of common soldiers in Old-Regime Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Brewster, K. (2003). *Militarism, ethnicity, and politics in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, 1917-1930*. The University of Arizona Press.
- Butler, M. (2008). *Faith and impiety in Revolutionary Mexico*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Butler, M. (2009). Mexican Nicodemus: The Apostleship of Refugio Padilla, Cristero on the Islas Marías, *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*. 25(2), 271-306.
- Butler, M. (2004). *Popular piety and political identity in Mexico's Cristero Rebellion: Michoacán, 1927-29*. Oxford University Press.
- CESU, Fondo Aurelio Acevedo (ARA), Rollo 3, Caja 4, Exp.s 14-17, Sección Militante Cristero, Subsección LNDLR, CD y CE, Serie: Propaganda, No. 14, 1934 invective from Cristero propagandists.
- Echeverri, M. (2018). Esclavos e indígenas realistas en la Era de la Revolución: Reforma, revolución y realismo en los Andes septentrionales, 1780–1825. Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes.
- Fallaw, B. (2012). Eulogio Ortíz: The Army and the Antipolitics of Postrevolutionary State Formation, 1920–1935. In B. Fallaw & T. Rugeley, T. (Eds.), *Forced marches* (pp. 136-171). University of Arizona Press.

- Fallow, B. (2013) *Religion and state formation in Postrevolutionary Mexico*. Duke University Press.
- Flores, R. R. (1992). The Corrido and the emergence of Texas-Mexican social identity. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 105(416), 166-82. <https://doi.org/10.2307/541084>
- Gómez-Rossi, A. (2022). The War of Words: The subversive Use of "Christ the King" and the otherworldly politics of the Catholic Laity in Mexico, 1925-1929, *International Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Society*, 12(1), 195-211. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2154-8633/CGP/v12i01/195-211>
- González Navarro, M. (2000). *Cristeros y agraristas en Jalisco*, II. El Colegio de México.
- Guerra Manzo, E. (2015). *Del fuego sagrado a la acción cívica: Los católicos frente al Estado en Michoacán (1920-1940)*. Colmich.
- Hernández Hurtado, J. F. (2009) *¡Tierra de Cristeros! Historia de Victoriano Ramírez y de la Revolución Cristera en los Altos de Jalisco*. Centro de estudios mexicanos y centroamericanos.
- Hernández, L. R. (2008). *Zacatecas bronco: introducción al conflicto cristero en Zacatecas y norte de Jalisco, 1926-1942*. Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas.
- Invective from Cristero propagandists (1934). CESU, Fondo Aurelio Acevedo (ARA), Rollo 3, Caja 4, Exp.s 14-17, Sección Militante Cristero, Subsección LNDLR, CD y CE, Serie: Propaganda, No. 14.
- de Jesús Torres, J. (2009). *Contreras, Relaciones de frontera entre los Huicholes y sus vecinos mestizos: Santa Catarina y Huejuquilla el Alto*. Colegio de Jalisco.
- Kalyvas, S. (2012). Micro-level studies of violence in Civil War: Refining and extending the Control-Collaboration Model, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24(4), 658-668. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2012.701986>
- Kalyvas, S. (2006). *The logic of violence in Civil Wars*. Cambridge University Press.
- Knight, A. (1986). *The Mexican Revolution. Porfirians, liberals and peasants* (Vol. 1). Cambridge University Press.
- Knight, A. (2010). The myth of the Mexican Revolution. *Past and Present*, 209(1), 223-273. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtq010>
- Lawrence, M. (2020). *Insurgency, counter-insurgency and policing in centre-west Mexico, 1926-1929: Fighting Cristeros*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Letter from Aurelio Acevedo. CESU, ARA, 3/4/14-17, Sección Militante Cristero, Subsección LNDLR, CD y CE, Serie: Propaganda, No. 45, 17 March 1928.
- Letter from Aurelio Acevedo. CESU, Fondo Aurelio Acevedo (ARA), Rollo 3, Caja 4, Exp.s 14-17, Sección Militante Cristero, Subsección LNDLR, CD y CE, Serie: Propaganda, No. 38, 25 February 1928.
- Letter from Aurelio Acevedo. CESU, Fondo Aurelio Acevedo (ARA), Rollo 3, Caja 4, Exp.s 14-17, Sección Militante Cristero, Subsección LNDLR, CD y CE, Serie: Propaganda, No. 56, April 1928.
- Letter from Juan Capistrano in Zacatecas to Quintanar in Huejuquilla. CESU, Fondo Aurelio Acevedo (ARA), Rollo 3, Caja 4, Exp.s 14-17, Sección Militante Cristero, Subsección LNDLR, CD y CE, Serie: Propaganda, No. 58, 1 June 1928.

Letter from provisional government at Huejuquilla to C-in-C of Valparaíso regiment. CESU, Fondo Aurelio Acevedo (ARA), Rollo 3, Caja 4, Exp.s 14-17, Sección Militante Cristero, Subsección LNDLR, CD y CE, Serie: Propaganda, No. 91, 1 May 1928.

Letter Valparaíso regiment commanders José Sánchez and Francisco de la Torre to priest Norberto Reyes. CESU, Fondo Aurelio Acevedo (ARA), Rollo 3, Caja 4, Exp.s 14-17, Sección Militante Cristero, Subsección LNDLR, CD y CE, Serie: Propaganda, No. 18, undated (1928).

Lombardo Toledano, V. (1990) *La Constitución de los Cristeros*. Editorial Combatiente.

López Beltrán, L. (1987). *La persecución religiosa en México*. Tradición.

Lynch, J. (1991). *Caudillos in Spanish America 1800-1850*. Oxford University Press.

McCullough, F. (1928). *Red Mexico*. Bretano.

Meyer, J. (2007). *La Cristiada*, I. FCE.

Meyer, J. (2009). *The Cristero Rebellion*. Cambridge University Press.

Morris, N. (2020). *Soldiers, Shamans, Saints: Indigenous communities and Revolutionary State in Mexico's Gran Nayar, 1910-1940*. University of Arizona Press.

O'Hara, J. (2010). The slayer of Victorio bears his honors quietly. In N. Foote & R.D. Harder Horst (Eds.), *Military struggle and identity formation in Latin America: Race, nation and community during the liberal period* (pp. 224-242). University of Florida Press.

The Holy See. (2023). *Quas Primus*. https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_11121925_quas-primas.html

Schell, P. A. (2007). Of the sublime mission of mothers of families: The union of Mexican Catholic ladies in Revolutionary Mexico. In S.E Mitchell & P.A Schell (Eds.), *The Women's Revolution in Mexico, 1910-1953* (pp. 99-104). Rowman & Littlefield.

Tone, J. L. (2007). A dangerous Amazon: Agustina Zaragoza and the Spanish Revolutionary War, 1808-1814, *European History Quarterly*, 38(4), 548-561.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0265691407081411>

de la Torre, L. (2020). 1926: *Ecos de la Cristiada*. Amat editorial.

Vaca, A. (1998) *Los silencios de la historia: las cristeras*. Guadalajara: Colegio de Jalisco.

Vázquez Parada, L. C. (2012) *La Guerra cristera: Narrativa, testimonios y propaganda*. Arroyo Books.

Weis, R. (2019). *For Christ and country: Militant pro-Catholic youth in Post-Revolutionary Mexico*. Cambridge University Press.

About the Author

Dr Mark Lawrence is Senior Lecturer in Military History at the University of Kent. He is known for his work on European, especially Spanish history, as well as Mexican history. His most recent book, *Anglo-Hispania beyond the Black Legend: British Campaigns, Travellers and Attitudes towards Spain since 1489*, was published by Bloomsbury in November 2023. He started his career at the University of Liverpool, and has since held positions at Sheffield, Newcastle, and a visiting position at the Universidad de Zacatecas. Lawrence is the author of several articles and books, including the award-winning *Spanish Civil Wars*, published by Bloomsbury in 2017 (published in Spanish as

Las guerras civiles españolas by Alianza in 2019). He is also author of *Spain's First Carlist War, 1833-1840* (Palgrave, 2014), of *Nineteenth-century Spain: a New History* (Routledge, 2019), and of *Fighting Cristeros* (Bloomsbury, 2020). He has edited a global history of guerrilla warfare and is currently completing a trans-Atlantic study of the Napoleonic Wars. Since 2019 he has been a co-editor of the *Small Wars and Insurgencies* journal. He is the creative director of a documentary on Mexico's Cristero Wars (La Cristiada - A Civil War: Think Kent Discovers Film and Panel - YouTube) and regularly discusses his research in international media outlets, including RTVE's *La Historia de Cada Día*.

Email: m.r.lawrence@kent.ac.uk

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5722-7503>