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RESEARCH ARTICLE

One Cross, Two Continents: How Catholic Women's Resistance in Mexico Inspired Their Spanish Counterparts (1926–1936)

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Abstract

The Mexican Cristero experience constituted a political laboratory and a school of resistance providing blueprints of action later exercised in Spain. With barely ten years between their own countries' conflicts, the ladies of Catholic Action—in Mexico and then in Spain—organized themselves, first, as a passive resistance, and then both used the same justifications to support the use of political violence. News of the Mexican Catholic women's experience had arrived across the Atlantic in the chronicles of Spanish newspapers beginning in the late 1920s and in the edifying, right-leaning novels that were spread, above all, in Spanish Catholic schools during the 1930s. This helps us understand the parallels between the actions, liaisons, informants, and weapons suppliers of the Brigades and other Catholic organizations in Mexico and the members of the women's fifth column in Spain. Perhaps the contemporary presence in the public sphere of European fascists resonated more among young urban Madrid or Barcelona women during the Spanish Civil War, but, without a doubt, the social origin, experience, and cultural heritage of Mexican women was more in line with the efforts of conservative Spanish women all over the country during the conflict. In both cases, the defence of religion and their Catholic identity was at the forefront of their efforts and gave coherence to what might, at times, appear to be diverse political projects.

Keywords: women; Spain; Catholics; Cristero; civil war; resistance

The first decades of the twentieth century witnessed the strengthening of transatlantic connections between Catholic organizations, militants, and ideas. The violent upheavals set into motion by the Mexican Revolution, World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the rise of Bolshevism, Fascism, and Nazism, among other epochal events, challenged the role of both the Church and Catholicism in society. The crisis of liberal political models, soon to be followed by a series of profound economic tremors, forced Catholics to design and disseminate socio-political alternatives capable of simultaneously conforming to the Church's doctrine and

defending Catholic ideals and interests from a host of new challenges, starting with the increasing laicization of modern industrialized societies. However, the long shadow of fascism, and in particular the horrors that accompanied its wars of conquest and extermination, have largely prevented an appreciation of the sheer variety of competing political models that, while sharing some authoritarian values with fascism, possessed their own characteristics and goals. A prime example is the flowering during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of social and political Catholic thinking and action, which both preceded and outlasted fascism and whose intellectual roots are to be found principally in two papal encyclicals: Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and Pious XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931). Based on these and other documents, Catholics attempted to offer responses to a modernity that they often rejected but did not altogether ignore. On the contrary, they actively organized themselves to promote intellectual and moral alternatives, even if these efforts were sometimes perceived merely as a reaction to events around them. In the process, Catholics not only established complex networks for practical co-operation and intellectual exchange but also fashioned a truly international corpus of public expression and thought whose advocates, among other things, watched, analyzed, and campaigned on behalf of other Catholics. Those links were particularly strong among Catholics in both Latin America and the Iberian Peninsula. The actions of groups on both sides of the Atlantic represented a form of political pedagogy, as the proposals and responses of certain groups were internalized by their colleagues elsewhere. And this was as valid for women as it was men.[1]

This article explores an aspect of this history that deserves greater attention from historians: the connection between the actions and ideas that Catholic women in Mexico developed in the context of the Cristero War and their influence on their Spanish counterparts during the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, the Second Republic, and the first months of the Spanish Civil War. As we will show, those connections existed on several levels—emotional, intellectual, and practical—as Catholic women in Spain assumed the trials of their Mexican sisters, both as an expression of their own problems and as a warning of the type of social and political conflict that might await them in their own country.

Women in a not-so-Distant War

La Esfera (The sphere) was a Spanish graphic magazine published between 1914 and 1931. Some of the best writers in the country appeared there, but it was the quality of its illustrations that made it famous throughout the Spanish-speaking world. It reproduced portraits by celebrated artists such as John Singer Sargent, Ricardo Brugada, and Julio Romero de Torres, among others. The photographs were also

[1]María Cruz Romero, Mª Pilar Salomón Chéliz and Nuria Tabanera, eds., *Católicos, reaccionarios y nacionalistas: Política e identidad nacional en Europa y América Latina contemporáneas* (Comares, 2021); Fabio Kolar and Ulrich Mücke, eds., *El pensamiento conservador y derechista en América Latina, España y Portugal: Siglos xix y xx* (Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2021); Hélgio Trindade, *Integralismo, o Fascismo Brasileiro na Década de Trinta* (DIFEL, 1979); Fernando Devoto, *Nacionalismo, fascismo y tradicionalismo en la Argentina moderna* (Siglo XXI, 2002); Valeria Galimi and Annarita Gori, eds., *Intellectuals in the Latin Space during the Era of Fascism: Crossing Borders* (Routledge, 2020); and Ericka K. Verba, *Catholic Feminism and the Social Question in Chile, 1910–1917: The Liga de Damas Chilenas* (Edwin Mellen, 2003).

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excellent. This explains its exorbitant price—one peseta (roughly US$0.01) starting in 1920. Its readers were the well-to-do or at least the solidly middle-class. In the 11 September 1926, issue, the magazine included an article that surely sent shivers up many readers' spines, starting from its very headline: "From México. Churches abandoned." Among other things, it reported that in Mexico fifteen million Catholic believers were being deprived of both sacraments and religious instruction.[2]

Affluent Spaniards were at the same time getting the first pieces of news related to what was already a very complex, rapidly evolving, and violent conflict between the post-revolutionary Mexican government of President Plutarco Elías Calles (1924–1928) and his country's Catholic population, including well-organized Catholic militant groups. This conflict came to be known as the Cristero War (August 1926–June 1929, with a second, less intense phase lasting from 1932 to 1938). Its human cost was horrendous: at least ninety thousand dead (some sources claim a quarter of a million) and hundreds of thousands of refugees who fled mostly to the United States. This, out of a total population of some 16.5 million people, was in a country that had already suffered the staggering loss of close to a million and a half deaths during the recently concluded revolution (1910–1920).

Although the Cristero War has been the subject of numerous studies and works of art (notably Graham Greene's 1940 novel *The Power and the Glory*), it occupies a marginal position, if it is present at all, in popular narratives of the twentieth century in English (for academics it is a different matter). This is not the case in Spanish-speaking countries, and even less so in Catholic circles. And this was especially true in the 1920s and 1930s, when the war's implications reverberated through Latin America and Spain. In the latter, the events in Mexico were seen, first, as an early sign of problems to come. As the events in Mexico were processed in Spain, they also came to be received more pragmatically by Catholic groups for the political lessons they were said to impart. Finally, when Spain's own civil war (July 1936–April 1939) started, the Mexican Catholic resistance and its "martyrs" provided ready-made images and narratives through which Spanish Catholics could interpret and explain their own predicament. In so doing they fashioned not just a shared transatlantic narrative of Catholic martyrdom, but also a pedagogy of Catholic political activism.[3] At the forefront of those processing the news from Mexico, and often well ahead of the learning curve, were Spanish women, who learned from their Mexican counterparts how to actively confront the challenge to their worldview represented by laicism and revolutionary politics.[4]

The roots of the Mexican conflict ran deep. The combative relationship between the Church and the Mexican state commenced with the 1857 Constitution. A crucial step toward the Cristero conflict came with the enacting of Mexico's liberal

[2]Ceferino Martínez Riestra, "Desde Méjico: Templos abandonados," *La Esfera*, 11 Sept. 1926.

[3]Julio de la Cueva Merino, "Los ecos de la Revolución Mexicana: El catolicismo español en la transnacionalización de un conflicto (1926–1927)," in José Ramón Rodríguez Lago and Natalia Núñez Bargueño, eds., *Beyond National-Catholicisms: Transnational Networks of Hispanic Catholicims* (Sílex, 2021), 203–28.

[4]Natalia Núñez Bargueño, "Varón y mujer los creó: Hacia una lectura a contracorriente de la historia, el género y la religión," *Alcores* 23 (2019): 17–34; Inmaculada Blasco Herranz, ed., *Mujeres, hombres y catolicismo en la España contemporánea: Nuevas visiones desde la historia* (Tirant Humanidades, 2018); and Mª Pilar Salomón Chéliz, "Laicismo, género y religion: Perspectivas historiográficas," *Ayer* 61, 1 (2006): 291–308.

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Constitution of 1917, and more precisely the anti-clerical provisions of Article 130, which, among other things, enforced the previous constitution's measures that largely dissolved the Church as a legal entity, including its capacity to own property and its right to carry out religious acts in public. For many Catholics this was nothing short of an attack against their faith, and perhaps the most brazen act yet in a violent campaign that began during the early days of the revolution, when some generals routinely carried out acts of iconoclasm and harassed priests.[5] These anti-clerical acts were in part a result of the Church's support for General Victoriano Huerta's coup against the legal president, Francisco Madero, in February 1913, but Mexican Catholics tended to view them as episodes in a larger struggle to maintain a religious and cultural identity they perceived as under threat.[6]

The sense of threat was intensified by the 1920 bombing of Mexico's most important icon: the image of the Virgen de Guadalupe in Mexico City. The icon's survival was for many Catholics the sure sign of a miracle.[7] Afterwards, the original image of the Madonna was hastily hidden away and replaced with a copy, which remained in place for several years.

At the same time, Catholics had been organizing themselves in a series of movements that were catalyzed by the onset of the Mexican Revolution. The first major Mexican Catholic social activist network was created in 1911 by the Jesuit Bernardo Bergöend in the form of the National Catholic Party and the National League of Catholic Students.[8] From these organizations would eventually emerge the networks that formed the Cristero movement, which coalesced in the face of continued anti-clerical violence against the Church and its property between 1914 and 1916 and, at a somewhat slower pace, during the presidency of Venustiano Carranza (1917–1920).[9]

In June 1917, Catholic organizations, with the very active help of women's groups, called for the first demonstrations against the detention of priests. Impressively, they even managed to gather close to two million signatures denouncing the administration's anti-clerical policies. At the core of the movement was the Unión de Damas Católicas Mejicanas or UDCM (Union of Mexican Catholic Ladies),

[5]Gabriela Aguirre, "La Iglesia católica y la revolución Mexicana," *Estudios* 84 (2008): 43–62; and Adrian Bantjes, "The War against Idols: The Meanings of Iconoclasm in Revolutionary Mexico, 1910–1940," in Anne McClanan and Jess Johnson, eds., *Negating the Image: Case Studies in Iconoclasm* (Routledge, 2005), 41–60.

[6]Madero, alongside with his vice-president, José María Pino, was tortured and assassinated. Huerta became Mexican dictator until he was overthrown in July 1914. Afterward, and until his death in 1916, he visited several countries, including Spain. Mario Ramírez Rancaño, "El amargo exilio de Victoriano Huerta y sus seguidores en España: 1914–1940," *Estudios de Historia Moderna y Contemporánea de México* 55 (2018): 159–94.

[7]Julio de la Cueva Merino, "La Virgen de Guadalupe en Madrid: La movilización de los católicos españoles contra las políticas anticlericales de Plutarco Elías Calles," *Itinerantes: Revista de Historia y Religión* 7 (2017): 33–59. A similar situation happened in Spain during the Civil War when, in August 1936, four bombs were dropped from a Republican airplane on Saragossa's Basilica del Pilar, next to the Virgin's image, but failed to explode.

[8]Vera Larisa García Núñez, "Las mujeres del Partido Acción Nacional: entre la beneficencia y la participación política (1939–1946)," *Nuevo Mundo, Mundos Nuevos* (2017), [En ligne], *Colloques, mis en ligne le 02 octobre 2017*, at: http://journals.openedition.org/nuevomundo/71307.

[9]Juan González Morfin, *Sacerdotes y mártires: La guerra contra la libertad religiosa en México* (Panorama Editorial, 2010).

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which, like its feminine Catholic Action counterparts elsewhere, devoted itself to social work, charitable missions, and propaganda spread through its newspaper, *La Mujer Mexicana* (The Mexican woman). From this publication's pages, the organization launched morality campaigns against such ills as modern dances, like the tango and the fox-trot, French fashion, and the evils of cinema. It also advocated for preserving Catholic schools, catechesis, and Catholics student centers. Beyond the pages of *La Mujer Mexicana,* union members practiced charity in dining rooms, nursing homes, closets, hospitals, and religious retreats. And significantly, they also turned overtly political, increasing their public activism with demonstrations against the recently approved Constitution of 1917. In so doing, they echoed the types of actions to combat immorality used by their counterparts in Spain, although paying special attention to land ownership, alcoholism, and countering indigenous ideology as an orthodox and unwanted deviation from both Roman Catholicism and Hispanic racial identity.[10] Their activities included intermittent but vigorous acts of mass protest. For example, in 1923 when the government expelled Monsignor Ernesto Filippi, the Vatican's Apostolic Delegate—charged by the authorities with promoting disobedience to state laws by celebrating public ceremonies in honor of Christ the King—it was met by a wave of women's protests.

The separation of Church and state instigated by the pronounced secularism of the Mexican government was one of the most rigorous in the Hispanic world.[11] In this context, the Mexican Catholic laity—in a process later mirrored by its Spanish counterpart in the 1930s—sought to extend its social influence and penetrate the working world to convey its message of illiberalism, anti-socialism, and its opposition to the state's embrace of modernization and secularism. From the government's point of view, the promulgation by Pius XI (1922–1939) of the encyclical *Quas Primas* in December 1925, with its pretensions of molding both society and state institutions to fit Catholic official doctrine and its exaltation of the cult of Christ the King—which Mexican Catholics had already adopted in 1919, following the country's dedication to the Sacred Heart in 1914—prompted President Calles to act against what he perceived to be Catholic political aspirations to reverse the separation of Church and state in Mexico.[12]

In 1926 the Calles administration enforced the anti-clerical laws of the Constitution by reforming the penal code. The Calles Law, as it was called, placed draconian restrictions on the Church, including requiring priests to register with state authorities, seizing Church property, banning religious schools and monasteries, and expelling foreign priests. With these measures, for most Catholics the state was no longer merely distancing itself from the Church—it was now going one step further and seeking to control it. This opinion was reinforced by the government's promotion, beginning the previous year, of a patriotic national Church, the Mexican Apostolic Catholic Church, independent from the Vatican and

[10]Robert E. Curley, "Género y política en la acción social católica, 1900–1914," *La Ventana: Revista de estudios de género* 4 (1996): 76–90; and Silvia Marina Arrom, "Las señoras de la caridad: pioneras olvidadas de la asistencia social en México, 1863–1910," *Historia Mexicana* 57, 2 (2007): 445–90.

[11]Julio Martínez García, *Las libertades de expresión y prensa en las Constituciones de México 1917 y España 1931* (Océano Atlántico Editores, 2021).

[12]Valentina Torres Septién and Yves Solís, "De cerro a montaña santa: la construcción del monumento a Cristo Rey (1919–1960)," *Historia y Grafía* 22 (2004): 113–53.

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loyal to the Calles government.[13] To add salt to the wound, in some states local authorities forbade unmarried priests from exercising their ministry. The Mexican Episcopate reacted by closing churches, leaving millions of Mexican Catholics deprived of their sacraments, as *La Esfera* would notify its horrified Spanish readers. This was the last straw for these faithful, particularly in the countryside, where many decided to take up arms beginning in August 1926.[14]

Most of the rebels in the countryside were poor peasants, while many of the movement's intellectual leaders in the cities were middle class. All considered themselves good Catholics, even if urban militants—whiter and more orthodox—tended to view the religious eclecticism and indigenist tendencies of their rural comrades with a degree of suspicion, if not outright hostility. In any case, the movements (plural: no single organization combined the full spectrum of rural armed militants and their supporters in the cities), with their overall social composition, structure, doctrine of violence, and ideology, bore a striking resemblance to the future Spanish Carlist rebels (ultramontane Catholic monarchists) in Navarre and parts of the Basque Country during the Spanish Civil War. In fact, some Catholic militants even argued for a return of a Spanish Catholic monarchy to rule Mexico.[15]

The *Cristiada*, as the conflict came to be known, was a guerrilla war, and, like most wars of this type, it was dirty, with those involved rarely distinguishing between military and civilian enemies. In this, once again, it presaged what would happen in Spain ten years later, where both sides would go on to commit unspeakable atrocities during the war, in the process generating a legion of martyrs for their respective causes. In Mexico, government forces targeted not only the insurgents but also their supposed leaders, who quite often were simple members of the clergy or low-level Catholic militants. For their part, the armed Catholic rebels, some fifty thousand, attacked civilians; most notorious among their actions was the killing or maiming (cutting off ears became a common practice) of teachers, who were seen as the evil agents of the state in its efforts to de-Christianize the God-fearing countryside. The Francoists would do the exact same thing in 1936.

Notwithstanding the fact that three radical bishops would end up being expelled from the country, the majority of the Church hierarchy in Mexico tried to keep a low profile and called repeatedly for a compromise, much as they would later do in Spain during the anti-clerical Second Republic (1931–1936). As a result, in 1929 an "arrangement" between the Church and the Mexican state was reached. It amounted to a tacit admission by the government of its intention to disregard its own laws and to seek to rein in the most radical anti-clerical state governors. In

[13]Matthew Butler, *Mexico's Spiritual Reconquest: Indigenous Catholics and Father Pérez's Revolutionary Church* (University of New Mexico Press, 2023); and Mario Ramírez Rancaño, *El patriarca Pérez: la iglesia católica apostólica mexicana* (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México-Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, 2006).

[14]Javier Mac-Gregor, "La derecha mexicana en los años veinte: tradición católica y conservadurismo," *Revista de Historia de América* 160 (2021): 275–303.

[15]Robert Weis, *For Christ and Country: Militant Catholic Youth in Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Cambridge University Press, 2019); Javier Ugarte Tellería, *La nueva Covadonga insurgente: Orígenes sociales y culturales de la sublevación de 1936 en Navarra y el País Vasco* (Biblioteca Nueva, 1998); and Natalia Núñez Bargueño, "La Reconquista de nuestro territorio cristiano: Espacio urbano y religión en el Congreso Eucarístico Internacional de Madrid, 1911," *Itinerantes: Revista de Historia y Religión* 8 (2018): 37–63.

exchange, the Church disavowed the most radical Catholic constituencies, including the Cristero cause.[16] Direct, violent confrontation rapidly decreased, even if the dissatisfaction of most sectors of the Catholic population remained high. However, the conflict would resume in 1932 in reaction to a subsequent wave of anti-clerical actions and laws, particularly the introduction of "socialist" education per Article 3 of the Constitution. In this context, the Vatican once more demanded conciliation: "Do not even consider armed defence," Pope Pius XI ordered Mexican Catholics in 1932 in the encyclical *Acerba Aninii*.[17]

Though it was passed before the start of his mandate, President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940) had to deal with the consequences of the new legislation and the renewed Cristero uprising for the next four years.[18] Luckily for him, both the Mexican bishops and Pope Pius XI—occupied at the time with managing the deep tensions in the Vatican's relations with Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany—stood firm in their defense of the 1929 agreements and insisted on the maintenance of peace. By 1938, then, the violence of the Cristero War was beginning to fade. Meanwhile, the Spanish Civil War was in its second year.

Despite its importance, and very likely because it was a highly traumatic episode in Mexico's national history, the Cristero resistance was largely ignored by that country's historians until the mid-1960s. The qualitative leap in academic research on the Cristiada would not occur until 1966, with a thesis by Alicia Olivera Sedano, amply supported by oral testimonies.[19] However, it was Jean Meyer's masterful work in the 1970s that opened a new phase in our understanding of the conflict. Meyer's research shifted the focus from institutions and associations in urban areas, which had hitherto been accorded the status of the chief protagonists in the literature on the Cristero movement, to ordinary people in the countryside, emphasizing religiosity as a channel for counterrevolution.[20] Meyer's comprehensive research was published just as the historiography about women—written, significantly, *by* women—in Mexico was finally taking off.[21]

[16]Stephen J. C. Andes, *The Vatican and Catholic Activism in Mexico and Chile: The Politics of Transnational Catholicism, 1920–1940* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

[17]Kristina Boylan, "Mexican Catholic Women's Activism, 1929–1940" (PhD diss., Oxford University, 2000), 82.

[18]Ben Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Duke University Press, 2013).

[19]Alicia Olivera Sedano, *Testimonios sobre el México posrevolucionario* (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2015); and Alicia Olivera Sedano, *La guerra cristera: Aspectos del conflicto religioso de 1926 a 1929* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2019).

[20]Jean Meyer, *La Cristiada*, vol. 3, Los Cristeros (Siglo XXI, 1974).

[21]Fernando M. Gonzáles, *Matar y morir por Cristo Rey: aspectos de la cristiada* (Plaza y Valdés, 2001); Edith Trujillo Martínez, "Oración y acción: el trabajo de las Brigadas Femeninas Santa Juana de Arco durante la Cristiada," in Fernando M. González, Mario Ramírez Rancaño, and Yves Bernardo Roger Solís Nicot, coordinators, *Militancias católicas en el México contemporáneo: clandestinidad, secrecía y partidismo* (UNAM, 2022); Omayda Naranjo Tamayo, "La mujer mexicana en la primera rebelión de los cristeros (1926–1929): una mirada historiográfica," *Historiografías* 8,1 (2014): 21–137; Barbara Miller, "The Role of Women in the Mexican Cristero Rebellion: Las Señoras y las Religiosas," *Americas* 40, 3 (1984): 303–23; Agustín Vaca, *Los silencios de la historia: Las cristeras* (El Colegio de Jalisco, 1988); Lourdes Celina Vázquez Prada, *Testimonios sobre la revolución cristera: hacia una hermenéutica de la conciencia histórica* (Universidad de Guadalajara, 2001); María Guadalupe Aspe Amella, *La formación social y política de los católicos mexicanos* (Universidad Iberoamericana, 2008); Juan Pablo Vivaldo Martínez, *Las mujeres en el movimiento cristero: Una aproximación crítica a la bibliografía* (Tesis de Licenciatura, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2008); Hernán Robleto, *Obregón—Toral: La madre Conchita* (Ediciones Botas,

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Women played a crucial, perhaps unprecedented role in the Cristero War. But Mexican Catholic women were by no means new to political activism. They had been organizing themselves since the 1840s at least; the revolution only catalyzed their formal involvement in politics. The main female organization, the UCDM, officially distanced itself from the National League for the Defense of Religious Freedom (Liga Nacional Defensora de la Libertad Religiosa, or LNDLR),[22] created in 1925. Many of this organization's leaders started to back the Cristero rebellion the following year, but this did not result in Catholic women's wholesale abandonment of active but peaceful resistance to the Calles administration's anti-clerical policies. Their resistance was centered on defying the government, on the one hand, and providing social assistance or protection to fellow Catholics, priests, and injured Cristero fighters, on the other.[23] Yet some women took a more direct course of action. The most notorious was Mother Conchita (Concepción Acevedo de la Llata, 1891–1979), a nun who was accused of being the brains behind the assassination of President Álvaro Obregón in July 1928—and ultimately sentenced to twenty years in prison.[24] Freed in 1940, she always denied the charge, and in the end was vindicated.[25]

Historians' relatively recent "discovery" of female Cristeras, women who supported the rebellion or fought during the war, has resulted in greater attention being paid to women's more assertive and even violent organizations and movements, many of significant scale. Consider the nearly twenty-five thousand–strong Brigadas Femeninas de Santa Juana de Arco (Saint Joan of Arc Women's Brigades) created in 1927. Also known as the Brigadas Bonitas (Beautiful Brigades, or BB), these militants were organized into some fifty-six distinct covert groups. They drew members from a wide spectrum of Mexican society, ranging from bourgeois ladies raised in Catholic schools to poor, illiterate, and landless peasants. They were the resistance's chief functionaries, transporting everything from weapons to food to the (mostly male) Cristero guerrillas, in addition to organizing assistance to the wounded, holding secret masses, and aiding the administration of sacraments by persecuted priests. Their vow of silence meant that their existence was not discovered by government authorities until very late in the conflict, in May 1929, when hundreds were arrested, mainly in Mexico City and Guadalajara. Of the 104 arrested in the latter city, twenty were accused of aiding the rebels. Condemned by the Mexican authorities to serve sentences of banishment, they were transported to the islands of the Tres Marías. Among the women arrested were several who belonged to Mexican

1935); María Elena Sodi de Pallares, *Los cristeros y José de León Toral* (Editorial Cultura, 1936); Consuelo Reguer Noriega, *Dios y mi derecho*, vol. 2 (Jus, 1997); and Laura Pérez Rosales, "Las mujeres sinarquistas: nuevas adelitas en la vida pública mexicana, 1945–1948," in Rubén Aguilar and Guillermo Zermeño, eds., *Religión, política y Sociedad: El sinarquismo y la Iglesia en México (nueve ensayos)* (Universidad Iberoamericana, 1992), 169–95.

[22]Javier MacGregor Campuzano, "La derecha mexicana en los años veinte: tradición católica y conservadurismo," *Revista de Historia de América* 160 (2021): 275–303.

[23]Margaret Chowning, *Catholic Women and Mexican Politics, 1750–1940* (Princeton University Press, 2023), 232–41.

[24]Internationalism was not reserved to Catholics. The trial of the supposed murderers of Obregón was conceived by the Mexican revolutionaries as an assertive message to be transmitted beyond Mexico's borders, especially to Latin America. See Robert Weis, "The Revolution on Trial: Assassination, Christianity and the Rule of Law in 1920s Mexico," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 96, 2 (2016): 319–53.

[25]Mario Ramírez, *El asesinato de Álvaro Obregón: la conspiración y la madre Conchita* (UNAM, 2014).

high society, who were accused of providing weapons, ammunition, and money to the revolutionaries.[26]

Some women did much more than merely provide material support to the Cristeros. Jean Meyer described a military organization created in Jalisco in March 1928 and extending to Mexico's Federal District that operated under the general leadership of María Goyaz (also known as Celia Gómez). Its function there, as in Michoacán, Zacatecas, and other states, was to provide financing and weapons, gather intelligence, maintain shelter, and deliver care for the Cristero combatants. But some of these women also learned how to make explosives and even took part in sabotage operations, including destroying train tracks. The Brigadas members also carried out espionage activities, reporting on the movements of the federal army, as well as counterespionage efforts aimed at detecting infiltrators. In Durango, their reputation for efficiency and secrecy earned them the moniker "the Invisible Brigade."

The Brigadas were not the sole female resisters, nor were their tactics the only ones employed by Mexican Catholic women. As we have mentioned, the Unión de Damas Católicas Mejicanas (UDCM) also collaborated with the Cristeros on logistics and provided general assistance, but it concentrated on non-violent resistance activities.[27]

The cascade of new works that have appeared over the last several decades have helped us to better understand critical aspects of the Cristeras' story and allow us to see how Mexican women organized as quickly and as efficiently as they did. To be sure, these women were not merely reacting to events—they had their own organizations, traditions, networks, and a shared world view, and they acted, often independently and proactively, to shape society according to their values. Ultimately, three main factors made this possible: first, the remarkable cohesion and organization of social Catholicism, not just in Mexico, but on both sides of the Atlantic, at the beginning of the twentieth century; second, the constant communication between the various Mexican Catholic organizations; and third, the increasing prominence of the laity in the overall Catholic movement.[28]

Central to these events in the Spanish-speaking world was the figure of Pope Pius XI (1922–1939). A man confronted by a rapidly changing, indeed confusing world in which fascism, liberalism, democracy, socialism, and communism were vying for supremacy in an era of mass politics, he conceived of evangelization as a political commitment to be channeled through active and combative organizations whose shared goal was only to protect the Church—the Vatican's main objective, certainly —but also to create a Catholic socio-political alternative to these other ascendent

[26]*[20 de los 104 detenidos en Guadalajara], fueron acusadas de prestar auxilio a los elementos rebeldes. Serán conducidas a las islas de las Tres Marías, donde cumplirán la pena de destierro a que han sido condenadas por las autoridades mejicanas. Entre las mujeres detenidas hay varias pertenecientes a la alta sociedad mejicana, a las cuales se las acusa de proporcionar armas, municiones y dinero a los revolucionarios* ("En Méjico han sido detenidas ciento cuatro personas," *La Nación*, 14 May 1929).

[27]Sofía Crespo, "Entre la Filantropía y la Práctica Política: La Unión de Damas Católicas Mexicanas en la Ciudad de México (1860–1930)" (PhD diss., Instituto Mora, 2016).

[28]Manuel Suárez Cortina et al., eds., *Cuestión religiosa: España y México en la época liberal* (Universidad de Cantabria, 2013); Manuel Suárez Cortina, ed., *México y España: Historia y memoria de dos siglos (1810–2010)* (Síntesis, 2014); Ángela Pérez del Puerto, "Las redes transnacionales de mujeres en Acción Católica," in Pilar Toboso, coordinator, *Redes, alianzas y grupos de poder en el mundo atlántico* (Síntesis, 2016), 197–221; and Lago and Núñez, *Beyond National-Catholicisms*.

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ideologies. One such outlet, previously noted, was the UDCM (1912–1929), created during the reign of Pius's immediate predecessors, Pious X (1903–1914) and Benedict XV (1914–1922). Initiated by Mexican women from the urban middle and upper classes, the UDCM eventually assumed a more interclass character, evolving into a rural militant organization. Its period of greatest growth was during President Álvaro Obregón's first term in office (1920–1924).[29] It followed the guidelines of the Catholic Women's Action internationally, including its Spanish, Italian, and Belgian sister associations, with which it maintained close institutional ties, in addition to its members' considerable private correspondence. They were also connected via supranational organizations like the International Union of Catholic Women's Leagues and the Hispanic American Catholic Women's Confederation, whose first congress was held in Seville in 1929 and brought together delegations from Chile, Colombia, Mexico, the Philippines, Spain, Uruguay, and Venezuela. The UDCM's activities were not carried out in isolation; their aspirations and tactics were shared internationally. *El Universo: Revista de Acción Católica y de Cultura General* (The Universe: Magazine of Catholic Action and General Culture), *edited* in Spain, reported on Mexican women's efforts and travails for readers throughout the Spanish-speaking world.[30]

After the application of the Calles Law in 1926, which instituted harsher penalties for the Church's defiance of constitutional rulings, it was the UDCM that spearheaded the defense of the Church and led an economic boycott against the government. They launched balloons and put up posters propagating their message, and they organized economic boycotts in which they urged their supporters not to buy fuel or newspaper advertisements, not to use public transportation, the mail, or the telegraph service, not to pay bills, and to withdraw their funds from banks and other financial institutions.[31] As tensions increased in 1927, there was a transfer of militants, particularly younger individuals, from the UDCM to its illegal counterpart, the Saint Joan of Arc Women's Brigades. A similar movement toward active but peaceful resistance happened with other organizations too, from the Daughters of Mary to the members of mixed apostolate organizations, including the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul.[32]

The mobilization of Catholic opinion was not, of course, confined to women's movements. Both men and women organized and contributed significantly. By July and August of 1926, different Catholic movements led by laymen or civilians had already been consolidated in Mexico, including the Popular Union of Jalisco;[33] the

[29]Vivaldo, *La Unión*.

[30]Ricardo José Álvarez Pimentel, "From Secret War to Cold War: Race, Catholicism, and the Un-Making of Counterrevolutionary Mexico, 1917–1946" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2022), 109–16; Alejandro Camino, *Defensoras de Dios y de las mujeres: Las activistas católicas en España (1900–1936)* (Comares, 2023); Teresa Ortega López, *Mujeres, género y nación en la dictadura de Miguel Primo de Rivera* (Sílex, 2023); Rebeca Arce Pinedo, "La construcción social de la mujer por el catolicismo y las derechas españolas en la época contemporánea" (PhD diss., Universidad de Cantabria, 2016); and Inmaculada Blasco Herranz, *Paradojas de la ortodoxia: Política de masas y militancia católica femenina en España (1919–1939)* (Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, 2003).

[31]Miller, "The Role."

[32]Omayda Naranjo Tamayo, "La mujer mexicana en la primera rebelión de los cristeros (1926–1929): una mirada historiográfica," *Historiografías* 8 (2014): 121–37.

[33]Robert Curley, *Citizens and Believers: Religion and Politics in Revolutionary Jalisco, 1900–1930* (University of New Mexico Press, 2018).

abovementioned National League for the Defense of Religious Freedom, which could boast fifty-five thousand members, among them the UDCM (with almost twenty-three thousand members); the Catholic Association of Mexican Youth (seven thousand members); the Order of the Knights of Columbus (five thousand members); and the National Catholic Confederation of Labour (19,500 members). This last labor organization brought together a network of small landowners with the purpose of defending religion, property, country, and family. It found creative ways of counteracting the official union, the Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers, via the Catholic press and the establishment of a network of co-operatives, savings banks, and mutual aid societies.[34]

Transatlantic News

While a good portion of Mexico was immersed in the chaos of the Cristero War, Spain was for the most part at peace under the Primo de Rivera dictatorship (1923–1930). While this was certainly an authoritarian regime, it was one that displayed limited but genuine toleration of certain kinds of diversity, including in the form of socialist labor unions. In this sense, de Rivera was closer to his contemporaries in Poland (Pilsudski) or Hungary (Horthy) than to Mussolini in Italy. His political project sought a rearmament of Spain's Catholic opinion through the strengthening of its confessional organizations, including women's associations. As a result, and in parallel with the UDCM in Mexico, the female members of Catholic Action experienced a process of growth, empowerment, and even at times a transgression of the traditional division between the male and female spheres.[35]

In this process, Catholic bourgeois women became "social women," ready to combat secularization and class-based unions of the Left. To this end they immersed themselves in the competition to define the "modern," using their social work as a weapon to advance Catholic feminism. Elite female orders such as the Theresians not only promoted the birth of Spain's Catholic Action, but also participated in collective endeavors such as conferences and associations of students, teachers, and "technical cooperators"—all part of an effort to defend their organization's institutions and teachers' schools according to the Church's "principle of subsidiarity," as endorsed by various papal encyclicals.[36]

Unlike in Mexico, where the post-revolutionary state was openly hostile to Roman Catholicism, Catholic social activists in Spain had the crucial support of the monarchy, which under Alfonso XIII (1902–1931) saw itself as a bridge between

[34]Geraldo Rafael Alfaro Cruz, "El fracaso del sindicalismo católico," *Iztapalapa, Revista de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades* 39 (1996): 155–72.

[35]Juan Carlos García Funes, "Propaganda y movilización de masas de la Acción Católica durante la dictadura de Primo de Rivera a través del diario *El Debate*" (TFM, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2011), 19–24.

[36]Alejandro Camino, *Defensoras de Dios y de las mujeres* (Comares, 2023); Teresa Ortega López, "Conservadurismo, catolicismo y antifeminismo: la mujer en los discursos del autoritarismo y el fascismo," *Ayer* 71, 3 (2008): 53–83; Inmaculada Blasco Herranz, "Ciudadanía y militancia católica femenina en la España de los años veinte," *Ayer* 57 (2005): 223–46; Rebeca Arce Pinedo, "De la mujer social a la mujer azul: la reconstrucción de la feminidad por las derechas españolas durante el primer tercio del siglo XX," *Ayer* 57 (2005): 247–72; and Miren Llona, "El feminismo católico en los años veinte y sus antecedentes ideológicos," *Vasconia* 25 (1998): 283–99.

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Spanish national identity and the Catholic faith. This bond was forged by three key initiatives: the consecration of the country to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in 1919; the monarch's privileged relationship with the Vatican after his visit to Pius XI in 1923, by which he established himself—or so he liked to think—as the pontiff's chief interlocutor for all Latin America; and the coronation on 12 October 1928 of the Virgin of Guadalupe as "Queen of Hispanidad." This last act, flawlessly orchestrated by Cardinal Pedro Segura, Primate of Spain and a protégé of the king, was considered emblematic of Spanish Catholicism during the 1920s, when it linked to a supposed communion with all of Latin America, but especially the Mexican people, "in light of the enormous cult that this virgin received in Mexico."[37]

During the de Rivera dictatorship, there were numerous political rallies in defense of Mexican Catholics. As Mexican diplomats observed, Catholic organizations had tried, unsuccessfully in the end, to influence the de Rivera government to denounce the Obregón and Calles administrations. In spite of the Spanish dictator's reluctance to do so, the grassroots movement of pro-Mexican Spanish Catholics gathered significant momentum in northern Spain, Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Sevilla, Málaga, and the Balearic and Canary Islands, fueled, if we can believe Mexican consular reports, by exiled members of the Mexican clergy who had partnered with local priests and lay groups to disseminate anti-Calles propaganda.[38]

At the same time, different types of Spanish magazines and newspapers referred to the Cristero conflict, contributing to the demonization of constitutionalist governments among the female Catholic population.[39] Thus, *La Voz de la Mujer* (Women's voice), for example, opened its edition of 26 June 1929, denouncing the "arrangements" or accommodation between the Mexican state and the Catholic bishops with an extensive article about religious persecution and the return of a hundred deportees from the penal colony on the Marías Islands, including Mother Conchita.[40] A deluge of anti-secular information came that year, toward the end of the Mexican conflict, further influencing Spanish Catholic women. And the transition from the monarchy to a republic in Spain in April 1931 did nothing to help Spanish society forget the experience of war in Mexico—indeed, quite the opposite. In 1931, *Mujeres españolas, Una revista exclusivamente patriótica* (Spanish women: an exclusively patriotic biweekly magazine), closely tied to the recently defunct Primo de Rivera regime, continued to refer to the end of the Cristero conflict in a Latin American travel chronicle, emphasizing the fervor with which the Mexican faithful had returned to their churches.[41] Three years later, in 1934, the weekly *Ellas* (Women), directed by the Right-wing intellectual José María Pemán, published a profile by journalist Carmen de Angulo of Our Lady of Guadalupe, in

[37]Guillermo María Muñoz, "Entre coronas, cruces y banderas: Monarquía, religión y nacionalismo español en la dictadura de Primo de Rivera," *Hispania Sacra* 62, 146 (2020): 579–91.

[38]Álvarez Pimentel, "From Secret War," 108–16.

[39]*El Siglo Futuro*, "Notas mejicanas," 4 Jan. 1928; *El Imparcial*, "La revolución en Méjico," 13 Apr. 1929; *La Nación*, "La lucha religiosa en Méjico," 15 July 1929; *La Libertad*, "Los cristeros mejicanos y sus instigados," 16 July 1929.

[40]*La Voz de la Mujer*, "Un centenar de mujeres católicas de Méjico, que habían sido deportadas a las Islas Marías, han sido puestas en libertad," 26 June 1929; "Las monjas en Méjico," 14 Mar. 1930; and "María de Maeztu en Méjico," 18 Jan. 1930.

[41]Valentín Gutiérrez-Solana, "Hispanoamericanismo: Enseñanzas de los viajes," *Mujeres Españolas*, 25 Jan. 1931.

which she recalled how, during the years of Catholic persecution, she had been hidden to preserve her safety.[42]

In the years leading up to the Civil War, in Spain, as in Mexico, the religious question remained open, and this served, above all, to mobilize the political right. Under the Spanish Republic, the belligerence of the confessional sectors was represented by a far-right cultural elite brought together under Acción Española (Spanish action), the Alfonsine monarchist party Renovación Española (Spanish renovation), and the Traditionalist Communion (the Carlist movement). These groups were ready to justify any coup d'état aimed at reversing what they saw as the country's social, political, and moral degradation thanks to the Republic, which, they claimed, had trampled on the interests of the Catholic Church and led the country into the Bolshevik abyss. According to this view, America and Europe were not that far apart, and nor were Catholicism and fascism. The reactionary magazine *Acción Española* (Spanish action) denounced the Western democracies' 1933 presumed boycott against Nazi Germany for its anti-Judaism as evidence of a double standard, as these same countries had not lifted a finger "when in Mexico and Spain thousands of Catholics were persecuted, thrown out and sacrificed because of their faith."[43]

Spanish reactionary forces came to propose four courses of action—sometimes simultaneously, and sometimes contradicting one another—to confront the supposedly illegitimate Republican regime: passive resistance (superficial submission without genuine compliance with the regime); active legal resistance (in the form of demonstrations or parliamentary obstructionism); civil resistance (an illegal, but peaceful, civil servants' strike, tax rebellion, and economic boycott); and armed resistance.[44] In this way they echoed the actions of mobilized Mexican Catholics, who passed successively through each of these stages leading up to or during the Cristero War. This Mexican influence was epitomized by the reissue of Jorge Gram's (also known as David Ramírez) *Héctor o los mártires del siglo XX* (Héctor or the martyrs of the twentieth century), the first novel with a Cristero setting first published in 1930. Republished in Madrid in the spring of 1936, only a few months before the start of the Spanish Civil War, it included a preface written by the staunch monarchist and anti-Republican conspirator and member of Spanish Action Eugenio Vegas Latapié.[45]

The war waged by the Mexican Cristeros and the struggle of Spanish reactionaries shared certain deeply entrenched religious and patriotic sentiments. Both were based on the defense of national Catholic symbols like Christ the King and the Virgin of

[42]Carmen C. de Angulo, "Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, Patrona de Méjico y de toda la América española," *Ellas*, 9 Dec. 1934.

[43]*Acción Española*, 16 May (1933): 530.

[44]Eduardo González Calleja, "La teoría y la práctica de la contrarrevolución en el monarquismo autoritario durante la Segunda República Española," *Pasado y Memoria* 23 (2021): 168; and Pablo Gil Vico "Derecho y ficción: la represión judicial militar," in Francisco Espinosa Maestre, ed., *Violencia roja y azul: España, 1936–1950* (Crítica, 2010), 263.

[45]David Ramírez, *Héctor o los mártires del siglo XX (novela histórica de ambiente mejicano)* (Fax, 1936). The book, first published in Spain in Madrid, had at least seven editions; the most recent one we have been able to find is from 1966. In 1926 this author had published a much distributed in Spain, and elsewhere, diatribe against the Calles government. David Ramírez, *La cuestión de México: Una ley inhumana y un pueblo víctima* (Isart Durán,1926). It was a translation of the French edition, and it included a reproduction of the Calles Law.

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Guadalupe, on the one hand, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus, on the other. This ideology was espoused by Catholic women like the Hispano-Cuban Carmen Velacoracho, editor of the magazine *Aspiraciones* (Aspirations), who was linked to the (pro-Nazi) Spanish Nationalist Party of José María Albiñana, and who had been arrested for her support of the attempted anti-Republican coup d'état of August 1932 led by General José Sanjurjo (the so-called La Sanjurjada).[46] Albiñana had practiced as a doctor in Mexico in the 1920s and published several autobiographical novels that give a sense of the political climate at the time; he would be expelled from the country by the government of Elias Calles because of his reactionary activism, and eventually executed by the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War.[47] For her part, the deeply anti-Semitic Velacoracho went on to a flourishing career during the Francoist dictatorship, publishing two biographies of Adolf Hitler, whom she considered a champion of Christianity.[48] The Carlist writer Dolores de Gortázar enjoyed a similarly successful career. She famously advocated for female instruction in the use of weapons, claiming that it would serve to encourage women to fight for the patriotic struggle, "as Catholics, women and Spaniards," and rid the country of the nefarious Republic.[49]

Leading up to the Republic and after its establishment, the religious persecution in Mexico was ever-present in Spanish literature. Among the novels with the greatest circulation was the already mentioned Jorge Gram´s *Héctor* (1930), based on a fictional couple formed by a Cristero and a Consuelo, one of the organizers of the economic boycott against the Mexican government. Recommended readings in religious schools at the time included Fernando Robles's *La virgen de los Cristeros* (The Virgin of the Cristeros, 1934) and José Guadalupe de Anda's *Los cristeros: La guerra santa en los Altos* (The Cristeros: the holy war in the Altos, 1937), both of which portrayed women in the Mexican Catholic resistance, among them Chief Gabriela Infante, a character inspired by María Natividad González, known as "the Generala," leader of the Durango Brigades.[50]

[46]Velacoracho is sometimes spelled Belacoracho.

[47]José María Albiñana Sanz, *La situación de México vista desde España* (Ateneo de Madrid, 1921); José María Albiñana Sanz, *Sol de Levante* (Gerardo Sisniega, 1923); José María Albiñana Sanz, *Aventuras tropicales: En busca del oro verde* (Espasa-Calpe, 1928); and José María Albiñana Sanz, *Bajo el cielo mejicano* (Cía. Ibero-Americana de Publicaciones, 1930).

[48]Carmen Velacoracho, *Dos hombres: Mussolini y Hitler* (Editora Aspiraciones, 1943).

[49]Camino, *Defensoras de Dios*, 208–48; Alejandro Camino, "Crítica religiosa y género en la obra literaria de la carlista Dolores de Gortázar (1895–1925)," *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma* 33 (2021): 167–86; Alejandro Camino, "Carmen Velacoracho, una pronazi católica en el primer franquismo (1939–1944)," in Adriana De Figueredo and Gabriela de Lima, coordinators, *Escrituras de autoría femenina e identidades iberoamericanas* (Autografía, 2020), 131–56; Concepción Moya and Carlos Fernández-Pacheco, "Carmen Belacoracho: una mujer periodista, productora de cine y líder feminista en el primer tercio del siglo XX," in Laura Branciforte et al., eds., *Las Mujeres y la Esfera Pública: Filosofía e Historia Contemporánea (*Reprografía, 2009), 332–53; Danièle Bussy Genevois, "Expresión y represión: el caso de *Aspiraciones* (1932–1935)," in Manuel Tuñón de Lara *et al.*, coordinators, *Comunicación, cultura y Política durante la Segunda República y la Guerra Civil*, vol. 2 (Universidad del País Vasco, 1990), 234–44; and Danièle Bussy Genevois, "La función de directora en los periódicos femeninos (1862–1936) o la 'sublime misión,'" in Jean Michel Desvois, coordinator, *Prensa, impresos, lectura en el mundo hispánico contemporáneo* (Université Michel de Montaigne-PILAR, 2005), 193–208.

[50]Vaca, *Los silencios.*

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Information on the Cristeros was even more abundant in the press, where it appeared even earlier than in the country's Right-wing and Catholic literature. In February 1926, *La Nación*, the mouthpiece for Primo de Rivera's official party, the Unión Patriótica (Patriotic Union), included a section on the American republics in which it reported on the fate of the deported Mexican clerics and the thirty-eight recently closed Catholic schools.[51] From August of that year, the "Mexico and Religion" section increasingly linked women, including the president's niece, Margarita Calles (who gave up becoming a nun to get married in San José, Texas), to the main acts of resistance by Catholics. The paper reported, for example, on the women—some "belonging to the finest Mexican families"—who had barricaded themselves in the temple of San Rafael, and of whom ten were injured and another forty detained for staging anti-government propaganda. It also profiled those imprisoned for attempting to assassinate President Calles, as well as the architects of the economic boycott, noting that "Catholic women have agreed to resign from their social functions and all measures have been adopted to prevent the sale of luxury objects: stamps, tobacco and lottery tickets."[52]

Other Right-wing newspapers contributed to the ongoing narrative of both Catholic persecution and defiance. In 1930, *La Hormiga de Oro* (The golden ant), a Carlist publication from Barcelona, included essays like *Las Catacumbas de Méjico o la Tiranía bolchevique* (The catacombs of Mexico or the Bolshevik tyranny), first published in Los Angeles in 1927, or *Les Phases de la Persécution au Mexique* (The stages of persecution in Mexico), from 1929.[53] Meanwhile, the Prensa Gráfica publishing group, specializing in illustrated magazines for women, echoed the Cristero conflict with articles in the weekly *Nuevo Mundo* (New World), one of which, on 6 August 1926, juxtaposed photographs of President Calles and Pope Pius XI, showing the two as the chief antagonists in the Mexican contest between religion and politics.[54]

Among Spanish newspapers, the usually very Catholic Basque press was a pioneer in offering timely information on events in Mexico, to which local papers often devoted whole sections. *La Gaceta del Norte*, for example, was very committed to the cause of the Cristeros, always presenting them as victims of "governmental vandalism."[55] *La Gaceta* reported on the "Whipping of women to break up a demonstration" as an example of the Mexican's government's particular cruelty toward women and Catholics.[56]

The much more influential Catholic Action–owned *El Debate* (The debate) was an especially close follower of the Cristero War. It described the scandalous punishment meted out to the "young ladies" of the League in Defense of Religious Freedom, who were imprisoned along with "thieves and prostitutes." These women reacted by offering a moral example—praying the rosary, which moved even those "corrupted" women with whom they had been confined. The paper espoused the

[51]"Deportación de religiosos extranjeros," *La Nación*, 15 Feb. 1926, and 14 June 1926.

[52]"Méjico y la Religión: Parece inminente una intervención extranjera en este asunto," *La Nación*, 3 Aug. 1926.

[53]"Notas bibliográficas," *La Hormiga de Oro*, 16 Jan. 1930.

[54]"Una cuestión transcendental: El problema religioso en Méjico," *Nuevo Mundo*, 6 Aug. 1926.

[55]Maricruz Castro Ricalde, "Ideología y Prensa Escrita: la Guerra Cristera en la Prensa Vasca," *Convergencia* 5, 16 (1998): 207–26.

[56]Ibid., 218–38.

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myth that "religiosity was greater among women, property-owning families, those of a certain cultural level, northerners, inhabitants of small towns and those who were not manual wage earners."[57] It even organized massive communions in the Madrid Cathedral and in the posh Church of Los Jerónimos in support of Mexican Catholics. It published the letters of the Countess of Gavia, president of the Catholic Women's Action Board, who said that "given what was happening in Mexico, the Spaniards have to unite in everything to defend religion."[58]

El Debate's positions gave voice to a more general discourse that ensured the Mexican question remained an ever-present part of Spanish Catholic political culture, from publications to mass religious meetings. The Marian Congress, held in Seville in May 1929, promoted a crusade to demand peace in Mexico. Likewise, the year before, the First International Congress of Women's Catholic Leagues, held in The Hague and attended by 320 delegates representing eighteen countries, among them Spain's Carmen García Loygorri, had been inaugurated with special reference to the Mexican martyrs: "It is not necessary to say with ardor that the Spanish Delegation joined the eloquent words of Madame Steemberge, since it is present, in the minds of all, that the blood that is shed in Mexico is our blood…."[59]

In general, the most conservative Spanish public opinion considered the revolution and the subsequent Cristiada a period of anarchy and Bolshevik chaos in Mexico, the fault of a liberal, Masonic, and Protestant conspiracy against Latin American peoples' supposedly true values—foremost among these their Catholic religion. And then came the Spanish Republic.

Another War

The arrival of the Second Republic in April 1931 was received by many Spanish Catholics with consternation. The monarchy and the Church had long maintained a strong alliance, with the clergy exerting considerable influence in affairs of state; Spanish prelates, for example, enjoyed unelected seats in the Senate. The cleric who best personified this alliance was the previously mentioned Cardinal Pedro Segura, a staunch, outspoken monarchist. In 1928, Segura wrote a note for his parishioners criticizing the Mexican government's policies. Within three years his fury would be turned against the Republic, which he hated. Such was his virulent opposition to the new democratic, secular regime that in June 1931 the Republican government expelled him from Spain.[60]

The Republic modeled its religious policies on those of the French Third Republic, seeking a separation between Church and state and the laicization of public life, especially in matters of education, where the Church's influence was particularly significant as thanks to an entrenched network of religious schools. Those were the objectives of the new Republican government's decrees and, ultimately, of the

[57]Almudena Delgado Larios, *La Revolución mexicana vista desde España, 1910–1931* (Publicaciones Cruz O, 2010), 215. See also: *El Debate*, 1 Aug. 1926, and 8 Mar. 1927; and *El Eco de México*, 5 Oct. 1926.

[58]Víctor Manuel Arbeloa Muru, "*El Socialista* versus *El Debate* (Jan.–Sept. 1933)," *Hispania Sacra* 66, 133 (2014): 287–335; and Delgado, *La Revolución*, 236.

[59]María López Sagredo, "Desde La Haya: El Congreso Internacional de Ligas Femeninas Católicas," *La Nación*, 19 May 1928; and "El conflicto entre la Iglesia y el Estado puede considerarse virtualmente resuelto," *La Nación*, 22 June 1929.

[60]Santiago Martínez Sánchez, *Los papeles perdidos del Cardenal Segura, 1880–1957* (Eunsa, 2004).

December 1931 Constitution, which among other things legalized freedom of worship, divorce, civil marriage, and lay cemeteries. The approval of Article 26 of the Constitution, which effected an official separation of Church and state, was considered by conservative Catholics an attack against the Church's "natural" rights —the first steps down a path that would lead to the same assault on religion that had transpired in Mexico, or, even worse, the Soviet Union. The plausibility of these fears was enhanced by some very grave incidents, including the burning by (mostly anarchist) mobs of churches, convents, and religious buildings in Madrid, Málaga, and other southern and eastern Spanish cities in May 1931.[61]

The Cristiada was an obvious reference point for those Spanish Catholics who considered themselves victims of an illegitimate, hostile government. And many commenced to arm themselves and undergo paramilitary training in anticipation of an uprising against the Republic. This was true of the ultramontane Carlists, who (with Mussolini's help) started to train its underground militias for a potential revolt. The comparison between the Cristeros and the Carlists in Navarra did not escape anyone, as the Spanish ambassador to Mexico, Julio Álvarez del Vayo, had noted in 1932.[62] That year, in August, the first military coup against the Republic was attempted, led by a disgruntled general, Manuel Sanjurjo. It was poorly planned, and it failed.

In 1932 those ready to confront the Republic with arms were still a minority. Most conservatives preferred, for the moment, to confine their protest to the usual legal channels. As resistance to the Republic's new policies increased, Catholics thus started to organize themselves in new political parties that originated within Catholic Action; this led to the creation of the first Catholic mass political party in Spain, the CEDA (Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas, or Spanish Confederation of Autonomous Rights), in March 1933. The party's leader was the young lawyer José María Gil-Robles, who had previously been the leader of the Catholic agrarian unions. He did not hide his disdain for democracy or his desire to change the Constitution and reverse what he considered anti-Catholic legislation. His political goals were very similar to those pursued by Engelbert Dollfuss's Catholic dictatorship in Austria. But to achieve them, Gil-Robles knew he first had to gain power.[63]

Gil-Robles's path to power started when his party received the most votes in the 1933 general elections, held in November and December of that year. However, he was refused the premiership by the moderate Catholic president of the Republic, Niceto Alcalá-Zamora, in favor of the increasingly conservative Radical Party. Eventually, in October 1934, it was announced that four CEDA members would enter the government. The Left's response was to declare a national general strike, which quickly transformed into an armed revolution in Asturias. It was a very violent

[61]Danièle Bussy Genevois, "Parricidas a medias": la prensa mexicana y la proclamación de la Segunda República española," in Nathalie Ludec et al., coordinators, *Centros y periferias: Prensa, impresos y territorios en el mundo hispánico contemporáneo* (PILAR, 2004), 59–74.

[62]Archivo General de la Administración, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, caja 82/2076, exp. 12 y 13. "Información sobre Política Nacional de Méjico" (1931 and 1933); and Carta del embajador: "Agravación de la cuestión religiosa" (Méjico, 12 Jan. 1932).

[63]Manuel Álvarez Tardío and Fernando del Rey, eds., *El laberinto republicano: la democracia española y sus enemigos (1931–1936)* (RBA, 2012); and Leandro Álvarez Rey, coordinator, *La Segunda República española, 90 años después (1931–2021)* (Ministerio de Presidencia-CEPC, 2023).

affair, with perhaps two thousand killed, most of them striking workers, but thirty-four members of the clergy—priests, monks, and seminarists—were also assassinated by the revolutionaries. The country was aghast. The most recent killings of priests in Spain had happened a century earlier. The religious victims of October 1934 were soon recognized as Catholic martyrs.[64]

In February 1936 Spanish voters again went to the polls. The events in Asturias, which had seen thousands of people incarcerated and provided the opening for Radical-CEDA administrations to reverse several progressive policies put in place under the new Republic, contributed to an atmosphere of radical confrontation. The Left-wing parties united under the banner of the Popular Front; the Right did the same, calling their coalition the Anti-Revolutionary Bloc. The Popular Front achieved a razor-thin victory, but one that gave it a clear majority in parliament. The political center collapsed.[65] The Right, having decided that time for democratic parliamentarianism was over, now actively supported the plan put forth by several generals to overthrow the government and install a dictatorship. In the meantime, violence between radicals in the streets left nearly five hundred people dead and more than 1,600 injured. Between February and July 1936 at least eight hundred religious buildings were attacked—some damaged, others destroyed entirely—by mobs, though no clerics would yet be assassinated.[66]

Spanish Catholic women continued to mobilize during the Republic. They concentrated their missionary efforts on combating the secularization of the state provided for in the 1931 Constitution and, with it, all legislative initiatives aimed at undermining the power, budget, and presence of the Church in society. They rejected divorce, coeducation, and, above all, the Law of Religious Confessions and Congregations of 1933, which increased state control over the Church and its property.[67]

The resistance strategies deployed by Spanish Catholic women represented a broad repertoire of tactics, ranging from collecting signatures to prevent the removal of crucifixes from public schools, sending letters to the media and government authorities, prayers, and sermons to the faithful, to promoting membership in those confessional political organizations that opposed Republican policies. This last point aligned these women with the full range of conservative political tendencies, including the monarchists of Renovación Española (Spanish Renewal) and the Carlist Traditionalist Communion, fascists like the Falange (Falange Española de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista), and, above all, the Catholic Action-backed CEDA. Women used these parties' organizational structures as springboards from which to organize rallies and campaigns in favor

[64]Brian D. Bunk, *Ghosts of Passion: Martyrdom, Gender, and the Origins of the Spanish Civil War* (Duke University Press, 2007).

[65]Eduardo González Calleja, *Contrarrevolucionarios: Radicalización violenta de las derechas durante la Segunda República, 1931–1936* (Alianza, 2011).

[66]Manuel Álvarez Tardío and Roberto Villa García, "El impacto de la violencia anticlerical en la primavera de 1936 y la respuesta de las autoridades," *Historia Sacra* 65, 132 (2013): 683–764.

[67]Inmaculada Blasco Herranz, "Las ramas femeninas de la AC durante la II República: de la política al apostolado," in Feliciano Montero, coordinator, *La Acción Católica en la II República* (Universidad de Alcalá, 2008), 43–72; and Mónica Moreno Seco, "República, género y religión. Las mujeres ante la política laicista republicana," in Mª Concepción Marcos and Rafael Serrano, eds., *Mujer y política en la España contemporánea (1868–1936)* (Universidad de Valladolid, 2012), 183–202.

of the re-Catholicization of society and the moralization of customs, and, above all, to push for a return to a government of the Right. This mobilization was a remarkable success. Catholic women called on the full range of political resources at their disposal during the 1933 elections, the first in which Spanish women, having only recently won the right to vote, could participate. When the results were revealed, many observers argued that women's votes had played a decisive role in tilting the electoral balance in favor of the conservatives.[68]

After the elections of February 1936, however, which resulted in a victory for the Popular Front, many Right-wing Spaniards, and certainly a significant sector of the army, were convinced that the time for politics was truly past. The Republic could not be rectified from within. The CEDA attempt to build a Catholic, anti-democratic regime through the control of both government and parliament, thus enabling it to denaturalize the Constitution, had failed. Spain was not going to follow the path of Dolffuss's Austria. It was the time for brute force. Long-standing conspiracies were reactivated. Political opinion became more radical. In the spring of 1936, there was a massive transfer of Catholic militants from the CEDA's youth section (Juventudes de Acción Popular) to the overtly fascist Falange. With this, the confessional identity of Spain's fascist movement, already notably Catholic, was further reinforced.[69]

And then war came. The long-simmering military-civilian plot was realized on 17 July 1936, but it partially failed as the Republic, with the support of Left-wing political parties and unions, along with troops and policemen who remained loyal to the legal government, managed to retain control of most of the country. But only formally: real power was now in the hands of militias and committees, which appeared everywhere. These groups started a hunt for the Republic's perceived enemies, and in the process some 6,800 clerics were assassinated, especially in the first months of the war. Thousands of churches, convents and monasteries, Catholic schools, and other religious buildings were assaulted, destroyed, or put to other use. At the same time, in rebel Spain, the army, with the help of Right-wing militias, primarily the Falangists and Carlists, committed mass atrocities with total impunity, often under the close observation of their chaplains and local priests. In fact, the rebels killed twice as many people as the loyalists did during this period, but the Catholic hierarchy, while loudly denouncing the atrocities committed by the "reds," remained silent, or sometimes even condoned the crimes carried out by their "blues."[70]

[68]Pilar Salomón Chéliz, "¿Espejos invertidos? mujeres clericales, mujeres anticlericales," *Arenal: Revista de Historia de las Mujeres* 11, 2 (2004): 87–111; Julio Prada Rodríguez, "Mujeres contra la revolución: La movilización femenina conservadora durante la Segunda República española y la Guerra Civil," *Amnis* 8 (2008), at: https://doi.org/10.4000/amnis.599; Rosa Ana Gutiérrez Lloret "¡Hagámoslo por Dios y por la Patria! La organización de las mujeres católicas en las elecciones de noviembre de 1933," *Historia Constitucional* 19 (2018): 251–85; and Sofía Rodríguez López, "Mujeres, agencia política y violencia contrarrevolucionaria en España (1934–1944)," *Hispania. Revista Española de Historia* 80, 265 (2020): 531–61.

[69]Sid Lowe, *Catholicism, War, and the Foundation of Francoism: The Juventud de Acción Popular in Spain, 1931–1939* (Liverpool University Press, 2010).

[70]Fernando del Rey, *Retaguardia Roja: violencia y revolución en la guerra civil española* (Galaxia Gutenberg, 2019); Julián Casanova, *La Iglesia de Franco* (Crítica, 2005); and Hilari Raguer Suñer, *La pólvora y el incienso: La Iglesia y la Guerra Civil Española (1936–1939)* (Península, 2001).

Most of Spain's big cities, except for Seville and Saragossa, remained on the government's side. For Right-wing women, the experience was terrifying. Men were arrested and disappeared, their bodies later found—if they were found at all—bearing the signs of a violent death. However, many Falangist women already had substantial experience in underground work as the party had been banned the previous March. As in previous months, beginning in July, their main mission was initially to provide assistance to their male counterparts. One of these Falangist women was María Paz Martínez Unciti, who was only eighteen when the war broke out. She was arrested in Madrid in October while escorting a male comrade as he attempted to seek refuge in a foreign embassy, a common practice among persecuted rightists. She was tortured and assassinated. Her sister Carina, a fervent Catholic who until then had not been particularly interested in politics, decided to work to undermine the beleaguered Republic. With the help of close friends, all of them women, she organized a secret underground organization that bore the name of her deceased sister.

The "Blue Auxiliary Maria Paz" was the most successful clandestine network of resistance, assistance, and espionage of the entire Spanish Civil War, on either side of the conflict, eventually counting approximately six thousand active members. It has been estimated that another twenty thousand women in Madrid collaborated in one way or another with the organization.[71] Moreover, similar, if smaller, female networks appeared in many other cities and even in villages across Republican Spain. Their success was in part due to the Republican authorities' disdain for women's capacity to conduct "men's" activities, even as women actually carried them out, and due to the common practice among those Right-wing female resisters of not accepting into their organizations women with whom they did not have long-standing relationships. As a result, they were never infiltrated by the Republic's counter-espionage services.[72]

Who were these Catholic women who played these crucial roles in the conflict? Most of them were not Falangists, at least in the sense that they had not been part of that organization's Women's Section (Sección Femenina) before the war. In July 1936, there were barely 2,500 such women in the whole country. By contrast, those females who flocked to the resistance networks in their tens of thousands after the war's outbreak came from a more generic Catholic background. They had learned their politics through Catholic associations and media, during mass through the priests' sermons, or simply in their conservative family milieus. All of these women—whether Falangists, monarchists, or simply conservatives—saw themselves primarily as defenders of the Catholic Church and its role in the Spanish nation. In this sense, in addition to their material contribution, their ideological role in supporting the Right-wing resistance to the Republic was significant. As Angela Flynn, the authority on the role played by women in Madrid's fifth column, has written, "Anti-Republican women were the first to mobilize an effective resistance and they played a vital role in the construction of a subversive national Catholic presence in the capital.… They

[71]Angela Flynn, *Falangist and National Catholic Women in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)* (Routledge, 2020).

[72]Sofía Rodríguez López and Antonio Cazorla-Sánchez, "Blue Angles: Female Fascist Resisters, Spies and Intelligence Officials in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939," *Journal of Contemporary History* 53, 4 (2018): 692–713. Other references are in Javier Cervera Gil, *Madrid en Guerra: La ciudad clandestina, 1936–1939* (Alianza, 1998) Sofía Rodríguez López, *Quintacolumnistas: Las mujeres del 36 en la clandestinidad* almeriense (IEA, 2008); and Carlos Píriz, *En zona roja: La quinta columna en la Guerra Civil Española* (Comares, 2022).

ensured the spiritual and material survival of Madrid's beleaguered anti-Republican community during the thirty-two months of civil conflict."[73]

These Catholic women also served as a bridge connecting pre-war Madrid with the city that was eventually taken over by Franco's armies almost three years later, at the end of March 1939. When victory was achieved, some women remained leaders of the now official Falangist Women's Section, carrying out whatever missions the new dictatorship tasked them with.[74] But most women resisters once again faded into the background, returning to their daily lives, their families, their churches, and their catechism. As happened to their Mexican counterparts, the memory of their deeds has until recently been largely buried in the historical record.[75] Their actions, and what they represented, repelled many historians—even those feminist authors among them—in Spain and abroad who preferred to devote much more energy to the phenomenon of the "liberated" Republican militia woman: the scarcely two thousand women who took up arms in July 1936 to defend the Republic, but who almost entirely left, or rather were forced to leave, the front as soon as the Republic began to organize a regular, male-dominated army. Symbolically important as they were then, and remain today, the contributions of the Left-wing *milicianas* (militiawomen) to the war effort was far less significant than that of their reactionary, Catholic counterparts.[76]

Conclusions

News concerning the experiences of Mexican Catholic women were transmitted across the Atlantic by Spanish newspapers, organizations, conferences, trips, masses, rallies, and personal letters (on which more research would be most welcome) beginning in the 1920s, and by the edifying, Right-leaning novels that were read, above all, in Spanish Catholic schools during the 1930s. This helps us understand the parallels between the various women's brigades and other Catholic organizations in Mexico and the members of the women's fifth column in Spain. Perhaps the visibility enjoyed by European fascists in the public sphere meant that radical Right-wing ideas would resonate more deeply among young women in cities like Madrid or Barcelona

[73]Angela Flynn, "The Role of Women within the Fifth Column in Madrid during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39)" (PhD diss., Oxford University, 2018), 15.

[74]Inbal Ofer, *Señoritas in Blue: The Making of a Political Elite in Franco´s Spain. The National Leadership of the Sección Femenina de la Falange (1936–1977)* (Sussex Academic Press, 2010); and Sofía Rodríguez López, "Las mujeres de Sección Femenina: una aproximación interseccional a los perfiles de su militancia y los motivos de afiliación," *Historia y Política* 51 (2024): 91–123.

[75]Begoña Barrera, "Las mártires del fascismo español: El culto a las caídas en la Sección Femenina de Falange (1936–1942)," *Pasado y Memoria* 25 (2022): 259–81; Julia Biggane "The Rewards of Female Fascism in Franco's New State: The Recompensas Y of the Sección Femenina de la Falange, 1939–1945," *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 90, 8 (2013): 1313–37; and Victoria L. Enders, "'And We Ate Up the World': Memories of the Seccion Femenina," in Paola Bacchetta and Margaret Power, eds., *Right-Wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists around the World* (Routledge, 2002), 88–101.

[76]Sofía Rodríguez López, "Fallen Militiawomen in the Spanish Civil War: The Identity of Unknown Fighters," *European History Quaterly* 53, 1 (2023): 115–34; Gonzalo Berger, *Milicianas: La historia olvidada de las combatientes antifascistas* (Arzalia, 2022); Lisa Lines, *Milicianas: Women in Combat in the Spanish Civil War* (Lexington Books, 2015); and Julio Prada Rodríguez, "Repensando la agencia femenina durante la Guerra Civil: El caso de Mujeres al Servicio de España," *Historia y Política* 47 (2022): 225–54.

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at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. But without a doubt, the social origin, experience, and cultural heritage of Mexican Catholic women was more widely applicable to conservative Spanish women all over the country during the conflict. In both cases, the defense of Catholic religion and identity was at the forefront of women's efforts and gave coherence to what might at times appear to be distinct political projects.[77]

The Mexican Cristero experience constituted a political laboratory and a school of resistance that provided the blueprint for action later exercised in Spain. With barely ten years between the two countries' conflicts, the ladies (and gentlemen) of Catholic Action—in Mexico and later in Spain—organized themselves, first as a passive resistance, and then, drawing on the same anxieties and using the same justifications, to support the use of political violence. The Mexican women who organized boycotts or bombed railways in Mexico taught Catholic women everywhere, but particularly in the Spanish-speaking world, what could be done, and how. For their part, the women who supported General Sanjurjo's 1932 coup d'état against the Spanish government, and later that of Generals Emilio Mola and Francisco Franco in 1936, held religion up as an essential part of their counter-revolutionary culture and sense of national identity, as had Catholic women in Mexico. These women's Catholicism also justified their embrace of violence: in their view, they acted in self-defense against forces that threatened to extinguish the very cornerstone of their worldview. Though they were separated by an ocean, Catholic women in Mexico and Spain carried, and fiercely guarded, the same cross against who they considered to be the same enemies.

[77] Aurora G. Morcillo, *True Catholic Womanhood: Gender Ideology in Franco's Spain* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).

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