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# "True Patriots for the Salvation of the Fatherland": Sinarquistas and the Struggle for Post- Revolutionary Mexico

John Smith

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**“True Patriots for the Salvation of the Fatherland”  
Sinarquistas and the Struggle for Post-Revolutionary Mexico**

**by**

**John Lucian Smith**

**THESIS**

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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Sinarquistas and the Struggle for Post-Revolutionary Mexico**

**by**

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**ABSTRACT**

The efforts of Mexico’s revolutionary leaders to rein in clerical power produced many violent confrontations between secular liberals and partisans for the Roman Catholic Church. Formed in 1937, the Unión Nacional Sinarquista built up a following of conservative Catholics in part by means of a mass culture produced by the movement’s elites, such as elaborately staged rituals, canons of national heroes and martyrs, interpretations of national history, and songs. With this propaganda, the Sinarquistas sought to generate popular support for the movement leadership’s right-wing political agenda. This thesis explores the mass culture of the Sinarquista movement, as well as that of Sinarquismo’s enemies on the Mexican left, to argue that discourses of nationalism and patriotism served to legitimize equally the irreconcilable political goals of both the Church’s partisans and its secular opponents. Political confrontations between secular liberals and Catholic conservatives thus continued even after the 1929 suppression of the Cristero Rebellion and were reflected in the acrimonious mass cultural wars of the period, as factions like the Sinarquistas sought to present themselves as Mexico’s true patriots and their opponents as nefarious enemies of the nation.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

Mexico's Unión Nacional Sinarquista (UNS),<sup>1</sup> founded in León, Guanajuato, in May 1937, emerged as one of President Lázaro Cárdenas's most formidable challenges, in the later years of his presidency. The UNS, rather than functioning as a political party in an arena that Sinarquista leadership viewed as dominated by the elites of the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM),<sup>2</sup> instead was formed as a renegade civic organization to promote the political aims envisioned by a narrow circle of conservative Roman Catholic opponents of the PRM. The Sinarquistas viewed formal political participation – for example, the formation of a registered opposition party – with suspicion and so operated without bureaucratic sanction, attacking Mexico's revolutionary party and its leftist allies with fiery nationalist propaganda. In effect, the Sinarquistas conducted their provocative public demonstrations without much interference from the state, because of the revolutionary party's relative weakness in the late 1930s and early 1940s; however, violent confrontations did still occur from time to time. Developing elaborate public rituals, as well as a canon of Catholic movement heroes and shared myths of Mexican history that celebrated above all a dominant role for the Roman Catholic Church in Mexican politics, Sinarquista elites created a distinctive mass culture in a bid to

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<sup>1</sup> “Unión Nacional Sinarquista” translates roughly as the National Union of Opponents of Anarchy, as the term *sinarquista* is an elision of *sin anarquía*, or “without anarchy.”

<sup>2</sup> The political party that ruled Mexico for over seven decades after the Mexican Revolution underwent several name changes. Established as the National Revolutionary Party (PNR) by Plutarco Elías Calles in 1929, the party under President Lázaro Cárdenas was known as the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM) after 1938. In 1946, President Manuel Ávila Camacho changed its name again to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Some of my discussion refers to periods when the party went by another name, and I use the acronym appropriate to the period of my analysis.

popularize their opposition to the agenda of President Lázaro Cárdenas and his party, the PRM. The Sinarquistas mobilized opposition around a radical departure from the revolutionary party's agenda, envisioning a modern Mexican state tied closely to, and deriving its legitimacy from, the Catholic Church, while decrying Cardenista efforts to collectivize rural lands and promote secular public education.

While concentrated in Mexico's center-west near their headquarters in León, the Sinarquistas sought national influence and power, threatening the hegemony of the emerging revolutionary party, predecessor to today's PRI. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the UNS built a sizeable constituency, primarily in Mexico's center-west, a conservative region of Mexico where, just a decade earlier, Catholic Cristero rebels had launched a violent, protracted rebellion against the nascent revolutionary state. Even in the late 1930s, the revolutionary party still effectively lacked the political support and control in more conservative regions of Mexico, and this granted the Sinarquistas significant freedom to stage public rituals, whip up anti-PRM sentiment, and publicize their vision of a more conservative, Catholic Mexico. By the early 1940s, Sinarquismo reached the apogee of its power and influence. According to historian Jean Meyer's analysis of Sinarquista rolls throughout Mexico by this time, the movement's adherents numbered between 300,000 to 500,000, though figures based in this case on public self-identification with the movement almost certainly understate broader sympathy for Sinarquista aims. Meyer's data on Sinarquista constituencies further show that the UNS garnered its greatest support in the states of Guanajuato, Michoacán, and Querétaro, where constituents numbered between seven and ten percent of the population.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Meyer, *El sinarquismo: un fascismo mexicano?* (Mexico: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, 1979), 47.



UNS's followers were, for the most part, working-class inhabitants of cities and the surrounding countryside in conservative regions of Mexico, while the movement's leaders were often young, middle-class professionals.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the conservative center-west, Sinarquismo attracted followers in states throughout Mexico, as well as among Mexican and Mexican-American workers in the United States,<sup>5</sup> for whom the Sinarquistas' glorification of a Catholic Mexican nation against its Protestant imperialist enemies perhaps reinforced attachments to national or family origins amidst the humiliations of poverty and racial discrimination in the 1940s United States.

Initially after its founding in May 1937, the UNS was led by José Antonio Urquiza, the son of wealthy agriculturalists from Querétaro, until his assassination shortly after in April 1938 at the hands of a rural worker whom today's UNS alleges was drunk and paid off by *agraristas* or the supporters of Cárdenas's land reforms.<sup>6</sup> The movement's early leaders like the young middle-class lawyer Salvador Abascal issued ferocious denunciations of both the PRM and Mexico's external enemies, until later moderate leaders like Manuel Torres Bueno softened the organization's official criticisms of both the PRM and the United States in the mid-1940s, after compromises with the more conservative Ávila Camacho Administration and possibly with US officials, too. After the mid-1940s, however, with the revolutionary party's retreat from some of the

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<sup>4</sup> Héglio Trindade, *O Nazi-fascismo na América Latina* (Porto Alegre, RS: Editora da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 2004), 41.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to Meyer, see Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 189.

<sup>6</sup> UNS, "Founders," [http://members.tripod.com/sinarquismo\\_net.mx/biografias.htm](http://members.tripod.com/sinarquismo_net.mx/biografias.htm), last accessed July 24, 2013.

most divisive of the Revolutionary Constitution of 1917's provisions – those prescribing secular public education and land reform – the Sinarquistas lost much of their strength as an opposition movement. The PRI's more conservative politics from the late 1940s onward sapped conservative opposition of much of its popular support as intrusive land reform campaigns stalled and the government abandoned the Revolutionary Constitution's public education guarantees (and hence its anticlerical challenges to the Church's presence in local schools). Moreover, the Ávila Camacho government's definitive crushing of a right-wing demonstration against the PRM's candidate for mayor in León, Guanajuato, a hotbed of reactionary resistance to the government,<sup>7</sup> also marked the decline of conservative opposition movements in Mexico's center-west. From 1946 onward, the government finally began to crack down on the troublesome state and local politicians that had allowed the Sinarquistas and others room to maneuver in the region. In the period after this January 1946 "León massacre," as federal troops' shooting of unarmed protesters came to be called, the Sinarquistas no longer posed the same serious oppositional threat to the revolutionary party.

A study of the Sinarquistas' opposition to Mexico's PRM raises a number of broader issues in the historiography of nation-building in post-revolutionary Mexico, among them the limits of the PRM's political and cultural hegemony in the periods of relative stability after the violence of the Revolution had subsided. A study of the UNS, emerging as it did on the eve of the revolutionary state's retreat from signature land and

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel Newcomer, *Reconciling Modernity: Urban State Formation in 1940s León, Mexico* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 143. Newcomer notes that soldiers opened fire on unarmed protesters in León's central plaza, chasing fleeing protesters into their homes and murdering them there, and "plucking out victims' eyes with bayonets" according to some accounts.

education policies in the 1940s, also helps to shed light on the revolutionary state's move to the right after Cárdenas, as well as the revolutionary state's increasing power as it began to incorporate the agendas of conservative opponents like the Sinarquistas. Furthermore, research on the UNS highlights the continuity and varying strategies of Catholic-inspired resistance in its confrontations with Mexico's revolutionary party – confrontations that began almost immediately after the Constitution of 1917 proposed new regulations on the Church in Mexico and erupted in greatest violence as the Calles Administration attempted vigorous enforcement of these constitutional provisions during the Cristero Rebellion.

The Sinarquista challenge to the PRM had its origins two decades earlier in the Revolutionary Constitution of 1917, which, with a number of anticlerical provisions and restrictions on the Church in Mexico, initiated a long confrontation between followers of the Church and proponents of the more radical anticlerical tenets of the Mexican Revolution. Specifically, the new constitution's Article 130 stripped the Church of much of its legal status, including its entitlement to own property in Mexico, while explicitly allowing for government intervention in the Church's affairs such as defining marriage as a civil rather than religious commitment, stipulating that only Mexican-born men could become clergy in Mexico, and barring clerical criticism of the government. In another challenge to Church authority, Article 3 provided for public education administered by the state, eliminating the Church's traditional role providing religious instruction in schools throughout Mexico.<sup>8</sup> The Sinarquistas would also oppose the state's

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<sup>8</sup> Linda B. Hall, *Álvaro Obregón: Power and Revolution in Mexico, 1911-1920* (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 1981), 179-81; Michael C. Meyer, William L. Sherman, and

expropriation of lands for public use, licensed by Article 27, as nefarious intrusions of a secular state on traditional local authority. In spite of these clear anticlerical provisions in the Constitution, however, over the next few decades revolutionary leaders were inconsistent in their implementation, in an effort to avoid confrontations with the Church. While in some periods revolutionary elites' compromises with the Church produced uneasy *détentes*, at other times more aggressively anticlerical leaders' attempts to regulate the Church provoked violent resistance from proponents of Church authority.

The presidency of Álvaro Obregón (1920-1924), for example, saw relatively peaceful Church-state relations. Obregón declined to enforce the new Constitution's anticlerical articles strictly and thereby avoided violent confrontations with supporters of the Church. Perhaps shrewdly recognizing the weakness of a state still besieged by political opposition, as well as a lack of the resources necessary to provide for public education throughout Mexico,<sup>9</sup> Obregón resisted aggressive enforcement of Article 3's prescriptions for secular public education, while doing little to challenge the Church's ownership of property in Mexico. He angered Church officials by promoting the activities of Protestant missionaries and the YMCA in Mexico,<sup>10</sup> but nevertheless his moves to challenge the Church's authority were tentative. In his rhetoric Obregón steered clear of direct denunciations of the Church, instead announcing as he campaigned for the presidency in December 1919 that "national salvation... will not be won by decreasing

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Susan M. Deeds, *The Course of Mexican History*, 6th ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 523-25.

<sup>9</sup> Meyer, et al., *The Course of Mexican History*, 6th ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 554.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

the numbers of Catholics... in our country, but by increasing the numbers of moral men.”<sup>11</sup> Obregón’s largely ignoring the letter and implications of anticlerical constitutional articles produced a temporary peace between the Church and the revolutionary state that would come undone in subsequent years, under Obregón’s successor Plutarco Elías Calles.

After the tenuous peace of the Obregón years, Calles’s ascent to the presidency ushered in heightened antagonisms between Church and State, which ultimately erupted in a rebellion of Catholic Cristero rebels against the government in 1926. More stridently anticlerical than Obregón, Calles insisted on stricter enforcement of the 1917 Constitution’s regulations of the Church.<sup>12</sup> In February 1926, the Mexico City daily *El Universal* published a provocative interview with the primate of Mexico, José Mora y del Río, in which Mora y del Río restated the Church’s opposition to the Revolutionary Constitution and its commitment to “combatting” the Constitution’s implementation.<sup>13</sup> In response, Calles ordered state governors to enforce strictly all of the Constitution’s anticlerical provisions, including the closure of monasteries (Church-owned property), with a decree following in March 1926 that all clergy register with local secular authorities. The infamous “Calles law” of early July 1926 threatened jail terms for the violation of the Constitution’s anticlerical provisions, reiterating in particular that

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Matthew Butler, *Popular Piety and Political Identity in Mexico’s Cristero Rebellion: Michoacán, 1927-29* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>12</sup> José Luis Sánchez Gavi, “Entre la tensión y la conciliación: La Iglesia católica en Puebla ante el torbellino revolucionario, 1910-1940,” in Yolanda Padilla Rangel et al., eds., *Revolución, Cultura y Religión: Nuevas perspectivas regionales, siglo XX* (Aguascalientes, AG: Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, 2011), 159-60.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Butler, *Popular Piety and Political Identity in Mexico’s Cristero Rebellion*, 146.

Catholic clergy would be completely removed from education and the Church would be barred from owning property in Mexico. Church officials responded to the Calles law by suspending all services and sacraments in Mexico as of July 31, 1926, and conservative Catholic rebels then began to gather arms and followers in Mexico's center-west, in preparation for open rebellion against the government – a rebellion that finally erupted with violence in Michoacán in February 1927.<sup>14</sup>

The overtly religious overtones of the Cristero Rebellion (1926-1929) have clouded two particular points about rebels' motivations and their relationship with the institutional Church. First, in many cases Cristero rebels did not oppose the government simply, or even primarily, for its anticlericalism but rather for the numerous disruptions that anticlerical campaigns, like registration requirements, threatened against traditional local governance. As political scientist Jennie Purnell has argued, Callista anticlericalism certainly threatened the Church's privileges in Mexico, but it also "constituted an attack on beliefs and practices that were central to popular cultures and the organization of rural social and political life."<sup>15</sup> Cristero rebels gathered followers not just among the Catholic faithful, incensed by attacks on the Church, but more broadly among conservative opponents of the state's intrusions on local governance – the intrusions of *both* anticlerical bids to regulate local clergy *and* land reform programs, the revolutionary state's collectivization of rural lands for communal use. Similarly, historian Matthew Butler observes that "Callista anticlericalism often foundered on a reef of local customs and alliances," and indeed, even as the state pressed municipal authorities to regulate

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 146-59.

<sup>15</sup> Jennie Purnell, *Popular Movements and State Formation in Revolutionary Mexico: The Agraristas and Cristeros of Michoacán* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 6.

local clergy and even as the institutional Church suspended services, municipal authorities themselves resented federal intrusions, and Catholic rites and sacraments often continued in secret, administered by local priests with the tacit approval of local authorities. Resistance to Callista intrusions ran particularly high in the highlands of northern Michoacán, where Cristeros built up a larger base of support than in the southern part of the state.<sup>16</sup> Second, Cristero opposition consisted largely of Catholic lay people taking up the banner of Catholicism, while the official Church publicly distanced itself from the Cristeros. For example, the Archbishop of Morelia, Leopoldo Ruíz y Flores, publicly opposed violent resistance to the government, while countering the rebels' invocations of Saint Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of "self-defence against tyranny" to legitimate the rebellion.<sup>17</sup> The complicated politics of Catholic resistance to the revolutionary party – the formation of broad alliances opposed to the state's multifaceted intrusions into local communal life, the local variations in the intensity of resistance within the center-west of Mexico, and the uneasy relationship between Church officials and Catholic political partisans – would also characterize later Sinarquista opposition to the PRM.

Meanwhile, the successful suppression of Cristero rebels in 1929 hardly resolved the crisis in Church-State relations provoked by the Revolutionary Constitution, and fissures persisted between conservative proponents of local authority and the Church on the one hand, and liberal allies of the revolutionary party on the other. While the Church urged the faithful to cease political organizing against the Mexican government, the

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<sup>16</sup> See Butler's discussion in *Popular Piety and Political Identity in Mexico's Cristero Rebellion*, 146-78.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

conclusion of the Cristero Rebellion nonetheless generated a groundswell of covert resistance to the revolutionary party from the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty, an organization of Catholic lay people founded in 1925 that had been principal agitators for rebellion during the Cristero Rebellion. The League's faithful remained fervent in their opposition to the state and energized by what they saw as the unacceptable encroachments of secular state authority on the prerogatives of the holy Church, the family, and local authority. In secret, disaffected former rebels and League members continued plotting against the revolutionary party amidst heightened crackdowns on Catholic political factions in the early 1930s as Calles continued to exercise effective state control through a number of puppet successors. In the early 1930s, Manuel Romo de Alba, a League boss from Guadalajara founded the Catholic Legions to continue covert plots against the revolutionary party. From the ranks of the Legions emerged a small group of Jesuits led by Eduardo Iglesias, who in disagreement with the Legions opposed violent confrontations with the state but called for uniting all Catholic civic organizations in Mexico into one rigidly organized opposition faction. This group called itself La Base.<sup>18</sup>

Calles-era crackdowns on clerical authority and the suppression of the Cristero Rebellion thus generated continued Catholic opposition to the revolutionary party. The precise influence of the Legions and La Base themselves on the Sinarquista movement is in many ways murky, and it is an underexplored topic in current scholarship. Still, Servando Ortoll draws a number of important connections between these earlier

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<sup>18</sup> Servando Ortoll, "Las Legiones, La Base, y El Sinarquismo: Tres organizaciones distintas y un solo fin verdadero? (1929-1948)," in Rodolfo Morán Quiroz, ed., *La política y el cielo: Movimientos religiosos en el México contemporáneo* (Guadalajara: Editorial Universidad de Guadalajara, 1990), 76-77.



organizations and Sinarquismo, as he notes that many Sinarquistas had belonged to the Legions or La Base, and that all three organizations – the Legions, La Base, and the UNS – shared a common ideology of opposition to the revolutionary party’s secularism and a goal of ushering in a conservative Catholic state closely tied to the Catholic Church.<sup>19</sup> The rigid, almost military discipline demanded by La Base’s leaders in uniting all Catholic organizations into one presaged the militaristic discipline of the Sinarquistas’ public rituals, designed to produce a façade of widespread movement orthodoxy. What is more, the idea to form the UNS came out of a March 1937 discussion among La Base’s leadership of the need for a highly visible “national civic organization,” courting popular support and capitalizing on Catholic-inspired opposition to Cárdenas throughout Mexico. La Base then chose a number of its younger, more charismatic members to fill leadership roles in a new public organization, the Unión Nacional Sinarquista, publicly founded in León in May 1937.<sup>20</sup>

The emergence of Sinarquismo from the ranks of dissident Catholic lay people in the wake of the Cristero Rebellion underscores a critical point about the movement’s ideological origins, which characterizations like the one found in Pérez Montfort’s history of the movement – Sinarquismo as a European-influenced fascist conspiracy<sup>21</sup> – have

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>21</sup> Ricardo Pérez Montfort, “Notas sobre el Falangismo en México (1930-1940),” in Brígida Von Mentz, Ricardo Pérez Montfort, and Verena Radkau, *Fascismo y antifascismo en América Latina y México* (Mexico: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios, 1984). For the Mexican Attorney General’s accusation in 1944 that Sinarquista ideology originated in Spanish Carlism, see *El Popular*, July 6, 1944. Quoted in, and translated by, Office of Strategic Services Research and Analysis Branch, “Crisis in the Mexican Sinarquista Movement,” September 19, 1944, Appendix II, xiv.

overshadowed in historiography. The Sinarquista movement crystallized around objections to the particular political stances of Mexico's ruling revolutionary party, such as dislodging the clergy from national education – stances that had animated the Cristeros before and continued to produce opposition to Calles's puppet presidents and Cárdenas in the 1930s. Sinarquismo emerged from contexts quite different from the depressed postwar economies and postwar humiliations for the former Central Powers characteristic of emerging fascisms in inter-war Europe.<sup>22</sup> Despite its strategic invocation of a transnational Church to imbue anti-PNR politics with a transcendent spiritual legitimacy, Sinarquismo emerged from political discontent particular to the context of 1930s Mexico, such as reactions to the suppression of the Cristero Rebellion and opposition to revolutionary leaders' continued anticlericalism. Like the rise of the UNS's predecessors such as the Legions, the birth of the UNS in 1937 was a reaction against the centralizing, secularizing tendencies of the PNR's policies, in particular anticlericalism and land reform, rather than an outgrowth of the ideology of international fascism or an international conspiracy as Sinarquismo's opponents alleged.

Another key point about the 1930s-era precursors to Sinarquismo belies Pérez Montfort's allegation of an international Catholic conspiracy. The Catholic Legions' stormy relationship with Mexico's Catholic Church hierarchy reveals that nominally Catholic factions frequently agitated against the PNR, independently of the Church's wishes and mandates. The conflicts between the Legions and the Church as the Legions resisted the Church's instructions to desist from organizing political opposition to the Mexican state raise problems for historiographical notions of an international Church-

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<sup>22</sup> On the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany, see Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 80-128 and 147-211.

sponsored conspiracy or of a Catholic-inspired “fascist” ideology common to both Spain and Mexico. In the wake of the failed Cristero Rebellion, for example, Mexico's Catholic Church opposed further political mobilization against the state, a position that politically active Catholic lay people simply disregarded. Guadalajara's Curia, for example, denounced the Legions in a 1932 pastoral letter for their attempts to “break away Catholics of all social classes from due subordination and obedience to the Holy Church.”<sup>23</sup> The political activities of the Catholic Legions, according to some clerics, undermined obedience to the Church's dictates that called for limited reconciliation with Mexico's revolutionary government. Thus, despite the Legions', and later La Base's and the Sinarquistas', appeals to Catholicism to foment opposition to the PNR, these factions' political aims often did not conform to the stances of Mexico's Catholic clergy, and, consequently, did not always receive the clergy's sanction. Although the Cristero Rebellion began with the Church's quiet support, the official Church increasingly distanced itself publicly from Catholic lay factions that were fomenting political opposition to the ruling revolutionary party. The fractious Sinarquistas of the late 1930s did not enjoy official Church sanction; theirs was an unsanctioned movement of laypeople invoking the Church's social teachings to legitimize their opposition to the PRM.

Revealing continuities between post-Cristero discontent and the ideology of Sinarquismo, the Catholic Legions' particular brand of nationalism calling for a “Christian social order” presaged Sinarquistas' demands for the establishment of a Catholic state in Mexico. Indeed, the Legions were not just an important ideological

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<sup>23</sup> *El Informador*, Oct. 25, 1932. Quoted in Ortoll, “Las Legiones, La Base, y El Sinarquismo,” 75.

precursor to Mexico's Unión Nacional Sinarquista; they were also a source for later popular membership in the Sinarquista movement. Many Sinarquistas had themselves been members of the Catholic Legions, and many in the Sinarquista leadership were also members of La Base. And although Sinarquistas ultimately disavowed participation in electoral politics, the basic contours of the UNS as a public political opposition movement emerged out of discussions in March 1937 among the La Base leadership in Querétaro about establishing a political party in Mexico to popularize Catholic-inspired opposition to the PNR.<sup>24</sup> Emphasizing the fervent nationalism among the Catholic Legions that inspired the birth of the UNS in 1937, an early Sinarquista *jefe* Salvador Abascal wrote in his memoirs that the Legions of Querétaro “proposed... a civic organization that would transform the people and that would reconstitute the national consciousness.”<sup>25</sup> José Antonio Urquiza, at the time La Base's chief for the State of Guanajuato, became the first leader of the newly formed UNS in the spring of 1937.<sup>26</sup> The UNS thus grew out of entrenched Catholic opposition to the PNR, which had been festering since Calles-era crackdowns to enforce the anticlerical articles of the Revolutionary Constitution. Moreover, the UNS drew its calls for a Catholic Mexico, and the redefinition of “national consciousness,” from the Legions' ideology of wedding the Mexican state with Catholicism.

Just as the Cristero Rebellion developed as a response to Calles's hard line against the Church, the Sinarquista challenge to the PRM erupted in response to new

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<sup>24</sup> Ortoll, “Las Legiones, La Base, y El Sinarquismo,” 75 and 78.

<sup>25</sup> Salvador Abascal, *Mis recuerdos: Sinarquismo y Colonia María Auxiliadora* (Mexico: Tradición, 1980), 145.

<sup>26</sup> Ortoll, “Las Legiones, La Base, y El Sinarquismo,” 80.

interferences threatened by reinvigorated land reform under President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). Invoking the Revolutionary Constitution's Article 27, Cárdenas began the collectivization of an unprecedented amount of rural land early in his presidency, provoking intense regional opposition that ultimately prevailed in rolling back many of the reforms of the Cárdenas era. As historian Ben Fallaw argues of the effects of Cardenista land redistribution in the Yucatán, for example, "Regional politicians enjoyed... success in blunting Cardenista mobilizations from 1937 to 1940.... Cardenista grassroots mobilizations that had survived until 1940 withered when denied the protection of the national Cardenista regime."<sup>27</sup> In other regions of Mexico, too, regional politics stymied the effective implementation of Cardenista reforms and produced resistance to the revolutionary party's anticlerical efforts. In Puebla in February 1937, for example, the ultraconservative Maximino Ávila Camacho became the state's governor, providing free reign for Falangist (Spanish fascist and pro-Francisco Franco) youth demonstrations and other public displays of right-wing opposition to Cárdenas.<sup>28</sup> Local resistance to Cardenista reforms would pave the way for a rollback of both the provision of secular public education and the collectivization of land during the presidency of Cárdenas's much more conservative successor, Maximino's brother Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-1946).

The UNS capitalized heavily on this period's heightened opposition to the revolutionary party, provoked largely by the increased land reforms under Cárdenas. The UNS was designed to serve, and did effectively serve for several years, as a public

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<sup>27</sup> Ben Fallaw, *Cárdenas Compromised: The Failure of Reform in Postrevolutionary Yucatán* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 7.

<sup>28</sup> Sánchez Gavi, "Entre la tensión y la conciliación," 170.

organization for Catholic agitation against the PNR's government, which had previously been underground with the clandestine La Base. With a public political organization, Catholic reactionaries then sought to harness ordinary people's antipathy toward the revolutionary government's interferences with local authority. The UNS, with its public demonstrations and overtures to rural workers, was more accessible to ordinary Catholics than the secretive Legions or La Base; unlike the secretive Legions and La Base, the UNS was designed to court popular opposition to the PRM just as Cristero rebel leaders had courted popular support for a rebellion ten years before. As Abascal explained, the Legions sought to mobilize ordinary Catholics against the PNR, which they believed would only be possible with the establishment of a public civic organization like the UNS. The Legions also intended to sabotage the government's patronage of rural workers by disrupting land reform. Through the UNS, Abascal argued, "We could achieve social justice from below, in defiance of the government, through patron-client relationships. The moderate, reliable peasants and workers could for the most part transform collective land schemes in spite of official control."<sup>29</sup> The formal establishment of the UNS in León, Guanajuato, in May 1937 thus marked the beginning of a new phase of Catholic reactionaries' courting of popular classes, particularly rural workers, to spark popular widespread opposition to the PNR and lay necessary groundwork with the masses for the Legions' and La Base's chiefs' seizing of national power.

*The Sinarquistas in Post-Revolutionary Historiography*

Despite the wealth of important scholarly questions raised by Sinarquistas' opposition to the PRM, the UNS has received very little attention in the historiography of

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<sup>29</sup> Abascal, *Mis recuerdos*, 145-46.

post-revolutionary Mexican state building. The Sinarquistas have received only brief references in some recent cultural histories focusing on other aspects of the revolutionary party's bids for political and cultural hegemony in post-revolutionary Mexico. For example Anne Rubenstein's history of Mexican comics from the 1930s to 1970s, *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation*, includes some Sinarquista propaganda in its analysis of the PRM's conservative opponents' "culture wars" against the state's alleged affronts to traditional morals, in particular Sinarquistas' allegations that the state was complicit in popular culture's weakening of patriarchal family structures and traditional roles for women.<sup>30</sup> Historian Paul Gillingham observes that in the 1940s Sinarquistas laid claim to the historical memory of the revolutionary party's canon of heroes of Mexican independence, as well as the memory of the last Mexica emperor Cuauhtémoc.<sup>31</sup> These histories begin to reveal the Sinarquistas' participation in broader conservative opposition to the revolutionary party's attempts at political and cultural hegemony in Mexico, during its concentrated nation-building campaigns of the 1930s and beyond. The Sinarquistas contested the modern, secular culture they associated with the revolutionary party in efforts to promote a more conservative national culture they viewed as consistent with the Church's social teachings. Nevertheless, the bulk of scholarship on right-wing Catholic resistance to the revolutionary party has focused on the more dramatic Cristero Rebellion, leaving insufficiently addressed the important

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<sup>30</sup> Anne Rubenstein, *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation: A Political History of Comic Books in Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 46 and 78.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Gillingham, *Cuauhtémoc's Bones: Forging National Identity in Modern Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2010), 190. Of Sinarquistas' mythmaking in response to the revolutionary party's own, Gillingham notes, "The last emperor, it seemed, was a *sinarquista* into the bargain."

issues surrounding the vestiges of Catholic resistance after 1929, which flared up again – albeit with less of the acute violence that marked the Cristero Rebellion – with the rise of the UNS in the late 1930s and its gradual decline in influence in the 1940s.

The very first comprehensive analysis of Sinarquismo emerged while the movement still maintained formidable strength in Mexico. In the context of the revolutionary party's continuing struggles with conservative opposition, Mario Gill's *Sinarquismo: Su origen, su esencia, su misión* reflected the orthodoxies of the revolutionary party's vision of national history. Gill's history, first published in 1944, contended that Sinarquismo originated as the Mexican arm of an international Nazi-Falangist movement and, after moderating its pro-Axis and anti-US stances in the mid-1940s, became instead a tool of British and US imperialism in Mexico.<sup>32</sup> Gill's presentation of Sinarquistas as the agents of dangerous foreign powers was consistent with the revolutionary party's attempts at the time to brand conservative opponents as outsiders threatening Mexico with foreign domination and standing against the proper legacies of the national Revolution. As Michael C. Meyer, et al., note, after the violence of the Revolution historical scholarship "was called upon to serve as one of the many vehicles for the apotheosis of the Revolution," and, with pressures to produce suitable revolutionary propaganda that presented the revolutionary party as inheritors of the Revolution's mandates, to legitimize the revolutionary party's claim to power.<sup>33</sup> Gill's assertion that outsiders dominated the Sinarquista movement at every phase of its

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<sup>32</sup> Mario Gill, *Sinarquismo: Su origen, su esencia, su misión*, 3rd ed. (Mexico: Editorial Olin, 1962).

<sup>33</sup> Meyer, et al., *The Course of Mexican History*, 7th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 598-99.



opposition to the PRM must be viewed in the context of the politicization of historical scholarship in Mexico, in the years after the Revolution when the revolutionary party sought control over interpretations of national history. As with the contemporary propaganda casting Sinarquistas as the servants of foreign powers – which I examine in Chapter 3 – Gill’s suggestion that Sinarquistas were foreign agents reflected the revolutionary party’s agenda to equate Mexican patriotism with loyalty to the party.

More recent scholarship takes seriously the domestic credentials of Sinarquismo, analyzing the sources of Sinarquista discontent with the revolutionary party’s policies. Historian Héctor Hernández García de León’s *Historia política del sinarquismo* (2004), for example, provides an excellent survey of the politics of Catholic opposition to the revolutionary party during the critical years of covert organizing against Cárdenas and the emergence of the Sinarquistas as a public pseudo-party of opposition to the PRM.<sup>34</sup> Hernández’s political history only briefly mentions the extensive mass culture the Sinarquista elite used to generate followers among ordinary Mexicans, however, so this work offers just a limited picture of the distinctive movement culture of Sinarquismo. Historian Daniel Newcomer’s *Reconciling Modernity* (2004) begins to analyze mass cultural sources like the Sinarquistas’ elaborate public marches in the city of León, although his explanation for Sinarquismo’s decline in the mid-1940s – that the undemocratic Sinarquistas’ participation in democratic politics enabled their cooptation by the ruling revolutionary party<sup>35</sup> – is not entirely convincing inasmuch as the Sinarquistas professed commitment to democracy from their founding in 1937.

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<sup>34</sup> Héctor Hernández García de León, *Historia política del sinarquismo* (Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2004).

<sup>35</sup> Newcomer, *Reconciling Modernity*, 182.

Newcomer's analysis of Sinarquismo's decline could be strengthened by more attention to the mid-1940s schism in the Sinarquista movement and consequent impacts on movement ideology. As UNS leadership moderated its stances against the United States and as relations with the revolutionary party became warmer with the party's shift rightward and friendlier stances toward the Church, the Sinarquistas lost two of the major bugbears that had animated the movement until the early 1940s.

### *Mass Culture and Popular Politics*

This thesis offers an analysis of mass cultural sources, in particular Sinarquista movement propaganda, to reconstruct the national movement culture UNS elites promoted in opposition to the revolutionary state. In the chapters that follow, I examine the politics surrounding the Sinarquistas' challenge to the revolutionary party for national power and legitimacy in Mexico, from the formal establishment of the UNS in 1937 to the end of the presidency of Ávila Camacho, Cárdenas's successor, in 1946 as the revolutionary party was becoming progressively more conservative and as Sinarquista influence began to wane. Drawing upon the political writings of Sinarquista elites, as well as similar writings from more hostile sources like the Mexican revolutionary party's allies and observers from the United States, I argue that struggles for power between the revolutionary party and right-wing challengers like the UNS took shape around discourses of the Mexican nation and revolutionary nationalism – discourses that ultimately legitimated *both* Sinarquistas' staunch defenses of public roles for Catholicism in the modern state *and* the revolutionary party's anticlericalism, land reforms, and accusations against the Sinarquistas. Even as the UNS's enemies accused it of seeking to drag Mexico backward into a grim (imaginary) past of widespread subservience to pre-

modern authority such as the Catholic Church, UNS elites invoked many of the same modern premises of politics – namely, the nation state – that the revolutionary party, too, used to legitimize its power. Democracy and nation for the UNS, however, justified a radical alternative to the PRM’s anticlericalism and land reforms with which it countered the PRM’s claims to national power.

In arguing that Sinarquistas opposed the PRM within the framework of a nationalist alternative to the revolutionary party’s politics, I rely in large part on elite-authored historical sources, which, while providing some insights into popular perceptions of Sinarquismo in Mexico and the United States, more directly reveal how elites sought to generate broad constituencies for their political platforms. The political writings that form my source base illuminate which sorts of claims elites from both the UNS and Mexico’s revolutionary party believed would be likely to manipulate popular sentiments, and these sources reveal, too, the broad ideas and particular policy platforms that competing elites thus used to legitimate their designs on national power. In using elites’ rhetoric to make observations about contemporary popular politics and culture – however incomplete those observations – I assume that elites would not have proposed the arguments they did, had such arguments not been effective in rallying broader followings. Elite constructions of nation and patriotism might have appealed to ordinary people’s material interests, or sparked feelings of belonging in a post-revolutionary nation (the nation of the PRM, or of its conservative enemies), or allowed elites to manipulate ordinary followers with persuasive ideologies, or most likely some combination of these. Elites’ constructions of a national post-revolutionary culture might have resonated with more popular understandings of the legacies of Mexico’s revolution, the modern Mexican

nation, and norms of social and communal life, and such constructions certainly appealed to followers' material interests in land, education, and local power in many cases. Thus, even the elite-authored sources drawn upon in this thesis offer partial glimpses of popular reactions to the struggle for power between Sinarquistas and the PRM.

Such a reliance on elite-authored sources to write history has been out of fashion since the rise of new emphases on social and cultural history in the US academy in the 1970s, stressing the experiences and perceptions of ordinary people. In the particular case of the historiography of revolutionary Mexico, historian Gilbert M. Joseph and anthropologist Daniel Nugent's *Everyday Forms of State Formation* (1994) called for just such a reorientation in the writing of cultural history toward the contributions of non-elite subjects.<sup>36</sup> Joseph and Nugent emphasized the role of popular, everyday actors in revolutionary elites' twentieth-century nation building projects, thereby encouraging new analyses of popular cultural practice in revolutionary Mexican nation building. For Joseph and Nugent, "popular culture" entails not simply the examples of elite-produced mass culture of the sort examined in this thesis but "the symbols and meanings embedded in the day-to-day practices of subordinated groups," which prior scholarship's focus on the mass culture engineered by revolutionary party elites frequently neglected.<sup>37</sup> Joseph and Nugent's new emphasis on the "everyday" galvanized a rich body of scholarship examining ordinary Mexicans' negotiation of popular cultural meanings in post-revolutionary Mexico, as well as ordinary Mexicans' resistance to the revolutionary

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<sup>36</sup> Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, "Popular Culture and State Formation," in Joseph and Nugent, eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

party's attempts at hegemony.<sup>38</sup> The popular cultural turn in scholarship on Mexican revolutionary nation building also fit well with broader Latin American historiography's recent enthusiasm for themes of resistance and negotiation, celebrating instances of ordinary subjects' often subtle resistance to mechanisms of elite domination, including the propaganda and mass culture of modern nation states.

The experiences of ordinary people are nevertheless profoundly shaped by mass culture and elite propaganda, disseminated in an attempt to neutralize the very threat posed by ordinary people's capacity for resistance and negotiation. Historians' recent enthusiasm for resistance and negotiation has produced a serious underestimation of the extent to which elite nation-building projects – like the deliberate construction of a national post-revolutionary culture in Mexico by both the PRM and its enemies – constrain the agency of ordinary people and limit possibilities for ordinary people's resistance to elite political aims. As historian of modern Mexico Paul Gillingham observes, mass culture's appeals to highly emotionally charged national stories have been central to modern political strategies of shoring up elites' power: "Politicians and cultural managers," he writes, "knowingly use public space... to fill everyday life" with "triggers for deeply emotive national stories of common origins, triumphs, and tragedies,"

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<sup>38</sup> See, among many examples of the recent boom in analysis of popular culture in the historiography of revolutionary Mexico, Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), for rock and roll music's generation of a popular youth counterculture from the 1950s to the 1970s, often at odds with revolutionary party elites' nationalism; and Rick A. López, *Crafting Mexico: Intellectuals, Artisans, and the State after the Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), for the shrewd politicking of local artisans from a remote area of Guerrero to elevate the town of Olinalá's handicrafts to symbols of authentic Mexican art amidst the revolutionary party elites' nationalist promotions of artwork (and thereby secure greater perks for Olinalá from elites in Mexico City).

designed “to produce a Pavlovian reflex in the ruled... attachment to... the homeland” and “obedience... to the nation-state's avatar, the political leadership of the day.” According to Gillingham, the national symbolism, rituals, and stories promoted in mass culture are designed by a narrow circle of political and intellectual elites to encourage reflexive attachments to their own political goals.<sup>39</sup> Access to the means of disseminating national propaganda thus confers major advantages in the promotion of a national culture that is politically useful to ruling elites, against which the resources of ordinary people – in their attempts at negotiation and resistance, if such attempts can even be contemplated against the onslaught of mass culture – might prove paltry indeed. As Gillingham suggests of the machinations of “political leadership of the day,” the highly emotional resonance of appeals to national unity encourages national elites’ conflation of their own narrow political faction with the nation state itself. In this discourse, one’s own interests become national interests, while political enemies become evil outsiders and thus existential threats to the cherished national community. Mass culture enables ruling elites to popularize self-serving discourses through emotional, nationalist appeals, significantly shaping and constraining the capacity of ordinary people to negotiate with, or resist, the justifications for elites’ domination encoded within national propaganda.

Gillingham’s idea of a national culture in post-revolutionary Mexico profoundly

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<sup>39</sup> Gillingham, *Cuauhtémoc’s Bones*, 3. Florentino Juárez, the most likely author of the forged bones of Cuauhtémoc at Ixcateopan, Mexico, was a prosperous and successful rancher, as well as “by most sociological standards an intellectual,” ideally positioned according to Gillingham to assume the role of an elite “cultural manager.” Although Juárez could aim to shape culture merely at the grassroots level, he was nevertheless a grassroots *elite* with significant local power. Gillingham notes that Juárez’s literacy and understanding of history, in an era of general illiteracy and poor education in the Mexican countryside, made Juárez the sort of Weberian intellectual, uniquely positioned among his fellow villagers to leverage a fraudulent national symbol for his own advantage.

shaped by “cultural managers,” the political and intellectual elite ideally positioned to disseminate self-serving constructions of national culture through propaganda, is a useful framework for thinking about the role of pro-Sinarquista and pro-PRM propagandists in defining the rhetorical terms of national power struggles of the late 1930s and early 1940s. The chapters that follow explore how cultural managers like the UNS leadership, labor movement leaders, pro-PRM artists and propagandists, and journalists invoked and manipulated discourses of the nation state during the Sinarquista struggle for national power in Mexico, a period in which the Sinarquistas’ claims to national power posed the most realistic threat to revolutionary party elites and their allies. The sources examined in these chapters reveal the ways in which the PRM and the Sinarquistas each promoted their own visions of a national post-revolutionary culture – visions that were elite constructions, designed to harness the participation of the masses while simultaneously neutralizing the threat that mass politics posed to their own power. The authors of sources examined in these chapters were for the most part Gillingham-esque cultural managers, underscoring that debates over the meaning of the nation, and the proper content of national culture, took place most vigorously in elite circles in post-revolutionary Mexico. Chapter 2, “The Mass Culture of the Sinarquista Movement,” draws from Sinarquista movement propaganda to examine how UNS elites imagined a Mexico starkly different from the revolutionary party’s modern secular state. In particular I rely on a photographic history of the movement, compiled by UNS leadership in 1947, for evidence of Sinarquistas’ visions of a Catholic Mexico inspired by social teachings of the Church – with a central role for the Church in education, deference to local governance and private land ownership, and patriarchal families as sources of

national strength, with strictly defined roles for women and men. Chapter 3, “Enemies of the Revolutionary State,” reviews anti-Sinarquista propaganda’s portrayal of the movement as an undemocratic, international fascist conspiracy. Just as Sinarquistas’ nationalism legitimated the UNS leadership’s claims to power, the revolutionary party and its allies used nationalist discourses to present its enemies as outsiders and thereby discredit them. The vitriol of anti-Sinarquista rhetoric of the period reveals that, well after the violence of the revolution had abated, notions of patriotism and the Mexican nation remained fiercely contested during the state-building campaigns of the 1930s and afterward. Chapter 4, “Theories of Sinarquista Conspiracies in the United States,” uses US journalists’ and officials’ assessments of the Sinarquista movement to examine how writers from north of the border used the Mexican left’s same characterizations of Sinarquistas as international fascists to justify opposition to a faction that threatened US imperial interests in Mexico.

Throughout, it is clear that the values of nation and patriotism as well as the specter of dangerous outsiders like fascists were central to elites’ engineering of popular culture – engineering they sought to accomplish through the dissemination of propaganda among ordinary people. The Mexican nation presented in the UNS and revolutionary party’s propaganda served to generate broad followings for more narrow elite interests. This thesis thus takes a bleaker view of nation building than have recent popular cultural histories’ celebrations of ordinary people’s participation. The discourses of nation used by both the UNS and its enemies manipulated the loyalties of ordinary people caught up in the conflicts of post-revolutionary nation-building in Mexico. Nationalist discourses served to legitimate often violent aspirations to power in post-revolutionary Mexico –



aspirations that, even if not widely shared by ordinary people, nevertheless defined the contours of their daily lives amidst the post-revolutionary state-building period's propaganda campaigns. The UNS's and the revolutionary party's nationalisms included ideals of popular participation, but in reality these were nationalisms often designed to serve the interests of narrow factions, not the masses.

## Chapter 2

### The Mass Culture of the Sinarquista Movement

Like the revolutionary party's elites and allies, Sinarquista elites participated vigorously in national debates over the legacies of the Mexican Revolution, and in what historian Anne Rubenstein aptly describes as the "culture wars"<sup>40</sup> of post-revolutionary state-building. As the Mexican Revolution's leaders consolidated their hold on power in the revolution's aftermath, ruling politicians promoted a national culture – e.g., through interpretations of the history of the Revolution, public artwork, and an indigenous beauty pageant<sup>41</sup> – to reinforce the party's claims to legitimate political authority. Historian Rick A. López describes these efforts on the part of politicians and intellectuals allied with then-President Obregón as the "search for an authentic national culture around which to unite the population."<sup>42</sup> Through mass cultural propaganda disseminated among followers, Sinarquistas contested the revolutionary party's deliberate attempts at constructing that "authentic national culture" with an elaborate, constructed authentic national culture of their own. Developing a detailed protocol and carefully scripted public rituals for their meetings and demonstrations, as well as a canon of movement heroes and shared myths of Mexican history, Sinarquista elites engineered a distinctive movement culture in which ordinary followers could perform loyalty to the movement's

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<sup>40</sup> Rubenstein, *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation*, 78.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, López, *Crafting Mexico*, 29-64; and Adriana Zavala: *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition: Women, Gender, and Representation in Mexican Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 7-8 and 161-67; for recent scholarly analyses of the 1921 India Bonita Contest held in Mexico City and organized by the founder of the Mexico City daily *El Universal*.

<sup>42</sup> López, *Crafting Mexico*, 30.

leadership and political objectives.

An ample primary source record documents this distinctive movement culture the UNS leadership promoted among its followers, revealing particular views of community, family, and nation that united ordinary followers around a conservative vision for Mexico. For example in 1947, the National Committee of the UNS compiled photographic examples of the movement's rituals, symbolism, and performances from the past decade in a collection called *Historia gráfica del sinarquismo*, or a "graphic history of Sinarquismo," which contains a wealth of detail on the national culture the UNS envisioned for a Sinarquista-dominated Mexico.<sup>43</sup> This photographic collection sets out a number of the social and cultural constructions integral to the conservative Catholic Mexico that Sinarquista elites promoted against the more secular vision of the PRM. The Sinarquistas revered an imagined colonial past, celebrating the rule of imperial Spain and authority for the Catholic Church. In the photographic collection, Sinarquistas identify a number of movement heroes consisting of the UNS' founding elite and especially of fallen "martyrs" for the present-day movement. According to the National Committee's photographic history, the ruling revolutionary party was tyrannical and anathema to Mexican values. The photographic history also set forth clearly defined roles for women and men, gendering women as wives and mothers in the home and men as warriors in the political struggle against the PRM; the family held a central, nearly sacred place in the national community, according to the Sinarquistas. The collection

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<sup>43</sup> Comité Nacional de la UNS, *Historia gráfica del sinarquismo* (Mexico: UNS, 1947), 12. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

reveals how Sinarquista elites mobilized ordinary followers a shared movement culture of symbols and values, rather than simple opposition to Cardenista land redistribution and the PRM's anticlericalism. Sinarquista elites aimed to unite followers through a shared and seemingly popular culture, distinctive to the movement and designed to build a constituency for the UNS's conservative political goals.

While the Sinarquista movement capitalized on discontent with President Cárdenas's anticlericalism and rural land reorganization, its founding manifesto offered a curious mix of demands for total national renewal – consistent with the conservative nationalisms of the day like European fascism – and liberal discourses celebrating the nation, the individual rights of each citizen, and a commitment to democracy. “Before the distressing problems that plague the whole nation,” the UNS proclaimed in its June 12, 1937, founding manifesto, “it is absolutely necessary that an organization exist, composed of true patriots, an organization that works for the restoration of the fundamental rights of each citizen, and that has as its highest aim the salvation of the Fatherland.”<sup>44</sup> With this founding statement Sinarquistas positioned themselves against the revolutionary party, which had claimed for itself the inheritance of the political legacies of the Mexican Revolution. Instead, according to the UNS manifesto, the Sinarquistas were “true patriots” promising “salvation” from the depredations of a secularizing PRM. Nevertheless, the statement's emphasis on “fundamental rights,” and elsewhere on the “free and democratic activity of the people” and the pursuit of personal

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<sup>44</sup> “Manifesto of the Organizing Sinarquista Committee to the Mexican People,” June 12, 1937, in Comité Nacional de la UNS, *Historia gráfica del sinarquismo*, 12.

happiness<sup>45</sup> belied left-wing accusations that Sinarquistas were illiberal and undemocratic. Sinarquistas cast the bureaucracy, secularism, and land redistribution efforts of the federal government in Mexico City as encroachments on the Mexican people's democratic freedoms to be ruled by local authorities and submit freely to the authority of family, community and the Catholic Church. The UNS's founding ideals thus *did* reflect a commitment to democracy and rights, even as the organization stood starkly at odds with the revolutionary party's vision of a people widely in thrall to the Church and traditional authorities, which had deprived peasants of opportunities for social advancement. For Sinarquistas the PRM, far from liberating Mexicans from the strictures of undemocratic traditional authorities, interfered with the prerogatives of local and religious authority – authority legitimated both by its religious associations and by the democratic, popular will.

Indeed, Sinarquistas' enthusiasm for close ties between the state and the Catholic Church has overshadowed a key aspect of their professed ideology, which Sinarquistas clarified in their founding manifesto. The UNS's fundamental ideals reflected, rather than undermined, liberal assumptions about the origins of legitimate political authority – assumptions like popular sovereignty and the equality of citizens. “Against utopians who dream of a society without governments or laws,” the UNS proclaimed, “Sinarquismo proposes a society governed by legitimate authority, emanating from the free, democratic activity of the people, which truly guarantees a social order in which all may find their own happiness.”<sup>46</sup> The Sinarquistas' claimed commitments to liberal ideals like

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

democracy, presumable equality of citizens, and pursuits of individual happiness suggest the UNS viewed close ties between Church and state as consistent with liberal democracy, a conflation not so strange in light of the popularity of Catholicism and conservative politics in many areas of Mexico. In the 1930s democratic majorities had elected deeply conservative politicians especially in Mexico's center west. For example, earlier in 1937, the same year as the UNS's formal establishment, voters in Puebla had elected the archconservative Maximino Ávila Camacho who harbored sympathies for the Falangists then fighting a bloody civil war against liberal Republican factions in Spain.<sup>47</sup> The Sinarquistas emerged onto a Mexican political scene in which democracy could legitimate conservatives', as well as liberals', political aspirations, and in which conservatives enjoyed considerable electoral success at the local level, despite the overwhelming national successes of the PRM. Only by taking at face value the Mexican left's accusations that conservative Catholics were coerced and manipulated, under the sway of authoritarian demagogues, would the idea that democracy might produce a radical conservative departure from the PRM's agenda seem particularly incredible.

As suggested by the reference to the "salvation of the Fatherland" in their manifesto, Sinarquistas' liberal nationalism was premised on naturalized notions of the political and cultural boundaries dividing Mexico from the rest of the world. For Sinarquistas, national renewal meant remaining faithful to the legacies of Mexico's distinctive history, as Sinarquistas interpreted it. The UNS called for reviving aspects of a glorious Spanish colonial epoch in which Mexicans lived under the legitimate authority of Spain and the Church, in contrast with the contemporary transgressions and treachery

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<sup>47</sup> Sánchez Gavi, "Entre la tensión y la conciliación," 170.

of the ruling revolutionary party. Indeed, Sinarquismo based its constructions of a Mexican nation – dividing insiders from outsiders – on a common history of Spanish and Catholic domination, which underpinned its hostility toward both the PRM’s secularism and the diplomatic and cultural influences of the United States. As other scholars examining the movement have observed, Sinarquistas imagined a harmonious colonial past in which Mexicans flourished under the exalted authority of Spanish colonizers and the holy Catholic Church. “Nationalism was an essential element of [Sinarquista] ideology,” historian Jean Meyer argues, as he describes Sinarquismo as “a cult of the military, the Mexican flag, religion, the imperial and Hispanic past, and a cult of fallen militants for the fatherland, of hatred for the United States, and of irredentism, evoking an epoch in which, from Florida to Oregon, all was Spanish.”<sup>48</sup> With this particular vision of a shared national history uniting Mexicans against outsiders, the Sinarquistas relied on a sort of continuous, atemporal cultural identity characteristic of modern nationalisms – a strategy that historian Ronald Grigor Suny has described as the crafting of a primordial origin story in order to produce a seemingly natural cultural identity for an in-group (and exclude an out-group) in modern times. As Suny explains, modern nationalists create such histories to “dispute who they are, argue about boundaries, who is in or out of the group, where the ‘homeland’ begins or ends, where the ‘true’ history of

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<sup>48</sup> Jean Meyer, *El sinarquismo: un fascismo mexicano?* (Mexico: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, 1979), 113. One intriguing issue that the Sinarquistas’ glorification of Spanish imperial history and a Hispanic identity for Mexicans raises is whether the UNS glorified this past to contest official discourses of *mestizaje*, or a mixed racial identity between Hispanic and indigenous promoted by the revolutionary party’s elites, most notably by President Obregón’s Secretary of Public Education, José Vasconcelos, in his 1925 treatise *La raza cósmica* (*The Cosmic Race*). The primary sources examined in this thesis do not allow me to substantiate an argument on that question.

the nation is, what is authentically national and what is to be rejected.”<sup>49</sup> The national origin story central to Sinarquismo served not just to identify outsiders like North American imperialists but also to brand the ruling revolutionary party as traitors to the legacies of Spanish rule and legitimate Catholic authority – legacies that for Sinarquistas bestowed on Mexicans their authentic primordial identity.

Sinarquismo’s primordial origin myths led the movement to condemn the interference of foreign interlopers in Mexican affairs and supplied Sinarquistas with powerful rhetorical accusations against political enemies like the PRM – namely, that the PRM betrayed Mexicans with its entanglements with foreigners. The UNS’s ardent nationalism produced hostility toward the machinations of foreign powers in Mexico, real or perceived, and the UNS believed that the ruling PRM above all was complicit in these machinations of foreign powers. For instance, the Sinarquistas accused Cárdenas of being in thrall to the Soviet Union and yearning to convert Mexico into a Soviet Communist satellite. According to Sinarquista propaganda disseminated some years later in an attempt to tarnish Cárdenas’s legacy amidst the anti-Communist paranoia of the Cold War, Cárdenas and his supporters had betrayed Mexico to Soviet domination. “What we call Cardenismo, as a political doctrine and practice,” the UNS proclaimed in its 1956 history of the Cárdenas years, *Six Years of Betrayal of the Fatherland*, “is the alliance of Lázaro Cárdenas and his followers with International Communism, to establish communism in Mexico and convert it into a dependent of the Kremlin.” Tying Cárdenas to the Soviet Union enabled Sinarquistas to denounce Cardenismo as “in

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<sup>49</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, “Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations,” *Journal of Modern History* 73 (2001), 866.



essence a betrayal of Mexico.”<sup>50</sup> According to Sinarquistas, the PRM's signature policies of the late 1930s, like secular education and land reform, evidenced a sinister conspiracy hatched by Cardenistas to allow the Soviet takeover of Mexico: Cárdenas had foisted socialist education onto Mexican villages “with the intention of establishing socialism in Mexico, consistent with his bolshevist militarism,” and, as for the reorganization of rural land into communal *ejidos*, “agrarian demagoguery... gave Agrarian Reform a bolshevist character... destroying small properties in order to socialize land and agricultural production.”<sup>51</sup> The Sinarquista movement’s nationalist preoccupations thus generated denunciations of the PRM’s political of land reform and accusations that land reform campaigns were evidence of the influence of sinister outsiders, an accusation that the PRM’s allies traded in kind against Sinarquistas -- as will be evident in the following section’s analysis of the rhetoric of Sinarquismo’s enemies. Accusations of Soviet plots reveal the particular strategy Sinarquistas used to discredit PRM, stoking nationalist paranoia and thus alleging the PRM’s entanglements with Soviets. The anti-Cardenista rhetoric of Sinarquista reveals that the specter of foreign domination – and in 1956 the specter of Soviet domination in particular – held great power to mobilize a following around the competing nationalist visions of Mexico’s elite factions like the UNS.

Although by 1956 the politics of the Cold War had generated new fears of the Soviet menace in the Americas, Sinarquistas’ warnings of Soviet domination in *Six Years of Betrayal* echoed their earlier claims to defend Mexico against the predatory influence

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<sup>50</sup> Unión Nacional Sinarquista, *México en la época de Cárdenas, o seis años de traición a la patria* (Mexico: UNS, 1956), 4. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 and 21.

of foreign powers. A Sinarquista broadside, undated but likely from World War II or immediately beforehand in light of its warning against Nazi domination of Mexico, declared that “we love liberty” and “we reject any type of foreign tyranny.” The broadside depicts a Sinarquista hand positioned against the three contemporary specters of foreign tyranny – the Soviet Union (hammer and sickle), the United States (white stars on blue background), and Germany (Nazi swastika).<sup>52</sup> While condemning their political



**Image 1.** UNS, “Amamos la libertad,” date unknown, Sam L. Slick Poster Collection Number PICT 000-674, Drawer 20, Folder 42, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

enemies for opening Mexico to the scheming of foreign powers, the Sinarquistas presented themselves as bulwarks against such foreign domination, evident in the

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<sup>52</sup> See Image 1. UNS, “Amamos la libertad,” date unknown, Sam L. Slick Poster Collection Number PICT 000-674, Drawer 20, Folder 42, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico. Possibly, the UNS produced this broadside shortly after Nazi Germany’s May 1942 submarine attacks on Mexican shipping in the Gulf of Mexico, which generated much more popular support for Mexico’s entry into World War II on the side of the Allies.

broadside's depiction of the Sinarquista hand labeled "UNS" pushing back the three symbols of tyranny. The UNS's bundling the US imperialist threat together with European fascism and Communism revealed the incoherence of the movement's nationalist xenophobia, as the Sinarquistas railed against foreign enemies with reference to vague and certainly imaginary plots but without specific details of the perils that foreigners' specific political ideology posed for Mexico.

Moreover, beneath the anti-Soviet rhetoric of *Six Years of Betrayal*, Sinarquista propaganda expressed deep anxieties over expanding prerogatives for the federal government in Mexico City, and the particular threats that state land ownership and state educational programs posed to more traditional local governance structures. In addition to anti-Communist paranoia, there was thus an aspect of opposition to the Cárdenas legacy grounded in the morality and economic efficiency of the central state's intrusions into local affairs. The association of Cárdenas with global Communism was to a great extent simply the rhetoric Sinarquistas used to advance their criticisms of Cárdenas's policies in favor of conservative approaches to religious education and land reform. At the same time the UNS tarred Cárdenas for his "bolshevist militarism," it also decried what it argued were the economically disastrous consequences of Cárdenas's land redistribution policies for Mexican agriculture and small landowners. Following expropriation, the Sinarquistas argued, "our country stopped earning millions of dollars from the sale of cotton and henequen, while the government squandered public funds." For Sinarquistas, socialist education, too, represented a nefarious state intrusion on local prerogatives, prompting Sinarquistas to denounce the "monopoly of the State over

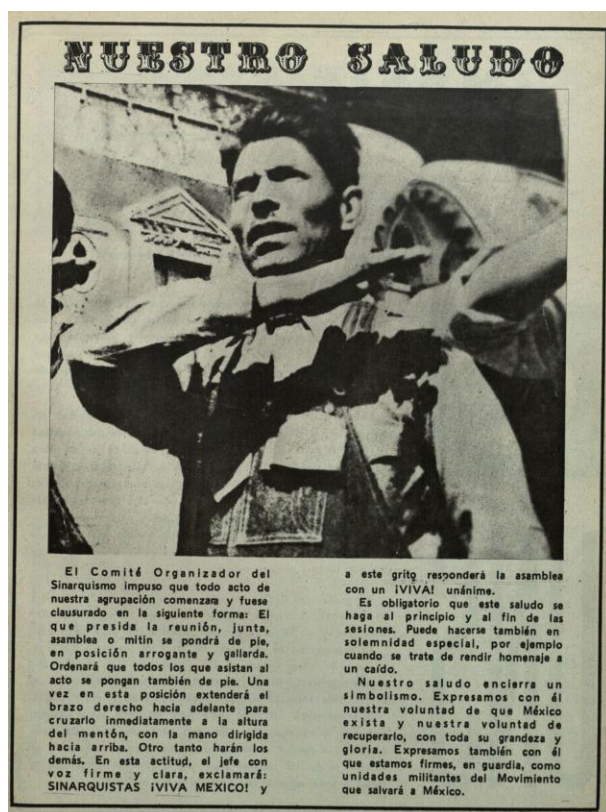
education” under Cárdenas.<sup>53</sup> The Sinarquistas opposed rural land collectivization and socialist education, as they feared the post-revolutionary political elite’s intrusions into facets of daily life, and aspects of local governance, which had before been the provenance of more local elites.

In this respect, Sinarquistas were the ideological heirs apparent of late-1920s Cristero rebels, whose opposition to the Mexican revolutionary government similarly reflected concerns with state intrusions into private property and local governance. As Purnell explains, “For cristero communities, revolutionary agrarianism and anticlericalism constituted a twofold and simultaneous assault on popular cultures and religious practices, property rights, and local political self-determination. Local allies of revolutionary elites displaced traditional politico-religious authorities and parish priests... and, in some cases, monopolized or otherwise threatened community landholdings and other resources.”<sup>54</sup> Cristero rebels’ attachments to local authority, and to more conservative notions of community, property, and political rights, had informed their opposition to the Calles Administration a decade before the Sinarquistas emerged in the late 1930s. The later Sinarquistas shared a number of similar attachments to community and to localized politics as bases for their opposition to the Cardenista government in the 1930s; the UNS made such preferences for local governance clear and opposition to the encroachments of central state power, in its expressions of anxiety over the state’s encroachment on local affairs and what it viewed as the economic and moral failures of centralization under Cárdenas.

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<sup>53</sup> Unión Nacional Sinarquista, *México en la época de Cárdenas*, 11 and 21.

<sup>54</sup> Purnell, *Popular Movements and State Formation in Revolutionary Mexico*, 18.



**Image 2.** Photographer unidentified, “Nuestro saludo,” in Comité Nacional de la UNS, *La historia gráfica del sinarquismo*, 11. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

As the UNS’s 1947 graphic history of the movement reveals, by elite design ordinary Sinarquistas could express their values and their solidarity with the broader Sinarquista movement through finely developed protocol, norms of behavior, and public performances. The Sinarquistas’ public rituals resembled those of European fascists, surely inviting charges of fascism from Sinarquismo’s political enemies.<sup>55</sup> For example, the photographic history of Sinarquismo teaches readers the protocol with which to open Sinarquista meetings, including proper arm motions for the Sinarquista salute, obligatory at the opening and closing of all meetings (as illustrated in Image 2): The meeting leader is to stand “with a proud and brave posture,” ordering attendees to stand, and then extend

<sup>55</sup> Newcomer, *Reconciling Modernity*, 120.

their right arms forward and cross their chests up the height of their chins, “with the hand extended upward.” Then, “the leader with a clear and loud voice will exclaim, ‘SINARQUISTAS, VIVA MEXICO!’ and to this exclamation the assembly will respond in unison, ‘VIVA!’”<sup>56</sup> The response in unison reinforced a sense of belonging in the movement for ordinary Sinarquistas attending the movement’s meetings, and it also presented outside observers of these often public meetings with the façade of a vigorous and unified anti-PRM opposition movement. As historian Daniel Newcomer has persuasively argued in his examination of similarly militaristic displays by Sinarquistas in their public demonstrations in 1940s León, “Sinarquistas used their processions to make a strong public statement about the hegemonic quality of the ideas the UNS represented even as leaders privately acknowledged that regular members hardly resembled the orthodoxy their organization affiliation suggested.”<sup>57</sup> As Newcomer points out, Sinarquistas’ public rituals projected a display of unity and solidarity by deliberate design, but these rituals also masked the much more complicated and varied political agendas of ordinary followers. At the height of Sinarquismo’s strength and popularity in the early 1940s, militaristic rituals such as the opening of formal chapter meetings made Sinarquismo seem like a much more unified and formidable threat to the PRM than it likely actually was. Nevertheless, such rituals of solidarity with the movement were the tools UNS leadership used to encourage, and preserve the illusion of, ordinary people’s total identification with the movement elite’s objectives.

Indeed, the authors of the *Graphic History of Sinarquismo* explicitly sought

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<sup>56</sup> Comité Nacional de la UNS, *Historia gráfica del sinarquismo*, 11.

<sup>57</sup> Newcomer, *Reconciling Modernity*, 121.

control over the popular meanings of Sinarquista rituals and performances like the salute, as they offered their own explanations of the meanings they intended would attach to such gestures. According to the UNS, the salute was a performance rich in symbolic meaning for the movement's members, a means of performing belonging in the authentic national community envisioned by Sinarquistas, and of performing militant opposition to the revolutionary party's power: "We express with the salute," wrote the UNS, "that we



**Image 3.** Photographer unidentified, "Brigadas de jóvenes propagandistas," in Comité Nacional de la UNS, *La historia gráfica del sinarquismo*, 121. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

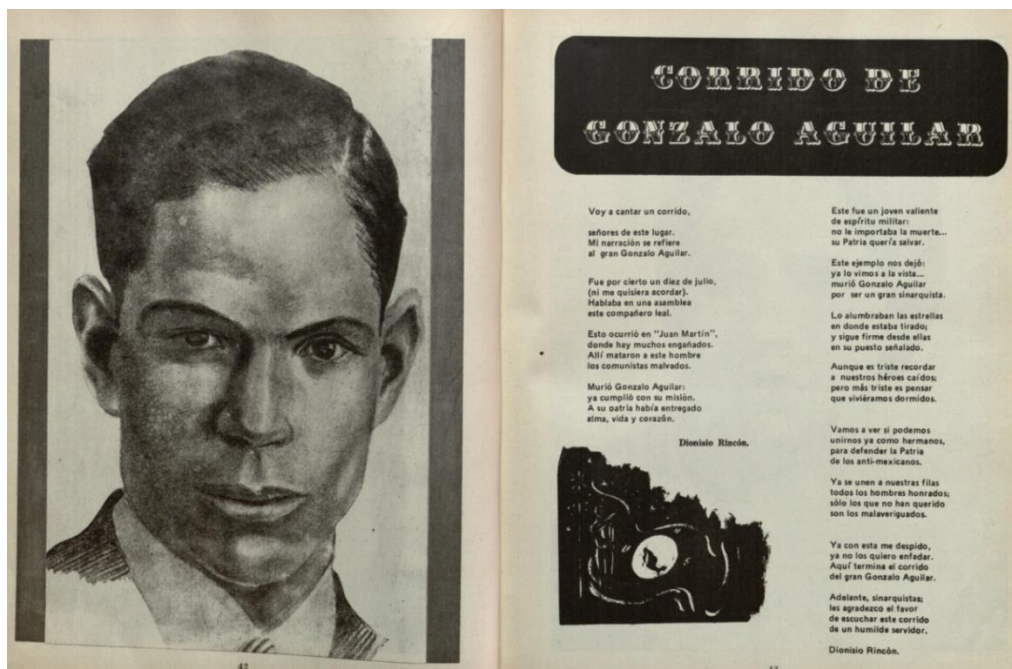
are strong, on guard, as militants united behind the Movement that will save Mexico."<sup>58</sup>

Thus the distinctive, symbolically meaningful Sinarquista salute became a signature of the burgeoning movement culture during the late 1930s and early 1940s, as it provided ordinary followers with a gesture with which to demonstrate their loyalties to the broader movement and thereby defy the revolutionary party. For example, in one of many photographs of followers performing the salute in *The Graphic History*, a group of

<sup>58</sup> Comité Nacional de la UNS, *Historia gráfica del sinarquismo*, 11.



“young propagandists” identified by the UNS as the PRM’s political prisoners in Jalisco in April 1943 – according to the UNS, imprisoned for “‘crimes’ of spreading ideas that were not those held by the government” – demonstrated their Sinarquista sympathies.<sup>59</sup>



**Image 4.** Dionisio Rincón, “Corrido de Gonzalo Águilar,” in Comité Nacional de la UNS, *Historia gráfica del sinarquismo*, 42-43. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

Sinarquista ballads or *corridos*, modeled on the earlier songs of Mexico’s revolutionaries, honored movement leaders and canonized the UNS leadership’s chosen movement heroes, especially those followers the leadership identified as fallen martyrs in the Sinarquista movement’s sometimes violent confrontations with the government. Martyred Sinarquistas occupied particular positions of honor in the UNS leadership’s interpretations of Mexico’s national history. A number of *corridos* dedicated to glorifying martyrs and other heroes appear in *The Graphic History*. One such *corrido*

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 121.



eulogizes Gonzalo Águilar, whom the *corrido*'s writer alleged had been murdered by "wicked Communists"<sup>60</sup> but who possibly died at the hands of Cardenistas or their left-wing allies on July 10, 1939, in Celaya – an incident described by today's UNS as a "massacre of Sinarquistas."<sup>61</sup> The *corrido* dedicated to Águilar honored his "militaristic spirit," and the ballad's author went on to extol Águilar's commitment to the Sinarquista cause: "Death did not matter to him... He wanted to save his Fatherland."<sup>62</sup> The qualities that the ballad's author attributed to Águilar, especially his extreme dedication to Sinarquismo, offer today's scholars some insights into the UNS leadership's ideas of what qualities good and loyal movement members ought to have possessed: in particular, a willingness to die in confrontations with the Mexican left, as the case of Gonzalo Águilar suggests. In honoring followers killed by government forces, the Sinarquistas imitated the Cristero rebels' earlier celebrations of martyrdom during the rebellion, which the historian Jean Meyer examines in his history of the Cristero Rebellion.<sup>63</sup> Gonzalo Águilar's virtues honored in *The Graphic History* echoed Cristeros' "calm confrontation of death" and what Meyer suggests was Cristeros' "collective 'imitation of Christ,' the sacrifice of the Cristeros rather than the pursuit of the death of the

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<sup>60</sup> Dionisio Rincón, "Corrido de Gonzalo Águilar," in Comité Nacional de la UNS, *Historia gráfica del sinarquismo*, 42-43.

<sup>61</sup> This detail is listed on the UNS's website, <http://sinarquismo.tripod.com/historia.htm#BANDERA>, last accessed July 24, 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Rincón, "Corrido de Gonzalo Águilar," in Comité Nacional de la UNS, *Historia gráfica del sinarquismo*, 43. For an example of a Sinarquista movement song composed for the movement's fallen martyrs, see also José T. Cervantes, "Hymn to the Fallen," in Comité Nacional de la UNS, *Historia gráfica del sinarquismo*, 272-75.

<sup>63</sup> Jean Meyer, *The Cristero Rebellion: The Mexican People between Church and State, 1929-1929*, trans. Richard Southern (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 190-93.

persecutors.”<sup>64</sup> The Sinarquistas’ honoring of Christ-like martyrs for the cause of Roman Catholicism against the persecutions of a secular state were both spiritual and political in content, galvanizing opposition to a persecutory PRM but nevertheless resonating with a spirituality that purported to transcend the gritty politics of the PRM’s confrontations with, and “massacres” of, Sinarquista followers. The lessons of Águilar’s martyrdom according to the ballad’s author are similarly revealing of Sinarquista ideals of patriotism and commitment to the “Fatherland,” as the writer then urges: “Let us see if we can unite as brothers to defend the Fatherland against anti-Mexicans.”<sup>65</sup> While the ballad never identifies the PRM by name as the “anti-Mexicans” the writer has in mind, the implication is clear enough. Sinarquistas are the true defenders of Mexico against the traitorous PRM and its left-wing allies, and patriotism demands that Sinarquistas defend Mexico to the death against Sinarquismo’s “anti-Mexican” enemies on the left.

The UNS’s strategy of canonizing movement heroes as figures to rally later generations of followers mirrored not only the Cristeros’ but also the revolutionary left’s own efforts at constructing a national culture in part around commonly honored heroes of the Revolution. In their celebrations of heroes and honored martyrs, Sinarquistas fostered a common movement culture like the revolutionary left’s “authentic national culture,” using figures like Gonzalo Águilar as unifying symbols in ways similar to the revolutionary party’s own uses of Mexican national heroes and history. Historian Paul Gillingham suggests that the Sinarquista movement sought to replace the canon of

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>65</sup> Rincón, “Corrido de Gonzalo Águilar,” in Comité Nacional de la UNS, *Historia gráfica del sinarquismo*, 43.

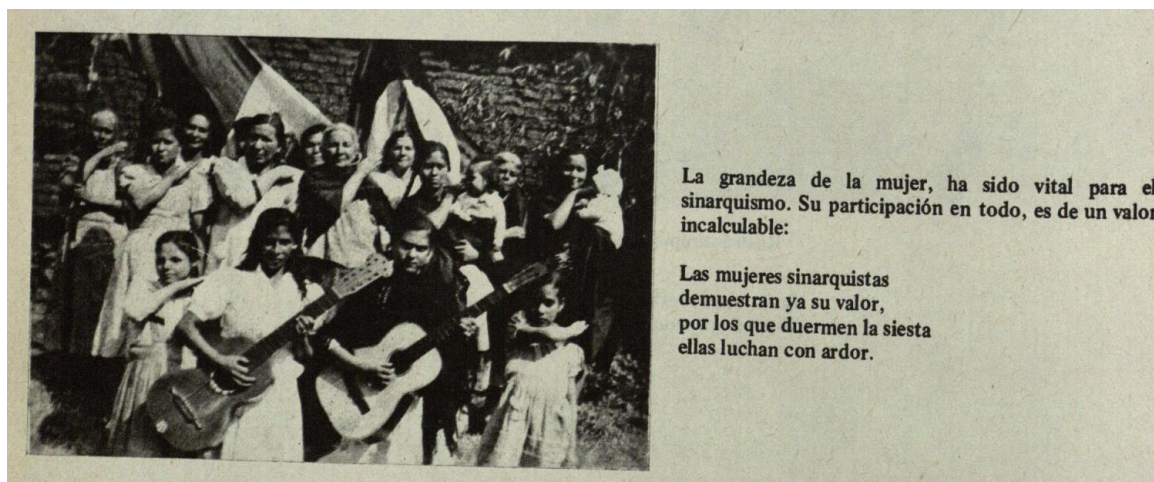
revolutionary heroes with its own, as well as to embrace some revolutionary heroes as symbols in support of Sinarquista ideology. He observes that the UNS “had previously opposed the government's choice of symbols in favour of an alternative set of Catholic national heroes; but their criticism of Benito Juárez and the revolution's great men had only won them banning as an electoral party, and this time they announced a parallel claim on Cuauhtémoc... the last Aztec emperor.”<sup>66</sup> With a panoply of martyrs and heroes to promote followers’ attachments to the movement, Sinarquistas built up their constituency in many of the same ways the revolutionary party sought to generate loyalty through interpretations of history and a canon of national heroes. The battles over the meanings and proper uses of the Cuauhtémoc symbol, which Gillingham examines, underscore the strategic uses of such heroes and symbols by both the revolutionary party and its opponents, as each faction sought to appeal to a widespread base of ordinary followers. National history replete with celebrated heroes legitimated not simply the revolutionary party’s politics but also the more right-wing politics of the Sinarquistas.

As part of their vision of a Mexico in which the family was central to community and social life, Sinarquistas prescribed norms of conduct for women that limited women’s roles in the movement: Women were not to participate in ordinary Sinarquista meetings or demonstrations, nor were they to engage in the direct political confrontations with left-wing opponents – although, as Newcomer has pointed out, Sinarquista women did have some limited involvement in public ceremonies for the Virgin Mary, during which they were encouraged to throw confetti from their porches onto male participants

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<sup>66</sup> Gillingham, *Cuauhtémoc’s Bones*, 190.

in the public street.<sup>67</sup> While prohibiting women from participating in its public marches, the UNS as part of its celebration of traditional Mexican families, which it viewed as central to a social and communal life in the nation, honored women for their contributions as wives and mothers supporting Sinarquista men from behind the scenes in the domestic sphere. A UNS publication entitled “Norms of Conduct for the Sinarquista Woman,” first disseminated in June 1937 along with the Sinarquistas’ founding manifesto, reflected the UNS leadership’s demands for strict divisions in acceptable roles for women and men in the movement. The “Norms of Conduct” admonished women “not to betray your wonderful destiny as a woman by devoting yourself to manly labors,” and that, as women, “your place is not in combat; but it falls to you to push and commit men to fight, even if you see that it is dangerous.”<sup>68</sup>



**Image 5.** Photographer unidentified, “La grandeza de la mujer,” in Comité Nacional de la UNS, *Historia gráfica del sinarquismo*, 286. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>67</sup> Newcomer, *Renconciling Modernity*, 138-39.

<sup>68</sup> The “Norms of Conduct” are reproduced in Unión Nacional Sinarquista, *El sinarquista canta* (Mexico: UNS, year of publication unspecified), 106.

As part of their national vision for Mexico, Sinarquistas naturalized identities for women and men – a strategy that historian Ida Blom has argued is common to nationalisms in modern democracies, as she explains that “national symbols rooted in... traditional understandings of gender paved the way for a gendered approach to citizenship in the democratic nation state.”<sup>69</sup> Sinarquistas represented women in ways that reflected a particular vision of womanhood, limiting women to domestic, subordinate roles and thereby circumscribing women’s power to shape the movement’s political directions and agenda while seeming to honor their contributions to the movement. As Blom’s observations about gendered nationalism suggest, the UNS would have understood such subordinate roles for women as natural, and the notions of femininity in a Sinarquista Mexico they promoted as a result would have become powerful premises of belonging in the national community envisioned by the Sinarquistas. Indeed, in her investigation of the Sinarquistas *Harper’s Magazine* writer Margaret Shedd notes that a “favorite topic for speeches is ‘the divine and beautiful destiny of womanhood,’ which means just what it sounds like – suffer, sacrifice, and accept.”<sup>70</sup> Shedd’s observation highlights that for Sinarquistas the very nature of “womanhood” itself conferred on the movement’s women members essentially subordinate roles in the background of political confrontation.

Thus, the Sinarquistas’ celebrations of women’s contributions *as women* reflect

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<sup>69</sup> Ida Blom, “Gender and Nation in International Comparison,” in Blom, Karen Hageman, and Catherine Hall, eds., *Gendered Nations: Nationalism and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2000), 8.

<sup>70</sup> Margaret Shedd, “Thunder on the Right in Mexico: The Sinarquistas in Action,” *Harper’s Magazine* 190 (1945).

broader nationalist commitments that both incorporated assumptions about naturalized roles for women and limited women's power to shape the content of Sinarquista nationalism. As literature scholar Anne McClintock has observed, "All nationalisms are gendered, all are invented and all are dangerous,"<sup>71</sup> and Sinarquista nationalism was no exception. While seeming to honor women's contributions, the UNS's prescription of rigidly defined (and apolitical) roles for women in the movement meant that women would not have any significant presence among the UNS's movement leadership and that they would lack effective power to participate in decisions determining the movement's political objectives. *The Graphic History* provides evidence of women's participation in the Sinarquista movement in that limited capacity – organized into women's brigades and honored for their supposed fulfillment of the very norms of femininity that limited their political power. Even as it barred women's public involvement in marches and the like, in the caption to a photograph of a Sinarquista women's brigade (see Image 5) the UNS extolled "the grandeur of the woman," which has been of "incalculable value" for Sinarquismo.<sup>72</sup>

In its propaganda the UNS prescribed rigidly defined roles for men, too, gendering participation in public demonstrations and direct confrontations with left-wing enemies as natural to masculinity. The UNS's demands that women remain behind the scenes of violent political confrontations suggested a complementary sphere for men squarely in the midst of those confrontations, as the UNS urged women "to push and

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<sup>71</sup> Anne McClintock, "No Longer in a Future Heaven," in Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., *Becoming National: A Reader* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), 260.

<sup>72</sup> Comité Nacional de la UNS, *Historia gráfica del sinarquismo*, 286.

commit men to fight.” A propaganda pamphlet encountered by the US writer Margaret Shedd, upon her visits to Sinarquista demonstrations in Mexico, portrayed men as the front-line warriors in the UNS’s struggle for national power – featuring, as one example of such a portrayal, a shirtless Sinarquista fighter with rippling muscles bearing the UNS flag and looking determinedly forward. The pamphlet was entitled “Mexico in 1960,” setting out the UNS’s vision of the glorious Sinarquista-dominated future.<sup>73</sup> The Sinarquista fighters and leaders portrayed in this propaganda are all male, suggesting a public political sphere in Sinarquismo’s conservative Mexico reserved exclusively for



**Image 6.** Artist unknown. UNS, “Mexico in 1960,” reprinted in Margaret Shedd, “Thunder on the Right in Mexico: The Sinarquistas in Action,” *Harper’s Magazine* 190 (1945), 416.

men. Shedd further noted that UNS leadership from its founding in 1937 had largely come from the ranks of graduates of male hunting clubs in Mexico “able to direct military maneuvers,” and that prominent Sinarquistas (all men) tended to “fall into three

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<sup>73</sup> Shedd, “Thunder on the Right in Mexico,” 416. Shedd does not specify what controversial content, in particular, forced the withdrawal of “Sinarquismo in 1960,” only reporting that it was withdrawn.

types – the very handsome ones, like [the *jefe* at the time] Manuel Torres Bueno... a few of the storm trooper type; and then young men with highly sensitive tragic faces,” although Shedd noted it was “my opinion that this third group is being weeded out.”<sup>74</sup>

The aspects of a common Sinarquista culture promoted by the National Committee in its *Graphic History* and by UNS leadership in its movement propaganda – e.g., public rituals, heroes and martyrs, and gender roles – suggest deeper sources of attachment to the Sinarquista cause for ordinary followers than mere political opposition to Cárdenas. Sinarquismo created a movement culture of its own, similar to, and in conflict with, the revolutionary culture promoted by the state. The rituals and norms surrounding Sinarquismo suggest that conflicts between the revolutionary party and its right-wing opposition extended beyond simple policy disagreements over land and education; disagreements played out in the realm of national cultural controversies, too. The UNS offered up a conflicting vision of nation and community, appealing to a number of its conservative followers. Embedded in the movement values expressed by the National Committee’s *Graphic History* was the potential for deep emotional commitments to particular notions of property, the family, community, and nation – commitments that pitted Sinarquismo against the revolutionary nationalism of Mexico’s left. Indeed, the Mexican left bitterly contested the Sinarquistas’ more conservative constructions of a national community, as will be evident in the following chapter.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.



### Chapter 3 Enemies of the Revolutionary State

Political elites on the Mexican left fiercely denounced Sinarquismo as a threat to Mexico's values and revolutionary legacy. The ferocity of the Mexican left's denunciations of Sinarquismo reveals the continuing tenuousness of the left-wing factions' influence in the ruling revolutionary party. Indeed, the revolutionary party's post-Cárdenas shift rightward, beginning with the election of Manuel Ávila Camacho to the presidency in 1940, provoked some of the harshest denunciations of Sinarquismo by two prominent leaders of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) as the conservatism of the Sinarquistas' political agenda became more closely aligned with the policies of the revolutionary party itself. Both Ávila Camacho and his opponent in the 1940 election, Juan Almazán, had courted the Sinarquistas' support in their bid for the presidency.<sup>75</sup> While the UNS ultimately spurned both candidates,<sup>76</sup> a more conservative revolutionary party's rollback of much of the Cárdenas-era reforms (like land redistribution and socialist education) in the 1940s meant that Sinarquistas found more of a mainstream home in a Mexican political scene still dominated by the PRM. As Sinarquismo seemed to gain traction in a more conservative post-revolutionary Mexico, CTM leaders and others on the left seized upon the widespread disrepute of European fascism in order to associate Sinarquismo with the specter of a European fascist threat to Mexico.

The rhetoric Sinarquismo's enemies used to excoriate the Sinarquistas in many

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<sup>75</sup> Hernández, *Historia política del sinarquismo*, 210.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

ways resembled the UNS's rhetoric, inasmuch as both sides painted their enemies as dominated by, or conspiring with, foreign powers (and themselves as patriotic Mexicans, resisting foreign influences). Both Anti-Sinarquista propaganda and Sinarquista propaganda reveal that accusations of conspiracies with foreign powers held particular power to discredit enemies' claims to legitimate national power in revolutionary Mexico. Anti-fascist discourses served the elites of the Mexican left, as such discourses stoked fears of nefarious, albeit nebulously defined, enemies of Mexico – fears that the left could then deploy against domestic adversaries like the UNS. Sinarquismo's enemies could thus use accusations of Sinarquismo's complicity with foreign fascism to contest Sinarquistas' nationalist vision by insinuating it was anti-Mexican. Just as Sinarquistas in their propaganda accused the Mexican left of conspiracies with outside tyrants like the Soviet Union, Sinarquismo's enemies drew upon the same nationalist strategies of tarring domestic political opposition by linking them to foreign powers – in the case of Sinarquismo's enemies, linking the UNS to European fascists.

The rising fortunes of Francisco Franco's Nationalist forces in Spain, in particular, generated hostility toward the specter of fascism in Mexico, as a number of refugees fled Spain for Cárdenas's Mexico in the late 1930s. Cárdenas embraced a policy of openness toward Spanish refugees, cementing the Spanish exiles in Mexico's loyalties to the Cárdenas government. Meanwhile, the atrocities Franco's forces committed during the Spanish Civil War<sup>77</sup> surely bolstered the terror surrounding fascism as a political idea among both Spanish exiles in Mexico and the Mexican left alike. In the late 1930s,

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<sup>77</sup> Paul Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (New York, NY: Norton, 2012) offers a thorough history of the Falangists' torture, gang rape, and mass executions of political opponents, both real and suspected, during and after the Spanish Civil War.

President Cárdenas became a particularly honored figure in the left's campaigns against international fascism. For example the Spanish cartoonist Julián Gamoneda – himself a Republican refugee from the Spanish Civil War – dedicated a collection of anti-fascist caricature art to “General [Lázaro] Cárdenas and his Government, which has garnered



**Image 7.** Julián Gamoneda, *El fascismo: Caricaturas, año 1939* (Mexico: publisher not identified, 1939), front cover. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

with its enlightened politics the admiration of the entire world.” With his cartoon collection attacking the regimes of right-wing figures from Europe like Mussolini, Hitler, and Franco, Gamoneda rebuked “the farce and ridiculous pantomime of that brutal and dissolute antisocial doctrine called Fascism.”<sup>78</sup> Gamoneda used the collection to warn

<sup>78</sup> Julián Gamoneda, *El fascismo: Caricaturas, año 1939* (Mexico: publisher not identified, 1939), 3-4. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

Mexican audiences about the dangers of fascism to a free and democratic people, declaring “war on fascism” on the collection’s front cover and adding that “only enslaved peoples can tolerate the brutal tyranny of the fascist regime.”<sup>79</sup> The cartoons inside featured acerbic critiques of European fascisms from the Franco regime in the Franco regime in Spain to the Nazis in Germany, while in one drawing Gamoneda associated the Catholic Church with other right-wing oppressors of ordinary workers: A priest clutching a cross and rosary beads sits atop the back of the proletariat along with a moneyed capitalist plutocrat, weighing the proletariat down to the point of exhaustion and near-collapse.<sup>80</sup>



**Image 8.** Julián Gamoneda, *El fascismo: Caricaturas, año 1939* (Mexico: publisher not identified, 1939), 13. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., front cover.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 13.

Similar anti-fascist propaganda proliferated in Mexico before World War II, reinforcing not only the message evident in Gamoneda's cartoons, which was that fascism threatened the freedom and democracy embodied in the PRM's government and especially in the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, but also that fascism posed a serious external threat to Mexican culture and values. Another refugee from Franco and a former prisoner of Franco's forces before returning to Mexico from Europe, the European-trained Mexican artist Santos Balmori highlighted the horrors of fascism with a vivid



**Image 9.** Santos Balmori, “El saber corrompería a mis juventudes.” Sam L. Slick Poster Collection Number PICT 000-674, Drawer 20, Folder 42, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

illustration of the Nazi threat to public education and national culture in Mexico.

Balmori's broadside portrays a gigantic, grotesque Nazi storm trooper who, having set fire to a library and a school, skewers “Culture” with his rifle bayonet. At the bottom of

the broadside, Balmori attributes the words “knowledge will corrupt my young followers” to Adolf Hitler.<sup>81</sup>

In this climate of suspicion of fascist threats to national sovereignty and values, the enemies of Sinarquismo attacked the movement as a tool of fascist conspirators plotting to take over and destroy Mexico. In the early 1940s, the Mexican left sought to tie Sinarquismo to German Nazism and Italian fascism, insinuating that European nationalist ideologies of the day dominated the movement. For example the founder of the Confederation of Mexican Workers, Vicente Lombardo Toledano, speaking before a workers’ syndicate in October 1941, proclaimed, “If the principles at the root of the Nazi regime in Germany, the fascist regime in Italy, and Franco's regime in Spain are compared with the principles that animate... Sinarquismo in our own country, one will see that they resemble each other: suppression of liberty, democracy, and the free reign of human interests.”<sup>82</sup>

Tying the UNS to global fascism was an effective political strategy for Sinarquismo’s left-wing opponents like Lombardo Toledano. By accusing the Sinarquistas of complicity with foreign powers, Lombardo Toledano could effectively cast the Sinarquistas as traitors to the legacies of the Mexican Revolution that had legitimized the later power of revolutionary leaders and their efforts to enforce constitutional articles protecting laborers in the country. At the same time he addressed

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<sup>81</sup> See Image 9, Santos Balmori, “El saber corrompería a mis juventudes.” Sam L. Slick Poster Collection Number PICT 000-674, Drawer 20, Folder 42, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>82</sup> Vicente Lombardo Toledano, *Educación científica o educación sinarquista?* (Mexico: Universidad Obrera de México, 1941), page number removed. The quotation is from the section “La escuela sinarquista.” Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

CTM members, Lombardo Toledano was likely also directing his criticisms of Sinarquismo at the CTM's patrons in the revolutionary party, as at the time of his speech in 1941 the revolutionary party under Ávila Camacho was beginning to retreat from the pro-labor policies of the Cárdenas years and express greater sympathy with some elements of Sinarquismo – greater deference to the Church, for example. Even if Ávila Camacho could have found common ground with the Sinarquistas on policies of restrained enforcement of the Constitution's most aggressively anticlerical articles, Lombardo Toledano's characterization of Sinarquistas as fascists flouting the Revolutionary Constitution would have made cooperation with the UNS less palatable even for the more conservative compromise-inclined leaders in the revolutionary party like Ávila Camacho.

Thus, Lombardo Toledano went on to characterize Sinarquismo as utterly anti-Mexican, as he invoked the Constitution of 1917, a significant achievement and legacy of the Mexican Revolution that had legitimized the power of post-revolutionary rulers. Since Sinarquistas rejected the Constitution (Lombardo Toledano clearly had in mind the Constitution's restraints on the power of the Church), they were an illegitimate and seditious faction. Sinarquistas, according to Lombardo Toledano, stood "[a]gainst the truth that our Fatherland accepts by the mandate of its supreme law, its Constitution," and, therefore, were "the 'fifth column' of Mexico."<sup>83</sup> Lombardo Toledano's accusations that Sinarquistas had betrayed Mexico and the Constitution of 1917 held particular power to discredit Sinarquistas in a political context in which nationalism – and vigilance against the interference of foreign powers – was a key strategic discourse to lay claim to

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., page number removed. The quotation is from the section "La escuela sinarquista."

legitimate power after the Revolution. Accusations that Sinarquistas rejected the Constitution also possibly were designed to make even conservative politicians in the revolutionary party (like Ávila Camacho), who like their more left-wing counterparts exercised power in the name of the Constitution, less inclined to accommodate Sinarquista interests with political compromises.

The usefulness of accusations of “fascism” for the Mexican left, and hence the liberal uses of such accusations against conservative political enemies, does not mean that ideology necessarily loomed large in the decisions of ordinary Mexican to join or oppose the Sinarquistas. While designed to appeal to ordinary people’s nationalist sensibilities and suspicions of powerful foreign countries, denunciations of a fascist threat to Mexico may not have swayed ordinary people as they affiliated themselves with elite factions like the PRM or the Sinarquistas in the 1930s and 1940s. Material interests probably better explain why people chose to support the PRM against its conservative opposition, especially where the Cárdenas-era land reforms provided them with important economic benefits. The historian Friedrich E. Schuler notes that conspiracy theories of Mexican conservatives’ alliances with European fascists indeed helped to mobilize opposition to fascism in the 1930s, but that economic priorities like land ownership better explain political loyalties in Cárdenas’s Mexico than do “fascist plots.” The “potential threat of fascist subversion to the Western Hemisphere in the 1930s,” he argues, “needs to be set in the context of other forces that did shape Mexican lives more strongly.”<sup>84</sup> As Schuler’s analysis suggests, where local Cardenistas administered the reorganized *ejidos* more

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<sup>84</sup> Friedrich E. Schuler, *Mexico between Hitler and Roosevelt: Mexican Foreign Relations in the Age of Lázaro Cárdenas, 1934-1940* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 4.



efficiently, the PRM attracted greater political support; where the *ejidos* were more poorly run or not established at all, Sinarquistas gained more traction against the PRM.<sup>85</sup> While Schuler's work cautions historians against the overreliance on "fascism" and ideology to explain political affiliations, it nevertheless underscores that the fevered rhetoric against international fascism did help Mexican political factions like the PRM build popular support and discredit opponents in the fierce struggles for national power after the Mexican Revolution. Even as other factors like the successes or failures at the local level of Cárdenas's land reforms loomed larger in determining ordinary people's political loyalty, the specter of fascism loomed large in the rhetoric with which competing factions traded accusations.

Indeed, the Mexican left's associations between Sinarquismo and fascism continued into the 1940s. For example Fernando Amilpa, who would head the CTM from 1947 to 1950, associated Sinarquismo with European fascism just as his predecessor had. Like Lombardo Toledano, Amilpa drew parallels between Sinarquista ideology and that of European fascists, while he also asserted that Sinarquismo was a Nazi-fascist conspiracy with the unintelligent masses in thrall and suggested that the movement would welcome the prospect of European fascists' seizing power in Mexico. His 1946 pamphlet *Sinarquista-Fascist Machinations in the Nude* called the followers of the UNS "fanatic masses" and "ignorant men," asserting that Sinarquista and other "anti-

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<sup>85</sup> For example, Schuler explains that the Sinarquistas "targeted peasants and small property owners who had been left out of the government's land redistribution program" and "condemned the *ejido* program as an imperfect form of land ownership." See Schuler, *Mexico between Hitler and Roosevelt*, 75.

patriotic forces” were “the instruments of Nazi-fascism” in Mexico.<sup>86</sup> It was denunciations like these which contributed to later interpretations of Sinarquistas as the agents of European fascists in Mexico, but it is important to remember that these were the characterizations of the Sinarquistas’ political enemies and thus cannot be accepted at face value. *Sinarquista-Fascist Machinations in the Nude* also repeated the trope found in Lombardo Toledano’s 1941 speech that Sinarquistas were counter-revolutionaries, opposed to the Mexican Revolution and the Revolutionary Constitution. In his denunciations, Amilpa focused in particular on the UNS’s opposition to Article 130 requiring that religious officials in Mexico register with state authorities: “The leaders of the UNS,” Amilpa charged, “have been able to boast of their impudence.... [T]hey showed to the credulous people how Article 130 of the Constitution could be violated.” Amilpa made similar accusations against National Action, another contemporary right-wing opposition group, for allegedly flouting the Revolutionary Constitution’s requirement that Mexican children attend secular, state-sponsored public schools. According to Amilpa, National Action just like the Sinarquistas was “able to boast of how little it esteems the Constitution... [I]t flouted Constitutional Articles... establishing... schools and the obligation of children to attend those schools.”<sup>87</sup>

The image of the revolutionary party’s conservative opponents promoted by CTM leaders like Lombardo Toledano and Amilpa – intransigent, hostile to the Constitution and the legacies of the Revolution, manipulative, and dominated by fascist foreign

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<sup>86</sup> Fernando Amilpa, *La maquinación sinarco-fascista al desnudo* (Mexico: publisher not identified, 1946), 11-12. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

powers – entered orthodox histories of the Revolution in Mexico and still linger on in some contemporary scholarly interpretations of the Sinarquista movement. Indeed, Amilpa’s uncharitable description of ordinary Sinarquistas as “fanatic masses” and “ignorant men” would come to dominate orthodox revolutionary interpretations of a variety of the revolutionary party’s conservative opponents, but such characterizations would chiefly be used to describe the Cristeros, the Sinarquistas’ ideological predecessors who had rebelled against the radically anticlerical Calles government in the late 1920s. As Matthew Butler explains, for orthodox historians of the Mexican Revolution and its aftermath, Cristeros’ resistance to a truly popular revolution was “inexplicable unless it was dismissed as a form of ‘white terror’ sponsored by reactionary elites.”<sup>88</sup> In other words, for orthodox historians who saw the Revolution as the beginning of ordinary people’s liberation from the oppression of exploitative *hacendados* and the Church, popular reactionary political movements like the Cristero Rebellion or the later emergence of the Sinarquistas could not be explained except as the grievous errors of ignorant followers, blind to their true interests and manipulated by elite conservative demagogues like Catholic priests. This is a view of the Sinarquistas that has persisted even in some contemporary scholarship – for example, a recent labor history of Mexican-Americans in the United States describing Sinarquistas as “profascist” and praising labor union leaders for “hinder[ing] the Sinarquistas in sending out their ultranationalist message that filled Mexicans with false hope and in recruiting new supporters for the fascist cause.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Butler, *Popular Piety and Political Identity in Mexico’s Cristero Rebellion*, 4.

<sup>89</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 174 and 188.

The increasing prominence of Sinarquismo in the 1940s spurred vigorous opposition among the revolutionary party's left-wing allies beyond the ranks of the CTM. The Anti-Sinarquista Committee in Defense of Democracy was founded to investigate alleged Sinarquista subversion in Mexico, although as historian Zaragosa Vargas notes, its president Alfredo Díaz Escobar, a congressman from the center-western state of Querétaro where Sinarquismo had garnered a substantial following, visited Los Angeles in October 1942 to denounce the machinations of Sinarquista chapters that had infiltrated into southern California.<sup>90</sup> In December 1948, the Committee led by Díaz Escobar issued an official denunciation of the UNS that largely echoed CTM leaders' earlier attacks on the movement – *i.e.*, that Sinarquismo was inspired by European fascism and its movement leaders bent on manipulating ordinary Mexicans whose ignorance left them vulnerable to such right-wing demagoguery. The Committee lambasted the “Nazi-fascist movement that every day, through deceptive and demagogic means, infiltrates the humble classes of our people, threatening to subvert public order.” Just as CTM leaders had argued before, Díaz Escobar's Committee accused the Sinarquistas of opposition to the legitimate legacies of the Revolution – in other words, of being dangerous counterrevolutionaries. The UNS according to Díaz Escobar “constitute[d] an organization that is an enemy to our Revolution... the principles for which the better part of the Mexican people fought and gave their blood.”<sup>91</sup>

The particular accusations which Díaz Escobar, Lombardo Toledano, and Amilpa

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>91</sup> “Acta Constitutiva del Comité Nacional Antisinarquista y en Defensa de la Democracia,” in Alfredo Félix Díaz Escobar, *Yo se los dije: el peligro sinarquista* (Mexico: [publisher unnamed], 1948), 6. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

raised in their attacks on Sinarquismo all bolstered a powerful nationalist critique of the UNS's politics. Labeling the Sinarquistas as fascist conspirators dominated by European overlords served the needs of Sinarquistas' left-wing political enemies, and it is almost certainly for this reason, and not as a result of particular alliances between the UNS and European Nazi-fascists (which the primary source record does not bear out), that Sinarquistas entered American historical narratives as fascist agents in Mexico. And as noted, the presentation of Sinarquistas as fascists fit comfortably with the nationalist discourses the Mexican left, just like its right-wing opponents, used to court popular support. Thus for leaders of the Mexican left like Lombardo Toledano and Amilpa, their Sinarquista enemies were anti-Mexican, and the political agenda of Mexico's revolutionary party and its left-wing allies, not its conservative opponents, merited patriotic citizens' nationalist loyalties. Nevertheless, the fierce attacks on Sinarquismo reveal that during the 1940s the questions of what particular vision of politics – land reform? socialist education? secularism? – the Revolution's legacies legitimized were far from settled. Indeed, by the late 1940s as Cárdenas's successors had backed down on public education guarantees and the promises of land redistribution in the Mexican countryside, the politicians ruling in the name of the Revolution began to hew more closely to the conservative vision of the Sinarquistas than to the demands of left-wing elites like labor union leaders.

By the time of Díaz Escobar's Committee's official condemnation of Sinarquismo in December 1948, the movement was already in decline, losing much of its resonance and power in the context of the revolutionary party's embrace of more conservative policies. Even if the Sinarquistas did not achieve a reconciliation with the

revolutionary party, they at least wielded a substantial influence on the party's right-wing trajectory after 1940 even as they lost much of their *raison d'être* as conservatives found more common ground with the government. The next chapter's analysis of a mid-1940s movement schism in the UNS, ushering in more moderate leadership and disempowering the movement's radicals, will also help to shed light on the UNS's decline as a significant opposition faction in the 1940s as the movement's moderates softened earlier ideologues' fiery condemnations of the United States.

## Chapter 4

### Theories of Sinarquista Conspiracies in the United States

By the early 1940s, Sinarquismo reached the zenith of its popularity and power, not only in Mexico but among a sizeable following of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans living in the United States. The UNS established a number of formal chapters throughout the southwestern United States, with the largest number in urban centers of Texas and southern California, though it also maintained chapters in areas of the Upper Midwest with significant Mexican and Mexican-American populations, such as Chicago, Illinois; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Indiana Harbor, Indiana. The nerve centers of its organizing in the United States were its two regional headquarters in El Paso, Texas, and Los Angeles, California.<sup>92</sup> The following that Sinarquismo generated among Mexicans living in the US generated serious anxieties, closely tied to fears of domestic subversion in wartime, in the early 1940s – as North American journalists' contemporary accounts of Sinarquistas reveal. At the same time, North American journalists also echoed official fears of domestic factions in Mexico, like the Sinarquistas, who might undermine a cooperative relationship between the US and Mexico. The Sinarquistas' anti-US rhetoric stoked fears of a less pliant Mexican ally should Sinarquistas succeed in wresting national power from the PRM in Mexico.

Nevertheless, the question of Sinarquismo's appeal to Mexican laborers in the US has received very little attention in later historical scholarship. The only sustained attempt to grapple with this question, of which I am aware, is David Williams's May 1950 Master's thesis at Texas Christian University, which argues that Sinarquistas'

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<sup>92</sup> David J. Williams, "Sinarquismo in Mexico and the Southwest," (M.A. Thesis, Texas Christian University, May 1950).

glorification of Mexico reinforced attachments to national or family origins amidst the humiliations of poverty and racial discrimination in the 1940s United States.<sup>93</sup> Other scholarship addressing Sinarquista organizing north of the border largely accept the PRM and US officials' characterizations of Sinarquistas as fascists, without scrutinizing either the disconnect between Sinarquista platforms and contemporary European fascisms or the strong political incentives that Sinarquismo's enemies had to attack Sinarquistas with such a label. Yet without scrutiny of enemies' motives for labeling Sinarquistas as "fascists," such scholarship presents international fascism as an all-encompassing, essentializing explanation for Sinarquismo's appeal to laborers in the US (or anywhere else, for that matter). Such an explanation threatens to subsume the contemporary social and political grievances of Mexicans in the US, which perhaps made the UNS's staunch criticism of Protestant North America appealing to followers north of the border.

For example, Zaragosa Vargas's *Labor Rights are Civil Rights* emphasizes alleged Nazi influences in the UNS's foundation in 1937 and characterizes conflict between the UNS and left-wing labor unions in early-1940s Los Angeles as "fascism and communism locked in a struggle for the hearts and minds of the Mexicans of the city."<sup>94</sup> Using labor organizations' and especially the Confederation of Mexican Workers' characterizations of Sinarquismo, Vargas describes the Sinarquista movement as "profascist exploiters" aiming "to revive and intensify a radical identity among the Mexican population in the United States and possibly provoke violence, according to the master plan of

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 188 and 161.



Sinarquismo.”<sup>95</sup> As noted in prior chapters, the view of Sinarquistas as violent right-wing nationalists influenced by European agents – which Vargas suggests here – came to dominate contemporary and early historiographical views of the movement, in both the United States and Mexico, yet it was a characterization born of the rhetoric of Sinarquismo’s enemies.

As other historians have pointed out, the Nazi origins of Sinarquismo have almost certainly been exaggerated, if not fabricated outright, while the Sinarquistas were neither popular nor powerful enough – north of the border, at least – to incite the violence that US observers hastily attributed to them (for instance, Los Angeles’ 1943 “zoot suit riots”). For example, Friedrich Schuler in *Mexico between Hitler and Roosevelt* argues that the German immigrant Helmut Schreiter, commonly identified as the Nazi inspiration for the UNS movement, in fact ended up wielding “little influence” on the movement and was “not that important,” though he had been on friendly terms with Sinarquista leadership and present at the UNS’s official founding in the spring of 1937.<sup>96</sup> The only evidence that contemporary accounts of the zoot suit riots could produce to establish Sinarquista influences on the violence consisted of vague speculation and the usual dire warnings about Sinarquista nefariousness generally. Moreover, the anti-Nazi (and generally anti-foreigner) rhetoric of Sinarquismo examined in previous chapters – as well as the UNS’s relentlessly nationalist emphasis on redeeming Mexico from the predatory political and cultural influences of outsiders, evident in preceding chapters as well – poses serious problems for straightforward characterizations of the UNS as “fascist” or a

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>96</sup> Schuler, *Mexico between Hitler and Roosevelt*, 75.

Mexican front for international fascist conspiracies.

Nevertheless, the insinuation of Nazi-fascist influence did serve the interests of Sinarquismo's enemies in the US, just as it did in Mexico, and it is my argument in this chapter that US officials' interest in stoking fears of fascist conspiracy in Mexico best explains why that narrative of Sinarquista villainy crystallized in the US the first place. American journalists' and the Office of Strategic Services' portrayals of Sinarquistas in the early 1940s reveal particular preoccupations with US prominence and power in the hemisphere, with the specter of Nazi-fascism, at the time a politically potent rallying cry, trotted out to generate popular hostility toward factions like the Sinarquistas who threatened that prominence and power. Sinarquista ideologues' staunch criticisms of the United States's diplomacy and culture threatened US officials' interests in hemispheric hegemony and pliant Latin American allies. Thus, echoing the accusations of Sinarquismo's domestic enemies in Mexico (examined in Chapter 3), US officials used the narrative of Sinarquistas as nefarious fascist conspirators to justify US surveillance of, and opposition to, an increasingly powerful political faction that posed problems for US interests in the hemisphere. In addition to the contemporary anxieties exposed in the accounts of US journalists in the early 1940s, the disappearance of tales of Sinarquista conspiracies from US discourses after a change in the UNS's tone and ideology diminished its threat to US interests bolsters the argument I propose here.

As noted in Chapter 2, for the Sinarquistas, the United States's imperialist designs posed a dire threat to Mexico's national sovereignty. Thus, much of the Sinarquistas' propaganda, especially in the movement's early years in the late 1930s and early 1940s, included ferocious denunciations of US popular culture and imperial machinations. As

part of their aggressive anti-US rhetoric, Sinarquistas harshly criticized Anglo-American Protestantism and what they saw as Protestant countries' bids for global empire and domination. Sinarquistas feared, in particular, the infiltration of US Protestantism in Catholic Mexico, and they opposed international cooperation with the US, thus attacking both pan-Americanism and Mexico's support for the Allied Powers of World War II. The Sinarquistas' attacks on the Allied Powers likely contributed to the observation in the US that the Sinarquistas had close ties to European fascists. Reviewing Sinarquista literature of the period, David J. Williams noted that "Protestantism and American materialism are popular subjects when referring to Americans," reflecting Sinarquistas' fears of cultural threats to Catholic Mexico. What is more, "[a]nother pet subject" of the Sinarquistas was "American imperialism, together with a sly reminder that the loss of Texas and the Southwest by Mexico was a manifestation of this imperialist tendency."<sup>97</sup> The early movement's ideologues demanded vigilance against the encroachments of US Protestantism and popular culture from north of the border; the history of US-Mexican relations, for them, was a century of North American conquest and humiliation of Mexico, which cemented their opposition to pan-Americanism.

Thus, for the Sinarquistas, friendly overtures to the United States on the part of the PRM evidenced the subjugation of Mexico to US imperialist interests. Sinarquistas opposed Mexico's joining the Allied Powers (and the United States) during World War II; some accounts in the US accused them of spreading rumors that Mexico's sending of troops to fight the war abroad was a Communist plot to seize power in an undefended

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<sup>97</sup> Williams, "Sinarquismo in Mexico and the Southwest," 127.

Mexico.<sup>98</sup> Even the PRM's policies nominally designed to protect Mexico's sovereignty were evidence, for the Sinarquistas, of international plots to subjugate Mexico to the US. For example, the UNS's history of the Cárdenas years *Six Years of Betrayal of the Fatherland* cast the United States as a foreign menace on par with the Soviet Union. The UNS accused Cárdenas of conspiring with US President Franklin Roosevelt to nationalize Mexico's petroleum industry, raising the specter of US, not simply Soviet, domination in Mexico (well after the Sinarquistas had faded into more mainstream segments of the Mexican right and, possibly cultivating new alliances with US officials, toned down their early denunciations of US imperial designs on Mexico). "The expropriation of the oil companies was a political plot," the UNS wrote in 1956; "President Roosevelt wanted to turn the petroleum reserves of our country into reserves for the United States." Expropriation was a "remedy suggested by President Roosevelt" that "caused enormous harm to the country, impeding us from exporting oil and, as a result, obtaining foreign currencies."<sup>99</sup> Cárdenas's claims to defend Mexico against predatory multinationals, for the Sinarquistas, belied secret plots to achieve quite the opposite – that is, to leave Mexico unable to export its petroleum reserves and, consequently, economically servile to the United States.

The Sinarquistas opposed the proliferation of US popular culture in Mexico, as part of their efforts to promote a "national consciousness" in opposition to North American Protestantism. As Anne Rubenstein notes, the Sinarquista newspaper *El*

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<sup>98</sup> Enrique L. Prado, "Sinarquism in the United States," *The New Republic*, July 26, 1943, 98.

<sup>99</sup> Unión Nacional Sinarquista, *México en la época de Cárdenas, o seis años de traición a la patria* (Mexico: UNS, 1956), 13-16. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

*Hombre Libre* inveighed against cooperation between Mexico's education ministry and Disney to promote Mexican literacy, warning that such collaboration meant “the peaceful conquest of Latin America by Uncle Sam.”<sup>100</sup> Aggressive UNS criticism of Disney and other examples of US popular culture’s creeping into Mexico, like Hollywood cinema, revealed the centrality of cultural controversies to right-wing Catholic groups' bids for national power in Mexico. Rubenstein explains that “[b]y 1940, it was clear that cultural questions were attracting the most attention from rank-and-file Mexican conservatives,” and that “more people allied themselves with Catholic political groups in the Mexican 'culture wars' than with any other party to these disputes.”<sup>101</sup> The Sinarquistas’ aggressive denunciations of US Protestantism thus went hand in hand with the Catholic nationalism at the heart of Sinarquistas’ political and ideological challenge to Mexico’s ruling revolutionary party. Nevertheless, these anti-Yankee imperialism discourses emanated from the Sinarquistas’ leadership only during the movement’s early years; the rise of Manuel Torres to movement *jefe* ushered in warmer relations with the US, as noted below. The ephemeral uses of the specter of US imperialism to legitimize Sinarquistas’ opposition to the revolutionary party suggest that the UNS’s opposition to Protestant North America was more strategic than principled. With the rise of anti-Communist paranoia after World War II, the Sinarquistas’ leadership found new international threats for their nationalist claims to defend Mexico from foreign aggressors. For the movement’s moderates like Torres Bueno and subsequent leaders, the Soviet Union

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<sup>100</sup> Crispín Villanueva Rivera, “Películas de penetración Yanqui,” *El Hombre Libre*, Sept. 22, 1944. Quoted in, and translated by, Anne Rubenstein, *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation: A Political History of Comic Books in Mexico* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 91.

<sup>101</sup> Rubenstein, *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation*, 77-78.

replaced the US as chief villain whose machinations threatened Mexican sovereignty.

Meanwhile, the portrayals of Mexico's Unión Nacional Sinarquista in popular newspapers and magazines in the United States during World War II reveal conflicting views on Sinarquista aims and ideology, but they expose common preoccupations with the place of the US in the Western Hemisphere. While some reports painted Sinarquistas as in league with European fascists and warned of the infiltration of fascism within the US, other accounts questioned those claims by noting Sinarquistas' nationalist opposition to entanglements with foreign powers. Some accounts of Sinarquistas also explained that Sinarquista ideology had gained traction among impoverished Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, promising them dignity and power against oppressors in the revolutionary state and in a racist United States. Nevertheless, despite some sympathy for Sinarquismo and the rationales for Sinarquista grievances in the US Southwest, for the most part US writers presented Sinarquismo as a threat to Mexican and US national interests, justifying vigilance and surveillance of the Sinarquistas in both nations. Even Sinarquismo's tentative defenders, questioning the extent of UNS entanglements with Nazis and European fascists, nevertheless assumed that whether the Sinarquistas impeded US interests in Latin America was the correct criterion for assessing the movement. In questioning the reality of Sinarquista threats to US dominance, the sympathetic accounts never questioned the legitimacy of US dominance itself.

In their tales of Sinarquista villainy, US writers echoed many of the same discourses employed by Sinarquismo's enemies in Mexico, casting Sinarquismo as a European fascist threat to the Western Hemisphere. Unlike the critics of Sinarquismo in Mexico, however, writers in the US revealed their own national preoccupations with, for

example, the success of the US-backed Allied Powers in the war then raging in Europe, as well as a vision of pan-Americanism in which the US dominated political and cultural affairs in the Western Hemisphere. Thus, US writers warned in particular of Sinarquistas' alleged obstruction of US war efforts and their opposition to US-Mexican international cooperation. Characterizations softened after a spring 1944 schism within the movement, which empowered new, more pragmatic leadership that largely abandoned the virulent anti-US and anti-Protestant stances of movement ideologues like Salvador Abascal. With the threat of European fascism neutralized and new discourses of the Soviet menace available to US officials to consolidate their power in the hemisphere, conspiracy theories of Sinarquista plots disappeared from US discourses after 1945.

Echoing the accusations of Sinarquismo's enemies in Mexico, US writers uncritically applied the label "international fascists" to Sinarquistas as early as June 1941, a few months before the US entered the war against fascist powers in Europe and Asia. "One quarter of a million men are at the service of international fascism in Mexico," warned Betty Kirk,<sup>102</sup> who wrote frequently on Mexican politics and whose work the US Ambassador to Mexico Josephus Daniels praised as "the best analysis and truest picture of Mexico" in the 1940s.<sup>103</sup> In her account of the UNS in *The Christian Science Monitor*, Kirk also called Sinarquistas "tools in the hands of Spanish Falangistas." Kirk's article drew parallels between Sinarquismo and Nazism, too, by presenting the UNS's following as a "fanatic uprising of the Mexican masses, exploited by agitators," emphasizing

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<sup>102</sup> Betty Kirk, "Sinarquista Rise in Mexico Seen as Totalitarian Plot," *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 7, 1941, 9.

<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Carleton Beals, "Mexico: The Middle Way," *The Saturday Review*, January 9, 1943, 18.

Sinarquista leaders' supposed manipulation of their followers. Moreover, the Sinarquista movement in Mexico evidenced, for Kirk, “totalitarianism... transplanted to this continent, and backing a European-dictated crusade to destroy democracy in the Western Hemisphere.”<sup>104</sup> The rhetorical presentation of Sinarquistas as European fascists enabled US writers to claim a moral high ground with opposition to fascism while, at the same time, defending more strategic US interests in maintaining cooperative allies in Latin America. While Kirk echoed the accusations of the PRM and its allies that Sinarquistas were ignorant fanatics, she also identified Sinarquistas as villains chiefly for their threats to these US political interests in the hemisphere; her account warned in particular of the Sinarquistas' opposition to “Pan American solidarity and cooperation with the United States,”<sup>105</sup> raising fears that Sinarquista political victories in Mexico might produce a Mexican government less pliant to US interests.

Reports warning of the dangers of Sinarquismo noted that it had established a significant presence in the US, especially in the Southwest, and stressed the danger of Sinarquistas' infiltration in the US itself. In a June 1943 article in *The Nation*, Kirk noted the UNS's abrogation of Mexican citizenship requirements for members, so that it could build a support base among Americans of Mexican descent in the US. Again, Kirk stressed Sinarquistas' opposition to US-Mexican cooperation.<sup>106</sup> Writing in *The New Republic* in July 1943, Enrique L. Prado warned that the Sinarquistas' fascist discipline

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<sup>104</sup> Kirk, “Sinarquista Rise in Mexico Seen as Totalitarian Plot,” 9.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Betty Kirk, “Mexico’s ‘Social Justice’ Party,” *The Nation*, June 12, 1943, 829-30.



and organization made them "strong and dangerous" in the US.<sup>107</sup> Also in *The New Republic*, Carey McWilliams warned of Sinarquistas' propagandizing of Mexican youth in Los Angeles,<sup>108</sup> and, writing in the wake of Los Angeles' "zoot-suit riots" in 1943, Prado referred to rumors that Sinarquistas may have stoked unrest, despite the testimony of a former local Sinarquista boss disclaiming involvement in the riots.<sup>109</sup>

Underscoring the US's interests in cooperative allies, many alarmist accounts of Sinarquista influences in the US expressed the particular fear that Sinarquistas sought to obstruct US war efforts and thereby harm the Allied Powers. Prado's article in *The New Republic*, for example, accused Sinarquistas of denouncing harsh US working conditions, in order to disrupt the wartime migrations of Mexican *braceros* to fill the US's wartime labor shortages.<sup>110</sup> Thus, at the same time US writers warned of fascist infiltration by the UNS, they associated Sinarquistas' anti-US sentiments with a plot to undermine US allies in the war in Europe. Mexico's entrance into World War II, joining the Allied Powers, further provided Sinarquistas' enemies with fodder for accusing them of fascist sympathies, as Sinarquistas protested against Mexican involvement in the war, both because it entangled Mexico in the conflicts of foreigners but also because it allied Mexico with an imperialist antagonist, the United States.

Some US writers in the early 1940s questioned a narrative of Sinarquista villainy, however, by scrutinizing tales of Sinarquismo spun by its political opponents and by

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<sup>107</sup> Prado, "Sinarquism in the United States," 99.

<sup>108</sup> Carey McWilliams, "Los Angeles' Pachuco Gangs," *The New Republic*, January 18, 1943, 77.

<sup>109</sup> Prado, "Sinarquism in the United States," 97.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

noting Sinarquistas' stated opposition to Nazi influences in Mexico. For example, in January 1942 reporter John W. White wrote in *The Washington Post* that "the real political objectives of the movement are not clear and there is a great deal of mud throwing on both sides." White then quoted UNS statements opposing imperialism by foreign powers in Mexico, namely the powers of Communism and Nazi-Fascism.<sup>111</sup> In a July 1943 letter to the editors of *The Washington Post*, Paul Dearing of Hyattsville, Maryland, wrote that "Sinarquista is as anti-Fascist as our own Republican Party."<sup>112</sup> Evidently, some Americans doubted the narrative of Sinarquistas as fascist agents in Mexico, bent on infiltrating the US and undermining its war objectives – the narrative put forth to discredit a group that threatened US interests in the Americas. Nevertheless, these isolated defenses of Sinarquismo did little to challenge the framework of a fascist threat to US interests. Both the opponents of and apologists for Sinarquismo on the pages of US print media accepted the premise that the infiltration of fascists in the Western Hemisphere threatened US interests. The debate raged over whether Sinarquistas were or were not truly the agents of the fascist conspirators hostile to the United States.

At the same time, blanket accusations of fascism also masked social problems in the US contributing to the disaffection of Mexican and Mexican-American residents. Among the more careful examinations of Sinarquista ideology, and, moreover, of the sources of ordinary Sinarquistas' discontent in the US, some writers acknowledged the role of poverty and discrimination against Mexicans in the US: "As long as the many

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<sup>111</sup> John W. White, "Sinarquista Party: Mexico Suffers But Watches It," *The Washington Post*, January 17, 1942, 9.

<sup>112</sup> Paul Dearing, "Pro-Sinarquista," *The Washington Post*, July 25, 1943, B6.

social and economic grievances of our Mexicans remain unheeded," Prado warned in 1943, "they will be easy prey for a movement which exploits these complaints."<sup>113</sup> Indeed, Sinarquistas' emphasis on the glory of Mexico and condemnations of Protestant North America appealed to poor and disaffected Mexican workers in the US, including many *braceros*. In his May 1950 thesis at Texas Christian University, David J. Williams explained the appeal of Sinarquismo in the southwestern US: "Continued economic and social discrimination will deprive the Mexican of an equal opportunity for advancement and improvement.... [T]he Sinarquista program promised to... correct all injustices committed against Mexicans."<sup>114</sup> Sinarquistas used the history of US imperialism in Mexico to legitimate their condemnations of the US and sow opposition to the US among Mexican workers. "It may sound ridiculous... that Sinarquismo looks upon Texas and California as lost territories which some day may be returned to Mexico," Prado observed, "[b]ut as a political weapon... the fostering of an active irredentism among Mexicans living in the United States is a political reality."<sup>115</sup>

At the same time that the specter of US domination afforded the early Sinarquista hardliners like Salvador Abascal opportunities for advancement within the movement, cozier relations between the US and Mexico during World War II afforded moderate opponents of Abascal opportunities to oust their enemies from the movement. After German submarines attacked Mexican ships in the Gulf of Mexico in May 1942, and as Mexico joined forces with the US in a war against the Axis Powers, Abascal's hard

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<sup>113</sup> Prado, "Sinarquism in the United States," 97.

<sup>114</sup> Williams, "Sinarquismo in Mexico and the Southwest," 123-24.

<sup>115</sup> Prado, "Sinarquism in the United States," 98.

stances against the US fell out of favor among Sinarquista leadership in Guanajuato and Mexico City: Support for the Axis enemies of the US no longer fit with nationalist defenses of Mexico from foreign aggressors, as the UNS came to view Nazi Germany, rather than the US, as a more serious threat to Mexican national interests. As historian Jason Dormady has observed, the UNS viewed Abascal's departure for Baja California to create a Sinarquista agricultural colony, the Colonia María Auxiliadora, as an opportunity to get Abascal out of the way and marginalize him within the movement; after all, the UNS had already found more common ground with PRM leadership in the Ávila Camacho Administration and could more comfortably cultivate friendly relations with the revolutionary party, while achieving some objectives like rolling back much of the aggressive anticlericalism and socialism of the Cárdenas years.<sup>116</sup>

Ultimately, the May 1944 departure of anti-US hardliner Salvador Abascal from the movement, and his replacement by the more pragmatic Manuel Torres Bueno,<sup>117</sup> softened Sinarquistas' rhetoric against the US. Although Abascal's influence over the UNS had waned since his stepping down as UNS Chief in October 1941 to found the Catholic mission colony in Baja California,<sup>118</sup> his public denunciations and departure from the UNS in May 1944 finally solidified the power of pragmatists like Torres Bueno over the movement. Highlighting the moderate Sinarquista leadership's new, more

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<sup>116</sup> Jason Dormady, *Primitive Revolution: Restorationist Religion and the Idea of the Mexican Revolution, 1940-1968* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2011), 117.

<sup>117</sup> For a US intelligence summary of the May 1944 schism in the UNS, see Office of Strategic Services Research and Analysis Branch, "Crisis in the Mexican Sinarquista Movement," September 19, 1944.

<sup>118</sup> Héctor Hernández, *The Sinarquista Movement: With Special Reference to the Period 1934-1944* (London, UK: Minerva Press, 1999), 289-90.

moderate stances toward the US, Abascal excoriated Torres Bueno for “plac[ing] the Christianity of the Mexican people and the ‘Christianity’ of the Protestants of the United States on the same plane,”<sup>119</sup> an equation that, for Abascal, was an egregious betrayal of Sinarquistas’ Catholic ideals. Nevertheless, the Sinarquistas’ new emphasis on the dangers of Communism, and their softening of anti-US stances, empowered new factions within the movement that began to push Sinarquismo into an ideological mainstream both on the Mexican right and in transnational alliances against Soviet Communism.

Observers from the US, too, took note of the UNS’s abandonment of its previously virulent and principled opposition to both Protestantism and US diplomatic policy in the hemisphere. Writing in *Harper's Magazine* in 1945, Margaret Shedd reported a much more welcoming attitude toward *gringos* at the May 1944 Founding Day march than at the previous year's event. Shedd noted, for example, that the *El Sinarquista* editor, "who up until then had been writing anti-gringo propaganda steadily for years," and who, on earlier occasions "would have brought the routine denunciation of Yankee imperialism," this time "came forth with ringing praise of United States policy in Mexico" and denunciations of Soviet Communism instead. From her conversations with Sinarquistas in Mexico and Mexican journalists, Shedd surmised that the UNS had reached a covert agreement with the US embassy in Mexico to redirect the Sinarquistas’ vitriol against the Soviet Union.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Abascal, “Sinarquismo is to be a Political Party: Ex-Chief Abascal Explains Why He Has Left the Movement,” *Novedades*, May 17, 1944. Quoted in, and translated by, Office of Strategic Services Research and Analysis Branch, “Crisis in the Mexican Sinarquista Movement,” Appendix I, iii.

<sup>120</sup> Shedd, “Thunder on the Right in Mexico,” 422.

For his part Abascal certainly recognized the strategic value for his opponents in the Sinarquista movement of an alliance between the US and UNS – an alliance premised on common anti-Soviet discourses and a global struggle against Communism. He denounced Torres Bueno for leveraging the prospect of deteriorating US-Soviet relations to seize control over the UNS and pervert the movement’s principles. In his statement in *Novedades*, he warned against entangling the UNS in the ideological disputes of foreign powers – entanglements that threatened to distract Sinarquistas from what he saw as the movement’s core mission in Mexico:

It is said that Sinarquismo is ready to fight against Communism anywhere. This is a demagogic device of... Torres to keep the poor deceived people under his control. It is also a fantasy which perhaps Torres and his gang believe. They believe or pretend to believe that when the break between Russia and the United States comes, our cousins will demand of the Mexican Government that it destroy the Left, and that therefore the president will be obliged to call upon Sinarquismo.... What is really necessary is that Sinarquismo be ready to overthrow the Revolution, which was destroying Mexico a century before the word Communism was heard in our country.<sup>121</sup>

Even as strident denunciations of the US has been integral parts of the Sinarquistas’ xenophobic rhetoric in the movement’s early years, clearly there were moderate forces within the movement willing to capitalize on the value of alliances with US interests, in order to gain greater power within the movement. And indeed, Torres Bueno successfully wrested power over the movement from Abascal and the hardliners in the mid-1940s, after which Sinarquista rhetoric on the US did soften considerably. The Soviet Union’s threat to the US’s burgeoning global power was creating opportunities for

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<sup>121</sup> Abascal, “Sinarquismo is to be a Political Party.” Quoted in, and translated by, Office of Strategic Services Research and Analysis Branch, “Crisis in the Mexican Sinarquista Movement,” Appendix I, v.

right-wing factions in Latin America to strengthen through alliances with the US,<sup>122</sup> an opportunity the Sinarquistas likely seized upon in the mid-1940s. As Abascal's bitter repudiation of the UNS reveals, moderates in the mid-1940s Sinarquista movement cleverly foresaw US confrontation with the Soviet Union and seized upon the prospect of the US's search for allies in its later campaigns to crush Latin America's leftist democratic coalitions, campaigns which would indeed come to fruition in the decades after World War II.

Even though the primary source record does not conclusively establish that the UNS leadership cut a deal with US national or corporate interests, US intelligence officials contemplated the strategic value of such a deal in shoring up US power in Mexico against the perceived threat of Soviet encroachments. In its surveillance of Sinarquistas, the CIA's predecessor, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), contemplated the possibility of courting Sinarquistas to prevent any coziness between Mexico and Russia. The OSS's report on the UNS schism in 1944 highlighted Torres Bueno's moderated stance toward the US, noting that the prospect of US opposition to the Soviet

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<sup>122</sup> See, for example, Greg Grandin and Gilbert M. Joseph, eds., *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America's Long Cold War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Peter Kornbluh, *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability* (New York, NY: New Press, 2004); and Doug Stokes, *America's Other War: Terrorizing Colombia* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2005), for examples of alliances between violent domestic right-wing factions in Guatemala, Chile, Colombia (among others) and the US, under the banner of anti-Communism, particularly as the US's diplomatic confrontations with the Soviet Union escalated after World War II. Under the guise of stopping Soviet encroachments into the Western Hemisphere, from the late 1940s onward the US supported brutal and violent campaigns against activists for democracy and their suspected allies in a number of Latin American countries. In his introduction to *A Century of Revolution*, historian Greg Grandin writes that US assistance to violent conservatives in post-war Latin America empowered "a domestic reaction against the democratization of the region's status hierarchy that had steadily advanced since the decades prior to independence."

Union, and consequent US-UNS alliances, might enable the Sinarquistas to enhance their political power in Mexico. “Torres Bueno and his group... evidently realizing the certainty of a severe and perhaps final defeat for fascist systems in the Eastern Hemisphere,” the OSS wrote, “proposed... cultivation of groups in the United States favorable to them, hoping that... the United States would adopt a violently anti-Russian policy and encourage the destruction of liberal and leftist groups in Mexico.”<sup>123</sup> The OSS’s assessment of the schism in the Sinarquista movement reflected US intelligence’s awareness of the opportunities for alliances with Latin American conservatives premised on prospective common opposition to left-wing factions in the region. The imminent destruction of the European fascist powers meant that US officials would need new global menaces like the Soviet Union, to justify political and economic dominance in Latin America. The new moderate UNS leadership presciently anticipated the opportunities for national power that an alliance with US interests, to achieve “the destruction of liberal and leftist groups” in the name of anti-Communism, afforded it on the home front in its political struggles with the PRM.

Intriguingly, the Sinarquistas' about-face toward the US in May 1944 predated by a few years the US's later alliances with conservative groups in Latin America and new postwar discourses of the specter of Communism – discourses in which Sinarquistas later participated, too,<sup>124</sup> as revealed by the early Cold War paranoia on display in the UNS’s

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<sup>123</sup> Office of Strategic Services Research and Analysis Branch, “Crisis in the Mexican Sinarquista Movement,” 11-12.

<sup>124</sup> See, for example, Unión Nacional Sinarquista, *México en la época de Cárdenas, o seis años de traición a la patria* (Mexico: UNS, 1956). In this example of Cold War era propaganda, Sinarquistas denounced Cárdenas’s land reform efforts as Bolshevik plots to enable the Soviet Union’s annexing of Mexico as a satellite state.



pamphlet attacking Cárdenas as a Soviet agent. The UNS leadership's new emphasis on the threat of global Communism, rather than US empire, fit well (and, in 1944, presciently) with new Cold War rhetoric that would in subsequent decades enhance US power in Latin America. Indeed, the campaign against Sinarquismo waged on the pages of US print media reveals that anti-fascist ideals offered many similar political opportunities for US officials as ideals of anti-Communism would later come to offer during the Cold War. Both rhetorical ideals seized upon a villain of the moment to justify an enhanced role for the US in the domestic affairs of Latin American neighbors. The Sinarquistas entered US journalists' narratives of Mexico as a "fascist" threat, because that characterization linked Sinarquismo most closely with transnational threats in the early 1940s and thereby served the exigencies of a US empire at the time.<sup>125</sup> And after 1945, with more moderate and pro-US leadership in charge of the UNS, the Sinarquistas ceased to serve as a useful villain to legitimate the politics of US dominance in the Americas. The specter of a Sinarquista threat to the hemisphere, emphasized by US media in the early 1940s, subsequently disappeared from US journalists' accounts altogether.

The usefulness of anti-fascist zeal to US imperialists, discussed in this chapter, highlights the continuity of US interests of power and hence the larger, longer purposes of transnational domination that US officials' invocations of rhetorical villains like fascists (1930s and 1940s) and Communists (after World War II) served. As historian

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<sup>125</sup> The movement's militarized public rituals strengthened the credibility of its opponents as they accused it of fascist sympathies. Newcomer makes this point in *Reconciling Modernity*, 120, where he observes, "The obvious social stratification and military discipline of [Sinarquistas'] demonstrations often invited charges of fascism from opponents."

Gilbert M. Joseph has noted about the anti-Communist ideals deployed in later periods to legitimize the US's imperial dominance in the Americas, the US's Cold-War-era support for right-wing factions in the name of anti-Communism constituted merely a moment in longer processes of hemispheric domination. The Cold War in Latin America was “not a fight among proxies of post...war superpowers, but an attempt by the United States (and its local clients) to contain insurgencies that challenged post-(or neo-)colonial social formations predicated on dependent economies and class, ethnic, and gender inequality.”<sup>126</sup> Anti-Soviet Communist rhetoric both justified the US's neo-colonial interventions in Latin America and masked such interventions' true purpose of reinforcing US imperial power. “Seen in the context of North-South imperial dynamics,” Joseph concludes, “one could make the case that the Latin American cold war began in 1898 [with the US invasion of Cuba] and has not yet ended.”<sup>127</sup>

The confrontation between US officials and Sinarquistas, too, can be read as an earlier episode in the long cold war waged by the US in the Americas. US journalists' and officials' preoccupation with a pliable Mexican political arena, free of significant anti-US agitation as for example from Sinarquista hardliners, suggests the same “imperial dynamics” at work – albeit before the Cold War, drawing upon the earlier specter of the transnational fascist threat before the Soviet Union assumed a similar role. As Sinarquistas' enemies on the Mexican left warned of foreign domination over Mexico, by presenting the Sinarquistas as in league with powerful European fascists and hence as

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<sup>126</sup> Gilbert M. Joseph, “Latin America's Long Cold War,” in Grandin and Joseph, eds., *A Century of Revolution*, 402.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

menaces to national sovereignty, writers in the US, too, found similar accusations against the Sinarquistas useful in responding to a group that threatened long-standing imperial objectives. Accusations of fascism for US writers served to discredit a faction that, because of its opposition to pan-American unity and to the hegemony of US culture in the Americas, threatened US prerogatives of dominance and power in Latin America. The anti-fascist rhetoric of the early 1940s reveals the usefulness at a particular historical moment of transnational alliances against the Axis Powers of accusing enemies of being in thrall to Nazi-fascists. With the defeat of the Axis in 1945, the rhetoric of anti-fascism would yield to the rhetoric of anti-Communism, as the US sought to preserve its influence and power south of the border.

## **Conclusion**

The Sinarquistas' politics were in some ways muddled, insofar as the UNS railed against numerous villains difficult to lump together coherently (like the Nazis, Communists, and US imperialists) and frequently denounced the revolutionary party with vague and paranoid accusations related to alleged, unspecific betrayals of Mexico. Nevertheless, the UNS's leadership promoted a movement culture rich in symbolism. In addition to a steadfast opposition to the revolutionary party, the UNS espoused some consistent ideology, evident in their mass culture. The Sinarquistas believed in an authoritative Catholic Church transcendent over secular bureaucracy, a national community with local authority and traditional families imagined as its bedrocks (and traditional gender roles for women and men), and the superiority of Mexico stemming from its Catholic and Hispanic heritage. Through mass culture promoting these aspects of a movement ideology, Sinarquistas' elites disseminated ideas among their followers in an evident attempt to build a unified right-wing opposition movement in Mexico. Sinarquismo was an opposition movement generated not simply by political priorities in conflict with the revolutionary Cárdenas administration. It was an opposition movement with a culture of its own, embracing symbolism, interpretations of national history, and reverence for movement heroes that all supported a more conservative vision of the role of a state bureaucracy in relation to the Church and local authorities.

Central to the nationalism of the Sinarquista movement was a remarkable fear and loathing of foreign powers, presented as imperialists and hence threats to the Mexican values of community, family, and Catholicism that the Sinarquistas celebrated. With examples from the propaganda of the Sinarquistas and their enemies, this thesis has

examined the strategic uses of specters of foreign tyrants in attacking the political platforms of domestic political opponents. The rhetoric Sinarquistas used to discredit their political opponents, and the rhetoric Sinarquistas' opponents in turn used against them, reveals that associating enemies with foreign interests like those of the Soviet Union, United States, or European fascist powers was an effective strategy in Mexican politics during the fierce contests of post-revolutionary state building. As fevered accusations and paranoid rhetoric from both the UNS and its enemies on the left have revealed, the struggle for national power between the revolutionary left and the Sinarquistas featured reciprocal accusations of opponents' conspiring with dangerous foreign powers. The conspiracy theories and paranoia that polarized political rhetoric in post-revolutionary Mexico highlight for historians that competing political factions within Mexico used discourses of foreign tyrants bent on dominating Mexico, in order to discredit opponents and thereby bolster their own claims to legitimate national power.

Nevertheless, Sinarquistas' emphasis on domestic Mexican concerns like the intrusions of a secular state bureaucracy, as the Sinarquistas mobilized against the PRM, confirms that the ideology animating Sinarquismo was particular to its national historical context. Tales of foreign plots and international conspiracies proved useful in tarnishing political opponents' credibility, but rhetoric should not be confused with reality. Notions of Sinarquistas as conspirators or tools of international fascism reflected the fears of their political enemies, whose prerogatives Sinarquismo challenged – for example, the revolutionary left with its tenuous lock on state power in Mexico especially after the Cárdenas years, and officials in the United States, whose interests in hemispheric hegemony and pliant Latin American allies were threatened by Sinarquista ideologues'

staunch criticisms of US diplomacy and culture. In its efforts to undermine the PRM's legitimacy, Sinarquistas accused Mexico's ruling party of both conspiring with sinister foreign powers and of opening Mexico to the corrupting influences of foreign popular culture. Accusations that opponents were receptive to foreign tyrants, as well as foreign culture, held particular power to damage their credibility. In response to the UNS's propaganda, Mexico's revolutionary left presented Sinarquistas as coconspirators with European fascists, in order to discredit Sinarquista challenges to post-revolutionary policies favored by the left like secular education and land reform. US officials used that same narrative of Sinarquistas as fascist conspirators for their own purposes, *i.e.*, to justify US surveillance of, and opposition to, a political faction that threatened to obstruct the US's hegemonic power in the Americas – an inference bolstered by the disappearance of tales of Sinarquista conspiracies from US discourses after a change in the UNS's tone and ideology diminished its threat to US interests. The rhetoric of foreign enemies, in other words, served the political objectives of a number of factions in both Mexico and the US – political objectives often masked, rather than revealed in a straightforward way, by the espousal of international and nationalistic ideals.

Understanding the discourse and practice of international relations as strategies for powerful factions' pursuits of their own domestic political agendas begins by complicating definitions of the “nation,” to emphasize that the nation is an often arbitrary, always contested concept, embedded in the violence of power struggles and enmeshed in political struggles to achieve power and dominance over enemies. Following Benedict

Anderson's definition of the nation as an “imagined community,”<sup>128</sup> Thongchai Winichakul was one of the first historians to re-theorize geographically mapped nation states as negotiable discursive constructs rooted in power dynamics and inequalities. In his work on Thailand, Winichakul argues that nations took shape not from the natural geographic features of territory but, instead, from the subjectivity and power that underlay geographers’ mapping of physical space in the nineteenth century.<sup>129</sup> This conceptualizing of nations as constructed entities – beginning with Anderson’s foundational *Imagined Communities* (1983) and continuing to influence contemporary scholarship on modern nations – challenged earlier Enlightenment notions like Immanuel Kant’s or Johann Gottfried von Herder’s in the late-eighteenth century, of nation states as naturally arising from physical geography and inhabitants’ linguistic and cultural characteristics, as well as socially harmonious sites of civic negotiation over common interests.<sup>130</sup> As the constructivist approach to nation states in Anderson and Winichakul begins to make clear, the reality of nation states is much bleaker than the Enlightenment theorists supposed. National territories enclose resources that cannot be shared by all; national politics produces opportunities for wielding power over others that cannot be enjoyed by all; the nation state itself encompasses competing and diverse interests, political and economic, that cannot easily be reconciled. The nation is a site of

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<sup>128</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, UK: Verso, 1983).

<sup>129</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

<sup>130</sup> See, for example, Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View” (1784), or Johann Gottfried von Herder, “Materials for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind” (1784).

irreconcilable claims and hence violent disputes, not simply common interests as Kant posited. And as the discursive concept of a “nation” is constructed and negotiable, it is subject to continuous reconstruction and renegotiation by interested factions and can thereby legitimize almost any of the irreconcilable interests it encompasses. The Sinarquistas and the Mexican left each invoked notions of the “nation” to justify their own irreconcilable political agendas, provoking violence and confrontation.

The political and cultural conflicts of the 1930s and 1940s, often expressed through fierce debates about the meaning of the “nation” in Mexico, further bolster the constructivist criticism that nations are neither natural nor harmonious. Rather, the idea of a “nation” is embedded within the contexts of struggles for political power, as “nation” can potentially legitimize political power for any number of claimants with radically disparate agendas. In Mexico after the Revolution, for example, both right-wing Sinarquistas and their more left-wing opponents laid claims to ideas about the nation – invoking nationalist symbolism and appealing to ordinary followers’ patriotic sentiment – in order to support their radically different visions of the relationship between state authority and the Church.

Rather than submerge political disagreements, the nation according to Winichakul serves as a metaphysical site for disagreements and negotiations over “social institutions and practices.”<sup>131</sup> Such a framework persuasively explains the bitter and polarizing politics of power struggles in modern states like post-revolutionary Mexico. Which factions get to wield national political power can depend on successfully claiming to defend properly national “social institutions and practices” – with political enemies’

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<sup>131</sup> Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, 15.



institutions and practices, by contrast, pitting them against the nation. This thesis has addressed an example of just such a bitter contest over “social institutions and practices” in modern Mexico, as left-wing factions after the Revolution, who favored secular education and public land ownership, competed for influence and power against the conservatives who favored an integral role for the Church in national education as well as greater deference for municipal authority and private landholders. Negotiations over the Mexican state’s “social institutions and practices” featured vicious and often paranoid accusations of conspiracies with nefarious outsiders, because these discourses of foreign menaces offered lucrative opportunities for politicians to associate challenges to their authority with the machinations of outsiders. As the exchange of rancor between Sinarquistas and the PRM demonstrates, casting political opponents as sinister agents of a foreign power held particular power to undermine them, in the context of fierce contests over properly national (and dangerously extra-national) “social institutions and practices.” The revolutionary party, with its still-weak hold on power in late-1930s Mexico, plunged into just such a fierce contest with the Sinarquistas, while US observers, themselves interested in Mexican national disputes’ ultimate production of a pliant ally south of the border, echoed the PRM’s accusations to serve their own needs.

A history of discourse and elite politics like this one offers only an incomplete glimpse, however, at the plight of ordinary Mexicans caught in the midst of these elite-waged struggles for national political power. More research grounded in the paradigms of social and cultural history is needed to explain exactly why ordinary people chose to support, or oppose, the Sinarquista challenge to Mexico’s revolutionary party and how ordinary people – both movement insiders and observers from the outside – viewed the

burgeoning Sinarquista movement. Even at the level of elite political history, however, Sinarquismo still merits much more attention in historical scholarship. Emerging as it did on the eve of the revolutionary state's retreat from its signature land and education policies in the 1940s, the Sinarquista movement exposes powerful vestiges of right-wing discontent with the revolutionary party's secularism almost a decade after the Cristero Rebellion; the presence of the Sinarquistas also confirms that the revolutionary party's hegemony in the politics and culture of post-revolutionary Mexico was far from completely achieved in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Investigations of Sinarquismo hold great promise for scholars attempting to explain a longstanding question in the historiography of post-revolutionary Mexico, which is what factors explain the rise of an increasingly powerful, and more conservative, revolutionary state in the years after Cárdenas. This more conservative state came into being just as the Sinarquistas enjoyed maximum power and influence in Mexico, still fulminating about the evils of the revolutionary party even as a change in the party's policies generated opportunities for limited reconciliation.

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