



## *Insurgency, Counter-insurgency and Policing in Centre-West Mexico, 1926–1929: Fighting Cristeros* by Mark Lawrence.

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The Cristero War, a violent confrontation in late 1920s Mexico between Catholic partisans and anticlerical government forces, has drawn the attention of scholars with various specialties. Historians of Mexico have debated how the war fits into the country's national narrative. Historians of Catholicism and the Catholic Church have analyzed the role of the Vatican. Historians of religion in general have studied how Catholic militancy affected patterns of devotion in Mexico. And increasingly, historians of migration (myself included) have considered how the Cristero War changed the politics of the Mexican diaspora. Until now, however, few have attempted a thoroughly military study of the war. This makes Mark Lawrence's new book a most welcome addition to the broader historiography of the conflict.

Lawrence (Univ. of Kent) specializes in war and radicalism in modern Spain and has published studies of the Spanish Civil War and Spain's First Carlist War.<sup>1</sup> Turning now to Mexico, he applies the methodology of new military history, with its focus on social history, to the Cristero War, concentrating on the west-central state of Zacatecas and its surroundings where the most intense fighting took place. To do this, he taps sources from state and municipal archives from Mexico (esp., Zacatecas, Durango, and Jalisco) and London, as well as memoirs, local histories, newspaper articles, and oral histories.

Chapter 1 sketches the history of the conflict and the nature of Cristero forces and the federal army and its rural supporters, the *agraristas*. A distinctive aspect of the war was its irregularity: many Cristeros (and some *agraristas*) were guerrilla fighters. This may account for military historians' lack of interest in the war, since only "conventional and intensive warfare was seen as 'worthy' of study and doctrine" (29). Furthermore, when scholars have studied guerrilla warfare, they have focused on leftist insurgencies, rather than conservative uprisings like that of the Cristeros. Lawrence redresses these imbalances.

Chapter 2 includes a welcome account of the historical development of Cristero militancy. Lawrence recounts the first uprisings in Zacatecas as well as some initial Cristero victories. In early 1926, when the conflict began, Cristeros were poorly armed and led. By the next year, the revolt had consolidated with Jalisco as its center and the famed general "El Catorce" (Victoriano Ramírez) had won a defensive victory (15 Mar. 1927). By then, Lawrence estimates, there were some fifty thousand Cristero fighters (47). But the relative weakness of the federal government in the region meant local elites often wanted "to keep the state at arms' length ... [so that] only when local pro-government elites were overwhelmed did they seek out the Federation" (55).

Chapters 2 and 4 concern the proliferation of violence as the Cristero insurgency gained momentum in west-central Mexico. Lawrence's account of this makes a key contribution to Cristero

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1. Viz., *Spain's First Carlist War, 1833–40* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and *The Spanish Civil Wars: A Comparative History of the First Carlist War and the Conflict of the 1930s* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2017).

scholarship. To this day, devout Roman Catholics revere the Catholic fighters who ultimately lost their battle and cast them as pacifist martyrs in their hagiographies.<sup>2</sup> But in fact, the Cristeros met violence with violence, executing Federal soldiers and conducting bloody raids. They sought revenge on civilians suspected of siding with *agraristas* and *federales*, meting out “assassinations, lynchings and torture” (56). Such tactics bred a “Cristero culture of clandestine behavior” (48) and wrought havoc on generations of civilians who saw their towns burned and sacked.

Lawrence also debunks the persistent myth that Cristero recruitment was entirely voluntary, and its troops willing “soldiers of Christ, or at least decent men” (31). In actuality, many troops were dragooned and economic devastation left others with no choice. In some cases, priests applied moral pressure on Catholics to join the fight. In short, people had various and complex motives for joining the Cristero cause. It was not simply a case of saints and martyrs as Catholic popular culture would have it.

In the last half of the war, when Gen. Enrique Gorostieta took charge of the army, victory seemed a real possibility for the Cristeros. Yet, ultimately, the federal army overcame the rebellion. Chapter 3 recounts developments in this period, especially regarding government military tactics. Notably, these included, after spring 1927, the *federales’ reconcentración*—that is, forcing large numbers of civilians out of Cristero villages to other towns and cities. This collective punishment caused tremendous hardship for civilians, as “roads were clogged with exhausted peasants struggling with chicken-hutches, birdcages, piglets and newborn babies” (65). Food production declined, towns were set afire, and the infant death rate skyrocketed. Yet, at the same time, this collective punishment also fueled resentment and even increased local support for Cristeros.

Ultimately, the federal army overcame the Cristeros by combining reconcentration with a strong cavalry, better access to arms, and aircraft used to wreak “terror on Cristero soldiers and civilians alike” (71). General Gorostieta was killed in May 1929 and that same spring the government put down the Escobarista rebellion, which Cristeros had hoped would overthrow the government. Thereafter, “the Cristeros would face the most concerted Federal counteroffensive of the war” (77). Catholic bishops signed a peace accord (21 June 1929) and the Cristero military was disarmed—for Catholics, a bitter symbol of defeat.

In chapter 4, Lawrence turns to the lived experience of war on the home fronts. He makes good use here of the rich scholarship on the roots of Cristero allegiance; he cites the enduring anti-state culture of indigenous communities, religious fervor, hostility to federal land reform and education, and sheer opportunism. Ultimately, he concentrates on the particular characteristics of the Church in west-central Mexico, noting that the nine states with the highest density of priests per capita “form a near-perfect geography of the Cristero revolt” (93).

Especially interesting is the author’s exploration of the social, political, and economic life of civilians within the “liberated zone”—on the Jalisco-Zacatecas border, which remained under sustained Cristero control. Here, Catholicism was openly practiced and alcohol and dancing were prohibited. Cristeros tried to implement mutualist societies, cheap credit, and a version of land reform; since they intensely opposed any threats to private property, these were not widely successful. There were, however, exceptions: Lawrence tells the fascinating tale of Bertie Johnson, a British owner of a 147,000-acre hacienda in Zacatecas that was taken over by Cristeros. When he appealed to the federal government and its *agraristas* for help, they refused, being “constitutionally opposed to the theory of large land holdings and ... usually not well affected towards foreign-

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2. E.g., *For Greater Glory: The True Story of Cristiada*, dir. Dean Wright (NewLand Films, 2012).

ers” (95). Within the liberated zone, residents paid a staggering 50-percent tax rate meant to help fund the war. In short, the liberated zone was no Catholic utopia for its residents.

Apart from underfunding, Cristero militants lacked arms—“always the weakest link on a ... home front devoid of large-scale industry or secure ways of importing arms” (99). One wishes Lawrence had expanded his account to include more on arms smuggling, which was essential to Cristero militants and involved a network of Catholic partisans across Mexico as well as the logistical and financial aid of their US supporters.

Chapter 5 concerns the widespread effects of the Cristero war on noncombatants outside Cristero-held areas. Municipal budgets were badly strained in Zacatecas and other center-west states, especially those hosting *reconcentrados*. Civil vs. military tensions stoked conflict between soldiers and local police. The author briefly analyzes gender issues, examining both female militancy and violence against women; he notes that Cristero literature downplays women’s agency, often portraying them as self-abnegating and even as martyrs (122).

Lawrence investigates how federal anticlericalism was enacted on the ground, finding varying degrees of toleration of religion; in some places, people were killed for going to mass; in others, socialist schools were ransacked. Lawrence astutely observes that official anticlericalism was hard even for some *agraristas* to accept. In a 99-percent Catholic country, it is unsurprising that a type of “agrarista cultural Catholicism” thrived (117).

Regardless of such regional variations in religiosity and the lived experience of the war, “on a daily level the presence of troops disturbed local ways of life in ways which felt like an occupation” (134). For decades,

The Cristero War reverberated not just across the front lines of the centre-west but also across the government-held towns, cities and villages far from the scene of fighting. The civilian experience in Zacatecas supports the recent trend finding Mexico’s post-revolutionary demilitarization process to have been longer and more partial than was claimed by historians writing at the peak of the PRIista ascendancy (136).

The signing of the peace accords in 1929 did not end the conflict. The Second Cristero War or *La Segunda* uprisings erupted and continued through the 1930s. Lawrence notes that a form of “cultural Cristiada persisted after 1940” (146) and helped shape Mexico’s main conservative political party, the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional). More recently, the Catholic Church has reinvigorated the Cristero legacy by canonizing twenty-five martyrs of the Cristero war, fourteen of whom hailed from Jalisco.

In concluding, Mark Lawrence reminds us of the persistence of local memory in Zacatecas, with its “flourishing of streets and statues dedicated to such Catholic counter-symbols as Iturbide and the absence of the same for the revolutionary symbol of Benito Juárez” (140). His much needed military analysis of the Cristero War will engage and instruct scholars of west-central Mexico as well as military historians trying to understand why a seemingly minor religious war still resonates to this day.