

Mexico and the Spanish Republic. 1931-1939

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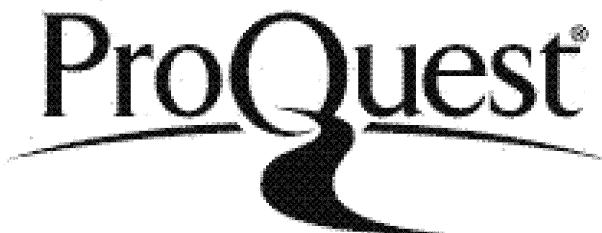


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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Mexico's relationship with the Second Spanish Republic, and analyses the rationale behind the Lázaro Cárdenas government's (1934-1940) decision to provide military, diplomatic and moral support to the Republic during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). The Mexican government sent arms and ammunition to Spain when other nations refused to do so, constrained by the so-called Non-Intervention Pact. Moreover, Mexican diplomats organised a covert network to buy arms in third countries and then re-direct them to Spain. Mexico also lent the Spanish Republic its diplomatic backing at the League of Nations, where its delegates defended the Republican cause and denounced both the Axis intervention and the democracies' inaction. The thesis also interprets the repercussions that such policy had on internal Mexican politics, and for Mexico's international position, most particularly with regards to the United States. The Spanish War generated a backlash in Mexico, with the growth of a domestic Right, heavily influenced by European Fascism and Spanish Falangism. Conversely, Cárdenas' position concerning Spain ultimately afforded his government the backing of the Roosevelt administration in the final showdown with that Rightist opposition. Extensive reference is made to primary sources, mainly diplomatic documentation and newspaper reports of the period.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines how the Mexican Government pursued its national interest within an international background that drifted toward a large-scale international war. It is a study of the correlation between Mexico's internal politics and the transformations experienced by the international context between 1936 and 1939. The thesis attempts to analyse a complex picture of domestic-international interaction within the framework of the specific case of the Mexican-Spanish bilateral relationship before, during, and immediately after the Spanish Civil War. The study presumes that far from being an ideological or romantic stance, Mexican support for the Republic represented a conscious effort that resulted in an increase of Mexico's economic and political autonomy amidst the sweeping conflict between the fascist, communist and liberal doctrines of the time. This solidarity also represented the opportunity for the Mexican revolutionary regime to confront a rising Right in the home front, which, emboldened by Spanish events, threatened to replicate them in Mexico. Moreover, Spain also afforded the Mexican revolutionary regime the opportunity to challenge the Right in its own terms on a "cultural struggle" for the hearts and minds of the Mexican people.¹ The Mexican Right had historically usurped for itself the image of Spain through the manipulation of the Hispanista discourse.² The emergence of a "new" Spain after 1931 represented in that sense a vindication of the Mexican Revolution.

Shortly after the Spanish Civil War started the government of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) declared its solidarity with the beleaguered Spanish Republic and pledged official support to its cause. Throughout the conflict, Mexico almost alone

¹ John Sherman, *The Mexican Right. The End of Revolutionary Reform, 1929-1940* Westport, Conn., Praeger, 1997. pp.87-98.

² Hispanismo, a doctrine, which combines the imperial ideas of Charles V's Spain with the assumption of a "mother" culture developed by the historian Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo (1856-1912). Its main tenet proclaims the existence of a supposed "community" or transatlantic race that bonds all nations, which at some point were ruled by the Spanish crown. For an analysis of the links between Mexican Conservatives and Hispanismo see Ricardo Pérez Monfort, *Hispanismo y Falange. Los sueños imperiales de la dercha española*. México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992.

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among nations -and, actually in opposition to the major powers of the time- gave its unrelenting support in every imaginable way to the Loyalists.

Weeks after Franco mutinied, Cárdenas ordered his Minister of War to send a freight of 20,000 rifles and 20 million pieces of ammunition. Various other consignments of arms followed all through the hostilities. When the Mexican arms industry proved insufficient to meet Republican needs, Cárdenas instructed his diplomatic agents to serve as intermediaries in arms purchases conducted by Spain in third countries.

The Mexican President also ordered Mexican representatives in the League of Nations to undertake the diplomatic defence of the Republic against the Non Intervention Pact imposed by the great powers. When defeat came for the Republic and hundreds of thousands of refugees poured out of Spain, Mexico welcomed to its own territory as many exiles as was possible.³ It was on Mexican soil that a Republican government-in exile was established and, for almost forty years Mexico refused to recognise Franco's regime, while acknowledging the government in exile as the true government of Spain.

This extraordinary episode of Mexican diplomatic history constitutes, in diverse ways, a unique event. Firstly, because it represented an unprecedented attempt by a nation deemed peripheral and subordinate to intervene in affairs beyond its geographical scope, in direct confrontation with the major powers of the time. Furthermore, because Mexico had seldom, if ever, engaged in international affairs and rather was regarded by contemporary observers to be little more than the American "backyard," safely placed under that country's sphere of influence. Mexican links with the outside world had been mostly limited to resisting American intervention in its own domestic affairs. In 1913, the U.S. occupied the port of Veracruz, while in 1916 following an incursion into an American border town by Villa, a 10,000 "punitive expedition," led by General Pershing penetrated Mexican territory. For the next 13 years, the revolutionary governments resisted American pressures and threats of military action. Furthermore, both the turmoil generated by

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the Revolution as well as the First World War had the effect of cutting Mexico off from its European links.

In 1931, thanks to Spanish sponsorship, Mexico was admitted to the League of Nations. This forum gave Mexico the chance of making her voice heard beyond the realm of American dominance, that is the Pan-American conference. From this platform, Mexico would be able to carry out an active foreign policy, advancing its agenda of a fairer international order, and even to play a part proportionate to her size in international “power politics.”

In a quiet and unobtrusive way Mexico under Cárdenas came to broaden her horizon to see and be seen beyond and apart from the overshadowing “Giant of the North” as the United States is called in the southern republics. Cárdenas did not hesitate to raise his voice in world affairs, for he felt that the twenty million people for whom he spoke had a right to be heard.⁴

In Geneva, Mexico raised its voice against Japanese aggression in Manchuria and opposed the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, on legal and juridical grounds. In the Spanish case, this doctrinal outlook went further, being also accompanied by tangible aid in the form of arms, raw materials and money. The spectacle of a lesser nation asserting its rights had few, if any, parallels at the time and, in fact, proved too much for 1930’s totalitarian powers, and for European right-wingers, which accused Mexico of meddling in European affairs.⁵ This may well be defined as an attempt to play power politics, in the sense of trying to influence events rather than witnessing them passively. In this sense, Cárdenas’ aid to the Republic may be regarded as inaugurating an active foreign policy for Mexico. As a contemporary observer commented at the time:

³ Ultimately, Mexico took in about thirty thousand refugees between 1937 and 1945. Patricia Fagen *Exiles and Citizens: Spanish Republicans in Mexico* Austin, University of Texas Press, 1973, pp. 38-39

⁴ William Cameron, Townsend, *Lázaro Cárdenas. Mexican Democrat* George Ann Arbor, Michigan, Wahr Publishing Co., 1952 p.184

⁵ “By covering up illegal trafficking for the Communists, Mexico is disturbing European Peace”. Italian Ambassador to London, Dino Grandi, in *Giornale di Italia*, March 24, 1937. p.1 See also *Popolo di Italia* and *Il Messaggero*, same date “Mexico, a country which has notoriously become the main agent of Soviet and French contraband of war materials and volunteers to Spain, thus overtly favouring Red Anarchy”. See also Evelyn Waugh’s *Robbery Under Law. The Mexican Object-Lesson*. London, Chapham & Hall, 1939. Passim.

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Mexico's foreign policy openly opposed conservative elements throughout the world for it was literally the most aggressive liberal diplomacy of its era.⁶

Few allusions have been made to the Mexican contribution to the struggling Republic,⁷ while entire books have been devoted to Soviet involvement in the Spanish conflict—as well as its intervention in the Republican camp's infighting.⁸ The very intensity and continuity of Mexican aid to the Republic, well to the end of the war, makes this omission at best, puzzling.

With regard to the existing literature, it must be said that while an enormous amount of work has been devoted to the subject of the Spanish exiles in Mexico, scant reference has been made to the role played by the Lázaro Cárdenas administration (1934-1940) in assisting the Azaña government in its war effort. The exceptions to this are Louis Elwyn Smith's study *Mexico and the Spanish Republicans*, published in 1955, and T.G. Powell's *Mexico and the Spanish Civil War*, published in 1981. Still, these studies display considerable limitations.

Smith's book is a precursor. It represents the first attempt to make a rigorous narrative of the Mexican response to the Civil War. Before that, there existed a number of partisan memoirs or recollections, without any pretension to objectivity, and with all the shortcomings of expiation or propaganda, written either by Republicans or Francoists. Nonetheless, having been written more than forty years ago, it naturally seems outdated. Not only have new sources surfaced, but also Smith's work, for all of its virtues, owing to its proximity to the subject, lacked the necessary historical hindsight.

Powell's work suffers from a blatant anti-Cárdenas bias that often smacks not only of Cold War anti-communism, making the book more of a partisan allegation than an academic paper, but also of a hasty research which involved a shallow review

⁶ Betty Kirk, *Covering the Mexican Front. The Battle of Europe vs. America*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 1942. 367 pp.

⁷ Raymond Carr, *The Spanish Tragedy*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson pp. 374-375 ; Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*. London, Penguin Books, 1986.

⁸ See for example David Cattell, *Soviet Diplomacy and the Spanish Civil War*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1957, or Noam Chomsky, "Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship" in *American Power and the New Mandarins*. New York, Random House, 1967.

of secondary sources. Furthermore, the book is completely outdated. Finally, Powell tries to belittle Mexican aid to the Republic as a myth created by the Mexican Revolutionary regime to legitimise itself as democratic. The arguments used for that purpose lack seriousness and may be easily disregarded as a damning evidence of the author's bigoted beliefs or his personal aversions.⁹

More strangely, perhaps, the topic has been barely studied by Spanish and Mexican academics, in spite of the obvious relevance to each country's national and international histories. Most Mexican works on the subject have been bachelor dissertations for Law or Diplomatic Schools. These have focused chiefly on the international legal aspects of Mexican diplomacy concerning the war, or on the country's presence at the League of Nations.¹⁰ A notable exception to this is José Antonio Matesanz's volume *México ante la República Española*,¹¹ which, as its subtitle implies, is a valuable collection of documents that cover almost five decades. This work is highly useful as a researcher's tool but remains far from being a thorough account of the specific episode.

The most oft-repeated explanation of Mexico's conduct towards the Republic may be summarized in Hugh Thomas' words:

The Mexican government was from the start an ardent supporter of the Spanish Republic, as might be expected from a country whose Constitution had itself derived from a rising against clerical and aristocratic privilege.¹²

For Ángel Viñas too, Mexico's "determined aid" to Spain was a natural consequence of the ideological parallelism between both regimes, but also a means to

⁹ Thus, for instance, Powell asserts: "one of many ironies involved in Mexico's unshakable support for the Spanish Republic was that it forced the anti-intellectual, *macho* Cárdenas into alliance with cerebral, effeminate Manuel Azafia, a man whose type he heartily detested; in terms of temperament, Cárdenas had much more in common with General Franco than with the Republican Head of State" op. cit. p.13.

¹⁰ See José Antonio Gómez Cangas, El caso México- España. México, Escuela Nacional de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales UNAM, 1960. Omar Martínez Legorreta, Actuación de México en la Liga de las Naciones: El Caso de España. México, Escuela Nacional de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, UNAM, 1962; Laura Elena Farías Peraldi, La actitud de México ante las agresiones fascistas. México, FCPyS, UNAM. 1966.; Fernando Aramburu Santa Cruz, Actitud del gobierno de México en el caso de España. México, Escuela Libre de Derecho, 1963.

¹¹ Antología de Documentos. 1931-1977. México, Centro Republicano Español de México, 1978.

¹² Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1965. p.304.

enhance its own international position.¹³ Thus it served the double purpose of aiding a congenial government in its direst hour of need, while persuading the Great Powers (namely the U.S.) to support the imperative of a more equitable international system that would put an end to imperialist aggression.

Still, Cárdenas' decision to assist the Republic has yet to be plausibly explained. Unlike the alliance between workers and the government, the nationalization of oil or the vast land distribution, it has never been considered one of Cardenismo's finest hours. At worse it has been deemed irrational and groundless, attributable in any case to Cárdenas' sole will and to the Constitutional faculty bestowed upon the president to determine the course of Mexican foreign policy.¹⁴ This contrasts sharply with his decision to bring in a sizable exile community, mainly to academia, which has been unanimously eulogized.¹⁵

Clearly, a historiographical void needs to be filled. This in itself justifies the need to undertake such research. Moreover, Cárdenas' motives for supporting the Republic are far from clear. At first sight, it seems perplexing that Cárdenas had knowingly embarked a poor country with such gross limitations into the murky waters of a transcontinental conflict. His administration has come to be best known through the nationalization of American and British oil interests undertaken in 1938. Before the expropriation, the Mexican government had been labelled as communistic or heading towards Bolshevism. When the companies tried to organize a boycott against the newly nationalized oil concern, Mexico shifted exports to Germany, Italy and Japan. Thenceforth, the charge most often levelled against his regime was of being shifting towards fascism.¹⁶ This reveals in itself the complexity of *Cardenismo* and the way it defies casual conceptualisation

¹³ Ángel Viñas, *La guerra civil española 50 años después*. Barcelona, Editorial Labor, 1985. pp.140-142.

¹⁴ Constitución Política de México, Article 89 paragraphs III, VIII and X and Archivo Histórico Diplomático Mexicano. *Méjico y España: solidaridad y asilo político. 1936-1942*. p.11.

¹⁵ See, for example, J. B. Trend *Mexico. A New Spain with Old Friends*. Cambridge, University Press, 1941. Patricia Fagen *Exiles and Citizens. Spanish Republicans in Mexico*. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1973. Or José Alameda, et al., *El exilio español en México, 1939-82*. México, FCE/Save, 1982.

¹⁶ See Evelyn Waugh, *Robbery Under Law The Mexican Object-Lesson*, London, Chapman and Hall 1939. pp. 42 and 283-286. Franz L. Kluckhohn *The Mexican Challenge*. New York, Doubleday, 1939.

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No account of *Cardenismo* may be complete if it fails to acknowledge Mexican involvement in the Spanish Civil War. That episode gave the regime an international dimension that together with the staunch diplomatic defence it undertook of Austria, Ethiopia, Czechoslovakia and Finland bestowed the regime with an international prestige, which at the time was clearly unmatched.

The question naturally arises as to what may have led Cárdenas to engage a weak country in an international adventure in a far off context, without an internal consensus behind his decision and with no apparent benefit for its national interest. Indeed, Mexican support for the Republic was far from unanimous. Apart from the President, the governmental bureaucracy, trade unions and the Mexican Communist Party, the Republican cause had few followers. The Mexican upper and middle class were, in the main, pro-Franco, and later, pro-Axis. This had to do more with an ingrained bias among these sectors towards the Hispanista ideal, as well as to a profound anti-Americanism, rather than to a real sympathy for the Nazi creed.

Many reasons have been advanced to justify or explain this decision. The official line of the time held that Mexico was repaying in such manner its debt to Spain after this country had built several vessels for the Mexican Navy, and that it was its duty to assist a friendly and legitimate government with which it had relations, after it had required assistance.¹⁷ In such fashion, the Mexican government could defend domestically the shipments as part of a commercial transaction; a measure to which not even Right wing malcontents could object. On the other hand, the fact that Mexico was paid for the equipment it shipped to Spain, a point raised by Leftist critics, does nothing to lessen the sincerity of Cárdenas' stand. Other nations would not ship weapons to Loyalist Spain even for money. While the Soviet Union required Spain to pay for the arms in gold, at the exchange rate set by the Russians, Mexico accepted payment in Spanish currency at the prevailing international rate.¹⁸

The official line ever since has rested on legalistic and rhetorical considerations such as Mexico's allegiance to international law and to the traditional principles of Mexican diplomacy that prescribe respect for national sovereignty and self-

¹⁷*El Nacional*, September 7, 1936.

determination.¹⁹ This of course, has allowed the official party to legitimate its position as democratic and progressive. Accordingly, it advanced a homegrown purpose of self-righteousness. Yet, these very principles have been used by Cárdenas' detractors to dismiss his policy towards Spain as a breach of the Estrada Doctrine,²⁰ a precept that has determined much of Mexican foreign policy since 1930.

For the Mexican Right, Cárdenas' staunch support for the Republic was the ultimate proof of his sinister association with the "Jewish-Masonic-Communist conspiracy".²¹ Furthermore, both Mexican and Spanish conservatives have coincided in their accusation that the aid to the Republic was merely a sinister ploy of the Mexican government to seize the treasury of *El Vida*. For Mexican historian, José Fuentes Mares, quoting the President himself, what really motivated Cárdenas was both "the fact that Spaniards belong to our race" and that the Republic "represented the trend towards economic and social emancipation of the Spanish people."²² Other authors have tried to explain his attitude hagiographically as part of his romanticism and idealism. Of course, such diatribes or eulogies have scarcely contributed to clarify the real motives behind such a complex decision. If anything, these versions only show how much passion and debate the decision has generated.

¹⁸ Lois E Smith, *Mexico and the Spanish Republicans* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955, p.190.

¹⁹ See, for example, Alberto Enríquez, (compiler) *México y España: solidaridad y asilo. 1936-1942*. México, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1990.

²⁰ The Estrada Doctrine of September 23, 1930, A communiqué issued by the then Foreign Minister, Genaro Estrada, has come to constitute the milestone of Mexican Foreign Policy. It stated literally: "It is a well known fact that Mexico has endured, as few countries have, the consequences of a doctrine which leaves to the discretion of foreign countries the capacity of pronouncing themselves over the legitimacy or the illegitimacy of another regime.. This generates situations by which the legal capacity and national ascendancy of governments and authorities seems to be subordinated to the opinion of strangers. The doctrine of recognition has been applied since the Great War, particularly to countries of the American continent... Mexico does not take a stand on granting recognition, because it considers this to be a denigrating practice, which apart from damaging the sovereignty of other nations, puts them in a position where other governments can qualify their internal affairs. These governments, in fact, assume a position of criticism, when they decide, favourably or unfavourably, on the legal capacity of a foreign government. Therefore, the Mexican government limits its practice to maintaining or withdrawing its diplomatic agents, when it considers it pertinent and to continue accepting the diplomatic agents of the nations accredited in Mexico, without qualifying neither hastily nor *a posteriori*, the right of foreign nations to accept, maintain or replace their governments or authorities". See *El Universal*, September 28, 1930. For an analysis of the Estrada Doctrine see, among others, Daniel Cosío Villegas, *Ensayos y notas* Volume 2. México, Editorial Hermes, 1966.

²¹ Alfonso Taracena, *La revolución desvirtuada*, Vol. V, Mexico Costa-Amic, 1968. See also Salvador Abascal, *Lázaro Cárdenas. Presidente Comunista*, México, Editorial Tradición, 1988. and Carlos Alvear Acevedo, *Lázaro Cárdenas: El Hombre y el Mito*. México, Editorial Jus, 1961.

²² José Fuentes Mares, *Historia de un conflicto. El tesoro del Vida*. Madrid, CVS Ediciones, 1975, pp. 163-165.

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Other, more scholarly approaches, particularly originating from the American academia, have too easily dismissed Cárdenas diplomatic achievements by rejecting them wholesale as “nationalistic mythology” or “boastful patriotism.”²³

Internal factors surely weighed considerably. In any case Mexican official support of Madrid came in the face of a spectacular growth of the Conservative opposition, no doubt driven by Cárdenas’ radical programme itself. From 1929 onwards, the Mexican regime faced the mounting challenge of a radical Right, first religious, and then secular. The rise of fascism in the world scene compounded this threat and forced the adoption of new strategies both internally and externally to confront the risks posed by a burgeoning Rightist opposition. The Spanish war reverberated deeply in Mexican politics encouraging domestic pro-fascist forces to attempt exploiting the social and political tensions within the Mexican State. On the external front this demanded the diversification of links in order to secure collective security.

This research aims to examine the rationale behind Mexico’s sustained support for the Republic, both with material aid and in the diplomatic front at the League of Nations. It attempts to demonstrate how, far from being a symbolic aid resulting from ideological affinity, it served Mexican national interest, and how, in that sense it was expedient to domestic necessities. Contrary to what has been previously believed, Mexican foreign policy of the time was deeply interconnected with the internal agenda.

In 1936, the Cárdenas administration, not yet consolidated after the showdown with former strongman Calles, feared a rightist coup. Later, when the Republic’s fortune ailed, Cárdenas dreaded that a Francoist victory might arouse his Rightist enemies to coalesce in a similar Fascist organisation such as Falange, or even, to try an equivalent insurrection.²⁴ Worse still, Cárdenas feared that such moves might give

²³ For examples of such patronizing approach see, Thomas G. Powell, *op cit.* or Mark Falcoff and Frederick Pike, *The Spanish Civil War. American Hemispheric Perspectives*. Lincoln, Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 1982.

²⁴ “A victory of Franco might precipitate an immediate and powerful onslaught against the revolutionary forces in Mexico. By aiding Spain, the Mexican government is not only siding with legality, justice and the Mexican popular causes, but it also furthers its own cause in the forefront that is being disputed in the Peninsula. Accordingly, the government presided by Franco may not be for us, even if it wins, anything else but the seditious and historical enemy” The Spanish Institutions were

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a pretext for American abandonment of the Good Neighbour policy and set the ground for renewed American interventionism. New evidence has shown that American concern with Fascist activities in Mexico had led the U.S. to consider the possibility of repudiating the Good Neighbour policy and to intervene militarily in Mexico with the aim of preventing the Axis from doing so.²⁵

While the prospect of a Falangist attempt to set up a puppet state in Mexico or an outright protectorate may now seem grossly exaggerated or even preposterous it was a serious concern of both the Mexican government and the U.S. intelligence. American archives, several articles in specialised press and books of the era attest to this.²⁶ The entrepreneurs, the discontented middle classes and even large sectors of the peasantry and the working class, which had been affected by Cárdenas radical agenda, overtly supported the Axis, rather out of sheer anti-Americanism than from real identification with the Nazi ideology. Francoism, with its appeal to Catholicism, family and tradition represented an even greater danger to the revolutionary regime than Nazism, for the masses could more easily relate to it, due to age-old cultural parallelisms between Mexico and Spain. As a contemporary commentator noted:

Franco's Hispanism is nothing more than Spanish fascism adapted to Latin American consumption. It is Creole Nazism.²⁷

These apprehensions intensified when, at the victory procession of May 19, 1939, in Madrid, General Franco, at the head of 250, 000 Italian, German, and Spanish soldiers, appeared surrounded by the banners of the Spanish conquistadors of America. It shall be remembered that point 3 of the Falange bluntly stated:

We have a will of Empire. We affirm that the historical plenitude of Spain is the Empire. We demand for Spain a pre-eminent position in Europe. We do

defended by the People. Had the Government armed them, no town would had fallen to the Military. However, the Spanish War will not end with the Triumph of Franco or the Republic, but with an International Conflagration. Confidential Report from the Mexican Ambassador to Madrid, Ramón P. De Negri to the Foreign Minister. AHSRE, exp. III-765-1 (4th section).

²⁵ See María Emilia Paz, *Strategy, Security and Spies. Mexico and the U.S. as Allies in World War II* University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p.15.

²⁶ National Archives of the United States (NAUS.) RG 59, Box 3960, 812.00/32033-1/5ff . "Spanish Government's Influence in the Mexican Presidential Election of 1940." 1941. For literary approaches see, for instance, Carleton Beals, "Totalitarian Inroads in Latin America" in *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 17 No. 1, October 1938 pp. 78-90 or Frank Kluckhohn, *The Mexican Challenge* New York, Doubleday, 1939. pp. 138-142.

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not bear international isolation or foreign interference. With regard to Spanish America, we shall set towards cultural, economical and political unification. Spain asserts its condition as spiritual axis of the Hispanic world.

Let us, in that sense, recall also several pronouncements made by various Francoist leaders after the Civil War about Spain's "destiny in the universal," to understand how justified were Mexican official concerns.²⁸ Thus, for instance, José María Pemartin, National Chief of University and Secondary Education of the Franco regime, in praising the magnificence of the German National Socialist movement, declared that one of the imperatives of Spanish existence was:

To extend and expand our political jurisdiction, above all, over the South American countries, of Hispanic soul and language.

In similar vein, Julián María Rubio, President of the University of Valladolid, in an article, which appeared in the March 1939 issue of the Francoist magazine *Spain*, published in the United States said:

Nationalist Spain is linked to Latin America by a triple bond: the past, the present, and the future. Because we want to triumph and conquer in our war, in order to share our victory with our brothers across the Atlantic, and if necessary to give it to them, so they may be saved.

Marshall Goering made a more alarming statement on the eve of Franco's victory, when he declared to the *Nationale Zeitung* of Essen:

Spain is the key question for the two continents. The victory of Franco decides between chaos and reconstruction in the two hemispheres. His final victory alone can preserve for Ibero-American countries their true Spanish culture and tradition. If these are lost, then the American continent will be more or less surrendered to the influences of the Yankees and the Muscovites, who march arm in arm, especially in the New World.²⁹

²⁷ F. Carmona Nenclares "Hispanismo e Hispanidad," in *Cuadernos Americanos*, May-June, 1942.

²⁸ Eduardo González Callejas and Fredes Limón, *La Hispanidad como instrumento de combate. Raza e Imperio en la prensa franquista*. Madrid, CSIC, 1988.

²⁹ Reproduced through cable by the *Chicago Daily News*, February 18, 1939.

As we now know, Spain was too weak, Mexico too far away. American industrial and military might would have made it highly difficult, or even impossible, for those aspirations to be realised. Yet we have the benefit of hindsight, and in 1939 no one could have thought that Spain would stay out of the Axis and remain first as neutral, then as non-belligerent for the duration of war. What would have happened had Franco entered into an alliance with Hitler? This has been a subject of much speculation, particularly concerning his ambitions over France's North African possessions, yet scant attention has been paid to his Spanish American designs. It is not our aim to attempt counterfactual analysis, yet these factors must be taken into account if we are to understand Cárdenas' motives.

Although many Mexican academics have tried to minimize Fascist involvement in indigenous right-wing organisations and conspiracies,³⁰ new evidence shows that Francoist Spain did send secret agents to Mexico during the 1940 election to assist Almazán's camp and to destabilize Cárdenas' succession, and that Almazán himself sought to emulate Franco, for whom he declared open admiration.³¹ Equally, recent scholarly works have revealed that such designs existed indeed and were not the product of the febrile imagination of the sensationalist press.³² That the threat was sufficiently feasible as to raise American concerns may be inferred by Roosevelt's own words:

The next perfectly obvious step, which Brother Hitler suggested in his speech yesterday (January 30, 1939), would be Central and South America.
(...) These are things you ought to regard. How far is it from Yucatan to New Orleans or Houston? How far from Tampico to St. Louis or Kansas City? How far? Now do not say this is chimerical. Would any of you have said six years ago when this man Hitler came into control (...) that Germany would

³⁰ See, for example, Carlos Martínez Assad, *Los rebeldes vencidos. Cedillo contra el Estado Cardenista*. México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990 or Brigida Von Mentz, et al, *Los empresarios alemanes, el Tercer Reich y la oposición de derechas a Cárdenas*. 2 volumes. México, CIESAS, 1988.

³¹ Informe del Servicio de Inteligencia sobre México, septiembre de 1939, in Fundación Nacional Francisco Franco, *Documentos inéditos para la historia del Generalísimo Franco*. Volume 1, Burgos 1992 pp. 588-602. See also Friedrich E. Schuler, *Mexico Between Hitler and Roosevelt. Mexican Foreign Relations in the Age of Lázaro Cárdenas 1934-1940*. Albuquerque, The University of New Mexico Press, 1998. pp. 76-77.

³² KlausVolland, *Das Dritte Reich und Mexiko*. Frankfurt, Lang, 1987 or Leslie Rout and John Bratzel, *The Shadow War: German Espionage and U.S. Counterespionage in Latin America during World War II*. Washington: Greenwood Press, 1986.

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dominate Europe, completely and absolutely? That is why we cannot afford to sit here and say it is a pipe dream. It is the gradual encirclement of the United States by the removal of its first lines of defence.³³

At any rate, the decision to assist the Republic was not an automatic one. It certainly was not a personal decision. The existence of a strong presidentialism as main feature of the Mexican political system, as well as the constitutional provisions that confer ample powers to the Executive concerning foreign policy have allowed for such versions to gain credence.

Like the Republican experiment, Cardenismo was a radical attempt at social transformation in an era characterised by major upheavals and considerable political experimentation. The reforms brought about a staunch opposition from the propertied classes, which in its turn gave rise to a proliferation of right wing organizations. These groups adopted a vociferous stance that presaged a civil struggle akin to that, which was taking place in Spain.

Thus, in that sense Spanish events produced a backlash in Mexican domestic politics, influencing its course more deeply than had previously been thought. In fact, the Generals' rebellion in Spain provided the necessary focal point for the hitherto fragmented rightist opposition to converge. The emergence and spectacular growth of the Unión Nacional Sinarquista during the Civil War years bears witness to this influence. Moreover, the appearance of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), Mexico's foremost Conservative party, took place also under the appeal of Franco's rebellion.

In this sense, this thesis' principal hypothesis is that Cárdenas aided the Republic in order to challenge the Mexican Right and to offset any possibility of it attempting a similar uprising. Thus should be read Cárdenas recurring line that 'by defending Spain we are defending Mexico'. His insistence on the Republic's right to defend itself was a call to the foreign powers and especially to the U.S. to support his government and forestall a repetition of Spanish events in Mexico.

³³ Conference, Jan 31, 1939. Quoted in Thomas H. Greer, *What Roosevelt Thought. The Social and Political Ideas of Franklin D. Roosevelt*. Michigan, State University Press, 1958, pp. 181-182.

In the end it would be Roosevelt's assistance to Cárdenas that prevented a Rightist insurrection in Mexico. Yet, this fell short of supporting the continuation of his policies. The price that Cárdenas had to pay in order to guarantee the survival of the regime was to be a shift to a more conservative position.

In the jigsaw of the Mexican foreign policy of the 1930s there are several missing pieces. If Roosevelt's Good Neighbour Policy helps us to understand the increased autonomy enjoyed by the Cárdenas government to carry out the oil nationalization, it does not clarify in any way American tolerance or even assent for Mexico's support of the Spanish Republic. Let us remember that not only did Roosevelt reject the League of Nations in 1932 as inefficient, but also that under his second government a Law of Neutrality was passed in 1937.³⁴ It is true that this occurred during a particular international conjuncture when America was abandoning its isolationism, facilitating Cárdenas' espousal of a firm nationalist stance. As the World War approached the USA tolerated a dissident policy in Mexico so as to contribute to the internal stability of that country, a stability that suited American national interest.

Another peculiarity worth noticing is that Mexico and the USSR—the only countries that supported the Republic—had no diplomatic links all through the Spanish Civil War. During the 1920s both revolutionary regimes had effected a rapprochement that led them to the establishment of diplomatic links—the first Soviet embassy in the Western Hemisphere opened in 1924.³⁵ The growing identification between revolution and communism after 1917 made the Mexican Revolution extremely vulnerable to attacks by the American press of flirtations with Bolshevism. This did not prevent Mexican diplomats at the League of Nations from coordinating their efforts at defending Spain with those of the Soviet delegation headed by Maxim Litvinov.³⁶ These peculiarities need further clarification.

³⁴ Charles A Beard, *American Foreign Policy in the Making 1932-1940. A Study in Responsibilities*. Yale, University Press, 1946 pp. 178-180.

³⁵ Let us also remember from that episode that Alexandra Kollontai was appointed as the first woman minister ever in the annals of diplomatic history.

³⁶ Report of the Sixth Commission formulated by Manuel Tello at the 18th Assembly of the League of Nations, October 1937, Exp. III-488-2 Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive AHSRE, Exp. III-170-33; III-491-6.

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On the other hand, a cross chronology of Cardenismo and the Spanish process reveals at first glance a surprising coincidence between the milestones of Cardenismo and the diverse stages of the Spanish process. Cárdenas came into power shortly after the Asturian October Revolution. His final riddance of the tutelage of Calles came shortly before the uprising of the Moroccan garrisons. The expropriation of oil, which marked the zenith of his government, took place at the time of the failed Ebro offensive. After this radical measure, the experiment ended and Cárdenas veered course towards greater moderation. Accordingly the choice of Ávila Camacho over Múgica as his successor was simultaneous with the defeat of the Republic. A relation of events may be thus inferred. This thesis aims to address and analyse the interplay of these events from the Mexican perspective in greater detail.

This research also aims to analyse the complex frame of domestic-international interaction of Cardenismo and the way it defies facile stereotypes of dependency. Mexico was not a Third World power meekly resigned to American hegemony. Quite the contrary; the Cárdenas administration seized every opportunity the international context provided to serve the national interest and advance its agenda through the inter war crisis and exploit the contradictions of the Great Powers for its own benefit.

Secondly, this research is also an account of the way the Spanish Civil War resonated in Mexican events and determined the subsequent course of the Mexican Revolution, that is the interplay between domestic affairs and Spanish events. Throughout the text the extent to which Mexican conservatives were galvanized following Franco's successive victories will become evident, and how the then young Mexican revolutionary regime came to link its own survival to that of the struggling Republic.

The dynamics between Cardenismo and the Spanish Civil War, may be seen through the text in a series of issues such as propaganda, Church-State relations, educational policy, the military, rebellions, trade unionism, land reform and domestic politics altogether. From a theoretical outlook the paper relates to foreign policy analysis. This orientation focuses on how and why decision makers behave the way they do. Thus the identification of the intellectual, psychological, and institutional

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factors that affect the reasoning process by which leaders arrive at decisions is the central analytic element of this thesis.

This is also a study of how the Spanish case became a source of national pride and legitimacy for the Revolutionary regime and how it set a precedent for Mexican foreign policy, at least until 1989, when the signing of NAFTA took President Salinas de Gortari to adopt a more ‘pragmatic’ stance in international relations.

Finally, this thesis attempts to determine if the impact of the Spanish Civil War in Mexico had any bearing on the transformation of the ruling PNR into the PRM, the denial of the vote to women in 1937 and in the outcome of the 1940 presidential election.

The research is organised into 7 chapters. The first chapter will provide an overview of Spanish-Mexican relations from independence to 1931. The second chapter will deal with the Spanish-Mexican relations prior to the Civil War. Relations between the two countries had been dwindling into irrelevance ever since Mexico had obtained its independence in 1821. Spanish domination had been substituted by British and French interests, and above all, American hegemony. After the Spanish Republic was established there was newfound enthusiasm brought about by its image of modernity. Thus, Republican Spain became a sort of beacon, or point of reference that confirmed in the eyes of the revolutionary bureaucratic elite the correctness of their course. The common cultural links were renewed and even increased. Spain became Mexico’s privileged relation with the outside world. What had seemed a reactionary museum-like nation of die-hards had become a respectable and influential ally in the international stage and a model worthy of emulation.

The third chapter will deal specifically with Mexican support of the Spanish Republic, both with material aid and diplomatic solidarity and will examine the rationale behind this support. In this section we will also survey the responses that Mexican aid had in the Republican zone. The crisis of the refugees inside the Latin American embassies in Madrid will also be examined, with a special emphasis placed on those who sought sanctuary at the Mexican Embassy and the brief estrangement that this brought about to the bilateral relationship. Chapter 4 will attempt to settle as far as possible the question of Mexican military aid to the

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Republic. Rigorous estimates of Mexico's military shipments to the Republic have yet to be tried. Some of the methodological difficulties to establish the precise importance of this cooperation have to do with the own clandestine nature of the operations.

The fifth chapter will concentrate on Mexican support for the Republic in the diplomatic front, at the League of Nations, before the United States, at the hemispheric level in the realm of the Pan-American conventions, as well as through its representations in Latin America. The sixth chapter will scrutinize the repercussions generated by the Spanish Civil War in the Mexican political scene. Chapter seven will analyse the end of the war, the arrival of the Spanish refugees and the way Franco's victory reverberated in Mexican politics well up to the landmark presidential election of 1940.

The research concludes that Cárdenas' assessment of the Spanish Civil War as a stage in a larger conflict between Fascism and democracy was a correct one and was validated by further events. The greater part of the League's member states limited themselves to witnessing the bloody Civil War in the hope that it would remain an exclusively Spanish affair. The Mexican government did not consider this to be the case. It interpreted the Spanish conflict as a preliminary stage in the ongoing world offensive of the anti-democratic forces. On June 17, 1937, President Cárdenas wrote in his diary:

Should the rebels win in Spain, it would not be remote that Germany and Italy, together with the Spanish military caste should assume an arrogant stance vis-à-vis the American nations. They would easily come to terms with Japan and would do everything to drag it into a war against the United States; on the contrary, should the Spanish government win, the fate of the German and Italian people could easily change.³⁷

³⁷ Lázaro Cárdenas, *Obras. I. Apuntes 1913-1940*. México, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1972. p.370.

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These words show Cárdenas at his best, both as an unwavering idealist and as a visionary statesman. On both counts, subsequent events would prove him and his generation right.

CHAPTER ONE

SPANISH-MEXICAN RELATIONS 1821-1931: AN OVERVIEW

Mexican governing circles hailed the coming of the Spanish Republic, on April 14, 1931, with unprecedented warmth. The Mexican Revolution was entering its eleventh year since the armed struggle ended, and the prospect of a friendly government in the Peninsula was relished by a hitherto isolated regime. Still, it seems paradoxical that a political system, which had based most of its nation-building efforts through an educational discourse of Hispano-phobia and exaltation of the Indian element, had embraced whole-heartedly the cause of Republican Spain. Yet this would be the case and the only possible explanation for this new approach would be a combination of ideological identification and pragmatic consideration that allowed both governments to overcome historically entrenched suspicions.

Past relations between Mexico and Spain had been far from cordial ever since the independence, and in fact, had reached acutely low points. The failed attempt by the Barradas expedition to re-conquer the former colony for the Spanish crown, or the ensuing expulsion of all Spaniards decided by successive Mexican governments in the 1820s, had left a legacy of mutual enmity.¹ Feelings were embittered further because of Spain's refusal to grant recognition to its former possession well up to 1836.²

¹After Mexican independence, Spain kept a stronghold in the fortress of San Juan de Ulúa, from where it successfully blockaded the port of Veracruz. Evicted by Santa Anna in 1825, the Spaniards attempted a re-conquest of Mexico under Isidro Barradas 3 years later. Partially defeated by Generals Santa Anna and Victoria the expedition was decimated by malaria. As a reprisal, the government of Vicente Guerrero decreed the expulsion of all Spaniards from Mexican territory. The American historian Harold Dana Sims has rendered the now classic versions of those events on his books: *La reconquista de México. La historia de los atentados españoles, 1821-1830*, México, FCE, 1984, and *La expulsión de los españoles de México, 1821-1830*. México, FCE, 1985.

² *Tratado Definitivo de Paz y Amistad Suscrito entre la República Mexicana y su Majestad Católica Doña Isabel II suscrito en la Ciudad de Madrid el 28 de diciembre de 1836*, in Luis Miguel Díaz and Jaime G. Martini, *Relaciones Diplomáticas México-España (1821-1977)*. México, Porrúa, 1979.

The first Spanish minister reached Mexico only on December 1838. Although controversies were partly settled through diplomatic recognition and by conventions on debt—in the years 1844, 1847, 1851 and 1853—old animosities would come to the fore again after Spain's recognition of the Maximilian Empire in 1862.³ This event led to severance of diplomatic relations by President Juárez in 1867; a connection that would not be renewed until 1871.

Under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1877-1911), the bilateral relation improved dramatically, yet paled as irrelevant by comparison with those held with France, Britain the U.S. and even Germany. Trade between the two countries was insignificant due to the relative backwardness and peripheral situation of both countries in the international economy, while both were largely dependent on foreign capital. An additional factor would be that both economies were competitive rather than interdependent. None of them had achieved a solid industrialisation during the nineteenth century, and remained agriculturally and mining-oriented. For those reasons the trade exchange between both countries, albeit having grown considerably under Díaz government, remained largely negligible. Mexico bought less than 5% of its imports from Spain, while sending 0.8%-2% of its exports to Spain.⁴ Mexico bought in Spain wine and groceries; textile purchases were negligible, while it sold sisal fibre, timber, chickpeas and tincture extracts.⁵

The colonization policy of Díaz encouraged a sizable flow of Spanish immigrants into Mexico that was duly appreciated by the Spanish government.⁶ Anyhow, it never achieved the success secured by Argentina, Brazil or Chile, as the Mexican government, unlike its South American counterparts, did not offer to pay

³ Ibid.

⁴ Great Britain was Mexico's main client and purveyor, taking as much as 39.65% of its exports. See Roger D. Hansen, *La política del desarrollo mexicano*, p.23. It is noteworthy to mention that according to Carlos M. Rama at the turn of the century Spain participated in world trade with barely a 1.2% of the total, in spite of having a coastline of more than 4,000 kilometres. *La crisis española del siglo XX*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica. p.40.

⁵ Manuel Grijalva, "Tendencias generales de las relaciones comerciales entre México y España", in Clara Lida, *Tres aspectos de la presencia española durante el porfiriato*, México, El Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios Históricos, 1981, pp.131-132.

⁶ Spaniards were the preferred immigrants owing to the obvious factors of language, religion and to their higher potential of integration with the local element than immigrants from other nationalities such as Germans, French Italians or, worse of all, the dreaded Anglo-Saxon. Let us remember, in that sense, that a first wave of immigration of American settlers in the 1820's and 30's had brought the loss of Texas and the American war of 1846-47.

the travel expenses. Nonetheless, the Spanish community rose from 6380 in 1877 to 29, 541 strong in 1910, a number larger even than the American colony.

During the Spanish-American war of 1898, Mexico remained neutral in spite of the governmental and popular sympathies for the Mother country. American pressure saw to it that Díaz stayed aloof from the conflict. Nevertheless, the Spanish Casino in Mexico was able to raise 800, 000 dollars and send them to Madrid as a contribution to the war effort.⁷

After Spain's defeat, Mexico became—according to Carlos Illades—a priority for Spanish foreign policy as it came to be regarded as a dyke in containing overflowing American influence.⁸ Díaz also valued the *Hispanista* policy undertaken by Spain from the second half of the 19th Century, insofar as it coincided with his policy of leaning on Europe to contain the U.S. *Hispanismo* asserted the existence of a Hispanic family of nations bound by links of race, culture, language, *Weltanschauung* and, not least, religion.⁹

This became clear in the festivities organised by Spain for the Fourth Centennial of America's discovery, in which Mexico partook with “pomp and munificence.”¹⁰ But it was the 1898 “disaster” which drew the American republics, and most particularly Mexico, closer to their defeated “Mother country”, as they now became aware that the real danger was coming from the North. Hispanic roots were accordingly reassessed as a common element of unity to counter the ‘Saxonisation of America.’

Under the aegis of Díaz's Minister of Education, Justo Sierra, Mexican support for Hispanidad received a new boost, as cultural exchanges with Spain began in earnest. In this context, the 1909 visit of Rafael Altamira y Crevea (1866-1951),

⁷ See Michael Kenny, et al, *Inmigrantes y refugiados españoles en México, siglo XX*, México, Ediciones de la Casa Chata, 1979, 369 pp. p.54.

⁸ Carlos Illades, *Presencia española en la Revolución Mexicana (1910-1915)*. México, UNAM-Instituto Mora, 1991, p.4.

⁹ Much later, the Spanish writer, Ramiro de Maeztu (1874-1936), would incorporate anti-Liberal and anti-democratic elements to this idea, thus breeding *Hispanidad*, a doctrine that prescribed the tutelage of Spanish American nations by the mother country. See Frederick Pike, *Hispanismo, 1898-1936. Spanish Conservatives and Liberals and their relations with Spanish America* London, University of Notre Dame Press, 1971, pp.1-9, and Ramiro de Maeztu, *Defensa de la Hispanidad* Madrid, 1933.

ahead of a commission of academics, who lectured at the National University set up a mutual rediscovery and an unprecedented dialogue between the two countries through scholarly interactions. Grand plans were made to institute a Spanish chair at the National University and a Mexican professorship in the University of Madrid. The Mexican Revolution wrecked this enterprise. Thirty years later, Altamira came back to Mexico, this time as a Republican exile.¹¹

Another, less significant, yet highly symbolic gesture came on Mexico's centennial anniversary of independence when Spain presented Diaz's government with the uniform of Morelos –Mexico's independence hero– captured by the vice-regal troops during the War of Independence. This was interpreted at the time as a milestone towards complete reconciliation between two kin, yet protractedly estranged nations.¹² Moreover, the Spanish Plenipotentiary, General Camilo García de Polavieja presented President Porfirio Díaz with the collar of the Order of Carlos III.¹³ Polavieja had received upon his arrival:

(...) the most roaring ovation that had been conferred to any diplomat. It was one of the few times that a Mexican crowd had spontaneously and enthusiastically cheered a foreigner, as if he was one of the Republic's finest.¹⁴

Such acclaim would not last. With the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution the bilateral relation rapidly deteriorated. Spain's image in Mexico since its birth as a nation had been negative. The rupture of the colonial relationship deteriorated Spain's image both in Mexico and the rest of the Spanish American nations as a result of the wars of independence. Moreover, the influence of the Enlightenment's ideas, the American Republican model and the Liberal doctrines furthered that rejection. The colonial era was repudiated as historical project and Spanish domination came to represent all things political and spiritual that the (Spanish)

¹⁰ Carlos M. Rama, *Historia de las relaciones culturales entre España y la América Latina*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982, 350 pp. p.186-191.

¹¹ For a description of this cultural mission and a complete portrait of Altamira, see Javier Malagón and Silvio Zavala, *Rafael Altamira y Crevea. El historiador y el hombre*, México, UNAM, 1986.

¹² Josefina MacGregor, *Méjico y España. Del porfiriato a la revolución*, México, Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana, 1992.

¹³ Héctor Perea, *La rueda del tiempo. Mexicanos en España* México, Cal y Arena, 1996 510 pp. p.126.

Americans did not want to be.¹⁵ To historical resentment now socio-economic mistrust was added. Hispano-phobia thus became a sort of State ideology of a nation aspiring to differentiate itself internally and internationally.

Manifestations of hostility towards Spaniards became particularly acute in Northern Mexico. When over forty Spaniards were killed on April 1911, Spanish subjects sent a petition to King Alfonso XIII informing him of the “deplorable situation” and urging him to take extreme measures.¹⁶ Furthermore, the Spanish Ambassador’s equivocal position towards the events that led to the assassination of President Madero,¹⁷ as well as damages to Spanish property and lives caused by the revolutionary tumult, brought about renewed ill faith. Old prejudices and grievances about Spanish superiority to the ‘barbarous’ aboriginal or the black legend of the Spanish conquest and the exploitation by the “selfish” Spaniard resurfaced with vigour.

This fresh nationalism set off by the Revolution has led several scholars to debate whether the Mexican Revolution was intrinsically xenophobic or not. It has been argued that while revolutionary events did affect foreign communities, the Revolution was not xenophobic in nature or aimed at a particular group.¹⁸ While the Spaniards were affected it was mainly due to the fact that they were the largest

¹⁴ Carlos Illades, *op. cit.* p.12.

¹⁵ Luisa Treviño y Daniel de la Pedraja, *Méjico y España, Transición y cambio*. México, Joaquín Mortiz, 1983, p.35.

¹⁶ *The New York Times*, April 29, 1911.

¹⁷ On February 9, 1913, General Bernardo Reyes and Félix Díaz (nephew of the old dictator) staged a right-wing counterrevolution against Madero. Reyes tried to assault the National Palace, where troops loyal to the President shot him dead. Upon learning these events, Díaz retreated to the capital's main arsenal, where he aimed to resist. In a fateful decision, Madero appointed Victoriano Huerta, an old crony of Porfirio Díaz, as Chief of Staff and sent him to crush the rebellion. Instead, Huerta engaged in a phoney exchange with Diaz, while entering in secret negotiations with him and the American Ambassador, Henry Lane Wilson. During these exchanges, the civilian population suffered heavy losses in what has come to be known as the “Tragic Ten Days”. Finally, Díaz and Huerta agreed under the auspices of Lane Wilson to overthrow Madero, in what is known as the “Pact of the Embassy”. Huerta's second Colonel Aureliano Blanquet arrested Madero and then murdered him together with vice-president Pino Suárez on February 19, 1913. Huerta assumed the Presidency, while Díaz fled the country. Presumably, the Spanish Minister Bernardo Jacinto Cólogo y Cólogo engaged in these intrigues, or at least, chose to turn a blind eye on them. Thus, Mexico's brief democratic experience ended. This episode would later be the object of recurrent comparisons by the Cárdenas government to the Francoist insurrection against the Republic, as well as to the Axis interference in Spanish affairs.

¹⁸ It should be noted that an anti-Chinese sentiment did arise, leading to outrages and even massacres of Chinese settlers, who accepted lower wages than Mexicans did and thus were regarded as competitors. The most notable example of these outrages was the carnage of Torreón in 1914, incited by Villa's troops.

foreign community. Nevertheless, American and British interests, being far more important, remained the major targets, both of disorders and radical measures, by the Revolutionary governments.

Mutual perceptions between Mexicans and Spaniards remained tainted by old stereotypes and prejudices. The fact that Spaniards controlled the liquor trade and usually owned the general stores in small towns made them particularly liable to loss of property, prone to resort to diplomatic protection, and therefore vulnerable to the resentment that caused xenophobic reprisals.

Thus, unsurprisingly, the Spaniard was readily equated in the populace's mind with the greedy grocer, a cliché that owed much to the preponderance of the Spanish community in both retail and wholesale commerce. The Spanish 'grocer' also indulged in usury, which may explain that so much of popular animosity was vented against that community. Other prevalent images included that of the Spaniard as the beastly foreman of the Porfiriato's Hacienda, crueler with the serf than the landlords themselves, the operator of crummy taverns and brothels, the drug peddler, or the dowry-seeker of affluent families.

As a consequence of the oppressive caste system, bequeathed by the colonial era, yet well in force up to the Porfiriato, the Spaniard felt culturally and racially superior to the Indian or the *Mestizo*. Ramón de Valle Inclán, who heartily endorsed the Mexican Revolution, gave good examples of this bigotry in his famous novel *Tirano Banderas* where a moneylender brashly retorts to a girl's complaint: 'If it wasn't for Spain you'd still be walking in feathers.'¹⁹

In his works, Valle Inclán drew a devastating portrait of the corruption that often underlay the accumulation of most quick fortunes made by the *Indiano* in the New World. Valle-Inclán loathed the Spanish immigrant that had arrived in the New World to "Hacer la América,"²⁰ with his denigrating trade of shopkeeper, hardworking, but ignorant, representative of the stereotyped Spain "of the tambourine." Spaniards of this sort, declared Valle-Inclán, did little to win esteem for Spain.

¹⁹ Ramón de Valle Inclán *Tirano Banderas*. Madrid, Austral, 1985.

The hatred of the Spaniard had originated in the time of the colonial era. Brading recalls the fact that the crowd assembled to independence over the cry of ‘Long live Fernando VII! Long Live our Lady of Guadalupe! Down with the *gachupines*!’ *Gachupín*, a term of unknown origin came to be a derogatory locution to refer to the Spaniards in Mexico.²¹ Memories of Mexico’s long struggle with Spain between 1810 and 1825 made it easy to stir popular resentment against individual Spaniards.

This dislike further increased during the Díaz dictatorship as the perception of a common identity became ingrained in the popular mind between the ruling classes and the Spanish element. The oft-repeated phrase that under Díaz Mexico had become “the mother of foreigners and the stepmother of Mexicans” underscores the conjunction most Mexicans saw between the preferential treatment accorded to foreigners in general, and Spaniards in particular, and their own exclusion from the *Porfirista* representation of national community. Consequently, this double association may have produced a popular animosity against the Spaniards during the Revolution, according to Illades.²²

MacGregor disagrees, sustaining her claim in the estimate given by González Navarro of the number of foreigners killed during the Mexican Revolution. While the revolutionary armies, particularly those of Zapata and Villa, did commit excesses against the Spanish residents, such as killing and looting, other communities were equally exposed to such outrages, because of their privileged positions. Again, according to this calculation, 1477 foreigners lost their lives in the period 1910-1919. Out of these, 471 were Chinese, 209, Spaniards, 550 Americans, 14 French and 38 British.²³ In this sense, MacGregor states it would be unfair, as well as untrue, to define the revolution as xenophobic, less so Hispano-phobic.²⁴ In truth, unlike the

²⁰ Literally, to become rich.

²¹ David Brading, *Los orígenes del nacionalismo mexicano*, México D.F Sepsetentas 32, p.112-113. Interestingly, according to María Moliner (1360) a distinction was established after the Spanish Civil War in Mexico between the old residents who were referred to as ‘gachupines’, and the Republican exiles that were plainly called ‘Spaniards’. See also, *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*, 1999, p.248.

²² Carlos Illades, op. cit. p.58.

²³ Moisés González Navarro, *Población y sociedad en México*. México, Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, UNAM, 1974 (2 vols.) Vol. 2, p.79.

²⁴ Josefina MacGregor, op. cit. pp. 11, 16 and 53.

Chinese or the Americans, Spaniards were less conspicuous objects of hatred, as they could not be so readily identified among the Mexican population.

Nonetheless, for Conservative Historian and champion of Hispanidad, José Fuentes Mares, from 1913 onwards the Revolution adopted a distinctly anti-Hispanic stance, at least from an ideological perspective.²⁵ The inveterate readiness shown by Spanish great landowners not only to demand consular protection but also to sponsor armed insurrections and competing warring factions, whenever they felt their interests might be at stake, did little to endear them with the successive governments. In short, to the anti-Spanish nationalist sentiment produced by its identification with the colonial past, and its economic prominence now a political factor was added, as the Spaniards became associated with the counter-revolution.

In due course, Venustiano Carranza, leader of the Constitutional Revolution that overthrew Huerta, severed links with all powers that had recognized the *putschist* regime and called for the expulsion of their diplomatic agents. This would be the case of Cólogan's appointed successor, Manuel Walls y Merino, who was ordered to leave federal territory on 1914.²⁶ Simultaneously, Carranza ordered the dissolution of the Mexican Foreign Service abroad,²⁷ which in its turn led to the exile in Spain of several former Huertista agents, such as Amado Nervo, Díaz Mirón and others. Carranza accused Spain of having supported the dictator, a claim that gained credit when Huerta secured diplomatic asylum and went on to live in Barcelona. Diplomatic relations would be renewed months later, but the Spanish diplomats would have to face the problem of dealing with the various warring factions.

In all fairness it should be acknowledged that several Spaniards also fought in the ranks of the Mexican Revolution, notably in the armies of Villa, Zapata and Obregón, among them, apparently, Luis Araquistáin.²⁸ This, however, did little to repair the tarnished image left by a century of bitter prejudice and the association fixed in the popular mind between the exploiters of the dictatorship days and the

²⁵ José Fuentes Mares, *Historia de dos orgullos. España y México*. México, Océano, 1984. 213 pp. pp. 56-59.

²⁶ Carlos Illades, op. cit. pp. 130-131.

²⁷ 'Decreto del Poder Ejecutivo suprimiendo las representaciones diplomáticas y consulares del General Victoriano Huerta'. AHSRE Serie EMBESP 343.

²⁸ Josefina MacGregor, op. cit. p. 65.

Spanish element. It is equally true that the Mexican Revolution owed a great deal of its intellectual origins to the influx of anarchist ideas, originating mainly from Spain, and brought into Mexico by Spanish immigrants who arrived with the migration waves of the turn of the century.²⁹

INTELLECTUALS AND DIPLOMATS

In spite of the political ups and downs of the diplomatic relations between the two countries, there existed a continuous cultural exchange that may have set the stage for the subsequent Mexican involvement in the Spanish Civil War. Although it is not the aim of this chapter to explore in depth the nature of these contacts, it may well be worth refer to some of these relationships in order to appreciate the extent by which personal contacts translated subsequently into institutional commitments.

Friendship and close liaisons between Spanish and Mexican prominent figures in the cultural and political domains have been proverbial. To the friendship between Obregón and Valle Inclán may well be added those of Calles and Álvarez del Vayo or the almost symbiotic one between Manuel Azaña and the Mexican writer Martín Luis Guzmán, in the 1930s.³⁰

Ever since the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío launched the Modernist movement in the turn of the century, Latin American intellectuals were very well regarded as peers, rather than as exotic artists from remote regions. Thenceforth, several Latin American literati and artists had actively engaged in the debate of ideas and aesthetic renewal of the former metropolis. The Dominican essayist Pedro

²⁹ See, among others, Colin MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*. Berkeley, University of California, 1991; David Poole, *Land and Liberty. Anarchist Influences in the Mexican Revolution*, Sanday England, Cienfuegos, 1977; John M. Hart, *Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class. (1860-1931)*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1978. and James D. Cockcroft, *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution*. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1968.

³⁰ Exiled in Spain from 1925 to 1936. There, he worked as Azaña's private secretary, and directed two Spanish dailies *El Sol* and *La Voz*, to which he was a regular contributor. Guzmán took the Spanish citizenship and functioned as an advisor without portfolio to Azaña (1931-1933), carrying functions of liaison between Azaña and the Spanish press. Guzmán carried out, on direct instructions from Azaña, secret missions such as supporting the Portuguese opposition of Alfonso Costa or trying to persuade Valle Inclán of accepting an official duty from the Republic. See Manuel Azaña, *Memorias políticas 1931-1933*, Barcelona, Grijalbo, 1992, pp. 84-85, 125-128 and 261. See also Cipriano Rivas Cherif, *Retrato de un desconocido. Vida de Manuel Azaña*. Barcelona, Grijalbo, 1979.

Henríquez Ureña (1884-1946) had the merit of bringing together several circles on both sides of the Atlantic and of solidifying such contacts.

Thus, as far as the Mexicans were concerned, it may be noted that a group of émigrés had made their presence felt in the Iberian Peninsula from the late 1910s. Among them stood out the historian Carlos Pereyra, the writers Salvador Díaz Mirón, Amado Nervo, Luis G. Urbina and Alfonso Reyes, as well as the magistrate Rodolfo Reyes; these two, offspring of the late General Reyes. From 1914 till 1919 Alfonso Reyes worked along with Américo Castro, Federico de Onís, Tomás Navarro Tomás and Ramón Menéndez Pidal at the prestigious Centro de Estudios Históricos de Madrid, directed by the latter, and widely contributed to the *Revista de Filología Hispánica*, published by that centre. Subsequently, Reyes helped the Republic in various instances, either as Ambassador to Argentina where he joined efforts by local Leftist and progressive organisations to raise funds for the Republic, or by lending support, both legal and financial, to the beleaguered Spanish Ambassador there, Enrique Pérez Canedo. Last but not least, his main contribution to the Republic came when he convinced President Cárdenas to give haven to Spanish intellectuals and open a centre for research for them in Mexico.³¹

Another worthy example is that of the poet Jaime Torres Bodet who after having served as a junior official in the Mexican Legation in Madrid in the late 1920s, played a crucial role in the evacuation of Spanish refugees from French soil a decade later. As first Director-General of the UNESCO in 1948 Torres Bodet also contributed to the upkeep of the Republican cause by promoting several condemnations of the Francoist regime and boycotting its accession to the United Nations.

These expatriates would somehow prefigure the Spanish exile in Mexico, two decades later, in their active participation in Spanish culture. Their views would parallel the divide that would split the Spanish intellectuals along the lines of left and

³¹ This would be the origin of El Colegio de México. See Chapter 4

right. Hence, Pereyra and Rodolfo Reyes would remain in Spain and become prominent members of the Francoist intelligentsia.³²

On the other hand, the Mexican tradition of giving diplomatic posts to intellectuals and artists allowed several Mexican writers to establish close bonds with their Spanish counterparts. Weekly journals like *España* or *La Pluma* and intellectual societies like the *Ateneo* of Madrid greatly contributed to this meeting of minds. Thus, for instance, Azaña and his in law Rivas Sheriff developed a close friendship with Urbina as well as with the poet Enrique González Martínez, who would later act as Minister of Mexico in Spain. Other cases worth mentioning include the historians Daniel Cosío Villélgas and Silvio Zavala, the diplomat, Genaro Estrada and the painters Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, all of whom had, at one time or another, junior posts in the Mexican representation in Madrid, held grants or had special commissions from the Mexican government.

Unlike England, in the Latin world in general and in the Hispanic world in particular the intellectual has historically exerted a great influence. Such prestige has often resulted in the holding of high public office.³³ Cultural Brahmins constituted the majority of the first Republican cabinet and a large segment of the Mexican diplomatic corps. Most of the future leaders of Mexico represented their country abroad at one time or another, and many of them were posted in Spain, or established contacts with Spanish diplomats. Familiarity between both groups was constant and productive. These associations would prove crucial in cementing a close relationship between Mexico and Spain in 1931, as shall be seen below.

SPAIN AND THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

During the 1920s, Spanish-Mexican relations were characterised by a reciprocal lack of understanding. Spanish diplomats regarded the Revolution's triumphant faction, at best, with disdain, at worst, with horror. The contrast between the international

³² See, for instance, Juan F. Marichal, *La sombra del poder. Intelectuales y política en España, Argentina y México*. Madrid, Cuadernos para el Dialogo, 1975.

³³ Let us recall in that sense recall the Presidencies of Rómulo Gallegos in Venezuela (1947-1948) and Bartolomé Mitre in Argentina (1862-1864).

respectability earned by the Díaz regime and the ‘rustic parvenus’ which had seized power after the armed struggle was too much to swallow for Spanish Conservatives. Many of the Revolution’s main events came to be seen by Spanish Conservatives as nothing more than the pinnacle of Masonic and Protestant influence stemming from the United States. Furthermore, to many of these Conservatives Mexico, like the nascent Bolshevik Russia, was the foremost example of the threat to Catholicism posed by doctrines “alien to Hispanic tradition” such as communism or socialism. Hence, the Mexican Revolution came also to be seen as a menace to the very “spiritual unity” advocated by Conservative Hispanism.³⁴

In several occasions, Spanish Liberals condemned too the novel nationalism that emerged from the revolutionary process. This nationalism combined elements of anti-clericalism, Indianism or the exaltation of the native element in detriment of the Spanish root, and American Liberalism; all three, abhorrent to Spanish traditionalists. Unsurprisingly those same three factors became the main arguments vented by Spanish Conservatives to reject the Mexican Revolution and to deny any legitimacy to the successive governments emanated from it. The second element was, for obvious reasons, equally repugnant to Spanish Liberals.

A celebrated case in point was that of the, then fashionable, Valencian novelist, Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, who after having enjoyed the high regard and patronage of Obregón’s government went on to publish a series of articles for the American press, later collected as a single volume, in which he denounced the revolutionary clique as a gang of rowdy kleptomaniacs, prone to banditry and endless insurrection. Accurate as many of Blasco’s accusations may have been, a tone of Hispanist spite is present all along the book, especially when dealing with the nationalist sentiment promoted by the revolutionary elite, or their onslaught against Spanish interests through agrarian reform.³⁵ Thus, true to form, several Spanish newsreaders, even those from Socialist or Liberal journals, began to consider whether the revolutionaries were indeed nothing more than a gang of bandits.³⁶

³⁴ Frederick Pike, *Hispanismo, 1898-1936. Spanish Conservatives and Liberals and their relations with Spanish America*. London, University of Notre Dame Press, 1971. pp.182-183.

³⁵ Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, *El militarismo mejicano. Estudios publicados en los principales diarios de Estados Unidos*. Valencia, Prometeo, 1921.

³⁶ Frederick Pike, op.cit , p.112.

Interestingly, a remarkable friendship developed in that period between Spanish writer, Ramón de Valle Inclán, and the Revolution's new strongman, General Álvaro Obregón. During his second visit to Mexico, Valle Inclán had enthusiastic praise for the agrarian reform and openly lauded his friend Obregón. October 1921, for "opening a new way for America."³⁷ He also wrote about the General:

Free men like Madero and Obregón have made the Mexican Revolution. Men who felt the need to redeem the Indian, before the Indian felt the need to redeem himself.³⁸

This did not help very much to counter the prejudiced opinions that were widespread, not only in Spain, but in much of the 'civilized world'. Far from it, Valle-Inclán scandalized the Spanish Ambassador and community with his denunciations of the *Gachupín* and with his demonstrations of support for the Revolution.³⁹

At that stage, the confiscation of Spanish-owned land estates by the government of Álvaro Obregón, made under the spirit of the agrarian law, which commenced to have effect in 1921, became the main point of friction in the bilateral relation. According to the then Spanish Ambassador, Luis Martínez de Irujo, 95% of all foreign-owned land holdings in Mexico belonged to Spaniards, making them highly vulnerable to forcible schemes of land redistribution.⁴⁰ Although Martínez de Irujo acknowledged that the land seizures affected Spanish proprietors far less than their English or American counterparts he tried to stop land expropriations through all available channels, even by means of joint diplomatic pressure with other legations. Moreover, Alfonso XIII's representative was prone to follow the lead of the United States government in demanding ample compensation for lands taken from its citizens. In some instances Madrid seemed to be even more intransigent than Washington was in pressing claims.

³⁷ Héctor Perea, op. cit., pp. 240-255.

³⁸ Paulino Masip "Obregón, el presidente de Méjico, asesinado, visto por Valle-Inclán", in *Estampa*, A1, Number 30, Madrid, July 24, 1928.

³⁹ On Valle Inclán's second visit to Mexico (the first one was in 1892) see Dru Dougherty "El segundo viaje a México de Valle Inclán: Una embajada intelectual olvidada" in *Cuadernos Americanos*, Vol. 223, 2, 1979.

⁴⁰ AMAE, Legajo H1659. Dispatch of the Spanish Legation in Mexico, October 25, 1921.

This in turn produced an exacerbation of Hispano-phobia, which was put to use by various regional political bosses in order to advance their particular interests or simply to gain popularity among the masses. Public discourse became infected with xenophobic explanations of the evils suffered by Mexico. Attacks against Spanish properties and lives soon followed. There were land occupations, arbitrary detentions, harassment of all sorts, and, more gravely, kidnaps, rapes and murders. The Spaniard became the preferred scapegoat of many local politicians and *caciques*. In 1921 there were several attacks in places as diverse as Acapulco, Puebla, Yucatán or Coahuila. Representative of this mood were the wild declarations of candidate to the governorship of Coahuila, Aurelio Mijares, consigned by Martínez de Irujo in a dispatch to Madrid: “Our purpose is to kill all *gachupines* and take over their *haciendas*.”⁴¹

As land distribution continued apace, the new Spanish Minister, Saavedra y Magdalena threatened to suspend official correspondence between his legation and the Mexican government. Obregón reacted swiftly and sharply to this menace, not only making the Spanish diplomat subject of “rude remarks”, but also threatening him with expulsion from Mexican territory.⁴²

In the eyes of the Mexican government, Spain came to be identified as a force basically hostile to the national Revolution, as a country inclined to pursue, if it had the means, an interventionist policy similar to the one associated with its powerful northern neighbour. It was only in 1925 that a bilateral covenant to negotiate the Spanish colony’s claims could be signed. The calls for entitlement set forth were so great, that an adjournment for its compliance had to be re-negotiated in 1930.⁴³ Consequently, the Hispano-phobia that emerged after 1913 seems to have spread, not only among the popular masses but also among the governing circles.⁴⁴

However, with the U.S. mounting again its pressure over Mexico, President elect Calles saw fit to start a rapprochement with Europe as a balance against

⁴¹ AMAE, Legajo H1659, memorandum, May 9, 1921.

⁴² AMAE, Saavedra y Magdalena to Ministry of State; transcript of dispatch February 27, 1923.

⁴³ The covenant was signed in Mexico City, on November 25, 1925, while the deferment of payments, on December 5, 1930. See Senado de la República, *Tratados ratificados y convenios ejecutivos celebrados por México*. Mexico, 1984.

⁴⁴ Ricardo Pérez Monfort, op.cit., pp. 32-33.

mounting American pressure.⁴⁵ In an effort to diversify Mexican external links Calles toured Europe in 1924 where he was officially welcomed in Berlin and Paris. Although this tour did not include Spain, every effort was made to intensify the bilateral link, as part of this strategy.

On that same year, the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera appointed José Gil Delgado y Olazábal, Marquis of Berna, Plenipotentiary Minister in Mexico.⁴⁶ Cooperation seems to have increased. This was the case especially in agricultural schemes where the introduction of pineapple and other tropical crops in Spain was reciprocated by technical advice from Spain to Mexican farmers.⁴⁷ An increased trade between the two countries also took place during these years.

A curious instance of ‘Hispanic solidarity’ may have taken place on those days. Obregón was said to have sent Primo de Rivera a detachment of 200 Yaqui Indians after the “Disaster of Annual” to fight in the Riff War. According to these versions, these men saw action and were approvingly praised by their Spanish superiors for their “temerity and courage.”⁴⁸

THE MEXICAN RELIGIOUS CONFLICT AND SPAIN

Another source of dispute was certainly the relentless anti-clericalism espoused by the administrations of Obregón and Calles. The enactment of the 1917 Constitution, in its chapter concerning religion and Church-State relations brought about mounting friction between the government and the Catholic hierarchy. The question had been a thorny one ever since Juárez had declared the separation of Church and State and had brought about a radical secularisation with his Reform Laws of 1857.

⁴⁵ Lorenzo Meyer, *Méjico y el mundo. Historia de sus relaciones exteriores*. Tomo VI. México D.F. Senado de la República, 1991. 215 pp., p.73.

⁴⁶ Ricardo Pérez Monfort, op. cit., p.39.

⁴⁷ Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. México (AHSRE) (exp. EMESP 566) 1923-1924. Technology transfer included techniques for the industrial use of sesame seed, wine production and agreements of trade that included Mexican sales of cotton, tobacco, vanilla, chickpea, candles and sisal fibre and Spanish sales of wine, cork, conserves (exp. EMESP 974) and even fighting bulls. (exp. EMESP 757).

⁴⁸ General Francisco L. Urquiza, an old Carrancista, self-exiled in Spain since 1920, first referred this episode. See his *Obras Escogidas*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987. Colección Letras

In 1923 the confrontations reached a climax when Obregón expelled the apostolic nuncio Ernesto Filippi for having defied the prohibition on open-air religious acts. This was followed by the expulsion of several Catholic priests, most of whom were Spaniards, as a result of their participation in unauthorised religious acts, and on account of not being Mexican nationals, a condition prescribed by law. Far from expressing its disapproval with the measure, the Spanish legation limited itself, in a dispatch sent to Madrid, to attribute the eviction to the resentment of the local clergymen against the higher instruction of Spanish priests and their "diaphanous" vocation for religious vows. The communication is also interesting insofar as it shows the unabashed racism and chauvinism of the Spanish envoys posted in Mexico before the advent of the Republic:

The Mexican clergy is mostly formed by Indians, with all the concomitant defects of that ignorant, degenerate race: ignorant, of doubtful morality, and, as all Indians apathetic, susceptible, envious and rebel to discipline.⁴⁹

From 1926 to 1929, all religious services were suspended, and civil war broke out in Central Mexico between government troops and the Cristero peasants instigated by the Church.⁵⁰ At its peak, the war engaged 50, 000 Cristero regulars. It is claimed that the war produced 90, 000 casualties on both sides.⁵¹ Predictably, the Mexican religious conflict appalled Spanish Catholics who saw in it a reversal of the 'civilizing mission' that Spain had pursued in Mexico and left there as its most 'precious' legacy.

The 'godless' Mexican government was to be repeatedly condemned in diplomatic dispatches by the Spanish emissary as "Bolshevizing", institutionalised banditry, not very differently from the way it was regarded by other governments at the time.⁵² The religious conflict aroused a great concern among Spanish

Mexicanas. pp. 1038-1042. A version of this story may also be found in Gutierre Tibón, *México en Europa*, México D.F., Editorial Posada, 1979, pp. 110-115.

⁴⁹ AMAE Delgado y Olazábal to the Ministry of State; dispatch 29; Mexico February 28, 1926.

⁵⁰ Graham Greene in his novel *The Power and the Glory* has acutely portrayed these events. Of course, being a Catholic, Greene displays an overt bias against the revolutionaries.

⁵¹ The standard work on the subject is, without doubt, Jean Meyer, *La cristiada*, (3 volumes) Mexico D.F., Siglo XXI, 1974.

⁵² See for instance, F. Ravie, *Le Mexique Rouge*. Paris G. Beauchesne, 1928; Francis McCullagh, *Red Mexico*. London, Brentano, 1928 or Francisco Gómez del Rey, *The Black Czar, Plutarco Elías Calles, Bolshevik Dictator of Mexico*. El Paso Texas, El Diario del Paso, 1928.

Conservatives, many of which saw in it a pre-figuration of things to come in Spain. The intensity of such feelings may be seen in the almost daily coverage of Mexican events afforded by Spanish newspapers at a time when Latin American news barely made the headlines. Moreover, the Spanish Catholic press utilised the Mexican religious conflict to indirectly criticise any political move aimed at secularisation or at the dis-establishment of the Catholic Church in Spain. Thus, for instance, at a rally “in defence of Mexican Catholicism, celebrated in Valencia, which was given wide coverage by Madrid’s press the speaker ominously rumbled:

Mexican persecution of Catholics represents for us a providential portend.

Our present tranquillity is nothing more than a pause. We, the Spanish Catholics, must come together lest one day we shall weep like women that which the disgraced Mexicans could not defend like men.⁵³

Several masses and meetings of solidarity for the Mexican Catholics were held in various Spanish cities, while the Spanish press echoed in its polemics the conflicting positions between Catholics and secularists. In that sense, the Mexican religious conflict served the Spanish newspapers to reflect upon and debate over domestic issues, in a way similar to that by which Mexican newspapers would discuss Mexican problems through the prism of the Spanish War a decade later. Thus, for instance, all through the summer of 1926 Angel Herrera’s *El Debate* engaged in a controversy with *El Liberal*, in which the former urged “solidarity with our brothers of the New Spain”, while the latter justified and defended the conduct of the Calles administration.⁵⁴

In addition, religious persecution meant more ominously for Hispanistas a surreptitious, yet deliberate, attempt by the “Protestant” United States to dilute whatever remained of Mexico’s Spanish identity as a prior step towards the complete takeover of that country. Therefore, defence of religion represented for Mexico, according to Hispanistas, the defence of its identity, the very same that the “Mother Country” had bequeathed four centuries ago:

⁵³ *El Debate*, November 30, 1926.

⁵⁴ Ricardo Pérez Monfort, op. cit., pp. 45-46

Two races contest one another in the New World for regional hegemony. One is the Hispanic race, the other the Anglo-Saxon. Every breakthrough English language makes, by way of infiltration of an English expression into Spanish language, a legislative reform or a religious alteration; it means an Anglo-Saxon victory and a Hispanic defeat. Religion is the most prized bond between Spain and the Spanish-American Republics. Therefore to favour Protestantism or to persecute Catholicism amounts to an abjuration of Spanish-America. In Mexico—the Spanish-American nation more directly menaced by Americans, whose claw has already mutilated its territory—revolutions, which make possible American interventions, are commonplace. These revolutionaries victimized in the past the Spanish element, and now they persecute Catholics.⁵⁵

Various Catholic organisations asked Primo de Rivera to use his good offices to bring to an end the acts of persecution and “barbary” to which Christians were subjugated in Mexico.⁵⁶ However, in spite of their anxieties, the Spanish government refrained from adopting any official stance, let alone making any kind of protest vis-à-vis the Mexican government. Spanish Ministry of State’s documentation evinces little sympathy for Cristeros, which as an “outgrowth of Mexican brigandage” could hardly be considered as a remedy to the original evils of revolutionary governments.⁵⁷ In any case, the Spanish government’s position regarding Mexico was less apocalyptic than that of Spanish Catholics, or for that matter, than the opinions of its own representative in Mexico. It may well have been that Primo de Rivera’s government did not want to agitate the waters of the bilateral relation when more compelling issues, such as the settlement of outstanding debts generated by land seizures, were at stake. The fact is that the diplomatic relation remained distant but away from open conflict.

Two major affairs drew the attention of Spanish press and diplomacy towards Mexico in an unprecedented way. The first was the assassination of President Elect Álvaro Obregón by a disgruntled Catholic in July 18, 1928 and the second was the Presidential Election of 1929, at which the renowned Hispanist intellectual and

⁵⁵ *El Debate*, August 22, 1926.

⁵⁶ Archivo General de la Nación, Legajo 292, Presidencia de Gobierno.

⁵⁷ AMAE, Legajo 2564, oficio 52, March 15, 1927.

former Minister of Education was robbed of an incumbency almost everybody held for certain, by the newly-created Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR).

Obregón's assassination seemed to have taken everybody, including the Spanish Legation, which had anticipated trouble for the Presidential succession, off guard. The warlord had apparently succeeded in imposing his re-election in spite of the fact that non-re-election had been precisely one of the Mexican Revolution's main tenets. On June 30, a fortnight before the assassination the Spanish Minister to Mexico, Manuel de Figuerola Marquis de Rialp, informed Madrid that:

Obregón's inauguration will take place, for sure, without any hindrance and in a peaceful and routinely fashion.⁵⁸

A month later, with Calles frantically trying to stabilise a dire situation and the Obregonistas incensed over what they deemed as a scheme by Calles to become the revolution's new strongman. Against that backdrop Rialp reported to Madrid:

The assassination of General Obregón may be considered the most severe political crisis that Mexico has experienced since the collapse of General Porfirio Diaz's government. With Obregón disappears the leading military and political figure of Mexico, while his death represents the end of a stage of the Mexican Revolution that initiated with the assassination of Carranza. Throughout this phase, Obregón was the soul and supreme arbiter of Mexican public life.⁵⁹

Once more, the Spanish Liberal and Catholic press became engaged in a controversy over the possible motivations of the slayer and over whether the Catholic Church had been behind the murder; an argument which only reflected their own differences within the Spanish political context. Thus while *El Sol* deplored the murder, it hinted at the Catholic rebels as its main culprits,⁶⁰ *El Debate* and *ABC* rejected any connection between the assassination and the Catholic Church.⁶¹ Furthermore, *El Debate* harshly remarked a day later:

⁵⁸ AMAE, Dispatch 157, Marquis de Rialp to the Ministry of State. Mexico, June 30, 1928.

⁵⁹ AMAE, Marquis de Rialp, summary of dispatch sent to the Ministry of State, July 31, 1928.

⁶⁰ *El Sol*, July 20, 1928.

⁶¹ *El Debate*, July 19, 1928; *ABC*, July 20, 1928.

Obregón has been murdered by the same reign of violence to which he contributed chiefly to engender.⁶²

This gave rise to an immediate retort from Liberal broadsheet, *El Heraldo de Madrid*, which not only rejected such a version of events but also obliquely condemned the apology of violence upheld by *El Debate* in a tirade that may also be read as premonitory of the attitude assumed by the Spanish Right precisely eight years later:

They preach law and order, when order is the one they want and when law is interpreted in a manner favourable to their interests. But whenever a power emerges which seeks to impose a different order of things, those same guardians of “order” surrender themselves, without hesitation, to all sorts of violence and recur to all sort of means, fanatizing the masses and infusing them with a spirit of vengeance and rancour.⁶³

Both the Spanish Legation in Mexico and Catholics in Spain welcomed Vasconcelos' entry into the contest for the Presidency as a salutary development for Mexico's political future. Hispanistas had high hopes in a man whose anti-Americanism and whose advocacy of Hispanic values such as language, culture and religion were precisely their own. His offer to restore “liberty of conscience”, furthermore, had the effect of endearing him with the Spanish Catholic intelligentsia, which saw in him a beacon of hope that could put an end to “atheistic barbarity”. However, these very elements were highly pessimistic about Vasconcelos' chances, precisely on account of his extreme Hispanism and Yankee-Phobia:

The mighty Republic of the North will never tolerate that a man who is not a marionette of Washington and of its Ambassador, Mr. Morrow, may conduct Mexico's destinies.⁶⁴

The Spanish Legation's dispatches grew increasingly anti-Calles and pro-Vasconcelos. After the election the Spanish Legation cried foul in its confidential reports to Madrid, ascribing Vasconcelos' defeat to the “apathy” of the Mexican people, a nation “without structure” and to Calles' wicked impulses:

⁶² *ibid.* July 20, 1928.

Ortiz Rubio (the PNR's winning candidate) is nothing more than a tool in the hands of Calles. The latter is held to be the most nefarious figure in Mexican politics, and still more to Spanish interests as all of his political performance has distinguished for its hatred towards all things Spanish.⁶⁵

It may also be a matter of speculation, whether Primo de Rivera's corporate regime had any influence on the later creation of Calles' National Revolutionary Party in 1929. Certainly, many Mexicans admired the dictator's early steps towards economic modernisation and his gradualist approach reflected in his dealing with socialist trade unions, and may have attempted to emulate them.

HISPANISMO AND THE EXALTATION OF THE INDIAN BY THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

By 1921, Obregón had re-established a Ministry of Education with José Vasconcelos (1882-1959) as Minister. Vasconcelos was highly enthusiastic about the cultural aspects of the revolution, involving Mexican artists in the education of the country. He held to the thesis that the Indian should be "redeemed" and the masses educated. Therefore, beginning in 1921, rural schools, teachers' training schools and cultural missions were developed. Amidst the great resurgence of national pride came the birth of a Mexican school of painters, the muralists, whose inspiration came directly from the Mexican popular scene. The nationalistic movement in painting left its imprint on market places, government buildings and other public spaces. Under that stimulus Mexican folk tunes and regional music came also widely into fashion.

The exaltation of the native element furthered by the governments of Obregón and Calles, known as *Indigenismo*, clashed directly with Hispanismo and accordingly brought about sour complaints by the Spanish diplomats posted in Mexico during the 1920s and 30's. This would be the case precisely with the Mexican muralist movement that extolled the virtues of the Indians while depicting the *conquistadors* as wretched, degenerate and syphilitic. In like manner, the school texts presented the conquest of Mexico by Spain as the main cause of Mexico's backwardness, and the

⁶³ *El Heraldo de Madrid*, July 21, 1928.

⁶⁴ AMAE, Legajo 2565, Marquis de Rialp to Ministry of State, June 10, 1929.

⁶⁵ AMAE, Legajo 2565, August 2, 1929.

Spaniards as covetous brutes. These images would coincide in time with the assumption by the Primo de Rivera's regime of the doctrine of *Hispanismo*.

The Spanish Minister, Marquis of Rialp, bitterly complained over the publication of "Hispano-phobic libel" edited by the Mexican Ministry of Education. The book in question was *Los gobernantes de México desde Agustín de Iturbide hasta el General Plutarco Elías Calles* written by a certain Roberto D. Fernández.⁶⁶ The author went to great lengths to demonstrate how Spain had bequeathed Mexico its backwardness and poverty, while indulging in the old stereotype of the avaricious grocer in such passages as the following:

Manifold were the causes of Mexican independence: the example set by the United States, the principles proclaimed by the French Revolution and above all the hateful oppression imposed by 70, 0000 foreigners unto 7 million Mexicans. Oppression with no more bases other than the unfair privilege of having been born in Spain.

Or:

Spaniards have succeeded in persuading our people ... that for the sale of kilos of 800 grams, metres of 90 centimetres, adulteration of basic utilities, manufacture of poisons called liquors...it is necessary to possess a very special technique. One, which may only be acquired in Spain.

The book called for the immediate expulsion of all Spaniards from Mexico as well as for the confiscation of their properties. Furthermore it demanded the prohibition of Spanish immigration and the barring of Mexican nationality to Spaniards as far as 1950. In spite of Rialp's protestations, the book was still circulating massively in 1932, being distributed at schools, army garrisons and universities, with apparent "official connivance."⁶⁷ Fernández was the leader of an obscure group of ultra-nationalists who called themselves Agrupación Mexicana de Reintegración Económica. This organisation accused the Spanish colony of

⁶⁶ Published in Saltillo, Coahuila by a publishing house jingoistically called "Cuauhtémoc", as the last Aztec Emperor, with no date of publication.

⁶⁷ José María Albiñana, *España bajo la dictadura Republicana (Crónica de un periodo putrefacto)* Madrid, Imprenta El Financiero, 1932.

dominating Mexican economy and, consequently, of exhausting the lot of the Mexican people.

According to Fernández the spirit of exploitation animated the Spaniards, those “bloodthirsty leeches” to usurp Mexico’s wealth. Notwithstanding the Hispanistas’ claims, Fernandez’s opinions did not conform to those of Mexico’s mainstream. Far from that, the group went on to harass pro-Spanish journalists labelling them as ‘black *gachupines*’ and even accused Calles and other leaders of the PNR of having ‘sold out’ to the Spaniards and their wretched allies, the Catholic Church. The group became ever more outspoken in their belligerence, yet never conducted an actual attack on the community.⁶⁸

The steadfast Mexican Hispanista intelligentsia was quick to counter these Indigenista onslaughts. Eminent Mexican Hispanistas included the likes of José Vasconcelos, then Minister of Education, as well as such outstanding rightists as Alfonso Junco and Querido Moheno. Therefore, it came as no surprise that a work by the Catholic Hispanista, José Elguero, had appeared before long as an urgent vindication to the “spiritual homeland”. In a counter-pamphlet, *España en los destinos de México*, the author called for a reappraisal of the Spanish cultural legacy in the presence of the American threat. Thus, for Elguero, an anti-Spanish Mexico would readily become a “Yankee Mexico.” The Spanish root was thus the chosen arm to oppose the real enemy: the United States, owing to the higher moral and cultural values of Hispanic civilization. Ultimately, this stance began to gain acceptance even among some Mexican left-wing intellectuals.

The decade closed with the Ibero-American Exhibition in Seville, inaugurated on May 10, 1929, to which Mexico, according to the otherwise hostile Spanish Catholic press: “duly attended as an obedient American daughter.”⁶⁹ Previous diatribes against Mexico on account of the religious conflict gave way in the Spanish Conservative press to open praise for its cultural and industrial achievements, “gallantly” on display in its pavilion. As far as the bilateral relationship was

⁶⁸ “La Embajada de España se queja de las calumnias e injurias a españoles por la Agrupación Reintegración Económica Mexicana de Veracruz” AHSRE, III/ 243(46)9 and Archivo del Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Madrid (AMAE), leg. H2565, Informe del 17 de abril de 1929.

⁶⁹ *El Debate*, May 12, 1929.

concerned, official ties reached a low point in the turn of the decade, primarily due to the lack of settlement for Spanish claims arising from the Revolution. Many Spaniards had amassed enormous wealth and property during the Porfiriato, comprising vast amounts of real estate, large haciendas and industrial and commercial concerns. Much of this property had been damaged, plundered or destroyed during the long years of the conflict.⁷⁰ And in spite of manifold bilateral efforts the two governments had been unable to satisfactorily resolve the resulting claims. Furthermore, the Spanish colony in Mexico in general was not well disposed towards the Revolution and continued to support openly opponents of the Mexican government, spawning a vicious circle of attacks to their properties and lives and attendant demands for compensation.⁷¹

The fall of Primo de Rivera would coincide with the end of the era of the warlords in Mexico, and with the emergence of the era of the institutions, as expressed with the creation of the National Revolutionary Party (PNR). Thus both countries embarked concurrently towards political transitions that would set them together, albeit briefly, through a close association not seen since colonial times.

⁷⁰ Edith O'Shaugnessy, *A Diplomat's Wife in Mexico*. New York, Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1916, pp.93-96, 176-178.

⁷¹ J. H. Plenn, *Mexico Marches*. Indianapolis, Bobbs Merrill, 1939. pp. 68-69. For the endless list of claims see Archivo Histórico de la Embajada de España en México 1826-1939. Biblioteca Daniel Cosío Villegas, El Colegio de México, México D.F. MP 142 Pt. Microfilm 141 (38).

CHAPTER TWO

MEXICAN RELATIONS WITH REPUBLICAN SPAIN

PRIOR TO THE CIVIL WAR (1931-36)

In 1931 Mexico was very much an international pariah. Its revolutionary ill-fame ostracised it in a fashion similar to that of Soviet Russia. Both countries were often compared for their unruliness, anarchy and godlessness. The Revolution's economic nationalism was often equated to communism by the Western press, while relations with the U.S. and Britain were markedly tense. Following the crisis of 1929, Hoover's administration forced the repatriation of more than 300,000 Mexican workers.

Mexico had also strained relations with its southern neighbour Guatemala, where the extreme right dictatorship of Jorge Ubico held sway. Its Latin American counterparts—mostly presided by conservative governments—regarded Mexico with suspicion and contempt. Relations with Peru and Venezuela had been suspended, while those with Argentina cooled to a minimum. In 1930, Mexico also severed diplomatic links with Communist Russia, because of Mexican Communist agitation among the peasantry and alleged Soviet meddling in a railway strike.¹ Official ties with Spain had reached a low point in early 1931, primarily due to the Spanish claims arising from the Revolution. As will be remembered, Many Spaniards had accumulated great wealth and possessions, including vast amounts of real estate, large *haciendas* and business. Much of this property had been damaged or destroyed

¹ Mexico was the first American country and the second western nation to establish diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia in 1924 when both the U.S. and many European powers still kept the Bolshevik regime quarantined. In 1926, Alexandra Kollontai was appointed as Ambassador to Mexico, giving motives to those in Washington whom regarded Mexico as too radical, or even leaning towards Communism. Secretary of State Frank Kellogg is said to have pressed the Mexican government to suspend those links. In any case, Mexico would not renew those relations until 1943, under the instances of the U.S. See William Harrison Richardson, *Mexico Through Russian Eyes, 1806-1940*. Pittsburgh, Pa., University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988 Héctor Cárdenas *Las relaciones mexicano-soviéticas*, México, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1974. Lorenzo Meyer, op. cit., pp. 135-37.

during the long years of conflict,² and the two governments had been unable to satisfactorily resolve the resulting claims.

After the municipal elections of February 1931 returned a sweeping victory for the Republican formula—forcing King Alfonso XIII to leave the country—the Mexican establishment, hitherto introspective, turned its attention towards Spain. The reaction of the Mexican government to the advent of the Republic was unusually enthusiastic given the practice of aloofness established by the Estrada Doctrine. Mexican Minister, Enrique González Martínez was the first diplomatic envoy to approach President Niceto Alcalá Zamora and transmit his country’s endorsement for the new government. On April 16, Mexico became the first country—together with Uruguay—to recognize the Republican regime.

The eagerness showed by the Mexican government in establishing a link with Madrid’s new regime did not come out of the blue. Such a swift and spirited reaction may well induce us to believe that the Mexican government had closely scrutinised events in Spain from August 1930, when the various anti-monarchist parties convened in San Sebastian. The friendship that many Mexican intellectuals, civil servants and diplomats had with the leaders of the Junta Revolucionaria, as well as their ideological associations, made Mexico take sides with them even before they secured power.

An episode of the time reveals the degree of involvement that Mexican officials were having in Spanish affairs. On December 12, 1930 the governmental troops of General Berénguer quashed an abortive revolt organised by the Republicans. As several prominent Republicans were arrested, Azaña hid in Martin Luis Guzman’s house on Velázquez Street where González Martínez readily offered him asylum at the Mexican Embassy. Azaña declined for reasons not disclosed and went into further hiding just before the police raided Guzman’s residence.³ This episode shows the way the Embassy, and, by inference, the Mexican government—as González Martínez could not act without the latter’s approval—were immersed in those events.

² Edith O’Shaughnessy, *A Diplomat’s Wife in Mexico*. New York, Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1916. pp. 93-95 and 176-177.

³ Frank Sedwick, *The Tragedy of Manuel Azaña and the Fate of the Spanish Republic*. Ohio, State University Press, 1963.

From its onset, the Mexican political class showed a great appreciation for the Republic. The Spanish Republic came to be regarded by many as a vindication of the Mexican Revolution, following her example in the abolition of feudal privileges. A number of Mexican officials and trade unionists openly expressed their satisfaction with Spain's political transformation. Their enthusiasm was reciprocated by similar declarations from their Spanish peers. This mutual regard was expressed by an added gesture of goodwill: the Spanish representation in Madrid was upgraded from Legation to Embassy by parliamentary decree. The Mexican government followed suit and took an identical step days later. This was far beyond a symbolic gesture. As Friedrich Schuler has recently observed:

Thirty-four nations had diplomatic relations with the Mexican government in 1935, but only eight of them had considered Mexico important enough to give their representation the rank of embassy. Seven belonged to American nations: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Guatemala, Peru and the United States. Only the eighth belonged to a European country: the government of Republican Spain.⁴

Nearly all Mexican newspapers devoted their headlines to inform about the Republic's proclamation and about the potential implications this event could have for Mexico. Right-wing newspapers, such as *El Universal* or *Excélsior*, while expressing a cautious optimism towards the new regime, preferred to devote their pages to the lot of the fallen royal family.⁵ King Alfonso XIII's abdication and his exile were presented as a noble and dignified gesture. Along with these reports, various editorials and articles written by renowned Mexican and Spanish writers tried to interpret events for the Mexican readers. Mexican government's mouthpiece, *El Nacional*, eulogised the Republic, sent special correspondents and sought the regular contributions of Spanish commentators, politicians and academics to include them in its pages.⁶

These views were amply matched. Many Spanish Republicans had always looked up to the Mexican Revolution with admiration, noting the close resemblance

⁴ Friedrich Schuler, *Mexico between Hitler and Roosevelt*. p .33.

⁵ *Excélsior*, April 21-22, 1931.

of problems and solutions between the two countries. Álvarez del Vayo described the Mexican government as “an example and a stimulus for today’s Spain.”⁷ Minister of Justice, Fernando de los Ríos had equal praise for the Mexican Revolution: “There is a great similarity between your revolution and ours. We are facing identical problems-agrarian, social religious and economic. I consider that the study I have made of your laws will be very useful to me now.”⁸

Spanish writer and diplomat Salvador de Madariaga (1886-1978), a life long Republican, was in Mexico during the proclamation of the Republic. He had arrived there as a visiting professor at Mexico’s National University and to head a technical mission of the League of Nations. *Excélsior* interviewed him about the recent developments in his country:

The triumph of the Republicans is a sanction against the errors of the monarchy. The restoration could have taken root in Spain had it bothered to create a prosperous agrarian class. Instead, the monarchy chose to rely on force. From beginning to end the reign of Don Alfonso has been a military reign. The Spanish revolution represents the latest endeavour through which Liberal Spain attempts to civilise, that is to de-militarise, public life. With this effort, it may be said, that the Spanish Nineteenth Century has finally been laid to rest.⁹

It is interesting to note how for Madariaga, the coming of the Republic meant ultimately Spain’s definitive accession to modernity, a theme that became recurrent among both Spanish and Mexicans liberals alike. The idea of two Spains gained wide acceptance in Mexico as a way of countering the Conservatives’ misappropriation of “eternal Spain.”

During and after the Revolution, Spanish heritage had become the rallying banner of the Mexican Right, which saw in it the origin of the privileges it aimed to

⁶ Editorials of *El Nacional* included the likes of José Ortega y Gasset, Miguel de Unamuno, Azorín, Luis de Zulueta, Manuel Azaña, etc.

⁷ Salvador Novo, *La vida en México bajo la presidencia de Lázaro Cárdenas*. p.348.

⁸ Roberto Núñez y Domínguez, op. cit., pp. 58-59.

⁹ *Excélsior*, April 14, 1931.

preserve. Conversely, for the revolutionaries, Spanish heritage represented everything they wanted to discard, namely religion and property. The two ideologically antagonistic “Mexicos” saw themselves and their adversaries through that prism. In this anti-thesis, the image of a Spain frozen in time was exaggerated by both camps in a somehow caricaturesque fashion.

In that sense, the coming of the Republic meant that for the first time Mexican leftists saw a Spain composed of men different to the conquerors, the grocers, the foremen or the landlords, facing similar problems and sharing their same expectations. This new Spain also afforded the Mexican Revolutionary government the opportunity of confronting the rightists on their own terms. Thereafter, the controversy would not be limited to rejecting or embracing the Spanish heritage wholesale, but to acting as heirs to one or another Spain. Altogether, the Mexican government and its supporters saw in the Republic the perfect occasion to reconcile itself with Spain without coming to terms with the heritage wielded by the traditionalists.

From his sojourn in Mexico, Madariaga also left us a portrayal of Mexican popular responses to the establishment of the Republic in his Memoirs:

Alfonso XIII's message to the Spanish people and the news from Spain monopolised the front-pages of all newspapers, and more. They even relegated the presidential messages about Pan-Americanism to the bottom pages. The effervescence in Mexico was a case beyond belief: jostlings, frights and 50 wounded. However united our colony might be, it seemed that our people were grossly exaggerating. This, I told to Estrada, who confirmed the version nonetheless: there were: 50 injured at least, although none was Spanish.¹⁰

Indeed, there had been a row between Spanish Monarchs and Republicans outside the offices of the pro-Republican journal *España Nueva*, at Madero Street, smack in the middle of Mexico City's downtown. Several Mexican citizens took sides with both groups, and it took police intervention to separate the

¹⁰ Salvador de Madariaga, *Memorias (1931-1936)*, Madrid, Espasa-Calpe, 1974, pp. 244-245.

troublemakers.¹¹ The brawl showed how many Mexicans across the social divide were attracted to Spanish developments, and to what extent they became involved by them.

In Mexican official circles, the appearance of the Republic was seen as the dawning of a new era, signified by the birth of something that was perceived as kindred and dear. It seemed as if Spanish circumstances had come closer than ever to those of the American nations, and had drawn nearer to Mexican revolutionary sentiment. The Spanish Republic meant at last the implantation of a liberal and progressive regime, one that had been several times glimpsed since 1812, yet had never been able to unfold completely. It was the culmination of a revolutionary process, more than century old, full of setbacks, and the expression of the same aspirations and hopes contained in the transit followed by Mexico since its independence, through its Reform and Revolution.¹²

Various Mexicans were also present in Spain at the time of the proclamation of the Republic. Of these, Roberto Núñez y Domínguez, correspondent of *Excélsior* in Spain, was an outstanding eyewitness of the change of regime in Spain, as he consigned what he saw in his book *Cómo vi la República Española*. His testimony is yet another source whence Mexican sentiment towards Spanish happenings may be inferred. Certainly a most engaging report as it bears witness to the metamorphosis experienced later by *Excélsior* before the Republic. Núñez described the euphoria in Madrid, after the April election results were announced, as epochal. The Mexican legation cast aside all diplomatic protocol and openly partook in the celebration. Mexican Minister, Enrique González Martínez, confirmed his impressions on having arrived in Spain at a time of historical shift: "This is one the most definitive moments of Spanish history, as Spain has finally reached modernity."¹³

Another privileged spectator of the historical transformation was the historian Silvio Zavala who had received a grant to carry on research at the Archivo de Indias at Seville, and who covered for *El Nacional* the debates of the Constituent Assembly.

¹¹ *Excélsior*, April 15, 1931.

¹² Félix F. Palavicini, ed., *Méjico: Historia de su evolución constructiva* México, Distribuidora Editorial Libro S. de R.L., 1945, Vol. IV. pp. 257-258.

The projected Constitution generated considerable interest in Mexican political circles, where its conceptual resemblance in several articles to the 1917 Constitution was widely pondered. Special attention was paid to the chapters devoted to the disestablishment of the Church, agrarian reform, and individual guarantees. The incorporation of the writ of *habeas corpus*, or due process of law, which protected the rights of the individual against the excesses of the authority, produced self-conceited pride among many Mexican lawmakers, as it was considered a Mexican contribution to the individual rights.¹⁴

On June 6, 1931 Julio Álvarez del Vayo arrived in the *Spagne* at the port of Veracruz. A chronicle by an eyewitness describes rhetorically the reception given to Álvarez del Vayo:

All ships stationed at the port hoisted the red, yellow and purple flag. From prow to stern, pennants with the national colours of all countries were laid out. The 30th platoon commanded by General Durazo intoned the martial notes of the Riego Anthem.

Former Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Jesús Silva Herzog, gave a speech on behalf of the Workers and Intellectuals Bloc, in which he stated that the representatives of Revolutionary Mexico, who were creating a new homeland, had gathered to greet him:

Those assembled here disagree with the existence of a privileged minority. We consider that all peasants have a holy and indisputable right to a plot of land. We consider that all workers have rights and duties, as consecrated by the Constitution. This Mexico welcomes the first Ambassador of the Spanish people. These revolutionaries coincide with the aspirations of the Spanish people. Men are dissatisfied with the misappropriation by the privileged minorities, with the hoarding of land, with the exploitation of the working class.¹⁵

¹³ Roberto Núñez y Domínguez, *Como vi la república española. Película impresionista*, México, Imprenta Mundial, 1933. pp. 78-80.

¹⁴ Though inherited from the Fueros de Aragón the Nineteenth Century Liberal jurist Mariano Otero rendered the *habeas corpus* in its modern sense. Silvio Zavala, *Las próximas cortes españolas*, in *El Nacional* June 29, 1931.

¹⁵ *El Nacional*, June 7, 1931.

Silva Herzog and Álvarez del Vayo had met before at the Soviet Union where Silva Herzog had been Ambassador. Years later, Álvarez defined his mission as one intended to put an end to a period of misunderstanding between “two people equally sensitive about personal bravery and equally jealous of their independence.”¹⁶ This was not a mission of mere protocol. The Mexican Revolution with its agrarian reforms, had affected the interests of Spaniards who had owned vast stretches of land that were expropriated under constitutional provisos to be distributed among the landless peasants. At the time of Álvarez del Vayo’s arrival there were three hundred unsettled claims, protests, deaths and a pervading tension between Madrid and Mexico. The end of his tenure apparently solved these grievances, while tensions between both countries eased dramatically.¹⁷

Thirteen days later he presented his credentials to Mexican President Pascual Ortiz Rubio. Ortiz Rubio expressed his “special satisfaction and genuine emotion” in welcoming the Republic’s envoy:

The congeniality between our peoples and governments, manifest in the upgrading of our respective representations, expresses, not the cold and affected acts of required diplomatic courtesy between nations, but rather deeper and more affectionate bonds. These sentiments are rooted both in the community of ideals shared by Mexico and the Spanish Republic and in the certitude that we are about to inaugurate a new era in the relationship between our two countries.¹⁸

Beyond the customary rhetoric implicit in all diplomatic practice it is worth noting the stress placed by Spanish and Mexican officials on class discourse, social emancipation and radical reform. In an era distinguished by counterrevolutionary discourse and practice, and even arrogant racist slur, these overtures carried significance far beyond mere effusion, and clearly reflect the identification both regimes shared. They, no doubt, differ sharply to those uttered by other coetaneous European diplomats posted in Mexico. A case in point is British Minister in Mexico, Owen O’Malley St. Clair’s words upon leaving his post which merit to be quoted at

¹⁶ Julio Álvarez del Vayo, *The Last Optimist*, London, 1970, p.202.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 204.

¹⁸ Boletín Oficial de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores 56 no. 6 (1931) *El Nacional*, June 20, 1931

length in order to illustrate, by way of contrast, the refreshing novelty that Republican diplomacy represented for Mexico:

Mexico City is a combination of the sinister and the meretricious. It represents a rather macabre answer to a problem biologically insoluble. I find it impossible to believe that the mingling of Spanish blood with the blood of the numerous tribes of degenerate Indians can make any permanent valuable contribution to humanity. For all the sunshine and glitter of their habitation the people of Mexico City seemed to me to have lost the innocence and beauty of animals without any prospects of learning to understand the life of the spirit, While therefore one could seem sympathise with their difficulties and with their somewhat jejune attempts to raise their standards of life and culture, it was with rather the same sense of escaped that I said good-bye to them as I experienced on terminating a journey through Russia in 1935.¹⁹

Long before the Spanish Civil War broke out, Spain, Russia and Mexico came to be likened negatively in the eyes of conservatives as exemplified by Pius XI's definition of the three outcast nations as the "Red Triangle."²⁰ This paragon was replicated by left-wingers everywhere. A celebrated book of the time, *¿A dónde va el siglo? Rusia, Méjico, España*, by Socialist ideologist, Teófilo Ortega, proposed that these three nations represented, in their respective paths, the avant-garde of social betterment and radical progress of the time. Ortega was careful to establish a parallel between Mexico and Spain and draw the line with Russia. Ultimately, the text aimed to set up an oft-repeated 'third way', a cliché that has been constantly sought after from Tito and the Non Aligned Movement to Blair.²¹ On March 28, 1934 the PNR's candidate professed his faith in socialism and not in communism. Among the reasons he gave to found his beliefs he remarked:

The principal action of the Revolution's new phase is the march of Mexico towards socialism, a movement which is equally distant of the anachronistic norms of classical liberalism and those of communism which has its field of experimentation in Russia. It dissociates itself from liberalism because this

¹⁹ PRO, FO 371, File 21472 A4932/10/26, O'Malley on board of HMS Acquitania, "report to London," June 24, 1936.

²⁰ John, Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope. The Secret History of Pius XII*. Middlesex, Penguin, 2000.

Mexican Relations with Republican Spain prior to the Civil War (1931-36)

was incapable of generating something other than exploitation of man by man. It dissociates itself equally, from communism, as it is not in the idiosyncrasy of our people the adoption of a system, which deprives it from the integral enjoyment of its efforts, nor does it wish to substitute an individual employer with a State-employer.²²

The PNR think-tank that drafted the 1933 Six-Year Plan took good care to stress the unequivocally national nature of the Mexican way to socialism:

The Mexican Revolution progresses towards socialism a movement that draws away equally from the superannuated tenet of classic liberalism and from the norms of the communist experiment being made in Soviet Russia.

In fact, both regimes adjusted to the definition of socialism as characterised by H.G. Wells in the following terms:

The ordinary socialist of today is what is called a collectivist; he would allow a considerable amount of private property but put such affairs as education, transport, mines, landowning, most mass production of staple articles and the like into the hands of a highly organised state.²³

Precisely those ideals were enshrined in both the Spanish and Mexican constitutions. For instance, Article 1 of the Spanish constitution proclaimed Spain to be a “Democratic Republic of Workers of all Classes.” Legislation over property contained in Article 44 of the Spanish Constitution meant a clear alteration of the classical principles of economic liberalism as it stated:

All the Nation’s wealth, whoever may be its owner, is subordinate to the interests of the national economy. Property of all sorts may be the object of forcible expropriation by cause of social utility through means of adequate indemnification. With the same requisites property may be socialised. Public services and assets that affect common interest may be nationalised in those cases in which social need demands so. The State may intervene by law in the exploitation and coordination of enterprises whenever the

²¹ Teófilo Ortega, *¿Adónde va el siglo? Rusia, México, España*. Madrid, 1931.

²² Arnaldo Córdova, *La Revolución en crisis. La aventura del maximato*. México, Cal y Arena, 1995, pp. 485-486.

²³ H.G. Wells, *Pocket History of the World* New York, Pocket Books Inc. 1941, pp. 330-333.

rationalization of production and the interests of the national economy may dictate.²⁴

In similar fashion, Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution provided for the breaking up of big estates and endowment of the land to those who worked it, namely the peons. It also reaffirmed the old Spanish law that subsoil wealth is the property of the nation, a principle later invoked in the oil expropriations. Article 123 was in its time the most advanced labour legislation in the world. It established six-to eight-hour day, social security, minimum wage, and the right of labour to bargain collectively and strike. These measures predated both Roosevelt's New Deal as well as the general trend to Keynesianism and Welfare State in the second post-war.²⁵

Without a doubt there were differences between both countries, yet the sense of identification between both administrations, albeit subjective, largely cemented a shared sense of purpose and identity. This may be the case of Spanish-Mexican identity in the 1930's. Then, in spite of the obvious and perhaps abysmal differences between the two countries, let alone their political classes, both governments chose to draw a parallel between their social challenges and the solutions advanced to confront them. Thus the insistence of both administrations in stressing their identities should not be discarded as rhetorical, nor the parallels of both realities may be downplayed as too remote to hold. Coincidences in given spheres (i.e. agrarian reform, Church-State relations etc.) were too striking as to be ignored by both governing elites as well as by their respective societies. Mexico and Spain had shared 300 years of history and it was patently obvious that many of the social structures Mexico wanted to cast off had been bequeathed by Spanish domination.²⁶ The legacy of authoritarianism, caste privileges and intolerance may not be easily disregarded by way of the particularities each society exhibited at the time.

Although certain regions in both countries had secured levels of relative development—such as Catalonia and the Basque country in Spain or Nuevo León and Veracruz in Mexico—many others remained trapped under semi-feudal modes of

²⁴ Carlos M Rama, *La crisis española del siglo XX*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1976, p.34.

²⁵ Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century*. London, Tauris, 1996. pp.55-56.

production. Nearly 50% of the Spanish Economically Active Population was dedicated to agriculture. Only 25 % was engaged in industrial activities. Out of an active population of eleven million in 1936, two million might be named lower middle class (tradesmen or small artisans) four and a million agricultural workers, and about two to three million industrial workers or miners.²⁷

Among the agricultural regions, the north, the northeast and the coast along the Mediterranean to Valencia were covered with smallholdings long enough to support a family. The rest of agricultural Spain was undeveloped and poor:

Conditions in Andalusia and Extremadura were in 1936 very much the same as they had been since the Reconquista, or even the Romans.²⁸

Yet, it must be said that unlike Mexico, Spain was not a country where the latifundist phenomenon was pronounced, nor did the landed gentry or the clergy played any longer a decisive weight in the agrarian structure of property as in Eastern Europe. Thus, whereas in Mexico properties over 1,000 hectares represented 62% of the total in Spain they only amounted to 5%. Albeit restricted to a certain area, there was a latifundia problem nonetheless. Whereas 96% owned 47% of rural lands 3,5% possessed more than half of them.²⁹ *Braceros* or land-less seasonal labourers were a common element in both countries.

According to the 1938 census Mexico had 16 million inhabitants. Of these, the economically active population was five million. Three and a half million or 70% were engaged in agricultural activities. The Mexican middle class accounted only for 8-9% of the total population.³⁰ It was still a rather small stratum, though an unusually influential one, not least because it included the liberal professions, journalists, doctors and lawyers. Finally, the challenge posed by the Spanish and the Mexican churches, both politically militant, and the liberal attempts in both countries to rid

²⁶ See for instance, Barbara Stein, *La herencia colonial en América Latina* México, Siglo XXI Editores, 1974.

²⁷ Javier Tusell, *Historia de España en el Siglo XX. II. La crisis en los años treinta: República y Guerra Civil*, p. 16.

²⁸ Hugh Thomas, op. cit., 76-77.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 19.

³⁰ *Anuario Estadístico, 1938.* México, DAPP/Dirección General de Estadística, 1939. See also Luis González, *Los artífices del cardenismo*. México, El Colegio de México, 1979. p.33.

themselves of their encroachment, which has been amply studied elsewhere, is also a common feature shared by Mexico and Spain. As a Spanish sociologist has recently established:

The Socialist-Republican coalition of 1931-33 implemented a series of reforms in the fields of land ownership, labour affairs, and education, religious freedom and military organisation that entailed certain similitude or approach to the solutions and outlines that had been attempted in Mexico. Thus, it is only logical that a current of sympathy and solidarity had developed among both countries' cadres.³¹

It is beyond the scope or purpose of this research to deal specifically with each one of the reforms in question, least of all to attempt to analyse them comparatively. Yet, it may be said that the longing for secularisation through education, land reform, a radical social legislation and a developmentalist approach were certainly the most striking among the various shared policies attempted by both revolutionary Mexico and "revolutionary" Spain.³² Ultimately, the very claim by both regimes to be deemed as "revolutionary" offers an additional affinity that may be cited as representative of this desire for renewed identity. In 1936, this coincidence deepened further as both the Popular Front and the Cárdenas administration attempted to establish their own paths towards indigenous forms of left-wing reformism.³³

A regrettable point of coincidence between the two regimes, particularly acute under Cárdenas in Mexico, and in the period running from the Asturian Revolution to the formation of the Popular Front in Spain, was the use of radical violent language,

³¹ Manuel Ortúño Martínez, 'Cárdenas, México y España' in *Leviatán, Revista de Hechos e Ideas* No. 61 II Época, Madrid, Invierno de 1995. p.140.

³² It is interesting to note how in spite of the fact that the establishment of the Republic in 1931 had not come as a result of a violent overthrow, many Republican politicians of the time referred to that change of regime as "the Revolution."

³³ Both the Spanish Republic and the Mexican Revolutionary exhibit a degree of complexity that defies clear-cut definitions. While the Spanish Republic was progressive liberal, the weighty presence of the PSOE in the Popular Front coalition took many to label the alliance as socialistic and even as downright Communist. The same may be said of the PNR-PRM, a regime where Liberals coexisted with Marxists. This "guilt by association" heavily contributed to earn both regimes a reputation as consorts of Communism if not as patently communistic among Conservative circles and American policymakers, something they were far from being. See, Douglas Little, "Anti-Bolshevism and American Foreign Policy." in *American Quarterly*, Volume 35, Issue 4 (Autumn, 1983), pp. 376-390.

no doubt inspired by the then in vogue intoxication with Soviet Communism.³⁴ Such usage often resulted provocative to other political formations and frequently made each government prey to red scares and far-fetched accusations levelled either by their domestic opponents or, more damningly, from abroad. Both Spain and Mexico were capitalist nations in the sense that private property, however contested, was prevalent and enshrined by law. In Spain the employment of inflamed Marxist rhetoric was evident in the PSOE's left wing, where the likes of Largo Caballero, Luis Araquistáin and Julio Álvarez del Vayo flung irresponsibly their visions of a Socialist Spain unto the political debate of the day. In Mexico, people like Lombardo Toledano, Múgica and Bassols were equally reckless in their expressions. This together with anti-clerical discourse in both countries had the effect of alienating important segments of their respective populations, such as the middle classes and the conservative peasantry, sections, which may had otherwise been amenable to their projects. The fact that middle classes in Spain were larger than in Mexico ultimately meant that the perils faced by the Republic as a result of the antagonism of these social groups posed a greater risk

To Mexican Liberals, the Republic represented the “new Spain,” a modern and cultured country governed by an enlightened generation, a salutary development as compared to the old, idolatrous and prudish Spain represented by Pérez Galdós’ *“Doña Perfecta”* that stood for everything the Mexican revolutionaries abhorred, the “old Spain” with its hatred for freedom and its irrational attachment to the Church and the latifundium, the Spain of the *gachupines* and the mutinous generals, lampooned by Valle-Inclán.

To most progressive circles in Spanish America, the Republic’s arrival marked a major departure in their perceptions of Spain. Prior to the advent of the Republic, Spain had had an image as a backward and decadent country. After independence, the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies were for the first time open to other foreign influences. This produced in turn a systematic rejection of Spanish or Portuguese culture, which was deemed to be antiquated and authoritarian. Spanish-Americans tended to regard their former metropolis as fanatical, backward and even fully hostile

³⁴ Diego Rivera ironically remarked, “Mexico is a bourgeois revolution with the language of Karl Marx.” Quoted by Frank L. Kluckhohn, *op. cit.*, p. 220

to progress, and not having anything to teach them. There was a generalised feeling of disdain, among Spanish-Americans who regardless of their country of birth assumed it to be infinitely more advanced a progressive than Spain.³⁵ In sum, Spain was accused of not having fully emerged from the era of inquisition. In their contempt for Spain Latin American upper classes turned to France as a cultural and fashionable role model—Paris became the intellectual capital of Latin America—, the middle classes reacted thinking Spain to be a fanatical country governed by priests, while the working classes hated it as a fulcrum of oppression. In general, Mexican liberals and leftists had been historically averse to:

The Spain of militarism, clergy and aristocracy. Precisely, the three structures that in the life of independent Mexico had represented the Spanish legacy.³⁶

After the Republic's proclamation this view was radically altered as the visits of Spanish intellectuals and progressive politicians helped Mexicans to:

...identify with a progressive Spain, different from the traditional land of Church and bullfighting.³⁷

With the advent of the Republic Spain had begun to recapture some part of her lost cultural empire in the Americas. Students from Spanish America began frequenting Spanish universities again, instead of going as a matter of course to the Sorbonne. In fact, the ill-fated University City on the northwestern outskirts of Madrid had been conceived to attract a Spanish-American clientèle.

Still, this sense of a shared identity was far from being homogeneous. In Spain itself, the identification with the Mexican Revolution seemed to be more pronounced among the Socialists than among the Liberals. Some Spanish Socialists like Luis Araquistáin or Enrique Gómez Barrero were highly enthusiastic in their praise for the revolution as their regular contributions to *El Sol*, or the former's 1928 volume on

³⁵ Frederik Pike, *op cit.*, p.163

³⁶ Octavio Paz, *Las peras del Olmo*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1957. p.136

³⁷ Michael Alpert, *A New International History of the Spanish Civil War*. London, Macmillan, 1994, p.108

the social movement attest.³⁸ After the bloody suppression of the Asturian uprising this identity became stronger among Socialists, as exemplified by Antonio Ramos Oliveira, Chief editor of “*El Socialista*,” who wrote in prison:

The battle of the Republicans to save the Republic has to be in Spain a repetition of the Mexican struggle. The Republic’s enemies are the same antagonists of the Mexican Revolution: the feudal landlord and the Catholic Church, the latter an ally of the latifundist and a latifundist herself. To vanquish the Church and the territorial bourgeoisie—in Mexico they were, literally, one and the same—General Calles availed himself of the 1917 Constitution of Querétaro. With this Constitution, no more democratic or more revolutionary than the Spanish code, the Mexican democrats have defended their country from ecclesiastic piracy and Yankee voracity. But, where is our Calles? Could he be Azaña in a new guise? A Calles without the harshness of the Mexican. A cultured Calles, without the stubborn, energetic and peasant determination of the other.³⁹

Spanish Liberals were far more inclined than their Socialist counterparts to have reservations and misgivings with regards to the Mexican Revolution. Some liberals hailed the anticlerical features of the movement and had praise for the 1917 Constitution that removed every vestige of clerical influence in the secular domain. However, others bitterly complained about the anti-Spanish attitude unleashed by the Revolution.

Whereas *El Sol*, Spain’s leading liberal journal, or *Estampa* consistently defended the revolution, other liberal publications such as *Revista de Ambos Mundos* or *Cultura Hispanoamericana* displayed an ill-concealed hostility against the Mexican social movement.

This animosity became more pronounced after the Presidential election of 1929, when the official candidate, Pascual Ortiz Rubio defeated the charismatic José Vasconcelos amidst widespread allegations of fraud. Vasconcelos, who had toured

³⁸ Luis Araquistáin, *La revolución mejicana. Sus orígenes, sus hombres, su obra*. Madrid, Editorial España, 1930.

³⁹ Antonio Ramos Oliveira, “La revolución en España. Nuevos documentos y revelaciones.” (Último capítulo del libro inédito “La revolución de Octubre” escrito en la cárcel.) In *Revista Futuro* Tomo III, no.5, June 1935. pp. 443-444.

Spain a year earlier, winning the admiration of many Spanish Liberals, was regarded as the true standard-bearer of Spanish Liberalism in Mexican soil, owing to his enlightened views and “spiritualism.” The fact that Ortiz Rubio had won by an exorbitant margin confirmed in their eyes the accusations of ballot rigging and exposed the revolutionary regime as an autocracy. Ironically, Vasconcelos, embittered by his defeat, shifted ever since to the right, embracing wholeheartedly conservative Hispanism. Thus by the time the Republic was proclaimed, Vasconcelos had become one of its most tenacious Mexican antagonists.

For their part, Conservative newspapers such as *El Debate* or *ABC*, with far wider circulation than their Liberal competitors, were predictably disgusted by the Revolutionary government and vented consistent attacks against it. These papers also drew parallels between the Spanish Republic and the Mexican Revolutionary government, albeit for the wrong reasons. Hence, in May 1931, after the first draft of the Republican anti-clerical laws was presented at the Cortes, and several convents were burnt in Madrid, both papers seized the occasion to liken Spain to Mexico. *El Debate* headlined: “Here as in Mexico, the religious persecution has already started,”⁴⁰ while *ABC* captioned: “The sectarian violence will take more lives here than in Mexico.”⁴¹

Some authors have noted that, either by omission or deliberately, Republican politicians failed to criticise or question the “peculiarities” of the Mexican democracy, and that unlike the Republic they set in motion in 1931 the Mexican revolutionary regime was far from being a representative democracy.⁴² In this sense, they argue, Republicans not only refrained from censuring the existence of an hegemonic party, that is the PNR, as undemocratic, many of them actually praised it as a way to end chaotic rule by warlords.

This, however, seems clearly to be a retrospective critique. In 1931 the PNR was only two years old and a far cry from the PRI that came to control all three branches of government, Executive, Legislative and Judiciary, and rule virtually unopposed for over 70 years. In fact, its stability was then far from assured. Recent

⁴⁰ *El Debate*, May 12, 1931.

⁴¹ *ABC*, May 12, 1931.

scholarship suggests that Spanish Republicans themselves were not precisely all that “democratic” either. According to Tussell, Azaña did not want to erect a legal framework for democracy, under which diverse political options could compete against each other, but rather a radical programme of transformation from above. A sort of “despotism of freedom” or “sectarian Jacobinism”* which resembled in many ways what the PNR and its heir the PRM sought to impose in Mexico.⁴³ In any case, it goes without saying that 1930s events should not be appraised through the prism of contemporary values. At the time, governments everywhere put a prime on stability rather than in democracy, and in this, both Spanish Republicans and Revolutionary Mexicans, were not very different from any other politicians of their time.

During his stay, Álvarez del Vayo toured all over Mexico, thoroughly studied the Mexican educational system and had praise for its reforms. On several occasions, he accompanied the Minister of Education, Narciso Bassols—who would later play a key role in Mexican aid to the Republic—in visits through various regions, being impressed by the achievements of the rural schools, teachers' colleges and cultural missions, which so much resembled the pedagogic missions set up by the Republic.⁴⁴ Álvarez del Vayo and Bassols would meet again years later representing their respective countries at the League of Nations, where they joined forces in condemning fascist aggression against Spain. The Embassy of Spain became a gathering place for many Mexican leaders, including diplomats Genaro Estrada, intellectuals Daniel Cosío Villegas and Jesús Silva Herzog and labour leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano. Álvarez del Vayo also became the friend of ex-President Plutarco Elías Calles and of the Minister of War and future president, Lázaro Cárdenas.

⁴² See José Fuentes Mares, *op. cit.*, pp. 143-144; and T.G. Powell, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46

* Jacobinism understood as a form of radical elitist politics, in which an élite, possessed of true social and political knowledge believes itself entitled to obtain and hold political power in the name of the people. Jacobinism is also sometimes used to describe the practice of those who engage in nation-building, forging national homogeneity out of diverse peoples, without much regards to their consent. Both definitions may also be seen as yet another parallel between the Mexican revolutionary regime and the Spanish Republican political class.

⁴³ Javier Tusell, *op. cit.* pp. 94-95.

⁴⁴ Salvador Novo, *La vida en México bajo la presidencia de Lázaro Cárdenas*. México, Empresas Editoriales, 1957.

In one of his private conversations with the Mexican strongman, Álvarez del Vayo noted that Calles kept in his library an issue of the *Diario de Debates de las Cortes Constituyentes*. According to Fuentes Mares when asked by Álvarez about the volume, Calles avowed that he considered its spirit to be “an example for the American democracies.” Álvarez del Vayo wondered: “if the circumstances and spirit of the Cádiz Cortes and the resulting influence of the Constitution of 1812 on the New World were being reproduced.”⁴⁵

The Spanish Ambassador was a well-known and respected socialist politician and journalist whose articles were known to the Mexican educated public through the Mexican press. As may be recalled, Álvarez del Vayo would later become Minister of State during the Civil War years. From that position he would thank Mexico for its contribution to the Republic and often reminisce about his ‘Mexican days.’⁴⁶ Considering these transformations, it may well be said that Álvarez del Vayo instituted a new style for Spanish-American relations. All in all, as Fuentes Mares has noted on the early 1930s Mexico and Spain were to live an *authentic honeymoon*.⁴⁷

The bilateral relation greatly improved owing much not only to personal sympathy between the Spanish Ambassador and Mexican officials, but also to an overall change of attitude of the Second Republic towards Mexico. In effect, the new Republic inaugurated an era of respect and equitable treatment of the Latin American republics, casting aside the paternalistic and patronizing approach of previous Spanish administrations towards their former colonies. In the opinion of a Spanish historian:

During the first two years of the Republic [Spanish Foreign Policy] aimed at a more realist policy towards Spanish America. Old demagogy was rejected, while an economical, cultural and political rapprochement was initiated—in the framework of the League of Nations—aiming at a plain of equality. Here too would political and ideological considerations prevail. A

⁴⁵ José Fuentes Mares, *op. cit.* pp. 142-144.

⁴⁶ See Julio Álvarez del Vayo, *Freedom's Battle*, London 1940.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p.145.

more intense relationship developed with those republics that had democratic regimes—most particularly with Mexico.⁴⁸

Republican mediation was crucial in putting an end to the bloody Chaco War between Bolivia and Paraguay (1932-1936), and played a leading role in settling the Peruvian-Colombian dispute over the Leticia region (1933-1934). Concerning Mexico the change in diplomatic outlook reflected a fresh respect for national traditions, especially indigenous ones. Hence, a new discourse emerged with less reference to Spanish “superiority” and a disposition to understand rather than to impose judgments. This in turn led to a significant attenuation of Hispanophobia among Mexican Liberals.

The ideological affinity and mutual sympathy also translated into very practical results. Through Spanish sponsorship, Mexico entered the League of Nations in 1931. The then Minister of State, Alejandro Lerroux appeared to have played a key role in that negotiation.⁴⁹ Hence the idyll seemed to be bearing tangible fruits and had not only ideological significance. Mexico’s accession to the League gave it the opportunity of having its say heard beyond the traditional realm of Pan-American conferences where it had felt confined by American hegemony. At a first meeting of the Mexican and Spanish delegations to the League of Nations in Geneva, mutual signs of admiration and respect were exchanged. Emilio Portes Gil, first Mexican representative to the League, the Foreign Minister, Genaro Estrada, and the Ambassador to Madrid, Alberto Pani, composed the Mexican delegation. The Spanish commission included Alejandro Lerroux, Salvador de Madariaga and Manuel Pedroso. But not all were pleasantries and compliments. Deep-seated sensitivities and competing national prides could not disappear overnight. Portes Gil has given his rendition of that encounter in his memoirs where he describes a dialogue he had with Lerroux:

Lerroux: I congratulate Mexico for having accepted the invitation that was made to her to enter the League of Nations. My country has given a great

⁴⁸ Ma. de los Ángeles Egido León, *La concepción de la política exterior durante la Segunda República*. Madrid, UNED, 1987 pp. 620-621.

⁴⁹ Daniel de la Pedraja, “La Admisión de los Estados de América Latina en la Sociedad de las Naciones: El caso de México” in *Revista Mexicana de Ciencia Política*, number 57, UNAM, Mexico, July-September 1969.

lesson of civility. In 72 hours and without bloodshed, we have passed from Monarchy to the Republic. This is not the case with other countries that had to sacrifice thousands of victims in order to change regime.

Portes Gil: I congratulate the Spanish Republic for such a transcendent step and for the fact that not a single a drop of blood had to be shed to perform it. Mexico may not boast such a thing. Yet, my country is proud of having shed so much blood, as this has proven beneficial to the fatherland, which has found thus its way to achieve its greatness and the reforms that the current degree of civilisation demands.

Portes Gil added that in a private conversation afterwards, he answered the repeated apologies of Lerroux, who thought he had offended his Mexican interlocutor with his remarks, by saying:

Let us hope that Spain shall not have to shed its blood to lay the foundations of the Republic, and may you secure the success that Mexico wishes you so the Republic may be ever more vigorous.⁵⁰

It may have been that Portes Gil had prophetic vision; however it is more likely that his statement had been made out of nationalist spite, thus exhibiting the degree of mutual suspicion that still remained.

Another limit to the otherwise cordial rapprochement was seen in the rejection by Mexican lawmakers to the proposal to extend Spanish citizenship to all Spanish-Americans, passed by the Cortes in 1931. In Mexico, the law generated renewed controversy between conservatives and the government. In vogue nationalism made it difficult for the Mexican revolutionaries to swallow the proposal without losing face about their purported defence from foreign interference. It may be that the rejection had also much to do with that who advocated the decision and what they represented. Conservative Hispanistas, whose reasoning included historical and cultural affinities as well as utilitarian considerations, enthusiastically lauded the decision. For them, dual citizenship could become a barrier to American imperial intentions and the “Monroeism” of native Yankee-philes by creating a legal statute to the Ibero-American unity, that would be advantageous not only to the countries involved “but

to the whole world.” It was true that the idea of a common Hispano-American citizenship could mean a boost to long sought cooperation and integration. Yet, the very arguments used by its propagandists of “a common historical destiny” or “the future of Hispanic spirit,” by implying a responsibility of the Peninsula over its former possessions smacked of tutelage.

Furthermore, the Mexican constitution excluded the possibility of dual citizenship; as a naturalized foreigner had to renounce its former citizenship, in order to obtain the Mexican nationality. It also prescribed the loss of Mexican citizenship on the acceptance of another nationality. Once approved by the Cortes, Hispano-American citizenship aroused diverse reactions. Some Latin American countries debated the principle in their legislatures and made it compatible with their own constitutions. The Mexican Congress, instead, refused categorically even to consider it.⁵¹

On July 1931, Álvarez del Vayo gave a lecture at the assembly hall of the University of Mexico about the political situation in Spain. Dr. Pedro de Alba, a celebrated Mexican humanist and director of the National Preparatory School, who would subsequently witness the outbreak of the Civil War itself, introduced him. At the conference, Álvarez once more drew parallels between the Mexican and Spanish challenges, and the way both administrations were tackling them. The Ambassador started his lecture making a brief recapitulation of what he literally dubbed the ‘Spanish Revolution’. He denounced previous Spanish governments for having pursued a mediocre foreign policy, “submissive to the Great Powers whose benevolence they valued as a prerequisite for the perpetuation of the Monarchy.” This foreign policy—he said—had been equally responsible for “a rhetorical, stale and unbearable Hispanism that far from endearing the American republics had made them turn away with disgust.”⁵²

⁵⁰ Emilio Portes Gil, *Quince años de política mexicana*. México, Ediciones Botas, 1941. pp. 422-426.

⁵¹ In 1998 the Mexican Congress passed a law that acknowledged dual citizenship. For a full view of the 1931 debate on Hispano-American citizenship, see Ricardo Pérez Montfort, “Mexico y España. Apuntes de una discusión sobre la ciudadanía hispanoamericana en 1931” in *La Jornada Semanal*, Mexico D.F, June, 6, 1993.

⁵² See Julio Álvarez del Vayo, “La República en España” in *El Nacional*, July 18, 1931. For reactions to the lecture, see José Córdoba, “Álvarez del Vayo, conferencista” in *El Nacional*, July 20, 1931.

Calles and Álvarez del Vayo developed a very close friendship, which certainly translated into closer bonds between the two countries. Fuentes Mares said about this mutual esteem that Álvarez felt for Calles “a respect that bordered on fascination.”⁵³ From the Spanish rightist perspective this friendship was frequently derided, as may be seen in a libel written by the leader of the Spanish Nationalist Party, Dr. José María Albiñana:

A brother in law of Araquistáin, Álvarez del Vayo (...) has been appointed as new Ambassador to Méjico (sic). Our diplomatic “prestige” progresses! This character, a dimwit, is ridiculing Spain with the initiative of paying homage to Calles. Naturally! The time has come to pay back the pesetas that his brother in law swindled from him! Diplomacy has its secrets, and I have revealed this one. If such a tribute takes place it shall be a disgrace for Spain.⁵⁴

Álvarez's relation with the Mexican political elite was largely determined by the admiration the Ambassador felt for the General and by Calles' deference towards the Ambassador and the community represented by him. Other cabinet members such as the War Minister, Lázaro Cárdenas or Foreign Minister, José María Puig Casauranc, took a keen interest in Spanish affairs and befriended the Ambassador. After his departure from Mexico, they corresponded regularly.

Owing to these associations and to the general rapprochement between governments that presided over them, several concessions were granted to Spain in what amounted to a most favoured country treatment. Thus, for instance, in 1932, under the patronage of Calles, the Mexican Federal Law of Employment—which limited the number of foreign employees in a Mexican enterprise to a 10% of the work force—was abrogated in cases that could affect Spanish workers. The move was taken in spite of the fact that domestic unemployment was very high. Álvarez del Vayo acknowledged this measure as a gesture of goodwill.⁵⁵ So close was the official rapprochement between both countries that a dispatch sent by the Associated Press

⁵³ José Fuentes Mares, op. cit. pp.142-143.

⁵⁴ *España bajo la dictadura Republicana (Crónica de un periodo putrefacto)* published in Madrid sometime around 1932. For a portrayal of Dr. Albiñana and the activities of his proto-Fascist party consult Antonio Ruiz Vilaplana *Sous la foi du serment*, Paris, Flory, 1938 (2nd. edition).

⁵⁵ AMAE, Álvarez del Vayo al Ministerio de Estado; despacho 41; México, 10 de marzo de 1932.

correspondent in Mexico City to syndicated newspapers worldwide remarked on the fact that:

The extreme nationalist propaganda furthered by anti-Spanish organisations has been waning under the sobering influence of the Mexican government. The latter appears visibly pleased with last year's events in Spain, which turned out in a change of regime, and has acted accordingly toning down the Hispano-phobic discourse it formerly seemed to have sanctioned.⁵⁶

The new climate reflected the change of attitude of Spanish diplomacy towards the Mexican revolutionary government whose nationalist policies the Embassy came to respect. Past relations had been considered as interventionist by successive Mexican governments and this new approach offered a vivid contrast to them. The protests expressed by former Spanish Ambassadors to the government concerning muralist painters or the official school texts were made in a new and constructive fashion. Álvarez del Vayo proposed to erect a statue of Hernán Cortés in Cuernavaca, something that amounted, then and now, to a national taboo in the Mexican psyche. Strangely enough, the Mexican government agreed to the scheme and offered to contribute to it. Nevertheless, the scheme would never materialize.

The relation seemed to achieve its symbolic peak, when Spanish President, Niceto Alcalá Zamora, was officially invited by the Rodríguez government to visit Mexico. The Spanish President accepted the proposition and the news were greeted with excitement, as no Spanish Head of State had ever paid a visit to Mexican soil.⁵⁷ Despite the official acceptance no further talk of the state visit has since been found, either at the newspapers or the official documents of the time, thus depriving us from any explanation as to why the tour never took place.

Regardless, more tangible issues from the bilateral relation seemed to be bearing fruit. A major landmark came in 1933 when Álvarez del Vayo negotiated the sale of 15 Spanish vessels to Mexico. Under his competence an agreement was

⁵⁶ *Excélsior*, December 24, 1932.

⁵⁷ The same day *El Nacional* informed of the planned state visit, Álvarez del Vayo was interviewed on the subject. He declared: There is an enormous ideological interest within the intellectual and workers' circles about Mexico. The same may be said concerning my government. As examples of these sentiments I should mention the current presence in Mexico of the Commission of Friendship and Study, and the future state visit of President Alcalá Zamora. See *El Nacional*, November 12, 1932.

signed for the construction of the vessels *Durango*, *Guanajuato*, *San Luis Potosí*, *Querétaro*, *Zacatecas* and other coast guard cutters with the Sociedad Española de Construcción de Levante S.A. and the Astilleros de Valencia y Cádiz.⁵⁸ The transaction would prove far more transcendent than it may have seemed at the time, for it would provide Cárdenas with an invaluable pretext to justify subsequently the sale of arms to Spain. The intensity that the bilateral cooperation had reached may also be inferred by the fact that Prime Minister Azaña seriously explored the possibility of acquiring concessions of Mexican petrol.⁵⁹

Álvarez attempted to increase commerce between the two nations, notwithstanding the economic downturn caused by world crisis. Nevertheless, he did achieve some success in certain areas. In December 1932, prompted by Calles, Álvarez lobbied for, and secured an increase of chickpea purchases from Mexico. This proved a mutually beneficial arrangement, as chickpea, a legume shunned by Mexicans, was a staple in Spain. Producers in the northern states of Sinaloa and Sonora, who were entirely dependent on the Spanish market for the merchandising of their produce, saw their output soar. Mexico would go on providing up to 60% of Spanish chickpea consumption well up to the Republic's demise. Mexico was Latin America's third importer of Spanish goods, only behind Argentina and Chile, although only Spain's fourth purveyor in the subcontinent. The trade balance was largely unfavourable to Mexico.⁶⁰

When the Spanish community renewed its protests against the publication of books with anti-Spanish content, the Ambassador took a more enlightened approach than his predecessors did. Álvarez realised that the conservative Hispanismo as well as the ignorant prejudices of the Spanish community had done as much in harming bilateral relations as the Hispanophobic libels. The Ambassador tried to counter this, not by requesting the publications' withdrawal to the Mexican authorities, but, rather, by asking the Spanish Foreign Ministry to send Spanish books to furnish libraries and

⁵⁸ AHSRE EMESP. Legajos, 630-677.

⁵⁹ Manuel Azaña, *Memorias Políticas 1931-1933*, México, Grijalbo, 1978 p.320.

⁶⁰ In 1934, Mexico sold goods to Spain for a value of 4, 223, 000 pesetas, while it bought there 12, 263, 000 pesetas. Although, seemingly negligible, it was the only Latin American country where the trade balance with Spain grew, avoiding the slump provoked by the world crisis. See Pike op. cit., p.4.

public schools and thus improve Spain's distorted image.⁶¹ In spite of his good offices, his success in this respect was very limited: only a mere 240 books seem to have arrived. Ultimately, his request would disappear in the labyrinths of Spanish bureaucracy.

Finally, during his tenure, Álvarez performed a successful diplomatic negotiation, when, through his intercession, Peru and Mexico re-established diplomatic links which had been broken since 1932, when Mexico granted political asylum to Raúl Haya de la Torre, leader of the APRA.⁶² His overall record proved fruitful, as he truly improved the bilateral relation and laid the foundations for Mexican commitment to the Republic. Unfortunately, Álvarez had to leave his post prematurely, forced by the political change in his country on September 30, 1933. After his departure, Álvarez continued to correspond with Cárdenas. Álvarez del Vayo later credited President Cárdenas with saving him from arrest; he believed that the telegram that Cárdenas sent him inviting him to his inauguration in Mexico City convinced the Spanish authorities that an arrest could have international repercussions.⁶³

Back in Madrid, Alberto Pani, former Mexican Minister of Finance, presented his credentials as Ambassador to the Spanish president Niceto Alcalá Zamora on August 13, 1931. At the ceremony, Pani also stressed the parallelism of the social challenges faced by both countries, and of the political approaches taken to solve them. More tellingly, perhaps, was the fact that both parts stated their will to recuperate the Carranza Doctrine of Hispanic solidarity against the U.S. growing influence in the Western Hemisphere. Thus while Pani stressed how "racial solidarity" together with ideological identity would conform the basis of a new rapprochement between Spain and its former colonies, Alcalá Zamora defended the launching by the Republican government of an "American policy."

For the first time (and I dare to say so) we have been able to have a foreign policy, more concretely, an American policy that goes beyond verbosity

⁶¹ Archivo del Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores (AMAE) Madrid Legajo R 950 Record 8.

⁶² Nuria Tabanera, *La segunda República española y México (1931-1936)* in Historia 16, January, 1985. pp. 6-7.

⁶³ Julio Alvarez del Vayo, *Give Me Combat*. Boston, Little Brown, 1973, p. 209.

towards substance. An American policy that gives the people at the other side of the Atlantic the sensation not of supremacy that seeks to subject them to the yoke of an institution, which they had already shed. A policy that lying in the similarity of ideals, political formulas and of social structures will enable us to reach a fraternal association of Spanish nations.⁶⁴

Diplomatic contacts at all levels intensified. On July 4, 1931 Azaña, then War Minister, attended a reception at the Palace Hotel, organised by the Mexican military attaché, Daniel Samuano López, to honour a group of Mexican officials who had graduated successfully at the Spanish Military Academy. On that occasion Azaña “conversed pleasantly” with Jaime Torres Bodet who would later play a key role in evacuating Republican refugees out of Spain.⁶⁵ The event was not a rare one as Mexican officers had been sent to Spain to attend courses since the 1920s. Although both armies were diverse in origin and nature, relations between them were cordial. In 1930 a ceremony to honour General Millán Astray was held at the Mexican Legation, while in 1933 the Mexican government decorated several Spanish officials. An unconfirmed version suggests that shortly before the 1936 uprising, General Franco himself had been decorated at the Mexican Embassy.⁶⁶

Pani imposed unto himself as a diplomatic duty, but above all as a personal interest, the daily assistance to the Cortes’ sessions in order to witness “the tournaments of eloquence and wisdom that gave shape to the Spanish Republic’s Constitution.”⁶⁷ Pani declared his admiration for the high values of the Republican intelligentsia and his pleasure in hearing that “several times our constitution of 1917 was cited with praise.”⁶⁸ On one such occasion, on September 26, 1931, the Mexican Ambassador attended the Cortes as a guest of honour. It was not an auspicious occasion. The session that day had gone awry, and Pani had to endure stoically

⁶⁴ Alberto Pani, *Apuntes autobiográficos. Exclusivamente para mis hijos*, México, Editorial Stylo, 1945. p.417.

⁶⁵ Manuel Azaña, *Memorias políticas 1931-1933*, p.15.

⁶⁶ Mary Bingham de Urquidi, *Misericordia en Madrid*. México, Bartolomeu Costa Amic Editor, 1975. p.20.

⁶⁷ Alberto Pani, op.cit., p.417

⁶⁸ ibid. p.418.

continuous interruptions and jeers from Rightist deputies to his Left Republican hosts.⁶⁹

Pani left an interesting insight in his memoirs on what he deemed the impending threat of the old order against the new Spanish regime. In a revealing entry, Pani describes how he perceived in those parliamentarian sessions the extent to which the administrative machinery of the monarchy, together with the “intact strength of the olden blue-blooded families,” represented a burden for the government that reminded him of the unfortunate government of Madero:

Spain, after Alfonso XIII’s flight, as Mexico after the Pact of Ciudad Juárez—*toute proportion gardée*—left unpaid, the toll of blood, wealth and suffering implied in the desired political change. The fact that political transformation was more sudden in Spain than it had been in Mexico made it reasonable to believe that the toll might rise to a point where it could not be paid.⁷⁰

Once again, a Mexican politician attempted to draw a parallel between the short-lived democratic experience of 1913 Mexico and the fledgling Spanish Republic, if only for fear that it could collapse in a similar and brutal way. In a later addition written *ex post facto* in 1945, Pani concluded that the combined strain of native conservative forces and foreign intervention had brought down both democratic projects.

Pani’s tenure was to be a brief one, as he was recalled to serve as Minister of Finance in the new cabinet of President Rodríguez. Genaro Estrada, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, replaced him, showing the importance accorded by the Mexican government to the Spanish representation. Estrada was also the author of the doctrine of Non-Intervention, which bears his name. Mexican opponents to Cárdenas would later invoke this doctrine to censure his aid to the Republic. Interestingly, this note would be conjured by Francoists at a later day to contest Mexico’s refusal to grant recognition to their regime.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Manuel Azaña, op. cit., pp. 186-187.

⁷⁰ Alberto Pani, op.cit., pp.418-419.

⁷¹ “Cada país puede adoptar la línea y política que prefiera ante un conflicto externo, pero Méjico exageró y ha exagerado su posición desde el fin de la guerra civil hasta el punto de incurrir en el

Estrada, who already enjoyed the recognition and respect of the Spanish intellectual milieu, pursued an intense editorial activity, initiating the Mexican Embassy's publishing house. The concern was launched with the manifest intention of divulging Mexico's image in Spain and countering the negative stereotypes generated during the Revolution. In only two years, 1933-1934, the Mexican Embassy published 12 volumes concerning subjects as diverse as art, bilateral trade, archaeology, Mexican history, literature and economy.⁷²

The close contact between the Mexican revolutionary elite and the Spanish Republicans is well illustrated by the intense correspondence exchanged by its leaders and the mutual counsel they dispensed to one another, particularly in moments of emergency. In December 1931, after a protracted strike of the Telephone Company by the CNT trades union, the Republican government considered the possibility of nationalizing without compensation the company, then in the hands of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company. Calles sent several letters to the Spanish government advising the government to expropriate the foreign concern. The admonition not only prefigured the Mexican oil expropriation of 1938, but also symbolizes the shared ideological outlook of both regimes in what pertained to the relation between Labour and Capital, especially foreign-oriented one. Mexican and Spanish trade unions also engaged in that correspondence.⁷³ In the end, the Spanish Government recoiled before American diplomatic pressure.⁷⁴

Another instance of close mutual consultation took place briefly after Sanjurjo's failed uprising on August 1932. On that occasion, Calles went beyond diplomatic protocol and sent a message to Azaña advising him that:

absurdo de (siendo un país que reconoce la doctrina Estrada de no intervención en los asuntos internos de otras naciones) reconocer, contra toda regla del derecho internacional, a un gobierno en el exilio"Fernando Schwartz, *La internacionalización de la guerra civil española*. Barcelona, Ariel, 1971, p.126.

⁷² *El Universal*, October 19, 1934.

⁷³ Fundación Pablo Iglesias. Madrid. Correspondencia entre Plutarco Elías Calles y Francisco Largo Caballero 1932; correspondencia CROM-UGT.

⁷⁴ The Department of State was outraged and demanded Spain that Spain abandon the project. Secretary of State Henry Stimson likened the move to the Bolshevik takeover of power. The dispute dragged on for over a year, and Azaña agreed to withdraw the confiscatory proposal only after Stimson threatened to sever diplomatic relations with Republican Spain. For a complete account of this episode, see Douglas Little, 'Twenty Years of Turmoil: ITT, the State Department and Spain 1924-1944.' in *Business History Review*, 53 (1979), pp.449-472.

If you wish to avoid bloodshed and to uphold the Republic have Sanjurjo shot.⁷⁵

Azaña left the suggestion unheeded, and pardoned Sanjurjo. Four years later the General was to be prominent among the conspirators against the Republic. Such leniency alarmed recurrently the Mexican revolutionary establishment, which saw in it a sign of weakness rather than a sensitive and pragmatic approach. Undoubtedly, the precedent of Madero's tragic downfall in 1910 weighed heavily in their fears. In his memoirs, Jesús Silva Herzog recalled later having been greatly troubled about the excessive magnanimity shown by the Republicans towards its enemies, and how, he felt, benevolence could cost them dearly.⁷⁶

The rapprochement between both governments became emotional due to a tragic episode. On June 1933 the airplane *Cuatro Vientos* piloted by Captain Mariano Barberán and Lt. Joaquín Collar left Seville in a mission of goodwill. The plane made a stop in Havana and was due to arrive to Mexico City, when all contact was lost. En route to the capital, the plane crashed somewhere at the Sierra Madre. An expedition was launched to rescue the ill-fated aircraft, awakening an emotional response from the Mexican public. Poems and scores were composed to honour the fallen pilots who were even compared to Columbus. Thousands of letters from people from all walks of life flooded the Spanish Embassy, expressing their sympathy. On July 16, 1933, a massive demonstration of gratitude to the people of Mexico took place in Madrid. Even unyielding Hispanistas would acknowledge that Mexico had confirmed their "affectionate love for Spain."⁷⁷ In September, President Abelardo Rodríguez bestowed the Aztec Eagle—Mexico's supreme award to foreign nationals—posthumously on the two ill-fated aviators. For Fuentes Mares the tragedy of the *Cuatro Vientos* marked the highest moment of Mexican Hispano-philia ever.⁷⁸

While such displays of emotion may now seem an irrelevant outburst of emotion, it must be remembered that this was the time of pioneering aviation when

⁷⁵ Julio Álvarez del Vayo, *The Last Optimist*. London, Putnam, 1950. p.226.

⁷⁶ Jesús Silva Herzog, *Una vida en la vida de México*. Mexico, Siglo XXI Editores, 1975, pp.165-166.

⁷⁷ *El Universal*, July 19, 1933. For the Republican reaction to Mexican solidarity to the fallen pilots. See Manuel Azaña, *Diarios Robados 1932-1933*. Barcelona, Crítica-Grijalbo Mondadori, 1997. July 16, 1933 entry, pp. 376-377.

⁷⁸ José Fuentes Mares, op. cit. pp., 146-147.

the “aces” were received as bearers of goodwill between nations. Let us recall, in that sense the emotions stirred by the expeditions of Lindbergh in the *Spirit of Saint Louis*, Amelia Earhart, or the sensation caused by Ramón Franco in his voyage to South America. The fact that Franco had not included Mexico in his American tour caused at the time tremendous disappointment.⁷⁹ Hence the expectations the expedition had raised and the feeling of empathy its tragic outcome generated among peoples and governments.

It may be said that until then, Mexico had lacked an authentic foreign policy. Mexico had been virtually isolated from the world and its external relations had focused almost exclusively with its powerful northern neighbour. In that sense, Mexico was able, for the first time since Díaz, to counterbalance its key economic relationships with the United States and Great Britain with the development of important political and cultural links with Spain, and in a minor scale with France and Czechoslovakia.⁸⁰

The Spanish- Mexican rapprochement, however, proved to be a brief honeymoon. Already at the 1933 election campaign, one Spanish rightist party widely distributed a poster showing a bloodstained Spain pierced by a spear on which the words Moscow and Mexico could be clearly read.⁸¹ With the defeat of the Liberal Republican formula in the election of 1933 relations between the two countries rapidly deteriorated. The shift toward conservatism in Madrid caused relations between Mexico and Spain to cool.

After their coming to power Spanish conservatives ceaselessly attacked Calles for his anti-clerical and allegedly left-wing policies. This introduced an element of strain into bilateral relations that had not previously existed. During the 1934-35 period, Mexican diplomats bitterly complained over what they assumed to be a “campaign against Mexico” conducted by the Conservative press and the Spanish Catholic hierarchy. As Alpert has observed: “the Spanish Right used consistently Mexico, where anti-clericalism was even fiercer than in the mother country, as an

⁷⁹ Frederick Pike, *Hispanismo*, op cit., pp. 132-133.

⁸⁰ Friedrich Schuler, op cit. p.139

⁸¹ “Ambassador of Mexico to Mexican Foreign Ministry.” Madrid, November 22, 1933. AHSRE III/243 (72-46)/2, III-125-42.

example of the horrors of revolution.”⁸² In December 1934, Madrid’s *Informaciones* published an editorial warning Spaniards to be on guard against Communism lest Spain become “another Mexico.”⁸³ When Mexican diplomats tried to get their versions of the religious conflict in Mexico published in Spanish papers they were unceremoniously turned down.⁸⁴

By an ironic coincidence, as Lerroux and Gil-Robles began to reverse the programmes of the Republic, Mexico elected President Cárdenas, who planned to carry out many of the unfulfilled promises of the Mexican Revolution, many of which had existed largely on paper for more than a decade. As their policies diverged, the two governments became suspicious of each other and began to criticize each other’s policies. Relations were not to be friendly again until just before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.

On April 1934, Lerroux appointed Domingo Barnés Salinas, who had served in his first government and Martínez Barrios’ as Minister of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, as new Ambassador. Little of his activities are known other than that he decorated some Mexican generals and that he travelled to Villahermosa, Tabasco, fief of the staunch anti-clerical Tomás Garrido Canabal to attend the Workers and Peasants Congress. Barnés also witnessed the 1934 election on which Cárdenas was returned to the Presidency. According to his report, the election was the quietest that Mexico had witnessed in years. Notwithstanding, he reinstated the patronizing tone that had characterized many of his predecessors, by referring to the polls in the following terms:

The way elections are understood and practiced in Mexico is a thorough demonstration of how uncivilised these people are.⁸⁵

Barnés’ tenure was a short-lived assignment, as he left his commission on October 1934, in protest at the repression that followed the Asturias insurrection.⁸⁶ The post was vacant until March 1935, which meant that the inauguration of

⁸² Michael Alpert, *A New International History of the Spanish Civil War*, p. 108.

⁸³ *Informaciones*, December 12, 1934.

⁸⁴ AHSRE, III/514(46) (04)/1; III-307-31.

⁸⁵ AMAE, Legajo, R 965, Record 14.

⁸⁶ *El Universal*, October, 7, 1934.

Cárdenas as President had to be attended by the Spanish Minister in Costa Rica, Luis Quer y Boule, as requested by Madrid's Chancellery. This move utterly displeased the Mexican government, which took it as an outright snub. The Lerroux government then appointed Emiliano Iglesias Ambrosio, a Radical deputy, as Ambassador to Mexico.

Iglesias was a very discredited figure. He had been involved in a corruption scandal in 1931 when he offered Radical deputy, Jaume Simó Bofarull, 25, 000 pesetas if he succeeded in getting his parliamentary group to turn a blind eye to Juan March's illegal activities. March rewarded him with a payment of 200, 000 pesetas. As a result of these illegal activities the Spanish Cortes impeached him. Azaña refers to Iglesias as a 'barbarian' an anti-Catalanist and a "rather asinine character."⁸⁷ It was rather an inauspicious appointment. To add injury to insult, the Lerroux government abruptly suspended the purchases of Mexican chickpea, which in its turn gave rise to numerous complaints by the Mexican press.⁸⁸

During his stay in Mexico, Iglesias protested continuously against what he regarded as nationalist affronts against Spain. Official Mexican identification with Azaña's left liberal government made Mexico vulnerable to attacks from the Spanish Rightist press. Thus the Spanish Catholic press ended its truce and renewed its attacks against the 'atheist' Calles. Special hostility was reserved for the socialist education law, promoted by Bassols and enacted on July 1934. The law idealistically and candidly declared that the socialist school was to be "obligatory, free, co-educational, integrative, progressive, scientific, cooperative, de-fanatizing, emancipating and nationalist."⁸⁹

For Spanish Catholics, instead, the law proved, beyond dispute, that Mexico had become the "first beach-head of International Marxism in Spanish America." According to *Razón y Fe*, a Spanish Jesuit periodical, Liberal democracy had engendered in Mexico its inherent offspring, 'atheistic socialism'. Therefore, Mexico, having joined Russia as one of the 'Satano-cracies' of the world, had

⁸⁷ Manuel Azaña, *Memorias* pp. 268 and 273-277.

⁸⁸ AMAE, Legajo R 962, Record 9.

⁸⁹ Victoria Lerner's, *La educación socialista en México*. México, El Colegio de México, 1979. is the classic study on socialist education.

replaced religious instruction with sexual education in all schools. In due course, Mexican boys and girls bathed together in the nude in order to arouse their carnal appetites.⁹⁰

In similar vein, the Mexican conservative press like *Excelsior* used the downfall of the Azaña government to advance its domestic agenda. After the failed October Revolution in Asturias, the paper accused Azaña of attempting to deliver Spain into “the clutches of International Communism and the Soviet Union.” Several editorials of October 1934 taunted the ‘Reds’ for trying to establish a ‘godless tyranny’ and for aiming to drown “immortal Spain” into the bloodshed perpetrated by the ‘ignorant and resentful riffraff.’

Meanwhile, Iglesias spent his days denouncing films with anti-Spanish content, and condemning school texts and books that indulged in the aforementioned stereotypes of “bloodthirsty conquerors” and the “greedy Spaniard.”

To make matters worse a scandal broke out when it was revealed that state schoolteachers received examination books containing questions unequivocally insulting to Spain. One question required pupils to discern correct statements among the following possible answers to form a list:

During their rule of Mexico the Spaniards (a) encouraged drunkenness among Indians; (b) built roads to facilitate communications; (c) encouraged robbery among the Indians; (d) put to use all sources of food production; or (e) left the Indians in the most complete ignorance.

Another question stated:

For forty years the Spaniards murdered in America 15 million Indians.

Calculate the number of Indians killed per year.⁹¹

As was to be expected, Iglesias issued a heated official complaint to the Mexican Chancellery, in December 1935, about the contents of the public school primer. The note claimed that textbooks aroused hatred against Spain. Such a curriculum was “poisoning the minds of Mexican children, and predisposing them

⁹⁰ Quoted by Frederik B. Pike, op cit., pp. 294-295.

against the Spanish blood that lay at the root of their origins.⁹² Despite such reproaches the new President, Lázaro Cárdenas tried to maintain an amiable attitude towards Iglesias. Therefore, he was invited to attend the Mexican Congress and deliver a speech, which was cordially, if not enthusiastically, applauded.

Having been largely neglected by the successive Ambassadors during the so-called Two Black years the Spanish representation fell effectively under the control of the First Secretary Ramón María de Pujadas, who had been appointed by Barnés on September 1934. Pujadas revived the reactionary style and content that had been characteristic of the Monarchic diplomacy. He was mainly responsible for the reports sent to Madrid during that period. In spite of Quer y Boule's presence Pujadas sent the report concerning Cárdenas' inauguration. The Spanish secretary remarked the absence of military in the new cabinet and drew attention to the presence of several Callistas in it, all of which confirmed, in his opinion, the continuity of the General's patronage over the new government. The appointment of the frenzied anti-Clerical, Tomás Garrido Canabal,⁹³ as Minister of Agriculture made Pujadas share the anxieties of the Mexican Right that the new government might unleash a new round of religious persecution:

Garrido Canabal's inclusion in the cabinet bestows this government with a radical and intransigent character over religious affairs, given his well-known anti-Catholic inclinations, rabidly displayed during his long tenure as Governor of Tabasco.⁹⁴

Pujadas identified Garrido as:

⁹¹ *Excélsior*, November 14, 1935 and December 10, 1935.

⁹² 'Emiliano Iglesias a Eduardo Hay', December 3, 1935, AHSRE, III/243 (46-72), AMAE, Legajo R962, exp. 9.

⁹³ Leader of the regional Radical Socialist Party, Garrido rose to become Governor of Tabasco. From that position he aimed to socialize the State and drive the Church out of its bounds his laws on the Church were the strictest in Mexico. The number of churches that could function was drastically reduced. Begun in the name of fighting Catholic fanaticism, Garrido's radicalism became in its turn a new fanaticism. Extravagant decrees were passed. Priests had to be married in order to officiate, making it impossible for them to carry their religious duties legally. Public burnings of sacred images and saints became commonplace.

⁹⁴ AMAE, Legajo R 962 , File 8.

The brain behind of the so-called Red Shirts, a priest-baiting organisation and one of the most exceptional upholders of socialist ideology within the PNR.

To all appearances, Pujadas seemed to be correct in his appreciation as by early 1935 a bloody confrontation between Catholics and Red Shirts in the southern suburb of Coyoacán, resulted in the killing of five churchgoers and one Red Shirt, tainting the new administration. In his New Year's message, Cárdenas accused clerical elements of plotting anti-patriotic schemes from abroad. The confrontations continued, and by early January the Red Shirts staged yet another altercation in Mexico City's downtown. This time the government outlawed the demonstrations, and ordered the Red Shirts back to Tabasco.⁹⁵

Pujadas notified his Ministry about the event as a Spanish citizen was among those murdered in Coyoacán. The *chargé d' affaires* met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Emilio Portes Gil, and demanded him a clarification of events and "punishment for whomever may be blamed."⁹⁶ For Pujadas the new government was veering towards communism, as the administration was "fomenting strikes and agitation in accord with Russian radical elements."⁹⁷

On another dispatch he criticized the appointment of General Manuel Pérez Treviño, as new Ambassador to Spain, in regard to his attacks against the Catholic Church while he deplored his unaccountable enrichment under the cover of the revolutionary governments.

Although Cárdenas had declared an end to religious persecution, the Catholic press in Spain continued its attacks against the Mexican government, denouncing a recurrence of religious oppression.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, in the light of those declarations,

⁹⁵ As Minister of Agriculture, Garrido imported an ass and an ox, which he duly named Pope and Bishop, and displayed them in several cattle fairs across the Republic. His Red Shirts organised every weekend 'cultural' festivals, dubbed 'Red Saturdays' at Mexico City's Palace of Fine Arts, at which blasphemy and sacrilege were commonplace. At one of such events, the main speaker 'challenged' God to prove his power by throwing a beam to the building and although "the Almighty disdained the challenge, several Red Shirts left the theatre, lest the Inexistent may answer the dare", Fernando Benítez, *Lázaro Cárdenas y la Revolución Mexicana. Vol. III El cardenismo*. México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1978. pp. 15-16.

⁹⁶ AMAE, Legajo R 962, File 9.

⁹⁷ AMAE, Legajo R 712, File 42.

⁹⁸ *El Debate*, February 28, 1935.

the Spanish government felt compelled to attempt a mediation between the Vatican and Mexico, which possessed no diplomatic links, through Pujadas and its Ambassador at the Holy See, Leandro Pita Romero.⁹⁹ It is worth noting how the Rightist Government assumed a moral authority capable of bringing back ‘impious’ Mexico to the fold of the “Spanish family of nations.” Pujadas had an interview with Foreign Undersecretary, Ramón Beteta on the matter. Notwithstanding, Spanish good offices were snubbed by Mexican officialdom. According to a letter subsequently sent by Pujadas to Pita, the Mexican government wanted:

The complete submission of the Church to the State, thus making very remote the possibility of a rapprochement between the Mexican government and the Vatican.¹⁰⁰

In the same letter Pujadas warned about the ominous implications for the Spanish community if the Spanish government insisted on the mediation.

From 1931 on Calles’ early radicalism had waned under American pressure. As he became the Revolution’s true boss, a succession of puppet Presidents was elected under his domination, abandoning many of the Revolution’s most radical goals. It is not altogether clear why Calles decided to select Cárdenas as the PNR’s presidential candidate in 1934. Calles had expected Cárdenas to submit meekly to his influence as his predecessors had done.

Alarmed by Cárdenas policies and by his success at generating mass support among workers and agrarian labourers. Calles initiated a confrontation with the President. When an unprecedented series of workers’ strikes broke out throughout 1935, the old General angrily protested against the government’s complacency with disorder and ‘unpatriotic’ industrial action. In subsequent declarations to the press, Calles condemned the divisions in Congress, the “marathon of radicalism” and the strikes disturbing the nation. Moreover, Calles slid the thinly disguised threat that the President could end as ignominiously as Ortiz Rubio, the pawn President that had succumbed under Calles supremacy, did.¹⁰¹ It was clearly a challenge. Beneath

⁹⁹ AMAE, Legajo R 962, File 9.

¹⁰⁰ AMAE, Legajo R 962, File 12.

¹⁰¹ *Excélsior*, June 12, 1935; *El Universal*, June 12, 1935.

appearances, the anti-clerical provocations had been a stratagem by Calles, through his henchman Garrido, to discredit Cárdenas and to make him clear who was really in control.¹⁰²

Pujadas depicted the mounting split between Cárdenas and Calles as a result of the new president's "unabashed embrace of communism." He pointed that Cárdenas was weak and in no position to challenge the strongman's dominion. The conflict evidenced the emergence of a rightist tendency, supported by Calles, which was opposed to the radicalism that Cárdenas was conferring to his administration, particularly in the domains of education and labour relations. Pujadas defended Calles' declarations as a note of "good sense and prudence in the face of the radical excesses of the new President."¹⁰³

As it is known, in the clash of wills, Cárdenas leaned on the peasants and workers to force a final confrontation with Calles, purge the cabinet and Congress of Callistas, and expel him from the country in April 1936. Fellow politicians, Francisco Múgica, Gildardo Magaña and Saturnino Cedillo incited the new president to show his independence. For them as for others in the PNR, Calles' words had become an illegitimate and menacing intrusion to the viability of the government. Accordingly, the government fomented strikes as a show of strength in order to discourage the old boss.

In February 1936, concurrently with the Popular Front electoral victory in Spain, Vicente Lombardo Toledano and Cárdenas launched the Mexican Workers' Confederation (CTM) a strong coalition of several trade unions that received support and financial backing from both the PNR and the Mexican government. Subsequently, Lombardo would often embarrass the government and Cárdenas himself with his verbal incontinence. Such excesses had the effect of alarming the middle class and playing on their fears of a communist takeover.

¹⁰² Lorenzo Meyer has suggested that "*the objective of the Maximum Chief was to destabilize the new administration in order to prevent it from gaining the strength and confidence necessary to challenge him.*" See Lorenzo Meyer, *Los inicios de la institucionalización: La política del Maximato*. México, El Colegio de México, 1978. pp. 294-295.

¹⁰³ AMAE, Legajo, R 962, File 9.

Ironically, Calles had become in the eyes of many Mexicans Conservatives as well as Spanish rightists the sole guarantor of “law and order” against the radicalisation brought about by Cárdenas. Calles was not silenced of course and from his exile in Texas he accused Cárdenas of planning “to socialize the machinery of production, disregard property rights, and establish a collective system of agriculture similar to that of the Soviet Union.” Moreover, he warned, Communism would not work in Mexico.¹⁰⁴ On March a new series of strikes impelled the Employers Confederation to issue a protest against the unruliness of the trade unions and to threaten a general lockout. Cárdenas openly sided with the workers’ organisations and even threatened to let the workers seize the factories “if the entrepreneurs felt tired enough to continue.”¹⁰⁵ Rumours about an imminent rightist coup, headed by Calles, grew to the day. Pujadas sent reports concerning these conflicts and assured its Ministry that:

At schools a systematic campaign is being completed to bring about Communism. In the area of labour relations, Cárdenas, far from appeasing employers concerns, has openly scorned them.¹⁰⁶

For Pujadas, a fresh realignment of Rightist forces under a new common front was distinctly taking place:

The expulsion of Calles has only reinforced Callismo, as it now represents everything that is rebellious against General Cárdenas and his government. It is the landlord, the industrialist, the merchant, and the small saver, in sum, all of those who suffer the consequences of Mexican social policy.¹⁰⁷

By then, however, Spain itself was experiencing considerable agitation. On February 12, 1936, the Spanish election returned a precarious victory for the Popular Front, yet enough for the Leftist coalition to form a government. The result was greeted with unconcealed satisfaction by the Cárdenas administration, which saw in it the arrival of a cognate regime and the renewal of the special relation of the early thirties.

¹⁰⁴ José C. Valadés, *Historia general de la Revolución Mexicana. Tomo 9. Un Presidente Substituto*. Mexico, SEP/ Ediciones Gernika, 1985.

¹⁰⁵ Luis González, *Los días del Presidente Cárdenas*. México, Editorial Clío, 1997, p.62.

¹⁰⁶ AMAE, Legajo 712, File 41.

The new government's envoy, Félix Gordón Ordás, arrived in May 1936, amidst the acclaim of the Mexican governing circles that had great expectations over the bilateral connection. They had good reasons to be optimistic as the new Popular Front government had as a priority the re-launching of the bilateral nexus, setting itself towards a greater cooperation. In his first declaration to the Mexican press Gordón made clear his government intentions and summarized what would be his tasks in Mexico:

We shall work intensely so the relations between Mexico and Spain grow ever closer. We have the prime objective of implementing a free trade agreement. We shall clarify the true situation in the Iberian Republic.¹⁰⁸

In an era characterised by a staunch protectionism of the world trade, such an ambitious goal reflected the importance attached by Republican Spain to the development of preferential relationships with Mexico. If the Constitution of 1931 had prescribed a "cultural expansion of Spain in Latin America" and the first Republican government had committed itself to extending full citizenship to all Latin Americans, the Popular Front aimed to endow with a new meaning the relationship with its former colonies by way of an increased economic association.

At his presentation of credentials before President Cárdenas, Ambassador Gordón reiterated sentiments expressed five years before by Álvarez del Vayo. More than ever, he said, Mexico and Spain were linked together by common social philosophies and programmes:

Today, once again, we have parallel historical destinies. Both our nations are confronting the same challenges in a similarly dramatic way. In both our countries the same pressure of the masses is felt towards an increased social justice. Therefore, Republican Spain understands deeply Mexico's monumental efforts to fulfil its historical destiny. It is only logical then, that the Spanish people and government fervently aspire that Mexico may

¹⁰⁷ AMAE, Legajo R 962, File 9.

¹⁰⁸ *Excélsior*, May 29, 1936.

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render into the most prosperous reality all the idealism of its generous aspirations.¹⁰⁹

Cárdenas response equally emphasized the ideological ties that bound together the two regimes:

I share your Excellency's views about the mutual historical destiny that unites Mexico and Spain. This parallel now extends to a common social task, which I am sure will be effectively and promptly accomplished in both countries. Please express to your government, Mr. Ambassador, that Mexico understands and estimates its demonstrations of international cordiality, and that we will now and in the future strive to achieve in both nations a unity of objectives and actions that will serve our two peoples, who have joined permanently to seek the same solution to our social problems.¹¹⁰

Sadly for them, the Spanish Civil War broke out exactly 40 days later.

¹⁰⁹ Félix Gordón Ordás, pp. 153-154.

¹¹⁰ ibid. p.155.

CHAPTER THREE

MEXICO AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR. MATERIAL AID AND DIPLOMATIC SOLIDARITY

The Spanish Civil War attracted the attention of international public opinion in a way that was unmatched since the days of the First World War. Perhaps no other international event has stirred such an emotional response. This was even more pronounced in Latin America where the cultural and “racial” kinship meant that the war was felt even more passionately than elsewhere.¹ Moreover, the Spain of the 1930s appeared to Latin Americans as a mirror that reflected similar predicaments to those that unfolded in their respective societies. In addition, the fact that many had Spanish relatives or, at least, ancestry meant that no Spanish American country could allow itself to be unconcerned about Spanish events or feel alien to them.² Spain was also the laboratory of a European civil war that in fact broke out only months after the demise of the Republic.

In Mexico the challenge to a radical reformist government posed by the military rebellion was felt even more deeply than in other Spanish American nations as it was only there that a revolutionary regime held sway. From its onset, working class organisations under the newly formed Mexican Workers’ Confederation (CTM) viewed the Spanish conflict with alarm fearing it might spread to the domestic front. Their concern was shared by the Cárdenas administration, which felt, correctly, as time would prove, that Spanish events might give inspiration to local conservatives. The continuity and success of one regime necessarily would have an impact upon the other. More so as both countries were regarded as international outcasts.

¹ See, for instance, “The Other Spains. Spanish America and the War” in *The Times*, August 24, 1937.

² Arnold J. Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs 1937. Vol. II The International Repercussions of the War in Spain*. Oxford, University Press, 1938. pp. 210-211.

In that sense, it may be said that Mexican diplomacy made Spanish affairs an integral part of domestic ones, insofar as the Republic's survival was deemed essential to the unhampered continuity of the Mexican Revolution programme. But it would be inaccurate to assume that only the Mexican government reacted to the Spanish conflict. The Spanish war afforded Mexican Conservatives with the possibility of portraying the Spanish Republic as a red anti-Christian bastion, and thus, to play on the religious sentiments of the Mexican masses and upon the fears spawned by the Russian Revolution and by the Mexican Revolution itself, whose anti-clerical excesses were apparently being reproduced in Spain.

For many Mexicans, as for the rest of the Western world, the Spanish war was the ultimate battlefield where the mutually excluding principles of democracy and authoritarianism would settle their differences. For others it was a struggle between fascism and communism. For yet others, a conflict opposing Church and State, people and army, Republic versus dictatorship. The very complexity of the Spanish Republic facilitated the identification with the diverse colours of an ample spectre of ideologies and political stances. In that sense Mexicans of different political hues "appropriated" the Spanish war to push forward their own political agendas. As *The Times*' correspondent in Mexico City noticed:

The Spanish War has seized and held firmly the imagination of the people of Mexico, even more than the American presidential election; and it is on Spain, rather than on Washington, that Mexico waits for an indication of her own political future.³

Another contemporary eyewitness, Evelyn Waugh, further developed this view:

The war in Spain was very much more real to them than any other piece of contemporary history; more real even than Roosevelt's New Deal. They understood the Spanish issue in Spanish terms, without any English and French and American confusions, and felt strongly about it one way or the other. It was like part of their own lives.⁴

³ "Mexican Eyes on Spain. Temptations to Generals" in *The Times*, London, November 4, 1936.

⁴ Evelyn Waugh, *Robbery Under Law. The Mexican Object-Lesson*. London, 1939, pp.37-38.

MEXICO IN THE EVE OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR. A RECAPITULATION

Waugh's statement accurately captures not only the Mexican response to the Spanish war, but the comparable effervescence Mexico was living in its wake; the domestic clashes which echoed those in Spain, and the deep polarity of the Mexican society; discrepancies that went well beyond the more obvious divide between left and right.

In that sense, according to the *Times*' Mexico City correspondent, beyond:

...the racial and cultural affinity of a former colony with its mother country the Mexican people feel themselves divided by the same rift of political opinion that has made a battlefield of Spain.⁵

When Cárdenas became President, he inherited a situation that had been stabilized to some extent but still had explosive potential. Mexico's political future was anything but certain. Some stability had been achieved in presidential succession since 1920. The creation of the PNR had secured elite cohesion and discipline. Furthermore, since the late 1920s the army had been increasingly professionalised and removed from direct intervention in politics. However, in 1934 the regime's future was anything but certain, and few were aware that it was indeed, in the midst of a dangerous fracture.

At the PNR's presidential nominating convention in 1933, an internal cleavage between party renovators and Conservatives had become apparent since its very opening. Whereas Calles himself had become increasingly conservative on issues such as land reform and labour militancy, other members of the revolutionary group concluded that the regime needed to move to the left.

In view of the growing conservatism displayed by the regime, or what seemed to many the exhaustion of the Revolution's early promises, various party cadres sought a revitalization of the Mexican Revolution through Marxist ideology. This is not surprising in light of the prestige enjoyed then by the Soviet Union, and since Calles himself had also promoted experimentation along fascist and Soviet models, especially after the 1929 crisis.⁶ The appearance of a leftist wing in turn gave rise to

⁵ *The Times*, London, November 4, 1936.

⁶ José C. Valadés, *Historia general de la Revolución Mexicana. Tomo 9. Un Presidente Substituto*. Mexico, SEP/ Ediciones Gernika, 1985. pp. 18-30.

the emergence of cliques within the party as early as 1930. The PNR itself was far from being a monolithic entity. Its origins lay as a coalition designed to articulate the competing demands of the diverse revolutionary factions within the regime. Still, the disagreements within the party came to the fore during the Convention.

The drafting of a Six-Year Plan, of clear Soviet echoes, became the battleground between supporters of the revolutionary *status quo* and those who sought to radicalise the process. At the Convention the leftist bloc succeeded in imposing its views upon the Callistas. Nowhere was this more clearly seen than in the realms of education and land reform. Among other resolutions, the congress agreed to reform Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution to provide for mandatory ‘socialist’ education in public schools.⁷ What the concept meant was far from clear even to those who postulated it. Nonetheless it clarified the necessity of renewing the revolution. Calles and Rodríguez tried to oppose the passing of the resolution by diverse means to no avail.

Two prominent cabinet members, Generals Lázaro Cárdenas and Manuel Pérez Treviño, Ministers of War and Interior respectively, emerged as the front-runners in the party’s candidacy. The former was identified with the party’s left while the latter represented distinctly its right wing. Ultimately, Calles anointed Cárdenas as the party’s nominee, conceivably on account of his loyalty towards him, or, as has been suggested, because he had no relevant previous political history, and perhaps thought him easier to manipulate.⁸

The 1934 Presidential election confronted the PNR with a divided opposition both from the Left and the Right. The PCM regarded the leftist Cárdenas as yet another stooge of Calles, and consequently fielded its own candidate, secretary-general, Hernán Laborde. In this conclusion they seemed justified as a luminary of the regime’s left wing, Adalberto Tejeda, launched his own candidacy through the Partido Socialista de las Izquierdas.⁹ For Tejeda, like for other leftist veteran

⁷ Gilberto Bosques, *The National Revolutionary Party of Mexico and the Six Year Plan*. Mexico, Partido Nacional Revolucionario, 1937.

⁸ José C. Valadés, op. cit. pp. 109-110.

⁹ Tejeda’s PSI sprung from the radicalised agrarian communities of Puebla, Veracruz and Tabasco and reflected the discontent of many leftist revolutionaries with the regime’s shift to the right. See Romana Falcón, op. cit. pp. 134-137.

revolutionaries Calles' inner circle had experienced an attitude of 'revolutionary regress' since 1929, and the PNR 'no longer represented the interests of workers and peasants'.¹⁰

In a like manner, the Mexican Right seemed incapable of settling its differences and fielding a single candidate. From his exile Vasconcelos advised his followers to abstain from the election so as not to legitimise the regime. Despite his admonitions, a sizable segment of the Right, mainly represented by the Anti-reelectionist Party (PNA) and the so-called Confederación Revolucionaria de Partidos Independientes (CRPI), mobilised to contest the Presidency.¹¹ A volatile coalition of discontented ex-revolutionaries, Catholics and ex-Cristeros, and open advocates of fascism, such as Diego Arenas Guzmán, editor of the ultra-rightist tabloid *El Hombre Libre*, joined forces to pick a candidate.

The most outstanding figures in the fray were Luis Cabrera, a former finance minister, Gilberto Valenzuela, leader of the misnamed Partido Social Democrático, and the disaffected General Antonio I. Villarreal.¹² After some initial wavering Cabrera declined the nomination, arguing that he saw no object in elections as long as Calles controlled the army and the bureaucracy. His decision engendered much animosity within the Rightist camp as Cabrera and Villarreal viciously exchanged accusations of collusion with the regime.

Ultimately, Villarreal organised his own party, and disowned the anti-reelectionists that had launched the candidacy of Román Badillo. Unable to settle its differences the Right partook in the election with two separate nominees. Like the Vasconcelos campaign five years earlier, the opposition headed by Villarreal included many true-blue conservatives. Strange bedfellows, Catholics, ex-Cristeros, and displaced revolutionary veterans rallied behind the old revolutionary. Anxious to secure an entente with the government, the Church hierarchy distanced itself from the

¹⁰ Lázaro Cárdenas, *Obras I. Apuntes 1913-1940*. México, UNAM, 1972. p.229.

¹¹ John W. Sherman, *The Mexican Right*, pp. 33-34.

¹² Villarreal participated in the 1929 Gonzalo Escobar revolt, closing chapter of Mexican military intervention in national politics. The government crushed the revolt with the support of United States and by mobilising labour and agrarian forces. See, John W. Dulles, *Yesterday in Mexico. A Chronicle of the Revolution, 1919-1936*. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1961. op. cit., pp. 218-263.

coalition. Moreover, the failure of Vasconcelos to endorse the campaign further harmed its possibilities.

Gross disparity of forces and the ceaseless harassment of the rightist alliance by the PNR's apparatus dominated the 1934 campaign. Widespread suspicion and the apathy generated by the electoral fraud of the 1929 election against Vasconcelos made up the rest by de-mobilising the electorate. The official count returned a landslide victory for the PNR with a dubious margin of 2,2 million for Cárdenas, 24,000 for Villarreal 16,000 for Tejeda and 1,118 for Laborde. There were the usual allegations of fraud, and there was talk that Villarreal would set off an uprising from Texas, but nothing came to pass.

Cárdenas' inauguration on November 30, 1934, took place less than two months after Spain's Red October, which had left a deep impression in Mexican upper and middle classes. The strict censorship imposed by the Lerroux government during the state of emergency meant that Mexican newspapers could reproduce only the government's reports, which were obviously damning to the revolutionaries. Moreover, the conservative press, favoured by the middle classes, added fuel through heated editorials that presented the revolutionaries as nun-rapists and priest-slayers. These strata saw with horror through the press and newsreels how a radicalised proletariat had 'surrendered to homicidal excesses,' no doubt encouraged by Moscow's 'sinister hand.'¹³ Labour agitation and strikes at home, openly encouraged by the new President, portended for many a repetition of Spanish events in Mexico.

Their fears were compounded by the declared intentions of the new Mexican President. Antithetically, the Mexican government followed attentively events in Asturias regarding them as a struggle that would define the course of "popular sovereignty."¹⁴

¹³ Several editorials of *El Universal* and *Excélsior* condemned the excesses of a general strike that had degenerated in an open insurrection. Reports of the hanging of 22 nuns by the rebels in Sama de Langreo, the purported burning of several convents, the proclamation of libertarian communism in several towns, and the attempted secession of Catalonia, among other events, must have been particularly shocking for the middle class readership of this dailies. See *Excélsior* and *El Universal*, 5-18 October 1934.

¹⁴ Moreover, The Mexican government requested the Lerroux government clemency for the Socialist trade-unionist and politician Ramón González Peña, who had been sentenced to death following the 1934 insurrection. For Mexican official reaction to the Asturian Revolution see, Félix Palavicini,

Such outlook was not unusual given Cárdenas' political orientation. At his inaugural speech Cárdenas announced that state intervention in the economy would be 'greater, deeper and incessant.' The new President proclaimed that he aspired to govern with the support of the people and for the popular masses: "I consider very difficult to realise the postulates of the Six-Year-Plan without the partnership of the organised, disciplined, and unified workers and peasants." Cárdenas also announced that his government would assume those tasks that "the private sector can not or does not wish to address."

Cárdenas avowed his will to resolve once and for all the agrarian question, particularly in those regions where the land endowment had been withheld. He expressed his concern over the deep divisions of the Mexican labour movement and exhorted the workers to form a single front. Finally he called for the unity of the army with the popular masses in the different phases of the class struggle, hoping that it would be the source from which militias of a National Guard might spring, allowing the government to "eliminate the last bastion of the organised reaction represented by the white guards and the corrupt interests which they defend."¹⁵

Following his words a general leftward move followed. Marxist rhetoric pervaded public discourse.¹⁶ Furthermore, the new cabinet included besides Bassols and Garrido Canabal several other radicals such as Juan de D. Bojórquez*, a fierce anti-Catholic, who was appointed Minister of Interior, Francisco Múgica, Minister of National Economy, and Ignacio García Téllez, Minister of Education. The latter, declared that he would strive to "obliterate the Catholic Church," inaugurated the First Congress of the Proletarian Child, an decree that in all state-run schools the word *Adiós* must be replaced by a "*Salud, camarada.*"¹⁷ For the key Labour Department Cárdenas chose yet another self-proclaimed atheist, Silvano Barba González.

México. Historia de su Evolución Constructiva. México, Distribuidora Editorial del Libro S.de R.L., 1945. p.261.

¹⁵ *El Nacional*, December 2, 1934.

¹⁶ *New York Times*, March 20, 1935 "The rhetoric of President Cárdenas is the language of proletarian revolution, official speeches abound in the phraseology of class struggle, while the bookstores' windows are brim with Marxist literature."

* "D" being an foolish attempt to conceal his middle name, Dios.

¹⁷ John W. Dulles, op. cit. p.626. Compare to similar undertakings in Spain in Hugh Thomas, op.cit., p.231.

Thus, as in Spain, the irresponsible use of a radicalised rhetoric by certain political actors generated an equally extremist response from its adversaries. The intoxication with Marxist thought suffered by many of the PNR cadres was comparable to the radicalisation experienced by the PSOE's left wing. Such a confusion brought about a 'red scare' among Mexican conservatives comparable to that which had drove their Spanish peers to insurrection.¹⁸ A deep polarisation would be the dominant note of Cárdenas' tenure.

To make parallelisms worse, religious persecution began anew. On May 10, 1934 the Red Shirts desecrated the San Francisco temple in Mexico City, precisely three years after the first church burnings and anticlerical mob violence in Spain. As in Spain, Mexican police turned a blind eye on incidents without intervening. Many Mexicans consequently began to wonder if Cárdenas was determined to unleash a leftist revolution similar to the one that had recently shaken Spain.¹⁹ The Red Shirts' brutal antics must doubtless have reminded many Mexican Catholics of mob rule in Spain.

Furthermore, reform of article 3 of the Mexican Constitution ruled mandatory socialist education in state schools. This, together with a previous law that ordered the closure of parochial schools, infuriated Catholics. The bill was precipitately debated and passed by Congress on October 1934, instantly becoming a divisive issue, even within the PNR.²⁰

The amendment served only to aggravate large sectors of the population, which in its great majority ignored the meaning of the word socialism, yet feared it nonetheless. The vagueness of the reformed law reflected the differences even among the party's leftist circles, between those who proposed a "Mexican socialism" and those who aspired to conform to the Marxist doctrine. Such ideological minutiae were beyond the grasp of the traditional sectors of Mexican society, which of course

¹⁸ For a conservative perspective on Cardenista policies see, Carlos Alvear Acevedo, *Lázaro Cárdenas: El Hombre y el Mito*. México, Editorial Jus, 1961. Chapter Five.

¹⁹ibid. p.630.

²⁰ The reformed article stated that only the State was allowed to provide elementary and secondary education. Moreover, the education imparted by the State was to be 'socialist' and would exclude any kind of religious doctrine. Finally, the new education "will combat fanaticism and prejudice, organising its teachings and activities in such fashion that youth may acquire a rational and precise notion of the universe and social life."

became alarmed at what they regarded as the communist indoctrination of their children. In addition, the introduction of sexual education by the Ministry enraged parents who were led to believe that their children were being initiated into masturbation and other degenerate practices.²¹

Bishops condemned socialist education declaring it to be inimical to religion. Riots and demonstrations, often involving rampant violence, followed. Catholics revolted against socialist education in the central states of Jalisco, Guanajuato and Michoacán. Archbishop Pascual Díaz himself went to jail.²² In urban centres, droves of enraged parents rallied to calls of 'Death to the PNR's educational policy!' Police and demonstrators clashed in Mexico City, Jalisco, Nuevo León and Zacatecas.

Parents' associations readily fomented disturbances and school strikes. The law also triggered violence especially in the rural areas. Between September and December 1936 villagers murdered 37 rural teachers and wounded hundreds of others, often incited by local priests. Overall, between 1931 and 1940 at least 223 rural teachers were the victims of violence.²³

The doctrine of socialist education was never fully explained or defined. The concept itself often became interchangeable with that of 'rationalist education' or 'modern school' within the documents generated by the commission. Private and confessional schools were already in decline making the move totally incongruous beyond the logic of the PNR's internal struggle.²⁴

The new law had also the effect of reviving the Cristero movement that had plunged Mexico into a civil war a decade earlier. There was renewed fighting in Durango, Jalisco and Michoacán. Although it peaked in late 1935, the second Cristiada was even less successful than the preceding guerrilla war. Its failure owed much to the fact that the Church withheld support for the rebellion and forced its parishes to ignore the guerrillas completely. Besides, the army, equipped with

²¹ Alfonso Taracena, *Historia Extraoficial de la Revolución Mexicana*. México, Editorial Jus, 1972.

²² Eduardo J. Correa, *El balance del cardenismo*. Mexico, Talleres Linotipográficos Acción, 1941 p.31.

²³ The cruelty of the assaults was shocking, as educators were either maimed or died at the hands of lynch mobs. See John Sherman, *The Mexican Right*, p. 43

²⁴ In Mexico City, to cite an instance, there were 48 private schools with 7,000 pupils as compared to 599 state-run schools with over 200,000 students. See, José C. Valadés, *op. cit.*, p.69.

modern technologies such as military aircraft and radio communications, was able to put down the rebellion swiftly. The insurrection, nonetheless, showed the potential for instability that the new government's radical measures could foster.²⁵

Again, as in Spain, religious discord became another source of instability in Mexico. A month after Cárdenas' inauguration, heavily armed Red Shirt thugs fired on Catholics as they left mass in Coyoacán. Five believers were killed and one Red Shirt died. Cárdenas suppressed Red Shirt activity after Calles purging, with Garrido Canabal banished to Costa Rica for his loyalty to Calles during the PNR power struggle. The Red Shirts were disbanded and sent back to Tabasco. Still, Cárdenas public image became tarnished by Catholic accusations of persecution. The decision to do away with the Church's influence in education, as an essential step toward creating a lay educational system, had been a major objective of the Republic since 1931. Hence, as in Spain, the politics of education became a source of bitter divisiveness in Mexico.

After the suppression of the Cristeros, most conservatives concluded that any attempt at armed resistance was futile. However, widespread rejection of the revolutionary regime remained, adopting other forms. Catholic loathing of what it saw as the prelude to communist takeover in Mexico bred the organisation of Catholic movements, most notably the Union Nacional Sinarquista (1937) and the Partido Acción Nacional (1939), a name that had been used by Gil-Robles for the antecedent of CEDA. Former Central Bank Governor and National University Rector, Manuel Gómez Morín organised the new party, which, in due time, would become the most permanent opposition to the official party. The PAN set out from religious principle. The term "salvation" was applied lavishly in their documents to every aspect of social and economic life. Subsidiarity and corporatism were at the core of its doctrine. It was the first expression of Catholic organisation in a political party since the nineteenth century.²⁶

²⁵ Jean Meyer, *La Cristiada, I. La guerra de los Cristeros*, México, Siglo XXI Editores, 1973. pp. 353-381.

²⁶ Soledad Loaeza, *El Partido Acción Nacional, la larga marcha 1939-1994: la oposición leal y partido de protesta*. México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999. pp. 22-37 and 45-49.

The radicalisation of Labour under Cárdenas was yet another element that resembled Spanish events of 1934 and that, consequently, raised the alarm between the upper and middle classes. Encouraged by Cárdenas, Mexican workers confronted management to obtain wage increases and improved working conditions.

In February 1936, the month of the Popular Front electoral victory in Spain, Marxist barrister, Vicente Lombardo Toledano, launched the Mexican Workers' Confederation (CTM) with Cárdenas' blessing. The CTM charter condemned 'bourgeois society' as one that led to fascism, and Lombardo invited Communist Party members to take high positions within the organisation. Moreover, Lombardo attempted repeatedly during the late 1930's to obtain Cárdenas' consent to the creation of armed workers militias to defend the 'conquests of revolution' from a Franco-type fascist attack, the imminence of which he never tired of announcing. Still, Cárdenas refused to do so undoubtedly restrained by the army's opposition to Lombardo's design.²⁷ Unsurprisingly, Lombardo became the most reviled figure in the eyes of the Mexican Right.

The number of strikes soared from 202 in 1934 to 675 in 1936.²⁸ In that context, the tension that a general strike had provoked in the industrial town of Monterrey forced the President himself to appear there. Such disturbances echoed union violence during the brief Popular Front period in 1936 and consequently outraged the upper and middle classes. Chaos had helped to precipitate the civil war there, and few Mexicans were likely to forget that as long as Lombardo remained at the helm of the labour movement.

Another policy designed to attain social justice and bolster political support for the administration was land distribution. Like the encouragement of labour, however, it brought about discontent and opposition not only from the former large landlords and business interests but also from smallholders, which found it inimical to their interests. Cárdenas allotted more land than all previous revolutionary presidents combined. Whereas from 1915 to 1934, the regime distributed less than eight million

²⁷ Raquel Sosa, *Los Códigos Ocultos del Cardenismo*. México D.F., Plaza y Valdés-UNAM, 1996. Albert Michaels, *Mexican Politics and Nationalism* pp. 203-204.

²⁸ Joe Ashby, *Organized Labor and the Mexican Revolution under Lázaro Cárdenas*. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1965. pp. 24-26. José C. Valadés, op. cit., p. 182.

hectares, Cárdenas allotted over twenty million hectares in six years, more than twice as much as in the previous twenty years.²⁹

In addition, the Mexican middle class and Catholics dreaded the rising prospects of the Mexican Communist Party (PCM), which was restored to legality by Cárdenas. Prior to 1934 the Mexican Communist Party had bleak prospects. The party had been proscribed in 1931. Mexico had broken its diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and had imprisoned several Communist leaders. Calles deeply resented Soviet self-professed superiority over the Mexican Revolution: 'The first social movement of the Twentieth Century.'

Their 1934 electoral slogan 'Neither Calles nor Cárdenas' had left the Communists in the wilderness. As many, the Communists were convinced that Cárdenas would be a mere puppet and that Calles would continue to dictate the regime's policy.

Laborde shunned systematically all of Cárdenas' conciliatory overtures towards the party until 1935 when Soviet power decreed otherwise. At the Seventh Congress of the Communist International the chairmanship of George Dimitrov had expounded the Popular Front strategy. This called for anti-fascist unity to be extended to former enemies such as social democrats, liberals and democrats, irrespective of their ideologies and political beliefs in order to resist the advance of fascism. The end result of this strategy would be the formation of wide electoral and political alliances or 'Popular Fronts.'³⁰

Mexican Communists Laborde, Miguel A. Velasco and José Revueltas were present at that congress. All three endorsed the adoption of the new line and called for the creation of a Mexican Popular Front that would include all workers and peasants organisations and chiefly the PNR to face the combined 'challenge' of imperialism, reaction, war and fascism.³¹ Internal concerns also played an important role in the PCM's espousal of the new line. The emergence in 1934 of an indigenous

²⁹ Héctor Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer, *In the shadow of the Mexican Revolution : Contemporary Mexican History, 1910-1989*. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1993, pp. 142-144.

³⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*. London, Abacus, 1995 pp. 147-148.

fascist movement, the Camisas Doradas or Golden Shirts (sobriquet of Acción Revolucionaria Mexicana, ARM), gave the PCM strong reasons to follow the path dictated by the Comintern.

A paramilitary organisation modelled after the German Brown Shirts and the Italian Black Shirts, its ideology was characterised by a strong anti-Semitism and anti-communism. Their principal activities consisted of strike-breaking and Jew baiting. By 1936 the group had grown so spectacularly that several prominent entrepreneurs and shopkeepers were willing to finance it. Concurrently, Nazi Germany, which had initiated subversive activities in Mexico, saw the need to subsidise the group through its legation. The Mexican government discovered also that Japanese agents gave clandestine alimonies to the group. Hence, the new Comintern line of popular frontism compelled the PCM towards collaboration with the PNR.

Embraced by Cárdenas the PCM came to exert a considerable influence in his administration, particularly in the Ministries of Education and Communication.³² Under the Popular Front strategy adopted in 1936, the Mexican Communists played a major role in implementing the President's pro-Republic policy during the Spanish Civil War. Still, Cárdenas was able to keep his distance and maintain his independence *vis-à-vis* the PCM. Its mediocre leaders proved no match for his authority. Thus, in spite of the high offices awarded to them the party remained weak and was unable to secure a lasting growth. Yet few opponents of the Revolution grasped this and there was an exaggerated, yet real, concern about a possible Communist takeover of Mexico. Calles himself seized on these fears and encouraged them in order to discredit the President.³³

All these elements combined to produce a background of considerable domestic upheaval. Against this setting, the Spanish Civil War broke out providing a

³¹ Partido Comunista Mexicano, *La nueva política del PCM*. Mexico, Frente Cultural/ PCM, 1936, pp. 8-22.

³² Betty Kirk, *Covering the Mexican Front. The Battle of Europe versus America*. Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1941. pp. 140-143.

³³ Miguel A Velasco, "El partido comunista durante el período de Cárdenas" in Gilberto Bosques et al, *Cárdenas*. México, 1975, p.38.

focal point for all the rightist organisations to put aside their differences and challenge the government.

THE SPANISH WAR

The Spanish War had a profound impact on Mexican urban classes across the ideological spectre. In Mexico City, department stores' windows exhibited gigantic maps of Spain, marking day by day with little flags and pins the breakthroughs of either Franco's troops or Loyalist militias.³⁴ In the cinemas, when the newsreels depicted scenes from the Spanish front, a storm of cheers and counter-cheers revealed the depth of feeling in the partisans of either side.³⁵

At the outbreak of Franco's rebellion President Cárdenas was engaged in one of his frequent working tours in the state of Coahuila. A strike by the electrician's trade union had plunged Mexico City in an almost complete blackout, and the President had remained deliberately absent so as not to interfere with the solution of the industrial conflict. Upon his return to the capital, Cárdenas remained silent, and no official position concerning the Spanish conflict was announced. The first official reaction to the uprising came from the governing PNR, which in a message declared its complete solidarity with the "socialist" Spanish government. Interestingly, the note drew a parallel between the Spanish situation and the military uprising that had brought down President Madero's government in 1913. The message signed by the party's president, Emilio Portes Gil stated that

The National Revolutionary Party, advocate of regimes identified with the working classes expresses its wish for the definitive consolidation of the Spanish Government at this moment when it is threatened by the disloyalty of the military. The democratic victory of a government, which threatens old privileges, would consummate the social reforms that unite our nations, intimately linked by historical destiny and by the struggle against every form of inhumane exploitation.³⁶

³⁴ Néstor Sánchez Hernández, *Un mexicano en la guerra de España*. p.94.

³⁵ *The Times*, London, November 4, 1936.

³⁶ *El Nacional*, July 19, 1936.

Aside from the PNR, the first organisations to react to Spanish events were the Mexican Communist Party (PCM) and the CTM. Barely a week after the war began the CTM organized a unitary demonstration on behalf of the Republic sent a communiqué to the Spanish UGT.

On behalf of Mexican proletariat, the CTM expresses its complete solidarity with the Spanish proletariat in this moment of trial and looks out for the definitive triumph of the oppressed “Spanish People.” The secretary-general of the CTM, Vicente Lombardo Toledano.³⁷

Solidarity with the besieged Republic began to flow from the Mexican workers almost immediately. The Electricians Trade Union donated \$1, 000 Mexican pesos to the Spanish Ambassador.³⁸ Moreover, several trade unions sent a message of sympathy and friendship to their Spanish peers for their “magnificent feat against fascism” and accorded to donate a day’s wage to the Republican cause.³⁹ That same week, there was a first talk of establishing of a Mexican leftist Popular Front and of arming the workers against the threat of fascism. At a later meeting, things seemed to get out of hand as some improvised orator spoke of the necessity of organizing armed militias as in Spain. Such displays provoked an immediate outcry from conservative organisations such as the Confederación de la Clase Media (CCM), or the Unión Nacional de Veteranos de la Revolución (UNVRM).⁴⁰ Still, the government remained silent about the Spanish crisis and only would react to specific questions when prompted by the press as will be seen below.

THE SPANISH EMBASSY IN MEXICO

Félix Gordón Ordás, a veterinary by training, and a Radical Socialist by affiliation, who had served as Minister of Industry and Trade under Azaña’s third government, took charge of the Embassy. Upon landing his first task was to settle the uproar that

³⁷ *El Nacional*, July 25, 1936.

³⁸ *Excélsior*, July 22, 1936.

³⁹ *ABC*, Madrid, August 13, 1936.

⁴⁰ Hugh G. Campbell, *La derecha radical en México*. México, Sepsetentas, 1976, pp.128-125

the bullfighters' controversy had aroused between Mexico and Spain, which had degenerated in a boycott of Mexican bullfighters by Spanish *toreros*:

The bullfighters' strike derived from the great success that summer of two Mexican matadors who were fighting a **mano a mano** that year. Newspaper references suggesting that Mexicans were braver than Spaniards caused resentment and criticism of the large number of contracts gained by foreigners. Bullfighters therefore decided to strike until the authorities undertook to control the work contracts given to Mexicans.⁴¹

The dispute, jingoistically inflamed by the sensationalist press, provoked a new wave of Hispanophobia in Mexico with radical groups calling for an ejection of Spanish "undesirables" as a retaliation against discrimination of the Mexican bullfighters. At the insistence of Gordón, the new Spanish authorities tried to solve the problem, although little was accomplished. So, on the eve of the Civil War ancient antipathies and aggravating new issues threatened to disrupt the renewed cordiality between Republican Spain and Mexico.⁴²

An excitable man, given to verbal excesses and mercurial reactions, Gordón soon won the animosity of the Spanish community and the conservative press through his outspokenness and imprudence. In fact, Powell suggests that he came very close to being removed for his incompetence, and hints that Cárdenas himself asked for this withdrawal.⁴³ Azaña validates this conjecture in his War Memoirs stating that in 1938 the Council of State, without consulting Azaña, had appointed Indalecio Prieto to replace him.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Gordón managed to remain as Ambassador throughout the war, taking part in crucial episodes, such as the arms purchases in the U.S., as will be seen later. In his defence it should be said that frequently he had to take initiatives and responsibilities unaided by the Republican bureaucracy which repeatedly left unheeded his ever more desperate requests. Cárdenas often praised the Ambassador and distinguished him by inviting him as guest of honour to several official events. Gordón's own testimony hints at a close relationship with Cárdenas.

⁴¹ Hugh Thomas, *op. cit.*, p.166.

⁴² Félix Gordón Ordás, *op. cit.*, pp. 141-147.

⁴³ T.G. Powell, *op. cit.*, p.56.

As many other Republican diplomats, Gordón Ordás had to confront an internal revolt from his own staff and had to enforce his control over the Spanish Embassy. On July 29, First Secretary Pujadas attempted to question his authority and take over the Embassy backed up by dispatches from the Burgos Junta, which “dismissed” Gordón and appointed Pujadas as new Ambassador. As Gordón refused to hand on his investiture, Pujadas “transferred the Embassy” to his private address. Next, he turned up at the Foreign Ministry, presenting the dispatches he had received from the rebel zone in order to accredit himself before the Mexican government. A note from Pujadas accompanied the affidavit in which he stated:

I have the honour of informing His Excellency that a new Spanish government has been established in Burgos. The aforementioned government has adopted the title of National Defence Junta. The president of the Junta, General Miguel Cabanellas, has commissioned me to convey the Mexican government the Junta’s sincerest desire to continue the same constant and cordial relations between Mexico and Spain.⁴⁵

Minister Hay at once dismissed the documents, jotting down in them “Shelve document as no legal authority may be given to the signatory.”⁴⁶

The Mexican government’s official mouthpiece, *El Nacional*, went further expressing the view that ‘only sheer civility’ from the Ministry had spared Pujadas from receiving a more compelling response:

The question raised yesterday by Mr. Pujadas is beyond the faintest consideration. The Mexican Government does not recognise and may not recognise any other government in Spain than the legitimate one, led by Mr. Azaña.⁴⁷

Other newspapers tried to exact a further official pronouncement from the Minister to no avail. *Excélsior* reported that several members of the Spanish community had established contacts with Pujadas. The attempt by Pujadas to replay in Mexico the Generals’ usurpation of the legitimate representation of the Republic

⁴⁴ Manuel Azaña, *Memorias de Guerra 1936-39*. Barcelona, Grijalbo. pp. 390-392.

⁴⁵ AHSRE, exp. III-764-1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *El Nacional*, July 30, 1936.

was the most resonant case, but certainly not the only one. Gordón ousted the Spanish vice-consuls in mid-August 1936. Two of them went to some lengths by sending letters to *Excélsior* stating that they had quit their positions before being fired, on grounds of utter disagreement with the policies of the Azaña government.

Thereafter, the conservative press began to label the Spanish government as communist. The Spanish Embassy threw further fuel to the debate. In a rather inept declaration, Gordón Ordás referred to the Fascist leanings of the insurrection and carried away by his enthusiasm declared “true Republicans would rather let Communism come before accepting a military regime.”⁴⁸ The Mexican conservative press would subsequently invoke this pronouncement in order to justify their propagandistic onslaughts against the Republic.

THE DECISION TO AID THE REPUBLIC

In 1936 military coups resulting in the establishment of new governments took place in Bolivia, Nicaragua and Paraguay. Mexico reacted to those events by strictly applying the Estrada Doctrine, without pronouncing itself over the changes of regime that had taken place in those countries. The customary diplomatic practice of the Mexican government limited itself to the summoning of the Ambassador posted there “for consultations.” and abstention of judgment over the political change that had taken place.⁴⁹ Why was Mexican reaction to Franco’s uprising in Spain so dissimilar?

Various relevant studies, particularly those originating from Mexican officialdom have attempted to explain Cárdenas’ choice on grounds of righteousness and altruistic advocacy of the principles of democracy and international justice.⁵⁰ Israeli historian, Tziv Medin has characterized Cárdenas’ foreign policy as anti-imperialist, in the sense that his socio-economic policies led him necessarily to a confrontation with foreign interests that had been predominant in the Mexican

⁴⁸ *Excélsior*, July 27, 1936.

⁴⁹ See Introduction note 20.

⁵⁰ See for example Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Alberto Enríquez Perea (compiler) *Méjico y España: solidaridad y asilo político 1936-1942*. Mexico, 1990. pp. 11-39.

economy.⁵¹ Always according to Medin, Mexican diplomacy was also anti-totalitarian, in the sense that it consistently opposed aggression by totalitarian expansionism regardless of its ideology. Mexico and the USSR were the only two countries that supported decisively the Republican camp in Spain. But that did not prevent Mexico from denouncing Soviet aggression in 1939, when the USSR invaded Finland.⁵² This belied the accusation often levelled by his detractors that Cárdenas was in connivance with the Soviet Union and that he aimed to take Mexico under the aegis of communism.

Even an observer so unlikely to sympathise with Cárdenas as Powell has admitted that in spite of taking a strong ideological stance on the Spanish question, the Mexican government:

...also protected Mexico's own best interests whenever certain forms of aid to the Republicans would have jeopardized these interests.⁵³

The Cárdenas-Calles showdown of 1935-1936 might also help to elucidate Cárdenas motives in coming to the Republic's rescue. In 1934 Calles sought to put in office yet another pawn, but against all expectations Cárdenas defied him shortly after being elected. The former Revolution's strongman was subdued and cast into exile, but the menace of a coup d'état plotted by him and his clique loomed many months after his banishment. Only three months after Calles' expulsion from Mexico Franco challenged the Republic with an armed uprising. The virtual simultaneity between both processes might contribute to explain Cárdenas decision to aid the Republic

A more doctrinal approach would suggest that the decision to aid the Republic was taken exclusively by Cárdenas. There are juridical bases to this view, as the Constitution of 1917 bestows ample powers to the Mexican presidency concerning the design and implementation of foreign policy.⁵⁴ Thus, it is hardly surprising that

⁵¹ Tziv Medin, *Ideología y praxis política de Lázaro Cárdenas*. México, Siglo XXI Editores, 1972. pp. 190-91 and 195-200.

⁵² Isidro Fabela, *Neutralidad*. Biblioteca de Estudios Internacionales, México, 1940. p.273.

⁵³ T.G Powell, op. cit., p.58.

⁵⁴ Article 89 of the 1917 Mexican Constitution.

Cárdenas has received all the credit for Mexican support for the Republic. On August 10, 1936 he noted in his diaries:

The Spanish Republic has requested through its Ambassador, Félix Gordón Ordás, the supply of the highest number of arms as may be possible for its defence. The Ministry of War and Navy has been instructed to place in Veracruz to the orders of the Ambassador twenty thousand 7 millimetre rifles and 20 million cartridges of same calibre. All of them Mexican made.⁵⁵

Cárdenas explained his motives:

The government of Mexico is obligated to the legally constituted Republican government of Spain, presided over by Manuel Azaña...Our responsibility is to serve Spain... Moreover, the Republican government of Spain is sympathetic to the revolutionary government of Mexico. President Azaña represents the desire for the moral and economic emancipation of the Spanish people. Today Spain is embroiled in a bloody and difficult struggle, caused by its privileged castes.⁵⁶

The purported idealism and moral righteousness of the Mexican President have been monotonously used and abused to explain the coherence of Mexican diplomacy in an age of abdication. Dante Puzzo considers in his celebrated book:

There was little if anything that Mexico could have hoped to gain either in political influence or strategic position or economic advantage by her pro-loyalist course. Thus Mexico was not motivated by ulterior purposes but solely by sympathy with the Madrid regime.⁵⁷

Yet the international repercussions of such a stance posed great challenges to the viability of his administration. His pro-Republican stance, in particular, caused several diplomatic reversals for his government. The support of the Republic had been aimed at furthering a dominant Mexican objective: to get the U.S. and other powers committed to the principles of non-aggression and anti-imperialism. Sadly, Mexico made few, if any, converts abroad. Foreign powers, especially Britain and the

⁵⁵ Lázaro Cárdenas *Obras 1. Apuntes* 1972, I. p.354.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 355.

⁵⁷ Dante Puzzo, *Spain and the Great Powers 1936-1941*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1962.

U.S., were adverse to Cárdenas' military assistance to the Republic and pressed the Mexican President to keep this aid to a minimum or to discontinue it altogether. As a result Mexico's diplomatic isolation deepened, leaving it with Spain as its only friend. Cárdenas' Spanish policy was consistently endorsed by the Mexican military, which nevertheless resisted all attempts to reproduce the meddling of trade unions or political parties in the realm of the Army.⁵⁸

While it is unquestionable that his personal disposition towards the imperilled Republic was the determining factor in this decision, other officials in his governments exercised considerable leverage towards the fulfilment of such a policy. It would be incorrect to construe Mexico's international linkages solely from the vantage point of the Presidency. By 1934 the Mexican State was far too large and complex for Cárdenas to conduct its entire operation. Undoubtedly, Cárdenas delegated many of his economic and diplomatic prerogatives to a government of experts. The revolutionary bureaucracy in its institutionalisation had engendered a State policy that predated Cárdenas and which, in any case was enriched by his idealistic personal diplomacy. The result was an organised effort, however modest, to engage Mexico in affairs far removed from American dominance.⁵⁹

Mexican exchanges with foreign countries were conceived of and executed by Mexican bureaucrats and technocratic professionals. The technical and economic expertise necessary to run a state in such a complex context should not be underestimated. Hence the need to consider the role of other actors in the design of Cárdenas' Spanish policy.

Following the 1935 crisis that led to the purging of Callistas on the cabinet and the expulsion of Calles himself, Cárdenas replaced Emilio Portes Gil with General Eduardo Hay in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Hay, an old Maderista, was largely unenthusiastic about the Republic yet functioned rather as a figurehead. Cárdenas did not trust the old General, whom he deemed far too conservative, and often bypassed him in favour of junior officials.

⁵⁸ cf. Edwin Lieuwen, *Mexican Militarism. The political rise and fall of the Revolutionary Army 1910-1940*. Albuquerque, The University of New Mexico Press, 1968. pp.127-128 and T.G.Powell, op. cit., pp.xi-xii.

This was the case of Foreign undersecretary, Ramón Beteta, who was actually in charge of international matters. The youngest member of the Cárdenas administration, he was credited with having a greater influence with Cárdenas than any other single person in his cabinet. He was also one of the few in the President's inner circle to have studied abroad. A graduate of the University of Texas in 1923, with high honours, the young technocrat may be credited largely with the design of Mexican diplomacy of the time. As a lawyer, he was ascribed with having drafted the replies to British and American notes on oil expropriation. Although married to an American woman, he developed a violent antipathy to the United States. Because of the leverage he exerted over the President, many of Cárdenas more drastic actions are attributed, rightly or wrongly, to Beteta.⁶⁰

The Mexican representative to the League of Nations, Isidro Fabela, also played an instrumental role in Cárdenas' decision to help the Republic. Fabela believed that Spain gave Mexico an opportunity to prop up its own declining international position. Accordingly he held that through the advocacy of Spain, Western powers could be persuaded that the Spanish war was yet another instance of external aggression against weak nations that endangered world peace ("fascism on the march").⁶¹

Historical experience gave Mexico a stake in the promotion of the policy of collective security. The United States had already agreed to non-intervention at the Pan-American conference in Buenos Aires. If this view could be persuasively conveyed, then the powers might commit themselves to saving the Republic and at the same time agree to oppose in principle any imperialistic intervention by one country in another's affairs. Such a development would clearly benefit Mexico, whose policies of economic nationalism made it highly vulnerable to foreign aggression.

Long before the Spanish Civil War Mexico had been lobbying in the League of Nations for collective resistance against imperialism. When Mexican representative

⁵⁹ Schuster has suggested that Mexican diplomacy of the time was "an efficient effort that procured and secured national interest."

⁶⁰ Frank Kluckhohn, *The Mexican Challenge*, New York, Doubleday, 1939. pp. 243-245. See also Evelyn Waugh, *op. cit.*, pp. 182-195.

before the League, Narciso Bassols urged assistance to Ethiopia, Cárdenas issued a series of decrees in November 1935 to comply with the League's sanctions against Italy. After Ethiopia's fall Bassols clarified Mexican position during the Abyssinian crisis in terms that may be applicable in explaining Mexico's later stance before the Spanish Civil War:

It is not merely attachment to the abstract principles of international law that compelled us to act the way we did. Throughout their history as an independent nation, Mexican people have, more than once, come to know the brutal meaning of imperialism's conquering invasions. For that reason, respect for the independence and territorial integrity of a nation is an essential element of our national sensibility and a fundamental exigency of our people.⁶²

Interestingly, throughout the protocol and rhetoric of the time may be seen the emphasis placed on agrarian reform by Mexican officials to depict their rapport with Republican Spain. Such identification by choice had few grounds in the specific issue of land reform.

There was certainly an ideological and even emotional component in the Mexican response to the Spanish civil strife. Alleged similarities between the coup that ended in the assassination of President Madero in 1913 and the foreign sponsored uprising against the Spanish government were often evoked. Then, the machinations of the American Ambassador, Henry Lane Wilson—together with the complicity of most of the diplomatic corps accredited in Mexico—had been instrumental in bringing down a legitimate government. Now, the actions of Germany and Italy appeared to be fundamental in achieving Franco's victory. The analogy was to be reiterated, time and again, by Mexican officials, whenever asked.

In that sense it is striking to note the number of Huerta's former associates that actively opposed both Cárdenas' reforms and the Spanish Republic. Men like Querido Moheno, Nemesio García Naranjo or Rodolfo Reyes had all served in Huerta's cabinet and all of them wrote vicious attacks against the Republic in *El*

⁶¹ Isidro Fabela, *Cartas al Presidente Cárdenas*, op. cit., pp. 22-25.

⁶² Memoria de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. 1934-1935 y 1935-1936, 2 volumes. Mexico, 1939, Volume II, pp. 89-117.

Hombre Libre and *Excélsior*. These conservatives used the same analogy to compare the new Republic with Madero's idealistic attempt to establish a democracy in Mexico, if only in opposite direction. In the wake of the Republic's proclamation, a leader of the conservative *El Universal* summarized this view :

1931 Spain closely resembles Mexico in 1911. Mexico plunged into anarchic violence. Spain seems likely to do that too.⁶³

For the Mexican government this was not a typical attempt at a coup d'état. The division between the two Spains transcended its local nature. Flagrant German and Italian involvement in Franco's rebellion had all the appearances of a foreign aggression. On that account, the "new" Spain represented democracy together with the legitimacy of an attacked government, whereas the "old" Spain stood for Fascism and aggression. It remains unclear whether Cárdenas would have shown much interest had the struggle not been in part between fascism and socialism. Since this was the case, in his view, and as a Fascist victory in Spain could give rise to a reaction from conservatives against the advance of socialism in Mexico, it seems clear why he aligned his regime with the Republic so intensely.

For officials such as Beteta, Bassols and Tejeda there was a remarkable resemblance between the aims and objectives of the Republic and those of the Mexican Revolution. To allow the sacrifice of the Spanish 'Revolution' could set an ominous precedent for the Mexican social movement, always vulnerable to foreign intervention. In that sense, a report by Mexican Ambassador to Spain, Ramón P. Denegri to Cárdenas in 1937 might also contribute to elucidate the rationale behind Cardenista's espousal of the Republic as a pre-emptive action destined to offset a similar turmoil in Mexico:

The bond between the Spanish capital and the Spanish Church with its Mexican counterparts is so strong, that the Spanish struggle projects itself onto our country. In this precise moment the Mexican capitalists and Catholics are in connivance with their Spanish peers to undermine, and, if possible, overthrow, the popular government of Mexico. A victory by Franco would immediately unleash a mighty offensive against all of Mexico's revolutionary

⁶³ *El Universal* April 15, 1931, p. 3.

forces. The Mexican government, by helping Spain, is not only abiding by legality, justice and the Mexican popular tradition, but it is also sustaining its cause in the vanguard of the peninsular struggle. For that reason, Franco's government, is not, and may never be, even if it succeeds, other than the seditious and the historical enemy. A battle in the Jarama or a cannonade in the Mediterranean may resound before long in Mexico.⁶⁴

Similarities between the Spanish Republic and the revolutionary governments of Mexico, most particularly the Cárdenas administration, have often been cited. Both countries were economically backward societies with small pockets of industrialization, in the midst of semi-feudal rural areas. Both had relatively small middle classes and their levels of illiteracy remained enormous, national unity was weak or nonexistent. Local bosses or *caudillos* still dominated regional politics; democratic institutions were weak. Bitter conflicts between anticlericals and Catholics reflected deep societal divisions on such issues as religious tolerance.

The two reformist regimes strove to implement radical social agendas in order to extricate their countries out of backwardness and dependency. Although Cárdenas' programme was far more radical than the measures the Spanish Republic intended to adopt, both governments closely identified with each other, for they shared a common goal, that of social redemption.

Last but not least, there existed the cultural element of a common language and a shared heritage. It may well be argued that there were more differences than similarities, yet the striking nature of the parallel situation remains. Arnold Toynbee considered Mexico the most ideologically congenial country to the Republic,⁶⁵ while Samuel Guy Inman suggested that the 1931 Spanish constitution had been modelled after the Mexican 1917 document.⁶⁶ Perhaps such assertions, both by contemporary observers, were overtly exaggerated; nevertheless these common identities between both elites remained. If figures like Calles, Cárdenas or Bassols opted to believe that the Republic was following the Mexican path, many among the Republicans, –true to

⁶⁴ AHSRE, Exp. III-765-1 (4th part) Confidential report.

⁶⁵ Arnold Toynbee, *op. cit.* p.212.

⁶⁶ Samuel Guy Inman, *Latin America. Its Place in World Life*. Chicago, Willett, Clark and Co., 1937. pp. 301-302.

the paternalism Spaniards have always attempted to exert over Latin America—believed the opposite to be truth.

At any rate, more recently, other scholars such as Sedwick (1963) and Tamames (1973) have reiterated the view that the Spanish Constitution was greatly inspired by the Mexican written law.⁶⁷ Carlos M. Rama shares this opinion stressing that the Constitution of Querétaro constituted a “valuable precedent of social and political reconstruction.” The Mexican constitution together with that of Uruguay (also from 1917) represented the “only two liberal democratic guidelines to be found in the Hispanic world.”⁶⁸ Again according to Rama, the Spanish lawmakers borrowed from the Mexican Constitution those aspects that stressed welfare provision by the State, the guarantee of individual rights, the incorporation of social rights (articles 27 and 123 of the Querétaro Constitution), and the separation of Church and State. Other common features such as the nationalization of certain branches of the productive process or the ambitious agrarian programme enshrined by the Mexican code were not originally included.

FURTHER INSTANCES OF SUPPORT

The sympathies of the Cárdenas administration towards Loyalist Spain were expressed in manifold ways. In addition to the arms supplies, diplomatic sustenance and the remittance of money, medicines and foodstuffs, refuge was given to 500 Spanish war orphans and Republican intellectuals. Moral support was given at every opportunity.

Mexico went as far as to allow Spanish ships to fly the Mexican flag.⁶⁹ Several Spanish officials were supplied with Mexican passports to cover their activities abroad from their enemies or to travel safely through countries sympathetic to Franco. Undersecretary of Navy and Air, Colonel Angel Pastor Velasco, was given a

⁶⁷ Ramón Tamames, *La República. La Era de Franco*. Madrid, Alianza Universidad, 1979 Frank Sedwick *The Tragedy of Manuel Azaña and the Fate of the Spanish Republic*. Ohio, State University Press, 1963.

⁶⁸ Carlos. M. Rama, *La crisis española del Siglo XX*. México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1976 (Third Edition). p.113.

⁶⁹ AHSRE, III/ 618 (44-0) October 16-22, 1936.

Mexican passport under the name of Alfredo Palacios to cover his activities abroad in connection with the Republican arms purchase commission.⁷⁰ In Paris, Minister Tejeda furnished Juan Simeón Vidarte a Mexican passport so that he could make his many wartime journeys safely. Vidarte thus became Juan Valdés of Veracruz, a made up character.⁷¹ As late as June 1940, Juan Negrín, Francisco Méndez Aspe and Santiago Casares Quiroga were able to leave occupied France bound to England under fake Mexican passports.⁷²

Most of the Republic's foreign service personnel overseas defected to Franco. In many cases, Mexico took over the diplomatic representation of Spanish Republican interests. After Uruguay's severance of diplomatic relations with the Republic in February 1937, Mexico took charge of the Spanish legation's archives there in order to prevent them from falling into the hands of the factious. Furthermore, Mexico assumed the representation of Republican interests in Montevideo.⁷³ Mexico also took custody of Spanish diplomatic missions in Costa Rica and Peru.⁷⁴ When feasible, Mexican diplomats and consular agents acted as couriers for the Republicans if their own communication channels had become blocked. Mexico also tried to protect Republican interests in Germany, Italy and Portugal, but this soon proved to be an impossible task. With virtually no friends abroad Republicans eagerly accepted Mexico's aid.

A token of such attempts may be seen in the hostility faced by Daniel Cosío Villegas (1899-1976) during his tenure as Chargé d'affaires *ad interim* in Portugal. Cosío Villegas would be the brain behind the idea of bringing Spanish intellectuals and academicians to Mexico to pursue their research tasks away from the staggering conflict. At Portugal, from the beginning, he faced the hostility of the Portuguese authorities and the press who scornfully referred to him as *O Ministro Vermelho*, the Red Minister. His chauffeur and housekeeper pried on him and his every move. When the Portuguese government froze Spanish Ambassador, Claudio Sánchez

⁷⁰ Marina Casanova, *La diplomacia española durante la guerra civil*. Madrid, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Biblioteca Diplomática Española. Sección Estudios No. 13. 1996. p.168.

⁷¹ Juan Simeón Vidarte, *op. cit.*, p.601.

⁷² Luis I. Rodríguez, *Ballet de Sangre. La caída de Francia*. Ediciones Nigromante, 1942. pp. 140-142.

⁷³ Alberto Enríquez Perea (compiler), *Reyes y el llanto de España en Argentina 1936-1937*. Mexico, El Colegio de México, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1998. p.174.

Albornoz's accounts, the Mexican government sent money and instructed Cosío Villegas to pay the Spanish personnel, thus averting Salazar's relentless stalking of Sánchez Albornoz.⁷⁵

On February 1937 Cosío Villegas sent a cable to the Mexican Foreign Ministry in which he stated that prominent Falangists together with the Consul of Guatemala in Lisbon had approached him requesting Mexico's good offices to aid in facilitating peace talks with Azaña. Naively, the Mexican diplomat advised that it was worthwhile to support this petition. The Mexican Foreign Ministry reacted swiftly with the categorical response that any attempt at mediation by Mexico would constitute an inadmissible meddling in the internal affairs of Spain. Furthermore, secrecy was altogether out of the question, as Azaña's government might rightly consider the whole affair inimical and a tacit recognition of the rebels as belligerents.⁷⁶

Another example worth of mentioning is that of Mexico Ambassador in Buenos Aires, Alfonso Reyes who openly and consistently supported his Spanish colleague, Joaquín Ruiz Canedo, in the face of Argentinian unmitigated hostility. In a breach of diplomatic protocol Reyes attended several acts in support of the Spanish Republic, more damningly a mass rally organised by the Argentinian Communist Party at Luna Park.⁷⁷ Reyes supported Ruiz Canedo in the negotiations that resulted in the repossession of the merchant vessel, *Cabo San Antonio* that had been seized by the Argentinian government.⁷⁸

SPANISH RESPONSES TO MEXICAN SOLIDARITY

Republican Spain manifested her gratitude to these gestures through the press, in public demonstrations, and by sending distinguished men as envoys of appreciation

⁷⁴ *New York Times*, April 25, 1938, and Cosío Villegas, op. cit.

⁷⁵ Daniel Cosío Villegas *Memorias*. México, Grijalbo 1976. pp. 163-166.

⁷⁶ Alberto Enríquez Perea, *Daniel Cosío Villegas y su misión en Portugal 1936-1937*. México, El Colegio de México/Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1998. pp. 127-135.

⁷⁷ Mónica Quijada, *Aires de Repùblica, Aires de Cruzada: La Guerra Civil Espanola en Argentina*. Barcelona, Sendai Ediciones, 1991. pp. 63-65.

⁷⁸ Alberto Enríquez Perea (Compiler), *Alfonso Reyes...*, op. cit., p. 116.

and to nurture further the already sympathetic attitude of her former colony. The extent of such deference may be seen in the decision by the Republican government to name a battalion in the Loyalist Army in honour of President Cárdenas. When the request for his consent reached him he replied true to his proverbial modesty:

While I appreciate profoundly the honour that has been offered to me, I beg the commander of the division that he permit me to decline it. I am convinced that final judgment cannot be made concerning men who are still exercising responsibilities of a public character until their task has been finished and history has thoroughly judged it.⁷⁹

Mexicans who travelled to Spain were warmly welcomed, celebrated and even flaunted by the Republican rank and file. Popular wartime ballads often referred to Mexico's pro-Republican stand:

Today is a day of celebration, comrades,
Mexico, brotherly nation, sends us its rifles,
victorious in Villa's revolution,
in Zapata's agrarian explosion
Long live the Mexican people!

Three hurrahs for the Mexican people
and three cheers for Cárdenas,
the soldier, the worker,
and the peasant's champion.⁸⁰

Or:

Spain do not fear,
although they hurl the Italian against you

⁷⁹ William Cameron Townsend, *Lázaro Cárdenas. Mexican Democrat*. Ann Arbor, Michigan, George Wahr Publishing Co. 1952 pp. 185-186.

⁸⁰ Patricia W. Fagen, *Transterrados y Ciudadanos*, p.136.

Justice is with you,

as are all the Mexicans.⁸¹

Throughout the war, organisations at all levels of the Loyalist zone sent greetings and messages of thanks to Mexican fraternal organisations and government. Salutes to the “noble” Mexican people were repeatedly conveyed. Several homages were celebrated; streets were named after Mexico to show appreciation. Barcelona’s city council asked Cárdenas his consent to rename a city street in his honour. Once again he declined proposing that Catalans should instead choose some Mexican historical figure for that purpose. At the suggestion of Consul José Rubén Romero they chose Benito Juárez. A battalion was named after Pancho Villa.⁸²

The Republican government itself made many formal demonstrations of gratitude to the Mexicans. In September 1937, the Spanish and Mexican governments co-sponsored an exhibition of Mexican Art to commemorate Mexican independence. Multitudinous acts were celebrated to “pay homage” to Mexico. Among the most celebrated we may cite those, which took place at the vast Palacio de la Música Cinema,⁸³ at the Teatro de la Zarzuela, the Palau de la Música Catalana and at the Teatro Principal of Valencia.⁸⁴ At these rallies and festivals, according to various newspapers of the time, the populace “heartily” chanted vivas for Mexico and General Cárdenas. The Popular Front launched a Society of Friends of Mexico, affiliated to the Propaganda Department, which had several sections all through Republican territory. According to several Mexicans who were in Spain during the war being Mexican became tantamount to a safe-conduct or a sort of “open sesame.”

On December 11, 1936 the Spanish Cortes thanked the Mexican government and people for their unconditional aid and solidarity. The declaration stated:

The Spanish parliament, gathered in Valencia, has agreed unanimously, amidst clamorous demonstrations in support of Mexico, to express to the Mexican people its deep gratitude for its exemplary conduct of international

⁸¹ Alejandro Gómez Maganda, *España sangra*, p.77.

⁸² See André Malraux, *L'espoir*, Paris, 1938. and Mary Bingham de Urquidi, *Misericordia en Madrid*. México, B. Costa-Amic, 1975. pp. 295-296.

⁸³ *El Sol Diario de la Mañana del Partido Comunista*, November 24 and 29, 1937. Año I No. 156.

⁸⁴ *ABC*, Madrid, November 14, 1936.

solidarity and the selfless support given to Spain. A Spain that fights today for the defence of the same ideals of liberty and peace, which are norm and essence of the “great Mexican nation.” The President of the Cortes. Diego Martínez Barrio.⁸⁵

Moral support took yet another guise with the sheltering of 500 Spanish children from the horrors of war by the Mexican government. As the hostilities had not spared even the civilian populations, producing instead unprecedeted carnage, several parents were only too eager to have their children evacuated. Moreover, the conflict had left many children orphaned or with no one to look after them. From 1937 the Spanish authorities began to transfer these children toward other countries. Almost 1500 went to the Soviet Union where many would forcibly stay well beyond the war. Five hundred approximately were sent to Mexico.⁸⁶ Other less important groups were sent to Belgium, Britain and France.

The children arrived in Mexico on June 1937 receiving a great attention from the public, not always favourable. Nonetheless, many Mexican families offered to adopt them. Even some wealthy families of Spanish origin with no sympathies for the Republic offered to take care of them. However, the Mexican government decided to keep the tutelage of these children to itself and to educate them under the leftist values for which their parents had fought or were still fighting.

Michoacán’s governor, Gilberto Magaña, offered lodging and education for the children in the state capital of Morelia and Cárdenas accepted his offer. An old convent was rehabilitated as boarding school, “Colegio España-Méjico,” with the Spanish staff that had escorted the children from Spain together with local teachers acting as tutors to the youngsters. Most of these children came from very destitute backgrounds, making it very difficult for them to adapt to their new environment. There has been endless debate about the success or failure of the affair as these children presented disciplinary problems and failed to integrate into the subsequent Spanish exile, and in fact were regarded by it as an unruly lot.

⁸⁵ *Excélsior*, December 12, 1936.

⁸⁶ Vera Foulkes, *Los niños de Morelia y la escuela España-Méjico. Consideraciones analíticas sobre un experimento social*. México, UNAM, Facultad de Derecho, 1953.

A month later, a further step towards the reception of Republicans in Mexico was taken when Cosío Villegas made public on behalf of Cárdenas an invitation to Spanish intellectuals and scientists to come to Mexico so they could carry on with their intellectual pursuits away from the hardships of war. Cosío Villegas and Republican Undersecretary for Education, Wenceslao Roces, devised the plan.

An academic institution, *La Casa de España*, was to be established by Presidential decree to that end. Many of these academics were not contributing to the war effort and in fact represented a financial and logistic burden to the government of Valencia. Cosío's plan got a warm reception from Mexican intellectuals such as Alfonso Reyes, Eduardo Villaseñor and Genaro Estrada, which, as mentioned had developed close friendships with many. Unsurprisingly, Cárdenas appointed the two first, together with Cosío as members of the Casa's advisory board. Mexico agreed to pay for their transportation and upkeep. In return, the scholars were required to teach at Mexican universities and to give special lectures and courses at *La Casa de España*.

In all, 35 Spanish scholars came to Mexico under this scheme during the Civil War.⁸⁷ In 1940, when it became clear that Franco would not be easily unseated from power, the charter of *La Casa de España* was revised. Renamed *El Colegio de México*, it was removed from governmental control. Structured teaching staffs of Mexican and Spanish academics were hired on a permanent basis to provide regular courses and degree programmes. Throughout the ensuing years, *El Colegio de México* was able to recruit distinguished intellectuals from Spain, Mexico and Latin America. It has since become one of the most respected centres of research and higher education in Latin America.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Daniel Cosío Villegas, *Memorias*, pp. 169-178.

⁸⁸ Jesús Méndez, "Foreign Influences and Domestic Needs in Intellectual Institution Building: The Gestation of the *Casa de España/ Colegio de México*," in *Secolas Annals*; Journal of the South-eastern Council of Latin American Studies, Vol. 21 (March 1990), pp. 5-23.

THE MEXICAN EMBASSY IN MADRID

Relations between Spain and Mexico had been far from cordial during the so-called 'Black Two Years'. However, in spite of the emergence of a kindred regime through the Popular Front victory, Cárdenas did not send a new Ambassador to Spain. The Mexican Ambassador, General Manuel Pérez Treviño, had been sent to Spain in January 1935 and remained there until he was replaced exactly two years later. With Pérez's appointment Cárdenas honoured the old revolutionaries' practice of assigning embassies to potential dissidents as a way of keeping them away from domestic politics or coaxing them to remain loyal by retaining them in under the national budget.

When the uprising began Ambassador Manuel Pérez Treviño was, as the rest of the diplomatic corps, spending his summer vacation at San Sebastián.⁸⁹ His first reaction was to establish provisionally the Embassy at Fuenterrabía, where he waited for more precise instructions. Pérez Treviño was impeded from returning to Madrid through the same route that he had taken, as Navarra had fallen in the hands of the insurrectionist General Mola.⁹⁰ From Fuenterrabía Pérez Treviño instructed his staff to ensure the protection of Mexican nationals on Spanish soil. Among them, there were the members of the delegation that had attended the 1936 Berlin Olympics, who had been trapped in La Coruña, while en route to Mexico.

The first confidential report sent by Ambassador Pérez Treviño to Mexico gave a thorough account of the murders of the conservative deputy Joaquín Calvo Sotelo and the Socialist chief of the police Lieutenant Castillo. In turn he received the instruction from the Chancellery to return to Madrid, where he arrived on August 24, 1936. He was the first Ambassador to re-enter the Spanish capital.⁹¹ He came back; travelling through French territory from Hendaye, where the headquarters of international diplomats posted in Spain was established, to Barcelona and Valencia. In fact, the only governments whose heads of mission remained *auprès* the Spanish Government throughout the conflict and followed them from Madrid to Valencia and then to Barcelona were those of the USSR and Mexico. The rest of the countries

⁸⁹ Claude Bowers, *My Mission in Spain*. op. cit.

⁹⁰ *Excélsior*, July, 29, 1936.

which had relations with the Republic limited themselves to leaving chargés d'affaires in their Embassies or Legations at Madrid.⁹²

At that point several Mexicans resident in Spain were seeking to escape the hostilities. Diplomatic shelter was given to them as well as to Spanish aristocrats and people with known, or suspected, links to the rebellion. An interesting case, was that of Rodolfo Reyes. As was previously mentioned he was the eldest son of General Bernardo Reyes. Following his father's death, Reyes supported Huerta, serving even as his Minister of Interior.

A renowned lawyer, Reyes undertook the defence of several aristocrats and conservatives, who felt under arrest after July 18. According to their captors, the prisoners had obtained "unconditional release" (i.e. ascended to heaven) When Reyes protested against the "savagery of Republican justice," the assault guards retorted that this was the 'Revolution', and that he as a Mexican should know that. Reyes rejected the riposte by saying that although in Mexico there had been cruelties, "even Villa killed in broad daylight and always stating the reason why he did it."⁹³

On September 1936, Reyes was arrested in his office because he 'appeared in several photographs in company of generals, barristers and bishops, and because he had books 'written by bourgeois and aristocrats, many of them autographed.' Reyes explained that the pictures belonged to a gathering of the National Union of Lawyers, which he had attended as a prominent member adding somewhat provocatively: 'If being a lawyer who makes his living out of the bourgeoisie makes me a bourgeois, then yes, I am a bourgeois.'

After being released Reyes obtained protection inside the Mexican Embassy together with his family. Reyes had four sons, two of who had been born in Mexico and two in Spain. The contrast between them could not have been starker as the eldest was a member of the Mexican Foreign Service while the two youngest were outspoken Falangists. These sought haven at the Mexican Embassy, becoming a

⁹¹ *El Nacional Revolucionario*, August, 25, 1936.

⁹² Arnold Toynbee, op. cit., p.272.

⁹³ Rodolfo Reyes, *La bi-revolucion española*. Vol. III of *Memorias políticas*. p.460.

permanent source of problems for the legation because of their Fascist leanings.⁹⁴ By October 1936, 800 people had secured cover at the Mexican embassy, while as there were as many as 25,000 people—most of them fascist or with fascist leanings—inside 30 other embassies at Madrid.⁹⁵

THE REFUGEE CRISIS

As was to be expected, the asylum issue brought a crisis between the Embassies and the Republican government. The Spanish government insisted that, in the case of a military uprising the right of asylum did not apply and requested that all asylees be turned over to Spanish authorities. In the streets there was soon talk of a “Fifth Column” conducting operations against the Loyalists from within the Embassies shielded by their diplomatic immunity. Some refugees were actually armed and carried out espionage and terrorism under diplomatic cover.

In a famous incident, the militiamen stormed the Finnish Embassy giving rise to vigorous protests from the Diplomatic corps, among them, very notoriously Pérez Treviño. On December, 1936, Álvarez del Vayo, in his capacity of Minister of State, cast aside the proposal of the League of Nations to evacuate the refugees from the embassies. The crisis reached its climax after Luis Araquistáin, then Spanish Ambassador in France, published a note in which he questioned the legitimacy of the diplomatic shelter:

This is not a humanitarian question as Mr. (Wladimir) D'Ormesson pretends.

It is an inconceivable and unprecedented abuse of the so-called right of asylum. It is not the case of two or twenty men defeated in a revolution, and seeking haven, as the traditional practice of asylum dictates. A right, by the way, virtually in disuse in Europe and now only practiced by some South American nations. Therefore, when a diplomat's residence protects 1, 000 enemies of a government this ceases to be asylum to become a garrison. In addition, when a diplomatic zone protects 5, 000 people hostile to a

⁹⁴ Mary Bingham de Urquidi, *op. cit.*, p.317.

⁹⁵ Javier Rubio, *Asilos y canjes durante la guerra civil española*. Barcelona, Planeta, 1979. pp. 23-40

government, then this zone becomes a military stronghold. This is an act of intervention by the Diplomatic corps accredited in Madrid.⁹⁶

In truth, the doctrine of asylum, a long established tradition in Latin America postulated by such hemispheric agreements as the Treaty of Montevideo of 1889 or the resolutions of the Pan-American conference at Havana of 1929, was far from universal. The Latin American Ambassadors at Madrid asked the Spanish government to uphold such a right, although Spain had never ratified those agreements. This gave rise to increased tensions between the Republican government and the Mexican Embassy.

The right to asylum traditionally applied to Heads of State overthrown by revolutions or military coups as well as to leaders or outstanding personalities. Such was not the case of the refugees at the foreign embassies in Madrid. At best, they were wealthy people, who feared for their lives because of what they saw as the Terror unleashed by the revolutionary ferment in the Republican zone. At worst, they were known supporters of the insurrection and under reasonable suspicion of conspiring against a legitimate government. Many cases amounted to overt breaches to the right of asylum even as it was understood in Latin America.

From inside the embassies radio transmitters were fitted, espionage was coordinated, the black market was funded, arms were stockpiled, shots were fired, while the refugees ate and drank far better than elsewhere.⁹⁷

Nevertheless, Pérez Treviño zealously defended the right to grant protection to these individuals in spite of the estrangement this would ultimately suppose to him vis-à-vis Cárdenas.

After the capital came under siege, several prominent Republicans also sought refuge at the Mexican Embassy. Among the most prominent should be counted Ramón Menéndez y Pidal, Gregorio Marañón, who later deserted the Republican cause, Pedro Rico—former mayor of Madrid—, and the sister of Undersecretary of War Jose Asensio. The arrival of Republicans brought about clashes with those

⁹⁶ 'Cuando el número de refugiados es excesivo, el derecho de asilo cae por su propia base'. Luis Araquistáin. AHREM Archivo de la Embajada de México en Francia. Box number 217.

⁹⁷ Andrés Iduarte, *En el fuego de España*, México, Joaquín Mortiz, 1978 p.230.

conservatives already inside the Mexican legation that echoed those taking places at the trenches.

With disputes rising in tone, Pérez Treviño began to fear the prospect of a bloody confrontation inside the Embassy. Outside, discontent in Madrid against what was perceived as the pampering of the refugees in the light of much deprivation endured by the besieged capital, was such that the Ambassador felt obliged to make clarifications through the press. In a paid statement, published in Madrid's *ABC*, Pérez Treviño declared that the granting of asylum implicated no meddling in Spanish affairs, and gave assurances that the asylees inside the Embassy had no arms, nor were engaged in subversive activities. To emphasize his words he declared:

My condition of Mexican revolutionary and my firm conviction as a friend of popular causes is a further guarantee of my loyalty towards the people of Spain.⁹⁸

On November 6, 1936 as the government left Madrid and moved to Valencia. Aurelio Núñez Morgado, Chilean Ambassador and dean of the diplomatic corps, proposed the evacuation of the Embassies together with the refugees to the port. The move was considered unacceptable by the Republican government. Following his Foreign Ministry's orders, Pérez Treviño opposed Núñez Morgado's initiative and refused to leave the capital. This proved insufficient to persuade the Republican government of the alleged justice of the Mexican position with regard to diplomatic asylum.⁹⁹

Having given sanctuary to more than 1,000 refugees, the Mexican Embassy had them spread in various domiciles in Madrid. The militias accused these refugees of assisting the Fifth Column and began to exert pressure upon the Embassy threatening to take it by storm. Among these refugees the most notable were Emiliano Pérez Iglesias, Lerroux's Ambassador to Mexico, Alberto Martín Artajo who would go on to be Franco's foreign minister and Josefa de Iraola, close friend of General Franco, who even gave birth to a girl inside the Embassy. Seemingly, the then submarine

⁹⁸ *ABC*, Madrid, December 6, 1936.

⁹⁹ Aurelio Núñez Morgado, *Los sucesos de España vistos por un diplomático*. Buenos Aires, Talleres Gráficos Argentinos L.J. Ross, 1944.

commander, Luis Carrero Blanco—future Head of Government—also found briefly shelter there before reaching Nationalist territory in San Sebastian on June 1937 through Toulon.¹⁰⁰

When the Embassy building, located in number 17 Fortuny Street, proved insufficient to host such a number of people, new premises were fitted out as a shelter under Mexican protection in 3 Hermanos Bécquer Street. The mansion, which currently houses the Madrid offices of French bank *Paribas*, belonged to the eccentric Spanish-Mexican aristocrat, Carlos de Beistegui (1894-1970) who had left to a self-imposed exile in Biarritz. There, several hundreds were crammed. Inside the Embassy the overcrowding and squalor grew worse. Epidemics of typhoid fever and diphtheria broke out.

The refugee crisis exhibited the disagreements within the Cárdenas administration, as well as the lack of coordination of its different instances over this particular issue. On the one hand, Mexico had historically honoured the right to asylum—if only under the provisos alluded to by Araquistáin—and several Mexican officials—chiefly those of the Foreign Service—considered the protection of refugees irreproachable. On the other, most Mexican leftists, officials like Beteta and, more importantly, the President himself, deemed the protection of notorious fascists, unacceptable, yet could not retract without losing face before the rest of the Latin American governments.

Chile and more crucially, Argentina, through her Ambassador, the 1936 Nobel Peace Prize winner Carlos Saavedra Lamas, not only resisted the pressures of the Republican government, but also threatened a joint Latin American rupture of diplomatic links with the Republic.¹⁰¹

While it is certain that the Mexican government supported such a course of action it is equally clear that it did not want to alienate itself further from its regional counterparts. Thus, the asylum question placed Mexico on an ambiguous and dangerous equilibrium: on one hand it was aiding the Republic through all means at

¹⁰⁰ David Wingeate Pike, *Les Français et la Guerre d'Espagne*. Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne-Presses Universitaires de France, 1975. p.250.

¹⁰¹ Arnold J. Toynbee, op.cit. pp.388-390.

its disposal, while, on the other it was protecting her enemies in its own Embassy. In that sense, the decision to grant indiscriminate diplomatic asylum to anyone who asked for it, was taken directly by Pérez Treviño himself through “considerations of sheer humanity.”¹⁰²

Cárdenas’ relations with Pérez Treviño were far from cordial. After all, Pérez Treviño had been a notorious Callista and as such had the ill reputation of a conservative and counterrevolutionary. Moreover he had been Cárdenas’ main opponent for the Presidency in 1933, and as such had been sent to Madrid as a way of cutting him off from Mexico. Their divergences increased further over the embarrassing question of the refugees. Not surprisingly, Pérez Treviño was ignominiously transferred to Chile in the middle of the refugee crisis, leaving Spain on December 17, 1936. After the Republic’s defeat, left-wing writer, Andrés Iduarte, wrote a serious indictment against Pérez Treviño’s tenure, accusing him of partiality in favour of the Francoists:

In Malaga, the Mexican consulate hid 200 enemies of the Republic. The Francoists deliberately forgot this after they captured the city. Some leftist intellectuals that had obtained asylum at the consulate were forcibly taken out and shot. What a pity that General Pérez Treviño could not exert then, in opposite direction, his Franciscan vocation.¹⁰³

Back in Mexico, the refugee crisis brought about a curious effect: the premiere of Alejandro Galindo’s film “Refugiados en Madrid” which narrated in a melodramatic guise the lot of a group of asylees in an undesignated embassy in Madrid.¹⁰⁴ There is no way of knowing if the film was a success or not, but at any rate it is revealing of the way the war impacted urban Mexicans.

After protracted correspondence between Mexico and Spain, the Spanish government partially yielded and agreed to evacuate to France some asylees housed in the Embassy’s compounds. A first round of refugees was evacuated and

¹⁰² AHREM ‘Asilados españoles en la Embajada de México’ 1936, pp. 34-35.

¹⁰³ Andrés Iduarte, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

¹⁰⁴ Alfonso del Amo García, *Catálogo General del Cine de la Guerra Civil*. Madrid Cátedra/Filmoteca Española, 1996. p.699.

transported to France by the vessel *Durango*, which had been built in Spain, and paid by exports of chickpea from Mexico.

Amidst the refugee crisis, as the war entered a new stage, Cárdenas appointed Ramón P. Denegri, on February, 1937, as new Ambassador. The reason of this choice remains unclear, although it must surely have had to do with Pérez Treviño's handling of the asylum issue. Contradictory versions depict Denegri either as a cunning communist agent, a Nazi agent, an influence peddler and a corrupt careerist in the Mexican administration or a honest official.¹⁰⁵ From Madrid Denegri reported to Cárdenas the 'scandalous' attitude shown by various refugees, which had conspired with impunity from inside the Embassy, were armed, had built barricades, and expressed themselves in denigrating terms about the Spanish and Mexican governments, while practicing inside the Embassy all sorts of religious practices, thus betraying "unashamedly" the right of asylum.

They threaten to expose us anytime to a conflict similar to that, which took place inside the Finnish legation. You may rest assured that I shall act energetically to put an end to this embarrassing situation.¹⁰⁶

From his arrival, Denegri's brief tenure (January 1937 to July 1937) was riddled with scandals. In an act of utter diplomatic courtesy, Denegri let more than 2 months elapse before arriving at his new post. At the presentation of his credentials, Denegri outraged the formally dressed Republican by appearing in street clothes, accompanied by two thugs, dressed as Mexican *rancheros*, boasting pistols. Pretending to be a radical and a fellow traveller, the new Ambassador indulged in harassing refugees with Rightist leanings. It was widely rumoured that Denegri engaged in acts of corruption and blackmail, issuing Mexican official passports to cronies while attempting to extort money from wealthy Spaniards that had taken refuge at the Embassy, toward smuggling them out of Spain under Mexican protection.¹⁰⁷ According to various testimonies, Denegri fell under the malign

¹⁰⁵ Compare Salvador Novo, op. cit., pp. 34-35 or Siqueiros, op cit., p. 360 to T.G. Powell, op. cit., p.86.

¹⁰⁶ AHSRE, exp. III-764-1 (2a parte) Denegri to Cárdenas. January 8, 1937.

¹⁰⁷ AHSRE, "Informe confidencial sobre la actuación del Sr. Embajador en ésta Embajada de México en España". June 11, 1937 and "Memorandum relativo a la gestión del Sr. Embajador Ramón P. Denegri al frente de la Embajada de México en España."

influence of his stepson, Carlos, who indulged in frantic drunkenness and fits of violence, which may have even resulted in a murder inside the Embassy.¹⁰⁸

During his tenure, Denegri held several appointments with Azaña, at which a crucial issue was discussed. They met in Valencia shortly before being summoned by Cárdenas to brief him on the Spanish situation. Denegri asked Azaña without circumlocution if he wanted to send a message to Cárdenas and he queried what could Mexico do on behalf of the Republic, not only by its own means, but also in consensus with other American republics and the U.S. He made it clear that Mexico was, thanks to Roosevelt, in good terms with the “yanks.” Azaña replied that it was necessary to stop the war as the Republic should not rely blindly on the prospect of defeating Italy and Germany. This could prolong war, thus consuming all Spanish energies until there remained nothing but ruins. The first step should be the repatriation of all foreign fighters; then, a suspension of hostilities could be declared. This in turn might bring about an initiative by a Spanish-American republic or Roosevelt himself to pacify Spain. Not a mediation or an intervention, but an appeal to pacification aimed not only at Spaniards but also to the European powers, based on humanitarian grounds and on sentiments of Spanish-American fraternity. The Spanish President stressed that no agreement that implied the liquidation of the legitimate Republic could be accepted.¹⁰⁹

Denegri offered to convey these ideas to Cárdenas so he could later transmit them to Washington. Furthermore, Denegri admitted that the outcome of the Spanish war could greatly affect America, and that a victory of Franco could unleash a similar fascist movement in Mexico.¹¹⁰ They met two days later setting forth in detail the aspects of their previous conversation. On October 9 Azaña mused on the Roosevelt speech and recalled his conversation with Denegri, of whom he had not heard ever since. Thus the alternative of an arbitrated solution seemed to have evaporated.¹¹¹ No record of the conversation exists in the Mexican archives, so it is impossible to infer

¹⁰⁸ Mary Bingham de Urquidi, *op. cit.*, p.261.

¹⁰⁹ Manuel Azaña, *Memorias de Guerra*, *op. cit.*, p.170.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ The 1996 Grijalbo-Mondadori edition of his *Memorias de Guerra 1936-1939*, wrongly refers to Denegri as Tejeda, although this dignitary would only be appointed as Ambassador to Spain in 1938. p. 169-170.

what the response of the Mexican authorities to Azaña's proposal was, if any were made.

Ultimately, 807 refugees were evacuated from the Embassy on March, 14, 1937 by 40 lorries of the Madrid Junta and of the Department of Security, facilitated by General Miaja "in spite of the war necessities", and only because "it concerned Mexico" and escorted by 200 Assault Guards in motorcycles to Valencia.

At the last moment worker's organisations demanded four refugees, accused of serious charges by the revolutionary justice, to be handed to them. They were Antonio Montes Castañola, former aviation Lieutenant and air-instructor, José Molina Castiglione, former high-ranking official at the Ministry of Navy, the Marquis José Alonso Pesqueira and a certain captain "Santiago", recorded as "former Director General of Security under the government of Lerroux, and one of the main police officials responsible for the repression that followed the Asturian rebellion."¹¹²

The four officers were already on board and 120 refugees still had to be embarked. As the discontented workers threatened to stage a riot, Denegri himself went on board the ship and convinced the three to come down and stay in Valencia under his custody. Denegri personally oversaw that the refugees did not take with them military secrets to give to the Francoist camp. Finally, he regretted deeply the 'lamentable circumstances of having to protect the people's enemies,' yet assured Cárdenas that he would offer them all sorts of guarantees. Thus he put them under his protection and took them back to Madrid, where they were forced to remain for several months.

The remaining 803 refugees left on the French steamship *Medi Segundo* bound to Marseilles and escorted by a French warship. Manned by French and Italian communists, the refugees were harassed until they arrived to their final destination.¹¹³ Once in Marseilles the refugees continued their way to nationalist Spain, thus disowning the pledge they had made to Denegri.

¹¹² AHSRE, III/510 (46-00/2, III-1246-6. It is unclear whether it was captain Vicente Santiago Hodsson, mentioned indeed by Azaña as: "(...) former Chief of the Intelligence Bureau. Collaborator of Valdivia; rewarded by Lerroux with the General Direction for Security.", (see Manuel Azaña, *Memorias de Guerra*, op.cit. p.16), or Captain Agustín Santiago Romero, cited by Paco Ignacio Taibo as one of the main repressors after the 1934 uprising.

On April 30, Spain refused again to allow the four officers, who by then had expressed their wish to emigrate to Mexico, to leave the country. By then Mexico had closed all but one small building in its official complex in Madrid and the Mexican ambassador had followed the Republican government to Valencia where a provisional embassy had been established. This made in turn extremely difficult for Mexico to house, feed and provide security to the asylees. At long last, on August 7, 1937, the Spanish government gave Mexico and other nations that still provided diplomatic asylum its assent to evacuate to France or North Africa all remaining persons housed in their embassies. Mexico was thus able to include the four officers among the evacuees.

Thereafter, each of the embassies and legations was forced by the Republican government to close its facilities for housing refugees. Most of the governments had already closed their embassies in Madrid and only a handful followed the government to Valencia.

It must be said that many Mexican diplomats were shocked by the prevalent terror in Madrid during the early stages of the war. Death squads roamed the streets, often attacking persons they suspected of being fascists. Although the Republican government did not condone the violence, many diplomats, including Pérez Treviño, believed that it did little to stop it. The Mexican government chose publicly not to rebuke the Spanish government but privately urged the Republicans to curb the violence.¹¹⁴

Shortly after the asylees' evacuation, the Foreign Ministry hastily recalled Denegri to Mexico, leaving General Leobardo Ruiz as *chargé d'affaires*. Again, it is a matter of speculation why Cárdenas decided to remove Denegri; whether if it had been on account of his breaches of diplomatic etiquette or because of his apparent ideological over-zealousness. In any case, it would appear that Cárdenas did not feel thoroughly represented by the diplomat.

On October 25, 1937 Ruiz visited Azaña to present him with the decoration that the Mexican government had conferred on him, and to reassure him of the

¹¹³ Mary Bingham, *op cit.*, p.459.

goodwill of Cárdenas towards his regime. He also delivered the letter that Cárdenas had given him instructing him of the precise nature of his political duties as chargé d'affaires.¹¹⁵ Ruiz performed his tasks efficiently and seems to have enjoyed a great esteem in the Republican zone.

In a widely publicized episode, Ruiz left his mission in Valencia a month later, accompanied by his staff, to visit 'the martyr city "of Madrid with the declared aim of fraternizing with its "heroic masses." Ruiz went to the working class districts of Vallecas and Carabanchel to learn first hand of the onslaughts of fascism and to convey his sympathy for the wounded and the bereaved. While on Madrid, Ruiz also visited the front, paid his respects to, and exchanged decorations with, Miaja. Ruiz also visited the Mexican volunteers fighting in the ranks of the Republican army. This visit, according to the local papers of the time "endeared further the Mexican diplomatic mission with the people of the Republican zone."¹¹⁶

When the question was finally raised about who should be the Mexican Ambassador, Cárdenas first thought of designating Narciso Bassols. According to Siqueiros, Cárdenas asked him to intercede to this end. When asked by Siqueiros, Bassols furiously refused evoking an incident at Geneva, when as Mexican representative to the League he had been discussing with Litvinov a possible resumption of diplomatic links between Moscow and Mexico. On that occasion, Litvinov had angrily protested against the Mexican decision to grant political asylum to Trotsky. The Mexican Chancellery had not informed Bassols of this arrangement. It was through Litvinov that Bassols would learn of Cárdenas' decision. Then, Bassols, a philo-Soviet, had quit his post. Now, true to his explosive nature the delegate was reported to have replied:

Tell him (Cárdenas) to look for another idiot. He won't do it to me again.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ ibid. See also AHSRE 'Denegri a la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores' April 1, 1937.

¹¹⁵ Manuel Azaña *Memorias de Guerra*, op. cit., p.340.

¹¹⁶ See *El Heraldo de Madrid*, November 20, 22 and 24, 1937 and *El Sol. Diario de la Mañana del PCE*, November 25 and 27, 1937.

¹¹⁷ David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Me llamaban el coronelazo*. México, Grijalbo, 1976. pp. 341-342.

COMMUNISTS AGAINST CÁRDENAS

From 1937, relations between Mexico and the Spanish government, increasingly under the ascendancy of the PCE, cooled as a result of Cárdenas' decision to grant political asylum to Leon Trotsky. Hounded by Stalin's secret service the "disarmed prophet" was compelled to leave Norway with unknown destiny. Prompted by Diego Rivera, as well as by humanitarian considerations, Cárdenas announced his decision on December 7, 1936 to grant official protection to the fallen Bolshevik.¹¹⁸

The Mexican Left reacted with dismay to the measure. Both the PCM and the CTM opposed it sternly. Lombardo became very vocal in its opposition to Trotsky's permanence in Mexico, thus alienating himself from the President. Predictably the PCM, through its mouthpiece, expressed, in a rather blunt way, its position regarding the right of asylum: Will Mexico offer next diplomatic protection to Franco, Queipo de Llano or Mola?¹¹⁹ The accusation was clearly malign and consistent with Stalinist practices of demonization of adversaries.

The reaction in war-torn Spain was no less caustic. Following the provision of Soviet aid, the hitherto negligible Spanish Communist Party began to gain control over the Republic. Thereafter, the communists displayed open hostility to the Mexican representatives, deprecating Mexican aid in contrast to Soviet solidarity. Hence, when Mexican journalist, Blanca Trejo tried to interview *La Pasionaria*, she was rudely turned down with the following message: 'For Mexico, Nothing!'¹²⁰ The hostility of the Communists towards Mexico reached grotesque proportions. Every member of the party had to acknowledge Russia as the "sole motherland": 'We shall not permit that any other country beyond Russia appear to be as the paradigm of revolution.'¹²¹

Despite Communist resentment against the Mexican government for having given shelter to Trotsky, CNT militants remained largely sympathetic to Mexico.¹²² In that line the Communist-controlled *ABC*, or *Frente Rojo*, published in Valencia,

¹¹⁸ *Excélsior*, December 8, 1936.

¹¹⁹ *El Machete*, December 5, 1936.

¹²⁰ Blanca Lydia Trejo, *Lo que vi en España*. Mexico, Editorial Polis, 1940, p.79.

¹²¹ *ibid.*

¹²² David Alfaro Siqueiros, op. cit., p. 116.

echoed the remarks of *Pravda* and *L'Humanité*. However, there were voices like that of General Miaja, who recalled that Mexico had been “the first and selfless nation to give its aid to Spain.”¹²³

Back in Mexico, the net result of Trotsky’s asylum was to split the Mexican Left. After a second successful attempt against Trotsky’s life in which several Mexican and Spanish Communists were involved, Cárdenas declared as traitors to Mexico those who had murdered the Russian revolutionary. This in turn also made the prospect of a nationwide Mexican leftist coalition, comparable to that in Spain, more remote. Any suggestion in that direction became thenceforth unthinkable.

It remains an irony that a Spanish exile, Ramón Mercader, who received asylum from the Cárdenas administration, had taken the life of the old Bolshevik. The signing of the German-Soviet pact in August 22, 1939 further discredited the Mexican Communists.

At long last, on December 1937, Colonel Adalberto Tejeda, former Minister to France who had been instrumental in Mexican aid to the Loyalists, was appointed as Ambassador to Spain. By that stage the bilateral relation was not exempt of friction, as shown by several incidents. In spite of Tejeda’s request to present his credentials to Azaña since January, three long months elapsed before the ceremony could finally take place. The slowness of the Spanish authorities to comply with the diplomatic protocol seems to have partially derived from Denegri’s scandals. The determining factor, however, seems to have been the ill will between Tejeda and the Spanish Ambassador to Mexico, Gordón Ordás. Enervated by the delay, Tejeda revealed his decision to give up the post. Ultimately, Tejeda was only able to present his credentials on March 6, 1938. At the ceremony, Tejeda gave an impassioned speech on which, yet again, he expressed once again the identity of purpose between the Republic and the Mexican Revolution:

Spain and Mexico follow convergent paths towards an identical ideal (...) In this struggle the defenders of the Republic are at the same time those of human liberties. Thus, it is expected that their heroic sacrifices, will decide the democracies to rectify the criterion imposed to them by a shallow analysis

¹²³ ibid. pp. 65-66.

of the motivations and nature of the present conflict (...) I may not finish without expressing to His Excellency, (...), the most sincere vows for the triumph of the Republican arms, as the necessary conclusion of this glorious chapter of its history. A chapter, written with the generous and fruitful blood of the valiant Spanish people. A nation that struggles for the advent of an era of peace and progress based on justice and on the rights of the working class.¹²⁴

In spite of all good will, Tejeda's diplomatic tasks during those days remained largely ceremonial: confining himself to the customary visits to factories, hospitals, schools, as well as sending careful reports to Cárdenas concerning the Spanish situation. Mexican aid to Republican Spain had by then all but ceased.

THE MEXICAN OIL EXPROPRIATION, SPAIN AND THE IMPENDING WORLD WAR

Twelve days after Tejeda's appointment as Ambassador to Spain, Cárdenas nationalised Mexican oil from British, Dutch and American concerns, in what has been considered the greatest milestone of his administration. It may be probable that no other Mexican President has ever enjoyed, before or since, such widespread support of the citizenship as Cárdenas had in the wake of the expropriation act.

Even the Church, the historic antagonist of the Revolutionary governments, backed the President, with the Archbishop of Mexico prompting his parishioners to contribute to the popular collection set to pay the demanded compensation by the oil companies. The oil companies, most particularly, the British Eagle Corporation deemed the action illegal and the nationalisation a "robbery under law" to paraphrase the words of its paid propagandist, the notorious pro-Francoist writer, Evelyn Waugh, and imposed a stringent blockade against Mexican oil.¹²⁵

In the evening of May 13, 1938, the Mexican government surprised many by announcing that it had broken off diplomatic relations with Great Britain.¹²⁶ The

¹²⁴ AHREM, e.10-1611, fol. 23-113. March, 6, 1938.

¹²⁵ Lorenzo Meyer, México y los Estados Unidos en el conflicto petrolero. 1917-1942. México. El Colegio de México, 1972. pp. 359-381.

¹²⁶ *The Times*, May 15, 1938.

move came as a result of an acrid exchange of diplomatic notes. In an ill-famed message, the Foreign Office sneered at Mexican pledges to pay immediate compensation for the expropriation, “when it could not even pay the unsettled debts caused by damages to British property during the Revolution’s disturbances.” The following day Minister Hay summoned British Minister, Owen O’Malley St. Clair, and presented him with a cheque for the exact sum of Mexico’s debt to Britain and a note which reminded the Foreign Office of Britain’s arrears regarding its own debt to the United States, while informing him that Mexico was withdrawing its diplomatic representation from London.¹²⁷

American responses to the expropriation, however, were far from uniform. Thus, while American conservatives, oil interests and the Catholic lobby called for an old style armed intervention to right Cárdenas misdeeds, Liberals in and out of the administration called for restraint in order not to imperil the Good Neighbour Policy.

Roosevelt’s cabinet appeared divided between those who wanted retaliation against the measure and those who desired instead to persevere with the policy of non-intervention and rally hemispheric support in the face of the upcoming world conflict. Among the former stood out Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Treasury Secretary, Henry Morgenthau and U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Josephus Daniels. All three, fearful of the breakthroughs of international fascism and the possible take-over of Mexico by it, persuaded Roosevelt to reverse the reprisal measure, fearing that the Axis would step in if the U.S. allowed its relationship with its southern neighbour to regress.¹²⁸

After the oil expropriation, the economic pressure on Mexico was overwhelming; both foreign and Mexican capital fled the country, the oil companies imposed an asphyxiating boycott that soon was observed by the shipping and insurance companies. It was only by chance that the government survived this onslaught in those first few months.

¹²⁷ Lázaro Cárdenas, *Obras. I. Apuntes 1913-1940*. (May 12, 1938) p.394. The full text of the British notes is to be found in AHSRE, L-E600 and 601.

¹²⁸ David E. Cronon, *Josephus Daniels in Mexico*. Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1960. p.190.

In an attempt to break the blockade, Eduardo Villaseñor, head of the Bank of Mexico travelled to Spain and France. To all appearances, Republican Spain seemed to be a good choice. The Republic owned seventeen tankers that could transport Mexican oil around the world. The Republican government owed the Cárdenas administration more than a political favour on account of the Mexican support in the League and the Mexican arms deliveries. However, soon after his arrival in war ravaged Spain, Villaseñor understood that the besieged Republic was completely engrossed by the war effort and seemed in no position to assist Mexico in breaking its isolation.¹²⁹ Cárdenas himself gave a hint of the importance bestowed to the relation with an ideologically akin government amidst a sea of hostility. In a somehow cryptic entry to his diary he wrote on July 1938:

My government is entrusted with the mandate of directing the development of the oil industry under Mexican hands, and towards that end I shall devote all my efforts. Perhaps Spain may help us by selling our oil. This would appeal all Spanish-American people. Should Mexico be forsaken in this struggle against capitalism, the political and economic revolution that is taking root on all American nations would perish, and this would seriously harm Republican Spain. Today I wrote to Mr. Azaña regarding this situation.¹³⁰

Possibly at that stage, months before the collapse of the Ebro front, Cárdenas thought the Republic still capable of winning the war. A victorious Republic might use its prestige and contacts to break the blockade and assist in the consolidation of the Mexican oil industry. It goes without saying that at that point, the Republic was not capable anymore of helping Mexico. And yet, the annotation is revelatory of the material importance that the President still conferred to the relation with Spain. It seems extraordinary that in the face of the blockade Mexico continued its aid to Spain albeit in ever more modest proportions.

On account of the blockade and of the Spanish difficulty to agree to the operation, Mexico accepted an offer from Nazi Germany to buy its oil. A first transaction amounted to \$17 million in exchange for much-needed hard currency and

¹²⁹ Eduardo Villaseñor, *Memorias-Testimonio*. México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1974. pp.116-118.

¹³⁰ Lázaro Cárdenas, *Obras. I. Apuntes 1913-1940*. (July, 17, 1938), p.397.

manufactured goods. A paradoxical situation arose by which Mexico was supplying Republican Spain with arms and food, while at the same time furnishing Franco's allies with a strategic war commodity. It has even been suggested that at this stage Mexican oil began to flow to the Nationalist side through Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.¹³¹

This case fully illustrates how Cárdenas foreign policy was guided by pragmatic consideration rather than by ideological motives and how it had to walk a fine line between commitment to Spain and its own survival. Mexican policy-makers, in spite of the ideological repugnance they may have felt, came to regard German co-operation and investment as a way to development without dependency.¹³²

It does not follow in any way that the Mexican regime had become pro-Fascist or pro-German as many at the time claimed. It simply shows how compelled by economic exigencies it did not allow ideological considerations to take over practical needs. In fact, the German-Mexican bilateral relation became chilly owing to Mexican position regarding Spain, and was further cooled by Mexican condemnation of the annexation of Austria on March 1938.¹³³ Furthermore, Cárdenas openly refused a decoration by the German government.¹³⁴

When Marshall Pétain questioned Mexican Minister Luis I. Rodríguez about Cárdenas' determination to help the Republicans at all costs, he instantly replied to himself without waiting for a response: "Too much sentiment, and scant international experience."¹³⁵ Without doubt, the Mexican position towards Spain was determined somewhat by emotion rather than by reason. Mexican support for Republican Spain had been driven by a shared cultural and historical heritage, a fresh ideological affinity and purported similarities in both government's aims and objectives. Still,

¹³¹ Frank Kluckhohn, *op. cit.*, p.296.

¹³² Friedrich Schuler, *op.cit.*, pp. 102-107.

¹³³ Mexican condemnation of the *Anschluss* was deeply resented by German diplomacy. The German Minister in Mexico tried to explain Cárdenas' position in the following terms: "Mexico's newfound self esteem, which has impudently exhibited itself in Geneva, no doubt encouraged by the so-called "Good Neighbour" policy, may well reach a point in which General Cárdenas may feel tempted to co-direct the destiny of the world, in order to please his leftist captive audience." in AHSRE, C-6-2-4 (2) Diaries of Rudt von Collenberg, March, 1938.

¹³⁴ Lázaro Cárdenas, *Apuntes*, March 22, 1939, p.429.

¹³⁵ Luis I. Rodríguez, *Ballet de Sangre: La caída de Francia*. México, Ediciones del Nigromante, 1942. p.234.

this support never allowed sentimentalism to take precedence over objective imperatives or put in jeopardy Mexican national interest. Far from that, it redounded to Mexico's benefit, albeit in unforeseen ways, as will be seen below.

CHAPTER FOUR

MEXICAN ARMS FOR REPUBLICAN SPAIN

“Mexico was, from the start, our most faithful ally, one that without any objection lent its decisive aid in our direst moments. What is more this support sought no ulterior interest of predominating in our country’s affairs.”

Commander José Melendreras of the Republican Air Force

All in all, the riskiest and most committed response of Cárdenas administration towards the Republic’s tribulations came in the form of furnishing it with arms at a moment when every other country denied such aid. From the very beginning, the Mexican government put at the Republic’s disposal the entire production of its National Arms Work. Every piece available at the army’s warehouses was delivered at once, and even complete units of artillery of the Mexican army were dismantled in order to be taken to Spain.¹ The Mexican military factories increased the number of workers and the work shifts to deliver more machine guns, rifles and ammunition. When this proved insufficient, Mexico acted as a cover for Republican secret purchase operations with third countries. This support would carry on, in varying degrees, throughout the entire conflict, leaving Mexico as the sole dependable arms' purveyor to the Spanish Republic besides the USSR.

The exact volume of this aid remains unascertained as information on that regard is muddled. Hugh Thomas estimated it in U.S. \$ 2 million.² In turn, Powell, basing himself on Cárdenas' 1937 State of the Union address, reckoned that Mexico sold arms to Spain valued at over 8 million pesos (or, at the then prevailing exchange rate of 3.60 pesos per dollar, U.S. \$ 2,225,000).³ This estimate, however, covers only arms deliveries for the period running between September 1936 and September 1937,

¹ Félix Gordón-Ordás, op. cit. p.769. “Memoria escrita por el Comandante José Melendreras de la Comisión Militar de Compras enviada a Norteamérica y México.” In Francisco Olaya Morales, *El Oro de Negrín*. Móstoles, Ediciones Madre Tierra, 1990. p. 418.

² Hugh Thomas, op. cit., p. 797.

³ T.G. Powell, op. cit., p. 74.

leaving unaccounted for all other shipments made between September 1937 until October or November 1938.

Otherwise, the Mexican government's determination to sell arms when everybody else refused to do so may also be considered as a policy designed to set a moral precedent for other countries to follow suit. In this last endeavour, though, it must be said that the Cárdenas administration failed utterly. Despite the many appeals his government made through its emissaries at diverse international forums, no other country, beyond the USSR, which already did, showed any willingness to sell arms to the Republic, at least overtly.

After the initial onslaught by the insurgents and the corresponding resistance of the Loyalist forces on July 1936, a virtual stalemate between both sides followed. The Nationalists held about one third of Spanish territory, with the Republic in uncertain control of the remaining two-thirds. Equipment and arms enough to reduce the adversary with a single blow, let alone to conduct an out and out civil war, were in short supply. With no immediate prospect of overturning the impasse in view, and with no hope of reaching a compromise, both contenders soon sought aid abroad.

From the outbreak of hostilities, the rebels could count on the military aid of Italy and the backing of Portugal. Only three days after the uprising started, they were able to secure German support, which initially came in the form of 20 Junker 52 heavy transports. With these, an air bridge was established between Tetuán and Seville to overcome the blockade imposed by the Republican fleet on the bulk of the Nationalists' troops, which had been stranded at the African garrisons. Massive support soon followed.⁴

In these earliest hours of the Civil War, the Republican government sought military help from the ideologically congenial government of neighbouring France in order to suffocate the military uprising. So as to justify the legality of its request the Spanish government recalled a Franco-Spanish agreement, signed in 1935, which stipulated under a secret proviso that Spain would buy twenty million francs worth of

⁴ See Angel Viñas, *La Alemania Nazi y el 18 de julio*. Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1974.

French armament.⁵ At first, the French appeared to have agreed to this request, but soon the combined effects of internal disputes in the Blum cabinet, a vicious campaign by the native right-wing press and the unabashed coercion of the Baldwin government made them abjure of their earlier pledges.

Yielding to these pressures, Blum retracted his earlier pledge and denied the requested arms to Spain. Blum personally conveyed to Cárdenas' envoy, Isidro Fabela, his agony over the decision and the risks which honouring his commitment to Spain might entail for his country:

Yesterday, the British Ambassador came to let me know that should the French government deliver arms to Spain, Britain will observe strict neutrality in case of a European conflict.⁶

A row had broken out within the Blum cabinet between those, like Air Minister Pierre Cot, who insisted on keeping France's engagement and those like Defence Minister, Edouard Daladier, who not only abhorred the Spanish government in particular, but also wanted to keep France removed from a new war. An alternative solution was found to both appease the domestic opposition and the conservative press and still dispatch the promised planes. The sale would ostensibly be called off, while orders might be sent secretly through an amenable government such as that of Mexico, so far the only government in the world to have openly declared its support for the Spanish Republic.

In the intervening time, Fernando de los Ríos, who had been hastily appointed as Spanish Ambassador to France,^{*} approached the Mexican Minister in France, Col. Adalberto Tejeda, to make a formal request for the Mexican government to buy arms and ammunition in France on behalf of the Spanish Republic. The purchase would appear as made by Mexico although in reality bound for Spain.⁷ Without prior consultation, Tejeda sent a cable to the Mexican Foreign Ministry informing Hay of

⁵ Michael Alpert, *A New International History of the Spanish Civil War*. op. cit., p.22.

⁶ Isidro Fabela, *Cartas al Presidente Cárdenas*, p. 29.

^{*} Owing to the defection of Spain's former envoy, Juan Francisco de Cárdenas, to the Francoist side.

⁷ AHSRE, exp. III-764-1.

the urgent inquiry posed by De los Ríos.⁸ Days later the response came. The Mexican Foreign Ministry fully authorised the enterprise, although upon the condition that there were no international complications of any nature with the French government. The communiqué stressed, “Under no circumstances are we to deceive friendly governments.”⁹

On August 1, 1936 the Mexican government received through Tejeda yet another request from the Spanish government, this time to buy arms either in Belgium or Britain. The solicited material included 10 to 12 bombers, 25,000 bombs 1,500 machine guns and several million cartridges. The request had been also made by Fernando de los Ríos. Again, the purchase would appear as made by Mexico.¹⁰

In the first instance, the transaction flopped as on August 26 Britain categorically refused to issue licenses for the sale of an unspecified number of rifles, machine-guns and ammunitions to Mexico for fear that they would re-exported to Spain, in spite of the assurances given by the Mexican Minister in London, Primo Villa Michel that this material was solely for the Mexican army.¹¹

About the Belgian connection, the very secrecy of the operation makes it difficult to determine with certitude its outcome. On September 19, the Belgian police broke into the headquarters of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, where they found documentation implicating Mexican Minister in Brussels, Carlos Dario Ojeda, with an order of 200,000 hand-grenades, which had been sent to Spain. The fortuitous discovery led to a search three days later of the *SS Raymond*, which uncovered a cargo of several crates containing 800 rifles, bayonets, 320 carbines and 210,000 cartridges, ostensibly arranged by the Mexican legation for ultimate shipment to Spain.¹² Beyond this instance, there are no official records, either Mexican or Belgian confirming other undertakings, and we can only infer that more of them took place through the indirect testimonies of the actors directly involved in their implementation.

⁸ AHSRE, Cable no. 42 de Ministro Adalberto Tejeda al Secretario de Relaciones Exteriores, Eduardo Hay. July 26, 1936.

⁹ Ibid, Cárdenas to Tejeda.

¹⁰ AHSRE, Tejeda to Hay, Paris, July 29, 1936.

¹¹ Public Records Office, Kew. (Henceforth PRO) Foreign Office (FO) 371 W9883/9549/41.

¹² *The Times*, 22-25 September 1936.

As far as the French operation is concerned, it is known with certainty that Mexican diplomats approached French Air Minister, Pierre Cot, obtaining his complete approval for the deal.¹³ Ultimately, on August 2, 1936 through Mexican cover, thirty reconnaissance aircraft and bombers, fifteen fighters, and ten transport and training planes were sent to the Republic. The bombers were *Potez 54* class.¹⁴ There are conflicting versions over the actual number of planes that ultimately arrived in Barcelona. Thomas names 55 altogether, Schwartz speaks of 37 between the end of July and August 17. Miguel Sanchís lowers the figure to twenty-five *Potez 54* bombers, thirteen of which had been taken by sea on July 26, the rest by air.¹⁵

Explicit reference of the arrangement is made in Cárdenas' Diaries, on the August 20, 1936 entry:

The Spanish government has requested Mexico to acquire armament and airplanes, in order to set up two regiments, that they badly need, and as the French government has consented to this operation, authorization has been given to our minister in Paris, Col. Tejeda, to purchase on their behalf the required armament.¹⁶

This has been proverbially considered the first instance of Mexican support. New evidence would suggest that Mexican aid encompassed more dealings than was previously believed. On August 15, the Mexican government bought with Republican money through the demarche of the captain of the gunboat *Durango*, Manuel Zermeño Araico, who had been in the area evacuating Mexican citizens away from the Spanish conflict, an Algerian hulk of 1700 tons, the *Berbère*, docked in the port of Marseilles. The vessel had been built in 1891 and had been wrecked in the French port for some months. Renamed *Jalisco* the ship would smuggle arms repeatedly from France into Republican Spain. Six days later, it set sail to Alicante taking a clandestine arms freight, containing 150 Brandt trench mortars and 45,000 mortar-

¹³ Pierre Cot, *Les événements survenus ... (Rapport fait au nom de la commission parlementaire chargé d'enquêter sur les événements survenus en France, 1933-1945: Les témoignages.)* Vol.1, no.2344, pp.215-29. (Audition de M. Léon Blum July 23, 1947).

¹⁴ Hugh Thomas, op. cit., p.305. Gerald Howson, *Arms for Spain*. London, John Murray, 1998. p. 25

¹⁵ Fernando Schwartz, *La internacionalización de la Guerra Civil Española, julio de 1936-mayo de 1937*. Barcelona, Ariel, 1971. p.56; Miguel Sanchís, *Alas rojas sobre España* Madrid, Publicaciones Nacionales, 1956. p.11.

¹⁶ Lázaro Cárdenas, *Obras I. Apuntes 1913-1940*, First Volume, Mexico, UNAM, 1972, pp. 354-355.

grenades.¹⁷ A further consignment took place on September 10, this time conveying 50 Oerlikon 20 millimetre anti-aircraft cannons and 75 shells.¹⁸

It was precisely at that moment that the idea of launching a non-intervention policy was first conceived. Indeed, on September 9, 1936 a Committee for Non-Intervention was established in London under Anglo-French auspices with a somewhat peculiar interpretation of what non-intervention meant, immediately establishing surveillance over Spanish borders and coasts. Thenceforth the French government refused to assist the Republic. France closed its border with Spain to all military traffic on August 1936, opening it intermittently in 1937 and 1938.

In the name of peace and with the purported desire of avoiding a new world conflagration, the scandalous evidence of an overt foreign intervention led by Germany and Italy was overlooked. The creation of the Committee ensured thus that the only party adversely affected by its prescriptions was the legitimate government of Spain. In fact, the Committee denied the aid that, according to International Law, Madrid could expect, at least from the members of the League of Nations. By early September, nine European countries had signed the declaration of non-intervention.* Of these, two, Germany and Italy, openly breached the agreement by continuing to provide considerable aid to the rebels, while a third, the Soviet Union would soon break its earlier commitment to the accord by supporting the Republic. Ultimately, twenty-seven nations adhered to the pact in a greater or lesser degree.¹⁹

Most early Mexican arms cargoes to Spain were secret, and there is no way of knowing their precise amount and value. Sources diverge, even concerning documented shipments. We have notice, albeit fragmented or unofficial, of several of these freights. In September 25, 1936, according to the Parisian newspaper *Le Temps*, the steamship *America* under Mexican flagship, left Antwerp, officially to Veracruz, but in reality bound to a Spanish port. According to the same source, the freight had embarked 1116 metric tons of potassium chlorate, 1,400 of sulphuric acid, 310 of

¹⁷ Gerald Howson, *op. cit.*, p.103.

¹⁸ *L'Action Française*, September 14, 1936.

* These were Belgium, Britain, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Sweden and the USSR.

¹⁹ Norman J. Padelford, *International Diplomacy in the Spanish Civil Strife*. New York, Macmillan, 1939, pp. 53-118.

phenol, all of them of Soviet origin, as well as 25 tons of copper scrap. These commodities were purportedly destined to the Madrid government for the manufacture of explosives.²⁰

A fortnight later, the French torpedo boat *Vauquelin* telegraphed the French Ministry of Navy reporting that the *Jalisco* had violated the arms embargo by taking yet another arms cargo from Marseilles to Alicante. The *Jalisco* had already four acquittals on counts of illegal arms smuggling, but was authorized to depart with an arms load which was purportedly intended for the Mexican Ministry of War via Veracruz. The freight included one case containing aeronautical motors, 60 cases containing an unknown numbers of pieces of ammunition, 16 cases containing machine guns, with 134 cases of matching cartridges, and several motorcycles, all worth 2,295,160 French Francs.²¹

According to the American military attaché in Mexico City, the same gunboat *Durango*, that had evacuated several stranded Mexicans and Spanish refugees, which had earlier taken shelter at the Mexican Embassy in Madrid, transported 8 million cartridges and 8,000 rifles to an undisclosed Spanish port on September 1936.²² Various airplanes were also smuggled from the U.S. into Mexico, concealed in the port of Veracruz, fitted with arms to convert them into bombers, and then sent by ship to Spain, as will be seen below.

It has also been suggested that Mexican diplomats also engaged in espionage activities on behalf of the Republic, trying to counter Axis attempts to influence European chancelleries in favour of the rebels. Simeón-Vidarte reports on how the General Consul in Paris, Epigmenio Guzmán, a junior diplomat named Mejías and Tejeda himself were able to carry out counterintelligence in Berlin and smuggle millions of cartridges of German and Austrian manufacture into Spain.²³ Elena Garro gives a degree of plausibility to this version by recounting in her memoirs how this same Mejías had told her in Paris that he had become involved in intelligence

²⁰ *Le Temps*, Paris, October 25, 1936.

²¹ Ministère des Affaires Etrangères B/28/1, Paris, October 24, 1936. Contrebande d'armes par le Vapeur "Jalisco" Désignation des pièces.

²² Marshburn September 18, 1936 MID NARA WDC, 7456 G2R MID 2657 G 768/ 111.

²³ Juan Simeón-Vidarte, *Todos fuimos culpables. Testimonios de un socialista español*. México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1973. p.566.

gathering activities in Berlin and Rome, taking advantage from his diplomatic status.²⁴ For obvious reasons, there exists no evidence for such claims in the Mexican official documentation.

Despite the lack of official documentation concerning many of those arm freights, there is considerable photographic evidence of Mexican shipments to Spain, particularly originating from Francoist propaganda sources, which, ironically, attempted to link the Republic with foreign intervention in Spain.²⁵ In these catalogues and other suchlike leaflets, Mexico was repeatedly accused of having sent to Spain substantial amounts of *dum-dum* expansive bullets in infringement to the Convention of Geneva, which had them banned a decade earlier.

OPEN ENGAGEMENT: THE EXPEDITION OF THE *MAGALLANES*

On August 23, 1936 an allotment of 20,000 Remington rifles and 20 million 7 millimetre cartridges, all of them Mexican made, was sent to Spain. The war provisions were taken in 15 train wagons to the port of Veracruz, and then embarked on board the Spanish vessel *Magallanes*. The cargo came as a presidential response to the Republican government's appeals for help. Cárdenas responded to the plea without waiting to fix a sale price with the Republicans. The whole operation was implemented under maximum secrecy.

The Spanish Ministry of State had instructed Gordón-Ordás to explore the possibility *auprès* the Mexican government of going beyond the cover up transactions and obtaining arms supplies directly from Mexico. The lack of a sizeable Mexican merchant fleet obviously complicated the scheme. Circumstances, anyhow, facilitated the operation as a Spanish vessel, from the Compañía Trasatlántica Española, the *Magallanes*, reached Veracruz performing routine passenger service.

²⁴ Elena Garro, *Memorias de España 1937*. Mexico, Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1992. pp.127-128. The *New York Times* delved briefly over these suggestions. See *New York Times*, June 4-5, 1937.

²⁵ Pictures of Mexican arms cargoes and inventories may be found in the following volumes: Pierre Héricourt, *Les soviets et la France fournisseurs de la révolution espagnole*. Paris, Baudiniere, 1938. Servicio de Recuperación de Material de Guerra, *Catálogo de material cogido al enemigo. Exposición de Guerra*. San Sebastián, 1938 (III año triunfal).

The liner was bound to Havana, New York, Cadiz and Barcelona.²⁶ Normal service ended on August 12 when the Republic seized the Company. The *Magallanes* had been expected to arrive in Veracruz from Coruña since the 13th but only got there until the 16th. Upon landing the passengers declared to an eager Mexican press their alarm at the rebellion and the difficulties they had faced to leave Coruña. The ship had been stopped there before being allowed to depart. The rebels had intended to confiscate it, but somehow let it depart.

Sensing an opportunity Gordón-Ordás persuaded his government through the Ministry of State to confiscate the *Magallanes*. The Trasatlántica was yet another hurdle that had to be avoided. The Consul in Veracruz and Argüelles tried to reach a friendly settlement with the company's manager to no avail. To make matters worse, the local press disclosed the meeting, making public the manager's decision not to take responsibility. Fearing desertions, the Embassy put confidentially under investigation two of the radio-operators, the first and third officers as well as the ship's priest. Suspected of being disloyal to the Republic, they were conclusively dismissed.

Once in Veracruz, the *Magallanes*' crew paraded on the port's streets, staging a rambunctious demonstration before the Spanish consulate, where they demanded the Republican flag to be flown.²⁷ The next day, the ultra-right-wing *Confederación de la Clase Media* (CCM), protested irately against what it considered a "shameless and intolerable provocation by foreign agitators."²⁸ The warm reception given by communists and trade unionists to the Spanish passenger ship in Veracruz raised suspicions among conservatives over the extent of the Mexican government's entanglement in the Spanish conflict. The rumour that Cárdenas was selling arms to the Republic increased. That same day the CTM rejected local rightists' accusations connected with the purported arming of worker's militias.²⁹

During that convulsed week, the *Magallanes* was converted from a passenger ship into a cargo under maximum stealth. The tourists were taken to Mexico City

²⁶ *Excélsior*, August 2, 1936.

²⁷ *Excélsior* and *El Universal*, August 17, 1936.

²⁸ *Excélsior*, August 18, 1936.

with all their travel expenses covered by the Spanish Embassy. There, they received lengthy explanations from the Embassy's officials about the risks entailed in going back to Spain in a ship transformed in a war vessel and reassurances that fares would be provided for other ships as well as payment for extra costs incurred. Only 16 passengers were allowed to return with the ship. The rest were redirected on the *Orinoco* bound for Havana and the French port of Le Havre.

Convincing Cárdenas of agreeing to the sale had not been an easy task. When Gordón-Ordás first parleyed with the President over the issue, he had found Cárdenas heavily influenced by the "fable skilfully spread from Burgos" that the military had rose in defence of the Republic. The Ambassador dissipated his doubts stating the "facts":

And so, I was pleased to hear from him that Mexico would lend all its support to the legitimate government in Spain in compliance with an international obligation that it had never refused.³⁰

Gordón-Ordás' request had come amidst appeals from the Mexican trade unions to the Mexican government to arm the workers, and form militias in order to safeguard the "conquests of the revolution." These overtures caused considerable disquiet among Mexican military, namely among the more conservative senior officers, which began to voice openly their opposition to the scheme, forcing the government to disavow it.³¹ Nevertheless, while Cárdenas refused to arm the Mexican workers he still seemed ready to do so with the Spaniards. Thus on August 10, 1936, the same day that the arming of the Mexican workers had been refused by his government, Cárdenas wrote down in his diary:

The Republican government of Spain has requested the Mexican government through its Ambassador Félix Gordón-Ordás to supply as many arms as possible for its defence. The Mexican War Ministry has been instructed to put at the Ambassador's disposition 20,000 7-mm rifles and 20 million

²⁹ Raquel Sosa, *Los códigos ocultos del cardenismo*. México, UNAM/ Plaza y Valdés, 1997 pp. 112-113.

³⁰ Félix Gordón-Ordás, op. cit., p.618.

³¹ Edwin Lieuwen, *Mexican Militarism. The political rise and fall of the Revolutionary Army 1910-1940*. Alburquerque, The University of New Mexico Press, 1968. pp.127-128.

cartridges of the same calibre of national manufacture in the port of Veracruz.³²

A letter from Cárdenas to the Minister of Defence, Manuel Ávila Camacho, conveyed the request of Gordón-Ordás: “In the understanding that the Ministry in your command shall fix the prices of the aforementioned supplies.”³³ At first, the Cárdenas government made every effort to keep the whole affair secret, fearing its potentially explosive repercussions, both in the international and domestic scenes. Thus, Cárdenas instructed Ávila Camacho to handle the matter under absolute confidentiality. One thing was to act as an intermediary for a friendly government with the connivance of the selling party, and yet another to sell directly one’s own armament.

With full presidential support, Gordón-Ordás approached next the Minister of Communication, Francisco Múgica, asking him to provide two replacements for the suspected radio-operators, as well as a short wave transmitter. Múgica agreed immediately and thus, two telegraphers from the Ministry, Salvador Tayaba and Alfredo Marín joined the expedition.³⁴ By this time, the Mexican government had become fully engaged in the project of furnishing with arms Republican Spain, and preparations were well under way. Cárdenas wrote on August 20, 1936:

Two trains with thirty-five wagons left today for the port of Veracruz taking the weapons and ammunition that have been sold to the Spanish government. The *Magallanes*, a vessel of the Spanish navy, which is currently stationed in Veracruz, will transport them to Spain. The shipment will be under the direct supervision of Mr. José María Argüelles, secretary of the Spanish Embassy, a citizen of firm revolutionary conviction and a loyal collaborator of the Republican government.³⁵

Back in Spain the lack of armament for the defenders of the Republic was extreme. The government forces, though superior in numbers, had suffered heavy losses, while Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy rapidly supplied Franco with substantial

³² Lázaro Cárdenas, *Obras. Apuntes. 1913-1940* First Volume, México, UNAM, 1971 p.354.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.* pp. 621-622.

³⁵ Lázaro Cárdenas, *op. cit.*, p.354.

consignments of war material. After July 18, the Republic had only limited and obsolete arms material at its disposal. Naive courage tried to make up for the lack of artillery in the Republican side. Calls for arms at whichever price grew more desperate by the day as the Nationalist forces relentlessly moved towards Madrid.³⁶

Spurred by the urgency of their “proletarian comrades”, the stevedores’ union of Veracruz helped in speeding up the process of loading the cargo without charging a penny for loading the holds of the ship with 20,000 rifles and the 20,000,000 rounds of ammunition. Moreover, they also donated one day of their salary to buy additional food to be shipped to Spain.

Finally, the *Magallanes* set sail at 6:45 p.m. of Sunday August 23.³⁷ No one knew where the ship was really heading for. *Excélsior* reported that its radio-operator had remained on land “for fear of reprisals”, but little else.³⁸ The Mexican conservative press speculated that its captain, Manuel Morales, had received an envelope from the Spanish embassy containing instructions that should not be opened until the ship sailed in high seas.³⁹

On board the ship, entrusted with guarding the precious cargo, was José María de Argüelles, First Secretary of the Embassy, invested with special powers. Despite the Mexican government’s hopes of keeping the affair secret, every single detail appeared to have been leaked to the press even before the *Magallanes*’ departure, giving rise to vehement protests from conservative editorialists.

Even now, in the face of heavy criticisms, the Mexican government remained silent over the issue and there was no official response to the press’ allegations. Insisting on the affair, *Excélsior* interviewed on August 21 an “unidentified” Mexican official concerning persistent rumours about Mexican shipment of arms for Spain. The official who “lent himself” to be interviewed over the issue declared:

I ignore whether the materials embarked in the steamboat *Magallanes* are precisely arms and ammunition, although I consider this highly improbable,

³⁶ Gabriel Cardona, *La Batalla de Madrid Noviembre, 1936- Julio, 1937*. Madrid, Historia 16/ Caja de Madrid. 1996.

³⁷ *Excélsior*, August 24, 1936.

³⁸ *Excélsior*, August 24, 1936.

as Mexico has never been an arms trader. To this I would add that it is well known that President Cárdenas decided that the National Arms Works be transformed into a factory for agricultural machinery. What I may assure you is that negotiations did take place in order to send the Spanish government items, which under normal conditions, make up the bulk of our exports to Spain.

The anonymous informant considered that such an attitude from the Mexican government was by no means suspect, given the:

...undeniable ideological identity of both governments, as both embody the longing for betterment of the working class, and especially the redemption of the peasantry.

He also pointed that Azaña's government had lifted the tariffs imposed by the previous administration—formed precisely by those “same elements that are today up in arms”—on the chickpea, of which marketing was vital for the producers of Sonora and Sinaloa. According to the same informer, Azaña's government had also shown greater understanding concerning the well-known bullfighter's conflict, less important than the chickpea issue “but more spectacular.” “For all these reasons,” ended the unnamed informant “there is nothing questionable about Mexican economic cooperation with Spain.”⁴⁰

It was true that Mexico sold beans, livestock, coffee, asphalt and forage to Spain. From Spain, it imported wine, olive oil, spirits and cider, cigarette paper, canned seafood, books, almonds, olives and firearms. It followed that there was nothing exceptional in Mexico wanting to even up its trade balance with Spain. Even Mexican conservatives could not oppose the reasoning used by the bureaucrat to justify the legality of the transactions.

However, the fact that the dealings made Mexican officials feel uneasy about possible international repercussions is underlined by the fact that on August 25, as a pre-emptive step to avert complaints from other governments, and to widen its margin of manoeuvre, the Foreign Ministry issued an unwarranted note stating that

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Excélsior*, August 21, 1936.

Mexico had not signed any agreement preventing American nations from selling arms to Spain, nor that it had not received any communication over the matter from the American government.⁴¹

Pujadas issued an “official” communiqué condemning the Mexican government for selling arms to the Republicans, setting up a volunteer Mexican legion to fight in Spain, and for breaching “the neutrality that European countries had attempted to establish.”⁴² Over a week later, the Spanish Rebels themselves sent a formal note of protest to the Mexican government concerning the sale of weapons to the Republic. Miguel Cabanellas, leader of the insurgent Junta de Defensa Nacional, accused the Mexican government of violating the doctrine of non-intervention by aiding the “Communists”, and announced that his government would not honour any agreement between Mexico and the Spanish Republic.⁴³

These complaints went unanswered as Cárdenas only acknowledged the sale at his State of the Nation address before the Mexican Congress on September 1, 1936, when the *Magallanes* was already on the high seas; giving even precise information about the volume and value of the materials it carried. The announcement prompted an ovation from the Mexican deputies to Gordón-Ordás, who sat glowing in the assembly’s gallery. Cárdenas’ speech had an immediate international resonance, with most leading newspapers carrying out the message.⁴⁴

In spite of the manifold difficulties that Gordón-Ordás had to cope with, the journey started under good auspices. Back in the ship, it turned out that the sealed envelope referred to by the press contained ciphered codes so the vessel might communicate with the Republican government or with Loyalists ships, as well as precise instructions about the conduct that its crew should follow so as not to fall into the hands of the insurgents. To avert such a contingency the Ministry of State decided on a straightforward route with only one stop in Curaçao to restock the steamship with fuel and water before continuing on to Cartagena bound for Barcelona.

⁴¹ *El Nacional*, August 26, 1936.

⁴² AHSRE, Ramón M. de Pujadas al Secretario de Relaciones Exteriores, Mexico City, August 13, 1936.

⁴³ AHSRE “La Junta de Defensa Nacional a la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores”, Burgos, August 21, 1936.

⁴⁴ See, among others, *New York Times*, September 3, 1936; *The Times*, September 4, 1936.

The crossing of the Straits of Gibraltar was the expedition's critical moment. Argüelles later described that during the passage he heard one of Queipo de Llano's nightly broadcasts on the radio. The histrionic General ominously proclaimed:

The reds say we shall not pass. Let me say this. It is the *Magallanes* that shall not pass. We have located it and tomorrow we shall soon be updating you about its capture.

Argüelles had strict orders to sink the ship before letting it fall into rebels' hands.⁴⁵ Providentially, a loyal ship, the *Cervantes*, came across, its crew "noisily roaring ovations for Mexico and Cárdenas." Without further delay, the destroyer *Sánchez Barcáitzegui* escorted the *Magallanes* through the Straits. The crossing started at 8 p.m. and from Ceuta a powerful searchlight beamed over them. At 8:15 a.m., two German airplanes flew at an altitude of 4000 metres over the convoy, well out of reach of the *Sánchez Barcáitzegui*'s anti-aerial artillery and dropped bombs at the *Magallanes*, which was able to elude them by steering in zigzag. By the evening, the *Magallanes* was subject to new bombings; this time by Italian bombers, which dropped 16, further bombs.⁴⁶ Although the Associated Press gave the false version that the ship had been captured at Vigo,⁴⁷ the ship arrived safely in Cartagena, where the unloading of armaments took place amidst cheering crowds hailing Cárdenas and Mexico.

The Mexican arms arrived at a crucial stage of the war when the Nationalists had opened the route to Madrid. The amount of arms sent by Mexico was by no means negligible taking into account the relation of forces at that stage. At the battle of Madrid, in early November, 15,000 to 20,000 militias opposed 30,000 rebels according to General Rojo.⁴⁸ Toledo, where the only ammunition factory existed, was in the Republic's hands, but Lugones, the provider of cartridges, was isolated and in

⁴⁵ *El Nacional* October 6, 1936.

⁴⁶ *El Nacional*, October 7, 1936.

⁴⁷ *Excélsior*, October 4, 1936.

⁴⁸ Vicente Rojo *Así fue la defensa de Madrid. Aportación a la historia de la guerra de España* México, Editorial Era, 1969 pp.42-43. Hugh Thomas credits the populace of Madrid with the defeat of a well-equipped army of 20, 000 Moroccans. op. cit., pp.409-412.

any case, the factory's capacity was not enough to furnish the Republic's needs.⁴⁹ The powder factories of Seville and Granada had already fallen to the Nationalists.

On the word of Simeón-Vidarte, the Mexican rifles served to arm the numerous contingents of volunteers and the newly formed International Brigades.⁵⁰ The fact that these arms were of standard quality made them all the more valuable, considering that other rifles at hand were old, miscellaneous, and sometimes even perfectly useless. George Orwell, fighting as a volunteer at the Aragón front with the POUM's militias, had ample praise for the Mexican cartridges, which because of their quality were "saved for the machine guns."⁵¹ According to the *Manchester Guardian*'s correspondent in Spain, Frank Jellinek, the Mexican rifles were: "Excellent, lighter than the Spanish Mauser type, carrying two magazines of five cartridges."⁵² Largo Caballero distributed the rifles himself.⁵³ Other versions suggest that Commander Vittorio Vidali (Carlos) himself distributed these rifles at the Cuartel de la Montaña in Madrid. As few or none of the improvised soldiers knew how to use the rifles, it became necessary to train militias in their use. Apparently, some Mexican officers cooperated in the drills.⁵⁴ Again, according to Jellinek, by September 22 new reserves arrived from the provinces, among them, the Durruti Column:

The new troops were flung straight into the Tagus Valley, amid frantic cheers. This had been made possible by the arrival of arms from Mexico. The Mexican arms had enabled Madrid to throw the reserves against the Tagus front and to hold the rebel advance for a month.⁵⁵

According to Alpert most of the Mexican rifles were lost in the rout of the Spanish militia that summer and autumn.⁵⁶ More significant, perhaps, than the actual

⁴⁹ On September 28, 1936, Toledo fell to the Nationals and the militia fled leaving behind the entire contents of the arms factory. See Hugh Thomas, *op. cit.*, p.363.

⁵⁰ Juan Simeón-Vidarte, *Todos fuimos culpables*. México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1973, pp.426-428 and 787-788.

⁵¹ George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*. Middlesex, Penguin, 1988.

⁵² Frank Jellinek, *The Civil War in Spain*. London Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1938. p.489.

⁵³ Manuel Azaña, "Artículos sobre la guerra de España" in *Obras Completas* Vol.III, Mexico, Oasis, 1967. p.489.

⁵⁴ Santiago Álvarez, *Historia política y militar de las Brigadas Internacionales*. Madrid, Compañía Literaria, 1996. p. 288.

⁵⁵ Frank Jellinek, *op. cit.*, p.489.

⁵⁶ Michael Alpert, *op. cit.*, p.108.

number of guns was the symbolic importance of their timely arrival: the arms landed in Spain when everybody else was denying them to the Republic.

INTERNATIONAL REACTIONS TO MEXICAN INVOLVEMENT IN THE SPANISH WAR

The Mexican government was criticised internationally for its role in supplying weapons to the Spanish Republic. President Justo of Argentina and his chancellor, and that year's Nobel Prize for Peace winner, Carlos Saavedra Lamas, privately deplored the operation yet stopped short of a formal protest.⁵⁷ Brazil received the news without surprise as it considered Mexico, Russia and Spain "the advance guard of international communism."⁵⁸ The Chilean government appeared to have been far more disturbed by an arms sale, which it regarded as a "shameless service to the Soviets."⁵⁹ The Mexican Ambassador in Santiago, Ramón P. Denegri warned the Mexican government about an imminent rupture of diplomatic relations between Mexico and Chile, due to the strong feelings that Mexican aid to the Republic had aroused there.

From Lisbon, the Mexican chargé d'affairs, Daniel Cosío Villegas, informed the Mexican Foreign Ministry that relations with Portugal were becoming "strained" due to Mexican aid to the "Reds." Furthermore, he stated, the Portuguese newspapers frequently published derogatory articles against Mexico, making Mexico's position in Portugal "untenable."⁶⁰ Predictably, Nationalist Spain reacted with anger to Mexican support of the Republic. In one of his nightly broadcasts from Radio Seville, Queipo de Llano lashed out at the Mexican government:

The Mexican people is subjugated by a gang of brigands comparable to that, which dominates Madrid. Thus it does not surprise me in the least that

⁵⁷ Alberto Enríquez Perea (compiler) Alfonso Reyes y el llanto de España en Buenos Aires 1936-1937. Mexico, El Colegio de México/Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1998. pp.28-30.

⁵⁸ AHSRE (Mexican Ambassador to Brazil), "José Rubén Romero a la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores", exp. III- 548-2.

⁵⁹ AHSRE "Denegri a la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, III 1510 (46) "37/1", February 10, 1937.

⁶⁰ A flyer circulated widely in Lisbon depicting a woman, allegorically representing Spain, being stabbed with daggers that distinctly displayed the names of Mexico and the Soviet Union. See AHSRE, III 516 (46-0) 9731 no. 10, "Cosío Villegas a Eduardo Hay", November 7, 1936.

Mexico sympathises with the Reds as it is ruled by a government that murders and steals from its people as much as it can.⁶¹

Unlike the German government, which, owing to its aims to challenge American hegemony in the Western hemisphere, wished to improve the bilateral relation, and boost further its already rising position in the Mexican economy by way of diplomatic courtesies,⁶² the German press harshly criticised the Mexican position. An article titled *Mexican Perversities* attributed Mexico's stance to the fact that its ideology was identical to that of the "Spanish Bolsheviks":

...Although Mexico support the reds, pretending them to be the authentic government of Spain, the Non-intervention Committee shall see to it that this will not be the case.⁶³

On repeated occasions throughout 1937, German Minister in Mexico, Rüdt Von Collenberg had to come forward and refute persistent rumours, which implied that Germany was about to sever its diplomatic links with Mexico on account of that country's support to the Republic.⁶⁴ Privately, in his communications to the *Wilhelmstrasse*, Von Collenberg ridiculed Mexican backing of the Republic, attributing it to the "Indian blood" of the President and to the "widespread aboriginal mentality, which is so difficult to fathom for a white man."

The Italian government was far more outspoken in its criticism of Mexican involvement in the Spanish War, issuing a note through its Ambassador in London, Dino Grandi, warning Mexico not to meddle in affairs in which it had no concern, and thus preserve peace in Europe.⁶⁵

⁶¹ AHSRE, III-510 (46) 36-III-766-1.

⁶² Brígida Von Mentz, et al, *Los empresarios alemanes, el Tercer Reich y la oposición de derecha a Cárdenas*, vol. II, pp. 86-88.

⁶³ *Dortmunder Zeitung*, April 1, 1937 cited in AHSRE, "Azcárate a la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores" III-510 (46) 37-III-769-3.

⁶⁴ AHSRE, II-766-2, Alemania, actitud ante la rebelión de España, Rüdt von Collenberg to Foreign Minister Eduardo Hay, February 3, 1937.

⁶⁵ By covering up illegal trafficking for the Communists, Mexico is disturbing European Peace". Italian Ambassador to London, Dino Grandi, in *Giornale di Italia*, March 24, 1937. p.1 See also *Popolo di Italia* and *Il Messaggero*, same date "Mexico, a country which has notoriously become the main agent of Soviet and French contraband of war materials and volunteers to Spain, thus overtly favouring Red Anarchy".

The sale was ill received by the Great Britain, which considered it acrimoniously as an act of inadmissible intervention by a lesser Latin-American nation in strictly European affairs. British-Mexican relations were far from harmonious and had been steadily deteriorating over Cárdenas' backing of the petrol workers' trade union against British-owned oil concerns in Mexico, which would ultimately lead to the expropriation of those interests by the Mexican government. Within the British Foreign Office there existed among officials directly concerned with Mexican affairs a deeply ingrained bias against the Mexican revolutionary regime, comparable to the preconceived notions that the chancellery held against the Spanish Republic, if only compounded by overt racial prejudice.⁶⁶

Thus, the Foreign Office not only refused to sell Mexico 30 thousand rifles and 30 million cartridges, for fear that their ultimate destination was Spain, but also brusquely demanded a 'clarification' of what it deemed as contradictory aspects of Mexican policy towards the Civil War: on one hand, the promotion of non-intervention, which Mexico had vehemently advocated at the Buenos Aires Pan-American Conference, and on the other, its actual aid to the Republican government. Mexican Minister in London, Narciso Bassols, then serving as Mexican Minister to London, notified Hay that the British government considered these policies as being "mutually incongruous and diplomatically confusing." In a formal protest, Britain expressed, without any diplomatic restraint, its alarm over the September 1936 arms sale. Furthermore, Britain warned the U.S. of Mexican intentions in connection with the Spanish conflict.⁶⁷

More gravely perhaps, the United States found Mexican transhipment of American arms to Spain through its territory "unfortunate" and contrary to its own neutrality. The prevailing isolationist mood was a reaction to American involvement in the First World War. During the Abyssinian crisis of 1935, Roosevelt secured from Congress the endorsement of a neutrality law by which it was declared unlawful for American citizen to sell arms to any nation at war. By early January 1937, this

⁶⁶ For a thorough account of Anglo-Mexican relations in the first half of the Twentieth Century, with references aplenty of British imperial arrogance against the Mexican Revolution see: Lorenzo Meyer, *Su Majestad Británica contra México*. México, El Colegio de México, 1993.

⁶⁷ PRO, FO 371/20634. See also AHSRE III-510 (46) 37-3-770-5.

ruling was extended to civil wars in order to avoid American involvement in the Spanish conflict.

Several officials at the State Department such as the American Ambassadors to Spain and Mexico, Claude Bowers and Josephus Daniels, or the Undersecretary Sumner Welles himself were pro-Republican. Notwithstanding, the Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, was averse to any kind of American involvement in the conflict, as he thought any such move might compromise the Good Neighbour policy by putting at loggerheads the Spanish-American nations with each other, and it was ultimately his view that would prevail inside the cabinet.⁶⁸ Moreover, both Conservative Republicans and the Catholic lobby-a key reserve of votes for the Democrat ticket- sternly opposed any American cooperation with the Republic in an electoral year, driving Roosevelt to pursue an isolationist course.

In early January 1, 1937, it was reported that several American planes bought by Mexican middlemen had been re-licensed, converted into military planes and resold to the Spanish Ambassador in order to be sent to Spain.⁶⁹ A political scandal ensued. The *Washington Herald* of the Hearst press group played up the story, accusing the Mexican government of “arming the Reds” and of violating the American neutrality act by way of contraband and transhipment through Mexican facilities. Under severe pressure, Mexican chargé d’affairs in Washington, Luis Quintanilla, published a statement refuting these versions and declared that Mexico had not purchased any sort of ammunition in the U.S. for re-shipment to Spain. He then reported to the Mexican Foreign Ministry that: “the good name of Mexico is being gravely affected here.”⁷⁰

Since the commencement of the Spanish war, Cárdenas had attached special importance to convincing the United States of the justice of the Republican cause. On several occasions, the Mexican President wrote personal letters to Roosevelt asking him to intervene on the Republic’s behalf. As late as June 17, 1937 Cárdenas still

⁶⁸ Claude Bowers, *My Mission to Spain*. New York, 1945. p. 60-62; Richard P. Traina, *American Diplomacy and the Spanish Civil War* Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1968, pp.153-155.

⁶⁹ *New York Times*, January 1, 1937.

⁷⁰ *New York Times*, January 3, 1937.

suggested Roosevelt to use his country's moral prestige to stop fascist intervention.⁷¹ The United States, however, maintained its neutrality policy, endorsing the Non-intervention Committee. Far from heeding Cárdenas' intimations, Roosevelt, firmly intent on avoiding domestic strife over the issue, coolly urged Cárdenas to stop transhipment of American weapons and aircraft to Spain.

Until January 8, 1937, the shipment of arms from the U.S. had been lawful. However, licenses issued to dealers in armaments for the exportation of war materials to third countries expressly forbade their re-shipment to Spain. Still, it would have been perfectly legal for a third nation to re-export American material from its territory on grounds of sovereignty. The State Department itself acknowledged that no base existed for a diplomatic protest to Mexico on that score. Yet, even if no infringement of Mexican law was involved, nor any act incompatible with any Mexican-American agreement, Cárdenas yielded to American pressure, no doubt anxious that a refusal to do so might bring about harsher reprisals, including renewed armed intervention.

In response to Roosevelt's exigencies, Cárdenas set a limit to his policy: Mexico would serve as an intermediary only with the express consent of the third party involved in the operation. A presidential statement in that sense was issued on January 3, 1937:

The Mexican government has in fact supplied war materials of its own production to the government of Spain. Notwithstanding, with regard to war materials of foreign origin, it has been its firm position that it would not serve as intermediary if the government of the nation concerned did not grant its full consent thereto. In accordance with this line, Mexican authorities will not authorize airplanes or any other military equipment whatsoever coming from the United States to be sent to Spain through Mexico, even in the case of purchases made by corporations of private parties.⁷²

New evidence has shown that despite this claim, Mexico did partake in covert operations. Cárdenas' apparent conformity to these pressures, notwithstanding,

⁷¹ Friedrich Schuler, op. cit., pp. 127-128.

provoked a negative response among many officials within his government, many of whom considered it an unacceptable limitation to Mexico's legitimate aid to Loyalist Spain. In an extreme case, the head of the Mexican Air Force, General Roberto Fierro Villalobos reportedly resigned when Cárdenas refused to ship a load of previously purchased American planes to the Republican government.⁷³

MISCELLANEOUS SHIPMENTS

Most previous studies of the Spanish Civil War have limited themselves to making passing reference to the Mexican arms remittance of September 1936 as a token of Mexican support towards the Republic. In fact, there were several other deliveries. In defiance of criticism abroad and dim support at home, the Mexican government continued to succour Republican Spain. In the wake of the *Magallanes*' success, other expeditions were launched. Some would be equally fortunate; others never left ground and yet others ended in tragic failure as will be seen next.

Prompted by the safe arrival of the *Magallanes*, Gordón-Ordás set out to arrange new arms shipments. An opportunity arose as the former prison-ship, *Sil*, arrived at Veracruz becoming readily available for the haulage of arms consignments. On January 12 1937, the *Sil* transported from Veracruz to Santander three Lockheed aircraft, (among them, the *Anáhuac*, presented by Fierro Villalobos) 2,000 Mexican made Mauser 7mm rifles, 100 Mendoza type machine guns, 8 million cartridges, 100 Mendoza machine-rifles and 24 cannons—types unspecified—with 15,000 shells.⁷⁴ The vessel had left Veracruz on December 22, 1936, transporting in addition 600 metric tons of sugar, and thousands of uniforms for schoolchildren.⁷⁵

Arms deliveries continued on a steady rhythm, and a month later the French Minister in Mexico reported to the *Quai d'Orsay* that Mexico had sent to Spain an extra 5,000 Mexican-made Mauser rifles, model 1934, 2 million 7mm cartridges, 13,000 hand-grenades, 65 "Mendoza-B" machine-guns, 7 artillery batteries (of which 2 "Mondragón T.P." 80 calibre type, 4 S. Canet 7mm calibre and 1 S. Vickers) for a

⁷² *El Nacional*, January 3, 1937.

⁷³ *New York Times*, June 4, 1937, p.11.

⁷⁴ Gerald Howson, *Arms for Spain*, op. cit. p.172; Gordón-Ordás, op. cit., p.770,

total of 33 million and a half million French francs, or U.S. \$ 638, 095.23, without revealing the name of the ship which had carried the freight or its port of arrival.⁷⁶

Amid these successes, other ventures were aborted due to the Spanish Embassy's continuous lapses of security, the consequent leaks of confidential information and the relentless campaign of the Mexican conservative press against the Spanish Ambassador. In several cases *Excélsior* and *El Universal* made public precise details of planned undertakings, thus hindering Gordón-Ordás' activities and exposing them to the Republic's many enemies.

In February 1937, the Republicans asked for food and gasoline, which were to be exchanged for crude oil that the Spanish government had purchased before the war and was not able to refine, because most of the refineries had fallen into the hands of the rebels. Mexico sent at once 15,000 sacks of chickpea and other amounts of food, including sugar, butter and flour. Although Mexico agreed to the exchange scheme, the operation was rendered impossible since the British-owned refinery of Tampico refused to supply the Republicans because of the Non-intervention Pact resolutions.⁷⁷

As the Republic expected more arms purchases to take place, it sent Gordón-Ordás through Paris and New York an initial instalment of six million dollars to pay for them. To his chagrin, *Excélsior* made the "sensational" revelation that since November 1936 the Spanish Ambassador had 9 million dollars deposited at the Banco Nacional de Mexico. Gordón-Ordás had been in effect empowered to procure second hand American aircraft—mostly transport and civil planes—to be adapted to war usage. *Excélsior* stressed the fact that the deposits had been placed under his name and not under the Embassy's orders to suggest that the deposit had other uses beyond the normal expenses of the diplomatic representation.⁷⁸ To make matters worse, the Midland Bank in London held back the deposit arguing that the Spanish Government had misspelled the last letter of the Ambassador's second surname. The

⁷⁵ *Daily Worker*, New York, December 1, 1936.

⁷⁶ Ministère des Affaires Etrangers, B/281 No. 10. M. Henri Goiran, Ministre de la République française au Mexique à Son Excellence Monsieur le Ministre des Affaires Etrangers. Paris February 15, 1937.

⁷⁷ AHSRE, III 1510 (46) 37/1b, "Valencia a la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores," February 5, 1937
"La Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores a Denegri, III 1510 (46) 37/1, February 16, 1937.

order had to be made out again. The minute blunder, however, caused the collapse of several deals that had already been settled.⁷⁹

On December 10 1936 the steamship *Motomar* had been confiscated by the Spanish State, as it travelled from Buenos Aires to Edgewater, New Jersey transporting a cargo of linseed.⁸⁰ As its former holder, García Díaz had filed a lawsuit against the Republican government in the U.S. on behalf of the Compañía Española de Navegación Marítima, the Spanish authorities ordered the ship to change course toward Veracruz to avoid legal action. The State Ministry notified Gordón-Ordás that as soon as it arrived in the Mexican port it should remain under his charge. The *Motomar* reached Veracruz on December 31, 1936.⁸¹

From its arrival the steamship-which owing to breakdown had to stay a long time in Veracruz- was subject to the intrigues of Francoist Spaniards resident in that port. As a result of these intrigues, two officers and a steward deserted. Alarmed at the prospect of further desertions, Captain Dicenta advised the Ambassador to convert of the transatlantic into a war vessel subject to military discipline. Thus, a new transport became readily available for further covert ventures.

Two arms purchases arranged by Gordón-Ordás, one from Japan the other with Canada, had failed, while the American "moral embargo" held back the loading of the airplanes stationed at the Tejería airdrome, making the departure of the *Motomar* unattainable. By August 1937, three airplanes had been loaded "discreetly." However, fresh difficulties arose as the *Motomar* needed long overdue scraping of its hull and the closest dry docks where such operation could take place were in Galveston Texas and Bermuda. Owing to García Diaz's litigation, the American government offered no guarantees in the event that the vessel arrived to their coasts, making that choice implausible.⁸² The British Admiralty, in turn, granted permission for the vessel to enter into its colony to undergo repairs.

⁷⁸ *Excélsior*, December 30, 1936.

⁷⁹ Félix Gordón-Ordás, op. cit., pp.709-712.

⁸⁰ Félix Gordón-Ordás, op. cit., p.736.

⁸¹ PRO FO 371/21320 W1507.

⁸² Félix Gordón-Ordás, op. cit., p. 740.

Once in the Bermudas the naval authorities found out that the ship had a cargo of arms and munitions presenting the Captain with a perplexing alternative: to enter the dry dock the ship had to unload all war materials, but once these were unloaded they would be seized in view of its infringement of the law of arms exportation. A more pressing problem arose when García Díaz appeared at Bermuda with the intention of claiming the *Motomar* back for his Company. As a result, Captain Fernando Dicenta left hastily to Veracruz where he arranged for divers to clean the *Motomar* by hand. The ship arrived on September 27, 1937 and was able to leave only on May 17, 1938 furtively to Antwerp. The boat was able to conceal the cannons it carried from the Belgian authorities, arriving ultimately in Barcelona. For 15 months and 18 days, the *Motomar* was placed under the command of Gordón-Ordás.⁸³

Shortly before, the Mexican government had offered Gordón-Ordás the services of an arms expert, Colonel Jesús Triana, to provide him technical support in his dealings in Bolivia. Several war implements left over from the Chaco War were on offer, and after Triana inspected their quality and condition and gave his approval, a sale was fixed on September 18 1937. The cargo left the Peruvian port of Mollendo on a Japanese transport the *Florida Maru*, bound for the Mexican port of Manzanillo in the Pacific. From Manzanillo a sealed train escorted by two platoons took the equipment to Veracruz where it was loaded in the *Motomar* and sent to Spain.⁸⁴

TRANSHIPMENT OF AMERICAN AIRCRAFT THROUGH MEXICO

On September 28, 1936, Fernando de los Ríos arrived in Washington as new Spanish Ambassador to Washington due to yet another diplomatic defection to the Francoist side. Along with him came a purchasing commission under Colonel Francisco León Trejo. At once, the delegation, which included Commander José Meléndreras and Sergeant Francisco Corral, travelled to New York City with the aim of purchasing airplanes and war material in general. Through a Republican pilot resident in New York City, Captain Agustín Sainz Sanz, they entered in contact with an agent of

⁸³ *ibid*, p.744.

American Airlines who had nine Vultees stationed in New York City itself and five further in airports in the vicinity. The merchant offered all 14 aircraft at a price of \$ 22, 000 each. Although the Commission conveyed the proposal to the Ministries of Air and Navy and that these instances pledged to send the due funds, the money never arrived, thus bringing down the transaction. The significance of this failure is underlined by the fact that it was precisely at that crucial stage that the Republic lost its supremacy.

The arrival of the commission to the United States also meant that the Republicans were duplicating efforts aimlessly. Lack of coordination and communication between the different governmental instances caused Gordón-Ordás and León Trejo to act separately, without each other's knowledge and, occasionally, even competing for the same aircraft and war material, a situation that which American arms traffickers and brokers exploited to their own benefit.⁸⁵ A turn for the worse occurred when the Spanish Air Ministry formed yet another commission, independent from those already operating under Gordón-Ordás and Trejo. This delegation, formed by Socialist deputy Alejandro Otero, the journalist Corpus Barga and Luis Prieto, had no success. For all their skill and dedication to the cause, these men could barely discern a piece of artillery from another and were far from able as procurers. In one decisive occasion, they allotted astronomical sums to arms dealers in exchange for war materials that never arrived.⁸⁶

Gordón-Ordás wrangled with both De los Ríos and Álvarez del Vayo over the issue and demanded the Ministry of State exclusive authority over arms purchases made in the United States, basing his claim on the fact that the contracted arms would depart from Mexico. At first, Álvarez del Vayo rejected Gordón-Ordás arguments, ordering the two Ambassadors to settle their differences among themselves, but soon appeared to have yielded to the evidence that the duplication of efforts was backfiring.

Thus, on October 10, 1936 Meléndreras was transferred to Mexico City and placed under Gordón-Ordás' orders in an apparent effort to establish a single

⁸⁴ Félix Palavicini, *op. cit.*, p.265.

⁸⁵ Gerald Howson, *op. cit.*, p.167.

commission. At first, Melendreras contemplated the possibility of purchasing aircraft belonging to the Mexican Air Force, and duly approached Col. Fierro Villalobos. In a frank response, Colonel Fierro laid open before Melendreras the sorry state of the Mexican Air Force and the low speed of its planes.

The Mexican Air Force, in fact, had only thirty Corsair reconnaissance planes with an acceleration of only 150 kilometres per hour, and nine 'consolidated' two-engine planes, which could reach the same speed, lacking bombers or pursuit planes of any importance. Beyond the military aviation, there existed three Lockheed aeroplanes in Mexico, which could be converted into military use. On one of them, the *Anáhuac*, Colonel Fierro had established a new record for a non-stop flight between Mexico City and New York, the former belonging to Amelia Earhart. The other two belonged to a German pilot, Fritz Bieler, which had acquired the Mexican citizenship, and to an unnamed Mexican General. The first could reach a speed of 200 to 210 miles per hour, while the remaining two roughly 180 miles per hour.

A sale was agreed. Fierro and the commission fixed the price of the two latter planes at 70, 000 dollars while presenting his own to the Republic as a gift. The three planes were loaded on board the *Sil* and sent to Spain, together with an additional arms cargo that comprised motors, propellers and aeronautical radio equipment. All this material was loaded without any advance payment, as Colonel Fierro took full responsibility for its reimbursement, and, according to Melendreras "had no objection in collecting the debt after the shipment's arrival in Santander, if the Spanish authorities ever decided to settle it."

Once it became clear that Mexico could not provide for the Republic's aerial requirements, Gordón-Ordás and Melendreras turned their attention to the U.S. as a potential source of arms supplies. To ensure the attainment of their dealings there they appealed for the assistance of Mexican authorities, which gladly obliged. Mexican Foreign Minister, Eduardo Hay, submitted accordingly a plan to the American Ambassador in Mexico City whereby the U.S. government would acquiesce to sell bombing planes to the Mexican Air force, which in turn would sell its available planes to the Republic. Daniels flatly turned the proposal deeming it at

⁸⁶ Hugh Thomas, op. cit. p.337

odds with American neutrality. A few weeks later the Mexican government insisted, this time through its Ambassador in Washington, Francisco Castillo Nájera, who asked whether the State Department would simply permit the transhipment of American arms through Mexico. The Ambassador was “politely” informed that this would not be allowed and that the U.S. would stop any such effort by refusing to issue export licenses.⁸⁷

Once the legal channels seemed exhausted, Meléndreras and Gordón-Ordás decided with the seeming complicity of certain Mexican authorities to secretly purchase several aeroplanes and smuggle them into Mexico by illegally flying the planes across the border. Meléndreras moved quickly and was able to close several deals with American aircraft brokers:

As soon as the funds arrived, I set out to procure a deal. I acted with the greatest possible haste as the American Prohibition Law had not been passed yet and because we had Cárdenas' promise that any war material in transit could freely leave the country. I was able to acquire immediately an *Elektra* which could speed 320 kilometres per hour, had a great bombing potential and was one of the most modern in the States, 6 twin-engine *Condors*, specially designed for night-bombing, 3 brand new *Spartan* reconnaissance planes, with a speed capability of 350km per hour; 3 large two-engine *Boeings*; 2 *Beecriff Bresse* and a *Seversky* with a speed of 500 kilometres per hour. Altogether 28 planes were bought in great haste, some deceiving the vigilance of the American authorities, as the last ones were acquired after the passing of the prohibition act.⁸⁸

Two flying aces, Cloyd Clevenger and Fritz Bieler together with other anonymous Mexican pilots were able to fly surreptitiously several planes from San Antonio, Texas and Calexico, California into the Veracruz airdrome of Tejería. Altogether, 28 planes were smuggled in this fashion.

In the following months, the Treasury Department detected several cases of planes flown to Mexico to be sold without having been licensed, and begun an

⁸⁷ Richard P. Traina, *American Diplomacy and the Spanish Civil War*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1968. p.78.

⁸⁸ José Meléndreras in Francisco Olaya, op. cit. p.414

investigation over its whereabouts. American intelligence soon discovered the nature of the stratagem. By December 1936, so many planes of American manufacture had come into Gordón-Ordás' possession that officers in the State Department referred to them as "the Spanish Ambassador's private collection."⁸⁹ These sources conveyed the information to the State Department, which in turn grimly threatened the Mexican government with 'economic retribution' if it did not put an end to the Spanish Embassy's illegal dealings. Luis I. Rodríguez, Secretary of the Presidency, visited Gordón to inform him on behalf of the President that he should suspend immediately all deliveries of aircraft to Spain as the American Ambassador had officially demanded this.⁹⁰

In the intervening time, the name of a certain Robert Cuse, "junk dealer from Jersey City,"* startlingly splashed across the headlines of most American newspapers. On the previous day, the State Department had announced the granting of two export licenses to Cuse for the direct exportation to Bilbao of \$ 2, 777, 000 worth of airplanes, engines and spare parts.⁹¹ Cuse had ignored the moral admonitions and patriotic appeals of the U.S. government and chose instead to stress his legal rights. Cuse's bold move portended the collapse of the American government's "moral embargo." There was reasonable alarm in Washington that others might seek to emulate his conduct. The American government's response, accordingly, was swift and irate. At a press conference, President Roosevelt, denounced Cuse's dealings as a "thoroughly legal but unpatriotic act." He then announced that he had given his full consent to plans by congressional leaders to amend the American Neutrality act, making it extensive to civil conflicts, and, in consequence, to the Spanish situation.⁹²

On January 1, 1937, Gordón-Ordás hastily travelled to Washington in an attempt to settle the damning consequences caused by Cuse's announcement. In a

⁸⁹ Richard P. Traina, *op.cit.*, p.78.

⁹⁰ Félix Gordón-Ordás, *op cit.*, p. 759.

* An Estonian, naturalised American, Robert Cuse was President of the Vimalert Company of Jersey City, founded in 1925. Cuse had sold air-engines and second-hand aircraft to the USSR in the early thirties, giving rise to wild speculations about him being a Soviet agent.

⁹¹ *New York Times*, December 28, 1936; *Washington Post*, same date.

⁹² *New York Times*, December 30, 1936.

vain attempt to keep a low profile in the face of unwanted attention, he travelled accompanied by his wife and daughter on one of the commercial planes he had bought to convert in military aircraft and that he had stationed at the airport of Tejería in Veracruz. The plane, flown by Cloyd Clevenger, almost crashed near Brownsville, Texas. The incident was given wide publicity by the Mexican press, making it extremely difficult for Gordón-Ordás to undertake further ventures.⁹³ The Mexican government also came into the spotlight bringing about renewed pressure from the American government to stop the transhipment scheme.

In view of the annulment of the American link, Colonel Fierro Villalobos, proposed and persuaded Gordón-Ordás to open a Seversky aircraft factory in Mexico with Republican subsidy. In due course, a representative of the Seversky Company travelled to Mexico to close the deal. Even before the settlement particulars could be formalised, the Ministry of Navy rejected the proposal, asking instead, against all rationality, for the delivery of more American aircraft. Gordón insisted that it was impossible for the company to export directly to Spain from the U.S., but that Cárdenas had agreed to authorise the remittance of parts to be assembled in Spain provided that they were made in Mexico. Gordón insisted that production in Mexico could be more beneficial due to the cheaper work force there. Álvarez del Vayo rejected the proposal deeming the entire scheme “far too complicated and onerous.”⁹⁴ Thus a cheap, imaginative and legal solution to the Republic’s aerial needs, which might also have collaterally contributed to the development of a Mexican air industry, was called off.

FAILED EXPECTATIONS. THE JOURNEY OF THE *MAR CANTÁBRICO*

The merchant ship *Mar Cantábrico* had left Valencia on August 1936 bound to New York. Upon orders from the Ministry of State, it stayed there for several months awaiting Gordón-Ordás’ attempts to secure arms deals in the United States. Gordón-Ordás was trying to load the ship with American arms material, when preparations for a decree banning all arms shipments to Spain began at the American Congress. A

⁹³ *Excélsior*, January 2, 3 and 4, 1936.

⁹⁴ Félix Gordón-Ordás, *op. cit.*, p. 757.

race thus began the Spanish buyers and the American legislators, with the *Magallanes*' crew hurriedly loading as much provisions as possible, with the view of proceeding onward to Veracruz, where the freight was to be supplemented with Mexican arms material.

On January 6, 1937, the *Mar Cantábrico* left New York to Veracruz with a cargo of armament. That same day, urged by Roosevelt, two American Congressmen, Senator Key Pittman and Representative McReynolds, presented drafts of law by which arm shipments to Spain would henceforth be banned.

Further obstacles for the Spanish scheme arose when two American pilots who deserted the Republican cause, Bert Acosta and Gordon Barry, both of whom had served as legionnaires in the Republican Air Force under the so-called "Yankee Escadrille" on autumn 1936, claimed (falsely) that the Republic owed them 1,200 dollars in back pay. On these grounds, the American pilots convinced the port of New York authority to serve a writ against the Captain of the *Mar Cantábrico*.⁹⁵

Offered with such an unexpected opportunity to delay further the ship's departure before the resolution was passed, American conservatives pressed the authorities, which obliged and detained the vessel. By way of a faulty case, the ship narrowly avoided the last hurdle as the port controller, Harry Duening, dropped the writ deeming it inapplicable.⁹⁶

A technical error in the Senate had prevented the resolution from becoming law until the 7th, and on the 8th the *Mar Cantábrico* left New York in great haste, lest the law would be passed, leaving behind the bulk of Cuse's original cargo. Hours later the new arms embargo, promoted by Pittman and Mac Reynolds, went into effect. By then, Cuse had already loaded the vessel with 11 airplanes, food and clothes. According to the *Times*' correspondent, the *Cantábrico* carried merchandise, planes and motors from the Vimalert Company of Jersey City valued at 2,777,000 dollars.⁹⁷

The ship arrived at Veracruz on January 13, where it was put under the custody of the Spanish Embassy. On the bridge, its sailors spread out a banner that

⁹⁵ Gerald Howson, *Arms for Spain* pp.182-183.

⁹⁶ Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, p.427.

proclaimed *Glory to Mexico. Anti-fascist Spain salutes you.*⁹⁸ The boat's political delegate, José Otero, sent through the Mexican official paper *El Nacional* a "Message of Gratitude to the Mexican Nation" drawing further attention to the ship's presence in Veracruz.⁹⁹

Such a bombastic display could not help either the Republican cause or the Cárdenas government. There was a justified alarm among Mexican official circles about possible American reprisals. In the U.S., Mexican support for the Loyalist cause had already provoked a political scandal spearheaded by the Hearst press, which questioned alleged breaches of U.S. neutrality in the Spanish conflict, finding an immediate echo among American conservative circles.

While on the surface it appeared as if Cárdenas had given in to Roosevelt's request of cancelling the delivery to Spain and promising not to send American made weapons through Mexico in the future, evidence suggests otherwise. In spite of Gordón's refutations, and assurances given by the Mexican government, an additional cargo of assorted Mexican arms and munitions was loaded in the *Mar Cantábrico*.¹⁰⁰ Gordón-Ordás performed the operation with the full connivance of the Mexican Minister of Defence, Manuel Ávila Camacho.¹⁰¹ Ávila Camacho helped the Spanish Ambassador while Cárdenas was temporarily away from the capital in one of his frequent nation-wide tours. In that same course, the War Minister also agreed to allow an undisclosed number of planes to be embarked on board of the *Ibai*. The *Ibai* left Veracruz on December 29, 1937. The remaining aircraft, eighteen planes, which included six Curtis Condors and three Boeing 247s remained in Mexican territory, and were later sold to pay for the support of Spanish Republican refugees arriving in Mexico.¹⁰²

Despite all the precautions taken by the Mexican military authorities, the imprudence displayed by the Spanish crew during the entire operation was so great that even the slightest details of its contents and schedule were accurately leaked.

⁹⁷ cf. *The Times*, January 6, 1937 with *Excélsior*, December 30, 1936, and Hugh Thomas, p.426.

⁹⁸ *Excélsior*, January 14, 1937.

⁹⁹ *El Nacional*, January 17, 1937.

¹⁰⁰ Gerald Howson, *op cit.*, p.183.

¹⁰¹ T.G. Powell, *op cit.*, pp. 72-73.

¹⁰² <http://www.fuerzasarmadas.mx.com>

According to several newspapers, various Mexican communists had embarked on the *Mar Cantábrico*.¹⁰³ At first, it was decided that it should set sail by February 17. On the 13th, it went to Tampico where it loaded oil, returning to Veracruz on the 16th. An inquisitive press closely monitored each and every of its movements.

Unsurprisingly, when it finally set sail on the 19th its freight was no secret to anyone. *Excélsior* reported on February 20, 1937 that the vessel carried 14 million 7mm cartridges, aircraft and war material bought in New York, 50 cannons of diverse calibres and a group of volunteers of different nationalities. 18 unassembled planes, clothes, uniforms, shoes, medicines, foodstuffs, medical instruments, gas bombs, radio transmitters, machine guns, rifles and 25 million expansive bullets were loaded in Veracruz. The near coincidence of these figures with those advanced by Gordón-Ordás fully attests to the clumsiness with which the whole operation was conducted.¹⁰⁴

Like other ships performing analogous missions, the *Mar Cantábrico* carried precise instructions as well as secret codes of transmission to communicate with Santander, Bilbao and the Republican fleet. As with the *Magallanes*, Gordón-Ordás had the ship fitted with a powerful short-wave transmitter to keep personal contact with Captain Santamaría. The Ambassador received radiograms on the 21 and the 23 stating that everything went 'as planned'. He replied that he had received the messages and wished them luck in the enterprise. The ship had set sail originally bound for the Mediterranean port of Cartagena. While on route, it received an order to change course and go north to the port of Bilbao. Apparently, it established contact with a coastal station without revealing its identity, asking for a plane squadron to escort it into the port. This alerted the Nationalist fleet, which set out immediately after the transport.¹⁰⁵

On the 25th, the *Mar Cantábrico* informed Gordón that they had flown the British flag, in what would ultimately prove a vain attempt to baffle the rebel fleet. Moreover, the crew painted the ship to disguise further its identity. Under

¹⁰³ *El Universal* and *Excélsior*, February 7 and 8, 1937.

¹⁰⁴ Félix Gordón-Ordás, *op cit.*, p. 751.

¹⁰⁵ José Luis Paz Durán, *28 meses a bordo del Canarias 1936-39*, La Coruña, Edicios do Castro, 1991 p.118.

instructions from Álvarez del Vayo Gordón-Ordás authorised the stratagem but told Santamaría to hoist the Spanish flag as they approached the Spanish coast in order to avoid impoundment by British or French ships enforcing the non-intervention agreement. There was considerable anxiety about the ship's route, as the Franco-British blockade would go in effect on March 3.

That precise date the *Magallanes* sent a cable to Mexico City wire reporting "all quiet, bad weather." Everything appeared to be on schedule. Barely twenty-four hours had elapsed though when Gordón-Ordás caught an unintelligible message signed by the Captain "but not credibly drafted by him", causing him to suspect the outbreak of a mutiny on board.¹⁰⁶ Two days later Gordón received yet another message— in what would turn out to be the last—also clumsily encoded. Out from the gibberish Gordón was able to infer that the ship would not arrive as had been scheduled, asking instead to arrive to Santander by night. The unintelligible wire also asked the Republican Air Force not to fly over the vessel in order to avoid drawing the Nationalists' attention. In turn, Gordón radioed the Ministry of Navy requesting the Republican fleet to escort the ship towards a safe port. As on many other occasions, the plea went unheeded.

On March 9, the newspapers carried the publication of vague and contradictory reports. Some papers conjectured that the *Mar Cantábrico* had been sunk. Others asserted that distress signals had been received in Santander from a mysterious ship that was being attacked by a Nationalist vessel. According to an account originating from London, a British destroyer, the *Echo*, had crossed communication with the *Canarias* by which the rebel cruiser had informed its captain that the *Mar Cantábrico* had sank in the Gulf of Biscay and that they had rescued its crew.¹⁰⁷ Another version published the day after by *El Nacional* speculated over "authoritative reports" that its burden had been conveyed to other Loyalist ships in high seas, and that the rebels had only managed to sink an "empty nutshell."¹⁰⁸

On March 10, *Excélsior* reproduced information originating from London's *Evening Standard* confirming that the *Canarias* had captured the *Mar Cantábrico*

¹⁰⁶ Félix Gordón-Ordás, 1965, p.747.

¹⁰⁷ *Excélsior*, March 9, 1937. *El Universal*, March 9, 1936.

and escorted it back to Ferrol together with its crew. Warned by the excessive publicity given to the affair and by the Portuguese Navy intelligence reports, the Nationalists had established a blockade with the *Canarias*, the *España* and the *Velasco* at the Cantabrian Sea. Captain Salvador Moreno of the *Canarias* had precise instructions to capture the ship ever since its very departure from Veracruz. Thanks to Francoist secret agents in Mexico, the naval officer had precise information about of its outline, the contents of its freight and its planned course. Furthermore, he had been alerted that the vessel would attempt to pass for the *Adda*. The *Canarias* positioned itself off Bordeaux, where it was notified about the “suspicious” movements of a “mysterious” ship. Once alerted over its presence, three Nationalist ships rushed towards the designated area.

On March 8, the *Canarias* stopped a merchant ship suspected of being the *Mar Cantábrico*. The latter tried to deceive the Nationalist flotilla by transmitting reports in English. This did not deter Moreno who ordered the merchant to surrender. As there was no reply to its signals, the *Canarias* fired a warning shot which stroke the prow of the *Mar Cantábrico*, instantly sparking a fire inside the ship’s compartments. The disguised ship was still able to send an SOS to the British fleet seeking protection. By sheer coincidence, the appeal was caught by the *Aba* of the Elder-Dempster Company. The British ship re-transmitted the plea to a flotilla of British destroyers, which rushed to its rescue. Still, the poor repainting of the ship was not enough not deceive the captain of the *Canarias*, Salvador Moreno, who no doubt helped by the ship’s calls for help in pidgin, moved on to seize it. The first appeal for help said literally: “*We are in danger stoped (sic) by unknown battleship. In danger we neeks halp.*”(sic)¹⁰⁹

Four English destroyers—the *Echo*, the *Eclipse*, the *Escapade* and another not identified—a French gunboat, the *Cameleyre*, and several fishing boats arrived at the scene in an attempt to rescue the embattled vessel. After an hour or so of consultations with Moreno, the British officers politely accepted his explanation that the steamship was not the *Adda* but the *Mar Cantábrico* and left the area. In defiance

¹⁰⁸ *El Nacional*, March 10, 1937.

¹⁰⁹ Michael Alpert, *La guerra civil española en el mar*. Madrid, Siglo XXI de España Editores, 1987, pp.216-217.

of the British flag and the name it displayed, the *Canarias* had sided round the ship twice, comparing its profile with that of the described *Mar Cantábrico*. From the nationalist ship, signals were conveyed and warnings were made through a megaphone. As no one replied, Moreno ordered a warning shot to be fired and when there was no reply, the captain sent an advance guard to board it.

The Republic's daring attempt to conceal the vessel's identity under an English name provoked the wrath of the British Parliament, with several Conservative MPs protesting on the 15th against what they deemed an inadmissible hoax. The Foreign Office replied to these objections by saying that the attempted stratagem had been a *ruse de guerre* that was perfectly justified by International Law.¹¹⁰

Five Italians and five Mexicans travelling on board as "passengers" were arrested and taken along to the nationalist-controlled port. Months later *Excélsior* revealed the ultimate fate of the imprisoned Mexicans. The only survivor from the carnage, a Mexican woman named Socorro Barberán, went to tell what had really happened. After their arrest, on March 15, the four Mexicans were subject to court-martial, and sentenced to death in spite of requests for clemency made by the honorary Consul of Mexico at Coruña, the Portuguese authorities and the professed assurances given by Franco himself. At the trial, the prosecutor referred to the Mexicans as "freebooters" who had left their country "to plunder Spain." On the other hand, the prosecutor asked Barberán's life to be spared on account of her gender and the requests for clemency of the Mexican honorary consul in Coruña. In due course, she was confined at the Navy's Hospital in Ferrol before being deported to Portugal shortly after.¹¹¹

Four Mexican citizens, Manuel Zavala, 21 years; Carlos Gallo Pérez—both from Guadalajara—and Ricardo Solórzano, from Ameca and Alejandro Franco from Mexico were held as prisoners in Ferrol. In due course, they were sentenced to death. An official statement issued through the press by the Mexican Foreign Ministry reported that the three men were subject to torture and untold humiliation before

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 218.

¹¹¹ *Excélsior*, July 19, 1937.

being executed. They were displayed in a cage over a lorry, and paraded through the streets of Ferrol with the cage bearing a sign that proclaimed:

These are the Mexican Communist invaders" The boys took all these mistreatments with great serenity and courage, even before being cowardly shot by a firing squad in front of a vile mob.¹¹²

General Queipo de Llano, true to his style, tried to deride the cargo deeming it useless:

We found on board of the ship a Douglas motor, which had been used for more than 800 hours. The motor set off when we tried to put it in one of our planes. We found also twelve cannons that date from the time of the Deluge and which will only come in handy as ornament for our gardens.¹¹³

Queipo's mocking words notwithstanding, the material on board seemed to have been considerable, and ultimately put to use against the Basques in the Battle of Bilbao judging by the testimony of José Luis Paz Durán, officer of the *Canarias* who wrote down about the impounded materials:

This is the best seizure made by our squadron. The *Cantábrico* carried arms material worth of 300 million pesetas. With this blow, no doubt, the red resistance in the North will come to an end.¹¹⁴

A good measure of the disorganisation and lack of coordination that pervaded the Republican zone may be deduced from the fact that even though all newspapers carried the complete details of the capture, the Minister of State, Álvarez del Vayo, still expected its arrival four days later.¹¹⁵

The expedition of the *Mar Cantábrico* gave many Mexicans, across all sections of the political spectrum, an unprecedented sense of active engagement in world affairs. The day to day coverage given by all Mexican journals to the voyage had all the elements of a novel by instalments, and produced accordingly a large following, even among people who did not use to read the papers. Thus it turned out to be a

¹¹² *El Nacional*, July 29, 1937.

¹¹³ *El Nacional*, April 5, 1937.

¹¹⁴ José Luis Paz Durán, *op. cit.*, p.119

¹¹⁵ Félix Gordón-Ordás, *op. cit.*, p.747

mass-media event of its time. Furthermore, its capture and the ensuing execution of the Mexican volunteers aroused a wave of nationalist indignation and a widespread demand for the search of culprits. For the first time since the war began, white-collar workers and university student organisations—at the time more commonly associated with conservatism—marched along with trade unionists in protest against the execution of the Mexican volunteers.¹¹⁶

On April 8, Lombardo Toledano sent a message to the Mexican General Attorney, Ignacio García Téllez, accusing the Italian consul in Veracruz, Gustavo Della Luna, of charges of espionage. According to Lombardo, confidential reports sent by Della Luna in connivance with local Falangists had enabled the rebels to capture the *Mar Cantábrico*. The *New York Times*' correspondent in Mexico, Frank Kluckhohn, had propagated this version, which was investigated, albeit briefly, by the Mexican Ministry of the Interior falling soon into oblivion. Far from dampening Mexican policy towards Spain, the vessel's capture compelled Cárdenas to publicly and unequivocally reaffirm Mexico's commitment to Spain at a moment when American pressures towards his administration were becoming ever more intense:

Mexico shall continue to support Spain with arms and munitions in the same determined way it has done until now. Spain has received from the Mexican government all the aid it has requested. It is my government's duty to defend all legally constituted governments that may be imperilled. Any other nation in a similar predicament may rest assured that it may count with Mexican aid.

Thus, in spite of the *Mar Cantábrico*'s flop, new covert expeditions were launched from Veracruz. On March, the Mexican government sent a large shipment of arms worth U.S. \$ 1,791,166 to the Republican government. Part of the shipment originated in Mexico and part was bought in Czechoslovakia with Republican funds through Mexican diplomatic agents. The arms included rifles, ammunition, grenades, machine guns and a few artillery pieces. Several hundred thousand kilos of Mexican sugar accompanied the weapons.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ *El Nacional*, July 29, 1937, *El Universal*, July 31, 1937.

¹¹⁷ AHSRE, "Denegri a la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores," III 1510 (46) 37/1, March 7, 1937.

THE CZECH CONNECTION

Czechoslovakia was not only the world's largest arms exporter it was also a democratic government of leftist leanings.¹¹⁸ Thus, it soon attracted the Republic's attention as a potential source for arms. Enemies of the Republic, however, surrounded Czechoslovakia: Austria, Hungary, Poland, Germany and Romania. Moreover, Czechoslovakia was an adherent to the non-intervention pact. The most that the Republic could therefore hope for was to appeal the Czech authorities over the heads of the Non-intervention Committee so they might agree to sell her arms discreetly.

Col. Angel Pastor Velasco, one of two Republican sub-secretaries for Air, was thus sent to Prague in September 1936 with the view to acquire arms there. Mexican Minister in Paris, Col. Adalberto Tejeda furnished him with a Mexican passport under the name of 'Alfredo Palacios' to spare him from unwanted publicity, so he might travel unhampered, and to avert the possibility of him being captured by the Gestapo, in case of an unanticipated landing in either Italy or Germany on one of his continuous journeys across Europe.¹¹⁹

Once in Prague, Palacios established a close rapport with several Czech officials, namely the Social Democrat Party's leader, Antonin Hampl, who offered him to sell armament to the Republic, provided he could find a cover to get the arms out of Czechoslovakia without the Non-intervention Committee's knowledge. The fulfilment of that condition proved no difficulty as the Republic could count with Mexico and the USSR, as well as the crude interest of arms smugglers, always eager to seal a transaction.

In due course, Luis Jiménez de Asúa, Spanish Minister in Prague, approached his Mexican peer, Agustín Leñero, to obtain his government's conformity to the plan. Czech-Mexican relations were moreover excellent,¹²⁰ making the scheme highly

¹¹⁸ Angel Viñas, *La guerra civil 50 años después*, Barcelona, Labor, 1985. Isidro Fabela, op. cit. p.161
Gerald Howson, op.cit., p.153.

¹¹⁹ Juan Simeón-Vidarte, op. cit., p.589.

¹²⁰ Fourteen Czech institutions maintained close ties with organisations in Mexico. The Czech Minister in Mexico gave several lectures at Mexican cultural institutions, donated and organised various concerts with Czech musicians. Correspondingly, Cárdenas named an important avenue in Mexico City after Jan Masaryk. Friedrich Schuler, op. cit., p.139.

feasible. As with the French transactions, Mexico agreed immediately to provide cover to the arms purchase and to appear as the ostensible buyer of the material. A network that involved, both direct shipments to Spanish ports and complicated transhipments via Veracruz, was thus successfully established. Through this circuit, an indeterminate number of materials were transported. We can only guess, as the absolute secrecy with which the entire operation was carried out left few traces beyond confidential diplomatic reports that refer cryptically to the scheme.¹²¹

It is known with certainty though, that the steamship *Azteca* left the Polish port of Gdynia on September 1936, with a cargo of Polish arms, which were later, unloaded in Bilbao and Santander.¹²² The former diplomat turned into Francoist agent Gaspar Sanz y Tovar made this information available to the British and French governments causing the embarrassment of the Czech government and conceivably a reprimand from London to Prague. In any case, the unwanted publicity generated by the *Azteca*'s successful expedition ruined the prospects of further enterprises. President Benes and his Foreign Minister Kamil Krofta were upset to learn through press reports that an arms cargo ordered by Mexico had ended in Bilbao instead, and imposed a ban on further arms sales to Mexico.¹²³

The situation complicated further on December 5, 1936, when the Czech police arrested 'Palacios' for use of a false passport. Jiménez de Asúa asked Leñero to intercede on behalf of 'Palacios' before the Czech authorities, alleging that under the Spanish Constitution he could hold double nationality.* 'Palacios' was released on a bail of 30, 000 Czech krons, aided by Leñero, but his arrest received wide coverage from the Francoist and Italian press, damaging for a while the viability of the connection.

Between January and April 1937 Jiménez de Asúa turned his attention to a Turkish middlemen, who offered him to cover a new deal with Czechoslovakia. The

¹²¹ See, among others AHSRE, III-165 (316).

¹²² Francisco Olaya, *El oro de Negrín*. 1990. p.82.

¹²³ Gerald Howson, op.cit., p.154.

* Disregarding the fact that under Mexican legislation he could not. Not to mention that the usage of a false identity invalidated such claim. See Marina Casanova, *La diplomacia española durante la guerra civil*. Madrid, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Biblioteca Diplomática Española. Sección Estudios No.13.1996.

whole affair turned out to be a complete swindle, and large sums of Republican money were lost in vain. During this same period, lack of coordination between the Ministries of Air and Navy, the Paris purchasing community and the Republican diplomats brought down several deals.

By May, Jiménez de Asúa sought to revive the Mexican cover that had been cancelled as a consequence of the *Azteca* affair, and duly approached Leñero.¹²⁴ He prudently waited for ‘Palacios’ to leave the country and wired to Prieto asking to send a new envoy in order to contact possible purveyors.

On May 8, 1937, Cárdenas authorized the acquisition of additional Czech armament for Spain. Four days later, Leñero had an interview with Minister Krofta at which conveyed the Republic’s precise request. Both parts, notwithstanding, took great care to conceal the negotiations from the London Committee’s vigilance. Although Krofta was aware of the precise nature of the project, he demanded Cárdenas to underwrite that the arms would not be re-exported to Spain. Leñero, following instructions from his government, replied on the 21st that Mexico deemed imperative the Czech government’s conformity to the deal, regardless of the ultimate destination of the war material. Thus, negotiations between both parts stagnated.

In a bold move, Jiménez de Asúa took advantage of a brief absence of Leñero to persuade the Mexican chargé d’affairs, first secretary Daesslé, to wire President Cárdenas notifying him that the Czech government had accepted his conditions. The telegram, however was drafted in such ambiguous terms, as it stated that the Czech government’s response could be “interpreted” as being favourable, that the Mexican Foreign Ministry decided to put it on hold and to postpone the official request of purchase.

As a last resource, Jiménez de Asúa organised an interview between the Mexican Military Attaché, Alamillo and the head of the political section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Zdenek Fierlinger. Fierlinger turned Alamillo to General Cizek, who immediately raised all sorts of excuses to avoid closing the deal. So great was his interference, that Fierlinger himself had to assure him that the granting of the

¹²⁴ AMAE. RE-60. Informe 25.

permit for the exportation of arms was the express wish of President Benes. In the intervening time, the Italian Ambassador called upon the Czech Foreign Ministry, complaining about the “established fact” that Republican agents had secured the cover of Mexico for the purchase of arms in Czechoslovakia. Thus, when Cizek took at last the relevant communication to the Council’ President, Milan Hodza, for his approval, the latter flatly refused to do so in order to spare his country from “international disrepute.”¹²⁵

Five months later, Jiménez de Asúa approached the Mexican delegate at the League of Nations, Isidro Fabela, who was on tour in Prague, representing Mexico before the International Labour Office’s Council, in a new attempt to revive the affair near Kamil Krofta. The Spanish Minister explained Fabela how the combined effect of Portuguese denunciation of a projected transaction before the Non-intervention Committee, and the lack of discretion of Bolivian diplomats agents with regard to another contract had brought down the whole connection.

Fabela gave assurances to Jiménez de Asúa in the sense that he would undertake every conceivable effort to reiterate to Krofta “the Mexican government’s goodwill to aid the government of Valencia”, while reminding him, that Leñero was the official Mexican representative in Prague. Leñero himself had warned Fabela how Krofta had unequivocally expressed his refusal to engage in any ulterior operation.

Notwithstanding, an opportunity arose as Krofta offered a banquet to all visiting delegates. Before Fabela could utter a single word, Krofta told him almost apologetically that Czechoslovakia could not acquiesce in selling any sort of armament to Spain, via either Mexico or any other country in the world, as the international situation was “extremely critical” and since all of its neighbours,—avowed enemies of the Republic—warily monitored their every move. Moreover, Krofta explained to Fabela, the British and Portuguese governments had set a special vigilance over Czechoslovakia. Lisbon had even severed its diplomatic relations with Prague, out of spite, as they realized that the Czechs were going to sell arms to the Azaña government while having refused to do so with them. “Under these

¹²⁵ AMAE. RE-60. Informe 34.

circumstances”, he concluded, “we have no option other than to refuse the Spaniards the aid we were willing to lend them only a short while ago.” Fabela inquired whether such decision could vary provided the circumstances changed, to which Krofta replied that everything depended on the disposition of Britain and France.¹²⁶

Three days later, Jiménez de Asúa offered a reception in honour of Fabela at which the Czech Minister of Social Welfare, Necas, an avowed supporter of the Spanish cause, was the main guest. Among those present stood out Dominois, friend of Leon Blum and his itinerant envoy to various countries of Central Europe. At the function’s end, Jiménez de Asúa convened Fabela, Dominois and Necas privately to announce them that President Benes had unilaterally cancelled a deal, carried out by the Mexican government, which had been already sealed and paid for. The supplies included 5,000 machine-guns, 10, 000 rifles and “several” pieces of anti-aerial artillery, worth one million pounds sterling.

Necas expressed his regret over his government’s attitude while trying to justify it in view of the precarious position of his country. Necas admitted, notwithstanding, that a victory of Francoist forces in Spain would be highly detrimental for Czechoslovakia, at which moment Fabela went out of his way and boldly asked Necas: “If that is your conviction then why not use your influence near Benes or whomever you may deem appropriate, so Spain may be aided once and for all?” To which Necas replied by offering his intercession near Krofta. Fabela then lashed out against Britain and France for having “temporised” with Germany and Italy, and for their repudiation of the League of Nations’ framework. Dominois assumed the harangue, and promised in his turn to urge Blum to revise French policy towards Spain.¹²⁷

A loose compromise emerged from that gathering whereby a tripartite scheme seemed to be taking form. Fabela learnt that both Dominois and Necas had kept their commitments. The former had been touring Eastern Europe, briefing Blum about the “ominous” repercussions that an abandonment of Spain by France might have upon Czechoslovakia and on the regional balance of power. Regarding Necas, Jiménez de

¹²⁶ Isidro Fabela, *Cartas al Presidente Cárdenas*, op. cit., p.45

¹²⁷ ibid. pp. 47-48.

Asúa informed Fabela that he had conferred with Krofta to no avail. Jiménez de Asúa then visited Krofta to try to persuade him to keep his government's commitment. Initially reluctant, Krofta agreed once he learnt of the French government's willingness to pass the cargo through French territory. Fabela then travelled to Paris where he parleyed with Blum and Auriol over the issue, apparently obtaining their complete agreement to the deal.¹²⁸ After this, however, no further reference of what the fate of that specific cargo exists, either at the French archives, the Mexican records or within Fabela's letters to Cárdenas, leaving us to guess what might have been its outcome.

THE MEXICAN LEGATION IN PARIS: PROCURER OF ARMS FOR SPAIN

In July 1936, Cárdenas instructed the Mexican Minister in Paris, Col. Adalberto Tejeda, to purchase arms for the Republic—namely aircraft and ammunitions—in other European countries and deliver them into Spain.¹²⁹ These orders were carried out, albeit with considerable exertion. As a result, covert purchases were made by Mexican diplomats assigned in Paris and Brussels in Poland, Belgium, and France and, apparently, even in Germany.¹³⁰ A front company under the name SOCIMEX (Société Mexicaine) was established in 55 Avenue Georges V, with the hidden objective of channelling arms to Spain via Mexico.¹³¹

As early as August 1936, Mexican diplomats assigned to the Legation engaged the purchase of 50, 000 bombs and 200, 000 hand grenades from an arms workshop in Liège. The sales agreement allowed the Mexican part to cede contract rights to a third party, which it did appointing Antonio Fernández Bolaños, an agent of the Republic's purchasing commission, as beneficiary.¹³² Two months later, Tejeda informed the Mexican Foreign Ministry of further purchases of military hardware from companies in Switzerland and Poland, adding that that payment had been made

¹²⁸ *ibid.* pp. 52-54.

¹²⁹ Romana Falcón and Soledad García, *La semilla en el surco, Adalberto Tejeda y el radicalismo en Veracruz, 1883-1960*, México, El Colegio de México, Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, 1986, pp.377-378.

¹³⁰ AHSRE, III-166-15, Compra de pistolas y equipo militar en Alemania.

¹³¹ PRO, FO 371 14177.

¹³² AHSRE, III-746-1 Minister Adalberto Tejeda to Foreign Minister Eduardo Hay, Paris October 10, 1936.

“in a way that will not incriminate our government.”¹³³ It is uncertain if Tejeda acted with the blessing of the French government or without its knowledge. Franco-Mexican relations at the time were friendly and instructions on that regard were strong and clear: there should be no antagonising of the French authorities whatsoever.

Tejeda pursued his assignment for the duration of his tenure, and when transferred as Ambassador to Spain, his deputy, chargé d'affairs Jaime Torres Bodet, carried on the venture.¹³⁴ Despite the secrecy under which the operations were conducted, Gerald Howson has recently established that the Mexican legation in Paris was able to send, among others, the following materials:

- 300,000 hand-grenades; 200 PWU28 Polish-made Browning automatic rifles; 10,000 Polish-made Mauser M98 carbines; 10,600,000 Mauser cartridges (old) and 2,000,000 Mauser cartridges (new). The cargo was worth U.S. \$ 111, 787. These commodities were sent through the *Azteca* on September 9, 1936.
- Nine, 300 PWU 29 kbk Polish-made Mausers worth U.S. \$ 39, 804.
- 100 PWU 28 Polish-made Browning automatic rifles; 35,000 shells 75mm; 500,000 Mauser cartridges (new); 5,000 Chauchat machine-rifles (old) and 15,000,000 French 8mm cartridges (old). Materials for a value of U.S. \$203, 940. Sent on October 7, 1936 through the *Silvia*.
- Eight Russian-made Schneider 76.2mm M1904/09 Mountain and guns, 15,000 matching shells and 1,500 ‘3 lusek’ detonators. Wares for a value of U.S. \$ 33, 520.
- 60,000 Shells, 75mm Worth U.S. \$173, 200, and 100, 000 kilograms of Trotyl, worth U.S. \$ 22,000. Sent through the *Rona* on November 16, 1936.
- 105, 5 tons of cartridge power, worth U.S.\$62, 000.¹³⁵

At his State of the Nation speech of September 1, 1937, Cárdenas acknowledged before the Mexican Congress that Mexico had sold to Spain more than

¹³³ AHSRE III/510(46) “37” Tejeda to Hay, Paris, October 10, 1936.

¹³⁴ AHSRE III/146 (46) 1, Torres Bodet to Eduardo Hay, Brussels, February 3, 1938.

eight million pesos worth of arms in the preceding year. The president stressed that Mexico had made clear its position concerning Spain in the League of Nations and reiterated his government's determination to keep aiding the Republic.¹³⁶ Reactions to the speech were mixed. While officialdom had ample praise for a policy that was "inspired by a lofty sense of humanity", the conservative press made a thinly veiled criticism of the government through its portrayal of the Republic as a "murderous lot."¹³⁷

The Spanish war provided a focal point for the Mexican radical Right to vent its opposition against Cárdenas' radical domestic agenda. It also allowed it the chance to rally its otherwise dispersed forces. From the start, the Mexican fascists condemned the shipments when they became public knowledge in early 1937. Thus, *El Hombre Libre* vigorously denounced an aid that: "impedes the ability of the Spanish people to resolve their own conflicts", noting that other states and the League of Nations honoured the arms embargo "in spite of having more at stake in the Spanish situation than Mexico does."¹³⁸

At the international plane, criticism also mounted. Cárdenas, realising this would be the case, summoned under-secretary of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Ramón Beteta to give him instructions concerning the peace conference in Buenos Aires. In the course of the interview, Cárdenas asked Beteta's opinion about the advisability of sending a diplomatic note to the League of Nations as well as to all other countries with whom Mexico maintained diplomatic relations, outlining Mexico's position towards Spain.

Accordingly, on March 30, 1937, the Mexican Chancellery issued a note to all countries with which Mexico had diplomatic ties, urging the termination of the Non-intervention Committee and requesting international support for the Republican government of Spain. The note was met with either indifference or hostility. Few nations bothered even to reply, let alone respond favourably. In Latin America only

¹³⁵ Gerald Howson, op. cit. pp.261-267.

¹³⁶ *El Nacional*, September 2, 1937.

¹³⁷ Ibid. See also *El Universal*, September 3-6, 1936; and *Excélsior*, September 2-6, 1936.

¹³⁸ *El Hombre Libre*, 1937.

Cuba and Colombia supported Mexico's stance, albeit rhetorically.¹³⁹ Clearly, this must have increased the sense of Mexico's international isolation among many inside the administration. Yet, perhaps, precisely for this reason many inside it intensified their efforts on behalf of what they deemed a politically allied government in a context of increased international uncertainty.

By late 1937, it became evident that Mexico's attempts to terminate the Non-intervention pact and to rally support on behalf of the Spanish Republic among the League's members had been futile. The Republic's isolation became everything but complete after French closure of its border. This meant that arms shipments through her border ceased. On June 13, Daladier, under British pressure once again closed the border. Free arms supplies into Republican Spain became thus ever more difficult. A year later, the blockade imposed by the London Committee and the persistence of the U.S. neutrality law made it almost impossible for Mexico to continue in the same measure its assistance to the Republic. Furthermore, a combination of bad weather, labour discontent, spiralling inflation, pressures by the foreign oil companies and a rapidly strengthening political opposition caused the Mexican economy to contract. The Cárdenas administration faced bankruptcy and consequent political collapse. All these constraints, however, did not diminish Cárdenas' commitment, and new endeavours were undertaken to prolong the aid, albeit in ever more modest proportions.

Further indication that in spite domestic and external pressures arms traffic under Mexican cover is found in a report published by the *New York Times* which stated that a Dutch ship had arrived at Veracruz carrying 1000 tons of American munitions to be re-shipped to Spain aboard a Loyalist ship.¹⁴⁰ On another instance, the motorship *Cabo Quilates*, renamed *Ibai*, left Veracruz on December 27, 1937 and arrived safely at Le Havre on January 13, 1938, carrying the Bolivian arms bought by Gordón-Ordás and Triana together with an additional freight of Mexican arms, albeit too belatedly to cross the border before it was closed.¹⁴¹ As late as December 1938,

¹³⁹ AHSRE "La nota mexicana," III 1510 (46) "36"/4050, March 30, 1937.

¹⁴⁰ *New York Times*, November 5, 1937.

¹⁴¹ The cargo consisted of 15,000 Mauser rifles, 111 Vickers Machine-guns and 40 million 7.65mm cartridges, 80 Bergman and Schneider light machine-guns, eight Schneider 75mm field-guns with 6450 matching shells, Six Krupp 7,65cm M-16 field-guns and 1792 shrapnel shells, four Krupp 60cm

with the fall of Catalonia almost imminent, Narciso Bassols, then acting as Mexican Minister in Paris, wired the Foreign Ministry requesting authorisation to furnish Mexican cover for a Republican acquisition of ten airplanes in the Netherlands, obtaining immediate approval for the covert transaction.¹⁴²

Mexico was the sole reliable alternative to the Soviet Union that Republican Spain had to supply herself with weapons. Other than that, there were was nothing more than the murky deals with unscrupulous and, worst of all, undependable, arms traffickers, whom often swindled, without any mercy, the professorial envoys of the Republic, turned overnight into arms procurers.

It is evident that set against Soviet military aid to Republican Spain, or, all the more so, compared to German and Italian armed support to Franco, Mexican arms handouts to Valencia would appear as pathetically modest. To put matters in such fashion, however, would be unfair. All three other nations were first-rank military powers with arms industries capable not only of supplying the rebels with a quantity and quality of weapons far beyond Mexico's ability, but also of launching and sustaining during a prolonged period a large-scale war over different fronts, as would be patent a couple of years later. Mexico was a marginal nation, which could barely produce arms enough to sustain its defence force's needs, let alone to compete with top arms producing nations.

Yet, paradoxically, in this resides the significance of its commitment to Spain; despite its manifold limitations, the Mexican government went out of its way and sustained, in the measure of its possibilities, Republican demands for arms. It is understood that Mexican arms did not make a crucial difference in the war's ultimate outcome. But they certainly went far beyond the hackneyed refrain of "20, 000 Remington rifles and 20 million 7-millimetre cartridges" tiresomely repeated by historians of the Spanish Civil War to account for the Mexican contribution to the Republic's war effort.

Cannons and 1208 shells, 30 105mm trench-mortars and 6, 000 mortar-grenades. See, Félix Gordón Ordás, *op. cit.*, p.769.

¹⁴² AHSRE III/146 (46) 1 Narciso Bassols to Eduardo Hay December 8 1938; III-1325-5 Eduardo Hay to Narciso Bassols January 19, 1939.

What is more, unlike German and Italian arms shipments, which were able to flow unhindered into the Nationalist zone, Mexican freights were largely constrained by the erratic opening or closing of the French border, giving their undertaking an added merit. That such a country had been able to engage in a feat beyond proportion to its size, wealth and political influence is altogether remarkable.

Last but not least, there remains the question of the quality of the aid given. In spite of its burdensome financial difficulties, the Mexican government always accepted Republican pesetas in payment. The Soviet Union, in turn, demanded payment in gold for goods sold to Spain, and capriciously fixed the exchange rate to its convenience.¹⁴³ More damningly, it exacted onerous political influence in exchange for its aid. No black market, no intermediaries and no Bank of Spain gold were necessary whenever Mexican purchases were concerned. Republicans of all persuasions amply acknowledged this fact.¹⁴⁴ Of all these testimonies, an article by Luis Araquistain is one, which perhaps best summarizes the moral facet of Mexican aid to Republican Spain:

Of all the intermediaries who offered to help us, the only one that did not rob or swindle us was Mexico. Only the Mexican government ordered its diplomatic agents to place themselves entirely at the disposition of the Spanish Republic, with no further personal or official profit. This they did, those who lent us their very competent and disinterested collaboration, and of this I was a first-hand witness during the time I served as Spanish Ambassador in Paris. For these vital services, Mexico never charged us anything, either as way of commission or in political usury. Its generosity with the Spanish Republic was absolute, without any utilitarian view, nor any ambition of influence or power.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Gerald Howson, *op. cit.*, pp.146-152.

¹⁴⁴ See, among others, Marcelino Domingo, *El Mundo ante España: México Ejemplo*. Paris, La Technique du Livre, 1938. Julio Álvarez del Vayo, *The Last Optimist*. London, 1950. Juan Simeón Vidarte, *op. cit.* Ángel Ossorio y Gallardo, *La España de mi Vida, Autobiografía*. Buenos Aires, 1945.

¹⁴⁵ *Excélsior*, October 23, 1945.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE DIPLOMATIC FRONT. MEXICAN DEFENCE OF SPAIN AT THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

Mexico rendered a further service to the Spanish Republic in the diplomatic stage by consistently giving its moral support in the debates of the League of Nations, where it virtually became a spokesman for the Loyalist cause.

Hobsbawm characterises as milestones on the road to war the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931; the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, the German and Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War; the German annexation of Austria and the dismemberment under German pressure of Czechoslovakia. Conversely, he identifies these same instances as the failure of the League of Nations and of France and Britain to respond to aggression by the post war malcontent powers.¹ Mexican diplomacy reacted consistently before all those episodes, denouncing the aggressors and calling for the enforcement of international law, and collective security.

Mexico joined the League of Nations only in 1931 but since its accession became an outspoken proponent of the organisation and its aims. In a more practical approach, Mexico utilised the League of Nations as a forum to pursue its foreign policy beyond the realm of American hegemony that were the Pan-American conventions, and to press for the acceptance by the major powers of its principles of self determination, non-intervention and collective security which were the pillars of its international action.² In so doing, Cárdenas' main aim was the promotion of a fairer international order.

¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, p.37.

² Lorenzo Meyer, *México y el Mundo. Historia de sus relaciones exteriores*, Tomo VI, México, Senado de la República, 1991.

THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION'S FOREIGN POLICY. ITS PRINCIPLES AND HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

During the Revolutionary process (1910-20) Mexico's position became increasingly vulnerable, owing to the lack of a stable centralised government and to the radicalism espoused by the revolutionary factions themselves. A blueprint designed largely to counter the isolation of successive revolutionary governments soon evolved into an established diplomatic practice, that sought to maintain an autonomous course and voice for Mexico within the framework of the international system.

By the time the Constitution of 1917 was enacted, a reconstruction of a central power, after a decade of aimless tumult, had already begun. At that point, the Great Powers had their concerns not in the Mexican Revolution, but rather in Europe where the Great War was still unfolding. After the Armistice the victors held Carranza under suspicion for having toyed with an alliance with the Kaiser, proposed in the notorious Zimmerman Telegram,³ and withheld recognition to his government.

Furthermore, the enactment of radical legislation, contemplated by the Constitution, on issues such as land tenure and national control over natural resources, namely petrol, became thenceforth a permanent source of conflict with both USA and Britain, as investments in Mexico were largely in the hands of those countries' nationals. The policy of the 'Great Stick' inaugurated by Theodore Roosevelt's administration opened the way to American intervention in the continent. From 1898 onwards the US invaded Cuba, Puerto Rico, Panama, Nicaragua, Haiti, etc., while threatening to do the same in Mexico.

That the Mexican Revolution was highly vulnerable to foreign intervention had been amply shown by the occupation of the port of Veracruz in 1914, and the Pershing expedition of 1916; both under instructions of, that purported idealist, President Wilson. As late as 1927, an attempt to enact the article of the 1917 Constitution raised again the spectre of an American invasion.

³ In January 19, 1917, the German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmerman sent to his plenipotentiary Minister in Mexico a ciphered message containing overtures to President Carranza inviting him to a German-Mexican alliance. The note stated that Germany would offer military assistance and promised Mexico the recovery of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. Friedrich Katz has rendered this story in his now classic *The Secret War in Mexico. Europe, the United States and the Mexican Revolution*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1981, pp. 350-378.

Thus, the impending fear of non-recognition, let alone, outright intervention, compelled the fragile revolutionary governments to defend themselves, out of sheer despair, through the appeal to international law. For the next ten years lagging debts, land seizures and damage to foreign interests became the main sources of dispute with the Great Powers. Diplomatic blockade forced the need to strengthen Mexico's international position, through a diversification of links. Such an urgency took Mexico to establish relations with the USSR in 1924.⁴

The net result of these pressures was largely the design of a lasting body of doctrine that has led Mexico's diplomacy since Carranza. Considering the principles of non-intervention, self-determination and a staunch defence of national sovereignty, Carranza launched new body of civil service that would replace the *ancien régime*'s foreign service. This diplomatic custom not only acknowledged Mexico's historical experience with repeated external aggressions, but also was consistent with the Revolution's social and economic goals.

For many years Mexico had taken the stand that no nation should interfere in the internal affairs of another sovereign state. The intervention of American forces in Mexico during the administration of President Wilson and in the case of the so-called "punitive" expedition against Villa had left a bitter legacy. Therefore, Mexico viewed comparable intrusions in other countries with utmost hostility. As a result of the clashes between the revolutionary forces and foreign powers, a series of principles that condensed the grand vision of Mexican revolutionary nationalism began to take shape. A standard of conduct emerged that would condition Mexican foreign policy for many years to come. In the main, most contemporary revolutions have been subject to external pressures. To the same extent, most revolutionary regimes have formulated foreign policies designed to safeguard the fledging revolution through the expansion of its zone of influence, either actual or ideological.⁵

It is clear that the ability of a peripheral nation like Mexico, placed aside of a major world power, strongly inhibited the possibility of developing an international activism. Yet, it was precisely for that same reason that the new Mexican regime was

⁴ See above Chapter 3, note 1.

so categorical in its conception of a series of general principles of an essentially defensive and anti-imperialist nature. Moreover, Mexico sought to convince the other Latin American nations to adopt these principles.

Hence, the so-called Carranza Doctrine, of which the main tenet was the need for economic emancipation of peripheral nations through the repossession of the control over their natural resources—then at the hands of foreign interests—and the exigency of following a rapid industrialisation.⁶ As a corollary of this proposal, which demanded the express political will of the other Latin American nations, a new international system might emerge based on the respect of three key principles: juridical equality of states, non-intervention in the internal affairs of a nation by another, and the right of all nations to self-determination.

The fall of Carranza in 1920 signalled a new era in American intervention on Mexican affairs that was characterised by the manipulation of diplomatic recognition over the different Mexican governments. Back in the U.S. most Democrats and Republicans prescribed a hard line on dealing with the “Mexican question.” Diplomatic recognition was thus conditioned upon the provision of securities to American investment and properties, which may have been affected by the provisos of the 1917 Constitution. Furthermore, the administrations of Wilson and Harding demanded from the Mexican government payment of reparations over American interests destroyed or expropriated during the Revolution.

In the second half of the 1920s Calles developed an aggressive anti-U.S. policy in Central America that actively opposed “gun-boat” diplomacy. Thus, when Americans marines intervened in Nicaragua, Mexico raised its voice in condemnation while supplying Sandino with materials and military aid.⁷ The biased stance in favour of Sandino constitutes the most visible precedent of the Mexican conduct before the Spanish Civil War; yet not the only one: Revolutionary Mexico

⁵ Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China*.

⁶ Antonio Manero, *Méjico y la solidaridad latinoamericana. La doctrina Carranza*, Madrid, 1918.

⁷ David R. Mares, “Mexico’s Foreign Policy as a Middle Power: The Nicaraguan Connection 1884-1986.” in *Latin American Research Review*, 23:3 (1988), pp. 81-107. See also Gregorio Selser, *El pequeño ejército loco. Operación México- Nicaragua*. Havana, Imprenta Nacional de Cuba, 1960.

covertly intervened in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, taking sides with Leftist dissidents in those countries.

Moreover, Mexico had a historic experience of foreign aggression, which, among other things, had resulted in the loss of half its territory, violation of territorial sovereignty as in 1914 and 1916, and the continuous vulnerability of Mexican administrations to the good will of successive American governments.

During the revolution, counter-revolutionary émigrés had repeatedly plotted and launched incursions into Mexico from American territory. A case in point was that of General Gonzalo Escobar's rebellion of 1929. On March of that year a clique of disaffected Obregonista generals together with sundry rightist opposition figures dictated a manifesto, the so-called Plan de Hermosillo. 30,000 troops under Escobar were mobilised to overthrow the government of Emilio Portes Gil. Calles himself took the portfolio of War Minister and oversaw military operations. The Escobar rebellion was quickly checked. A conclusive factor was the American government's decision to decree an arms embargo. Furthermore, the American authorities refused to have anything to do with Escobar's envoy to Washington, Gilberto Valenzuela, siding decisively with the Mexican government as it quashed the rebellion.

Thus, the Revolutionary regime had been preserved only through a prohibition placed by President Coolidge upon export of arms to Mexico, except to the recognised government of Mexico.⁸ U.S.-Mexican tensions had eased dramatically and the Escobar insurrection provided Washington with an opportunity to improve relations, avoid chaos along the border and ostensibly "promote" democracy abroad.

The question of recognition, however, had been historically an American tool to manipulate and coerce successive Mexican governments in order to advance its interests there. By lifting the arms embargo or suspending the exclusion of third parties, the American government was in a position at almost any moment to threaten the life of the Mexican administration; this gave to their negotiations a considerable leverage.

⁸ G.M Gathorne-Hardy, *A Short International History of International Affairs 1920-1939*.

The doctrinal distinction between recognition of a state and recognition of a government is a recent one. But in actual practice this distinction was somewhat blurred. In truth strong states were the only ones in a position to grant or deny recognition. The very step of stating a diplomatic recognition revealed the strength and capacity of a nation to influence international affairs. The recognition of belligerence or insurgency was given accordingly by way of convenience. In this sense, political recognition has been more a political practice rather than a juridical one.⁹

Several doctrines have sought to resolve the vexed question of recognition. Developed from the American independence and of Latin American continuous change of governments during the Nineteenth Century, the practice of diplomatic recognition came to be used by the U.S. as an instrument of pressure. During the Mexican Revolution the so-called Wilson Doctrine March 11, 1913 prescribed diplomatic recognition only to governments founded on law and not over arbitrary force; a recognition based on the "consent of the governed." In that sense it was impracticable for the Wilson administration to grant recognition to a government that emanated from a revolution. At any rate the American government was never consistent in applying the Wilson doctrine, using it only when it deemed it convenient. Thus, there remained always the menace of American intervention, dependent upon the whims of every new administration.

World depression caused a reorientation of American policy towards Latin America. Under the Hoover administration the foundations for the "Good Neighbour" policy were laid and direct interventionism began to wane. The economic contraction of the US forced Mexican diplomats to seek alternative markets in Europe and Asia. After ten years of forced isolation Mexican diplomats were ready to become active in issues pertaining to Europe, Africa and Asia.

As fascism advanced, American concern with its potential spread to the Western Hemisphere led the Roosevelt administration to make friendly overtures to the Latin American republics. This new approach known as the Good Neighbour

⁹ See, M.J. Peterson, "Political Use of Recognition: The Influence of the International System." in *World Politics*, Volume 34, 3 (April, 1982) pp. 324-352.

policy which exchanged overt intervention of the “Colossus of the North” in the internal affairs of its southern neighbours for increased cooperation and common consultation in case of disagreement found precise expression in the Pan-American conferences of Montevideo in 1933, Buenos Aires in 1936 and Lima in 1938.

The Good Neighbour Policy lined up American policy to pay at least lip service to the spirit of the Estrada Doctrine of Non-Intervention. Most Mexican uprisings had started in the north, where there had been easy access to guns and munitions. The Good Neighbour policy did in fact put an end to the smuggling of arms across the border.

From the time of its accession to the League Mexico maintained a complete attachment to the strictest orthodoxy of International Law. A standard Mexican study on Mexican Foreign policy has aptly shown how weak countries, lacking any other means in the face of the powers' greater force, adhere to legality as the only resource available to them so as to further their interests in the international sphere.¹⁰

This was clear in the Mexican attitude with regards to the Chaco War and before the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. In both cases Mexico addressed the League's Council and Assembly demanding their immediate intervention to apply the Covenant swiftly and drastically. Unfortunately, Mexico entered the League at the moment of its decadence. England and France dreaded the prospect of a new war and were unwilling to confront the totalitarian menace. Moreover, Germany and then Italy left the League depriving it of any significance as a forum for world peace.

MEXICO AND THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS 1931-1939

When the League of Nations was established in 1920 Mexico was excluded from becoming a member of the organisation. This may have been largely due to American leverage as its relations with Mexico were tense owing to Mexican seizure of American-owned land and interests during the Revolution. The Foreign Office's attitude towards Mexico was equally disheartening. Lord Balfour's belief was that

Great Britain could hardly favour Mexico's admission to the body, since that country was in default of its financial obligations and that it was precisely for this reason that London felt disinclined to recognise its government. Mexican diplomatic activity in Europe remained marginal throughout the 1920s.

In 1923, the League offered admission to Mexico but that country declined on grounds that it was not diplomatically recognised by Great Britain. Past strains in Mexican-American relations had made Mexicans somewhat intransigent regarding any international matter that they considered might, in the slightest way, affect Mexico's national dignity and self-esteem. Nevertheless, by 1928 the fervour of the Revolution had subsided and this time the Mexican Foreign Ministry itself raised the question of entering the League again.

The pretext was a minor international congress of harmonisation of statistics to which Mexico was invited. In due course, Antonio Castro Leal was accredited as an observer to the League with the mission of exploring the possibility of full accession. A skilled negotiator, Salvador Martínez de Alva, succeeded Castro Leal.

Many Mexican diplomats saw no use in joining an organisation that could not guarantee its rights against American intrusion, since the League accepted the validity of the Monroe Doctrine and, consequently abstained from intervening in Latin American affairs. The government's mouthpiece, *El Nacional* demanded that before acquiescing in the League's overtures something was done to right "The Paris insult of 1919." In addition, Martínez de Alva raised the possibility of making a reservation to the Monroe Doctrine, pointing out that the aforesaid principle had never been recognised by his country. Alarmed by a measure that could cause the disgust of the U.S. the League refused to accept such step, and upheld acknowledgement of American hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. Mexican response to this refusal was, to say the least, acrimonious and all negotiations ceased overnight.¹¹

¹⁰ Mario Ojeda Gómez, *Alcances y límites de la política exterior de México*. México, El Colegio de México, 1976.

¹¹ Friedrich Schuler, *op. cit.*, p.12.

In early September 1931, Spain submitted a resolution to the League's Assembly which pointed out that Mexico had not been included in the League's original members and proposed to "repair the unjust omission" by inviting her to accede to the Covenant. The Assembly passed the motion unanimously. Days later, the Mexican President publicly explained that Mexico appreciated the gesture and had the will to have a friendlier attitude towards the League than had previously been the case.

On its acceptance to the offer Mexico put forward, however, a reservation, in which it declared that Mexico had never taken recognisance of the regional understanding— the Monroe Doctrine cited in Article 21 of the Covenant.¹²

Mexico's entry to the League took place precisely in the moment that the body entered in frank decline, due to its inadequacy to confront the challenges posed by the powers that were disaffected to the status quo.

Difficulties developed within a year after Mexico's admission to the League. In late September 1932 plans were announced to withdraw from the League because the money expended could, in view of the world financial crisis, be better employed for education and other public works in Mexico. The Japanese invasion of Manchuria and the timorous response given by the League to this aggression made several Mexican civil servants dismiss the international organisation as a tool in the hands of Great Powers. The political benefit of Mexico's association with the League was widely questioned.

The Mexican Minister of Finance, Alberto Pani, sternly opposed Mexico's continuance in the body on financial grounds. In response to the ongoing depression, the funds for the Mexican legation in Geneva were cancelled. As a result, the Mexican delegate to the League moved to the Mexican Embassy in Paris and had to commute to Switzerland in order to attend the body's deliberations. In late May 1932 a reversal of opinion among the revolutionary elite took place and Mexico renounced her withdrawal from the League.

¹² *The Times*, London September 11, 1931.

For Cárdenas instead, the League afforded Mexico a European forum where it could adopt a firm stand against the United States and counterbalance its hemispheric domination. The Foreign Ministry gained more influence as a result of the President's reinstating of Mexico's membership in the League of Nations.¹³

Elements within the Senate have been debating about the convenience of Mexico withdrawing from the League of Nations. My criterion is that Mexico's accession to the League represents one of the most brilliant successes of our diplomacy. The government of the United States has undoubtedly resented the international position reached by Mexico at this forum. Those who support the move towards Mexican departure from the League serve, perhaps unwittingly, the interests of whom thus would result benefited, i.e. imperialism. Among the many powerful reasons that justify Mexico's permanence within the League, there is a conclusive one: to hold a tribune from where our denunciations against the dominance of our neighbours may be heard.¹⁴

In many ways Cárdenas' pursuit of diplomatic initiatives resembled and updated Porfirio Diaz's scheme of counterpoising Europe against the United States in a concerted effort to maximise Mexican sovereignty and margin of manoeuvre. Not surprisingly Cárdenas' ambassador to the League of Nations, Isidro Fabela had learned his diplomatic practice under the Presidency of Venustiano Carranza.¹⁵

By the time of Cárdenas accession to power Mexican diplomacy had undergone a thorough process of reorganisation and professionalization. According to Schuler under the aegis of Puig Casauranc the Mexican Foreign Ministry was transformed into a "modern economic intelligence service."¹⁶ During the first years of the Cárdenas administration Minister Hay fostered the reorganisation by expanding the Foreign Ministry's diplomatic departments from three to six: Diplomatic Personnel, Treaties and Conferences, League of Nations.¹⁷ This professionalization created an

¹³ Friedrich Schuler, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁴ Lázaro Cárdenas, *Apuntes*, 1972, p. 350

¹⁵ Friedrich Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico. Europe, the United States and the Mexican Revolution*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1981.

¹⁶ Friedrich Schuler, *op cit.*, p.14.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.16.

efficient diplomatic organisation “that generated critical information and an understanding of international relations with great speed.”¹⁸

Well before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War Mexico had championed collective resistance to imperialist aggression in the League of Nations. During the Abyssinian crisis of 1935 the Mexican delegate, Marte R. Gómez, played a leading role by presiding the Committee that originated the only sanction imposed upon Italy as the aggressor nation: the oil embargo. His successor, Narciso Bassols urged assistance to Ethiopia and complied fully with the League’s sanctions against Italy. However, the League recoiled before Italian threats of withdrawal and the sanctions were lifted. On July 4, 1936 sanctions against Italy were dropped with the key collaboration of the British Foreign Office, in an action that foreshadowed British passivity before the threats of the dictators.

MEXICAN DIPLOMATIC SUPPORT FOR THE REPUBLIC

When the Republican government, through the direct appeal of President Giral himself, requested the aid of the French Government, the incumbent Ambassador, Juan Francisco de Cárdenas, leaked the dealings to the French conservative press and joined the Nationalists’ side. With the negotiations made public the Radicals, junior partners of the French Popular Front coalition, pressed Blum to halt all arms sales to Spain. Sharp divisions and a chronic political crisis already tore France. Blum was also aware that open aid to Madrid would alienate Britain, with whom relations were already tense. London pressed Paris stating unequivocally that should the French government help Madrid Britain would remain neutral in case of a European conflict.

The Non-Intervention Committee originated in an exchange of diplomatic notes by the Quai d’ Orsay and Whitehall. In its preamble, the note referred to the unfortunate Spanish situation, and declared that both countries would rigorously refrain from any sort of involvement, either direct or indirect, in Spanish internal affairs. In due course, they would forbid any exportation from their countries of any

¹⁸ ibid. T.G. Powell differs from this view, as he alleges that: “Mexico lacked an effective intelligence-gathering operation overseas.” See T.G. Powell, op. cit., p.66. The creation of a secret infrastructure

sort of arms, machinery and war material to Spain. Moreover, any pre-existing contract involving such commodities would become void, even if it was already on its way. The two chancelleries invited the rest of the European nations to join an “International Committee for the Application of the Non-Intervention in Spain Agreement.” Twenty-six nations joined the Committee through notes of adhesion.¹⁹

Days after the French note was issued, the Spanish Ambassador, Álvaro de Albornoz sent a note to the French Foreign Minister, Yvon Delbos, stating his country’s displeasure with it. Albornoz emphasised the fact that the Spanish government did not accept the principle of non-intervention inferred by the note. He declared that the Spanish conflict could not be compared to an international conflict. It was a question of the national domain, that is, the uprising of a fraction of the Army against the established order. For this reason, the Spanish government did not want to leave this interpretation pass unnoticed.

The Spanish question was first posed before the League of Nations on September 25, 1936. In a scandalous incident, Dr. Carlos Saavedra Lamas, the Argentinian president of the Assembly sought with the collusion of other Latin American nations to prevent Álvarez del Vayo from speaking. There, the Spanish delegate, Álvarez del Vayo, summoned the League to intervene on behalf of the legitimate government under the provisions of Article 11 of the League’s Covenant. His speech stated that Spain was the first episode of an unfolding war, the clash between two competing ideologies, two mentalities, and two opposed conceptions of life: democracy and oppression. Hence when talking about collective security it was absolutely indispensable to protect States from the risk of internal subversive movements, sustained from abroad as was happening in Spain.

“It is necessary—stressed Álvarez del Vayo—that the members states be aware of this new modality of foreign intervention and try to unite themselves to save world’s peace from the dictatorships’ provocation.” Álvarez del Vayo deplored the “monstrosity” of the Non-Intervention policy, which placed on an equal footing a

that was able to smuggle arms into Spain would give the lie to this view.

¹⁹ Norman J. Paddleford, *International Law and Diplomacy in the Spanish Civil Strife* New York, The Macmillan Co., 1939. pp. 53-120.

legitimate government with a group of seditious and to the “dangerous innovation” that this policy might imply for the rules of International Law.

By international principle the Republic was lawfully entitled to buy arms abroad while the rebels were not. It followed that an authentic non-intervention policy would imply unfettered freedom for the Spanish government to buy arms, a right that the Non-Intervention Committee refused to grant.

The Mexican delegation wholly agreed with Álvarez del Vayo’s stance, particularly in what pertained to the definition of non-intervention and to the possibility that other governments would compromise with the rebels, professedly, in order to avoid war. Bassols warned: “The nations that through a cause or another have decided to save the juridical abyss that separates a legitimate government from a mutinous group, may end up falling prey to the same evils they have propitiated.” Then, Bassols summed up Mexican position concerning the Spanish conflict along the following terms:

1. Mexico holds that the Spanish Republican government represents the will of the people of Spain, as expressed in a free election.
2. Mexico rejects non-intervention policy as it denies the legitimate defence to a legally constituted government confronted by a military insurrection.
3. Mexico believes that the crisis should be dealt within the framework of the League, and not by an agency created outside of its jurisdiction, that is the Non-Intervention Committee.
4. In view of the League’s failure to maintain the integrity and independence of member states, Mexico deems imperative a transformation of its procedures. When the League refused to act, Bassols called for an overhaul of the organisation and its procedures in order to restore its integrity and independence. Furthermore, Bassols castigated the:

The powerlessness of the League of Nations to perform its primary and most decisive task—which is sustaining the integrity and enjoyment of their independence by the states composing it—has led us to recognise the need of

revising its existing machinery. For, whatever the causes of failure may have been, it would be absurd to expect that if we keep the same factor in play, results would tomorrow or the day after, in the face of a new conflict, be any different to what they were before.²⁰

5. Mexico believes that the League's failure to adhere to international norms strictly might allow the dispute to spread rather than confine it. Bassols admitted before the organisation that his government was following a policy of material collaboration with the Spanish government, and maintained that such policy was amply justified under international law. Cárdenas had already made public the initial transaction weeks before.²¹

Bassols declared that the Mexican government advocated the strictest application of international doctrines regarding aggression. Bassols referred specifically to Article X of the League's Covenant by which all member states committed themselves "to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all members."

As Mexico was not a member of the League's Council, the delegation could do little else but voice its protest. Thus, from the rostrum, Bassols censured the London Committee and the weakness of the League by considering both a true regression, a step backwards, "as we have fallen from the heights of the ideals consecrated by the Covenant into an abasement that."

During that same session, delegates Delbos of France, Litvinov of the USSR and Monteiro of Portugal referred to the Spanish question. Unlike Bassols all of them defended the Non-Intervention agreement as "indispensable to the maintenance of world peace." The Portuguese delegate, however, went well beyond this by questioning the legitimacy of the Republican government itself.

As the Seventeenth Assembly failed to produce any resolution on the Spanish case, once again, several voices demanded Mexico's withdrawal from the League.

²⁰ Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, *The Mexican Government in the Presence of Social and Economic problems*. Mexico, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1936. pp. 20-21.

²¹ Narciso Bassols, Discurso pronunciado en Ginebra, ante la XVII Asamblea General de la Sociedad de las Naciones. Informe de la Delegación de México. Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. AHSRE: III/381 (S-N)/51. III-487-2.

Mexican Foreign Minister, Eduardo Hay, rejected those claims clarifying Mexico's aims at the League:

Mexico strives for a positive development of the League because by its historic destiny it is one of the countries that most vividly interested is that the force of law may prevail over the law of force.²²

MEXICO'S ADVOCACY OF SPAIN IN THE REALM OF THE INTER-AMERICAN SYSTEM

In December 1936, a new Pan-American Conference convened in Buenos Aires under the heading of "For the Consolidation of Peace", a direct reference to the recent Chaco War. At the opening session, Roosevelt, who travelled to Buenos Aires to stress the importance bestowed by him to the conference, pointed to the need of common consultation against the threat of extra-continental powers which "driven by war madness or land hunger might seek to commit acts of aggression against us,"²³ an obvious reference to the Axis Powers. Distrust in Latin America of American intentions, however, ran still deep, and it was only with great difficulty that the Conference arrived at a non-committal resolution prescribing mutual consultation in the event of a threat to the Americas.

In Buenos Aires, the Mexican delegation headed by Ramón Beteta referred to the Spanish conflict, stating its motives for having come to the aid of the Republic and tried to rally continental support for Valencia.

Regarding the Spanish case Mexico has remained constant to the duties imposed by its diplomatic relations. Selling war materials and lending moral, and material, support to a friendly government, legitimately constituted, is in perfect conformity with the roles of ethic that preside the life of international relations. To act differently would be tantamount to grant belligerency to a military insurrection, clearly contrary to Mexican popular sentiment.²⁴

²² Eduardo Hay *Discursos pronunciados en su carácter de Secretario de Relaciones Exteriores (1936-1940)*, Mexico, SRE, 1940.

²³ *New York Times*, December 2, 1936.

²⁴ *El Nacional*, December 8, 1936.

In spite of these overtures, the Conference refrained from commenting or debating the merits of the Mexican position regarding Spain. Sentiment at the Conference over the Spanish conflict was “highly combustible”, as Secretary Hull observed, and this threatened to put Latin American governments at odds with each other. Several Latin American countries under conservative administrations regarded both the Spanish Republic and Mexico with unconcealed ill will. Furthermore, some were already flirting with Fascist-like solutions in which the causes of the old conservative groups were updated with the “modern” methods of *en vogue* totalitarianism.

In this sense, as Hull saw it, the Spanish Civil war could pose a direct threat to the Good Neighbour policy as the conflict accented and aggravated divisions among American nations and within them as well. The American delegation rightly feared that the pursuit of a pro-Loyalist stance could easily antagonise those same governments, endangering accordingly the Good Neighbour edifice, which was so painstakingly being erected.²⁵

Under a Mexican initiative the Eighth Pan American Conference at Buenos Aires of 1936 passed an additional protocol on Non-Intervention which stipulated explicitly: “no country shall intervene in the internal affairs of another nation, either directly or indirectly.” Mexico had attempted at the previous Pan-American conferences of Havana 1928 and Montevideo 1933 to pass this resolution.²⁶ On 1933 the U.S. had finally consented to follow this principle. Still Hull made on that occasion two reserves on American commitment to the non-intervention principle: Firstly, that such observance would limit itself to Roosevelt’s tenure and secondly, that the U.S. reserved in that regard “the rights that are due to it in accordance with the law of nations.²⁷

Mexico alleged that in addition to the external dangers to be confronted there still existed the impending menace of the United States vis-à-vis its weaker, southern neighbours. In that sense, Mexico attached great importance to American conformity

²⁵ Richard P. Traina, *American Diplomacy and the Spanish Civil War*. 1968. pp. 146-147.

²⁶ Félix F. Palavicini, op. cit., pp. 220-223.

²⁷ J. Lloyd Mecham, *The United States and Inter-American Security, 1889-1960*. Austin, The University of Texas Press, 1965. p.104.

to the postulate since the US was not member of the League. On the other hand, the US was greatly interested in coordinating a hemispheric policy with their southern neighbours to confront the growing hostility of the totalitarian powers. American concern for continental security was epitomised by the presence of President Roosevelt himself at the Conference. In return for their acceptance of a continental mechanism of defence the U.S. were forced to accept unconditionally the principle of non-intervention.

Paradoxically, this very tenet was the averred argument utilised by the American government to deny military aid to the Spanish Republic, alleging that such an engagement could constitute an unnecessary meddling in the affairs of another country. In effect, when Spanish Ambassador asked U.S. Secretary of State to come to his country's aid, to aid democracy against totalitarianism, Hull evoked the Montevideo Convention of 1933 to justify his country's inaction. Thus, the agreement established a moral precedent, which the United States would have to follow, if only for consistency's sake.²⁸

Such a pronouncement debilitated further Cárdenas' endeavours to rally the American government's support towards the Loyalist cause. In that sense, it is also interesting to note that the only other instance of American refusal to furnish war materials to an established government with which to quell a revolt had been precisely Mexico. This legal precedent took place in 1912, when the Wilson administration denied the Huerta regime the sale of military means to defend itself from the onslaught of the revolutionary forces.²⁹ All this supposed a predicament for the Mexican administration, in the sense that it could not push too far its legalistic approach without persuading the American government about the insincerity of its case.

²⁸ Dante A. Puzzo, *op. cit.*, pp.153-154.

²⁹ Norman J. Paddleford, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

UNFLAGGING SUPPORT: ISIDRO FABELA'S UPHOLDING OF SPAIN BEFORE THE LEAGUE

On December 10, Álvarez del Vayo presented the Republic's case before the League's Council. The Spanish delegate demanded the League to condemn Germany and Italy for having granted diplomatic recognition to the rebels. He made reference to the fact that foreign warships had attacked Republic merchant vessels in the Mediterranean, that the rebels used Moorish troops, that the war in Spain was a general danger to European peace and that the Non-Intervention Committee had shown its incompetence. British and French delegates, Lord Cranborne and Pierre Vienot, rejected the accusation and appealed to the Council to adopt the Franco-British mediation plan. In conclusion, the Council passed a resolution condemning intervention, urging its members to adhere to non-intervention and endorsing mediation as the only way out of the crisis. Both the Republic and the Francoist zone rejected any sort of mediation and thus the plan was abandoned.

At the beginning of 1937 Isidro Fabela replaced Bassols as Mexican delegate to the League by appointment of President Cárdenas and the Foreign Ministry. Mexico's advocacy of the non-intervention principle at the Pan American Conference of 1936 was used by its critics to decry its defence of the Republic as ambiguous and inconsistent. Several nations went as far as to accuse Mexico of intervention in Spanish affairs. This took Cárdenas to instruct Fabela to clarify Mexican position on Non-Intervention. The Mexican president contended that Mexican aid to the Republic did not contradict the principle of non-intervention, because the denial of aid was, in fact, an indirect aid to the rebels.³⁰ In consequence, Mexico's support of Valencia was "the logical result of a correct interpretation of the doctrine of Non-Intervention."

Fabela confided to Cárdenas what he considered an absurd error by Álvarez del Vayo, who after having denounced the policy of Non-Intervention as an aberration had legitimated it, when he added:

³⁰ "Carta de Lázaro Cárdenas a Isidro Fabela" quoted in *Méjico y la República Español*, ed. Centro Republicano Español, pp. 27-28.

We shall accept, nonetheless, a rigorous policy of non-intervention.³¹

A statement by which the League's Council gave full recognition to the Committee. Spain by subscribing such agreement voluntarily renounced to the rights that Articles 10 and 11 lawfully granted her. What is more, Azaña ratified his government's stance in a public speech on January 21, 1937, on which he declared:

The Republican Government has agreed to make certain sacrifices regarding her rights in order to limit the scope of war. It has given in to the inspection or control of arms import in Spain. We have always advocated the principle of intangibility of the right of a legitimate Government to trade with other countries. We affirm such principle. Yet it has been said to us: "It is convenient for world peace not be overly intransigent," and we have compromised.³²

Fabela judged this as a risky lapse of judgement by the Republican government, which by accepting the regulation of the Non-Intervention Committee had abdicated from the very Covenant's principles that authoritatively guaranteed its defence. Nevertheless, Fabela justified Spain's acquiescence to the Committee's arbitration on grounds of the tremendous pressure that London and Paris had exerted over Valencia.

It goes without saying that Mexico could be more determined and intransigent in its advocacy of International Law and of its implications for the Republican cause than Valencia was ever able to be. Without a doubt, this had to do with the larger autonomy enjoyed by Mexico on account of its geographical situation. Mexico was beyond the menaces that the Spanish situation posed for Europe, and thus could express its convictions with relative ease.

On the contrary, the Spanish leaders could not invoke International Law in its purity. It was important for them to maintain and consolidate their diplomatic relations with France and Britain, and not to exacerbate tensions unnecessarily. Spanish diplomats had to be far more accommodating and understanding; they were forced to take in account the vital interests of the European powers. Therefore, Fabela advised Cárdenas not to be "more papist than the Pope." In its defence of the

³¹ Isidro Fabela, *Cartas al Presidente Cárdenas*, pp. 16-17.

³² *Ibid.*

integrity and the compliance of the Covenant, argued Fabela, Mexico was going “against the entire world and even against Republican Spain itself.”³³

In London, the Committee for Non-Intervention, considering what it deemed its victory of December 12, 1936, when it had been granted recognition by the League’s council, decided to invite all the body’s members to convey their governments its will to extend the Non-Intervention agreement beyond its original body of members , and thus insure the cooperation of non-European states.

In view of this initiative, Mexico-considering that such a move had the object of limiting the freedom of action of Latin American countries, instructed its delegate in Geneva to deliver a note to Joseph Avenol, Secretary General of the League, on which Mexico’s international position was clearly defined. The note, which due to its importance must be quoted at length, stated that:

The universality of the Covenant of the League of Nations—to which Mexico adhered in 1931, with the sincere hope of collaborating to preserve world peace—not only calls our government to take an interest on events that may endanger collective security, but also obliges it to consider the arduous circumstances that prevail in Spain from the higher perspective of humanity and justice. My government deems a duty to offer all means at its disposal on behalf of world peace, and especially to put an end to the armed struggle that has afflicted the Spanish Republic eight months ago. Considering that, my country avows itself to appeal to the sentiments of humanity of all members state, as the manner and timing by which it has been attempted to implement the policy of so-called Non-Intervention has not had any consequence other than to deny Spain the aid that in accordance to International Law the legitimate government of that country could rightfully expect; especially from those countries with which it maintains diplomatic links.³⁴

In the note, the Mexican Government denounced the Non-Intervention Committee claiming that any pretence of neutrality should clearly distinguish between attacked governments, which can rightly expect all sort of material and

³³ Ibid. pp. 23-25.

³⁴ Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, *Memoria*, September 1936-August 1937, Tomo I, pp. 29-30

support and aggressor groups to which it is unlawful to provide any sort of aid for that would only prolong a bloody conflict.

In response to attacks against its advocacy of the Spanish Republic which many deemed ambiguous,³⁵ the Mexican Government hurried to clarify that the Spanish case did not represent any departure from the principle of non-intervention which was at the core of its foreign policy. Certain European nations have followed a policy that lessens the principle of non-intervention, as the isolation of the Spanish government implies an indirect support to the rebels.³⁶

Fabela recalled that Article 10 of the Covenant clearly expressed the duties to which all states had committed to of preserving and respecting the territorial integrity and the political independence from all sort of aggression. As its proposals fell on deaf ears Mexico decided to clearly state its position over the Spanish conflict, making it clear that it had lent material and moral support as much as it had been possible to a friendly government. That this had been done overtly and legally without recourse to secret conventions or conniving. The note made clear that Mexico in so doing had complied with International Law and with the dispositions of the Pan-American Convention on Rights and Duties of States in case of Civil Struggles, signed in Havana in 1928.³⁷ A treaty that “taking its inspiration from the basic principle of Non-Intervention, prescribes the material assistance to legally constituted governments banning it to the seditious elements.”³⁸

However, Fabela forgot, or deliberately omitted on that occasion, that Spain could not be entitled to the Convention’s benefits as this treaty had been signed solely among the Latin American countries. In any case, the Mexican note was widely commented in the European press with the French newspaper *La Tribune des Nations* stating:

³⁵ Britain demanded a clarification of what it considered Mexican double standards. See AHSRE III-510(46) 37-3-770-5.

³⁶ *Excelsior*, April 2, 1937.

³⁷ *The Convention on the Rights and Duties of States in the Event of Civil Strife*. In its first article, the agreement stipulated: All signing states take it upon themselves to ban the traffic of arms and war material, except when such materials are destined to the legally constituted government and when belligerency is not acknowledged. Since Mexico had not recognised the rebels as belligerents, it had lawfully given its assistance to Azaña’s government.

³⁸ Isidro Fabela, op. cit., p.12.

It may be said that that the Mexican government defends the cause of the Republican government with more determination and intransigence than the own spokesmen of Valencia.³⁹

For its part, the Swiss paper, *Journal des Nations*, lauded Mexico as “the only state loyal to the Covenant.”⁴⁰

In early March, Cárdenas sent a personal note to the Secretary General of the League of Nations, Joseph Avenol, stressing Mexico’s support for the League and international peace. The note strongly denounced the non-intervention policy adopted by several nations, especially in the face of documented German and Italian aid to the insurgents. Cárdenas stated that the lack of cooperation with the legally constituted authorities in Spain was cruelly prolonging the war and increasing the risks of a larger international conflict. He reminded the Secretary General that Article 10 of the League’s Covenant made a clear distinction between a constitutional government that was legally entitled to receive aid and arms and aggressors who were due nothing.⁴¹ Avenol politely overlooked the admonition. Despite unenthusiastic international response to its stance, Mexico continued her unyielding support of Spain in the League of Nations. In response to a British initiative to extend the Non-Intervention pact to non-European states, Cárdenas sent another letter to Avenol rejecting the plan and asking instead for League’s cooperation with the legal authorities of Spain:

Mexico cannot admit that while she is being asked to lend her assistance in solving world problems, an attempt should be made to reduce the scope of her peacemaking action and to circumscribe European problems by a method which, if successful, would undermine what is left of the foundations on which the League is built.⁴²

As may be seen, Mexico emphasised on juridical grounds its defence of the Republic at both the bilateral and multilateral level with the third countries concerned. On March 30, Mexico sent a note to all countries with which it had

³⁹ Isidro Fabela, *Cartas...*, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ “Nota dirigida a la Sociedad de las Naciones con motivo del caso de España” quoted in José Antonio Matesanz(editor), *Méjico y la República Española*, Centro Republicano Español de México pp. 28-29.

⁴² Quoted by Norman J. Padelford, op.cit., pp. 625-626.

diplomatic relations, urging the termination of the Non-Intervention Pact and requesting international support for the Republican government. Few countries bothered even to reply, let alone respond favourably; only Cuba and Colombia agreed to send whatever aid they could. Other nations, such as Argentina and Chile were overtly hostile to Mexico's request.⁴³ Britain went further demanding a clarification of what it deemed an incongruous Mexican position regarding non-intervention.⁴⁴ The very principle of non-intervention, postulated at Buenos Aires by the Cárdenas administration, to prevent American hemispheric interference was been retracted to assist the Azaña government. Thereafter, the Foreign office shunned all discussion with Mexican diplomats with regards to the Spanish conflict or Non-Intervention policy, either at the bilateral level or at the realm of the League of Nations.

Apparently a contradiction of its foreign policy, Mexico's chancellery hastily clarified the motives of its aid to Republican Spain in impeccable legal grounds. On May 31, 1937, Mexico issued a note to the League, in which it defined its criteria in the interpretation of international neutrality in the Spanish case. The message claimed that neutrality, by equating a legitimate government, which had a lawful claim to international aid, to an insubordinate army, only benefited the latter. This only served to prolong the struggle, and make it bloodier. In fact, Cárdenas' administration considered that the European powers were using this principle as a mere excuse for not helping the legally constituted government of Spain. Furthermore, the communiqué stressed that in the Spanish case, the rebels received considerable support from forces alien to Spain's internal affairs. The Mexican government held that Germany and Italy had attacked Spain, a member state of the League, and that therefore the non-intervention constituted in substance an intervention by omission.

That same day, the Spanish government requested the League 's Council to deal urgently with the question of foreign intervention in its territory. Álvarez del Vayo, spoke eloquently of German and Italian flagrant involvement in the Spanish conflict. He expressed his doubts as to whether Non-Intervention enforcement would really prevent the influx of arms and agreed to a unilateral withdrawal of volunteers.

⁴³ *La nota mexicana*, AHSRE III 1510 (46) "36"/4050. March 30, 1937. For the reaction in Argentina, see also, Alberto Enríquez Perea, *Alfonso Reyes...*, op cit., p.177.

⁴⁴ AHSRE, III/510(46) 37/1 Villa Michel to SRE, London, April 13, 1937.

At the Council's session Litvinov supported the Spanish case arguing that Spain was being submitted to "aggression in its crudest form" and to "foreign invasion and violation of its territorial integrity and political independence." He pleaded with the Council to take action lest inaction created a precedent and promotion of subsequent intervention of a similar sort.⁴⁵

In his turn, Álvarez del Vayo requested the League's intervention stating that this would be "its last opportunity to intervene."⁴⁶ For all response to his pleas, the Council unanimously adopted a sterile resolution by which it expressed its hope that "all international efforts to put an end to the struggle may be successful." Its only meaningful statement on that occasion was to condemn the bombing of civilian targets.⁴⁷

The real power brokers at Geneva, Delbos and Eden, expressed their "complete confidence" that the Committee had made considerable progresses since its establishment.

Their policy both at the conference table and in the corridors was, as ever to keep the matter in a low key so as not to drive the Germans or Italy from impatience out of the Non-Intervention Committee.⁴⁸

In the meantime Britain introduced to the Committee a new plan through which it showed its intentions of acknowledging the belligerency of the rebels. After the fall of Bilbao, on June 19, 1937, the so-called Eden Plan as it was called intended to grant the status of belligerency to the rebels as the zone, now controlled by the "Nationals," produced much of iron ore that Britain imported.⁴⁹ In July, the Non-Intervention Committee endorsed a plan under which belligerency to the insurgents would have been recognised by all parties of the Pact. This proposition elicited impassioned denunciations from Ambassador Fabela. In the end, the League did not accept it as it entailed the approval of both warring factions involved in the Spanish conflict.

⁴⁵ Norman J. Padelford, *op. cit.*, p.130.

⁴⁶ *Excélsior*, May 29, 1937.

⁴⁷ Norman J. Padelford *op. cit.*, p.130.

⁴⁸ Hugh Thomas, *op. cit.*, p.563.

⁴⁹ Isidro Fabela, *Cartas al Presidente Cárdenas*. *op. cit.*, p.34

The Eighteenth General Assembly of the League of Nations convened on September 13, 1937. In its opening session Negrín who had been appointed as new Republican delegate, requested the League to examine the Spanish conflict. Somewhat ironically, Negrín conceded that the Spanish conflict being a civil war was beyond the League's concern but as a war of conquest was not. He went on arguing that:

We have always considered that the greatest risk of the Spanish Civil War becoming a European conflagration lay, and still lies, in the fact that international law instead of being applied, has been sacrificed to the demands of those who have made blackmail by war an instrument of their foreign policy.⁵⁰

Once again, Negrín demanded the demise of non-intervention to no avail. Eden claimed that non-intervention by confining the conflict within Spanish borders had prevented a European war. Spain was not re-elected member of the Council due to the lack of prevision of its own delegation and to the fact that Franco had already sent to Geneva representatives, which had lobbied among several representatives convincing them that to vote for the Republic was to vote for a communist government.⁵¹

The isolation of the Mexican delegation in that assembly was highlighted as the rest of the Spanish American nations rapidly heeded the Francoists' exhortations and deliberately ignored the defence of legality implicit in the Havana Convention of 1928.

On September 20, Fabela addressed the Council again castigating overtly the Non-Intervention Committee and its concomitant policy. Fabela denounced the violation of international treaties, which, in his view, threatened with the complete breakdown of the Covenant.

⁵⁰ Norman. J. Padelford, op. cit., p.133.

⁵¹ AHSRE, III/381 (S-N)/53. Delegación de México, Informe de la Delegación de México ante la XVIII Asamblea de la Sociedad de las Naciones. Mexico, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores.

The present moment is particularly despairing as two of the League's members China and Spain are being confronted with the horrors of violence inflicted on their soils by foreign aggression against their will.⁵²

The Mexican Delegate urged the League's members to form a united front by reminding the Council that beyond the causes that may had originated the conflict this had trespassed the borders of the merely local, acquiring international proportions.

Fabela evoked how after the world had faced the bitterness of the wars of conquest it had endowed itself with a legal instrument to banish forever the spectre of war. And how by abdicating of those founding principles, the League of Nations carried in itself the seeds of its own destruction.

Hence, the Mexican government saw no other choice but to deal with the Spanish conflict within the framework of the League of Nations "where it should have been dealt with since the start, with the utter exclusion of any other body." In other words, the Mexican government demanded the complete dissolution of the London Committee and the total, disavowal of its resolutions.

Fabela warned that if the League continued to witness passively aggression, this would revert unto the other member states:

There may not be any compromise with the principle of collective security. The larger European nations, from which the rest of Europe expects an initiative, are paying, and shall pay, dearly the failure of having let the notion of collective security vanish from the minds and hearts of free men. I earnestly dread that one day their renunciation will force them to employ, under graver conditions, the very force which to-day they have clearly feared to use.⁵³

For all his verve, Fabela's denunciations were largely unheeded by a body dominated by Britain and France.

⁵² Isidro Fabela, Discurso pronunciado en Ginebra 20 de septiembre de 1937. AHSRE III/381 (S-N)/53.

⁵³ ASHRE, exp. 111-488-2.

Fabela took the rostrum, again, on September 28. The Spanish delegate had made a clear denunciation of German and Italian intervention solidly based on incriminating evidence such as documents seized from imprisoned enemy soldiers and photographs. “Before such confirmation”, denounced Fabela, “it is no longer possible to ignore the aggression against Spain, unless we want the truth to be concealed.” That sort of offence fell under the provisos of Article 10 and its obligations. “Consequently”, added Fabela, “this war has become an illegal war.”⁵⁴ At that stage, the international press had amply acknowledged German and Italian involvement in the conflict. These countries had tried to justify their actions through the absurd expedient of presenting their soldiers as volunteers.⁵⁵

Another cardinal point of Mexican position at the League was that the ongoing conflict was not merely a civil war, but rather an international struggle, and that, in that sense, the Spanish Republic was the victim of a flagrant external aggression.⁵⁶ The Mexican delegate demanded accordingly the application of international doctrines regarding aggression as expressed in Article 10 of the Covenant. This laid upon members the duty not only to respect the territorial integrity and the political independence of member states but also to preserve them; a proviso, which according to Fabela, implied the unrestricted supply of arms to the Spanish government.⁵⁷ Thus, Mexico demanded immediate restoration of the Republic’s right to buy arms freely. When the resolution was finally voted, 32 delegates voted in favour, 4 voted against and there were 12 abstentions. Notwithstanding, as Article 5 of the League’s Covenant demanded unanimity for resolutions to be passed, the declaration was dropped.⁵⁸

This outcome caused many in Mexico to demand the immediate withdrawal from the organisation. To counter those accusations Cárdenas was forced to publish an open letter to the Mexican delegation that was published in all Mexican newspapers, defending its conduct.

⁵⁴ Isidro Fabela, *Discurso pronunciado en Ginebra*, September 20, 1937.

⁵⁵ Philip C. Jessop, “The Spanish Rebellion and International Law, in *Foreign Affairs*, January 1937. Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 260-279.

⁵⁶ Isidro Fabela, *Neutralidad*, pp. 263-264.

⁵⁷ League of Nations, *Official Journal*, Special Supplement, no.175, p.60-62.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 64-65.

Once again, Álvarez del Vayo appeared before the League's Council on May 13. He demanded reconsideration of non-intervention as it had blatantly proved its ineffectiveness. The new British Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, anxious to concentrate his efforts on the unfolding Czech crisis, swiftly reacted and pressed for a hasty vote on the question. Spain and the Soviet Union voted in favour of the resolution calling for immediate action. France, Poland and Romania voted against while the other nine states of the Council abstained. The massive increase in the number of abstentions reflected the growing suspicion over the Dictators' designs.

On September 1938, Negrín presented his plan before the Nineteenth General Assembly for the evacuation of foreign combatants from its soil. Germany had annexed days before Austria. The presence of the International Brigades in Spanish soil had been used as a pretext to question the national character of the Republican cause. Negrín asked the League to establish immediately a commission that would verify this step. In so doing he demonstrated his contempt for the non-intervention committee.

On that same occasion, the new Mexican delegate, Primo Villa Michel reiterated Mexico's stance to no avail.⁵⁹ Villa Michel urged the League Munich Treaty to enforce the withdrawal of Germans and Italians supporting Franco as a congruent response to the Republic's unilateral gesture. Once more he denounced the futility of the Non-Intervention Committee and called the League to take urgent steps to preserve Spain's legitimate government. Villa Michel also contended that collective security established by Article 16 had failed in Ethiopia, the Far East, Austria and that the time had come to rescue the principle and apply it to Spain.⁶⁰ The 19th General Assembly closed amidst growing apprehension about the imminence of a general war.

The 8th Pan-American Conference took place on December 1938. Cuba presented an initiative by which the Conference should offer its good offices as mediator in the Spanish conflict. The draft was submitted to vote being rejected by 18 votes against three. Only Mexico and Haiti supported the Cuban initiative.

⁵⁹ AHSRE, exp. III-170-33; III-491-6.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

In Mexico, Cárdenas diplomacy was highly criticised. Several voices protested against what they described as intervention in internal European affairs. Furthermore, international indifference to Mexico's approach had amply demonstrated the futility of its presence in Geneva. The Spanish case, said these critics, was alien to Mexico and Mexico should abstain from entangling 'in godforsaken affairs.'⁶¹

It seems evident that Mexican chances to go beyond the moral condemnation of the aggressors were limited, or null. However, it was in Mexican interests not to omit any opportunity to reiterate publicly its adhesion to the basic principles of its foreign policy: the peaceful solution of controversies, non-intervention in the internal affairs of another nation and, consequently, self-determination.

The validity of those principles was deemed imperative as a framework for Mexican relations with the U.S. and the European powers. In a candid defence of Mexican diplomacy, Beteta acknowledged that Mexico's stance had not kept Ethiopia from being invaded by Italy nor had it ended the Spanish War. Nonetheless it had unequivocally asserted before Great Powers the principle of absolute legality that Mexico had promoted since its independence.⁶² Apparently an ill-fated stance, Mexico's position was to be subsequently vindicated by the demise of fascism, when the U.N., under a Mexican initiative, prescribed a severance of links with Franco in 1946.⁶³

Crucially, Mexico's undeviating anti-totalitarian diplomacy contributed decisively to communicate the Roosevelt administration Mexico's dependable alignment with regards to the approaching world conflict. Following the oil expropriation, the huge increase in barter trade between Mexico and Nazi Germany, and the concomitant reduction of cash and credit commerce with the United States had raised the alarm in Washington. American anxieties over alleged Nazi machinations south of the border mounted. Carleton Beals repeatedly voiced his concerns about fascist threats to the subcontinent.⁶⁴ He was not alone in these warnings. Others, such as Herbert Southworth and former *New York Times'*

⁶¹ *Excélsior*, October 11, 1938; *El Universal*, September 27, 1938.

⁶² Ramón Beteta, "Los principios de México en su vida internacional." In Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. *Memoria September 1937-1938. Tomo I*, pp. 24-29.

⁶³ See Chapter Eight.

correspondent, Frank Kluckhohn denounced the fascist penetration of Latin America as the next foreseeable stage after Franco's destruction of the Republic.⁶⁵

Several American newspapers, mainly the Hearst press but also the *Wall Street Journal*, began to call for armed intervention in Mexico, alternately calling Cárdenas a fascist or a communist. Any governmental action that affected American interests became liable in the eyes of those newspapers of being Nazi-sponsored, or implied that Mexico was playing the German card against the U.S. Inspired, perhaps, in the antecedent of Carranza's Germano-philia and the Zimmerman telegram incident, the American press gave in to wild reports about alleged submarine bases in Campeche, aerodromes built by the Germans in the north of Mexico, or Japanese submarine bases in Baja California.⁶⁶

At first, Roosevelt's administration retaliated by suspending the silver purchases that the U.S. Treasury had been carrying out in Mexico since 1935, in what amounted to a decisive blow against the Mexican economy.⁶⁷ Notwithstanding, the State Department's concerns about Mexican national security and the possibility that instability could fulfil the direst prophecies of Fascist take-over there ultimately weighed more, and the Roosevelt government gradually took a more flexible line with regard to Mexico. American oil companies were accordingly urged to settle their grievances with the Mexican government through negotiation.⁶⁸

Roosevelt was fully aware that Mexico had initially offered its oil to the democracies. After his failed deal in Valencia, Villaseñor had travelled to Paris to offer oil surplus production to the French government already engaged in the build-up of a strategic reserve for an expected war with Germany. After an initial agreement the French government recoiled under pressure from Whitehall.⁶⁹ Then Mexico offered its oil to the Scandinavian countries. All turned down the offer,

⁶⁴ Carleton Beals, *The Coming Struggle for Latin America*. London, Jonathan Cape, 1939.

⁶⁵ Herbert Routledge Southworth, "The Spanish Phalanx and Latin America" in *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 18 no. 1 (Oct. 1939) pp. 148-152. For a British perspective on the alleged Nazi penetration of Mexico see, N.P., Macdonald, *Hitler Over Latin America*. London, Jarrolds Publishers Ltd., 1940.

⁶⁶ Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo Lázaro Cárdenas, exp. 704.1/124.

⁶⁷ Lorenzo Meyer, *México y los Estados Unidos en el conflicto petrolero*. México, El Colegio de México, 1972. pp. 374-388.

⁶⁸ David E. Cronon, *Josephus Daniels in Mexico*. Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1960. pp.200-201.

⁶⁹ Eduardo Villaseñor, op. cit., pp. 121-124.

preferring to stay away from a deal that could compromise their relation with Britain. It was only then that Mexico had been forced to accept the German proposal. And even then Cárdenas clearly stated his government's position:

We have always insisted we would always sell oil to the democracies if possible. However, if they will not buy and boycott our oil, we are forced to sell wherever possible.⁷⁰

Although the American position regarding Spain in 1936 had been equivocal, subsequent events showed Roosevelt that Spain had been the testing ground of the Axis. By 1939 the American administration had come to regret its attitude towards the Republic.⁷¹ Officials within the Roosevelt administration, such as Treasury Secretary, Henry Morgenthau and State Department Under-secretary Sumner Welles were prominent in convincing the American President about the wisdom of upholding the Good Neighbour policy and not destabilising Mexico. The American Ambassador to Mexico Josephus Daniels, played a key role in that course, warning Roosevelt that Mexico could become the "next Spain."⁷²

Daniels reminded Roosevelt the way that the Cárdenas government had been invariably in favour of the democracies, having supported the causes of Ethiopia, Czechoslovakia, Republican Spain, Austria and China, both at home and at Geneva, and had repeatedly condemned Germany, Italy, Japan and Nationalist Spain for wars of aggression. According to Daniels, by supporting Spain, Cárdenas had evinced his commitment to the Allied cause, thus disproving those voices, which had tagged his government as Communist or accused him of flirting with the Axis.⁷³ In this sense, it may be said that, in no small measure, Mexico's position before Spain afforded Cárdenas Washington's trust and support.

Mexican-German co-operation would culminate in 1939 only to stop a year later under the combined effect of the English blockade of the northern Atlantic and

⁷⁰ Frank L. Klukhohn, *op. cit.*, p.74.

⁷¹ On March 1939 Roosevelt told Claude Bowers: "We have made a mistake; you have been right all along." Shortly after, Cordell Hull wrote: "In the long history of the foreign policy of the Roosevelt administration, there has been, I think, no more cardinal error than the policy adopted during the civil war in Spain." See Dante A. Puzzo, *op.cit.*, p.162.

⁷² Josephus Daniels, *op.cit.* pp. 77-83; David E. Cronon, *op. cit.* pp. 230-234. See also Lorenzo Meyer, *Méjico y los Estados Unidos*, *op.cit.*, pp. 374-375.

increased co-operation with the United States. By the end of Cárdenas tenure, his administration's stance in the face of the approaching conflict was unmistakable. Despite the opposition of large sections of the Mexican public opinion, the Mexican government took sides with the Allies.⁷⁴ From Cárdenas' perspective, the defence of the workers and peasants, which he deemed the core of national interest, demanded the defeat of the Axis Powers. The explicit embracing of the Allied cause would still take some time to materialise. And yet, the decision to fight alongside the Allies had been taken years ago when Mexico had given its active support to the Spanish Republic.

⁷³ Friedrich E. Sculer, *op.cit.*, pp. 201 and 206.

⁷⁴ On August 26, 1939 Mexico agreed to the American proposal of activating the Inter-American Consultation Mechanism, signed at the Buenos Aires Conference of 1936, which prescribed Pan-American reciprocal defence in case of an extra-continental aggression, a thinly-disguised reference to the Totalitarian Powers. See, Lázaro Cárdenas, *Obras I. Apuntes*, *op. cit.*, p. 429.

CHAPTER SIX

DOMESTIC REPERCUSSIONS OF THE WAR

Beyond the “appropriation” that Mexican authorities and certain sections of the Mexican society, such as the intellectuals and the trade unions, made of Spanish events, the War produced unforeseen repercussions in the domestic scene, which threatened to unleash a similar standoff. Extremists of diverse hues contemplated Spanish affairs in Mexican terms while considering its developments as viable for the domestic scene. Thus while local conservatives dreamt of a Creole Franco who could restore tradition, law and order by way of a ‘crusade’ against bolshevism, Mexican radicals sought to organise armed militias and to “exacerbate the contradictions of capitalism” as preliminary steps towards the thorough establishment of socialism in Mexico.

Prior to further examination of the reactions provoked inside Mexico by the Spanish Civil War certain hard facts of the Mexican society of the 1930s need to be qualified. In 1936 Mexico had an illiteracy rate of 50%.¹ This meant that most Mexicans were not capable, let alone interested, in reading the press. The pressing urgencies of daily survival meant their requirement for information and knowledge took a second place. Hence when we refer to the Mexican public opinion we clearly mean the section of educated Mexican population that was interested in foreign affairs and was conscious of its possible impact upon Mexican events.

Having said that, it is clear that the Mexican people were largely apathetic about the Spanish Civil War. Few were interested in foreign affairs, especially in events that had little or no effect on their daily lives. Conversely, most members of the public administration, leaders of the labour unions and many intellectuals heartily supported Cárdenas stance and recognised the relationship he had drawn between events in Spain and potential national and international repercussions for Mexico.

¹ Luis González, *op. cit.*, p.116.

Yet, many Mexicans who were more directly related to Spain by reason of origin, commercial, cultural or religious exchanges sided with the insurgents. This group included most businessmen, leaders of the Catholic Church, and middle-class political moderates and conservatives who opposed Cárdenas "socialist" policies. The Spanish rebellion encouraged "reactionary" opinion to express itself more openly than it had hitherto deemed prudent.² Groups whose interests had been affected or were threatened by the socialistic policies of the Cárdenas administration began to look forward with "ill-disguised impatience" to an outbreak of active and armed opposition.³

Conversely, the most enthusiastic support for the government's policy toward Spain came from the civil service and the labour's union leadership. As a rule members of the PNR supported the government's stance with regards to the Spanish War. Unsurprisingly, most of the private funds for Republican Spain raised in Mexico were collected by the CTM. The Spanish war had thus the effect of polarising Mexican society in a way unprecedented since the end of the revolutionary armed struggle. So great the antagonism its outbreak brought about, that according to Fuentes Mares for three long years, Mexico became the "ultramarine stage of the Spanish Civil War."⁴

ARMED MILITIAS IN MEXICO

The clash between rightist and leftist forces in the Spanish war reverberated very deeply in domestic factions. *Would Mexico end as Spain?* was the most frequent asked question in the Mexican press. While the war progressed such probability began to seem conceivable as home-grown radicals from both the left and right strove to replicate the Spanish conflict in Mexico. An example of this prospect was the threat by CTM radicals to form popular militias to defend "popular conquests from the reactionary attacks" and the immediate response it generated from the Right.

² PRO Kew, FO 371 20532, Minister Rodney Gallup from British Legation in Mexico City to the Right Hon. Anthony Eden, Foreign Office, August 9, 1936.

³ PRO, Kew, FO A8119/196/26 South and Central America confidential, Murray to Eden, Mexico City, September 30, 1936.

⁴ José Fuentes Mares, *op. cit.*, p.161.

By the end of July, the Mexican section of the Spanish Popular Front was founded.⁵ On July 26, a meeting was celebrated at the Teatro Principal of Mexico City with Lombardo Toledano and Gordón Ordás taking part along with representatives of the CNT, Acción Republicana, the PSOE, the PCM and the PCE. Among other resolutions the assembly approved to convey the Spanish government and the Popular Front the solidarity of the Mexican proletariat, and to congratulate the government “for having armed the militias.” According to the assembly, the Republic, by this action: “had set an example to the world in the struggle against fascism.”⁶

The declaration alarmed the Mexican military establishment, which took immediate action to prevent any such move. At the gathering, Ramón García Urrutia, of the PCM spoke against the Spanish residents who conspired against the Republic, demanding the Mexican government to deport them under Article 33,⁷ and called for a boycott against their businesses. Moreover, he denounced the existence of a fascist group, the Falange Española de México, merged within the Spanish community and offered to make their names available to the CTM, the Senate and Chamber of Deputies.

Lombardo apologised for the tardiness of the CTM’s reaction, justifying it by the electricians’ strike. Carried away by his personal excesses, Lombardo Toledano first suggested arming the workers and forming militias to prevent a Fascist uprising and called the government to undertake such a measure. He menacingly stated that while the CTM had not tolerated the existence of the Golden Shirts, it would bear less the intrigues of Spanish rightist organisations.⁸ Lombardo agreed with Urrutia on calling for the expulsion of the rightist Spaniards and announced that the Spanish Embassy had assured him that far from resisting such action it would wholeheartedly sanction it. Gordón confirmed this view.

⁵ *El Universal*, July 30, 1936.

⁶ *Excélsior*, July 27, 1936.

⁷ “The Federal Executive shall have the exclusive power to compel any foreigner whose remaining it may deem inexpedient to abandon national territory immediately and without the necessity of previous legal action. Foreigners may not, in any way, participate in the political affairs of the country.” *Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos*.

⁸ *El Nacional*, August 3, 1936.

Following the trend already established, a week later the Mexican communists and the Frente Popular Mexicano held another rally at Zócalo Mexico City's main square. More than 4,000 people took part according to *El Nacional*, among them various unions belonging to the CTM, the FPM, bureaucrats, intellectuals and students, the PCM, PSOE and it was broadcast live by a state owned radio station. There were nine speakers, among them, two deputies, Jacinto Riva Palacio and David Arizmendi, belonging to the so-called Left Wing of the Congress.

First, to speak was José María Benítez of the FPM who announced, somewhat dramatically, that: "the fate of humankind is being decided on the fields of Spain." At that point, Miguel Velasco, a communist who held the CTM's Secretariat of Organisation seized the juncture offered by the rally to advance his interests within the syndicate and proposed that the CTM should arm militias and hit squads in all factories as to prevent any attack from the "reaction." These militias should: "choke the Fascist Golden Shirts and the Confederacy of Clase Media in their own blood."⁹ From the makeshift podium Luis Capelo, a Spanish worker, emissary of the Spanish Builders Trades Union of the UGT, broadened the proposal and blatantly tried to arouse the crowd: "those governments that proclaim themselves to be revolutionary should arm the workers." To add insult to injury, the gathering ended with the crowd chanting the Internationale.¹⁰

The situation was tense. An industrial lockout had just ended in Monterrey, while in Yucatán there was restiveness amongst the sisal plantation owners. One thing was to support the Spanish militias yet another was to arm the Mexican workers. Cárdenas' administration could hardly afford to polarise further an already strained atmosphere. The conservative press seized the opportunity to accuse the unions of attempting a communist take-over.

Thus, on August 10 *Excélsior* loudly announced to have discovered the existence of the first such militias, organised by the workers of the Government's National Print Works, the Teachers' Trade Union, the bureaucrats of the Ministry of Communication and Transport, the Communist Party and Youth, and the Mexican

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *Excélsior*, August 3, 1936.

Popular Front itself. The daily went on to describe how the workers carried machines guns, assault rifles and pistols and set guards at their premises awaiting an attack by the Golden Shirts. Although the Vice-Commander of the First Military Zone, General Othón León denied the existence of such groups and the CTM published a lukewarm denial on August 11, the conservative press carried on its denunciations.

Having been outlawed a year before, and with their leader, General Rodríguez, in exile, the Golden Shirts seemed an improbable opponent. The whole idea of a Fascist uprising appeared far-fetched, yet the Spanish war gave credence to those versions amidst a context that began to be paranoid.

Against that background, there were voices among the Right, like the influential Unión Nacional de Veteranos de la Revolución Mexicana (UNVR), which tried to stir the situation further by increasing the polarisation. Formed in 1935, the organisation had been initially devoted to secure land concessions for its members.¹¹ Soon, their staunch defence of private property and their self-avowed anti-communism put them in direct clash with the government's agrarian reform, and more specifically against the *ejido*.

This group, part of the secular radical Right, was particularly menacing for the government owing to the potential leverage it could exert over the army, to which, in fact it tried to appeal to through its condemnation of the purported armed workers' militias. As a whole, the UNVR was unambiguously pro-Franco. General Ríos Zertuche, leader of the organisation wrote to Cárdenas with an eye to the army:

The Russian paid demagogues have accused the National Army of being incapable of defending the public institutions. This intolerable offence should be dealt with, in an uttermost and drastic manner.¹²

Many Mexican army officers supported the President's Spanish policy, especially those of the middle ranks. In fact, some of the Republic's most staunch supporters belonged to the army as illustrated not only by the various Mexican soldiers who fought for the Republic, but by prominent officers who served as top

¹¹ Hugh G. Campbell, op. cit., p.60; John Sherman, op. cit., p.104.

¹² AGN, FLC 556/1, Daniel Ríos Zertuche to Cárdenas México, August 10, 1936.

officers in the Republican army and exerted their leverage in supporting it.¹³ Still, in spite of their allegiance to the Republican cause, the army as whole was appalled by the political wrangling within the Popular Army and did not want to see partisan interference recurring in Mexico. Hence, many officers became incensed by what they saw as the union leader's demagogery. As a result, they publicly voiced their discontent against the idea of organising the labour force as an alternative armed force and accused Lombardo of seeking the dissolution of the revolutionary army and its replacement by the militias.

The CTM and the Senate's Left Wing protested against the UNVR and rejected the accusations, trying to appease public opinion. On August 11 the trade union published an extensive document trying to placate public opinion and private enterprise as well as to check the unruly extremists within its realm who saw the moment ripe to advance 'their' revolution. The text denied that a general strike was about to occur. Furthermore, it stated that all strikes that had broken out aimed solely to serve the betterment of the working class. Finally it denied categorically the existence of workers' militias.

A deceitful account has been published purporting that the workers are organising militias to replace the army. The purpose of this rumour is perfectly clear: to arouse the mistrust of the army against the proletariat and to increase the public anxiety of which the conservative class is solely responsible. We deny categorically and emphatically such assertion. The Mexican Labour Confederacy has complete trust for President Cárdenas and in the high sense of duty of the National Army.¹⁴

¹³ Approximately 800 Mexicans fought for the Spanish Republic between 1936 and 1939. Most were military and trade unionists. Most fought in the Popular Army Units rather than among the International Brigades because of obvious linguistic reasons. Although there was no secrecy to their dispatch, as Mexicans enrolled in the Republican army with complete presidential approval, no official records were kept of their participation. Many Mexicans who wished to volunteer to aid the Republican army were discouraged from doing so by the high cost of transportation to Spain. See, for further reference, Carl Geiser, *Prisoners of a Good Fight. The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* Westport Conn., Lawerence Hill & Co. 1986. p.253; Andreu Castells, *Las Brigadas Internacionales* Ariel, Barcelona, 1974. p.377; Michael Alpert *El ejército Republicano en la guerra civil*. Madrid, Siglo XXI de España Editores, 1989, pp 345 and 351, and Roberto Vega González, *Cadetes Mexicanos en la Guerra de España*. México, Compañía General de Ediciones S.A. 1954.

¹⁴ *Excélsior*, August 12, 1936.

At this point it should be remembered that Cárdenas had armed the peasants in order to consolidate the agrarian reform by helping them to defend from the attacks of the former landlords and their white guards. This fact encouraged the version that workers militias were being formed under presidential patronage. As Arnaldo Córdova has stated, by way of his 'mass politics',¹⁵ Cárdenas leaned on the workers to rid himself of Calles' tutelage and to implement his radical agenda, but not to hand on power to them. In this sense, it seems highly unlikely that Cárdenas could have approved such a measure. He wanted the workers as junior partners in the support of his own policies, yet he was not prone to tolerate the workers' organisation to be too independent. This may be corroborated by the fact that the so-called Left Wing faction of the Congress led by deputies Ernesto Soto Reyes and Cándido Aguilar, which championed the arming of the workers, dissolved presumably owing to Cárdenas "recommendation."¹⁶

A potentially dangerous incident took place on November 1936 when following the early diplomatic recognition of Franco by the governments of Guatemala and El Salvador, angry mobs attacked the embassies of those countries in Mexico City and set fire to the latter. The Mexican conservative press at once accused Valencia of sending unruly elements to destabilise Mexico and unleashing in the country a "red terror" comparable to that which prevailed in Republican Spain.¹⁷ The Mexican government, in turn, announced that those responsible for the attack would be punished.

Aside from the UNVRM, the ARM, the CPRM and the CCM countless other radical rightists groups surfaced in that period. This should not, however, be taken as a proliferation of letterheads without following. Far from it, all these groups were interrelated, often through blurred links, as their covert activities demanded. All of them counted upon the financing of the great entrepreneurs and the activism of

¹⁵ See Arnaldo Córdova, *La política de masas del cardenismo*, México: Editorial Era, 1974. In a major departure from previous scholarship, Córdova first suggested that far from being a social revolution, the Mexican revolution was merely a political one with populist undertones. What emerged was a Leviathan like State capable of co-opting opponents and controlling society.

¹⁶ Raquel Sosa, *Los códigos ocultos del cardenismo*. México, UNAM/Plaza y Valdés, 1998. pp. 221-222.

¹⁷ *Últimas Noticias* November 12, 1936; ABC Sevilla, November 14, 1936.

middle class cadres to pursue their aggressive activities. Ultimately they would come pretty close from securing their objective.

THE SPANISH COMMUNITY AND THE REBELLION

The Spanish colony of Mexico constituted the largest foreign community in the country, representing nearly 35 % of the total foreign population.¹⁸ Their interests lay in diverse concerns ranging from banks, mines, movie theatres, department stores, grocery stores, mines, and textiles to the publishing domain. They exerted an influence far beyond their relatively small numbers. Most of them dwelled in Mexico City, although there were also large concentrations of Spaniards in towns such as Veracruz, Puebla, Tampico, Mérida, San Luis Potosí and Guanajuato.¹⁹ Liberal and radical Spaniards gathered in lesser social clubs such as the Orfeo Catalá.

Most of the 50,000 strong Spanish community was wealthy, deeply conservative, and at least sympathetic to Franco. A host of Fascist organisations sprung from the community such as the Asociación Española Anti-Comunista y Anti-Judía, led by the Spanish engineer Francisco Cayón y Cos.

This small organisation published a leaflet, *Vida Española* from May 1937 to April 1938, which disappeared as a result of financial problems and scarce diffusion. From its inception the AECAJ closely associated to the native right-wing organisations such as the UNVR and the CCM. Furthermore, in May 1937 Cayón y Cos wrote to Franco assuring him that the majority of the Spanish colony supported him, and explained the lack of more assistance to his cause on interference by the Cárdenas government and the Spanish Embassy.²⁰ Subsequently, in September of that year, the group dissolved in order to merge with the Mexican section of the Falange Exterior.

¹⁸ Moisés González Navarro, *Los extranjeros en México y los mexicanos en el extranjero. 1821-1970.* Vol. III. Mexico, El Colegio de México. 1994. p. 28.

¹⁹ Juan de Dios Bojórquez, *La inmigración española de México.* México 1932. pp. 1-13.

²⁰ Manuel Fernández Boyoli and Eustaquio Marrón de Angelis, *Lo que no se sabe de la rebelión cedillista.* México, Grafi-Art, 1938. annexe.

The formal founding of the foreign section of National's Spain new official party, the FET de las JONS had taken place, in April 1937. Beyond its avowed purpose of rallying towards the National cause all the communities of the Spanish emigration it also devoted itself to an intense propaganda effort on behalf of the Axis. According to FBI records, the Falange's expense on propaganda was substantial. Franco's secret service in Mexico spent 40,000 pesos (10, 000 dollars) per month.²¹

The FE published more than 15 reviews in Latin America. To attract a following among Spaniards and Hispanic Americans the Falange opened sections in most Latin American capitals. These branches organised fund-raising, raffles, dancing teas and luncheons with the money collected sent to Francoist Spain.

In Mexico, the Head of the Section was Augusto Ibáñez Serrano, a Spanish merchant who had taken the Mexican citizenship, self-proclaimed "Franco's personal representative in Mexico." Ibáñez was in fact appointed representative of the Spanish "National" State but only on January 9, 1938 and he would remain in that capacity until 1950, in spite of the continued unwillingness of Mexican governments to grant recognition to Franco throughout forty years.

The chapter assembled at the Casino Español—the community's foremost club—and represented the interests of those Spaniards in Mexico who had pledged their allegiance to the National cause through the Portuguese Embassy in Mexico City. Ibáñez had received the Spanish Embassy's archives from Pujadas shortly before he was expelled from Mexico, thus depriving Gordón Ordás of much needed contacts and information regarding the Spanish community. More importantly, Ibáñez possessed connections among top officials inside the Mexican administration, namely at the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Interior. This may explain why the Falange's undertakings were largely tolerated by the Cárdenas administration as compared to Nazi or Fascist meddling, in spite of the continuous protestations of Gordón Ordás.

Thus Ibáñez's activities in Mexico were manifold: he conducted unofficial consular duties through the Portuguese Embassy, implemented and co-ordinated

²¹ Allan Chase, *Falange. El ejército secreto del Eje en América*. La Habana, Editorial Caribe, 1944.

propagandistic activities of the Falange, served as middleman between prominent members of the Spanish community which has taken sides with the rebellion and Mexican authorities, and sent reports concerning the Mexican political situation as well as of Falangist activities in the country, both to Madrid and to the Francoist representative in Washington, Juan F. Cárdenas.

Several renowned merchants and industrialists resident in Mexico such as Adolfo Prieto, Angel Urraza and Arturo Mundet contributed with a minimum of 1000 pesos each to the cause. The Ministry of Interior estimated that forty thousand, out of forty-seven thousand individuals of Spanish origin living in Mexico, had joined the Falange. According to a U.S. military intelligence report there were 1600 militant activists among thirty thousand members.

Furthermore, Ibáñez clandestinely recruited both Spanish residents in Mexico as well as Mexicans to enrol in the Francoist army. According to some sources of the time Ibáñez enlisted more than 100 youths to serve under Franco and sent them to Spain from Veracruz aboard the German transatlantic, *Orinoco*.²² Some authors go as far as to associate him with Nazi espionage in Mexico. It is an established fact that he sustained close contacts with the German Legation in Mexico City.

The activities of the Falange in Mexico became notorious thanks to the denunciations of the American press, which by then had become concerned with Axis penetration in the Americas. A great deal of pro-Falangist demonstrations had taken place in Mexico City, often ending in violent brawls. The Spanish shopkeepers sympathetic to the rebellion started dressing their window shops with the yoke and the arrows while Francoist paraphernalia became valued mementoes among certain sections of the capital's population.²³

pp.159-160.

²² *Excélsior* November 5 and 7, 1937; *El Universal*, November 6, 1937. AMAE Legajo R996, exp. 20.

²³ Archivo General de la Nación, exp. 551/14 and Evelyn Waugh, pp.39-40.

THE CEDILLO REBELLION. A MEXICAN FRANCO?

Soon after Calles was exiled Cedillo moved to occupy a position as leader of the Right. Among other measures, Cedillo turned his fiefdom of San Luis Potosí into a safe haven for the Mexican Church for half of Mexico's priests in 1935. Consequently, the Right increasingly looked to him as its champion. Having been ousted from the cabinet, Cedillo planned to run for president as an opposition candidate in 1940, but was forced into rebellion as he watched his position consistently weakened by the Mexican government. In 1937 the War Ministry closed an aviation school set by Cedillo in San Luis Potosí and stationed federal troops there. In a last attempt to curb the General, Cárdenas appointed him to command Michoacán military zone. Cedillo deemed the assignment tantamount to political banishment and chose to revolt instead.

Cedillo had enjoyed links with the German legation in Mexico City long before his uprising began. This gave rise to all sorts of wild suggestions trying to link the rebel of San Luis Potosí to machinations of the Axis. Thus, it was suggested that Nazi Germany backed Cedillo to overthrow a Communist regime in Mexico just it was aiding Franco to sweep the 'Reds' out of power. In this plot Jorge Ubico, Guatemala's dictator would play against Mexico the same role that Salazar had played in assisting Franco, by stabbing the 'Red' from the back.²⁴

The strongest "evidence" produced to give weight to the Nazi-Cedillo conspiracy claim was the General's close relationship with Ernest von Merck, a German citizen that acted as instructor of Cedillo's private army, and who had transformed San Luis Potosí's garrison into a modern military unit.²⁵ It was also alleged that Sonora state's governor was implicated in the conspiracy, and that he received arms and funding from Japanese and German agents.²⁶

Available sources on the affair are vague, making difficult to discern actual Axis involvement from deliberately mystifying propaganda. Racist propaganda distributed by the Cedillistas, namely anti-Semitic pamphlets give some credibility to

²⁴ *La Prensa*, May 21, 1938.

²⁵ J.H. Plenn, *Mexico Marches*, p.91.

²⁶ *La Prensa*, May 19, 1938.

the claims of Nazi involvement. After all Cedillo claimed through his Manifesto to the Nation that he had risen against the “Judaic ideal”, while accusing Cárdenas of “disguising Communism under the name of Collectivism.”²⁷ Rumours were strong enough to convince the American press and congressmen of a Nazi involvement in Cedillo’s largely anticipated uprising. Congressman Jerry O’Connell predicted a “Nazi insurrection in Mexico,” and claimed to have proof of German supply of arms and ammunition to General Cedillo.²⁸

Although there may have been some German involvement in the rebellion, it would be more accurate to attribute Cedillo’s funding to the disgruntled oil companies. There was open talk of the corporation’s representatives of their willingness to pay one million dollars “or more” to whomever attempted the overthrow of Cárdenas’ government.²⁹ Cedillo himself defined the companies’ “legitimate” demands of restitution of their expropriated possessions, as one of the main aims of his uprising.³⁰

The Cedillo rebellion of 1938 actualised the fears and fantasies that the Spanish Civil War could be replayed in Mexico. When asked by reporters if the United States would remain neutral before the Mexican conflict, as they had done in Spain, Roosevelt replied that the U.S. would actively support the established Government.³¹

Cárdenas himself appeared in San Luis Potosí offering full amnesty to any Cedillista that put down its arms. Most accepted the offer. 8, 000 soldiers were shifted to San Luis Potosí, where they engaged in sporadic skirmishes against Cedillista forces. Encircled by the Federal Army, Cedillo was gunned down in an ambush on January 1939. This was to be the last important rebellion of Mexican military against the federal government. Henceforth, the Mexican army kept its loyalty to the Revolutionary State.

²⁷ *Manchester Guardian*, August 31, 1938.

²⁸ *New York Times*, January 30, 1938.

²⁹ David Cronon, *op. cit.*, pp. 210-211.

³⁰ Nathan and Sylvia Weyl, *op. cit.*, p.300.

³¹ Manuel Fernández Boyoli and Eustaquio Marrón de Angelis, *op. cit.*, p.190.

IN SEARCH OF THE MEXICAN POPULAR FRONT: THE PARTY OF THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION (PRM)

In the throes of the oil expropriation a most remarkable political development took place: the transformation of the ruling PNR into the PRM. Under the spell of the Spanish Civil War and the Blum Government in France, enthusiasm for the new popular front tactics took hold of the leadership of the Mexican labour movement.³² At its inaugural congress on February 1936, the CTM had pledged itself to work for the establishment of a Mexican Popular Front in close co-operation with the Communist party.³³ In like manner, close advisers of Cárdenas were impressed by the example of France and favoured a broad coalition of the national mass organisations in a Mexican Popular Front. Lombardo Toledano then proposed a popular front type alliance between the CTM, the government sponsored peasant confederation (CNC), the Communist party and the PNR to counter the extreme right offensive. Cárdenas himself seemed amenable to the plan. The plan however collapsed apparently because the PNR's bureaucracy sternly opposed the inclusion of the Communists.

After several failed attempts to reach a compromise, Cárdenas opted to broaden the official party instead of coalescing the existing organisations. In March 1938, the PNR was transformed into the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM). Four autonomous sectors –Labour, Peasant, Popular and Military–were fused into a single political entity. It was, as Arnaldo Córdova has pointedly stated, a defence of the Mexican Revolution following the strategy of the Popular Front. Córdova notes that the programme of these popular fronts also coincided with the revolutionary regime in that it was deemed necessary to develop the nation economically and safeguard its security from external threats before arriving to an egalitarian society.³⁴

Within the framework of domestic agitation of the Cardenista period, the war in Spain had encouraged the Mexican rightist groups who saw in the outlook of the Falangists an applicable solution to Mexico.³⁵ The hopes of Mexican conservatives

³² J.H. Plenn, *op. cit.* pp. 331-333 and Tziv Medin, *op. cit.*, pp. 116.

³³ Confederación de Trabajadores de México, *CTM, 1936-1941*, México 1941. pp.16-30.

³⁴ Arnaldo Córdova, *La política de masas del cardenismo*. *op. cit.*, p.176.

³⁵ Jorge Alberto Lozoya, *El Ejército mexicano*. El Colegio de México, 197. p.65.

rose with every victory of Franco in Spain. The appearance of the Sinarquismo in that juncture was therefore no coincidence.

Moreover, the oil companies and multinational interests that aimed at stopping Cárdenas reforms began sponsoring all those groups opposed to the Mexican government, raising further fears of a repetition of Spanish events in Mexico. In fact, despite the military reorganisation launched by Cárdenas, the oil companies were able to drive a high-ranking General, Saturnino Cedillo, to revolt against Cárdenas.

In words of Lozoya, Mexican Conservatives had seen in the Francoist uprising an “attainable and applicable solution for Mexico.” In the presence of this threat Cárdenas government faced the imperative of reorganising the national political forces by widening the popular front that the official party intended. At stake was the own survival of the regime and of the achievements of the post-revolutionary governments.³⁶ It is in this precise sense that the transformation of the PNR into the PRM in the summer of 1938 must be understood. The party’s Constituent Assembly stated in its letter of convocation the incorporation to the party of the social classes, which had been “benefited by the regime’s reforms.” To achieve this end, the party would be forthwith structured along four sectors: Labour, Peasant, Popular (state bureaucrats and middle class) and Military.³⁷

In December 18, 1937 Cárdenas announced the historical transformation. The most important innovation consisted in the incorporation of the military (and the middle class) into the party. The juncture was too critical and the government could not eschew the military. The ideological implications of enrolling the military into a political party were, however, all too controversial. Many viewed as risky the incorporation of the military due to the possible parallels it may draw with the Fascist Party in Italy.³⁸

The reorganisation of the PRM, however, meant ultimately a further reduction of the generals’ political influence and a corresponding increase of the agrarian sector and organised labour’s leverage within the regime. Since its founding by Calles in

³⁶ Jorge Alberto Lozoya, *op. cit.*, p.65.

³⁷ Partido de la Revolución Mexicana, *Pacto Constitutivo, declaración de principios, programa y estatutos*. México D.F., 1938.

1929, the official party had been an amalgam of local political machines, largely dominated by the military. With the transformation, geographic representation (i.e. regional *caudillismo*) was replaced by occupational representation. The CTM was by far the dominant force. The army now could be outvoted by the other sectors.³⁹ Moreover, Cárdenas and Defence Minister Ávila Camacho encouraged young officers to join the labour, peasant and popular sectors. Thus, any aspiring general who might wish to mutiny against the regime's radical agenda might have to face the possibility of fighting against its own subordinates and troops.⁴⁰

The fact that Cárdenas had Spain in mind when deciding the transformation of the governing party into an all-embracing Popular Front type of organisation may be inferred from his own words at a private meeting with the Republican Under-secretary of State, Juan Simeón-Vidarte:

I have studied thoroughly and with affection the Republican process in Spain and I consider that among your many and excellent successes you have committed two mistakes, at least from my perspective: first not having created a truly Republican army, purging the unreliable elements from positions of command. In Mexico we did it and to-day the Mexican army is the staunchest bulwark of the Revolution and its conquests. The Republic's peaceful and bloodless advent seemed to you, and to the world, a grand and unique historical event. We, for our part, hailed it without hesitation. Nonetheless this very fact made you overconfident. The other was to not have implemented an all-embracing agrarian reform from the Republic's initial stages. This would have given the peasant classes a vested interest that would have aided in countering the onslaught of the propertied classes. You were a few years in power, while we have been in this revolutionary process almost thirty years.⁴¹.

³⁸ Jorge Alberto Lozoya, *op. cit.*, pp.65-66.

³⁹ At the time of its establishment the PRM claimed nearly four million member, which under the new sector arrangement were divided as following: Labour Sector 1, 250, 000; Peasant Sector 2, 500, 000; Popular Sector 55,000 and Military Sector 50, 000.

⁴⁰ Edwin Lieuwen, *Mexican Militarism. The Political Rise and Fall of the Revolutionary Army. 1910-1940*. Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1968. p.126.

⁴¹ Juan Simeón-Vidarte, *Ante la tumba de Cárdenas* México, Luz Hispánica, 83, Editorial Valle de México 1971.

Cárdenas, in effect, took great care to tame the military by integrating them into the revolutionary party and by relieving suspected generals away from the command of strategic military zones. Moreover, the arming of the peasants in order to “defend the conquests of the agrarian reform”, meant that a conservative uprising backed by insurrectionary generals could now be resisted, if not quashed. The agrarian reserves became indeed a presidential counterbalance to the army.

THE FALANGE IN MEXICO

The Cedillo rebellion of May 1938 brought about renewed speculation about the activities of the Falange in Mexico, especially over Francoist support to the insurrection. These rumours also affected, bizarrely, the Spanish Embassy in Mexico as by early July 1938, *Excélsior* published an article, which tried to implicate Gordón with the sale of armament and aircraft to the General of San Luis Potosí.⁴²

In fact, the Ambassador's former pilot, Cloyd Clevenger was entangled in the Cedillo affair, charged with the clandestine purchase of military aircraft and ammunition.⁴³ The American pilot sold and delivered two Howard DGA-8 airplanes to the rebel general. As result of the transaction, Clevenger received a \$700 commission from the Howard Aircraft Company, and flew himself one of the planes from Chicago to San Luis Potosí. Clevenger found himself indicted by the U.S. for illegal export under the Neutrality Laws, along with Cedillo. Clevenger turned in and was given a suspended sentence and fined.⁴⁴ At once, Nicolás Rodríguez disappeared from his confinement in Mission, Texas. Colonel Von Merck accompanied him and it was said that both had been trying to purchase arms and planes in southern US for Cedillo.⁴⁵

Soon after the oil expropriation act and the Cedillista rebellion, a State led anti-Fascist offensive began. This took several forms as the administration took earnest measures to close ranks against the mounting menace.

⁴² *Excélsior*, July 9, 1938.

⁴³ NAUS State Department Memorandum. Conversation between Cloyd Clevenger and Gibson Washington, May 13, 1938 SD, NARA, WDC, 812.00 Revolutions 284.

⁴⁴ I owe this information to the kind advice of Gerald Howson.

These apprehensions were not far-fetched as various episodes attest. On the summer of 1938 two representatives of the Franco regime, Juan José Ruano and the Jesuit dignitary Julio Vértiz, arrived in Veracruz with the assignment of “setting the stage” for a future recognition of the Francoist regime by the Mexican authorities. Once in Mexico City Vértiz set up the Escuadra Tradicionalista, yet another agit-prop organisation bent on promoting the National cause in Mexico and furthering a likewise take-over. Coinciding with their arrival several editorials appeared in the Mexican press demanding diplomatic recognition for Spain. At that point, the famous landscapist Dr. Atl wrote an open letter to the President insisting, “The time has arrived for Mexico to recognise the vanquisher of Communism in Spain.”⁴⁶

Not surprisingly, the Mexican Right greeted the Republic’s defeat on April 1, 1939 with unconcealed enthusiasm. For many it was the first great defeat inflicted on Communism and as such the dawning of a new era in which Christianity would rule the land. The conservative press gave in to boastful proclaims. Thus, for instance, *El Universal*’s leader irrepressibly stated, “It is said and rightly so that communism has met its tomb in Madrid.”⁴⁷

Emboldened and boastful by Franco’s crushing victory, supporters of the National cause within the Spanish colony began to act more openly, indulging in a series of public acts in spite of the warnings of the Mexican Ministry of Interior. Events reached their climax, when, on the first of April a group of thugs threw stones at the Ambassador’s automobile, hurting his chauffeur and aide de camp.⁴⁸

A tumultuous gathering was summoned the next day at the Casino Español to celebrate Franco’s victory and to allow the Falangists to admonish the colony on future directives. The pretext was the so-called *Plato único*, a luncheon held weekly by the Falangists to raise funds. On Sundays the Spanish community gathered to eat a single dish to reflect the “austerity of the time.”

On that precise occasion, three thousand attended, cramming the halls of the Casino, which proved insufficient to provide room for so many people. Presiding the

⁴⁵ *New York Times*, May 26, 1938.

⁴⁶ *Excélsior*, February 6, 1939.

⁴⁷ *El Universal*, April 2, 1939.

ceremony were Augusto Ibáñez Serrano, emissary of the new Spanish State, Alejandro Villanueva Plata, visiting inspector of the Falange, and Genaro Riestra, sectional Head of the Falange in Mexico. All the directors of Spanish organisations in Mexico, such as the Orfeo Catalá, The Centro Asturiano, Círculo Vasco Español and the Casa de Galicia were also present. Conspicuously, at the table of honour were the Axis Ambassadors, Count Alberto Marchetti di Muraglio, from Italy, and Rüdt Von Collenberg, from Germany, as well as representatives of Japan and Portugal. Ibáñez sternly made clear that from then on, Spanish residents in Mexico must act in accordance to the doctrines espoused by the Caudillo:

Spain does not yearn, nor has any interest, to re-conquer by force the 20 nations over which long ago it extended its dominion. Yet indeed it wishes to recover the spiritual ascendancy over them with affection, love, good reasons, education and intelligence.⁴⁸

Then came Villanueva, who prudently warned the Spaniards in Mexico not to meddle in Mexican affairs. Furthermore, in order to comply with the new Spanish reality all centres would have to dissolve and merge into one. As in Spain only one party existed, the Movimiento Nacional, thus in Mexico only one Spanish centre should exist under the firm control of the Spanish government. In spite of Villanueva's precautions a number of Falangists disobeyed their chief's orders and went half drunk to hail Franco and shout death to Lombardo in front of the CTM building. These acts were prone to cause the wrath, not only of the Mexican Left but also of the Mexican government itself.

The Mexican government retorted firmly. On, April 3, 1939 the Ministry of Interior published a bulletin that stated that by agreement of the President of the Republic the Mexican authorities acknowledged no legal personality to the Falange. The very wording of the prohibition is revelatory of the Mexican government's heartfelt stance during the Spanish conflict, and the measure of Cárdenas' fears about the potential consequences for Mexico of a Francoist victory in the Spanish war:

⁴⁸ *El Nacional* April 2, 1939.

⁴⁹ *El Universal*, April 3, 1939.

The Falange seeks the imperial fulfilment of Spain through its expansion on Spanish America, aiming to unify her cultural, economic and political realms under her aegis, with the character of “spiritual axis” of the Hispanic world. In consequence, the Mexican government considers—without abjuring of the historic legacy of the Old Spain in the New World, or of the necessary exchange of spiritual and commercial values between nations—, it essential to its sovereignty and its democracy to educate its generations, organise its economy and constitute itself politically, free from any foreign interference or imperialist penetration.

The document also warned or threatened that:

As the members of the Falange have been operating in connection with individuals and groups that are notoriously opposed to our social reform, and as they are a fraternity that has pledged allegiance to its chiefs, the Ministry reaffirms that Mexican hospitality is conditional upon respect to our Republican institutions.⁵⁰

Thus, the statement called on foreigners to refrain from subversive activities either individually or under the cover of groups. Next, the Mexican government announced that Villanueva Plata, Riestra and Celorio had been arrested and taken to Veracruz to face deportation. The same day they were forcefully embarked in a ship that took them to the United States. This, apparently, put an end to Falangist activities, although the movement would resurface later using other, somewhat more clandestine methods, as shall be seen.

THE MEXICAN RIGHT AND FRANCO'S CRUSADE

In the eyes of the Mexican middle and upper classes the “Terror” unleashed by Spanish extremists was seen as a corroboration of their own likely fate if the PNR carried on its anti-religious and extremist course. In Mexico the attraction of Franco's movement was felt immediately among rightist circles. For Mexican Conservatives, however, Franco's coup came almost too late to reverse the social transformations

⁵⁰ *Excélsior* April 5, 1939.

spearheaded by Cárdenas' administration. Yet, at the same time, German and Italian involvement in the Spanish conflict induced many Mexican Hispanistas to believe that their struggle might be becoming part of a larger effort to "check the Red tide."

The Mexican Radical Right grew out of the religious conflict that pervaded Mexico throughout the 1920s. The enforcement of the Constitution's secular legislation led the Catholic Church to mobilise its parish against the "heretical government." Among the middle class, the formation of secret societies and pressure groups such as the *Asociación Cristiana de la Juventud Mexicana* and *Liga Nacional Defensora de la Libertad Religiosa* multiplied. At grassroots level the millenarian peasant movement known as *La Cristiada* led to a ferocious civil war waged in Central Mexico's countryside between 1926 and 1929.

However, these groups were far from homogeneous and one of its most salient features was clearly their fragmentation and their utter inability to secure enough cohesion as to become a serious threat to the revolutionary administrations. Only during the later years of Cardenismo, coinciding with the Spanish Civil war did these groups appear to be making serious breakthroughs, as shown by Sinarquismo that achieved a considerable growth following.

An organisation that became especially active during those days was the Revolutionaries Veteran Organisation (UNVR) a fiercely nationalistic group comprised of disgruntled veterans that began to play a key role in political agitation by 1937. The UNVR public pronouncements raised deep concerns in the Administration about the impact they could have on the Mexican army. Only three months after the outbreak of the Civil War, the UNVR approached the Treasury's under-secretary Eduardo Villaseñor, and asked for his support to create a Mexican fascist movement. Alluding to Spain, the group argued that only a fascist movement could prevent "Mexican Communists and foreigners from plunging Mexico in a civil war."⁵¹

The diffuse popular conservatism that had manifested in acts such as the murder and mutilation of rural teachers took shape in the Sinarquista movement

founded to preserve the faith and Hispanic tradition. Sinarquismo claimed over half a million followers at the height of its power in the early 1940s. Its spectacular growth owed much to the impact that the Spanish Civil war had had on Mexican domestic politics.

Set up in May 1937 in the central state of Guanajuato by Salvador Abascal, Manuel Zermeño and José Antonio Urquiza. Within a year Urquiza was murdered and became the official martyr of the movement. Thus by a strange coincidence Sinarquismo boasted a martyr called liked Falange's José Antonio. It has been suggested that a Nazi agent, Helmuth Oskar Schreiter, a chemical engineer who held chair as Language professor at the University of Guanajuato played a key role in its foundation.⁵²

Sinarquismo also shared several features with conservative Hispanismo, such as the staunch defence of Catholic faith, the upholding of family and tradition, and thus predictably exhibited a distinct ardour towards Franco's "crusade."

The movement's origins remain obscure. Apparently it sprang out of *La Base* a Catholic secret society aimed at penetrating all aspects of secular life, much in the fashion of the Opus Dei and in like manner structured in cells.⁵³ Sinarquistas considered Mexico to have originated in the Spanish conquest, and that consequently the Spanish heritage outweighed the Indian past. Therefore, they repudiated the very Indigenismo upheld by Cárdenas. They considered Hernán Cortés rather than Miguel Hidalgo as Mexico's authentic founding father.

Without doubt, the Sinarquistas aped the fascist ways of saluting and dressing in military fashion. However, Abascal was far from being *Der Mexikanische Führer*, as rather than the Nazis he admired and emulated the Falange, more akin to his cultural background than the remote Teutonic code of Hitler cohorts. All in all, the organisation was a combination of middle class leaders and a massive popular base of peasant followers.

⁵¹ AGN, Fondo Lázaro Cárdenas, Exp. 120/1482, Unión Nacional de Veteranos de la Revolución, "Carta a Villaseñor", September 14, 1936.

⁵² Allan Chase, op. cit., p. 172

⁵³ Hugh G .Campbell, *La derecha radical en México*, México, Sepsetentas, 276, 1976, p. 44 *passim*.

Like the Spanish Falangists whom they favoured, Sinarquista ideologues advocated a model of authoritarian corporate social organisation; unlike the Spanish Fascists, the Mexican millenarians were profoundly Catholic and sought their golden age in a pre-modern past. Concerning their connection with what many consider their natural predecessors, the Cristeros, there is still great debate over whether there existed continuity or overlap between both movements. It would be more precise to say that Cristeros resembled Carlistas. Both organisations were rurally based and upheld a fundamentalist sense of religiousness and tradition that longed for a sort of medieval corporatism.⁵⁴ Derived from Greek, Sinarquismo purported to be the antithesis to the anarchy that their creators felt was sweeping Mexico. Above all, the Sinarquista movement was an organisation devoted to promote the interests of the Catholic Church and to defend and recover the privileges it had enjoyed before secularisation.

The Nationals victory in Spain in April 1939 had great impact in the Sinarquistas growth.⁵⁵ Not surprisingly, Francoist agents took a keen interest on Sinarquismo and tried to lure it in their own interests. Despite the great numbers it secured, Sinarquismo faded away as it renounced all form of political action and later as Ávila Camacho outlawed it.⁵⁶

The extent of Axis influence on and manipulation of *Sinarquismo* to foment subversion before and during World War II will probably never be clearly known. Many of them organised themselves in agrarian colonies in, from a Second World War vantage point, strategically crucial Lower California raising the alarm of the U.S. State Department. The Mexican government, too, was firmly of the opinion that the movement constituted an Axis' "Fifth Column", and it was directly as a means of

⁵⁴ Jean Meyer, *Le Sinarquisme. Un Fascisme Mexicaine? 1937-1947*, Paris Hachette, 1977. pp.106-147.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p.114.

⁵⁶ Jean Meyer, *op. cit.*, pp.270-271.

keeping *Sinarquismo* under check that an espionage law was enacted in September 1941.⁵⁷

Discontent with Cárdenas' radical policies encouraged too the growth of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). The PAN's programme called for the establishment of a corporatist state in Mexico and advocated the unabashed promotion of the cause of Hispanidad. The new party had such strong links with the Catholic Church that the revolutionaries dismissed it as a confessional party. It has been suggested that it received a subsidy from Falange Exterior. What is true, anyhow, is the existence of close links between Gómez Morín with José María Pemán and Carlos Peroya, two of the main Falange's propagandists.⁵⁸ According to its founding father, Manuel Gómez Morín:

In 1938 an intolerable situation prevailed in Mexico: an impending threat of the loss of freedom, which made indispensable the creation of the party.⁵⁹

This "intolerable" situation was the "spread" of Marxist socialism which threatened to "take over Mexico" just as it had done in Spain before Franco "had law and order fully restored."⁶⁰

Although all radical rightist groups were deeply ultra-nationalist, anti-Marxist and anti-liberal, religion was the crucial factor that would ultimately divide them. A second variant of the radical right was the secular right. After the debacle of the Cristero movement, the Church sought reconciliation with the Mexican State. The ACJM and the LNDR were thus dissolved. A *modus vivendi* was reached, first under Rodríguez, then under Cárdenas.

The widespread use of Marxist terminology by the Cárdenas administration led many observers, local and foreign, to believe that the government was taking Mexico to communism. The urban middle classes were to drift farther and farther to the right

⁵⁷ Harold E. Davis, "Enigma of Mexican Sinarquism" *Free World* V (May 1943), 410-416; Donald J. Mabry, *Mexico's Acción Nacional: A Catholic Alternative to Revolution* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1973), pp.32-35.

⁵⁸ Allan Chase, op. cit., p.171.

⁵⁹ Soledad Loaeza, op. cit., pp. 60-62.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

during Cárdenas tenure. Alienated by the belligerent unionism of the CTM and soaring inflation they made up the nucleus of the secular radical right.

A specifically Fascist organisation Acción Revolucionaria Mexicanista, founded in 1933 as an anti-Semitic and anti-Communist paramilitary organisation under ex-Villista General Nicolás Rodríguez, reached its heyday coinciding with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Also known as *Camisas Doradas* in opposition to Garrido Canabal's *Camisas Rojas*, the Golden Shirts emerged as a consequence of the Communist growing influence under Cárdenas. Their first actions included strike breaking and random attacks against the headquarters of the Mexican Communist Party (PCM). The Golden Shirts found valuable inspiration in European fascism adopting many of its most salient features, mainly vicious anti-Semitism, anti-Communism as well as paramilitary attire and regalia.⁶¹

The ARM represented in its ideology, the extreme reaction of Mexican middle class against the ascent of the urban proletariat in the mid-thirties and the hopes of the incipient capitalist class to obtain protection from foreign competition. Predictably, the group was extremely nationalist, anti-Marxist and anti-parliamentarian. Its motto was "Mexico for the Mexicans", while they considered the middle class: 'the principal component of our nationality.'⁶²

The group represented the extreme response of the middle class to what they perceived as a scheme to implant communism in Mexico. Their continuous denunciations of an alleged Jewish-Communist conspiracy to subvert Mexican tradition and nationality are yet another feature of their fascist inclinations.⁶³ In the Mexican context, it was clearly a reaction against the social aspirations promised by the Mexican Revolution.

In their view, the emergence of labour demands in the guise of the increasing number of strikes that shook Mexico obeyed to the espousal by the Mexican government of an alien ideology: Russian communism.

⁶¹ PRO FO. 1936; 371/19793 Activities of Golden Shirts organisation A2307/196/26.

⁶² *Excélsior*, January 1, 1936.

⁶³ Cf. Juan B. Linz, Some Notes Toward a Comparative Study of Fascism in Sociological Historical Perspective. In Walter Laqueur, *Fascism A Reader's Guide*. Middlesex, Penguin, 1976. pp. 13-80.

In consequence, they demanded Cárdenas to limit stringently the number of Jews living in Mexico, to strip them of Mexican citizenship, that they were barred from political participation, and that all factories and commerce in their hands be seized and passed unto Mexican hands. The Golden Shirts soon gained increased popular support among disaffected shopkeepers and small property farmers. Rodríguez then turned his attention to big business setting briefly his headquarters in Monterrey, Mexico's chief industrial town. There he would obtain considerable funding from the business elite.

In a well-known episode, the Golden Shirts clashed with the Communist taxi-drivers' trade union on November 20, 1935 in Mexico City's main square. The scuffle left a balance of three dead and more than 50 injured, among them Rodríguez himself.⁶⁴ As a result of this clash, Cárdenas outlawed the group and Rodríguez went to exile in the U.S., whence he continued to engage in conspiracies against "Mexican bolshevism."

As with Calles, American Ambassador, Daniels helped Cárdenas to exile Rodríguez to the U.S., thus effectively removing him from Mexican politics. Nevertheless, his departure did not spell the organisation's demise. The Golden Shirts continued to harass Jews, Communists and trade unionists throughout Cárdenas' term of office. A phoney organisation, the Vanguardia Mexicana Nacional served as a cover organisation for the banned ARM, while several Golden Shirts infiltrated the UNVR.

During the early stages of the Spanish Civil war a group organised in Mexican university campuses, the Confederación de la Clase Media, an umbrella organisation headed by Gustavo Sáenz de Sicilia, was especially active at raising political alarm. The group circulated pamphlets that attacked trade unions and warned peasants about the State's intentions of becoming the new master. The CCM was successful in fund-raising among employers' organisations. It was also able to build a popular following, in spite of the continuous harassment it had to endure from the government. As early as 1936, the CCM declared its adhesion to the Francoist cause:

⁶⁴ *Excélsior*, November 21, 1935; *El Universal*, November 21 and 22, 1935.

Mexico lives difficult days, similar to those experienced by the mother country in the moments prior to the emancipating movement. Here as there, the party of demagogic aims to destroy everything that is worthy in our traditions; here as there they strive to establish a regime of barbarity. It is our wish in addressing Your Excellency that the clamour of conscious Mexico, which acclaims with jubilation the victory of Hispanidad, may be known in Spain. The liberation movement in Spain is ours in the same proportion that Spanish blood flows through our veins. We believe in the triumph of your cause, which is our cause, and we shall undertake, provided that the opportunity arrives, to follow your example, your courage and your decision in the re-conquest of the immortal fatherland.⁶⁵

The CCM, linked to the infamous leader of the Golden Shirts, Rodríguez, wrote to Francisco Franco, congratulating him on the occupation of Bilbao.⁶⁶ This support would come to its fruition after Franco's victory when the conservative students of the National University launched a pro-Axis crusade, opposing Mexico's co-operation with the Allies and demanded that Hispanidad, to link Mexico with Franco's Spain, be substituted for the Pan-Americanism in Mexico's foreign policy. Dr. Mario de la Cueva, the University's rector, who supported such programme, was quoted by the Falange Española de Mexico's official publication as saying:

The National University of Mexico, proud of its glorious past and conscious of the high mission that it fulfils as the centre of culture in the nation, is identified completely with the Spanish nations and opens its doors to Hispanidad. Everything that promotes the ideals of our race and the belief in the destiny of our nation will meet with all of the aid, the comprehension, and the good will of which we are capable. But for anything that denies or goes against Hispanidad, our doors are permanently and inexorably closed.⁶⁷

The magazine concluded its interview with the rector by saying that Dr. De la Cueva represented:

⁶⁵ Manuel Fernández Boyoli and Eustaquio Marrón de Angelis, *op. cit.*, p.212.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 221-223.

⁶⁷ *Hispanidad*, March 7, 1941.

...the cultivated and sincere youth of Mexico, which is not contaminated with the virus of Jewishness and the bastardly interests of those who are paid by Yankee imperialism.⁶⁸

To this day, the National University of Mexico unwittingly maintains the slogan 'For my Race shall the Spirit speak' as its motto; most students and professors ignore the true nature of this formula, proverbially attributed to Vasconcelos' authorship, but, indubitably, owing a great deal to Francoist propaganda.

Formed by the Spanish merchants resident in Mexico, the Falange Española Tradicionalista had the avowed aim of neutralising the consistent support given by Cárdenas to the Republicans. As mentioned before, the group was outlawed in 1939.

In November 1938 a priest in the Santo Domingo church, Mexico City, blessed a flag of the Spanish Fascist Falange, which was to be taken to Spain by a group of recruits for the Franco army.⁶⁹ The authorities discovered a widespread pro-Franco Fascist organisation in the Spanish colony with an associated youth organisation Juventud Obrera Nacional Sindicalista. Investigating these activities, the secret police stumbled in their headquarters on 120 General Prim Street, blocks away from the Ministry of the Interior. Their bank accounts showed they had contributed considerable amounts of military and monetary aid to the Francoist cause. They were expelled from Mexican territory under the provision of Article 33 of the Mexican Constitution. Among them, there was Genaro Riestra Díaz who would later serve as Military Governor of the province of Vizcaya.⁷⁰

Contrary to what has been believed, Cárdenas foreign policy received only limited approval from the Mexican common folk. Most educated Mexicans rejected it.⁷¹ Furthermore, the government loyalist sympathies angered not only the middle class and business circles, but also the devout Catholic peasantry. Thus, for instance in February 1937 rural Fascists chanting *Viva Franco!* disturbed the constitution anniversary celebrations at Bajío.⁷² Oddly enough, the Catholic hierarchy, seeking to

⁶⁸ Betty Kirk, *op. cit.*, p.145.

⁶⁹ J. H. Plenn, *Mexico Marches*, p. 210.

⁷⁰ Erik Saffer, *Un mexicano en las garras de Franco*. Mexico, Editorial Tepaliztli, 1961, pp.37-40.

⁷¹ Marcelino Domingo, *Méjico ejemplo: El mundo ante España*. Paris, 1938. p.40.

⁷² *El Nacional*, February 6, 1937.

accommodate with the Revolutionary regime refrained from taking part in these attacks against the Republic, even after receiving a letter on July 1937 from their Spanish counterparts asking them to condemn the Republican government.

The rightist opposition was counterrevolutionary in the sense that it had a restorationist agenda. Its aim was to return to a mythical golden age of authoritarianism and hierarchical class structure. In this yearning they appealed to the most backward and traditional sections of Mexican society. In truth, millions of Mexican peasants despised Cárdenas and his broader project.

Vasconcelismo marked the beginning of the Right's earnest electoral challenge to the Revolutionary regime, a challenge that resurfaced cautiously in 1934, resolutely in 1940 and continues under the influence of the PAN today. Vasconcelos' campaign attracted large segments of the Mexican Right. His failure catalysed the disillusionment of the right with electoral competition. Due to its divisions, the right had displayed a relative weakness at the 1934 contest. The Conservatives had abhorred the prospect of Cárdenas becoming even a stooge President given his antecedents of radical reform and leftist leanings. Their fears were largely justified.

Once in power, Cárdenas' incorporation of Mexico's workers and peasants into the national political system, the revival of socialist education, the implementation of large-scale land redistribution in the Laguna region and Yucatan, as well as the exaltation of Mexico's indigenous tradition in the official image of Mexican nationalism, irreconcilably antagonised the Mexican Hispanistas.

The Mexican Right was further reinforced by the dissension of former revolutionaries, which infuriated with Cárdenas radical approach rallied to the forces of opposition. In some instances the administration would be able to deactivate their potential by way of co-optation, in others with outright defamation.

On December 1938, General Pérez Treviño issued a manifesto to "the Mexican citizenry" charging that the PRM had been modelled after the Soviet Union's Communist Party, designed with the intention of subverting democracy.⁷³ In due course he called for the formation of a new party, the Partido Revolucionario Anti-

Comunista (PRAC) to prevent Mexico from falling into the “wreck of communism.” The PRAC strove to be an umbrella organisation of the right, incorporating four lesser groups into its ranks.

The most important among them were the Partido Social Demócrata Mexicano (PSDM) and the Vanguardia Mexicana Nacional (VNM). The former had been organised in mid-1937 by the editor of *El Hombre Libre*, Diego Arenas Guzmán, and after his decease had passed into the hands of Jorge Prieto Laurens. The party's programme, published in *El Universal* on August left no doubts about the organisation's ultra-rightist views. The document opened with an incendiary attack against Marxism, although it tried to disguise it under the tenets of classic liberalism. The determination to frighten further the already dismayed middle classes is evident as the text lashed on the evils of Marxism-Leninism:

A doctrine that aspires at the destruction of the bourgeoisie, as the proletariat aims to exterminate the last man, woman and child of the wretched middle class. Moreover the Communist regime aims at the destruction of the family. Communism must destroy the homestead, because as long as family ties endure it will not be able to thoroughly take over men's heart and minds.⁷⁴

It should be remembered that been the more conservative General Manuel Pérez Treviño had been Cárdenas' chief rival for the PNR's presidential nomination. Although he exerted considerable leverage inside the party structure he failed to canvass successfully among other instances of power, namely the congress, which strongly opposed his aspirations.

On March 8, 1939 General Joaquín Amaro issued a manifesto against the “communistic tendencies in the granting of communal land holdings and the false labour policy based upon demagogic.”⁷⁵ On that same occasion he declared: “we must turn our attention to our own affairs and we must cease a boastful international policy. Let us respect all the nations of the world...while working modestly ourselves upon our own real internal problems. Thus we shall earn the respect of all nations.”⁷⁶

⁷³ *Excélsior*, December 8, 1938.

⁷⁴ *El Universal*, August 24, 1937.

⁷⁵ *Excélsior*, March 8, 1939.

⁷⁶ *El Universal*, March 8, 1939.

El Nacional, the official organ of the government swiftly retorted on March 10th, reminding General Amaro of his obscure role in the political assassination of General Francisco Serrano at Huitzilac in 1929. Thereafter, Amaro plunged into obscurity

Franco's victory of and the concomitant fascist model in Spain revived Hispanista dreams in Mexico and strengthened the most organised social mass movement against Cardenismo and the post-revolutionary state. Furthermore, Franco's Spain sent secret services and agents provocateurs to destabilise Mexico. Through the Falange and with German financing, they exacerbated Mexican social tensions. Mexican conservative and Catholic circles contemplated. It was alleged that the Francoist Servicio de Inteligencia Militar (SIM) and the Falange had by 1940 14,736 agents operating on Latin America⁷⁷ and that they had penetrated the Mexican government. This would explain why they could act unhampered until Mexico's entry to the war. Allan Chase considered that Mexico had the most powerful concentration of Falangists in the Western Hemisphere. Chase reckoned that the FET de las JONS had over 50,000 active members in Mexico.⁷⁸

Only the Hitler-Stalin pact would effectively stifle what seemed the irresistible ascent of the Mexican right. It provided the Cárdenas administration with a much-needed respite. Without it, the course of the elections would have been influenced by a stronger, better-organised, foreign supported Rightist coalition.

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN MEXICO AND THE SPANISH WAR

The Spanish Civil War may have had another hitherto unconsidered repercussion for Mexican politics: the denial of the right to vote for women. There is ample evidence that Cárdenas initially favoured the idea of granting the right of women's suffrage. In his 1933 candidacy acceptance speech Cárdenas stated that women were: "beings eminently aware of human problems and sufficiently generous to seek the general

⁷⁷ Betty Kirk, op. cit., p.245

⁷⁸ Allan Chase, op. cit., p.173

interest.” However, he later qualified his remarks by stating that women’s rights would be granted gradually and over an unspecified period of time.⁷⁹

Women participated extensively in his campaign, and he complied with some of his electoral pledges by including some women in national political posts. Mexican women obtained the right to vote within the PRM and had the right to run for public office.⁸⁰ Cárdenas had espoused a movement to give them the franchise, but several left wing leaders, who pointed out that Mexican women were conservative, uneducated and superstitious, opposed this reform.⁸¹

Thus, Palma Gullén was appointed as Mexican Minister to Colombia in 1934, making her the first Latin American woman to be commissioned as female diplomat. Concurrently to these measures, incipient feminist organisations pressed to obtain women’s suffrage. By the end of August 1936 the Unión de Mujeres Americanas sent a note to the Mexican Congress demanding political rights that the Constitution prescribed for them as citizens. The Union righteously declared that:

History has shown that truly revolutionary governments have consecrated equality in their constitutions, whereas only the reactionaries and the conservative opposed women’s equality before men.⁸²

As the mid-term elections of 1937 approached, the pressure to obtain the extension of ballot to women increased. Thus, the so-called United Front for the Rights of Women through its representatives, Margarita Robles and Esther Chapa both from the Frente Único Pro Derechos de la Mujer announced its presence at the ballot boxes: “as women tend by nature to be more legalistic than men.”⁸³ For all official response the front was incorporated to the popular sector of the PRM.

Both, Robles and Chapa, had been arguing in favour of women’s civil and political rights since 1930. Paradoxically, it was the secular Right that first advanced the cause. From 1929, the Partido Nacional Antirreleccionista had debated the issue

⁷⁹ Anna Macías, *Against all Odds: The Feminist Movement in Mexico to 1940*. Westport Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1982. p.139.

⁸⁰ Nathaniel and Sylvia Weyl, op. cit., p. 353.

⁸¹ Ibid. pp.353-354.

⁸² Luis González, op. cit., p. 119.

⁸³ Ibid. pp. 120-121. Salvador Novo, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

of woman's suffrage.⁸⁴ The role of women in the Catholic Right was so pronounced that some government officials viewed them as a sort of "clerical fifth column" and the regime was clearly nervous about their national enfranchisement.⁸⁵

Ultimately, the regime's reluctance to enfranchise women had, beyond doubt, much to do with the outcome of Spanish events. The defeat of the Spanish Republic by Francoists deeply affected the mood among the revolutionary elite causing them to become extremely cautious. The Republic first introduced legislation extending electoral suffrage to women in Spain. Spanish women had voted for the first time at both the municipal and national level in 1933. It was an important novelty as not even Republican France had enacted it. The measure produced a distinct uneasiness among republican deputies of centre and left, most of which had not voted for it. Out of a total of 470 deputies only 188 voted in favour. Among those who opposed the measure stood out important personalities such as the socialist Prieto. Even some of the first women deputies in Spanish history backed the refusal to grant women the right to vote.⁸⁶

For the most part, a conservative disposition was attributed to Spanish women as they nurtured the ranks of the Catholic Right (40% of Madrid's CEDA members were women, whereas only 5% of the Radicals).⁸⁷ The Spanish Church, fighting bitterly against the anticlerical reforms of the hated Republic, openly exerted its influence over female voters who in some places marched directly from the churches to the polling booths.⁸⁸

After the Republic's demise and with the ensuing conservative shift in Mexico caused partly by Franco's victory, the participation of women in Catholic Church sponsored organisations, and their support for the campaign of conservative candidate, Juan Andreu Almazán, further convinced Mexican authorities to drop the initiative.

⁸⁴ John W. Sherman, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.44.

⁸⁶ Javier, Tussel, *Historia de España en el Siglo XX. II La crisis de los años treinta: República y Guerra Civil*. Madrid, Taurus, 2000. p.58.

⁸⁷ *ibid.* p. 59.

⁸⁸ Ward W. Morton, *Women Suffrage in Mexico*. Gainesville, Fla., The University of Florida Press, 1962. p.23.

As a matter of fact, Mexican women first voted for President in 1958, long after most of their counterparts in Latin America. Cárdenas had set a constitutional amendment through Congress in 1938 but the states failed to ratify it. Both Cárdenas and the PRM's hierarchy were well aware that a majority of women supported the opposition. Women were indispensable to the project of the Right and targets to its rhetoric on preserving home and family. To all appearances, in 1940 they would have disproportionately voted for Almazán.⁸⁹

THE MEXICAN PRESS AND THE FRANCOIST UPRISING

Cárdenas' presidential period witnessed a degree of freedom of press that had not been enjoyed since the days of the late President Madero. The fact that the majority of the newspapers were clearly aligned against his government and policies amply confirms this claim. Some of Cárdenas advisers counselled him to close the lid before the "reactionaries" could undermine the government just as they had done before with Madero, unleashing a prolonged period of bloodshed. Regardless of these overtures, Cárdenas refused to restrain even the loudest publications. This freedom gave rise to grievous excesses from the newspapers. As the Republican Ambassador to Mexico attested:

The regime that presides over the Mexican press has no paragon in the world. There is no code that regulates the press, for that reason, even the President of the Republic may be gravely libelled and insulted without any accountability.⁹⁰

The Revolution had marked a new journalistic era in Mexico. In 1914 *El Imparcial*, the leading journal of the late Porfiriato, shut down, but it was soon followed by two newspapers who sought to inherit its place: *Excélsior* and *El Universal*. Félix F. Palavicini founded *El Universal* in late 1916. *Excélsior* appeared in March of 1917 established by Rafael Alducin. *Excélsior*, "was born as an imitation of the new American press, even its format was very similar to that of the *New York*

⁸⁹ John W. Sherman, op. cit., p.137.

⁹⁰ Félix Gordón Ordás. *Mi política fuera de España*, p.739.

*Times.*⁹¹ They were certainly much removed from the polemical papers of an earlier era. Both *El Universal* and *Excélsior* were of conservative political leanings by the time of Lázaro Cárdenas' administration (1934-1940). Editorial articles and opinion columns in both were in self-restrained opposition to the issues of land reform and labour policy. Perhaps most telling as to the political persuasions of the two leading newspapers was their position on Jewish immigrants who were then seeking exile in Mexico. *Excélsior* was laden with editorials decrying the admission of "undesirables" into Mexico while *El Universal*, altogether a smaller newspaper, made comparable remarks though not with such a stridency of tone.

Lombardo Toledano accused in several occasions the mainstream papers of defending fascist interests in Mexico. With regards to *Excélsior* he wrote literally:

The Spanish war has served Mexican newspapers, especially *Excélsior*, and its evening edition, *Últimas Noticias*, to defend fascism, not there, but here, thus arousing local fascists, so that they may persevere in their defiant attitude and may secure here what they have achieved elsewhere.⁹²

A close examination of the Mexican press of the day shows that all the mainstream papers, including the former as well as *La Prensa* and *Novedades* from Mexico City and *El Dictamen* from Veracruz were overtly anti Republican and pro-Franco. Of all nation-wide newspapers, only the governmental *El Nacional* and the CTM's *El Popular* were consistently pro-Republican. Furthermore, *El Nacional* opened its pages to regular contributions by noted Republicans, and even launched a special supplement devoted entirely to Spain.

The conservative press, however, had an exceedingly larger circulation than those papers. Thus, whereas *Excélsior* and *El Universal* had an edition of 80,000 daily issues, *El Nacional* and *El Popular* could barely reach 40, 000 copies. The same was true concerning the Spanish community's publications. Whereas the far more conservative *Vida Española* and *El Diario Español* had each a circulation of

⁹¹ Yolanda Argudín, *Historia del periodismo en México desde el virreinato hasta nuestros días*. México, Panorama Editorial, 1987. p.123.

⁹² Confederación de Trabajadores de México, *CTM 1936-1941*, Talleres Tipográficos Modelo, México, D.F. 1941. p.615.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE REPUBLIC'S DOWNFALL AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

DEFEAT AND EXODUS

On September 1937, Prime Minister Negrín called Juan Simeón-Vidarte, then Under-secretary of State, to Geneva to entrust him with a delicate mission near President Cárdenas. Under the pretext of settling the transaction of the ships bought by Mexico in 1935, Simeón-Vidarte had the assignment of sounding out Cárdenas about the possibility of accepting a massive immigration of Spaniards in anticipation of a Republican defeat.¹

Negrín made no bones about the gravity of the situation: the war was almost lost and safe haven had to be secured for several people who otherwise would end up facing Franco's fire squads. Thus, the mission had to be confidential so as not to dampen the troops' morale at the front. Simeón-Vidarte left on October 1 on board the *Normandie*, where he met Gordón-Ordás who was coming back to his Embassy after having attended a series of parliamentary sessions. Simeón-Vidarte took good care of not revealing Gordón-Ordás the purpose of his journey. Once in Mexico, Simeón-Vidarte met with Cárdenas, who immediately gave his pledge to take in a massive immigration, in the "remote event of a Republic's defeat."²

In a desperate attempt to exert pressure on the democracies so that they would demand the withdrawal of German and Italian troops from Spanish soil, Negrín decided to unilaterally discharge the International Brigades and order their evacuation. On October 25, 1938, shortly after the Munich Pact had sealed the Republic's fate, Rafael Loredo Aparicio, interim chargé d'affaires of the Spanish Embassy, handed Cárdenas a message from Álvarez del Vayo requesting diplomatic

¹ Juan Simeón-Vidarte, *Todos fuimos culpables. Testimonio de un socialista español*. México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1973 p.765-768.

asylum for the “foreign volunteers repatriated from our ranks, who are original of countries to which they may not return due to their political ideas.”³ At once, Cárdenas acquiesced, and plans were devised to settle the ex-combatants in agricultural colonies in sparsely populated areas such as Baja California.

Imprudently, Lombardo made public the decision to welcome the ex-combatants triggering a hostile response from the Mexican Right. There was an immediate uproar. In a typically jingoistic response the conservative press contrasted the warm welcoming of foreign communists with the lack of attention given by the government to the migrant workers who were being expelled from the U.S.⁴

Rumours circulated that Mexico was about to receive 1, 200 brigadiers. In an unsigned editorial, *Excélsior* disparaged against: “the adventurers of various nationalities, without scruples or principles, always willing to engage in agitation and discord,” while lamenting the lot of those “thousands of Mexicans that die of starvation in the United States, which face the threat of expulsion. However, since they are not Reds, nor serve to the secret designs of communism, they may well die abroad or come here to beg.”⁵

The Mexican Right dreaded the prospect of Spanish Republicans bringing into Mexico the class struggle that had shred the Peninsula. “The Reds”, they claimed through their dailies, “have the intention of transferring into Mexico the civil war they have lost in Spain.”⁶ Furthermore, they feared that their presence might reinforce the ranks of the Mexican Left. Altogether, this segment of the Mexican society regarded the refugees as individuals without any moral quality: that is, little more than church-burners and priest and nun slayers.⁷

The arrival of the volunteers was expected to take place in Veracruz by the first week of February. The Spanish community reacted negatively too against the arrival

² *ibid.* pp.786-789.

³ Félix Gordón Ordás, *op. cit.*, p.780.

⁴ *Excélsior*, January 5, 1939.

⁵ *Excélsior*, January 17, 1939.

⁶ Inmaculada Cordero Olivera, “Exilio español e imagen de España en México.” *In Leviatán. Revista de Hechos e Ideas*. Madrid, Pablo Iglesias, Invierno de 1995 no. 62 época II ; p.125.

⁷ *Excélsior*, June 3, 1939.

of the Republican exiles.⁸ Official recognition of the plan came only on January 17, when the Interior Minister Ignacio García Téllez had a release published in all national newspapers confirming the controversial governmental decision.⁹ Protests followed and threatened to get out of hand. Tumultuous meetings took place. As a result, the scheme was called off. Cárdenas declared that the agreement to accept the Volunteers had been cancelled by the abrupt fall of Barcelona and not because of “the pressure of the street.”¹⁰

As early as 1938 Cárdenas had transmitted the Republican authorities through Tejeda his willingness to welcome 60,000 refugees. Cárdenas asked his overture not be made public until it was strictly necessary so Republican morale would not be weakened under the ongoing struggle.¹¹ Bassols, who before being appointed as Mexican Minister in France had been actively working in Spain for the Negrín government, had amply informed Cárdenas of the predicament faced by the Republicans.

By February 9, the Francoists held the entirety of Catalonia. In Southern France, nearly half a million Spaniards crammed in a series of concentration camps set by the French government. Isidro Fabela continuously briefed the Mexican President over the situation experienced by the refugees.

Bassols was entrusted with the task of lending the necessary assistance to offer asylum to all Spaniards who wished to immigrate to Mexico.¹² This infuriated further the Mexican Right who saw its archenemy in charge of bringing the unwelcome “Reds” into Mexico. The Mexican Minister in France announced that Mexico would accept an unlimited number of refugees provided that the Republican authorities could pay their transportation and placement in Mexico. At this stage Cárdenas had clearly taken sides with Negrín’s position of “resistance at all costs.” Furthermore, Fabela warned Cárdenas on February 23 that recognition by France and Britain of

⁸ Mauricio Fresco, *La emigración republicana española: una victoria de México*. México, Editores Asociados, 1950. p. 29.

⁹ *El Universal*, January 18, 1939; *El Nacional*, same date.

¹⁰ *El Nacional*, January 31, 1939.

¹¹ Marcelino Domingo, *El mundo ante España* p.254.

¹² *Excélsior*, February 1, 1939.

Franco might impede the Republican government from paying the transportation of the refugees to Mexico.¹³

On early February the Republican Cortes met for the last time on Spanish territory at Figueras castle in order to analyse their precarious position and to layout the immediate strategy to be followed. Following the meeting, Azaña, Martínez Barrio and several other government officials crossed the border into France. Britain and France officially recognised Nationalist Spain on February 27.

Azaña's resignation as President of the Republic, on February 28, had puzzling legal implications for the Mexican government, which insisted on recognising a regime that appeared to possess no longer any legitimacy, let alone to exist. Nonetheless, the Mexican Chancellery announced in an unprecedented move that it would maintain a representative in Spain as long as "the representative authorities of the Republic existed." As the Loyalist forces lost ground, the Mexican Ambassador followed the Republican government in its retreat through various towns and villages.

At some point between March 8 and 10 of 1939 Tejeda left Spain accompanied by his family, bringing with himself the Embassy's archives. Shortly before, he accorded the Embassy's personnel with due immunities.¹⁴ The very 28 of March, Mexico City learnt through a special edition of *Últimas Noticias* of the fall of Madrid. That same day, the Spanish community began a series of boisterous celebrations. On April 1, all members of the Spanish Embassy in Mexico asked for political asylum, which was at once granted by the Mexican government.¹⁵

Even now, the leaders of the exiled Republic were quarrelling fiercely among themselves, blaming each other for their debacle. A meeting of the permanent Committee of the Cortes in Paris ended amidst mutual recriminations.¹⁶ Sharply divided among themselves, Republican factions exacerbated their differences in exile and took them into Mexico. Fuelled by these disagreements, the co-ordination of efforts to set up a body to aid and canalise the flow of immigrants proved impossible.

¹³ Isidro Fabela, *Cartas al Presidente Cárdenas*, op. cit., p.127.

¹⁴ "Acta de Entrega de la Embajada en España", AHSRE, III-166-21 Clas. III / 101.5 (46-0)/10114.

¹⁵ *Excélsior*, April 3, 1939.

The estranged leaders Indalecio Prieto and Juan Negrín set up their own organisations to provide relief to the refugees, each one claiming for itself the sole legitimacy. Although Negrín had under his charge the funds of the vanquished Republic, Prieto managed to establish a financial autonomy owing to his skilful manoeuvring in the *Vita* affair.

On the verge of the Republic's collapse, Negrín decided to export a part of the Spanish treasure in order to save it from falling into the hands of the Nationalists, and to finance the eventual transportation and settlement of Spanish refugees in case of a defeat. Cárdenas secretly agreed to keep in custody the cargo until Negrín or his appointees could collect it. By the end of March, a recreational yacht, the *Vita*, "mysteriously" arrived to Veracruz amidst the most complete official silence.¹⁷ Later it would be known that it had arrived packed with precious stones and other valuables, mainly confiscations from Nationalist sympathisers at the start of the Civil War.

Without further explanation it proceeded to Tampico. Presidential envoy, General José Manuel Núñez, welcomed a number of Basque officials who had come with the ship. Utter reserve surrounded the entire operation. An armoured car left for Mexico City, replete with enormous cases that contained gold bars "for an approximate value of \$14,000,000 and public papers."¹⁸ The sailboat had been loaded in the French port of Le Havre with over 100 suitcases as well as with an undetermined amount of boxes which contained jewels, masterpieces, gold bars and coins valued in over 50 million dollars.¹⁹

Negrín had entrusted former President of the University of Valencia, Dr. José Puche with the custody of the treasure. Puche, however, never turned up. Faced with uncertainty, the *Vita*'s commander, Captain José Ordorika, and the treasure's custodian, Enrique Puente, decided to proceed to Mexico City, in order to hand on the valuables to the Mexican authorities.

¹⁶ Hugh Thomas, *op cit.*, p.757.

¹⁷ Although both the craft's registry as well as the crew were ostensibly Spanish, it flew an American flag. See *Excélsior*, March 31, 1939.

¹⁸ *Excélsior*, April 1, 1939.

¹⁹ Salvador de Madariaga, *España. Ensayo de historia contemporánea*. Buenos Aires, Editorial Sudamericana, 1950. p.589.

Prieto had been touring Latin America after his official visit as guest of honour to the new President of Chile's inauguration.²⁰ Somehow Prieto managed to persuade Cárdenas that he had a claim to the treasure. How was Prieto warned about the presence of the *Vita* in Veracruz and what took Cárdenas to hand the valuables to a man he knew was an irreconcilable rival of the Spanish Prime Minister are questions that have been a matter of endless speculation over the years. Be that as it may, Prieto's impoundment of the treasure had the effect of aggravating the already sharp divisions among the Republican exile, giving rise to bitter controversies for many years to come.

With the money thus obtained, Prieto established a committee known as the Junta de Auxilio a los Republicanos Españoles (JARE).²¹ By the end of March, Negrín had set in his turn the Servicio de Emigración para los Republicanos Españoles (SERE),²² to co-ordinate the emigration to Mexico with Bassols' assistance.

On April 17, 1939 Gordón Ordás quit as Ambassador following Azaña's resignation. He left First Secretary, José Loredo Aparicio, as chargé d'affaires. The Cuban Embassy in Mexico took over the Spanish interests issuing passports for those Spaniards residing in Mexico as well as performing consular duties. On April 12, 1939 the Foreign Ministry rejected reports that Mexico planned to establish diplomatic relations with Franco.²³ Moreover, the Mexican government suspended all commercial contacts with Spain. Imports of wine, olive oil and cigarette paper from Spain were banned, as were exports of chickpea, oil and other commodities.²⁴ The controversy arose as whether the withholding of recognition was in accord to the spirit of the Estrada Doctrine. It is clear that Cárdenas' commitment to the Republic had by this stage surpassed even legal and doctrinal considerations.

On April 22, the French transatlantic *Flandres* arrived with the first wave of refugees who were greeted with an official ceremony of reception. Among them

²⁰ *El Nacional*, February 19, 1939.

²¹ Patricia Fagen, op. cit., pp. 37-38.

²² *ibid*, pp. 38-41.

²³ *El Nacional*, April 12, 1939.

²⁴ Félix F. Palavicini, ed., *México: historia de su evolución constructiva* México, Distribuidora Editorial Libro S. de R.L., 1945, Vol. IV, p. 265.

stood out General Sebastián Pozas and his family, and Fernando Dicenta, former captain of the *Motomar*.²⁵ Two days later, the steamship *Orizaba* arrived in Veracruz bringing General Miaja, who was welcomed as a hero of epic proportions.²⁶

Back in France, Negrín and Bassols engaged themselves with the task of organising the exodus of refugees from France. In order to monitor the Spanish multitude that had taken refuge in France a list was compiled and contingents assembled for emigration to Mexico.

The major problem faced by Mexican officials in complying with Cárdenas wishes was, no doubt, lack of transportation. Mexico had no significant fleet and could hardly bear by itself the financial burden of chartering vessels from third countries. In June 1939, acting on instructions from his government, Bassols approached American Ambassador in France, William C. Bullitt, requesting that American ships be made available to transport Spanish refugees to Mexico. The American government refused apparently because it did not want Spanish Republicans in Mexico since it considered them to be Communists.²⁷ Providentially, aid was forthcoming from various relief organisations operating with private funds, such as the British Committee for Refugees from Spain.

The first and most celebrated expedition was that of the *SS Sinaia*. A French vessel, whose usual route was to take pilgrims to Mecca, the *Sinaia* was chartered by the SERE. It could hold about 2,000 passengers. The Duchess of Atholl, Wilfred Roberts MP, and the Mexican Ambassador, Tejeda, who was going to travel with the refugees, made farewell speeches. Government figures accompanied Negrín. The *Sinaia* arrived in Veracruz in June 1939 carrying some 1,800 refugees.²⁸

Two luxury liners moored in Veracruz harbour were conditioned to lodge the Spanish children. A large warehouse was cleared and fitted up with beds and showers for the arriving men and women. Different agencies and personalities assisted in providing food, clothing and lodging to the newcomers. An inter-ministerial commission was set up in May 1939, to co-ordinate all activities of the Mexican government in matters relating to the Spanish exiles, such as reception, settlement

²⁵ *Excélsior*, April 22, 1939.

²⁶ *El Nacional*, May 26, 1939; *Excélsior*, same date.

²⁷ Lois E. Smith, *Mexico and the Spanish Republicans*. p. 237.

and integration. This body was composed of Minister of the Interior García Téllez, Minister of Agriculture, José G. Parrés, Minister of Economy Efraín Buenrostro and Minister of National Defence Manuel Ávila Camacho.²⁹ Each of these ministries contributed toward getting the refugees established.

Of all Mexican non-governmental organisations engaged in behalf of the refugees, the CTM was undoubtedly the most prominent. The trade union organised committees to aid in the landing of the exiles, their immediate care, and their access to the labour market.³⁰ Moreover, the Confederacy gave assistance in the form of subsidies, direct provision of material necessities and placement in remunerative activities. Both the PRM and the PCM were also active in the pro-refugee campaign, undertaking programmes of their own for direct aid to the Spaniards.³¹

Contemporary observers could not fail to remark the stark contrast between the warm reception offered to the Spaniards and the cold shoulder afforded to the Jews. There were only about 18, 000 Jews in Mexico, 8,000 of which resided in Mexico City, a capital, then of a million and a quarter inhabitants. Most of these Jews had come to Mexico on the invitation of former strongman Calles. The CCM had set off a vicious anti-Semitic campaign since 1937, denouncing that the government immigration quotas for 1938 for countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia would encourage "a new wave of Jewish immigration."³² When anti-Jewish riots took place in Mexico City early in 1939, promoted by those same ultra-right wing organisations, the government reacted swiftly defending the Jewish community and having the perpetrators arrested. However, on May 24 the Ministry of the Interior acknowledged through a press bulletin that as a compensation for the welcome of Spaniards the doors of Mexico had been closed to 200,000 Jewish applicants for immigration.³³

Certain legal obstacles had to be removed so the refugees could take certain jobs in Mexico. In the concrete case of doctors there was staunch opposition from the Surgeons' Trade Union of Mexico City, which objected that their Spanish peers be allowed to work in large towns, and accused them of "disloyal competition," because

²⁸ *El Nacional*, June 14, 1939.

²⁹ *El Nacional*, May 24, 1939.

³⁰ *Ibid*, June 4, 1939.

³¹ *Excélsior*, July 9 and 26, 1939.

³² *New York Times*, December 2, 1937.

³³ *Excélsior*, May 24, 1939.

some, they alleged, charged extraordinary fees.³⁴ Others, like Salvador Novo, initially criticised the faculty of the Casa de España on account of their high wages and for its purported meddling in Mexican politics.³⁵

Cárdenas' decision to welcome the Spanish exiles was far from popular. The Mexican conservative press and its patrons were openly opposed to the perspective of thousands of anti-clerical leftists setting in the country. Such consistent propaganda had the effect of arousing the wrath of sectors of public opinion otherwise indifferent to the Republicans. Thus, even moderate liberals within the administration dreaded the prospect of unruly extremists, who had won the upper hand in the Republican zone, coming into Mexico and strengthening the position of domestic radicals. Those same extremists who had snatched the supremacy of the ill-fated Republic away from its founding fathers could well, once in Mexico, expect to do the same.

In particular, they feared, rightly, the fact that Bassols, a well-known radical, had been chosen to select those exiles that would be admitted into national territory. As it would turn out, Bassols would indeed favour the entry of leftists above anybody else.³⁶ Other critics dreaded the possibility of the Spanish Civil War being waged from Mexican soil, putting Mexico in an awkward international position. Last but not least, there was the concern that Spaniards would compete with Mexicans in an already sagging labour market. Although the trade union's leadership was solidly pro-Republican the rank and file were not easily convinced that the Spanish "brothers" would not pose a threat to their jobs. Such was the workers' hostility to the scheme that the CTM felt impelled to organise special meetings to dispel such fears and ease the fears of its followers.

Among the peasants, hostility against the Spanish inflow was even more marked than among city dwellers. The fact that the Mexican government had insisted in bringing into Mexico qualified farmers and land labourers in order to develop the

³⁴ *Excélsior*, April 3, 1939. p. 3.

³⁵ Moises González Navarro, op. cit., pp. 164-165.

³⁶ Several refugees accused Bassols and Fernando Gamboa of being Communist agents, with a strong bias against CNT, POUM and PSOE affiliates. It was claimed that many applications for emigration to Mexico were refused by these Mexican officials to outspoken adversaries of Negrín and the PCE. While conceding that some of these charges might have been genuine, it is equally true that Mexico gave asylum to refugees from all sections of the ideological divide. See, Patricia Fagen, op. cit., pp.38-39.

backward agriculture of the nation arose predictably the opposition of the peasants' organisations, who feared that the land that had been granted to them would be taken away on behalf of the newcomers. Thus accordingly, there were riots in Jalisco, Mexico and Veracruz where it was expected that the larger concentrations of Spaniards would settle.³⁷ Furthermore, there is evidence that Sinarquista elements, directly influenced by Falangist propaganda were stirring peasants against the Spaniards in the belief that their opposition to the outsiders was a sign of resistance against the Communists and American influx, which in their oversimplification were one and the same. Thus, Whetten informs us that to the most backward Mexican peasants:

To defend Spain and to defend Mexico is to fight against the degrading influence of both the Anglo-Saxon and the Communist.³⁸

Franco's victory and the growing prestige derived from it had an immediate echo upon the most traditional sectors of Mexican society which saw in him the bulwark not only against the impending communist menace but also against the apparently irresistible Anglo-Saxon influence coming from the North.

Finally, there existed the historical antipathy against the Spaniard bred during the struggle for independence, and developed in the turbulent days of the Mexican Revolution. As we have seen, most Mexicans knew little else from Spain beyond the simplistic stereotypes they had learnt at school. Mexican pedagogues formed pupils under the influence of the so-called "revolutionary nationalism", believing that the best way to instil a sense of national unity was to create a separate Mexican identity. In that direction they took good advantage of the Spanish 'black legend' coined by the English to portray the Spaniards as bloodthirsty parasites driven solely by greed. Furthermore, the Mexican lower classes knew only the economic immigrant, typically a fortune-seeker that rarely mixed with the locals and who was prone to exploit them.

³⁷ *Excélsior*, May 23, 1939. See also Alfonso Taracena, *La revolución desvirtuada*, México, Costa-Amic, 1967. pp.85, 94 and 160.

³⁸ Nathan L. Whetten, *Rural Mexico*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1948. p.496.

At his state of the nation address of 1939, Cárdenas justified his decision to bring in the Spanish exiles, both on altruistic and pragmatic considerations. The emphasis was placed on the economic benefits that the emigration would report to Mexico. Mexico would receive men of great skills and energy that would greatly contribute to the nation's development. He elaborated on the advantages that Mexico would obtain from inviting the refugees:

There is something more: the mixture of bloods. The Spanish root has created our nationality. We descend from Spain. From Spain come our towns; from Spain is our language; from Spain has come the religion that has bind our people together.³⁹

Cárdenas deplored the political usage of the Spanish immigration by the rightist opposition against the government. Still, the President avowed his belief that once the electoral agitation faded their contribution to Mexico would be duly appreciated: 'As their blood and spirit blended together with the Indian root have decisively contributed to the formation of our nationality.'⁴⁰ This last statement made plain one of the main aims pursued by the administration in bringing a sizeable Spanish immigration:

The affinity of the Spanish people will allow their fusion with our autochthonous peoples, thus fortifying our own nationality.⁴¹

During the following months the number of Spanish refugees welcomed in Mexico increased with the expeditions of other ships. Thus the *Ipanema* arrived in Veracruz on July 7 with 994 refugees, the *Mexique* on July 27 with 2091 and the *De Grasse* with 206 to New York who then made the journey by train to Mexico City, bringing altogether around 5, 000 passengers.⁴² Thousands more arrived paying for their transportation as they could. All four ships had been leased by the SERE. By early 1940 the SERE declared that its funds had been exhausted, so the JARE took

³⁹ *El Nacional*, September 2, 1939.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ It must be stressed that in 1939 Mexico exhibited a manifest demographic deficit. In that sense, Spanish migration could also serve to "replenish the exhausted sources of the Mexican nationality." See, Secretaría de Gobernación, *Manual del Extranjero*, México 1939. pp. 190-192 and Gilberto Loyo, *La política demográfica de México*. México, Talleres Tipográficos de S. Turanza del Valle, 1935.

⁴² *Excélsior*, July 9, August 3, 1939 and January 10, 1940.

over the task of transporting more refugees to safe haven in Mexico. In 1941, under the ever more precarious conditions of an occupied France, the JARE managed to organise three more expeditions, those of the *Saint Dominique*, the *Quanza*, the *Nyassa* and the *Serpa Pinto*.⁴³

There is no precise data informing about the total number of Spanish refugees that ultimately arrived to Mexico. The Mexican Office of Statistics computed less than 15,000,⁴⁴ while Mexican Consul in Marseille, Mauricio Fresco, estimated a bit over 16,000.⁴⁵ Registers made by the JARE and SERE seem to be imprecise, and anyhow several refugees arrived through their own means.

The widespread opposition to the coming of the refugees waned over the ensuing months and even Mexican conservatives began to perceive the migratory flux as beneficial to the nation. This new attitude was visible in the leaders of *El Universal* and *Excélsior*, which increasingly lauded the virtues of professors and intellectuals.⁴⁶ Ultimately, the lack of sufficient transportation would prove an insurmountable obstacle for Cárdenas to bring a larger number of exiles to Mexico, as he avowed to Álvarez del Vayo:

Had I had the ships I would have brought to Mexico all the Spaniards lost in the French concentration camps.⁴⁷

CHANGE OF COURSE. FRANCO'S VICTORY AND THE DECLINE OF CARDENISMO

American concern over Axis plots in Mexico increased in 1939 with the defeat of the Spanish Republic. New alarming publications denouncing real or purported fascist inroads in Mexico mushroomed every day. Among them stood out Frank Klukhohn's sensationalist *The Mexican Challenge* that denounced Japanese spies working in Mexico, German influence on domestic policies, and predicted Mexico's fall into the Axis orbit. These rumours paradoxically afforded the Mexican government with the

⁴³ Altogether 1,618 refugees arrived in those four vessels. See, *El Universal*, April 3, October 2 and 15 and December 18, 1941 and Félix Palavicini, op.cit., p.276.

⁴⁴ Félix Palavicini, op. cit., p. 223.

⁴⁵ Mauricio Fresco, op.cit., p. 112.

⁴⁶ Ricardo Pérez Monfort, op. cit., p.125.

opportunity of discrediting the Right further and securing American official support to confront its menace.

That same year witnessed a remarkable growth, without precedent, of opposition to the Mexican government. Widespread animosity against the Cárdenas administration, apparent since 1935, reached new heights at the close of his period. Public enthusiasm with the oil expropriation swiftly faded as inflation and recession fuelled popular discontent to the Right's apparent advantage. As a consequence of the oil expropriation Mexico's fiscal stability was destroyed: the Mexican peso fell from 3.60 to the dollar to 5 to 1.⁴⁸ Wage increases were largely eliminated; retail prices soared 38 %, with food costs spiralling by 40% between 1936 and 1940, arousing discontent among the working and middle classes alike.⁴⁹

Other events, this time from the opposite side of the political spectre, had an equal bearing on Cárdenas increasing moderation as a way of safeguarding the existing conquests of the Mexican Revolution. The proclamation of the Hitler-Stalin pact on August 23, 1939 had ruinous consequences for Mexico's leftist groups. The majority of the PCM bureaucracy subserviently adhered to the Comintern's official line, specifically, to the argument that the Iron Pact was essential to keep the USSR out of a war between conflicting imperialisms. Many party followers felt betrayed in their previous devoted struggle against fascism and left in droves the PCM.

Furthermore, the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1939 had the effect of alienating other leftists who viewed the conflict as an imperialistic attack of a powerful country on a weak neighbour. The parallelism with Mexico and the United States was too obvious to pass unnoticed. Cárdenas' strong condemnation of the Soviet attack on Finland in the League of Nations initiated the rupture of the President with his former allies.

Internationally, the move had other implications. Cárdenas' stance revealed to the Americans and the British, how far from being the Bolshevik of their clichés

⁴⁷ Julio Álvarez del Vayo, *Give Me Combat*, p.214.

⁴⁸ Frank L. Kluckhohn, *op. cit.*, p.228.

⁴⁹ Luis González, *op. cit.*, p.168.

Cárdenas was independent and therefore could be a reliable pro-Allied leader.⁵⁰ Notwithstanding, when other governments attempted to, and succeeded in, exploiting the incident as a pretext to expel the Soviet Union from the League of Nations, Mexico sternly opposed them. The Mexican delegate, Primo Villa Michel pointed out that this was sheer hypocrisy in view of the fact that those same countries, which had passively accepted the invasions of Abyssinia, Spain, Austria and Czechoslovakia, now cried foul in the face of Soviet aggression.⁵¹

After the Soviet-Nazi entente became effective, even the Communists among the refugees from Loyalist Spain were suspected of establishing liaisons with Hitler's agents. Diego Rivera denounced this apparent co-ordination between former adversaries dubbing them as "commu-nazis."⁵² It is difficult to determine the veracity of such allegations. Communists all over the world did indeed return to pre-Popular Front tactics of attacking bourgeois parties and governments and to minimising the Fascist threat. In the Mexican case, however, no sound evidence exists of collaboration between Spanish Communists and domestic pro-Fascist forces. What may be demonstrable beyond dispute is the leading role of Spanish Communists in the purging of the PCM executive, as well as in the planning and execution of Trotsky's murder.

On December 1939, the Comintern sent a delegation to Mexico entrusted with the task of purging the PCM. An extraordinary congress of the PCM was convened. Vittorio Codovilla and the ill-famed Vittorio Vidali, a.k.a. Commander Carlos were among the delegates sent to Mexico. An unidentified *apparatchik* under the assumed name of 'Comrade Pérez' swiftly pointed to the Trotsky question and the "unsatisfactory" manner in which the PCM had handled it. To this 'Pérez' added the offer of sending comrades trained in Spain to help 'purge' the party. Barry Carr has suggested that Pérez may well have been Codovilla.⁵³ A purge took place on March 1940 by which Valentín Campa and Hernán Laborde were suspended from their posts of secretary-general and head of the political bureau, as they had vigorously

⁵⁰ See, for instance, William O. Scroggs, "Mexican Anxieties" in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 18, no. 2 January 1940. p.272.

⁵¹ Isidro Fabela, *Neutralidad* Biblioteca de Estudios Internacionales, México, 1940. p.273.

⁵² Betty Kirk, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

opposed the elimination of the Old Bolshevik. Moreover, Campa and Laborde were accused of following an “opportunist-sectarian” line because of their “submission” to the new governmental policy of national unity with their slogan of “unity at all costs.”

Hardly had the PCM been purged when the GPU agents prepared to set the stage for the elimination of the former Soviet leader. On May 24, 1940 came the first failed attempt against the life of Trotsky. The attackers had shouted *Viva Almazán!* The PCM immediately seized the alibi provided by the use of police and military uniforms by the attackers and the absurd cry of support for Almazán to blame the foreign oil companies, the reaction and imperialism.⁵⁴

The extreme right also used the attack and the ensuing scandal. A telegram sent by the UNVR to the President dated by the end of May purported that the attack corroborated the existence of foreign elements that “blatantly attempt to meddle in the internal affairs of the Mexican people.” Another right-wing organisation demanded the expulsion of foreigners that “have maliciously intervened in political affairs of the nation.”⁵⁵

By June 18, thirty people were behind bars in connection with the attempted murder of Trotsky. Mexico City’s Chief of Police, General Núñez, openly incriminated the PCM and the GPU. Noteworthy among those involved in it were Néstor Sánchez Hernández, a “student” and ex-combatant in Spain, David Serrano Andónegui (member of the Political Bureau), Antonio Pujol and a Communist from the Canary Islands, Rosendo Gómez Lorenzo. Their testimonies led to the pursuit and capture of yet another Spanish War veteran, Siqueiros. Mexican public opinion was shocked to learn that one of its greatest artists with world renown, locally held in high esteem, had been a GPU agent since 1928. Despite the overwhelming evidence,

⁵³ Barry Carr, *Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1992, p.299.

⁵⁴ According to the PCM, these forces aimed to create an environment conducive to reprisals and attacks against working class organisations in general, and mexican Communists in particular. For a complete chronicle of the attempt against Trotsky’s life see, *El Universal*, May 26, 1940. For the PCM’s conspiratorial version see *El Popular*, May 27-31, 1940.

⁵⁵ Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo Lázaro Cárdenas del Río, expediente “Trotsky”.

the revamped organ of the PCM, *El Popular* went on to denounce the “monstrous provocation” of which the party had been victim.⁵⁶

On June 26, Trotsky prompted the judge who was following the cause, to summon Narciso Bassols to testify. According to Trotsky, Bassols, in his capacity as Mexican Ambassador to Paris, had to know which Spaniards would be allowed to take refuge in Mexico. Thus, he could have not suffered pressures and may even have acquired commitments with people that sought to infiltrate Mexico with GPU agents.⁵⁷

Bassols replied at once to the imputations levelled against him by Trotsky of being the “intellectual author” of his attempted assassination. He accused Trotsky of slander, and even threatened to file a suit against him. Furthermore, as a respected member of the revolutionary establishment Bassols swiftly moved his connections with top officials to confront Trotsky. Cárdenas sided this time with Trotsky, provoking an outrage. The PCM publicly distanced itself from Siqueiros and Pujol declaring that they had never been members of the party. Despite this denial the action marked the decline of the PCM.

The CTM issued a strong condemnation against the murder in an attempt to elude unscathed the political fallout generated by the crime. A skilful power broker, Lombardo was briefly able to disentangle himself from the failed attempt and, apparently, to consolidate his new alliance with the PRM’s candidate, Ávila Camacho. However, by late 1938 Lombardo came under a sustained attack from the Right, rapidly falling from grace with the official nominee and his entourage.

At this stage, the GPU had a string of agents operating in Mexico. Several of them had been in Spain during the war. Among the most conspicuous should be noted: Codovilla, Vidali, Tina Modotti, and Caridad Mercader del Río, an old militant of PSUC, who had first visited Mexico with an arms purchasing commission.

⁵⁶ *El Popular*, June 20, 1940.

⁵⁷ Olivia Gall, *Trotsky en México y la vida política en el periodo de Cárdenas 1937-1940*. México, Editorial Era, p.317.

Her son Ramón Mercader del Río, member of the Spanish Communist Youth, fought in the Aragón front and in 1937 was destined to counter-espionage and sabotage duties behind enemy lines directed by Kotov.⁵⁸ It was precisely Kotov who, after becoming the lover of Caridad Mercader, picked her son Ramón as a useful agent, and to use him later to murder Trotsky. Mercader left Spain mysteriously. In June 1938 he was in Paris with a Belgian passport under the name of Jacques Mornard. He had entered with an American passport furnished by the GPU from some fallen American member of the International Brigades. Mercader got into Mexico through Laredo on October 12, 1939. He took advantage of his amorous liaison with Sylvia Ageloff, a member of Trotsky's entourage. On August 20, 1940 Mercader murdered Trotsky. Nine days later, Cárdenas issued a 'Message to the Mexican Workers Concerning Trotsky's Murder' through which he declared:

The Communist Party, as the rest of the political organisations of the country, has enjoyed under our government freedom and respect for its members and doctrines. Notwithstanding, they have deemed useful to their cause to forsake their alliance with the Mexican working class, in favour of an alliance with a foreign power. This represents an aggression to national sovereignty as it has organised armed assaults, in combination with foreign elements, thus committing offences that dishonour civilisation and questioning the Mexican people and government's capacity to maintain order. These elements have committed the crime of betraying the nation, they have corrupted their doctrines of redemption and proletarian progress, they have hurt the nation, and thus they have committed a crime that history shall condemn.⁵⁹

In this same statement, Cárdenas somewhat cryptically asserted the principle of diplomatic asylum, adding that "some", a thinly-veiled reference to Spanish Communist refugees, had betrayed it by "irresponsibly" disturbing the public peace of the host nation.

⁵⁸ A Russian who directed sabotage and guerrilla warfare in Nationalist territory also known as Etington See Hugh Thomas, op. cit., p.389 n. 3.

THE PROTECTION OF SPANISH REFUGEES IN VICHY AND OCCUPIED FRANCE

The inauguration of Ávila Camacho as president in 1940 signalled the last personal initiative of Cárdenas towards Spain: the rescue of more than 100, 000 Spanish refugees who had been left stranded in France after that country's defeat at the hands of Germany. One of the most pressing problems faced by Mexican diplomats was that of preventing the delivery to Franco of Spanish refugees under the guise of extradition. The cases of Lluís Companys and Julián Zugazagoitia made this all too pressing. Mexican officials made sure that the life of Republican leaders such as Juan Negrín be safeguarded. Thus, Negrín was able to leave France on the passport of Alfonso Castro Valle, Minister of the Mexican Legation.⁶⁰ An 1877 treaty between France and Spain provided for extradition of common criminals, but not for political prisoners. Franco, however, claimed that exiles were common delinquents and angrily protested French acceptance of Mexican protection of the refugees. Immediately after the signing of the Franco-German armistice, Cárdenas ordered Mexican Ambassador to France, Luis I. Rodríguez to confer with the newly formed Vichy government about the fate of the refugees in French soil.

Rodríguez met Marshall Pétain on July 8, 1940 and conveyed him Cárdenas' wish to bring to Mexico all Spanish refugees resident in France. Pétain asked Rodríguez why Mexico was so intent in favouring such "undesirable people", to which Rodríguez replied, "they have our blood and spirit." Pétain insisted on the risks posed by a lot who had reneged of their traditions and customs. Rodríguez then retorted that Mexico would relieve France from a heavy burden, to which Pétain replied predictably "at times of great misery rats are the first to die."⁶¹ Pétain then praised Cárdenas as a soldier and a citizen and authorised Rodríguez to visit other concentration camps, which Rodríguez described as: "Dantesque gaols with Senegalese hangmen." At the end of the conclave both men signed an agreement

⁵⁹ "Mensaje del Presidente de la República a los trabajadores en relación al asesinato de León Trotsky" in Lázaro Cárdenas, *Mensajes, discursos, declaraciones y otros documentos*. Mexico, Siglo XXI Editores, 1978, Tomo I, pp. 440-441.

⁶⁰ Luis I. Rodríguez, *Ballet de Sangre*, pp. 138-140

⁶¹ ibid. pp. 169 and 233-235

through which Mexico promised to grant all Spanish refugees in France immigrant status.⁶²

Mexico maintained two refuge centres in rural France that cared for 2,500 people. Another facility financed by the Mexican government looked after 1,300 disabled war veterans and their families. In Marseilles alone, Mexican money supported nineteen welfare centres where Spanish exiles could get food, lodging, medical care.⁶³ Two chateaux, Reynade and Montgrad, were leased to house another 1500 Spanish refugees and former members of the International Brigades.⁶⁴

Previously, Rodríguez went to Montauban to visit the ailing Manuel Azaña. The Mexican Minister was deeply shocked to encounter an emaciated man with sunken eyes. The former Spanish President told Rodríguez that he feared that Francoist agents were hounding him to take him to Madrid. Azaña expressed his concern over the fate of his brother-in-law, Cipriano Rivas-Cheriff, who had been made prisoner in Spain. Rodríguez promised to intercede before Pétain so he may stay at Montauban to recover before proceeding to Vichy where he would be placed under the protection of the Mexican legation. Rodríguez gave him 2000 francs as part of the economic assistance that the Mexican government had arranged for him.

As promised, Rodríguez parleyed with Pétain about Azaña's ill health. Rodríguez informed Pétain that Cárdenas' administration had a special interest in protecting Azaña's life and bringing him into Mexican territory as soon as the first available means of transport was secured. Pétain agreed to let Azaña reside in Montauban, without the risk of extradition, grant him permission to relocate in Vichy

⁶² Acuerdo Franco-Mexicano del 22 de agosto de 1940 in AHSRE, Archivo de la Embajada de México en Francia. Caja no. 292. The note contained four clauses. The first reiterated Mexican willingness to bring in all Spaniards living in French territory and colonies. The second point evoked France's long humanitarian tradition. The third point stressed that Mexico would assume all transportation expenses. On the fourth and last point Mexico asked France to collaborate in the undertaking of the "largest emigration to ever have crossed the Atlantic Ocean."

⁶³ Testimonio Oral de Don Gilberto Bosques Saldívar in *Desdeldíez Boletín del Centro de Estudios de la Revolución Mexicana "Lázaro Cárdenas"*, Noviembre de 1993.

⁶⁴ AHSRE, Archivo de la Embajada de México en Francia. Caja no. 309; Mauricio Fresco, op.cit., pp.42-44.

as soon as his health allowed him to do so, to reside at the Mexican Legation, and to leave France bound to Mexico.⁶⁵

Meanwhile, Rodríguez found out that Rivas-Cheriff and his family had been arrested at Pyla-sur-Mer (Gironde) under German occupation and that he had been handed to Falangists who then took him to Madrid. Concerned with an aggravation of Azaña's health, Rodríguez dispatched Captain Antonio Haro Oliva, the aide-de camp of the Mexican Military attaché, to Montauban to look after him. Azaña refused to leave Montauban until the whereabouts of Rivas-Cheriff became known and the Nazis released his family from house detention. According to Rodríguez, he even contemplated the possibility of surrendering himself to Franco in order to obtain the release of his brother in law.⁶⁶

As Azaña's health further deteriorated, Rodríguez secured the release of his personal medic, Dr. Felipe Pallete, from the concentration camp of Saint-Cyprien. On August 22, Haro Oliva informed Rodríguez that a group of Falangist agents headed by a certain Urraca had arrived to Montauban to abduct Azaña. A day later the Falangists had left the town, apparently they had been tracking General Manuel Riquelme and Luis Fernández Clérigo rather than Azaña. Shocked by press agency reports wired from Paris, which informed that Azaña had been arrested, Cárdenas insisted to Rodríguez that Azaña should be taken as soon as possible to Mexico on a Clipper via Lisbon and the U.S.

On September 15, Rodríguez had Azaña and his followers transferred to the Hôtel Midi where the Mexican flag was hoisted in order to extend diplomatic protection to the premises. An attempt to move furtively the former Spanish to Vichy failed, as the Montauban *prefecture* was notified candidly by Mrs. Azaña of Rodríguez's plans. With his plans frustrated Rodríguez reflected upon the Mexican government's imperative of safeguarding Azaña:

His cause, our cause, is the cause of Mexico. To care for his life is to advance the restoration of the Republic. To expose it is to foment the

⁶⁵ Luis I Rodríguez, *Misión de Luis I. Rodríguez en Francia. La protección de los refugiados españoles julio a diciembre de 1940.* p.240.

⁶⁶ *ibid.* p.244.

political division among his followers. To loose it is to loose the national unity, united around him, legitimated in his person. It would complicate the downfall of Franco and prolong the martyrdom of more than 100000 expatriates.⁶⁷

Azaña suffered a stroke on the 19th, which left him paraplegic. Rodríguez despaired about the prospects of moving Azaña to Vichy. The Spanish Ambassador Lequerica sternly opposed any such attempt and the French Chancellery turned down all subsequent requests made in that sense by the Mexican minister. To make matters worse, Switzerland refused to grant Azaña any sort of admission. Meanwhile, after a series of deliberations, First Secretary Bernardo Reyes, son of Rodolfo,⁶⁸ was able to secure the release of the Rivas-Cherriff family in Pyla-sur-Mer from the Paris Kommandantur.

On the 29th, events took a dramatic course with the suicide of Dr. Pallete. A fortnight earlier, the apostolic Nuncio before Vichy, Monsignor Valerio Valeri, had informed Rodríguez that through papal intercession Franco had commuted the death penalty of Rivas-Cheriff for a life sentence. On November 4, 1940 Rodríguez arrived to Montauban just to see Azaña expire. Cárdenas ordered Rodríguez to organise a state funeral for Azaña.

The *prefect* of Montauban banned any public demonstration or funeral procession and threatened to dissolve by force any similar event. Furthermore he suggested that by reason of diplomacy, the bicolour flag of Franco should cover Azaña's remains instead of the Republican banner. To avoid such a humiliation Rodríguez decided to cover the coffin with the Mexican flag.

Thousands of war veterans, many mutilated, paraded in silence paying their last respects to the fallen President. Rodríguez presided the retinue accompanied by Mexican diplomats, Gilberto Bosques, Ernesto Arnoux, Colonel Luis Alamillo (military attaché), Agustín Alva, Alfonso Castro Valle and Haro Oliva. Among the

⁶⁷ Luis I. Rodríguez, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

⁶⁸ See Chapter 3, p.30.

Republicans present at the obsequies were Rodolfo Llopis, Fernández Clérigo, Mariano Ansó, and Azaña's former *aide-de-camp*, Juan Hernández Sarabia.⁶⁹

On November 9, 1942, Mexican relations with Vichy were severed. This move, combined with the total occupation of France on November 11, 1942, caused the complete termination of mass expeditions of Spanish Republican refugees to Mexico. Three days later the Mexican Legation was stormed by Nazi assault troops. The last Minister of Mexico before Vichy, Gilberto Bosques, his family and staff were taken as prisoners to Bad Godesberg where they were retained until April 1943, when they were sent to Lisbon to be swapped for German diplomats held by the Allies.⁷⁰

THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 1940

It has long been accepted that 1940 marked a turning point in Mexico's political history. Some contend that the revolution stabilised and became institutional others that the social movement of 1910 simply died.⁷¹ Be it as it may, it is clear that under Ávila Camacho, the regime turned to the Right, embracing a developmentalist conservative agenda that was a far cry from the Revolution's original postulates.

The oil expropriation of 1938 marked the apogee of the Cárdenas administration. The move had meant the greatest realisation of its mandate, insofar as it represented the pinnacle of the most sought-after aspiration of the Mexican Revolution (i.e. the economic control of the nation's natural resources); nevertheless it had a highly burdensome cost. From then on both the economic and political situation dangerously precipitated into a widespread crisis. The boycott dictated by the oil companies, and the reprisals taken by the American and British governments gravely affected the Mexican economy. Furthermore, attacks by the Right against the revolutionary establishment became ever more vicious and constant.

⁶⁹ *ibid.* pp. 276-277.

⁷⁰ Gilberto Bosques, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-76.

⁷¹ Ariel José Contreras, *Méjico 1940. Industrialización y crisis política*. Mexico Siglo XXI Editores, 1983. Albert Michaels, "The Crisis of Cardenismo" in *Journal of Latin American Studies*. 2, 1970, pp. 51-79. Stanley R. Ross (ed.), *Is the Mexican Revolution Dead?* New York: Knopf Borsoi Book Co., 1966.

Inside the PRM a premature rush towards presidential succession prompted the mobilisation of party groups in favour of potential candidates. Political circles rallied about the names of Francisco J. Múgica, Manuel Ávila Camacho, Rafael Sánchez Tapia and Juan Andreu Almazán. Such was the haste, that in December 1938, two years before the end of Cárdenas presidential term, two of his cabinet ministers, Múgica and Ávila Camacho resigned their posts, in order to vie for the party's nomination. Likewise Sánchez Tapia relinquished his post as commander of the First Military Zone, and Almazán's sympathisers also mobilised.

The PRM entered into a severe crisis. The party's president, Luis I. Rodríguez, came under sustained attacks from Múgica and Sánchez Tapia's supporters, who accused him of being overtly biased in favour of Ávila Camacho, forcing him to resign at the end of 1939. Conservatives inside the party were outraged by the presence of Lombardo Toledano aside Rodríguez at the podium during the Revolution's anniversary in November 1938. The veteran revolutionary, congressman and General from Veracruz, Heriberto Jara, replaced Rodríguez. Despite this move the crisis could not be completely resolved.

By July 1939, Almazán left the army and entered fully into the battle for presidential succession. A PAN convention in September 1939 endorsed half-heartedly Almazán as its candidate.⁷² In the face of these events Cárdenas was urged to make a choice, and in November 1939 the PRM announced that its candidate for the period 1940-1946 would be Ávila Camacho and not Múgica who had been regarded as the natural successor to the Cardenista reform movement.

Set off against Múgica, Ávila Camacho lacked revolutionary credentials. It is therefore of little wonder that a contemporary comedian had made fortune lampooning him as the "Unknown Soldier" or the "Virgin Sword"⁷³ as there was no record of him ever having taken part in actual combat. Nevertheless, his popularity within the army was considerable, and as such a further guarantee against the spectre of military rebellion.

⁷² Virginia Prewitt, *Reportage on Mexico*. New York, E.P Dutton & Co., Inc., 1941. pp.194-203.

⁷³ William Cameron Townsend, op. cit., p.337.

The PRM had been organised mainly to elect Cárdenas' successor, and at the time of its creation pre-candidacies for the official candidacy were already defined. One of the strongest was that of Francisco Múgica. Considered the "reddest" of the inner Cárdenas circle of intimates, Múgica was one of the revolutionaries *pur sang*; he had fought in all of the political and military battles of the movement since 1910. It should be mentioned that among the revolutionary elite, none worked as tirelessly as Múgica in promoting the causes of labour unions, Loyalist Spain and women's suffrage.⁷⁴ Notwithstanding, Múgica was very inflexible, almost puritanical in his beliefs. Widely said to be a adherent to Marxist thought, Múgica kept an intense correspondence with Leon Trotsky.⁷⁵ Far from popular in the army circles and with the trade unions, Múgica's radicalism would have certainly meant an insurmountable obstacle in the face of the impending negotiations with the U.S. On the contrary, Ávila Camacho represented conciliation, consolidation, and ultimately, the revolution's shift to the right.

The process of Presidential succession was certainly influenced by external factors. Had the government supported Múgica the struggle would have been rougher and riskier when more urgent and vital interests were at stake. Múgica had more personal and revolutionary merits than the other inner candidates did. His candidacy represented the radical trend of the Revolution. What went on Cárdenas' mind through those heady days remains a matter of speculation. Cárdenas invoked international factors in order not to appoint Múgica as his successor.⁷⁶ This has led many specialists to speculate on American pressures on Cárdenas in order to prevent Múgica's nomination.

An educated guess would also take into account the tragic downfall of the Spanish Republic as an additional factor in Cárdenas' decision. The fact that a valuable ally had disappeared as a result of its radicalisation highlighted Mexican international isolation. It seems likely that Cárdenas reasoned in 1940 that Mexico had surpassed the limits of autonomy in the international capitalist system and that it

⁷⁴ *ibid.* p.105.

⁷⁵ Olivia Gall, *op.cit.*, pp. 218-222.

⁷⁶ Fernando Benítez, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

would therefore be sensible to reconcile the regime to the demands of capitalism.⁷⁷ The only way to avoid the fate of the collapsed Republic appeared to consolidate the achievements of the administration through the moderation of its programme as a way of securing American support in a context of ultra-rightist advance.

In that sense, the victory of the military rebellion in Spain marked a change of course for the Mexican administration. At the international level this meant that the Mexican government would thenceforth submit to the American administration's designs with no further objection. At the economic level this supposed the open embracing of the route to industrialisation, and at the political plain it signified a general re-orientation towards greater moderation and even the reversal of many of the conquests of the working class achieved during Cárdenas tenure.⁷⁸ "National Unity" became the rallying cry even among the most radical sections of the Left. Ultimately, the discarding of Múgica meant the demise of Cardenismo and its radical programme.

In his early bid for presidential nomination, Múgica tried to disprove his reputation as a radical in an open letter published in *El Universal* in order to appease the fears of his opponents, both within and outside the PRM. Múgica offered to conciliate capital and labour, respect private property and preserve freedom of religion and press.⁷⁹

His efforts would prove vain. Lombardo used his power to thwart the candidacy of Múgica, because of Múgica's friendship for Trotsky. Although not officially a Communist, Lombardo was a fellow traveller and an avowed admirer of Stalin. His portrayal of Soviet Russia as the champion of true progress and real democracy was conspicuous and reiterated. After the Stalin-Ribbentrop Pact he became discreetly silent.

On November 3, 1939 Ávila Camacho, a conservative general and a devout Catholic, was proclaimed the PRM's official candidate. Those on the regime's inner

⁷⁷ Albert Michaels, "The Crisis of Cardenismo" in *Journal of Latin American Studies* 2, 1970, pp. 51-79; Nora Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy: Post-Revolutionary Mexico*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1982, pp. 254.

⁷⁸ Luis González y González, *Los días del presidente Cárdenas*. p. 230.

⁷⁹ *El Universal*, September 19, 1938.

circle must have seen that certain changes in policy, a modification of the Cárdenas revolution, was inevitable if that revolution were to continue its march. Circumstances at the time demanded a moderate consolidation of what had been achieved rather than a renewal of the radical wave that had swept the country during Cárdenas' tenure. There was discontent with the decision inside the major grass-roots organisations of the party, but Lombardo managed to control the CTM.

With their presidential ambitions abruptly cancelled both Sánchez Tapia and Almazán left the PRM in a haste to form new parties. Almazán's alliance, the National Unification Revolutionary Party (PRUN) became the most effective and menacing opposition to the regime. Almazán was largely to the right of Cardenismo and thus was able to appeal disgruntled rightists. Still, he also appealed workers, peasants, military, and white-collar workers.

In 1938, adjustments to one of the regime's most radical programmes had already been started: the socialistic orientation of public education. The pedagogic practices and rhetoric, that ordinary people had somehow or other confused with communism, were toned down. The more radical books were withdrawn from circulation. The Mexican Revolution was in its death-throes; counterrevolution had begun in earnest. The Rightist onslaught to split the labour movement, but above all to destroy Lombardo, took form both within and outside the official party.

Another salient feature of the turning tide was the return of the Catholic Church into public life, and its regaining of a certain degree of prominence in the educational realm: a manifest victory over the revolutionary policy of secularisation. For many, this comeback augured new confrontations between Liberals and Catholics, and even a downright civil war.

The ugly spectre of a coming battle between Church and State hovers over Mexico. This spectre appeared at the end of Spain's Civil War when General Francisco Franco announced that Spain's foreign policy would be dedicated to the 'spiritual re-Conquest of Latin America.' This foreign policy has since been exposed as the brain child of Hitler, presented to Franco as the bill for Hitler's putting, and keeping, the Spanish dictator in power. The spectre at first a mere wraith, which no one took seriously, has

over 20,000 issues per week, the official organ of the Spanish Embassy, *La Gaceta Española* could hardly publish 6,000 copies per week.⁹³

A number of ultra rightist weeklies such as *Omega*, *El Hombre Libre*, *Semana*, and *Hoy* were even more brazen in their attacks on the Republic. Not only were they staunch supporters of Franco; they were also vehemently pro-Axis. In fact, these papers would later be accused by the American government of being sponsored by Nazi Germany, through Goebbels' Ministry of Propaganda.⁹⁴

It is interesting to note in that sense that while *El Nacional* used the services of the Associated Press and Havas Antas, *Excélsior* reproduced dispatches of *Transocean*, the latter, the official Nazi news bureau. Most of the news published by Mexican newspapers had by then every indication of propagandist manipulation behind them.⁹⁵

The polarisation of debate produced by such information contributed to create a climate of exaggeration and paranoia where the influence of fascism and communism among the native forces was grossly overstated. A shallow reading of the Mexican press of the time might suggest that the Axis or the USSR were making inroads in Mexico. Thus, a climate similar to that of Spain led several figures to recur too easily to epithets such as Fascist or Communist in order to discredit their opponents. This makes it difficult to determine the real degree of penetration that either the USSR or Nazi Germany may have secured at the time.

Even Daniel Cosío Villegas, Mexican Minister to Lisbon, a figure who may not be accused of being a supporter of Franco criticised this bias in terms of naiveté. In a letter to Francisco Múgica, Cosío Villegas wrote:

It is shameful to observe how a small and not very intelligent nation may be deceived in its entirety by a press agency. Thus, according to *El Nacional* Madrid is winning while Burgos is losing. The opposite is truth: the military are winning, and it will not be long before their victory is complete. The

⁹³ María del Carmen Ruiz Castañeda, et al, *El periodismo en México*. México, UNAM-ENEP-Acatlán, 1981.

⁹⁴ Nathaniel and Sylvia Weyl, op. cit., p.321.

⁹⁵ J.H. Plenn, *Mexico Marches*, p.68.

only truth in this is that Mexico is, and has been, the only country avowedly friendly towards Spain.⁹⁶

Excélsior, then the mouthpiece of the conservatives and the alienated middle class, upholder of capitalism, private property, family and tradition, took sides openly and wholeheartedly with the rebels. As the fascists took more territory from the Republic, the Mexican papers clamour on the Cárdenas government to grant recognition to Franco increased. The pressure on Cárdenas became tremendous from within the government and outside of it. Controversies aired over Mexican diplomatic precedents and whether the established norm had been to recognise *de facto* or *de jure* governments. Thus, Cárdenas' fate came increasingly to be viewed by the Mexican Right as inextricably linked to that of the Republic. A headline of *El Hombre Libre* even boasted: "Cárdenas Defeated at Teruel."⁹⁷

THE MEXICAN CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE SPANISH CRUSADE

A deeply Roman Catholic country, Mexico has been also a fiercely anti-clerical one. The Constitution of Querétaro, promulgated on February 1917, gave concrete expression to diffuse anti-clerical sentiment. Laicism became mandatory in primary education, and priests were banned from conducting schools (art. 3); seminary studies were not recognised by the State (art. 130); any religious act was forbidden outside the churches (art. 24); the Church and all religious organisations were forbidden to hold property (art. 27); all building that housed institutions dependent on the Church were declared property of the State (articles 27 and 130); priests lost all political rights (articles 55, 82 and 130) and even exercise of citizenship (articles 27, 59 and 130); the federal states were given the right to limit the number of priests (art. 130) and the Catholic press and all confessional parties were suppressed (articles 9 and 130).

Persecution followed. Most bishops had to leave the country, many priests went into hiding or into exile, and hundreds of Catholic schools were closed. In effect,

⁹⁶ The full letter may be read in Clara Lida, *La Casa de España en México*. México, El Colegio de México. Jornadas 113, 1988, pp. 27-28.

⁹⁷ *El Hombre Libre*, January 5, 1938. See also J.H. Plenn, *Mexico Marches*, p.68.

since the early days of the Revolution, there had been continued Church resistance to everything that represented modernity. The hierarchy had never reconciled itself to the Revolutionary secularism and anti-clericalism. In rural areas the conflict had even got out of hand through guerrilla warfare known as the Cristero rebellion (1926-1929).⁹⁸

During the ensuing turmoil a Catholic fanatic, José de León Toral, murdered President-elect Álvaro Obregón in 1928. Although Church and State agreed to a truce in 1929, mutual hatred and fanaticism continued to spawn violence. The 'socialist' education system implanted by the Cárdenas administration had a profound impact on the religious radical Mexican right. The religious right experienced a massive growth during Cárdenas' tenure, which even exceeded in quantity that of the Cristero rebellion of the preceding decade. Many Catholics took to the streets in mass demonstrations, triggering street riots over issues such as socialist education, limits on numbers of clerics and church closures.

Whereas Hugh Thomas has suggested that the Vatican took no sides in the Spanish conflict, new evidence shows how from 1931 Pope Pius XI and his Secretary of State, Eugenio Pacelli, strongly attacked what they dubbed the "Red Triangle" i.e. Spain, Mexico and the USSR.⁹⁹ Pius XI was inspired enough to speak out not only against Spain's Popular Front but also against what he saw as the Bolshevism behind it, which, he said, had already given ample proof of its will to subvert all orders from Russia to Mexico.¹⁰⁰ On April 1938 the Pope gave its blessing to Franco as a "new hero of Christian fortitude."¹⁰¹ The Vatican had recognised the Franco government *de facto* since August 28, 1937, and extended it *de jure* recognition on May 3, 1938. Barely a fortnight after the end of the Civil War, the recently exalted Pius XII unequivocally declared in a radio broadcast:

⁹⁸ Jean Meyer, *La cristiada* México, Siglo XXI Editores, 1977.

⁹⁹ John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope. The Secret History of Pius XII*. Middlesex, Penguin, 2000. pp.112, 263.

¹⁰⁰ *Lettre Apostolique adressée aux évêques mexicains* March 2, 1937.

¹⁰¹ *Manchester Guardian*, April 20, 1938.

Peace and victory have been willed by God to Spain... which has now given to proselytes of the materialistic atheism of our age the highest proof that above all things stands the eternal value of religion and of the Spirit.¹⁰²

In Mexico, the Catholic Church supported Franco, as did the Catholic Church throughout the world. The Mexican hierarchy, however, conceivably fearful of unleashing a new wave of governmental anti-clericalism, refrained from following the lead of the Pope in supporting the armed rebellion as a means to stop the “destruction of civilisation” and took a low profile attitude before the conflict. In consequence, Mexican bishops limited themselves to send a temperate message of support and sympathy for the Spanish clergy in 1937.¹⁰³

By early 1939, however, Franco’s victories had emboldened even those clerics who had initially shied away from open confrontation. So notable was the reaction that in the months prior to the Republic’s defeat, *Excélsior*’s columnist Eduardo Correa told the *Christian Science Monitor*’s correspondent Betty Kirk: “When Franco wins there will be a great revival of Catholic activity in Mexico.”¹⁰⁴ It is no coincidence, thus, that Spain and Mexico had monopolised, with 233 and 200 “martyrs” respectively, the largest numbers of sanctified during the largest collective beatification celebrated by the Vatican on March 9, 2001.¹⁰⁵

Rejection of secular solutions to the nation’s pressing social and economic problems had been evident in Pope Pius XI’s 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* that negatively likened Mexico with Spain. By 1936, the demise of Calles meant that the religious right could count on a new ally in its struggle against the revolutionary regime: the business elite deeply disturbed by Cárdenas radical labour policies.

THE ECONOMIC ELITE

The rise of Cárdenas had the effect of alienating the business sector. Labour turmoil and the political tension that pervaded the early stages of his mandate bitterly

¹⁰² Quoted by Dante Puzo, op. cit., p.166.

¹⁰³ Thomas G. Powell, op. cit., 111.

¹⁰⁴ Betty Kirk, op. cit. p. 135.

estranged captains of industry and finance from his administration. Business interests had not been particularly well organised as lobbies. Chambers of commerce had emerged in the 1920's, yet only at a local level. The *Confederación Patronal de México*, COPARMEX, designed to lobby government and resist militant labour was only founded in 1930.

Trade unions, which had been weakened during the late Maximato, were ready to engage in strikes once sanctioned by the new government, alienating accordingly the propertied class. Cárdenas mobilised labour to form a power base in his struggle for hegemony with Calles. Business interests first tried to temporise then actively opposed the Cárdenas administration.

The powerful Monterrey Group in particular, led by the Garza Sada family, resented the President's labour policies, transforming the "Mexican Detroit" into a hotbed of conspiracy against the revolutionary regime. The entrepreneurs' association which included men such as Luis Garza (of the steel mill); Roberto Garza Sada (head of the Vidriera Mexicana); Luis G. Sada (CEO of the Cuauhtémoc Brewery); Joel Rocha (president of the Salinas y Rocha department stores); Manuel Barragán (first chairman of the Topo Chico soda factory, later of Coca-Cola, and, after 1928 editor of *Excélsior*); Pablo Salas y López (Cementos Hidalgo) and Emilio Azcárraga (executive of the Ford Motor Company distributorship in Monterrey, who would later become Mexican media mogul) came to occupy the most extreme position of the right within the Mexican private sector.¹⁰⁶

After the Porfiriato's demise and the parallel fall of Nuevo León state governor and Monterrey businessmen's benefactor, General Bernardo Reyes, the Monterrey Group had been through a long period of opposition and indeed exile. After 1924 the Monterrey Group was drawn further into the opposition, no doubt alienated by Calles' radical policies. The enactment of a labour code implementing Article 123 of the 1917 Constitution in 1931 elicited an angry response from the Monterrey Group, which was vented through their newly acquired mouthpiece *Excélsior*.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ *El País* Madrid, March 10, 2001.

¹⁰⁶ Alexander M. Saragoza, *The Monterrey Elite and the Mexican State. 1880-1940* Austin, University of Texas Press, 1988.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. pp. 160-167. Hugh. G. Campbell, *The Radical Right*. pp.155-158.

Having developed industry in their region, without the aid of the Mexican State, Monterrey's brewers and steel-makers were able to enjoy a larger autonomy vis-à-vis the Mexican government than their peers from the centre. Their resolute commitment to pre-Revolutionary values and their economic muscle made them an unassailable target even for the revolutionary regime, which resigned itself to suffer their hegemony in their northern fief.

The Monterrey Group was also exceptional in its advocacy of an extreme, almost fundamentalist, interpretation of Catholicism. The anti-clericalism of the 1917 Constitution upheld by the official party forthrightly appalled them. Even moderate politicians of the PNR were considered too radical by standards of the group. Their propaganda in the newspapers and radio appealed to traditional values of family, religion and fatherland.

In 1935-1936 an momentous conflict took place between the Monterrey Group and the Cárdenas' administration. Lombardo Toledano had supported an attempt to replace the paternalistic company union that the group had founded to control labour in its factories with a pro-government union.¹⁰⁸ Local business organisations financed the Golden Shirts to counter the CTM. Between November 1935 and July 1936 there were street battles between CTM trade unionists and Monterrey group-sponsored *pistoleros*, strikes, lockouts and heated declarations. Such was the group's strength that they were able to organise a rally against the strike which mobilised 60, 000 people. Monterrey's bankers threatened to hold back all loans until the threat of strikes was revoked.¹⁰⁹

When the president visited the northern town in February 1936, the entrepreneurs swiftly closed up their factories in protest. On March 16, the administration backed off and effectively abandoned its attempt to bring the CTM into Monterrey trade unions. Soon after, Monterrey became a major focal point of anti-Cardenista activity.

Mexican industrialists attempted to turn public opinion against the President by way of rightist propaganda in the newspapers and radio. The COPARMEX also

¹⁰⁸ *New York Times*, February 6, 1936.

became actively engaged in anti-governmental indoctrination at grassroots level, widely distributing in factories pamphlets with titles such as “Bolshevism: Number One World’s Public Enemy”, “Communists Atrocities in Spain”, and the “Anti-Communist Primer.” The latter imputed that Moscow’s agents dominated the Mexican government and that communism was behind both the CTM endeavours to unionise workers and the administration’s social reforms.

When this appeared to have failed, business interests turned to street intimidation, enlisting accordingly the assistance of the Golden Shirts. According to the State’s Attorney the Mexican fascists were responsible of several attacks against CTM activists in Monterrey with the apparent financial support of leading industrialists.¹¹⁰ His office was able to establish that COPARMEX had handed out 24,700 pesos to rightists’ organisations, ranging from the Golden Shirts to the Cedillo movement from December 1936 to July 1937.¹¹¹

According to Fernández Boyoli, by 1937 COPARMEX-sponsored agitation was at full force, aiming to foment an armed uprising to overthrow Cárdenas’ government. This campaign may have reached its climax in 1938 with Cedillo’s rebellion. The group secretly allotted the General with “considerable funds”, which also encompassed handouts of the oil companies, through Nicolás Rodríguez.¹¹²

After Cedillo’s crushing defeat, the rightist groups, headed by Monterrey’s business community, turned their attention to the electoral path, founding a new champion for their interests in the shape of General Almazán. The financial backing of the Mexican businessman gave new impetus to the sundry rightist organisations converging around his candidacy. Under the combined effect of Cárdenas’ radical agenda and the spell of Franco’s victory, these groups coalesced ideologically and organisationally as never before, posing a direct challenge to the regime’s viability.

¹⁰⁹ *New York Times*, February 7, 1936.

¹¹⁰ Manuel Fernández Boyoli and Eustaquio Marrón de Angelis, *op. cit.*, p.213.

¹¹¹ *Ibid* p. 272.

¹¹² *Ibid.* p. 157. Saragoza backs this claim basing himself on U.S. intelligence sources, *op. cit.*, p.183.

now become the embodiment of counter-Revolution in Mexico. The latest incident to dramatise its existence smacks awesomely of pre-Civil War Spain, when the army joined with the clergy to overthrow the Republic, ending with the delivery of their country into the hands of Germany and the establishment of another totalitarian state.⁸⁰

The incident to which Kirk referred to was the celebration of the canonisation of the Virgin of Guadalupe made to coincide with Columbus Day on October 12. Religious ceremonies in Mexico had not had displayed such splendour and ostentation since the Crowning of the Virgin in 1895. This time for greater aggravation of the leftists still inside the official circles, cadets from the Military College carrying the Mexican flag led the procession.

...and when the shooting of workers by the army is followed by open support of the Church by the army it is time to begin thinking of Mexico's future in terms of Spain's past.⁸¹

Still another crucial aspect of this readjustment was the shifting relationship between Mexican workers, the Mexican State, and national labour organisations. The State was no longer the mediator between Mexican labour and foreign companies, but the owner of the oil fields and the employer of the oil workers.⁸² Workers of the nationalised concerns sought to manage these interests by, and, conceivably, for themselves, disregarding the severe economic crisis experienced by the nation after the expropriation act. As Cárdenas firmly rejected such demands, the trade union threatened to strike, and even indulged in acts of sabotage. The Mexican government responded to these menaces by firing 2,592 workers and by forcing the repayment of 22 million pesos lost in revenue, attributable to the "corruption and inefficiency of the trade union."⁸³

A CTM convention in Puebla revolted against Lombardo's "dictatorship" and gave its full support to Almazán. All the while, the opposition led by Almazán began

⁸⁰ Betty Kirk, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-136.

⁸¹ *ibid.* p.137.

⁸² Compare Friedrich Schuler, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28 with Tziv Medin, *op.cit.*, pp.204-206; and with Lorenzo Meyer, *México y los Estados Unidos en el conflicto petrolero (1917-1942)*. México, El Colegio de México, 1968. p.263.

⁸³ *Ibid.* pp.225-226.

attacking Lombardo and the PCM and it soon became too all apparent that their support represented for Ávila Camacho a liability rather than an asset. Not surprisingly, the patronage that the Left had enjoyed hitherto began to be drastically reduced, while the apparatus began to act against radicals in several areas.

Finally, the transition between Cárdenas and Ávila Camacho witnessed the undermining of agrarian reform. The Supreme Court of Justice applied an abrupt brake to the re-distribution of landed estates. The Agrarian Code was also revised to protect private property from the possibility of confiscation.⁸⁴ Given the lack of independence of the judiciary with regards to the executive it seems evident that Cárdenas had retracted from his own programme. Conservative circles in Mexico and abroad could hardly fail to notice the government's shift to the Right, no doubt compelled by the spectacular growth of the Rightist opposition.

Although today it may be tempting to disregard such organisations as the Sinarquistas, the ARM, the CCM, the PAN, et cetera, as little more than fringe groups that were attracted to fascism, they were taken quite seriously as a threat to the Revolution. Their links to powerful entrepreneurs, especially the Monterrey Group, took the Mexican government not to underestimate them. Moreover, the presence of Spanish refugees in Mexico served as a reminder of how even an minor extremist party, given the right conditions, could plunge a nation into fascism.

Most of these groups were outspoken in their admiration of the Spanish Falange. The PAN itself was tainted by its sympathy for Franco and fascist theories of corporativism.⁸⁵ American diplomats were concerned about their links to Falange.⁸⁶ After an extended European tour in July 1937, General Juan Andreu himself Almazán had declared openly his admiration for General Franco.⁸⁷ Although such declaration was certainly overstated by the press, it helped to portray Almazán as a Fascist.

⁸⁴ *El Universal*, July 26, 1940 and August 13, 1940.

⁸⁵ Soledad Loaeza, *op.cit.*, pp.146-148.

⁸⁶ Josephus Daniels, *Shirt-Sleeve Diplomat*. Raleigh, University of North Carolina Press, 1947. pp.350-351.

⁸⁷ National Archives of the United States RG 812.00/30472, Blocker, "Letter to Secretary of State, July 19, 1937.

Still, evidence suggests that members of the Almazán coalition did enter in contacts with the Spanish Falange and government. The Falange had continued to be attentive to tensions in Mexico. On August 23, 1940 the Spanish Ministry of the Interior decided to send several “clandestine groups of Falangists to counsel and support the followers of a totalitarian form of government.” According to the Minister, Valentín Galarza, “the time had come for a fascist government to seize power in Mexico.”⁸⁸

On October 1940 a confidant of the Almazán movement approached the Spanish Ministry of the Interior asking for financial support for an imminent insurrection. Moreover the Almazanistas asked for arms and equipment. Apparently, the Franco regime agreed to help. In due course, Spanish diplomats inquired whether the Germans might be involved in the plot. The Wilhelmstrasse flatly rejected the proposal on grounds that “Ávila Camacho could be more advantageous to Germany than Almazán.” Furthermore, the Germans warned their Spaniard counterparts to stay out of the plot.⁸⁹

It goes without saying that at the time Spain lacked the requested weaponry, let alone the infrastructure and shipping capacity necessary to convey it into Mexico. Thus the projected Hispanista collaboration came to a close.

Eventually, Cárdenas’ decision to admit thousands of Republican refugees became a heated topic and a major issue of the political campaign. On June 1939 protesters jeered Cárdenas and the Spanish refugees and clashed with PNR supporters until two-dozen were left wounded.⁹⁰ Almazán assailed the administration as a “racketeer government”, which had entered in collusion with the Spanish “communist” refugees to drive Mexico into the Soviet orbit.⁹¹

Almazán was far from being the fascist bogey depicted by the left-wing press. Nor was Ávila Camacho the champion of the working classes as that same press tried to purport. The fact that both generals abhorred communism and wanted to uproot it

⁸⁸ NAUS, RG59, Box 3958, 812.00/31457 “Confidential Memorandum,” September 12, 1940.

⁸⁹ NAUS, T-120, Roll 143Fr 84760, Stohrer/Madrid, “Telegram to AA,” October 5, 1940; FBI report, “Spanish Government Influence in the Mexican Presidential Election, 1940,” 1941.

⁹⁰ John W. Sherman, *op. cit.*, p.187.

⁹¹ *New York Times*, June 25, 1940.

from Mexican life shows the ascendancy that the Mexican Right had attained, and how Franco's victory induced a swing to the Right by the Mexican Revolution. The rationale behind this change of course was ultimately to integrate the enemies of the Revolution into the regime's machinery rather than confront them in an open conflict that may have terminated as the Spanish Civil War in the total defeat of its tenets. In any case it is revelatory of the degree to which Mexican politics had become infected by the Spanish conflict. Domestic politics came to be seen through the Spanish prisms in ways that often did not correspond to sheer reality. This, however, does not diminish the dangers faced by the revolutionary regime even if it does not automatically follow that a pre-fascist situation did exist.

Spurred by Almazán's continuous onslaught against revolutionary radicalism, Ávila Camacho increasingly embraced conservative rhetoric. Lombardo's Six-Year-Plan was revised giving way to a document that not only shunned most of its radical features but that was even renamed as Plan of Government in an apparent effort to discard Marxist terminology and radicalism. In the end, it became difficult to differentiate both candidates' programmes.

On July 7, 1940 the presidential elections were held amid bloodshed and persecution. Cárdenas had promised a free and clean election. The country had not known one since 1910 when Madero had been elected President. However, the 1940 election was as rigged as any before it. The official results were scandalously distorted in the regime's favour:

Ávila Camacho	2,476,641
Almazán	151,010
Sánchez Tapia	9,840

Days before the poll, Almazán had declared that should the people's will be cheated, he would lead "popular might" to put it at the service of law, and thus prevent an usurping faction from seizing the nation.⁹²

⁹² *El Hombre Libre*, July 5, 1940.

Almazán proclaimed himself the winner and left for Cuba to try to persuade the US Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, who was attending the Pan-American Conference, to support him. His followers insisted that he had been cheated out of his victory by fraudulent means and threatened with rebellion. Almazán even held an interview with Elliot Roosevelt, the American President's son, in yet another vain attempt to obtain American collaboration to his cause. Far from getting it, Almazán had to swallow Roosevelt's blessing of Ávila Camacho.⁹³ The feared military rising feared to materialise.

Had Cárdenas chosen a leftist such as Múgica as his successor it seems highly probable that the political violence of 1940 would have been far greater than it ultimately was. The choice of a moderate as his successor neutralised the discontent of the Right and allowed the incorporation of conservatives to the 'revolutionary family' and consequently to a peaceful resolution of the preceding polarisation.

The virulence of the Presidential election of 1940 increased the alarm over an invasion of "red gachupines", as the Mexican government enlisted many refugees to help it counter a potential military uprising by Almazán's supporters. Of course, this training was hidden as not to give rise to a Mexican nationalist reaction. These units were not given arms, although arsenals were ready to equip them in case of an emergency.

At the May Day parade of 1940, a Republican contingent marched behind the Republican flag, with a music band playing *pasodobles* and Mexican music. In one of their banners it could clearly be read: "UGT. Spanish officials in exile seek a post in the struggle against fascism." Lombardo Toledano praised the group for being one of the parade's most numerous and best organised groups.⁹⁴ Owing to their military experience during the Civil War, many of the Spanish refugees formed a nucleus of highly trained and disciplined soldiers.

⁹³ Roosevelt's endorsement of Cárdenas' appointed heir was shown in the enforcement of the American Neutrality Act with regards to Mexico. This meant that the Mexican administration was acknowledged as the sole legal recipient of American arms exports. Roosevelt's sanction of Ávila Camacho was also seen in his decision to send vice-president Henry Wallace to his inauguration. See *New York Times*, December 2, 1940.

⁹⁴ *El Nacional*, May 2, 1940.

On October 1940 Cárdenas stationed two hundred well-trained Spanish Republican veterans in Chilpancingo, Guerrero, where an imminent attack by Almazanistas was expected. This military unit included Spanish aviators.⁹⁵ Ultimately the encounter never took place but Cárdenas' willingness to use the refugees as allies in a showdown against Almazanistas is revealing of how pressing the situation had become for the survival of the regime. There were in fact armed uprisings in the north, but federal forces were able to quell them. At any rate, the utilisation of Spanish war veterans was a double-edged sword; while it reinforced the exiles' links with the government that had welcomed them it also augmented the antagonism of its numerous political adversaries.

Shortly after the elections internecine clashes began within the PRM as the Right and Left attempted to wrest control of the party. The party's right wing was headed by Maximino Ávila Camacho, brother of the President-elect and one the most conservative generals inside the Mexican army. The Left belatedly grasped that the real enemy to be faced was not Almazán but the Ávila Camacho reactionaries who were out to destroy the entire Cárdenas programme.⁹⁶ Thus, not surprisingly, after the election, much of the dissident right of 1940 was incorporated into the PRM.

At his inauguration, Ávila Camacho declared, "I am a believer."⁹⁷ No Mexican President since the days of Juárez had dared to confess his faith so openly. Ávila Camacho rapidly began to distance himself from the radical nationalism espoused by the Cárdenas administration. In the first few months after his inauguration, a number of clear indications emerged suggesting that the new government was changing course. The socialist education amendment was reversed on December 29, 1941, opening the door to religious schools and instruction; a great victory by the Catholic Church. Co-education established under Cárdenas was also abolished.⁹⁸

The new government became also involved in a massive effort to domesticate the labour movement. Rapid economic growth, the subordination of unions and

⁹⁵ FBI October 3, 1940 quoted by Friedrich E.Schuler, op. cit., p. 189.

⁹⁶ Betty Kirk, op. cit., p.245.

⁹⁷ *La Prensa*, September 19, 1940.

⁹⁸ The Minister of Education, Luis Sánchez Pontón, one of the last remnants of Cardenismo in Ávila Camacho's cabinet was sacked purportedly "for reasons of poor health", but in fact for his refusal to

peasants and the rapprochement with the Church all helped to reconcile conservatives and business to the regime after 1940. Thenceforth, Mexican Conservatives' flirtation with the cause of Almazán quickly faded, and Ávila Camacho became, for the Right, the first bulwark against a potential resurgence of Cardenismo.

Most of Cárdenas' measures were reversed. His moral authority remained, however, untouched in two crucial issues: the continuity of oil ownership in the hands of the Mexican State and the refusal to establish diplomatic relations with Franco's regime. Thus, in a truly remarkable development, the Spanish case became an untouchable legacy of Cárdenas for his successors. How did such a tradition come about? It is clear that for an increasingly authoritarian regime, in the sense of Linz's definition,⁹⁹ such as the one presided by the PRI, which had all but abdicated from its founding principles, the undeviating advocacy of the Spanish Republic, however unrealistic, served a purpose of internal legitimisation with regards to the Mexican Left.

Time and again, rumours would emerge divulging that under pressure from Madrid and from powerful commercial interests, Mexico was about to renew its diplomatic links with Spain.

MEXICO AND SPAIN 1945-1977 FROM ENDURING HOSTILITY TO FINAL RECONCILIATION

In spite of such hopes seven Mexican administrations would maintain Cárdenas Spanish policy untouched. It was not until the demise of Franco himself and the accession of Adolfo Suárez to the Presidency of the Spanish Government that the administration of José López Portillo (1976-1982) entered negotiations conducive to the re-establishment of diplomatic links.

On June 1945, the Mexican delegation attending the United Nations Conference at San Francisco sponsored an initiative calling for the exclusion of

annual socialist education, two months before. His subsequent replacement by Octavio Véjar Vázquez initiated a purge of the Left within the Ministry of Education. See Betty Kirk, *op.cit.*, p.148.

⁹⁹ J.J. Linz, "An Authoritarian Regime: Spain." in S.N Eisenstadt (ed.), *Political Sociology*. New York, Basic Books, 1971. p.522.

Spain from the new world organisation, as its “spurious” government had been forcibly imposed by the Axis Powers. Ambassador Luis Quintanilla evoked how German and Italian military had brought down a legitimate government. The resolution was approved by acclamation.¹⁰⁰

Ten months later, as the first General Assembly of the UN convened, Mexico sponsored a new initiative calling for the immediate cessation of diplomatic relations between all UN members and the Spanish dictatorship, as it constituted “a threat to world peace.”¹⁰¹ Forty-six nations voted in favour of the motion and only 2 against.

The exclusion of Franco’s government from the “community of nations” raised fresh hopes that the Republicans could be reinstated in power, thus making imperative the creation of an official body that could be recognised by other nations. Mexican support for the Spanish Republic took a new turn in August 1945, when Negrín and Álvarez del Vayo went to Mexico City to negotiate an accord with other Republican leaders to re-establish Republican institutions in exile.

The setting up of governments-in-exile had been a widespread practice during the Second World War, when the “free governments” of European nations occupied by Germany had tried to maintain a semblance of continuity for their countries. After consultations with President Ávila Camacho and Cárdenas, Negrín and Álvarez del Vayo received assurances that the Mexican government was ready to give moral and political support to this endeavour.

Thus the Mexican government extended the right of extra-territoriality to the Spanish Cortes and the Council Room of Mexico City’s town hall was fitted out as official seat of the exiled Republican Cortes on August 17, 1945.¹⁰² The Spanish deputies were given immunities by the Mexican authorities. In an impressive gesture of amity, Mexican troops paraded in Mexico City to pay tribute to Diego Martínez Barrios, who had been elected provisional President of the Republic by the Spanish deputies. Nine days later, with the Republican government-in-exile formally

¹⁰⁰ “Acta Taquigráfica de la Tercera Sesión Efectuada el 19 de junio de 1945 de la Comisión 1 de la Conferencia de San Francisco” in Luis Miguel Díaz y Jaime G. Martini, *op.cit.*, p.320.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.* p.322.

¹⁰² *El Universal*, August 18, 1945; *Excélsior*, August 18-19, 1945.

constituted, the Mexican Chancellery announced its agreement to continue diplomatic relations.¹⁰³

In Spain, the establishment of the Republic in exile was unmercifully lampooned as a “grotesque masquerade”, “predictably” sanctioned by the Mexican government, “a well-known friend of the Reds.”¹⁰⁴ Mexican Conservatives too lambasted the Mexican government for allowing foreigners to engage in political activities in Mexican soil,* “when Mexicans are not permitted to do so,” and for breaching the Estrada Doctrine.¹⁰⁵

Ultimately, the Republican factions’ endless controversies gravely impaired the credibility of the Republic-in-exile as a legitimate interlocutor vis-à-vis the international community. Unsurprisingly, support for vigorous action against Franco’s regime waned among UN member-states. Moreover, the advent of the Cold War took the U.S. administration to disregard Franco’s Spain former links with the Axis, and to consider its potential as a useful ally against the spread of communism in Europe. Thus, by November 1950 a complete reversal of UN policy towards Francoist Spain became apparent, when the General Assembly voted to revoke its mandate for the withdrawal of diplomatic missions from Madrid and for the exclusion of Spain from membership in the UN’s specialised agencies.¹⁰⁶

Two years later, Spain was admitted into the UNESCO in what ultimately would be the first step towards the complete normalisation of the Franco regime’s international links. Mexico’s representative sternly opposed the move, while the agency’s Director-General, Jaime Torres Bodet resigned his post, apparently in protest.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ *El Nacional*, August 29, 1945.

¹⁰⁴ José Gutiérrez-Ravé, *Las Cortes errantes del Frente Popular*. Madrid, Editora Nacional, 1953. pp.183-195.

* In defiance of Article 33 of the Mexican Constitution, which forbids foreigners from intervening in domestic politics, and, moreover, of the pledge they had given upon entering the country of not doing so.

¹⁰⁵ Alfonso Junco, *Méjico y los refugiados, las cortes de paja y el corte de caja*. México, Editorial Jus, 1959.

¹⁰⁶ Only Mexico along with Guatemala, Israel, Uruguay and the Soviet bloc voted against the resolution.

¹⁰⁷ *The Observer*, November 23, 1952.

For almost a quarter of a century, increasingly conservative PRI administrations upheld the fiction of diplomatic recognition to a Spanish Republic that was anything but an entelechy. In the meantime, commercial and economic ties with Francoist Spain were maintained through several unofficial Francoist emissaries and the Portuguese Embassy.

Bilateral contacts reached a new low only two months before Franco's death when the Dictatorship executed five anti-Francoists. Several European countries withdrew their Ambassadors from Madrid as a gesture of condemnation. Mexican President, Luis Echeverría, went further by calling the UN's General Assembly to expel Spain from the organisation. In addition, Mexico cancelled unilaterally all forms of trade, transport and communication with Spain.¹⁰⁸ Francoist die-hards retorted by staging massive demonstrations against the "Jewish-Masonic conspiracy against Spain," spearheaded by Mexico, while reminding of Echeverría's purported role in the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968.¹⁰⁹

With Franco's demise on November 1975, conditions for the resumption of diplomatic links seemed ripe. The Mexican government, notwithstanding, conceivably urged by the Republican exiles, delayed the move until the Spanish political situation "clarified."

In March 1977, weeks before the first democratic election in Spain in over 39 years, the governments of Mexico and the Spanish Republic agreed to cancel their diplomatic relations so that Mexico would be able to establish them with the

¹⁰⁸ "Las ejecuciones una vileza" Cancela México todo trato con España. Pide a la ONU su expulsión, in *Excélsior*, September 29, 1975.

¹⁰⁹ Echeverría had indeed been Minister of the Interior when the government of Gustavo Díaz Ordáz (1964-1970) bloodily suppressed the Mexican students' movement of 1968. The fact that spokesmen of a 'fascist regime' made damning imputations of repression against the President of a 'revolutionary' state, only served to deepen the crisis between the two countries. For allegations against Echeverría see *Arriba*, September 30, 1975 and *Ya*, October 1, 1975.

Kingdom of Spain, a polity that according to Mexican officials “now represented the majority of the Spanish people.”¹¹⁰ The renewal of diplomatic links was fully formalised ten days later on March 28, 1977.

¹¹⁰ *Excélsior*, March 19, 1977.

CONCLUSIONS

In this thesis we have focused on the Mexican aid to Republican Spain during the Spanish Civil War, the rationale behind it, its significance, and the impact that such support had with regards to its international position and in Mexico itself. We have tried to show how such support far from being symbolic was substantial and how it may have even served effectively Mexican national interests. We have also attempted to demonstrate how this aid was perceived by the Mexican revolutionary elite as a defence of its own regime against the onslaught of a burgeoning Rightist opposition, and how this same opposition was spurred by the Nationalists' victory of 1939, up to the point of threatening a similar standoff.

The Mexican government identified the Republican cause with the struggle for freedom and social justice everywhere, seeing in it analogies with the Mexican Revolution. This had positive and negative effects. By linking the lot of the Republic to the permanence of his own regime, Cárdenas assumed an incredibly high risk. In fact, the Spanish War produced a backlash in Mexico whose first manifestation was the Cedillo Rebellion of 1938-1939, reaching its climax with the Presidential Election of 1940. Newspaper reports of the time were laden with suggestions that Mexico could be the next stage of the factional war that had torn Spain.

The Spanish war had a direct impact in the Mexican political arena. Due to the obvious analogies between both countries, unsurprisingly Mexican opinion polarised between those who supported the rebellion and those who backed the Republican cause. Rightist groups, both Fascist and Catholic became staunch supporters of the Francoist cause. In fact, many among them began to long for the emergence of a Mexican *Generalísimo*.

A battle for the “cultural hegemony” was waged between the Mexican Right and Cárdenas’ government against the backdrop of the Spanish war, through the Conservative press and over an inflamed political rhetoric, with great effect, as

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demonstrated by the extraordinary upsurge of political opposition in 1939-1940.¹ The Mexican Right was successful in presenting the Revolutionary government as anti-clerical, inimical to family values and communistic, thus alienating the vast majority of Mexicans across class lines from the revolutionary regime. Every battle won by the Nationalists immediately became a boost for Mexican Conservatives in their attempts to discredit the Revolutionary regime.

Rightist groups sprang up in anticipation of the 1940 election and clearly under the spell of the Nationalists' victory in Spain. The Mexican Right included raucous supporters of European fascism as well as traditional conservatives. To both, Franco's rebellion represented not only a vindication against the excesses of the Revolution but also a model to emulate. A civil war seemed highly feasible.²

Fears aroused by the Spanish War suited the conservative opposition. Cárdenas' decision to admit in thousands of Spanish refugees became a subject of bitter controversy and a major issue in the electoral campaign. A similar animosity to that which had plunged Spain into civil strife was grievously setting in. Thus, while PAN's founder, Manuel Gómez Morín, and General Almazán castigated Cárdenas' Spanish policy denouncing it as Communistic, Lombardo Toledano and the PCM played upon popular fears of fascist aggression by linking Almazán to alleged German and Falangist plots to seize Mexico and convert the General in a Mexican version of Franco.

In the end, the revolutionary regime was able to survive, only through American backing, at the cost of capitulation from its most radical policies, and by way of temporisation with the Church and the business elite.

Mexican commitment to the Republic may not be ascribed to a single cause. It was a by-product of the rapprochement of two very different political classes, which, notwithstanding, shared a common goal of social betterment for their respective polities. While previous works have credited Cárdenas alone, we have tried to show how many other politicians intervened in that specific policy formation. Mexican sympathy with Republican Spain predated Cárdenas. Already during the

¹ John Sherman, *op. cit.* pp. 87-101

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maximato, Mexican authorities had been highly enthusiastic about the creation of a Republican Spain. This development presented the Mexican revolutionary regime with the looking glass of a modern and progressive mother country, whose secular modernisation would disprove Catholic and Hispanista Conservatives yearnings. On that account, Cárdenas advocacy of the Republican cause was simply an enhanced expression of a policy that had already existed before 1934.

In a different way, the Spanish Civil War allowed Mexico to convey its international principles of non-intervention, national self-determination and territorial integrity in search of a fairer world order and as a juridical defence, against imperialist aggression. The Mexican attitude towards Spain was the consequence of a long historical experience with foreign aggressions.

The French Intervention, when under the pretext of a civil war between Mexican Liberals and Conservatives, Napoleon III stepped in on behalf of the latter, and established a “Mexican Empire” under Maximilian of Hapsburg, could easily constitute for Mexican diplomacy a prior instance of what was happening in Spain.

More recently, the U.S. had intervened twice in Mexico during the revolutionary process. First in 1914, with the naval occupation by the Marines of Veracruz, and then through the so-called “Punitive Expedition” of 1916, launched by General Pershing against Francisco Villa.

Despite American assurances of non-intervention, enshrined in the “Good Neighbour” policy, Mexican officials still dreaded the prospect of U.S. meddling in their country’s affairs, either by deed or by omission. Hence, Mexican advocacy of the Spanish Republic at the League of Nations must also be understood as an appeal to the Great Powers, namely the U.S., to uphold international law, respect self-determination, and renounce unilateralism and military intervention.

The Mexican government was from the start in favour of collective security and firmly opposed to appeasement and capitulation to the Axis Powers’ demands. Mexican diplomacy had staked its trust to the League of Nations as a mechanism for

² Edwin Lieuwen, op. cit. pp. 127-128

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the fair and peaceful solution of controversies between countries, and had acted accordingly before the Spanish case.

Although Mexican support to the Republic was a rational decision, a strongly emotional element underlay its espousal. Sheer ideological conviction took several Mexican officials to see Spanish events through a Mexican prism, identifying the Insurgent cause with the legacy of the old Spanish colonial regime that they were attempting to uproot: large land-holding, militarism, religious prejudice, political oppression, ignorance and its sequels. Differences apart, the very nature of the Nationalists, heavily predisposed them to favour the Republic against the “all time reactionaries.” On that account, we may cite Lombardo Toledano’s statement that the Spanish people were the “last victims of Imperial Spain”, and that, “by aiding Spanish Republic, a former colony (Mexico) was helping the last remaining colony (Spain) to rid itself from the ancient yoke.”³ For that reason too, Mexican diplomatic and consular officials defended with passion the Republican cause well beyond the instructions they had been given from their national government, often engaging themselves to that cause, even in infringement of their duties.

The Mexican government’s commitment to Republican Spain represented a striking decision insofar as it involved the active engagement of Mexican diplomacy in international affairs, a major departure with the country’s long-standing tradition of isolation and restraint.

From a material point of view, it seems equally astonishing that the Cárdenas government had embarked in such a substantial logistical endeavour. As we have seen, a sophisticated infrastructure was set up by the Mexican government through its diplomatic agents to smuggle arms into Spain from third countries. Given 1930s Mexico’s circumstances, it seems remarkable that such network could have been put through and had operated effectively for such a long time. Due to the stealth with which the whole enterprise was carried out, its true extent may never be fully known.

Various authors look upon 1940 as a turning point that marked the end of the Mexican Revolution insofar as from that year Mexican administrations pursued a

³ Confederación de Trabajadores de México, *CTM, 1936-1941*. México D.F, 1941. p.154

more moderate course. Many theories have been advanced to explain such shift. This study posits the notion that the final outcome of the Spanish Civil War might have had a greater relevance on that change of course, than was previously believed. From that perspective, the Republic's defeat may have produced a renunciation of the revolutionary elite's former goals.

After 1938, it became evident that Cárdenas felt disillusioned with the working class in general and with its leaders in particular. The workers' administration of the nationalised railways had been a fiasco, while in the oil industry, workers behaved irresponsibly, pursuing personal gains rather than class interest. The obstinate backing of Lombardo to the Nazi-Soviet pact further estranged the President with the labour leader. The radical excesses of the Spanish trade unions must have played a part in this disappointment. Mexican diplomatic correspondence is awash with damning references to the unruly behaviour of the factious trade unions, and how, on many occasions these groups privileged their particular interests over the common cause of the Republic.⁴

In this sense, the Republic's defeat amidst a sea of factionalism may have had a sobering effect on the most radical elements of the Mexican Revolutionary establishment, whom thenceforth gave stability and regime consolidation an overriding importance. Hence, the need of co-opting and even incorporating into the system its conservative adversaries, namely Capital and the Church, rather than facing them in open confrontation, became an imperative.

Evidently concluding that radical reform had reached its limits, Cárdenas decided that Mexico needed a respite in the form of a more moderate successor. Ávila Camacho's choice was a clear attempt to blunt the conservatives' campaign to regain national office. On the contrary, Almazán's sabre-rattling redounded unfavourably on his candidacy, reviving fears of a new bloodshed.

Thus, the Spanish Civil War may have immunised the Mexican Revolution from falling yet again in the vicious circle of renewed rebellion and endless tumult. The atrocities produced by the Spanish war were readily available to the larger

⁴ See, among others, AHSRE, exp. III-764-1; exp.(46-0) 131.III. No.1708

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Mexican public through the press and the newsreels, which gave a thorough coverage of even its minutest details. Ten years of destructive armed struggle, 1910-1920, had already exacted a toll of more than a million lives and exhausted Mexicans' patience with uprisings.

Overall, one may conclude that Mexican support to the Spanish Republic inaugurated a tradition of progressive foreign policy for the Mexican Revolutionary regime. Mexican support for the Republic was not only an explicit instance of Cárdenas' international principles, but also of his political beliefs in general. Cárdenas wanted to build a different nation whereby Mexico, under an interventionist State, arbiter and regulator, based on the constitutional law of 1917, progressed towards a more egalitarian society, socially fairer, more educated and conscious, nationalist, yet linked to the world's democratic and anti-imperialist causes.

As with the granting of diplomatic asylum to Leon Trotsky, or the oil expropriation act of 1938, Cárdenas' advocacy of the Spanish Republic represented a reaffirmation of national sovereignty, insofar as it implied an expansion of the nation's autonomous decision making. Mexico was for the first time pursuing a protagonist role on world affairs without requesting permission or sanction from the world's hegemons.

This diplomacy reached subsequently new heights with the staunch defence of the Cuban Revolution in the Pan-American realm, the refusal to sever diplomatic relations with the Castro regime,* its defence of the Allende government and the subsequent severance of diplomatic relations with the Pinochet dictatorship. Similarly, the support for the Sandinista regime and the Mexican government's continued condemnation of South Africa's apartheid regime gave the Mexican foreign policy an immense prestige.

It goes without saying that Cárdenas would not have been able to support Spain had the international circumstances been any different. It was, precisely, the turbulent nature of the 1930s, which afforded him the chance to pursue a firm nationalist

* Mexico was the only Latin American nation not to break diplomatic relations with Cuba, despite American pressures to comply with the OAS guideline.

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stance and to maximise the benefits for his country at each juncture. Surely, Cárdenas was able to exert an unprecedented diplomatic freedom due to a favourable international context. The world recession and the rise of Fascism greatly enhanced his bargaining capacity. Cárdenas was thus able to conduct his foreign policy without risking extreme responses from the Great Powers, which he defied on several occasions. This he did with great shrewdness and skill.

Cárdenas challenged briefly the United States, only to recoil and yield to Roosevelt's pressures when the U.S. threatened to squeeze the noose. Cárdenas confronted Britain in the knowledge that its imminent collision with Germany would prevent it from undertaking military retribution against Mexico. He sold all sides as much oil as he could, exploiting the differences between the Great Powers, and even had the audacity to give moral lessons to the European Powers from the rostrum afforded by the League of Nations.⁵ As far as the Spanish case is concerned, Cárdenas' views ran counter to mainstream opinion, and still was able to get away with it.

World events worked in Cárdenas favour and vindicated his stance: After 1939 fascism came to be perceived by the U.S. as a greater threat than Mexican nationalism. Thus it became increasingly imperative for Washington to prevent Mexico from falling into the Axis orbit. Although the expropriation act of 1938 had strained relations between Mexico and the U.S., Roosevelt upheld the Good Neighbour policy in the face of Fascist threat to Latin America. The relative success of Mexican diplomacy may be seen in the fact that Roosevelt was persuaded to abstain from intervening in Mexico and in his refusal to aid either Cedillo or Almazán. Washington tightened the enforcement of the Neutrality Act, prosecuting American arms dealers for selling implements of war to Mexican army officers without a permit. Thus, the dreaded military rising failed to materialise. In the end, his position on Spain helped him persuade Roosevelt that Mexico would be a reliable ally in the approaching hostilities.

⁵ Friedrich Schuler, *op. cit.* p.202

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Last but not least, Mexico's support to Republican Spain, up to the bitter end, yielded it the dividend of a sizeable immigration of intellectuals and skilled cadres.⁶ While the immigration was never as numerous as Cárdenas had hoped for or expected, it was qualitatively transcendent, as it impacted deeply in the expansion of Mexican academia, research and development. Most refugees were intellectuals, scientists and professionals. Their contribution to Mexican culture was by all standards outstanding.

Finally, the arrival of a the Spanish exiles provided Mexicans with the opportunity to get acquainted firsthand with actual Spaniards, of progressive outlook, very different from the shallow stereotypes fed to them through generations of nationalist education. Thus, the image of the greedy *gachupín* was cast off for good from the Mexican imagery.

⁶ Patricia Fagen op. cit. pp. 192-204

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