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VIOLENCE IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY MEXICO

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VIOLENCE IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY MEXICO*

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ABSTRACT

Despite the formal end of civil war and armed conflict, Mexico continued to experience significant levels of violence during the 1930s and 1940s. This period has traditionally been associated with the process of pacification, institutionalization, and centralization of power that enabled the consolidation of rule in post-revolutionary Mexico; a process epitomized by the marked national decline in levels of homicide that began during the 1940s and continued throughout the second half of the twentieth-century. However, the dynamics of coercion and resistance that characterized state-society relations during this period, particularly at the regional and local levels, reveal that violence pervaded all aspects of society and that it was perpetrated by a multiplicity of actors, including vigilantes, pistoleros, private militias, lynch mobs, military, police, and others, including violent entrepreneurs. Violence was used both as a means to contest the legitimacy of the post-revolutionary state project and as an instrument of control and coercion on behalf of political elites and local power brokers. Conversely, violence superseded the realm of traditional politics and constituted a central force shaping Mexican society. Violence against women in both the public and private sphere, violence driven by economic interests, and violence incurred in citizens' attempts to control crime and social transgressions, reveal that citizens—and not only state actors—contributed to the reproduction of violence. Although violence in post-revolutionary Mexico was neither centralized nor exercised in a top-down manner, impunity and collusion between criminal and political elements were central to the production and perpetuation of violence, both within the Mexican state and within civil society. When examined in light of these two decades of the post-revolutionary period, the character and levels of violence in contemporary Mexico appear less as an aberration and more as the latest expression of a longer historical trajectory, uneven and nonlinear, of decentralized, multifaceted, and multi-actor forms of violence.

RESUMEN

A pesar de la ausencia formal de guerra civil y conflicto armado, México continuó experimentando niveles significativos de violencia durante las décadas de 1930 y 1940. A este periodo se le ha asociado tradicionalmente con el proceso de pacificación, institucionalización y centralización del poder que permitió la consolidación del régimen político durante el México post-revolucionario; un proceso marcado por la disminución, a nivel nacional, de los niveles de homicidio desde la década de 1940 y durante la segunda mitad del siglo veinte. No obstante, las dinámicas de coerción y resistencia que caracterizaron las relaciones Estado-sociedad a nivel local y regional durante este periodo revelan que la violencia, lejos de estar ausente, permeaba todos los aspectos de la sociedad y era perpetrada por una multiplicidad de actores, incluidos grupos de autodefensa, pistoleros, milicias privadas, turbas responsables de linchamientos, militares, policías y otros actores violentos. La violencia fue utilizada como un medio para cuestionar la legitimidad del Estado post-revolucionario, tanto como un instrumento de control y coerción por parte de élites políticas y operadores políticos a nivel local. Así mismo, el uso de la violencia iba más allá del ámbito tradicional de la política y constituía más bien una fuerza central que alteró las relaciones sociales y a la sociedad mexicana en general. La violencia en contra de las mujeres en la esfera pública y privada, la violencia motivada por intereses económicos, y el intento por parte de

ciudadanos de controlar el delito y otras transgresiones sociales, ponen en evidencia que los ciudadanos – y no solo los actores estatales – contribuyeron a la reproducción de la violencia. Aunque la violencia en el México post-revolucionario no fue ejercida de manera centralizada ni de manera vertical, la impunidad y la connivencia entre actores políticos y criminales fueron elementos centrales en la producción y reproducción de la violencia al interior del Estado y de la sociedad civil en general. Al ser analizada a la luz de estas dos décadas del periodo post-revolucionario, el carácter y los niveles de violencia que caracterizan al México contemporáneo aparecen menos como una aberración y más como la expresión más reciente de una larga, aunque heterogénea y de ninguna manera lineal, trayectoria histórica de formas de violencia descentralizada, multifacética, y perpetrada por una multiplicidad de actores en el país.

Over the last ten years, levels of violence in Mexico have drawn significant attention at the national and international levels. Beginning in 2007 in the context of the federal government's all-out war against drug-trafficking organizations, the country experienced a spike in homicide rates that reversed a historical downward trend in levels of lethal violence observable since the 1940s.¹ The absolute number of killings and homicide rates in the country reached new highs in 2017, 2018, and then again in 2019, with conservative estimates indicating that 20 percent of all homicides are driven by organized crime.² In addition to homicides, human rights organizations have denounced the disappearance of 37,000 people, as well as the targeting and assassination of journalists, human rights activists, and religious authorities.³ Adding to the visibility of violence in Mexico, many of the killings perpetrated by criminal organizations include brutal methods of torture, including dismemberment, hangings, and the display of corpses in public spaces, such as bridges and large avenues.⁴ To many observers, Mexico's contemporary context of insecurity and criminal violence signals a clear moment of crisis in a country otherwise considered to be on a steady path of democratic stability and macroeconomic growth.

Despite the recent attention it has received, violence is certainly not new to Mexico. Neither the levels of homicide the country has experienced during the first two decades of the twentieth-first century, nor the particularly brutal and visible character of the violence are entirely novel phenomena. Violence has undoubtedly changed, and drug-trafficking organizations—their criminal activities increasingly fragmented and diversified—were not always at the center of the country's history of violence. Nonetheless, violence has been a fundamental force driving Mexico's process of state building since the country gained independence and recognition as a

¹ Source: Pablo Piccato, "Estadísticas del crimen en México: Series históricas, 1901–2001," <http://www.columbia.edu/~pp143/estadisticascrimen/EstadisticasSigloXX.htm>. According to Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography, (INEGI), in 2018 alone there were a total of 35,964 homicides in Mexico, which represents a homicide rate of 29 homicides per one hundred thousand inhabitants. See: INEGI, "Comunicado de Prensa Núm. 347/19," July 25, 2019, available at: <https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/saladeprensa/boletines/2019/EstSegPub/homicidios2018.pdf>, last accessed November 25, 2019.

² Laura Y. Calderón et al., *Organized Crime and Violence in Mexico*, University of San Diego, April 2019.

³ Daniel Wilkinson, "Mexico: The Other Disappeared," January 15, 2019, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/15/mexico-other-disappeared>, last accessed December 1, 2019; Congressional Research Service, "Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug-Trafficking Organizations," August 15, 2019, available at: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41576.pdf>, last accessed December 1, 2019.

⁴ On the visibility of violence and the incentives for criminal organizations to hide or display violence, see: Angélica Durán Martínez, *The Politics of Drug Violence: Criminals, Cops, and Politicians in Mexico and Colombia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 35–64.

sovereign nation.⁵ Violence has also been at the center of the social, cultural, and political dynamics observed both in state-society relationships and within Mexican society.

At the outset of the twentieth century, the 1910 Revolution and the civil war that ensued (c. 1910–1920) claimed the lives of more than one million people, most of them men from the popular sectors of society, particularly the peasantry.⁶ Massive executions, political assassinations, rape, looting, destruction of private property, and attacks carried out amongst different revolutionary factions and between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces, were all expressions of the violence that unfolded after the dictator Porfirio Díaz (c.1876–1911) was effectively overthrown by the revolutionaries. Although geographically circumscribed to the central-western region, the Cristero War (1926–1929)—Mexico’s conflict over the religions question—also translated into violent confrontations between revolutionaries and those militant Catholics that opposed the secular, socialist, and anti-clerical undercurrents of the revolution.⁷ Estimated in the thousands, the killings during the Cristero War also involved a great level of highly visible brutality, such as executions, mutilations, and torture—including cutting off the soles of victims’ feet and hanging people from their thumbs—as well as dumping bodies on the roads for all to see.⁸ The Cristero War would not be the last expression of religious violence in Mexico and its political and symbolic repercussions would be felt during the following decades. And although revolutionary violence was replaced by a more institutionalized, centralized, and civilianized “revolutionary” regime during the 1930s, the politics and policies of this regime remained contentious, and violence continued to be a constant feature of state-society relations, as well as of everyday interactions taking place within communities and neighborhoods.

⁵ See: Eric Van Young, *The Other Rebellion: Popular Violence, Ideology, and the Mexican Struggle for Independence, 1810–1821*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002; Paul Vanderwood, *The Power of God against the Guns of Government: Religious Upheaval in Mexico at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998; Friedrich Katz, ed., *Riot, Rebellion and Revolution: Rural Social Conflict in Mexico*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988.

⁶ Alan Knight, “War, Violence and Homicide in Modern Mexico,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 32, no. s1 (2013): 12–48; Friedrich Katz, “Violence and Terror in the Russian and Mexican Revolutions,” in Gilbert M. Joseph and Greg Grandin, eds., *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America’s Long Cold War*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 45–63.

⁷ Matthew Butler, *Popular Piety and Political Identity in Mexico’s Cristero Rebellion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; Jean A. Meyer, *The Cristero Rebellion: The Mexican People Between Church and State 1926–1929*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976. On Cristero militancy in Mexico City and its relationship to violence, see: Robert Weis, *For Christ and Country: Militant Catholic Youth in Post-Revolutionary Mexico*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

⁸ See, for instance, Archivo del Centro de Estudios de Historia de México Carso, Fondo Personajes Cristeros, DXV.35.20, DXV.35.2, DXV.35.21.

In this paper I examine the persistence of several expressive and brutal forms of violence during the decades of the 1930s and 1940s, a period that has traditionally been associated with the process of pacification, institutionalization, and centralization of power that enabled the consolidation of rule in post-revolutionary Mexico. I show how the occurrence and legitimation of violence escaped the realm of the law and the direct control of the state and was instead exercised by a multiplicity of actors. When violence is observed at the local and regional levels, it becomes evident that it was neither centralized nor exercised in a top-down manner. Its perpetuation was fueled by impunity, the connivances between criminal and official elements, but also by social constructs that contributed to shape the acceptability of violence within society.

DISCUSSION OF THE LITERATURE

Before the 2007 spike in homicides, Mexico was considered an exemplar in terms of its levels of institutional consolidation and democratic stability. Set against the trajectory of dictatorships, revolutions, and counter-revolutions characterizing Latin America throughout the twentieth century, Mexico was seen as a country that had managed to avert social and political upheaval through corporatist inclusion, corruption, cultural politics, and selective use of force.⁹ The country's relative stability was seen as a direct outcome of the process of state building that followed the 1910 Mexican Revolution. The 1930s and 1940s, in particular, had traditionally been seen as a watershed moment in the country's trajectory of institutionalization and political consolidation. Later, under a narrative that highlighted the regime's use of cooptation and cultural politics over direct repression, the student massacre of 1968 in Tlatelolco was interpreted as a deviation from an otherwise stable process of pacification and democratization.¹⁰

Over the last two decades, several scholars have called into question the characterization of Mexico as an "exception" within Latin America's trajectory of violence. Scholars have also questioned a periodization that had traditionally presented the decades from the 1930s to the

⁹ See, for instance, John Bailey and Leopoldo Gómez, "The PRI and Political Liberalization," *Journal of International Affairs* 43, no. 2 (1990), pp. 297–9; Juan Molinar, *El tiempo de legitimidad: elecciones, autoritarismo y democracia en México*, Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 1991; Joy Langston, "Breaking Out is Hard to Do: Exit, Voice, and Loyalty in Mexico's One-Party Hegemonic Regime," *Latin American Politics and Society* 44, no. 3 (2002), pp. 61–88; Daniel C. Levy and Kathleen Bruhn with Emilio Zebadúa, *Mexico: The Struggle for Democratic Development*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006, pp. 5–6.

¹⁰ Miguel Centeno, *Democracy Within Reason: Technocratic Revolution in Mexico*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, pp. 179–180.

1950s as the pinnacle of the “pax-priísta”¹¹ and have complicated a narrative that privileged a top-down, state-centered, and center-centered understanding of violence. One of the earliest and most influential works in this regard was a series of individual essays published by historian Alan Knight, which showed how the so-called trajectory of progressive stabilization, civilianization, and pacification did not hold when examined beyond the federal level. Not only was violence prevalent in labor, agrarian, and electoral conflicts at the state and municipal levels, but as Knight suggested, to a certain extent “the successful elimination of violence at the national level involved its displacement to the provinces...”¹² The collection of essays edited by Wil G. Pansters, *Violence, Coercion, and State-Making in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, further contributed to pluralize and advance scholarly interpretations of violence in Mexico.¹³ The book’s authors demonstrate that violence was not an exceptional or external force, but that it had instead a constitutive role in the country’s process of state building and democratization throughout the twentieth century. Moreover, through a discussion of the practices used by pistoleros, drug-traffickers, union thugs, police officers, and violent entrepreneurs, the authors are also able to contest a state-centered understanding of violence and focus on the ways in which violence was utilized by both political and criminal actors in ways that could at times expand, and at others limit, the influence of political elites.

Vigilantes and pistoleros have been the focus of attention of several recent studies. Ben Fallaw’s book *Religion and State Formation in Postrevolutionary Mexico* examines the actions of armed groups of Catholic vigilantes who opposed the socialist education, agrarian reform, and secularizing and anti-religious policies promoted by the state.¹⁴ In his account, attacks perpetrated in the context of the Second Cristiada involved both offensive forms of violence enacted by vigilantes, as well as defensive forms of violence carried out by spontaneous mobs of

¹¹ The notion of a “pax priísta” consisted in presenting the 1930s and even more so the 1940s–1950s as a period characterized by a steady process of pacification, political stability, and decreasing levels of violence, resulting from the institutional and socioeconomic foundations laid out by the PRI and the generation of politicians, bureaucrats, and powerbrokers that emerged from the revolution.

¹² Alan Knight, “Political Violence in Post-Revolutionary Mexico,” in Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt, eds., *Societies of Fear: The Legacy of Civil War, Violence and Terror in Latin America*, London: Zed Books, 1999, p. 107; Alan Knight, “Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26, no. 1 (1994); Alan Knight, “Habitus and Homicide: Political Culture in Revolutionary Mexico,” in Wil Pansters, ed., *Citizens of the Pyramid: Essays on Mexican Political Culture*, Purdue University Press, 1997, pp. 107–30.

¹³ Wil G. Pansters, ed., *Violence, Coercion, and State-Making in Twentieth-Century Mexico: The Other Half of the Centaur*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012.

¹⁴ Ben Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation in Postrevolutionary Mexico*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.

women, men, and even children. In a recent article, Salvador Salinas traces the motivations and activities of the Catholic vigilante Enrique Rodríguez, alias *El Tallarín*, and finds that his use of violence responded to religious reasons as much as it did to political and agrarian grievances.¹⁵ Both of these works complement and expand the rich body of literature that has dealt with the violent confrontations taking place during the Cristero War. Among many other works, this literature includes Jean Meyer's *The Cristero Rebellion*, Matthew Butler's *Popular Piety and Political Identity in Mexico's Cristero Rebellion*, and Robert Weis's *For Christ and Country*.¹⁶

Pistoleros are at the center of Pablo Piccato's book *A History of Infamy: Crime, Truth, and Justice in Mexico*. Piccato's work not only illustrates the multiple actors that exercised violence in post-revolutionary Mexico but also brings to the fore the realm of culture, politics, and everyday life in the reproduction of violence. In his account, pistoleros represented the impunity that went hand in hand with political power and illustrated the extent to which politicians used violence—both legal and illegal—in order to maintain political control. Far from the Weberian ideal that entailed the emergence of a bureaucratic body able to exercise violence and punishment through legal means, pistoleros were “violence experts” on hire, who exercised violence illegally and who were accountable only to their political bosses. The relationship between politics and pistoleros is also the subject of Benjamin Smith's *Pistoleros and Popular Movements: The Politics of State Formation in Postrevolutionary Oaxaca*.¹⁷ This regional-level study demonstrates that state formation depended on political intermediaries and violent entrepreneurs who had the capacity to negotiate and challenge the mandates of the central government.

As Paul Gillingham has argued, although central elites were quick to disregard violence taking place in the countryside or in the country's periphery as an expression of atavistic or backward traditions, most violence was actually essential for the maintenance of the regime.¹⁸ In particular, post-revolutionary elites depended on pistoleros and local power brokers in order to exercise social and political control in regions and localities where the central state did not have a

¹⁵ Salvador Salinas, “Untangling Mexico's Noodle: El Tallarín and the Revival of Zapatismo in Morelos, 1934–1938,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 46, no. 3 (2014), pp. 471–99.

¹⁶ Meyer, *The Cristero Rebellion*; Matthew Butler, *Popular Piety and Political Identity in Mexico's Cristero Rebellion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; Weis, *For Christ and Country*.

¹⁷ Benjamin T. Smith, *Pistoleros and Popular Movements: The Politics of State Formation in Postrevolutionary Oaxaca*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009.

¹⁸ Paul Gillingham, “Who Killed Crispín Aguilar? Violence and Order in the Postrevolutionary Countryside,” in Pansters, *Violence, Coercion, and State-Making in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, p. 105.

prevailing presence. Among the local power brokers who were necessary to keep up an appearance of centralized and top-down control were caciques, the political bosses who have permeated politics and state rule for decades in Mexico.¹⁹ As argued by Gillingham and Smith in their edited volume *Dictablanda*, negotiation of political power was an act of necessity on behalf of a regime that escaped conventional definitions of dictatorship or democracy.²⁰

Although scholarly literature published during the 2000s and 2010s has complicated the narrative of centralized state control, several works have demonstrated that violence was nonetheless exercised by the state and by central political elites in order to repress social mobilizations and political dissidence, and this so before the 1960s and 1970s. Workers, peasants, and students who demanded the government fulfill the radical promises of the revolution were subject to imprisonment, torture, and political assassinations by the police and military. Tanalís Padilla's *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata* demonstrates how peasant demands for land and economic modernization were met with contempt and then outright repression once peasants decided to mobilize through armed rebellion in mid-twentieth century Morelos.²¹ Similarly, Gladys McCormick's *The Logic of Compromise in Mexico* shows how central elites used selective repression against political opponents in the countryside and enabled the use of coercive and extralegal practices by public officials and power brokers at the regional and local levels during the 1950s.²² According to McCormick, Cold War politics provided elites with the rationale to criminalize leftist radical ideas. Situated also against the backdrop of the Cold War, Robert Alegre's *Railroad Radicals in Cold War Mexico* traces the mobilizations of railroad workers and their repression by the Mexican military in the 1950s.²³ The repression of political dissidents by the military at the height of the regime's so-called stability highlights

¹⁹ Caciques' influence and use of violence during and beyond the post-revolutionary period is the focus of the edited volumes by Alan Knight and Wil Pansters and by Ben Fallaw and Terry Rugeley: Alan Knight and W. G. Pansters, eds., *Caciquismo in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2005; Ben Fallaw and Terry Rugeley, eds., *Forced Marches: Soldiers and Military Caciques in Modern Mexico*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012.

²⁰ Paul Gillingham and Benjamin T. Smith, eds., *Dictablanda: Politics, Work, and Culture in Mexico, 1938–1968*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

²¹ Tanalís Padilla, *Rural Resistance in the Land of Zapata: the Jaramillista Movement and the Myth of the Pax-Priista 1940–1962*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. On Rubén Jaramillo's movement and other armed peasants groups emerging in the following decades, see also: Verónica Oikión Solano and Marta Eugenia García Ugarte, eds., *Movimientos armados en México, siglo XX*, Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán/CIESAS, 2006, and Laura Castellanos, *México armado. 1943–1981*, México: Ediciones Era, 2007.

²² Gladys McCormick, *The Logic of Compromise in Mexico: How the Countryside Was Key to the Emergence of Authoritarianism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016.

²³ Robert F. Alegre, *Railroad Radicals in Cold War Mexico: Gender, Class, and Memory*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013.

central elites' continuous reliance on the army to exercise control and political power. Thomas Rath's *Myths of Demilitarization in Postrevolutionary Mexico, 1920–1960* examines the precise ways in which the military engaged in political repression, corruption, and provincial politics, all under an appearance of a nation under civilian rule.²⁴

There are many more works that deal mainly with the 1960s and 1970s, going beyond the period covered by this article. The earlier work of Sergio Aguayo, *La Charola*, on the origins and evolution of the Mexican intelligence services, was pioneer in its exploration of the government's political use of surveillance and information gathering as a tool to repress radical students and guerrillas during the 1970s.²⁵ More recent and equally influential works, including Jaime Pensado's *Rebel Mexico*, Alexander Aviña's *Specters of Revolution*, and Fernando Calderón Herrera and Adela Cedillo's edited volume, *Challenging Authoritarianism in Mexico*, bring to the fore the state's use of violence in the context of Mexico's Cold War and "dirty war," relating the ways in which guerrilla organizations, student activists, and labor leaders both resisted and contributed to shaping the country's process of state formation during this period.²⁶ Taken together, these works make significant contributions to understanding the precursors of repression and resistance that inform the context of violence in present-day Mexico. They further allow for a more nuanced examination of the institutional and cultural legacies that connect the dirty war with the country's contemporary war on drugs.

The present article contributes to this growing historiography by putting different expressions of violence—criminal, religious, political, gender-based—in conversation as well as by offering an original analytical framework to examine the ways in which violence was perpetrated and legitimated by both state and non-state actors. Focusing on the formative decades of the post-revolutionary period, which set the foundations of the PRIista rule that prevailed throughout the twentieth century, the article moves away from approaches that are either primarily or exclusively centered on state-sanctioned violence and incorporates instead the many

²⁴ Thomas Rath, *Myths of Demilitarization in Postrevolutionary Mexico, 1920–1960*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013.

²⁵ Sergio Aguayo Quezada, *La Charola. Una historia de los servicios de inteligencia en México*, México: Grijalbo, 2001.

²⁶ Jaime M. Pensado, *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture during the Long Sixties*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013; Alexander Aviña, *Specters of Revolution: Peasant Guerrillas in the Cold War Mexican Countryside*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014; Fernando Herrera Calderón and Adela Cedillo, eds., *Challenging Authoritarianism in Mexico: Revolutionary Struggles and the Dirty War, 1964–1982*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

forms of violence and harm that pervaded societal relations as well as citizens' interactions with the state. In doing so my aim is not to deny the coercive character of the post-revolutionary state but rather highlight how the state's coercive powers intersected with, and were propelled by, citizens' understanding of violence as a legitimate means to resolve disputes and respond to crimes. The opposite holds also true. Societal violence, in the form of violence against women and lynching, for instance, was made possible by the negligence and active complicity of state actors.

THE POST-REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD: THE MACRO APPROACH

The temporal boundaries of the post-revolutionary period can be traced back to as early as the 1920s, with most scholarly literature identifying the 1950s as its closing decade. Nonetheless, since the party that emerged after the 1910 Revolution—first called the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (National Revolutionary Party or PNR) and later the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Revolutionary Institutional Party or PRI)—retained control of the presidency until the year 2000, some consider most or all of the twentieth century post-revolutionary. For the purposes of this article, the focus will be on the formative decades of the 1930s and 1940s, with the first decade representing the most radical phase of revolutionary social reform and the second marking the beginning of a conservative phase that deepened the corporatist structure established during the prior decade while stripping the regime of most of its social and redistributive promises.²⁷ The different expressions of violence taking place in both of these decades constitute key precursors to the violence that would shape the country during the next decades of the twentieth century.

By 1930, Mexico had left behind two decades of civil war and large-scale armed conflict and transitioned to a period of formal peace. The end of the armed phase of the revolution, together with the 1929 accords or "*arreglos*" that brought an end to the Cristero War, inaugurated a period marked by political elites' efforts to build the institutional and political foundations of the post-revolutionary regime. Such efforts included the development of a national party structure, large-scale land distribution, and the secularization of public life, as well as the incorporation of different sectors of society—peasants, workers, teachers, and local

²⁷ Knight, "Political Violence in Post-Revolutionary Mexico," p. 107.

powerbrokers—into the party-state machinery.²⁸ The presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940), in particular, was characterized by a concerted effort to modernize the countryside and to promote institutional channels of participation for peasants and urban workers alike.

The 1940s signaled a shift towards more conservative politics as well as the abandonment of some of the more radical redistribution policies promoted by Cárdenas. This decade also marked the beginning of a period of greater economic and political stability in terms of macroeconomic growth, institutionalization of political dissent, civilianization of rule, and the “taming” or disciplining of regional caciques.²⁹ Coercion and repression were certainly not absent, but they became increasingly selective and covert, especially when observed at the aggregate level and in connection with political disputes that concerned the central government.³⁰ In terms of levels of lethal violence, the 1940s saw a reduction in national homicide rates. Between 1936 and 1940 the rate was 38 homicides per 100 thousand inhabitants.³¹ Between 1941 and 1945, the rate had dropped to 31; and between 1946 and 1950, to 29. This downward trend would continue for the rest of the twentieth century and would only be reversed in 2007.

It is against these national, macro, state-centered, and center-centered³² trends that the narrative of an idealized pax-priista had, until recently, been upheld by media and official accounts sympathetic to the regime.³³ According to this narrative, the post-revolutionary state’s tendency to privilege cooptation and covert forms of control vis-à-vis overt repression was only interrupted during the late 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, in the context of the series of

²⁸ Adrian A. Bantjes, *As If Jesus Walked on Earth: Cardenismo, Sonora, and the Mexican Revolution*, Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 1998; Mary K. Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930–1940*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997; Mary K. Vaughan and Stephen Lewis, eds. *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

²⁹ Gilbert M. Joseph, Anne Rubenstein, and Eric Zolov, “Assembling the Fragments,” in *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico Since 1940*, edited by Gilbert M. Joseph, Anne Rubenstein, and Eric Zolov, Duke University Press, 2001; Alejandro Quintana, *Maximino Ávila Camacho and the One-Party State*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010; Stephen R. Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s: Modernity, Politics, and Corruption*, Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2001; Alan Knight, “Caciquismo in Twentieth-Century Mexico,” in Knight and Pansters, *Caciquismo in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, pp. 12–3.

³⁰ Gillingham, “Who Killed Crispín Aguilar?” p. 105; Knight, “War, Violence and Homicide in Modern Mexico,” p. 34–5.

³¹ Piccato, “Estadísticas del crimen en México.”

³² That is, dynamics that take place in the country’s capital and that involve mainstream politics and events. For a critique of state-centered and center-centered approaches to understanding the workings of hegemony in Mexico, see: Jeffrey W. Rubin, “Decentering the Regime: Culture and Regional Politics in Mexico,” *Latin American Research Review* 31, no. 3 (1996), pp. 85–126.

³³ For critiques of this narrative, see: Padilla, *Rural Resistance*; Gillingham and Smith, *Dictablanda*; Rath, *Myths of Demilitarization*.

militarized and repressive tactics used by the government against guerrillas, radical student movements, teachers, and unionized workers. Evidence from the 1930s and 1940s, however, suggests that overt and brutal forms of violence were not absent from these years, certainly when observed at the regional and local levels. More importantly, violence was actually central to the dynamics of coercion, resistance, and accommodation characterizing the country's process of state building during this period, as well as to the social, political, and cultural forces shaping local communities and civil society in general.

CHARACTERIZING VIOLENCE IN THE POST-REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD

Although expressed in multiple forms (e.g., state-led violence, domestic violence, vigilante killings, violent crimes) and perpetrated by a variety of actors (e.g., military, police, criminal groups, individual actors, lynch mobs), it is possible to identify three general characteristics in regards to the occurrence and reproduction of violence in post-revolutionary Mexico. The first characteristic relates to the fact that the perceived legitimacy of violence did not stem from the existing legal order or from the state's sanctioning of what constituted rightful or tolerable conduct. Rather, it stemmed from socially constructed understandings of the acceptability of violence based on religious beliefs, political ideologies, gender-based constructs, and economic interests, all of which escaped the realm of the law or the direct control of the state. As a matter of fact, many forms of violence in post-revolutionary Mexico directly contested and called into question the post-revolutionary project, particularly in regards to the state's economic and social policies as well as to the political elites' attempt to secularize society and centralize power. For instance, Catholic militants who continued to support armed rebellion and violent forms of militancy after the 1929 accords construed violence as a legitimate response to an immoral and tyrannical government, based on religious and symbolic grounds. Radical peasants who opposed the reformist and at times conservative policies advanced by the post-revolutionary state defended their right to arm themselves by appealing to the original promises of the revolution that, in their view, had been betrayed by political elites. In sum, Mexico's post-revolutionary state did not have, as the classic Weberian model would have it, a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence.

The second characteristic relates to violence as a phenomenon that was neither centralized nor exercised in a top-down manner during the post-revolutionary period. Violence was exercised

by a multiplicity of actors at the regional and local levels—from regional caciques to local power brokers, vigilante groups, and violent entrepreneurs—who were able to act with a significant level of impunity and discretionary power thanks to the central state’s incapacity or unwillingness to control and curb their actions. Examples of perpetrators include pistoleros, armed men hired privately by public officials, politicians, or local elites to carry out “dirty jobs” such as extrajudicial killings;³⁴ *guardias blancas* or *defensas rurales*, both of which operated as militias that favored the interests of large landowners and local political elites;³⁵ groups of vigilantes motivated by religious or political reasons, or a combination of both.³⁶ There were also attacks perpetrated by more spontaneous and ephemeral groups such as rioters and lynch mobs,³⁷ as well as by random transgressors involved in interpersonal forms of violence, from robberies to rape and domestic violence.³⁸ Although these violent activities were in some cases in tune with the political interests of local and regional elites, they were not always aligned with the interests or preferences of central elites. In other cases, the acts actually contested the politics of local, regional, and federal elites. In yet others, these acts simply escaped the sphere of traditional politics (e.g., electoral competition, party disputes, or armed mobilizations against the state) and were linked instead to intra-community conflicts, family disputes, private vendettas, or villagers’ attempts to control crime.

The third characteristic refers to the central role that impunity and the connivance between criminal and official elements had in the production and perpetuation of violence in post-revolutionary Mexico. Political elites and public officials used both the military and the police in order to advance their interests and secure their rule through the use of coercive tactics. As a result, the police and the military, which were supposed to protect citizens’ personal safety, became instead a threat to citizens as both forces participated actively in the repression of

³⁴ Pablo Piccato, “Pistoleros, *Ley Fuga*, and Uncertainty in Public Debates about Murder in Twentieth-Century Mexico,” in Gillingham and Smith, *Dictablanda*, p. 329; Smith, *Pistoleros and Popular Movements*.

³⁵ Knight, “War, Violence and Homicide in Modern Mexico,” p. 39; Antonio Santoyo, “La mano negra: en defensa de la propiedad y el orden: Veracruz, 1928–1943,” *Secuencia. Revista de Historia y Ciencias Sociales* 28 (1994), pp. 81–98.

³⁶ Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation*; Salinas, “Untangling Mexico’s Noodle.”

³⁷ Gema Kloppe-Santamaría, “Lynching and the Politics of State Formation in Post-Revolutionary Puebla (1930s–1950s),” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 51, no. 3 (2019), pp. 499–521.

³⁸ Robert Buffington and Pablo Piccato, eds., *True Stories of Crime in Modern Mexico*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009; Susana Sosenski, and Gabriela Pulido eds., *Hampones, pelados y pecatrices. Sujetos peligrosos en la ciudad de México, 1940–1960*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2019; Martha Santillán Esqueda, “Mujeres Delinquentes e Imaginarios. Criminología, Cine y Nota Roja En México, 1940–1950,” *Varia Historia* 33, no. 62 (2017), pp. 389–418.

unionized workers, organized peasants, and political dissidents. Telegrams and letters of complaint written by citizens to the president or other high-level officials referred explicitly to the participation of mayors, police commanders, and military personnel in the harassment, intimidation, torture, and killing of *compañeros* (fellow activists) or family members.³⁹ Security reports prepared by federal inspectors, who reported conflicts or political tensions in given localities, also offered a window into the overt forms of repression used by politicians and public officials alike, particularly in the countryside.⁴⁰ Perpetrated by state actors in conjunction with landowners or local elites, these expressions of violence contributed to undermine the credibility of state authorities and citizens' trust in them as well as to perpetuate the cycle of impunity that rendered these forms of violence possible and seemingly un-punishable. Even more, the participation of state actors in illicit forms of violence and abuse contributed to blur the lines between legal and illegal forms of violence.

These three general characteristics point at how intimately connected violence was to the country's process of state building and to the social and political dynamics observed within Mexican society. The following sections, "The Contested State," "The Coercive State," and "Societal Violence," bring to the fore how these characteristics both reflected and contributed to different expressions of violence that were not only directed at and perpetrated by the state, but also carried out and directed against non-state actors. The first two characteristics described above—that violence was sanctioned not only by the state and that it was perpetrated by a multiplicity of actors—help explain the occurrence of violence organized against, or in reaction to, the post-revolutionary state (see "The Contested State," below). These two characteristics also shed light on the fact that violence was driven by social or intra-community conflicts that did not involve state actors and escaped traditional politics altogether (see "Societal Violence" section below). The third characteristic—that violence was driven by impunity and by the criminal behavior of political actors—illuminates the use of coercion by state actors as well as the blurred lines or "grey zones" between criminal and political elements (see "The Coercive State").⁴¹

³⁹ These letters can be found in the Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter, ANG), in the presidential archives or *Ramo Presidentes*.

⁴⁰ Such reports are located in the AGN, particularly in the *Fondo Secretaría de Gobernación, Dirección General de Gobierno (DGG) and Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (DGIPS)*.

⁴¹ On the notion of the grey zone between legal and illegal forms of violence as it pertains to modern Mexico, see: Pansters, *Violence, Coercion, and State-Making*.

The Contested State

Despite the formal end of large-scale armed conflicts, violence organized against the policies and politics promoted by the post-revolutionary state was not absent in the decades of the 1930s and 1940s. Perhaps the most dramatic example of the discontent and armed mobilizations produced by the state's cultural and economic policies during this period was the series of collective attacks perpetrated against federal teachers between 1934 and 1938. These attacks were organized in opposition to the implementation of socialist education, a policy introduced in December 1934 with the aim of nationalizing public education, promoting a secular and rational model of education, and modernizing the countryside through agrarian reform, sanitation and literacy campaigns, and a resolute fight against "religious fanaticism."⁴²

For Catholics, socialist education constituted a direct threat to their material interests and spiritual beliefs, including the defense of private property, the "natural" right to educate their children, and the observance of Catholic values and rituals. Socialist education also represented a direct threat to Catholics' personal safety and their spiritual wellbeing. Implemented through the use of cultural and educational programs, this policy was also promoted with coercive tactics—including the burning of churches and statues of saints, the expulsion and harassment of Catholic leaders, and the extrajudicial killing of armed groups of Catholic vigilantes. In this sense, Catholics' contestation of the cultural politics of the state was also a reaction to its coercive nature.

Considered an expression of the Second Cristiada or the second Cristero uprising, attacks against federal teachers were concentrated in the Bajío—Guanajuato, Jalisco, Nayarit, and Querétaro—as well as in the states of Veracruz, Puebla, and Michoacán.⁴³ Catholics' use of violence against teachers was conspicuous. It included hangings, rape, burning, and maiming (including the mutilation of ears and genitals) as well as the destruction and pillage of public schools.⁴⁴ This violence was perpetrated both by spontaneous mobs and by organized groups of

⁴² On the socialist education, see: David L. Raby, *Educación y revolución social en México*, Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1974; Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*. On the Second Cristiada and the violence unleashed against teachers, see: Salinas, "Untangling Mexico's Noodle"; Fallaw, *Religion and State*.

⁴³ Raby, *Educación y revolución social*, p. 191.

⁴⁴ See, for instance, "Maestros socialistas sin orejas. Se las cortó un núcleo de gente alzada," *Excélsior*, November 19, 1935; "Llegan las maestras a quienes les cortaron los alzados las orejas," *Excélsior*, November 24, 1935; "Maestro víctima de unos vecinos," *Excélsior*, September 18, 1935; "Fue quemado un maestro rural y otro más fue vilmente mutilado," *Excélsior*, April 21, 1936; "Rinde informes de la investigación practicada en la Zona de Teziutlán, Puebla," AGN, DGIPS, Caja 71, Ex. 2.

vigilantes, some of which self-identified as Cristeros.⁴⁵ A representative example of the former kind of attack was the threat of lynching against a teacher and his wife on behalf of a group of villagers in the state of Jalisco in September 1935.⁴⁶ An example of the latter was the burning of a teacher and the mutilation of another by a group of seventy armed men in the state of Veracruz in April 1936.⁴⁷

Although political and material interests underpinned the Second Cristiada, the role of religious beliefs in the legitimation of these attacks should not be underestimated. Even armed vigilantes, who were often supported and financed by large landowners who opposed the agrarian reform, rationalized their use of violence on religious grounds. For instance, on November 15, 1935, a group of federal police officers killed a well-known Catholic vigilante leader who was accused of hanging, mutilating, and slaying dozens of socialist teachers in the state of Puebla.⁴⁸ Among his belongings, they found anti-socialist propaganda, a list containing the names of teachers who taught the socialist education curricula, and a prayer of penitence written on a piece of paper that read: “I do not want to fight nor live nor die if it is not for your Church and for you. Holy Mother of Guadalupe, join this poor sinner in his agony and make his last cry on Earth and his first chant in Heaven be: ¡Viva Cristo Rey!”⁴⁹ Infused with religious fervor, the prayer invokes an understanding of martyrdom that celebrates the profusion of blood and the notion of sacrificial violence in the name of Christ.

Opposition to federal teachers on religious and political grounds was certainly not the only expression of violence triggered by citizens’ resistance towards the post-revolutionary state. Alcohol inspectors, tax collectors, doctors in charge of vaccination and sanitation campaigns, police, and even military provoked the anger of villagers and urban dwellers who distrusted or rejected their presence.⁵⁰ Citizens’ rejection of the presence and actions of these state actors expressed people’s discontent with the state’s socioeconomic policies as well as with the forms of social and political control promoted by central elites. Political opposition and collective protests against rigged elections provided further grounds for contesting the legitimacy of the post-

⁴⁵ Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation*, p. 6.

⁴⁶ “Maestro víctima de unos vecinos,” *Excélsior*, September 18, 1935.

⁴⁷ “Fue quemado un maestro rural y otro más fue vilmente mutilado,” *Excélsior*, April 21, 1936.

⁴⁸ The vigilante in question was Clemente Mendoza. AGN, Documentación de la Administración Pública (DAP), Serie Asesinatos, Caja 53, 2/012.2 (18), exp. 52.

⁴⁹ AGN, Documentación de la Administración Pública (DAP), Serie Asesinatos, Caja 53, 2/012.2 (18), exp. 52.

⁵⁰ See: Kloppe-Santamaría, “Lynching and the Politics of State Formation”; Benjamin Smith, “Towards a Typology of Rural Responses to Healthcare in Mexico, 1920–1960.” *Endeavour* 37, no. 1 (2013), pp. 39–46.

revolutionary state. The 1938 rebellion organized by General Saturnino Cedillo, former governor and strongman of San Luis Potosí, against the government of Lázaro Cárdenas is illustrative of the bitter divisions that the post-revolutionary state project generated, even amongst former revolutionaries. Cedillo and his supporters opposed some of the central tenets of Cárdenas's government, including agrarian reform, socialist education, centralization of power, and the expropriation of mineral resources.⁵¹ Although Cedillo's rebellion was rapidly suppressed by federal forces, that it broke out precisely in the context of the nationalization of petroleum reserves, an event that had seemingly united all sectors of society, sheds light on the limits of the so-called "pax Cardenista."⁵²

Electoral competition also contributed to challenge the state and its coercive powers. The 1940 presidential election was particularly divisive and led to the assassination of dozens of peasants and workers who supported the independent right-wing candidate, Juan Andreu Almazán, against the official candidate, Manuel Ávila Camacho. In the state of Puebla, controlled by Ávila Camacho's brother—the governor and regional cacique Maximino—supporters of Almazán were murdered by pistoleros who killed with the covert or overt support of the governor. In the state capital on the night of the election, violent confrontations between Avilacamachistas and Almazanistas broke out while federal forces beat up and killed pro-Almazán "agitators."⁵³ Throughout the 1940s, elections at the local and regional levels remained arenas of contestation and dissent that required state repression, and in 1952 another contested presidential election led to the imprisonment or assassination of several political dissidents.⁵⁴

⁵¹ On Saturnino Cedillo and the Cedillista rebellion, see: Dudley Ankersen, *Agrarian Warlord*, Dekalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1985; Carlos Martínez Assad, "La rebelión cedillista o el ocaso del poder tradicional," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 41, no. 3 (1979), pp. 709–28.

⁵² It is worth mentioning that although the Catholic clergy supported Cárdenas against the foreign oil companies, lay and militant Catholics saw the expropriation of oil as a scheme to sustain a government that was "prostituting" children with socialist and communist ideas. Many of these recalcitrant Catholics, who were active members of the Liga Nacional Defensora de la Libertad Religiosa (National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty or LNDLR), actually supported Cedillo's uprising against Cárdenas. See: Archivo Histórica de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (AHUNAM), Fondo Aurelio Robles Acevedo, Sección documental, Caja 1, Boletín de Noticias Interesantes 10 de mayo 1938, México D.F.

⁵³ "Mexico is Tense on Eve of Voting," *The New York Times*, July 7, 1940; "47 Slain as Mexico Votes; Troops Called in Capital," *The New York Times*, July 8, 1940; "Homes of Almazan Supporters Machine-gunned by Terrorists," *Los Angeles Times*, July 10, 1940.

⁵⁴ The main contender of the official candidate and future president Adolfo Ruiz Cortinez (1952–1958) was Miguel Henríquez Guzmán, whose supporters were subjected to political repression and eventually marginalized from politics altogether. See: Paul Gillingham, "Mexican Elections, 1910–1994: Voters, Violence, and Veto Power," in Roderic Ai Camp, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Mexican Politics*, Oxford University Press, 2012.

The formation of a new coalition that included conservative groups and industrialists, together with Mexico's entry into World War II in May 1942, allowed Manuel Ávila Camacho to legitimate his rule. Nonetheless, his administration was not devoid of conflict. In particular, Ávila Camacho's introduction of national conscription was met with opposition and resistance in the countryside.⁵⁵ Federal elites envisioned this measure as a means to stimulate national unity and the disciplining of young men.⁵⁶ Letters of complaint written to the president by aggravated villagers, however, revealed citizens' perceptions of military recruitment as a corrupt and abusive process that was blind to the economic needs of the rural poor.⁵⁷ In 1942, the discontent provoked by conscription led to an armed uprising in Matamoros, Puebla, as well as to an attempted lynching of military inspectors and members of the recruitment committee in Oaxaca.⁵⁸

In 1946, the state's efforts to eradicate a foot-and-mouth disease infecting Mexican cattle provoked similar wariness, if not outright rejection in the countryside. In tune with the United States' demands and following the government's own commitment to large-scale agricultural production and efficiency, Mexico implemented an anti-virus campaign that privileged the slaughtering of infected cattle over vaccination procedures. The aggressive measures, promoted under the presidency of Miguel Alemán Valdez (1946–1952), provoked such discontent that peasants lynched veterinarians and military officers in charge of overseeing state eradication efforts in Michoacán and Estado de México in 1947 and 1949, respectively.⁵⁹

Beyond opposition to these federal policies, press reports reveal people rejected and violently opposed members of both the military and the police who, in the view of citizens,

⁵⁵ Resistance to conscription has certainly a long history in Mexico, which predates the revolution. See, for instance, Peter Guardino, *The Dead March: A History of the Mexican-American War*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019.

⁵⁶ Thomas Rath, "'Que El Cielo Un Soldado En Cada Hijo Te Dio ...': Conscription, Recalcitrance and Resistance in Mexico in the 1940s," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 37, no. 3 (2005), pp. 507–31.

⁵⁷ See, for instance: Extract from complaint sent to the president by Rosenda A. de Méndez and Saturnina R. de Miller, December 30, 1943, Ixtlán de Juárez, Oaxaca, AGN, Ramo Presidentes, Manuel Ávila Camacho (hereafter MAC), 545.2/14-19; Letter addressed to Secretaria de la Defensa Nacional by Agustina Gutiérrez, October 23, 1949, Santa María Petapa, Oaxaca, AGN, MAC 545.2/14-19.

⁵⁸ Message from Ezequiel Navarro, Comité Regional Campesino, Tuxtepec, Oaxaca to Antonio Gómez Velazco, 29 Zona Militar, December 22, 1942, AGN, MAC 545.2/14-19; Rath, "'Que El Cielo Un Soldado En Cada Hijo Te Dio ...,'" pp. 516–7.

⁵⁹ One of these incidents took place in September 1947, when hundreds of female and male villagers lynched a Mexican veterinarian and all members of his military escort in Senguio, Michoacán. In January 1949, an American veterinarian would be also lynched in the municipality of Temascalcingo, in the State of Mexico. See: Archivo Histórico Suprema Corte de Justicia, Expediente 531/51, Amparo Directo presentado por José Guadalupe López, Demanda, December 28, 1949; "Mexicans Kill American," *The New York Times*, February 3, 1949; "Robert L. Proctor, inspector de la Comisión México-Americana contra la aftosa, asesinado de forma salvaje," *El Porvenir*, February 3, 1949.

overstepped their power as part of their “law and order” activities. Cases included policemen who were attacked after using violence against a suspected criminal or soldiers who were nearly lynched after assaulting a civilian.⁶⁰ Taken together, these incidents exemplify the extent to which the legitimacy of the post-revolutionary state remained contested, both during and after the presumably popular Cardenista period. They also shed light on the ways in which citizens were able to call into question the state’s abusive practices, even when members of the police and the military, along with pistoleros and caciques, enjoyed impunity throughout these years. Contrary to what the pax-priísta thesis assumed, the disciplining of regional caciques and powerbrokers by central elites did not lead to a consistent decline on the coercive practices used by municipal authorities, military personnel, and police against peasants, workers, and students at the local level.

The Coercive State

Implemented during the 1920s and deepened during the Lázaro Cárdenas presidency, the agrarian reform remained a highly contentious issue during the second half of the 1930s and throughout the 1940s. Despite being officially supported by the federal government, especially during the second half of the 1930s, redistribution of land was affected by intra-community politics and disputes and depended ultimately on the mediation and will of local powerbrokers.⁶¹ Municipal authorities, in particular, acting in conjunction with large landowners or town caciques, not only frustrated villagers’ access to lands, but also made use of tactics of intimidation and overt repression in order to neutralize and eliminate radical and organized peasants. Private militias or *guardias blancas* appear at the center of the grievances and denunciations articulated by groups of peasants who saw the promises of the revolution being systematically undermined by local authorities.

⁶⁰ See, for instance: “Linchamiento de un gendarme que fue a aplacar un mitote,” *La Prensa*, June 12, 1942; “Escandalazo en Tlanepantla: iban a linchar a 3 soldados,” *La Prensa*, August 7, 1944; “Por criminal acción iba a ser linchado un soldado,” *La Prensa*, August 9, 1950; “Comandante policiaco sufre una paliza,” *La Opinión*, August 4, 1942.

⁶¹ For illustrative examples on how agrarian conflicts were intertwined with local politics and also with private vendettas, see: Paul Friedrich, *The Princes of Naranja: An Essay in Anthrohistorical Method*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986 (particularly Chapter 1).

The state of Veracruz figured prominently in the history of violence driven by the unfulfilled promises of the agrarian reform.⁶² In August of 1935, for instance, the mayor of Zacualpan, Veracruz, who also served as leader of the region's *guardias blancas*, murdered the president of the agrarian commission.⁶³ The body of the deceased remained abandoned for four days, as the *guardias blancas* prevented the family from claiming and burying the body. The victim had been shot multiple times and stabbed in front of his nine-year old son. After the attack, the town's mayor occupied and then sold the lands belonging to the deceased. Denouncing this incident, peasants from the Liga Nacional Campesina Úrsulo Galván (Úrsulo Galván National Peasant League) asked the president to prosecute those responsible for the crime and to guarantee the creation of a rural police force that would protect rural workers. The same year, a local peasants' organization from the town of Chilchotla, in Puebla, asked the president to intervene in order to punish members of the *guardias blancas* who, disguised as municipal police, had perpetrated various crimes and assassinations against *agrarista* peasants (supporters of the agrarian reform) in that town.⁶⁴ In this and similar letters, Puebla peasants bitterly complained about the complicity of municipal authorities in these acts of violence, denounced the indifference of the governor, and lamented the fact that "true revolutionaries" and "Cardenistas" who believed in the promises of the federal government were being sacrificed. As manifested by these denunciations, even during the presidency of Cárdenas, who defended a more progressive agenda, peasants were subjected to tactics of violence and intimidation.⁶⁵ Thus, not only fervent anti-revolutionary Catholics but also revolutionary peasants who were "too radical" became the target of political repression by the authorities.

Agrarian violence continued throughout the 1940s, in a context characterized by the government's clear abandonment of land redistribution and state neglect of small farmers and peasants, in favor of large-scale agrarian capitalism.⁶⁶ In the southern state of Chiapas, for

⁶² See: Santoyo, "La Mano Negra," pp. 81–98.

⁶³ The president of the agrarian commission oversaw villagers' access to communal lands and was thus an influential but also highly divisive figure within communities who held opposing views on the agrarian reform. AGN, Ramo Presidentes, Lázaro Cárdenas (hereafter, LCR), 541/549 Fojas 18, 31, 36 y 37; see also LCR 541/549 Fojas 18, 31, 36 y 37.

⁶⁴ "Quejas contra Isidro González y Zenón Fabián," AGN, Documentación de la Administración Pública, Serie Asesinatos, Caja 52, 2/012.2(18)1640, Exp. 66.

⁶⁵ There were of course limits to Cárdenas's support for progressive and redistributive policies. On Cárdenas's pragmatism and outright abandonment of his revolutionary promises in exchange of political support, see: Bantjes, *As if Jesus Walked on Earth*; McCormick, *The Logic of Compromise*.

⁶⁶ The number of peasants benefiting from the agrarian reform fell from 54,678 in 1940 to 9,042 in 1948. See: Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s*, p. 4.

instance, peasants denounced the abusive practices of local authorities who acted in conjunction with the military. In July 1946, the president of the agrarian commission of the town of Montecristo Playa Grande, in Chiapas, condemned the assassination of a peasant who had been seized from his home by a group of soldiers.⁶⁷ After he was taken, his wife found his body a few meters away from the barracks in the nearby town of Huixtla. In this and other cases, peasants demanded the removal of military garrisons and municipal police officers who, instead of protecting citizens, acted as a direct threat against their personal safety.⁶⁸ Echoing these dynamics of abuse, members of the agrarian commission in Olinalá, Guerrero, denounced several murders of unarmed peasants perpetrated by *guardias blancas* between 1944 and 1948.⁶⁹ The killings they described included peasants being shot multiple times, in plain sight, and in the presence of soldiers who did nothing to stop the violence. With frustration and anger, the aggravated peasants described how the intervention of the federal government had been useless, as municipal authorities refused to disarm *guardias blancas* with the excuse that they were legitimate members of the municipal police.⁷⁰

In addition to *guardias blancas*, pistoleros—privately hired armed men on the payroll of public officials or local powerbrokers—appeared as prominent actors behind the violence impacting citizens in post-revolutionary Mexico. Pistoleros, who tended to be former or active members of the military, police, or intelligence agencies, enjoyed de facto immunity and could therefore carry out killings with impunity and “professionalism.”⁷¹ Letters written by citizens expressed vividly the climate of vulnerability and exposure to violence created by the conflation of pistoleros with security officials who were by law supposed to serve and protect citizens. In November 1941, the widow of Marciano Cabrera wrote President Ávila Camacho to demand justice for the attack suffered by her husband in the town of Tecomán, Colima, in October of the same year.⁷² In this and subsequent letters, Tecomán villagers explained that Cabrera had been assailed by pistoleros who had until recently been part of the municipal police. Cabrera died as a result of the attack, unable to receive medical attention since police officers imprisoned the

⁶⁷ AGN, Ramo Presidentes, MAC, 404.11/639.

⁶⁸ AGN, Ramo Presidentes, MAC 541/113.

⁶⁹ AGN, Ramo Presidentes, MAV, 404.1/815, 541/264; see also: AGN, Ramo Presidentes, MAV, 541/185.

⁷⁰ Agrarian violence in the state of Guerrero continued during the 1950s and contributed to shaping the guerrilla movements led by Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vázquez in the 1960s. On this, see: Armando Bartra, *Guerrero bronco. Campesinos, ciudadanos y guerrilleros en la Costa Grande*, México: Editorial Era, 2000.

⁷¹ Pablo Piccato, *A History of Infamy: Crime, Truth, and Justice in Mexico*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017, p. 162–3.

⁷² AGN, Ramo Presidentes, MAC, 541/380 fojas 25–26 y 14–15.

doctor who had agreed to see him. In addition, a policeman sent by the governor himself murdered the only pistolero put in prison in connection with the crime.

Parallel incidents perpetrated against peasants, urban workers, and students took place throughout the 1940s, the decade that when examined at the aggregate level suggested an overall process of pacification and political stability. In the state of Veracruz, unionized workers denounced the assassinations and disappearances of workers by pistoleros, who defended the interests of factory owners and acted with total impunity. In a letter sent to President Alemán Valdez in July 1948, the writers explained that workers had been shot and some of them stabbed multiple times.⁷³ Examples of labor violence such as this need to be understood against the backdrop of an increasingly state-controlled union leadership, which was meant to discipline workers and prevent them from striking and threatening the interests of political leaders, industrialists, and investors.⁷⁴ The use of pistoleros against students in Mexico City shows that these actors were not confined to the countryside or to remote areas. In July 1944, students from the Veterinary School of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico or UNAM), who had been striking against school authorities, denounced the assassination of a fellow student by pistoleros working under the orders of the university rector, Rodolfo Brito Foucher.⁷⁵

These and similar examples show that underneath the façade of a centralized state authority, a coercive apparatus that relied on “private” actors and the use of extralegal forms of violence persisted.⁷⁶ For instance, the so-called “*ley fuga*” (flight law) which entailed the extrajudicial killing of a criminal upon his alleged attempt to escape from the authorities, remained a common practice throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Supported by citizens who believed that certain crimes or criminals were too offensive to be punished through procedural

⁷³ AGN, Ramo Presidentes, MAV, 541/414.

⁷⁴ Violence against workers as well as hostilities between independent unionized workers and those who operated under the state’s controlled union leaders (known as “charros”) became more acute as Mexico’s so-called “economic miracle” relied increasingly on keeping urban workers’ salaries low. See: Marcos Aguila and Jeffrey Bortz, “The Rise of Gangsterism and Charrismo: Labor Violence and the Postrevolutionary Mexican State,” in Pansters, *Violence, Coercion, and State-Making*, pp. 185–211.

⁷⁵ AGN, Ramo Presidentes, Manuel Ávila Camacho, MAC 534/203; see also: Javier Mendoza Rojas, *Los conflictos de la UNAM en el siglo XX*, México: UNAM–Plaza y Valdés, 2012, pp. 104–5

⁷⁶ Rath, “Que El Cielo Un Soldado En Cada Hijo Te Dio ...,” p. 516.

means, the *ley fuga* revealed the existence of a state that was incapable of providing justice through the rule of law and that was susceptible to the fluctuations of public opinion.⁷⁷

In addition to the *ley fuga*, authorities relied on the use of lynchings in order to control crimes and other social transgressions. Perpetrated in conjunction with neighbors or members of given communities, municipal authorities orchestrated collective attacks against individuals who were seen as threatening or offensive. In contrast to *ley fuga*, lynchings offered municipal authorities the possibility of camouflaging their acts as an expression of the “will of the people.”⁷⁸ The support that extralegal forms of justice such as the *ley fuga* and lynching enjoyed among citizens makes it clear that the state was not the only actor behind the reproduction of violence in post-revolutionary Mexico. Instead, violence also prevailed within civil society in both the public and private spheres, justified under citizens’ understandings of crime and of what they perceived as legitimate responses to social transgressions. Just as citizen contestation of the state was driven, to a great extent, by coercive state tactics, the state use of coercion was further fuelled by citizen support of punitive practices against criminals as well as by people’s tolerance of certain forms of violence—including violence against women and girls—that were seen as acceptable or excusable.

Societal Violence

Despite the seeming ubiquitous presence of state actors in the perpetuation of violence, there were several forms of violence that took place beyond the realm of traditional politics, perpetrated by and between regular citizens. Given the type of news it covered, *nota roja*, a genre of sensational journalism focused on crime, offered a unique window into the ways in which violence permeated social relations across different spaces, from the domestic sphere to the street and the community level. Violence against women, for instance, was felt throughout these

⁷⁷ Pablo Piccato, “Ley Fuga as Justice: The Consensus around Extrajudicial Violence in Twentieth-Century Mexico,” in Gema Santamaría and David Carey Jr., *Violence and Crime in Latin America: Representations and Politics*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017; Gillingham, “Who killed Crispin Aguilar?..,” p. 101. On popular perceptions of the justice system in Mexico, see: Elisa Speckman Guerra, *En tela de juicio. Justicia penal, homicidios célebres y opinión pública (México, siglo XX)*. México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/Tirant Lo Blanch, 2020.

⁷⁸ Kloppe-Santamaría, “Lynching and the Politics of State Formation.”

different spaces.⁷⁹ In December 1942, the press reported the assassination of a woman by her intimate partner in a town close to the city of Chihuahua.⁸⁰ The murder involved a great deal of cruelty. After killing her with a machete, the perpetrator cut the body of the victim into multiple pieces and hid them in different places, claiming the victim did not deserve a proper burial. The murderer confessed that his crime was driven by jealousy. A few years later, a similar case was reported in Mexico City. In this case the perpetrator was a butcher who stabbed his wife with the same knives he used in his business.⁸¹

Violence against women was perpetrated not only by intimate partners, but also by strangers who assaulted, raped, and killed their victims with conspicuous cruelty. In July 1942, in the city of Chihuahua, a 52-year old woman was raped and strangled by a group of men that had broken into her home with the intention of robbing her.⁸² In October of the same year, in Mexico City, the press reported the murder of a young woman by two men who had mutilated her body with such brutality that it was barely recognizable.⁸³ In Chiapa de Corzo, Chiapas, another young woman was viciously assaulted by a group of men who nearly decapitated her in retaliation for a private vendetta.⁸⁴ In February 1944, in Texcoco, State of Mexico, a woman was found hanging from a tree with signs of torture on her hands and feet and severe injuries to her abdomen. The autopsy revealed the victim had been raped before being hanged.⁸⁵

Informed by different motivations—from robbery to sexual assault to private vendettas—what these forms of violence have in common is a particular disregard for the lives of women, revealed in the viciousness the perpetrators demonstrated against their victims. Although these gruesome killings were not necessarily routine crimes, they highlight the existence of social constructions of gender that reinforced men’s supposed control over women’s bodies and that contributed both to the victimization of women as well as to the impunity surrounding these acts.

Far from being driven by an inherently “Mexican” trait, social constructions of gender and the violence they enabled depended on both cultural and symbolic representations as well as

⁷⁹ Violence against women was also perpetrated by political actors. During the 1930s, for example, female socialist teachers were victims of rape, kidnapping, and genital mutilation by vigilantes and mobs that opposed socialist education.

⁸⁰ “Espeluznante ‘chacal’ despedazó a hachazos a su mujer y los trozos macabros los arrojó a los coyotes,” *La Prensa*, December 20, 1942.

⁸¹ “Enloquecido, apuñaló a su abnegada esposa,” *La Prensa*, October 1, 1950.

⁸² “Ahorcaron a la señora y luego la ultrajaron,” *La Prensa*, July 21, 1942.

⁸³ “Simona fue horriblemente mutilada por chacalitos de Ixtapalapa,” *La Prensa*, October 24, 1942.

⁸⁴ “Dos energúmenos émulos de ‘chacales’ degollan a muchacha en forma infame,” *La Prensa*, December 9, 1942.

⁸⁵ “Mujer victimada en forma diabólica, por despecho,” *La Prensa*, February 18, 1944.

on institutional and political conditions.⁸⁶ Cultural representations included films, novels, and songs that celebrated a notion of “romantic love” premised on the fidelity and sacrifice of women along side the courage, honor, and strength of men.⁸⁷ The press, which occupied a central place in shaping people’s understanding of gender norms, demonized women that defied these traditional roles. For instance, newspapers represented female murderers, especially in cases of filicide, as “unnatural,” “monstrous,” and “hyena-like.”⁸⁸ Moreover, villagers and even neighbors lynched or threaten to lynch “bad” or “neglectful” mothers who, due to their “deviant sexual conduct” and their use of alcohol, failed to take proper care of their children.⁸⁹

Such gendered representations were reinforced by a political system that, despite the promises of the revolution regarding gender equality, continued to promote an image of women associated with responsible motherhood, unconditional affection, and passive victimhood.⁹⁰ Most importantly, violence against women was made possible by the negligence and complicity of police officers and judges who disregarded women’s accusations against their attackers, subjected victims to denigrating medical exams, and were lenient towards male offenders.⁹¹ State actors’ inadequate and harmful responses to violence against women were not an anomaly, but an expression of Mexico’s inadequate laws regarding sexual and gender-based violence. Men accused of rape and sexual abuse against girls and women could be forgiven if they promised to marry their victim and thus retribute the victim’s honor; and penalties could be lessened if

⁸⁶ On masculinity constructs and gender-based violence in mid-twentieth century Mexico, see: Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sánchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family*. New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1961; Lola Romanucci-Ross, *Conflict, Violence, and Morality in a Mexican Village*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. For a useful critique of these authors’ somewhat reductionist treatment of *machismo*, see Matthew C. Gutmann, *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

⁸⁷ Saydi Nuñez Cetinia, “Los estragos del amor. Crímenes pasionales en la prensa sensacionalista de la ciudad de México durante la posrevolución,” *Trashumante: Revista Americana de Historia Social* 7 (2016), pp. 28–51. For a contrasting example of women artists who defied traditional gender expectations and denounced gender-based violence in post-revolutionary Mexico, see: Dina Comisarenco Mirkin, “To Paint the Unspeakable: Mexican Female Artists’ Iconography of the 1930s and Early 1940s,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 29, no. 1 (2008), pp. 21–32.

⁸⁸ Santillán Esqueda, “Mujeres Delincuentes e Imaginarios.”

⁸⁹ See, for instance, “Iba a ser linchada una madre que dejó a su hija,” *La Prensa*, June 16, 1930; “Iban a matar a una madre cruel,” *La Prensa*, March 12, 1930; “Una madre convertida en hiena quería matar a palos a su propia hija,” *La Prensa*, March 31, 1943.

⁹⁰ On gender relations and constructions of femininity in the post-revolutionary period, see: Alexandra Minna S., “Responsible Mothers and Normal Children: Eugenics, Nationalism, and Welfare in Post-Revolutionary Mexico, 1920–1940,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 12, no. 4 (1999): 369–97; Oresta López, “Women Teachers of Post-Revolutionary Mexico: Feminisation and Everyday Resistance,” *Paedagogica Historica* 49, no. 1 (2013), pp. 56–69.

⁹¹ Pablo Piccato, “A Historical Perspective on Crime in Twentieth-Century Mexico City,” *USMEX 2003–04 Working Paper Series*, May 2003, available at <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8NS0SSP>, last retrieved May 1, 2021, pp. 14–16.

violence was exercised against a so-called adulterous woman.⁹² In addition to the defficiencies of the legal system, police officers and soldiers were themselves responsible for perpetrating acts of sexual violence against women and girls.⁹³ Social and cultural norms shared by state representatives and private actors helped sustain the corruption, impunity, and negligence surrounding violence against women, as husbands and parents shared the patriarchal views of judges and police officers.⁹⁴ Societal violence and state violence fed off each other in pernicious ways.

Lynchings of social transgressors and criminal suspects illustrate the ways in which ordinary citizens endorsed and tolerated the use of violence beyond the purview of the state. In spite of its illegality, lynching was regarded as a legitimate means to attain justice in a context where impunity prevailed and wherein extralegal violence came to be seen as a corrective to the inefficacy and lack of expediency of punishments sanctioned by the law. Lynching was furthermore informed by people's shared perceptions of criminals as either immoral or monstrous individuals who did not deserve to be punished through procedural means.

Victims of lynching included murderers, rapists, cattle rustlers, and individuals—particularly women—accused of witchcraft. Lynching was also perpetrated against people that committed more inconsequential crimes, including small robberies or injuries caused by car accidents. An example of a lynching driven by murder was the collective killing of four men in the town of San Martín Texmelucan, Puebla, in September 1931.⁹⁵ One of the victims was Felipe Valencia, the former mayor of a neighboring town, who had killed an innocent man weeks before. No charges had been made against Valencia for the crime, so when the neighbors saw him walking freely around the town, they decided to kill him in order to avenge the deceased. A similar case took place on August 3, 1943, in Cholula, also in Puebla.⁹⁶ In that case, the lynching victim was a man who had been serving time in prison for having murdered eight people but had managed to escape. When the criminal was identified by a group of neighbors, around seventy people attacked him with sticks, knives, and pistols, leaving his lifeless body completely disfigured.

⁹² Piccato, "A Historical Perspective on Crime," p. 16; Susana Sosenski, "Sexual Abuse of Girls in Post-Revolutionary Mexico: Between Legitimation and Punishment," *Girlhood Studies* 14, no.1 (2021), p. 39.

⁹³ Sosenski, "Sexual Abuse of Girls," p. 44.

⁹⁴ Sosenski, "Sexual Abuse of Girls," p. 46.

⁹⁵ "Cuatro individuos fueron linchados ayer en el pueblo de Temaxalac," *La Opinión*, September 24, 1931.

⁹⁶ "Fue linchado un asesino y prófugo en San Francisco Ocotlán, Cholula," *La Opinión*, August 3, 1943.

Impunity surrounded both lynching and violence against women. In the case of violence against women, such impunity was based on inadequate laws, the actions and omissions of corrupt officials, and social constructs that contributed to normalize the aggressive instincts of men and the “natural” vulnerability and passivity of women. In the case of lynching, impunity was linked to the fact that public officials—mayors but also police officers and members of the military—participated in lynchings and similar forms of extralegal violence. In this sense, even when not perpetrated by state actors, violence in civil society reflected the state’s incapacity or unwillingness to prevent or address these practices.

The performative character of lynching and of violence against women suggests violence was not only part of the language of domination and resistance that characterized state-society relations. Rather, violence was also central to the interpersonal relationships that existed within communities and neighborhoods. Violence, including its more visible and brutal manifestations, was tolerated and justified by both state and non-state actors. Hangings, mutilations, and burning, for instance, characterized the violence perpetrated during the Second Cristiada and in the context of agrarian and labor conflicts, vigilante killings, and interpersonal and gender-based violence, underscoring the communicative dimensions of violence in post-revolutionary Mexico.

Such violence allowed perpetrators—both state and non-state—to send a message to public authorities, or to political dissidents and social transgressors, that certain behaviors would not be tolerated. These spectacular forms of violence were not evenly distributed but rather concentrated in particular states, including Guerrero, Veracruz, Chihuahua, Estado de México, and Puebla,⁹⁷ key battlefields of today’s drug-related violence. Rather than responding to some natural or intrinsic feature of these regions, this geographical distribution suggests that over time, in some of these localities, violence has emerged as a preferred language to resolve intra-community conflicts, advance political and economic interests, and establish forms of social and political control.

THE MANY EXPRESSIONS OF VIOLENCE IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY MEXICO

Violence in post-revolutionary Mexico was expressed in various forms and perpetrated by a multiplicity of actors. Although at the macro level, measured in terms of homicides, violence

⁹⁷ See: Gillingham, “Who Killed Crispin Aguilar?”; Gema Kloppe-Santamaría, *In the Vortex of Violence: Lynching, Extralegal Justice, and the State in Post-Revolutionary Mexico*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020.

seemed to have experienced a significant decline during the 1930s and 1940s, when observed at the local and regional levels in terms of the *quality* of violence—i.e., its expressive, public, and plural character—violence emerges as a central force shaping social relationships as well as citizen interactions with the state.

Although the use of repressive and coercive practices were not at all absent from the dynamics of governance and political control that existed during this period, it would be wrong to conclude that violence was controlled in a top-down or centralized manner. Citizens that called into question the validity of the post-revolutionary project justified their use of violence based on the perceived intrusiveness and illegitimacy of the state. Moreover, even when perpetrated by state actors or with the aim of securing the rule of political elites, the operationalization of violence included privately hired armed men or militias who contributed to decentralizing and “democratizing” the use of violence. Violence was not only driven by political disputes or by attempts to subvert or reinforce state authority; violence was also motivated by social constructions of deviance, crime, and gender that escaped the purview of the state.

That violence pervading state-society relations as well as citizens’ everyday interactions in post-revolutionary Mexico, in ways that continue to be observed in the present context, should not be taken as a sign of the country’s “natural” predisposition towards violence. The history of violence in post-revolutionary Mexico suggests precisely the opposite. Violence was the result of institutional, political, and cultural factors that were informed by particular historical junctures and were therefore subject to change. If spectacular and expressive forms of violence prevailed in Mexico during the 1930s and 1940s, and for most of the twentieth century, it is not the result of some inherent Mexican trait. Instead, it is the consequence of persistent institutional deficiencies and forms of abuse that have added to, and are also propelled by, cultural norms and perceptions regarding the acceptability of violence.

As the evidence examined in this paper suggests, Mexico’s brutal and spectacular contemporary violence is neither a recent phenomenon nor merely an expression of the war on drugs. It is part of a longer trajectory of violence that has been shaped by, and has contributed to shaping Mexico’s social and political history.

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