

**Divisions In Mexican Support  
Of  
Republican Spain**

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On July 17, 1936 the news of the Nationalist uprising in Morocco was confirmed by a radio station at Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, after General Franco alerted his fellow conspirators in the mainland with a telegram that the uprising against the Popular Front government of Spain had begun.<sup>1</sup> General Quiapo de Llano occupied Seville after bitter fighting on July 18; General Varela held the port of Cádiz and the eastern coast down to Algeciras near Gibraltar. General Miguel Cabanellas rose in Zaragoza; in Castile the rebellion placed the principal towns in Nationalist hands, and General Mola controlled Pamplona, the capital of Navarre by July 19.<sup>2</sup>

The initial plan of the coup was for the Army of Africa to mobilize in the early morning of July 18, to be followed 24 hours later by the Army in Spain with the goals of capturing the country's major cities and communication centers. This would be followed with the ferrying of Franco's African Army to the peninsula by Navy ships that had joined the rebellion. The forces would converge in Madrid and force the transfer of power, which had happened numerous times in recent Spanish history.

However, the uprising of July 17 failed in its initial goal of toppling the Republic in a swift coup. When in July 19 Prime Minister Jose Giral ordered state arsenals to hand out arms to the various militias associated with workers unions and political parties, the rebels were confronted by unexpected resistance.<sup>3</sup> Four days after the uprising, the Nationalists had managed to take control of approximately one third of the country, including the principal wheat growing districts of Castile, and were therefore well able to feed both their troops and civilian

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1 Raymond Proctor, *Hitler's Luftwaffe in the Spanish Civil War* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983), 1.

2 Sheelagh Ellwood, *Franco: Profiles in Power* (New York: Pearson, 2000), 73.

3 William Philips and Carla Phillips, *A concise History of Spain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 253.

population. However, the uprising had failed to capture the most economically advanced portions of the country. The result was that most of the major cities, including the capital of Madrid, as well as the major industrial centers remained firmly in Republican control with the exception of Seville. Thus, the Nationalist Generals would be forced to rely on the importation of armaments and machine made goods of all kinds. <sup>4</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of July 17, neither the Republicans nor Nationalist had enough weapons or supplies even for a brief war.<sup>5</sup> Though the Nationalists held the loyalty of most of the Army officers, the Republican government controlled the resources of the state. The vast majority of the Navy remained loyal thanks to the bravery of the ship's crews who fought and arrested their officers who tried to join the nationalists. For its part, the Spanish Air Force joined the navy and remained loyal to the Republic.

The Navy immediately blockaded the Strait of Gibraltar isolating General Franco and his Spanish African Army and leaving them without any means of landing on the peninsula, thereby effectively removing his force of 30,000 from the conflict at this critical point. Slight military assistance (which the Republic expected from its fellow Popular Front government in France) to either side would have been enough to tip the balance of power. Three days after the uprising General Mola warned monarchists in Burgos that there was sufficient rifle ammunition for only a few weeks fighting as he prepared to withdraw north away from Madrid.<sup>6</sup> While in Morocco,

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<sup>4</sup> Gabriel Jackson, *The Spanish republic and the Civil War 1931-1939* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), 245.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Frazier, *Blood of Spain: An oral History of the Spanish Civil War*, (New York: Pantheon Publishing, 1986.), 126.

General Franco received crucial assistance from the German Luftwaffe, after Hitler authorized the dispatch of 20 Junker 52's, who managed to ferry 15,000 of Franco's Moroccan troops by August 5 to Andalusia despite the Republican naval blockade.<sup>7</sup>

The Republican government fully expected the democratic powers and the Soviet Union would come to their aid, and waited eagerly for the assistance of France, England, and the United States.<sup>8</sup> However, the United States was wary of international commitments. France was concerned by Hitler's rearmament and reoccupation of the Rhineland and relied on an alliance with Great Britain, which was led by a firmly non-interventionist Stanley Baldwin and then Neville Chamberlin, for mutual defense, and would only proceed with absolute caution in fear of stirring German aggression.<sup>9</sup> In addition, France was itself living under the threat of a civil war between the left and the right. After the right wing press in Paris printed the Spanish request for assistance on July 25 the concerned radical party members in France asked French Prime Minister Blum to desist.<sup>10</sup> Blum, who had hoped to aid the Spanish Republicans, realized that if France openly aided the Republicans he would stir continuing turmoil in a politically divided France which was experiencing street fighting between left wingers and fascist groups. Moreover, he would dangerously alienate France from England, at a time when Germany was rearming. Furthermore, Belgium and Poland had added further pressure on France to remain neutral.<sup>11</sup>

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7 Jackson, 248-249.

8 Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006.), 111.

9 *Ibid.*, 109.

10 Jackson, 251, 252.

11 Beevor, 109.

However, Blum did manage to secretly arrange the shipment of 50 planes to the Spanish Republican Government with the assistance of the Republican sympathetic French Air Minister Pierre Cot, who arranged the fake sale of the aircrafts to Hejaz, Finland, and Brazil. All together Republican Spain had received 30 reconnaissance and bombing planes, 15 pursuits, and 10 transport and training planes, all obsolete by 1936.<sup>12</sup>

With France now intent on non-intervention, Blum and the French war minister Daladier were aware that French armaments were inferior to those the Nationalists could acquire from Germany and Italy.<sup>13</sup> Heeding the advice of the British foreign secretary Anthony Eden and Salvador de Madariaga, former Republican representative at the League of Nations, who stated “apart from foreign intervention, the sides were so evenly balanced that neither could win,” France formally proposed a policy of non-intervention on August 2. By August 8th the French cabinet suspended all further arm sales and the French chargé d'affaires in London recommended an international committee of control to “to supervise the agreement and consider further action.”<sup>14</sup> The non-intervention agreement of 1936 was immediately signed and implemented by England; the United States did not sign the agreement but made it known it would remain neutral, Italy signed on August 21, The Soviet Union followed on August 23, and Germany on August 24. Thus, France now believed that the best way to aid the Republican government of Spain was by preventing the inflow of arms to either zone since both sides had minimal ammunition and equipment to fight a prolonged war, Blum officially closed the border

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<sup>12</sup> Jackson, 251.

<sup>13</sup> Beevor, 110.

<sup>14</sup> Fraser, 127.

with Spain preventing any influx of arms from passing through Southern France into the Republican zone and imposed an arms embargo along with England to the Republican government.

The Non-Intervention Committee began meeting in London on September 8, 1936. It was organized by the British Foreign Office in London, and consisted of ambassadors from 27 countries including every European country except Switzerland. As Anthony Eden, England's foreign secretary, reported, "Accusations were met with flat denials and the results of both were sterile." The committee failed to address the violations committed by Italy and Germany, as "a blind eye had been turned on the streams of Junkers and Savoias over Gibraltar which were ferrying the Army of Africa between Tetuan and Seville."<sup>15</sup> The American ambassador to Spain, Claude Bower, later commented, "Each movement of the Non-Intervention Committee has been made to serve the cause of the Rebellion...This Committee was the most cynical and lamentably dishonest group that history has known."<sup>16</sup>

As Republican Spain found herself shunned by the democracies of the west, including the majority of Latin American countries who favored a Nationalist victory, Mexico stood as the only western country alongside with the Soviet Union to publically denounce the British-French policy of non-intervention and support to its fullest ability the Spanish Republic throughout the conflict. Given her limitations, Mexico managed to assemble an impressive \$2,000,000 in aid and material, including small arms and a few aircraft. Though her material support was limited,

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15 *ibid*, 121.

16 *ibid*, 149.

her profound moral support greatly comforted the Republic.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the conflict and its aftermath, Mexico accepted about 30,000 of Spanish exiles and refugees from 1936 - 1945, and allowed the establishment of the Republican Government in exile in Mexico City from 1940 - 1946. However, as generous and sympathetic as Mexico was towards the Spanish republic, the country was itself significantly divided over its support of Republican Spain. Division in opinion ranged throughout the nation's population, press, and political arenas.<sup>18</sup>

During the 1930's Mexico was still undergoing reconstruction and reformation after the end of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. In 1936 Mexican President Lazaro Cardenas was dealing with radical conservative groups in Mexico, including the followers of Conservative extremist General and former President Plutarco Calles, who up to the Cardenas Presidency had managed to dominate Mexican politics through puppet administrations following his Presidency.

Five days before the outbreak of war in Spain, on July 12, 1936, a Mexican right wing paramilitary group named *Acción Revolucionaria Mexicanista*, nicknamed *Las Camisas Doradas* or *Dorados* ("The Golden Shirts," "The Golden ones"), held a rally with over one hundred thousand demonstrators that shocked the nation's capital and the Cardenas Administration. *Dorados* from various areas of Mexico marched to the capitol to demand an end to President Cardenas' Populist reforms. According to the July 10, 1936 Mexican Newspaper, *El Siglo deTorreon*, 18,000 *Dorados* came from Sinaloa, 17,000 from Senora, 15,000 from Lagunera, 14,000 from Chihuahua, 12,000 from Nuevo Leon, 13,000 from Tamaulipas, 9,500 from Guanajuato, 10,800 from Durango, 10,000 from Nayarit and 2,500 from General Cepada, a total

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<sup>17</sup> Jackson, 260.

<sup>18</sup> T.G. Powell, *Mexico and the Spanish Civil War* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1981), 59, 110.

of 118,800 strong.<sup>19</sup> This demonstration made it clear that continued conservative and traditional Catholic support was still prevalent and concentrated in the northern Mexico.

The July 12 Dorados demonstrations came as Mexico was still recovering from the end of the sporadic civil war waged between the Church and State from the Mexican Cristero war in the 1920's. Under President Cardenas Mexico was currently undergoing rapid social, economic, and land reforms, including land distributions to landless Mexican peasants, increased education and literacy, and greater utilization of Mexico's natural resources.<sup>20</sup>

With tensions between conservative Mexicans, Church traditionalists, and Mexican peasants still unfolding, President Cardenas's left leaning populist policies and the expulsion of former President Plutarco Calles to the United States on April 10, 1936, exacerbated tensions further. Calles was a long supporter and protector of the *Acción Revolucionaria Mexicanista* and was an outspoken political rival of Cardenas. Nevertheless, Cardenas policies were met with significant popular approval throughout the country.<sup>21</sup>

As news of the events of July 17 in Spain reached Mexico City, President Cardenas realized the implications that the conflict in Spain could bring. Mexico was the only country in Latin America that had undergone radical social, economic, and political changes. In the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the separation of Church and State and a move

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19 El Siglo de Torreon July 10, 1936

20 Jackson, 260.

21 *Ibid*, 260-1.



towards Populism was still ongoing. Mexican conservatives saw the Nationalist uprising in Spain as a vindication of their defeat and humiliation in Mexico following the Revolution.<sup>22</sup>

With anger mounting over the expulsion of General Calles and other influential conservatives from the country a few months prior, the extreme right saw the Spanish Nationalist uprising as an example to emulate in Mexico. A new conservative leader and politician, Saturnino Cedillo, soon filled the void left by Calles and he would later attempt a coup in 1938 after Cardenas prevented Cedillo from running for President.<sup>23</sup>

Mexico's support for Republican Spain was not her first international stand against fascist and imperial aggression. In 1935 President Cardenas had issued a decree to comply with the League of Nations sanctions against Italy, and had campaigned in the League for collective assistance to Ethiopia. After Ethiopia fell to Italy, Mexican delegate Narciso Bassols explained Mexican sentiments on the Ethiopian crisis, "It was not merely attachment to the abstract principles of international law that obliged us to act as we did. The Mexican people... throughout their history of independent life have more than once come to know the harsh significance of imperialism's conquering invasions...For that reason, respect for the independence and territorial integrity of a country is an organic element of our national sensibility and a fundamental demand of all our people."<sup>24</sup>

Mexico agreed to supply Spain's Republican government with arms and munitions in August 1936, immediately moving twenty thousand 7MM Mouser rifles and twenty million

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22 Mario Revah, *México y la Guerra Civil Española*, (Madrid: Turner, 200), 19.

23 *Ibid*, 229.

24 Powell, 61.

cartridges to Veracruz for shipment to Spain on the Republican ship *Magallane* before Spain even signed a contract covering the sale in October. The initial shipment was worth 3.5 million pesos. President Cardenas intended to supply the Spanish Republic with arms purchased from other countries under the deception of only using them for the Mexican military. Therefore Cardenas needed to keep Mexican arm sales to Republican Spain secret in order to avoid an international uproar and increasing difficulties in purchasing higher grade weaponry from foreign governments who signed the non-intervention agreement. However, news of Mexico's arms agreement broke almost immediately, even before Cardenas had the opportunity to announce his decision to the Mexican Congress in September. The press from pro Nationalist countries criticized Mexico, a Chilean radio station and newspaper demanded a break in diplomatic relations with Mexico, and a Portuguese newspaper published a cartoon depicting a Spanish communist murdering several noncombatants with a gun marked "from Mexico."<sup>25</sup>

Cardenas's government found increased difficulty in acquiring weapons after news of Mexico's commitment to the Spanish Republic was made public. Great Britain refused to sell thousands of rifles, machineguns, and millions of bullets to Mexico, even after Mexico's diplomat assured British authorities that the weapons were intended only for Mexico's own military, but Britain would not "risk the possibility that these arms would be reshipped to Spain." The United States sold ten planes to Mexico under the assurance they would go to the Mexican Air force, and a Mexican company purchased six additional planes for American Airlines in late 1936. All sixteen planes found their way to Veracruz destined to be shipped to Spain on the Republican ship *Motomar*. Shortly after the American press discovered this, the

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

*Washington Herald* objected that American warplanes were being sent to the aid of “Spanish Communist forces.” President Roosevelt then asked Cardenas to refrain from sending American made war material to Spain. In order to avoid political turmoil, Cardenas agreed, cancelled the shipment, and did not order any further American made war material to Spain. However, Cardenas did allow the accumulation of fifty American warplanes in Veracruz if President Roosevelt could ever be persuaded to change his mind. In 1937 those airplanes found their way to Spain without Cardenas knowledge. A result of the actions of the Spanish Ambassador to Mexico, Felix Gordon Ordas, who after several months of futile attempts to convince Cardenas to ship the American warplanes took matters into his own hand. After unsuccessfully traveling to Washington D.C. to ease tension on the issue, he and pro Republican Mexican Defense Secretary Avilia Camacho secretly organized their shipment on board the Republican vessel *Ibai* in late December without informing President Cardenas. Cardenas later forgave Gordon after stating he would have done the same thing if he had been in his shoes.<sup>26</sup>

Even with such setback’s Cardenas commitment to helping the Spanish Republic did not waver. He sent the Republic the majority of Mexico’s old military weaponry, and replaced them with newly purchased weapons from the United States. Even after the tragic capture of the Republican ship *Mar Cantabrico* by the Nationalist in February 19, 1937, which was loaded with thousands of essential arms and material destined for the Republic. President Cardenas reaffirmed Mexico’s commitment to Republican Spain at a time when American pressure was intensifying by commenting,

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26 *Ibid*, 72. ; Revah, 165-6.

“Mexico will continue to support Spain with arms and munitions with the same determination which we have already shown until now. Spain has received from the Mexican government all available assistance she has offered. It is the duty of the Mexican government to defend all legal constitutional governments who find themselves in danger. Any other nation who finds themselves in a similar situation can count on Mexican support. Despite the failure of the Mar Cantabrico, there have been further secret expeditions from Veracruz. In March, the Mexican government sent a cargo of arms valued at 1,791,166 dollars. Part of the shipment originated in Mexico and part was purchased with Republican funds in Czechoslovakia through Mexican diplomatic agents. The cargo included rifles, ammunition, guns, a few artillery pieces and several hundreds of kilos of Mexican sugar.”<sup>27</sup>

It is vital to understand the degree and importance of Mexico’s efforts in supplying the Spanish Republic. Mexico had devoted its entire national production of arms and munitions and increased their military factories’ work force in order to maximize the amount of material sent to the Republic. Mexico immediately sent the Mexican Army’s weapons reserves, and even disarmed completely artillery units, in order to send their weapons to the Republican army. Mexico’s assistance came at a time when Republican Spain found herself with few available options for purchasing war material due to the non-intervention agreement.<sup>28</sup> At the same time the Nationalist’s enjoyed the support of private companies in the United States who played a pivotal role in supplying the insurgents throughout the course of the conflict. As the Spanish under-secretary at the Spanish foreign ministry admitted in 1945, “without American petroleum and American trucks and American credit, we could never have won the civil war.”<sup>29</sup>

At the start of the conflict the Republican government backed its peseta with the country’s 700 tons of gold reserves, while the Nationalists could only offer the probability of

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27 Revah, 174- 175.

28 *Ibid*, 139.

29 Beevor, 115.

victory as collateral for their currency. Republican politician Indalecio Preito commented in August 1936 that the Republic's gold gave "the Spanish government an unlimited resistance, while the financial capacity of the enemy is negligible." However, the Anglo-French arms embargo limited the Republic's ability to purchase arms, British oil companies at Gibraltar, and the American owned Vacuum Oil Company in Tangier, refused to sell to the Republican ships. In July 1935 the Texas Oil Company had signed a long term contract to supply the Spanish government oil monopoly of CAMPSA. However, the president of the Texas Oil Company was an admirer of the fascists, and after learning of the Nationalist uprising he diverted five oil tankers en-route to Spain to Nationalist held ports and would continue to sell oil to the Nationalist completely on credit. Ford, Studebaker and General Motors supplied 12,000 trucks to the Nationalist, nearly three times as many as the Axis powers. The chemical giant DuPont provided 40,000 bombs to the Nationalists through Germany, to avoid the US Neutrality Act of 1935 which forbade the sale of arms to all parties in a foreign war.<sup>30</sup>

The Cardenas government decided early on to support the Spanish Republic to the best of their ability. However, Mexican popular opinion was divided about this policy. As news of the conflict spread throughout Mexico differing views became apparent. With recent updates on the conflict publicly posted in El Palacio De Hierro and El Centro Mercantil in Mexico City, groups of pro Nationalist and pro Republican supporters would gather daily to cheer or condemn recent events reported from the conflict in Spain. Automobiles would roar throughout the city, their occupants waving the Republican Spanish or Nationalist flags. Newsreels reporting on the conflict would receive cheers or disapproval as they were displayed

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 114-6. ; Jackson, 250.

in theaters and occasional fist fights erupted throughout the city between those who were at odds over the conflict.<sup>31</sup>

An incident in the College of San Ildefonso, reported by the Mexico City conservative newspaper *El Excelsior* on July 31, occurred at a lecture by the Republican Spanish ambassador to Mexico Felix Gordon Ordas over "Education and Labor in Republican Spanish Government." Intense fistfights erupted in the crowd, followed by tear gas explosions, as pro Nationalist and pro Republican students fell upon each other chanting, "Viva los generales Mola y Franco" and "Viva el gobierno de Azaña!" depending on their allegiance.<sup>32</sup>

Mexican college students in the early twentieth century remained an elite minority in Mexico, drawn from the upper and middle social classes and not surprisingly holding traditional conservative views. Therefore, Ambassador Gordon found little support for the Republican cause from most college educated and upper class Mexicans who already deeply disapproved of Cardenas's left leaning Presidency.<sup>33</sup>

As pro-Republican writer Lois Elwyn Smith wrote,

"A large sector of Mexican public opinion looked on President Cardenas's Spanish policy with extreme disfavor. It served as a focal point uniting the president's opponents. The pressures of the opposition from outside the government was tremendous; reportedly there was also pressure from within the government... the long association between Spain and Mexico tended more to create hostility than to arouse friendship in Mexico for the Spanish Republic...

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31 Revah, 103, 104.

32 *Excelsior*, July 31, 1936.

33 Powell, 124.

chiefly because the institutions which the Spaniards transplanted to Mexico were the very ones that furthered the anti-Republican cause."<sup>34</sup>

Mexicans citizens with connections to Spain, whether of origin, commerce, cultural or religious affiliation, sided with the Nationalists. This group of Mexicans consisted of the majority of Mexico's business men, the Catholic Church, and politicians and conservatives who opposed Cardenas's populist policies.<sup>35</sup> The Spanish community in Mexico was the nation's largest foreign community, with 47,000 members comprising 35 % of Mexico's foreign population. The majority of Spaniards resided in Mexico City, followed by large concentrations in Tampico, Merida, Veracruz, Puebla, San Louis Potosi and Guanajuato. Spaniards living in Mexico City excitedly supported the uprising as some of them had left Spain following the formation of the second Republic in 1931 after King Alfonso XIII abdicated the throne.<sup>36</sup>

As Mexican writer Blanca Trejo observed "Almost all the resident of Spaniards" in Mexico City had a drunken celebration on the news of Malaga's fall to the Nationalist in 1937; in fact overwhelming support for the Nationalists was true in Spanish communities' throughout Mexico.<sup>37</sup> As the conservative newspaper *La Opinion* reported in late 1936, from the southern Mexican city of Puebla, of its 3,000 Spanish residents only ten attended pro Republican rallies, as most threw parties in celebration of Nationalist victories.<sup>38</sup>

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34 Lois Smith, *Mexico and the Spanish Republicans*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955.), 171-2,177.

35 Revah, 216.

36 Revah, 221, 222.

37 Powell, 116.

38 *La Opinion*, November 29, 1936; December 1, 1936.

Mexico's Minister of the Interior estimated that 40,000 of Mexico's 47,000 Spanish residents had sided with the Spanish Falange during the war, and 1,600 were active militants.<sup>39</sup> A number of fascist groups emerged from the Spanish community in Mexico. One such group was called "la Asociación Española Anticomunista y Antijudía" (The Spanish Anti-communist and Anti-Jewish Association), and published the *Vida Española* from 1936 to 1937. The AEACJ founder Francisco Cayon even wrote to assure Franco that the support of the Spanish community in Mexico was secured, but that he had been unable to organize larger assistance due to the interferences from the Cardenas administration and the Republican Spanish embassy in Mexico.<sup>40</sup>

Mexico's economic elite had opposed President Cardenas rise to power and his presidency. However, the corporate sector was insufficiently organized to exert pressure on his policies (Chambers of Commerce emerged during the 1920s but only locally). The trade unions, which had been weakened during the last years of the *Maximato* period (1928 -1934, the period of the Emilio Gil Administration, which was a puppet administrations controlled by formal President Calles after the assassination of President elect Alvaro Obregon), were now willing to resort to the strikes, which had been recently legalized. Nevertheless, a group of Mexican business leaders from Monterrey managed to unite against Cardenas by forming a powerful group, named *Grupo Monterrey*. This group represented the conservative opposition in northern Mexico's largest city, by including prominent Monterrey figures like Luis Garza (a major Monterrey steelmaker), director of *Vidriera Mexicana* Roberto Garza Sada (auto glass

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<sup>39</sup> Revah, 223.

<sup>40</sup> Manuel Fernandez Boyoli, *Estaquío Marron de Agnelis, Lo que no se sabe de la rebellion cedillista*, (Mexico, 1938), appendix.



manufacturing company), the executive director of *La Cerveceria Cuauhtemoc Louis Sada* (a major brewery in Monterrey), the president of the major furniture wholesale factory *Salinas y Rocha* Joel Rocha, the Executive of Monterrey's distribution of The Ford Motor Company, Emilio Azcarraga, and Manuel Barragan first President of *Topo Chico, Coca-Cola*, and the editor of conservative Mexico City newspaper *Excelsior* after 1928.<sup>41</sup>

The *Grupo Monterrey* funded and organized conservative propaganda through pamphlets, newspaper articles, and radio broadcast's against the country's support of Republican Spain, and particularly President Cardenas and Mexico's two liberal political parties PRI and CTM. They preached support for traditional family values, Catholicism, and the motherland.<sup>42</sup> The group even undertook extremist measures by funding the conservative group *Las Camisas Doradas*, sponsoring a group of armed street gangsters to threaten the local CTM, and even organized demonstrations that attracted up to 60,000 protestors in Monterrey. During President Cardenas's visit to Monterrey in February 1936 the manufacturing plants shut down in protest. Shortly after the Cardenas visit the government ordered the CTM (the liberal Confederation of Mexican Workers party) to abandon its offices in Mexico's largest northern city, and Monterrey became the focal point of anti-Cardenas activities.<sup>43</sup>

Beyond the Mexican elites was a population that had an illiteracy rate 50%. This meant that many lacked the capability to keep abreast of international affairs, or even read a newspaper. Therefore, the vast majority of Mexico's peasantry stood generally indifferent

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41 Revah, 250.

42 *Ibid*, 251.

43 *Ibid*, 252.

towards the conflict. Moreover, they distrusted the Mexican populist government under Cardenas and the rapid changes undergoing Mexican society. As most rural Mexican peasants in the 1930's had a dismal view on the Spanish conflict, without direction from political organizations such as the PNR or CTM, they relied on the Catholic Church for leadership who remained pro Nationalist. Therefore, the vast majority of Mexicans who held a reasonably informed opinion on the conflict in Spain were educated enough to keep up with newspapers, or lived in villages or cities which cultivated an interest in Mexican foreign affairs and politics.<sup>44</sup>

Therefore, Mexican support for the Spanish Republic came from her working classes who gravitated toward the nation's two liberal political parties the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (National Revolutionary Party or PNR) and or the *Confederación de Trabajadores de México* (Confederation of Mexican Workers party or CMT). As Ambassador Gordon observed Mexico's pro-Republican activists came from, "workers and peasants, intellectuals of the left, members of the PNR... Masons, the Veterans of the Revolution organization, public functionaries supporting President Cardenas's policies, and ... teachers."<sup>45</sup>

A July 1938 editorial from the left leaning Mexico City newspaper *El Popular*, argued for the relevance of the conflict in Spain to the Mexican worker, by comparing the conflict with Mexico's recent history.

"In the Spanish latifundium, in the clergy, in capitalism, in the traitorous military rabble, Mexican workers are seeing a repetition of the Mexican Revolution's experience... The Mexican people are witnessing in the Spanish war their civil war of 1910-1917. Fortunately, during our Revolution, foreign intervention was

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44 *Ibid*, 215. ; Powell, 125-126.

45 Felix Ordas, *Mi politica fuera de Espana*, (Mexico: Talleres Graficos Victoria, 1965), 488.

minimal... Mexican workers are deeply concerned about the fate of the Spanish workers... Triumph of the Spanish Revolution will signify a new manner of struggle and progress for the Ibero-American nations; a step closer for all toward realization of a better society. Its defeat, however, will be our defeat, through a strengthening of fascism and its threat to the democratic countries.”<sup>46</sup>

Mexico’s working class organized under the leftist political organizations of the PNR, the CTM, and the PCM. The country’s workers showed their support through rallies, contributions, sympathetic letters of moral support and even volunteers traveling across the Atlantic to fight in the defense of the Republic. Mexico’s rural population who supported the Republic only managed modest efforts but with the deepest sincerity. As In the small villages of Yztacapa and Teltapa in the state of Hidalgo, residents collected a modest sum of donations to be sent, accompanied by a letter offering a “fraternal salute” to the “noble combatants” of the Republic. General Porfirio del Castillo, recalled the enthusiasm of his countrymen from the state of Hidalgo,

“...the Mexican people...deeply love their liberties and know how to defend them courageously....Our rural folk and the masses generally only know the Spaniards from superficial contact and through commercial transactions with Spanish businessmen residing here, most of whom continue to be filled with prejudices and to treat Indians disdainfully. Our masses however possess a wonderful institution... and know how to distinguish...between those archaic Spaniards who still live in the past from the Spanish Republicans who are fighting for their integrity and autonomy as a sovereign state. Thus, across space and through time, in a supreme communion of ideals, Mexico and Spain identify with each other, and the two peoples draw together as brothers. Tyrants can neither force them from the course on which they have mutually embarked nor prevent them from justly realizing their common destinies.”<sup>47</sup>

With the exception of Mexico and Russia the countries of the world chose to remain neutral to the Republican plight as the Nationalist enjoyed the support of Nazi Germany and

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46 El Popular, July 19, 1938.

47 Powell, 125.

Italy however, thousands of foreign volunteers flocked to the side of the Republic on their own accord. From middle class intellectuals to poets, students, communists, workers, exiled Germans and Italian political prisoners. Though the democratic nations may have remained neutral in the war, they could not prevent their citizens from taking action in defense of the ideals they believed in. The Spanish civil war saw the creation of the International Brigade, with a total of 35,000 volunteers, though never more than 18,000 at one time. Volunteers included nationals from all the countries of Europe and the America's, 10,000 French, 5,000 each from Germany, Poland, Austria, Italy 3,000, Britain 2,000, Latin America 2,000, and the United States 3,000 who served in the Lincoln Battalion, as well as others.<sup>48</sup>

Just as volunteers from the mentioned countries took it upon themselves to defend Spain from the threat they understood to loom over the western world, Mexico also had citizens who traveled across the Atlantic Ocean to aid Spain, by joining the Republican or the Nationalist cause. The number of Mexican volunteers in Spain is estimated to be around 150 to 300; they served on both sides of the conflict. Of all the Mexican volunteers who served in Spain only around twenty percent survived the war to return to Mexico. The majority of Mexicans who volunteered to serve with the Republican army received minimal financial aid from the PNR and little encouragement from the Cardenas government. This was mainly due to the government's pro-Republic policy's unpopularity with many Mexicans and Mexico's weak international position. Mexican volunteers who supported the Republic relied on travel funds

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48 Beevor, 125.

from the Spanish Embassy who recruited volunteers, the CTM who provided funds or the Communist party who funded Mexican Communist volunteers.<sup>49</sup>

As Mexican Republican volunteers arrived in Spain, they found themselves serving in the Popular Army units instead of the International Brigades. This was due to their ability to fit in well as fellow Spanish speakers, and the fact that some had come from the Mexican army including Mexican officers who were immediately assigned to command units in the chaotic and undisciplined Republican Army. Motives for Mexican Republican volunteers ranged from adventurism, personal conviction, and to escape from personal responsibilities.<sup>50</sup> One Mexican Republican volunteer was David Alfaro Siqueiros, a celebrated artist and Communist who had been a Mexican officer in the Constitutional Army during the Mexican Revolution. He was assigned to command the 82<sup>nd</sup> Mixed Brigade and later the 46<sup>th</sup> Brigade.<sup>51</sup> He said, "Because I was a Mexican officer, I was given command of a unit composed of anarchists... Other Mexican officers and myself were given command of such units..., because the love that the anarchists had for Mexico, in contrast to their hatred of the Soviet Union, facilitated our organizational work."<sup>52</sup>

Mexican volunteers serving in the Republican Army soon discovered the extent of the gratitude Spaniards felt towards Mexico for their support of the Republic. Embassy First Secretary Navarro wrote on October 1936, "In all sectors of public opinion, in the press, at high

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49 Powell, 104-5.

50 David Siqueiros, *Me llamaban el coronelazo*, (Mexico: Grijalbo, 1977) , 358-63.

51 Revah, 196.

52 Siqueiros, 317, 322-23.

government levels, in every phase of national life where manifestation of sentiment is possible, great thanks are clearly and sincerely expressed toward Mexico and its president...The current of sympathy is unanimous, and everyone talks about Mexico."<sup>53</sup>

A Mexican civilian and volunteer, the writer Octavio Paz, a member of LEAR which was the League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists who assisted the Republic in its propaganda efforts, recalled one night in Valencia when he found himself in a raid with fellow Spanish friends,

"We went through singing the Internationale to keep our own courage and also to encourage the inhabitants, and then we took shelter in a vegetable garden. The peasants came to look at us and were interested to hear that I was a Mexican. Mexico was sending help to the republicans, and some of those peasants were anarchists. They went back to their houses in the middle of the bombardment to look for food, and brought us a little bread, a melon, cheese and wine. Eating with those peasants during a bombardment...that's something I can't forget."<sup>54</sup>

Another Mexican volunteer who fought for Republican Spain, Hector Sanchez Hernandez, was the only Mexican who was assigned to an International Brigade. In 1937 at the age of 17, Hernandez made his way to Spain after traveling from Veracruz to Havana to New York where the Brooklyn Association of Solidarity for the Republic of Spain funded his transcontinental trip to Cherbourg and then to Paris, making his way into Spain through the Pyrenees. In Spain Hernandez was assigned to the Polish Dombrowski Brigade, and saw action

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53 Powell, 99.

54 Ibid, 109.

in the Battles of Jarama and Ebro, where he was wounded after being reassigned to the Mickiewicz Battalion, which was annihilated before Hernandez could rejoin them.<sup>55</sup>

After the Republic disbanded all foreign volunteers from Spain, Hector made his way to Barcelona and was united with fellow Mexican volunteers, where he organized a reception in celebration of Mexico's Independence in the Mexican Embassy in September 1938. However, before returning back to Mexico, Hernandez represented the Mexican Republican Volunteers in Spain by marching with the Mexican flag in the parade of the International Brigades through Barcelona on October 28, 1938.<sup>56</sup>

As strong as pro-Nationalist support was in Mexico, it is no surprise that Mexico had volunteers who fought on the side of the Nationalists. One Mexican Nationalist volunteer was a conservative doctor, Luis Lara Pardo, who informed the right leaning Mexico City newspaper *Excelsior* that the majority of Mexican Nationalist volunteers in Spain were from Mexican conservative families who had left Mexico during the Revolution of 1910 and immigrated to Spain. Pardo explained that Mexican conservatives living in Spain sought to defend the country from the Popular Front which they compared to the Mexican Revolution that caused them to flee their motherland. Pardo also mentioned to *Excelsior* that Pablo Sanchez Juarez, decedent of Mexican President Benito Juarez, was serving as an officer under General Felix Monasterio.<sup>57</sup>

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55 Néstor Hernández, *Un Mexicano en La Guerra Civil Espanola y Otros Recuerdos*, (Mexico D.F.: Carteles Editores, 2005), 128 -9, 144.

56 *Ibid*, 219.

57 Revah, 211-13.

Under President Cardenas's administration, the Mexican press witnessed the greatest advancement in free speech and the removal of government censorship. As a result, press opinion could be uninhibitedly Pro Nationalist, including two of Mexico City's prominent newspapers, *El Excelsior* and *El Universal*.<sup>58</sup> During the course of the war, the Republican defeats continued to cover the front page of Mexican newspapers, creating tensions as left wing organizations accused editors and reporters of the conservative newspaper's *El Excelsior* and *El Universal* of treason of being financed by Spanish fascists.<sup>59</sup>

CTM founder and one of Mexico's foremost labor leaders, Vicente Lombardo Toledano, commented, "The Spanish war was used by Mexican daily papers, particularly *El Excelsior* and its afternoon edition called *Las Ultimas Noticias*, not only as an issue with which to defend fascism over there but also to defend fascism here, in such a way as to encourage fascist living in Mexico to persevere until they succeeded in achieving in our country the fascist victory already won in other parts of the world."<sup>60</sup>

Such accusations of unfair reporting on the conflict were not entirely accurate as most Mexican newspapers made an effort to represent both sides of the conflict in an accurate, manner, though on occasion they did tend to slant their headlines. For instance, conservative newspapers *El Universal* regularly published entire speeches on Spain by the liberal CTM

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58 Revah, 246.

59 *El Universal*, February 24, 1938

60 Tzvi Medin, *Ideologia y praxis politica de lazaro Cardenas*, (Mexico,1976), 198.



founder Vicente Lombardo (who regularly accused “El Universal” of being fascists in his speeches) and occasional publications approving of Cardenas and the PNR humanitarianisms.<sup>61</sup>

Since *El Universal* was conservative, they did take opportunities to criticize Republican Spain on issues concerning Mexican politics at that time, directing their criticism on Cardenas populist economic and social policies, which the *El Universal* opposed. For instance in late January 1938, *El Universal* published an editorial on the “collectivist failure” of Catalonia’s industrial and agriculture economy. Blaming Catalonia’s failed industrial economy on lower worker wages and time wasted on “useless meetings”, and the failures of Catalonia’s agricultural economy to “the land, belonging to nobody, nobody works it”. The editorial continued by stating “order and common sense” must prevail over “the empty rhetoric of myopic ideologies and opportunistic agitators” as “a body cannot govern itself without a head”.<sup>62</sup>

While some Mexico City’s newspapers made occasional efforts to publish balanced reports on the conflict, some provincial conservative papers did not. As conservative newspaper *El Provenir* in Monterrey frequently published pro Nationalist articles for their northern readership such as “The Anarchists and the Communist Terror of Red Spain” which appeared in January 1938.<sup>63</sup> Merida’s pro Nationalist *El Diario de Yucatan* newspaper also treated its southern readers with similar articles such as “The Reds are Paying with Their Lives

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61 Powell, 134, 135, 136.

62 El Universal, January 31, 1938

63 El Provenir, January 10, 1938

for Their Terrible Crimes” in April 1939.<sup>64</sup> Another pro Nationalist newspaper went beyond the usual publication of pro Franco articles. The owner of Veracruz newspaper *El Dicatmen*, Juan Malpica Silba, was discovered to have assisted the Italian consul in Veracruz by photographing airplanes headed to Republican Spain.<sup>65</sup>

Pro Republican newspapers such as Puebla’s *La Opinion* countered Nationalist bias in the media by describing the conflict as a war waged on the working class by fascist forces led by Germany and Italy. Who were “trying to crush the Spanish proletariat, trying to drown it in its own blood and with it the proletariat of all nations” as “criminal Legionnaires...and dirty Moors...are now washing their filthy feet in the noble blood...of Spanish militiamen in the ravaged streets of glorious Madrid.”<sup>66</sup>

Pro Republican newspaper, *El Diario de Puebla*, distanced itself on the ideology of the conflict and stood closer to Cardenas and the PNR view that the Republican government was the legal democratically elected government of Spain and that the Nationalist uprising threatened the freedom of the Spanish people.<sup>67</sup> On occasion *El Diario de Puebla* deplored political extremes by describing the conflict as a war between “Communism and fascism [that] have made Spain a testing ground, where they prepare for a mad war of extermination and annihilation.”<sup>68</sup> *El Diario de Puebla* praised the Cardenas government efforts in defending the

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64 *El Diario de Yucatan*, November 4, 1939

65 Powell, 142.

66 *La Opinion*, November 11, 1936

67 Powell, 143.

68 *El Diario de Puebla*, September 22, 1937

Republicans position to the International community in the League of Nations by stating “In these chilling moments of international politics, it is well that Mexico persists in pointing out errors and condemning injustices so that the truth historically sustained by this nation endures in the world.”<sup>69</sup>

As the war drew to a catastrophic end for the Republic in 1939, half a million Spaniards crossed the border into France seeking asylum.<sup>70</sup> After several Mexicans in Europe toured the Spanish camps in France, a sense of urgency grew as the realization that France might send back refugees to prison or certain death in Spain. As former Mexican governor Abalberto Tejeda urged Cardenas to “initial international action” by accepting Spanish refugees including “talented people” such as Spanish intellectuals, writers, and other professionals. By April 1939, President Cardenas announced that Mexico “would accept an unlimited number of refugees if the Republican authorities would arrange to finance their transportation and settlement in Mexico.” After the first shiploads of Spanish refugees arrived in Veracruz in the summer of 1939, immigration continued throughout the course of the Second World War, and by 1945 around forty thousand Spanish refugees had arrived in Mexico.<sup>71</sup>

After Cardenas announced the decision to accept thousands of exiled Spanish Republicans, the right wing hatred of the Republic was demonstrated as the conservative press and their sponsors openly opposed the idea of thousands of left wing Republican Spaniards

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69 *Ibid* , October 11, 1937

70 Jackson, 465.

71 Powell, 150-1.

entering the country.<sup>72</sup> In general, the majority of Mexico's population did not look eagerly to the arrival of the Spanish exiles and were, in fact opposed to the ideal of giving them refuge. However, as the years passed Mexican opposition towards the exiled Spaniards declined.<sup>73</sup>

The presidential election of 1940 witnessed a shift in Mexican politics. The election of moderate conservative and Catholic President Manuel Avila Camacho who received ninety three percent of votes, signaled the end of Mexico's post-Revolutionary drift towards the left. The new government under Camacho embarked on a solid effort to crush the worker's movement. The rapid economic growth, the subordination of the unions and farmers, and the rapprochement with the Church helped to reconcile the conservatives and the business sector with the Mexican government after 1940. From then on, conservative Mexicans stood behind Camacho and his efforts in overturning the majority of Cardenas's policies. However on the two crucial issues of the continuity of ownership of the oil in the hands of Mexican State and the refusal to establish diplomatic relations with the Franco regime continued, as Cardenas policy on the issue of the Franco regime and Mexican support of Republican exiles was passed on as an untouchable inheritance.<sup>74</sup>

Mexico's actions during and after the Spanish Civil War under President Cardenas proved to be one of the most appreciated generosity towards the Spanish Republic. Even after the conclusion of the war, Cardenas continued to receive personal sentiments of gratitude from

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72 Raveh, 262.

73 Powell, 157.

74 Revah, 282-83

Republicans, and was the center of countless tributes until his death in 1970 in Mexico City.<sup>75</sup> However, this essay has sought to demonstrate that even as the Mexican government fully backed the Spanish Republic, it did not receive the full approval of her people. Mexico was highly divided on the issue, and the Cardenas government acted without the intention of following the will of the Mexican people they were elected to represent, but instead, acted on moral grounds. As the continual turmoil between Mexican conservatism and liberalism remained after the Mexican Revolution, and with Mexican government under the leadership of a populist President, the right and left sought to use the conflict in Spain as another political statement in their political efforts in the home front. With the majority of Mexico's economic elite, Mexico's newspapers, religious community, Spanish community, and college educated class aligned to the right in support of the Nationalist cause, only a minority of workers, Intellectuals, and peasants, sided with the Republicans. As for the vast majority of the Mexican peasantry and lower classes, they were misinformed and ignorant on the issue.

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<sup>75</sup> Powell, 101.

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