

FASCISTS, NAZIS, OR SOMETHING ELSE?: *Mexico's Unión Nacional Sinarquista in the US Media, 1937–1945*

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the public relations battles in the US media over Mexico's Unión Nacional Sinarquista (UNS), an explicitly Catholic social movement founded in 1937 that aimed to restore the Church to its traditional role in Mexican society and to reject the reforms of the revolutionary government. The *sinarquistas* shared many of the features of fascism and Nazism, the major global antidemocratic movements of the time, including a strident nationalism, authoritarian leanings, an emphasis on martial discipline and strict organizational structure, and a militant aesthetic. Both its ideological leanings and rapid growth (as many as 500,000 members by the early 1940s) led many US writers to suggest that the UNS represented a dangerous fifth-column threat to both Mexico and the United States. Others, particularly in the Catholic press, saw the UNS as an anticommunist organization that could actually help foster democracy in Mexico. For their part, UNS leaders defended themselves vociferously and sought to build relationships with influential US Catholics who could advocate for them in the press. By analyzing this debate, this paper both underscores the transnational characteristics of the UNS and highlights the crucial role of US public opinion in Mexican politics during the 1940s.

KEYWORDS: Unión Nacional Sinarquista, Mexico, fascism, Catholic Church, sinarquism, Salvador Abascal

In the early 1940s, a Mexican public relations battle was unfolding in the print media in the United States. On one side were the leaders and supporters of a new, rapidly growing Catholic organization, the Unión Nacional Sinarquista (UNS), a right-wing group with chapters across Mexico and in the United States that actively contested Mexico's revolutionary government. On the other side were the organization's detractors in both countries, who claimed, among other things, that the UNS was nothing less than a fifth column for foreign powers—especially the Spanish Falange and Germany's Nazis—that could destabilize not only Mexico, but the United States as well.

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Given the timing, the stakes could hardly have been higher. The Spanish Civil War had begun a year before the UNS's founding in 1937, and the organization's tremendous growth in membership during the early 1940s overlapped chronologically with the Second World War. Thus, the rise of the UNS coincided with growing fears throughout the Western Hemisphere of potential infiltration by Axis and fascist powers, and with authorities' increasing wariness toward right-wing groups of all kinds. With regard to US-Mexican relations, the scandal over the Zimmerman Telegram during World War I had primed at least some Americans to be aware of the southern border as a permeable space that global enemies of the United States could easily penetrate.¹ For many in the United States it seemed eminently plausible that a right-wing or fascist movement in Mexico could become a fifth column of Axis support, and therefore a grave threat to US national security.²

Between 1937 and 1945, the UNS received widespread press coverage in the United States, and its opponents and supporters—in both Mexico and the United States—sought to sway that coverage. American journalists and writers in the mainstream secular press largely portrayed the UNS as a fifth column for America's enemies and a source of potential danger to both Mexican and US national security. Opponents of the UNS in Mexico often served as both sources and contributors for these portrayals. By contrast, the US Catholic print media described the Sinarquista movement very differently, largely downplaying the possibility of violence and danger, and even arguing that the UNS represented a critical bulwark for religious freedom and anticommunism in both Mexico and the United States.

Throughout the war years, Sinarquista leaders and representatives in the United States attempted to improve the public image of the organization in the American media landscape, primarily by collaborating with influential US Catholics. They did so despite the fact that the UNS was, for most of the early 1940s, openly and vociferously critical of the United States, for they were well aware that negative press coverage could—and did—trigger condemnation

1. For more on the fascist threat in the Western Hemisphere, see Max Paul Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors: The United States Campaign Against the Germans of Latin America in World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), as well as Francis MacDonnell, *Insidious Foes: The Axis Fifth Column and the American Home Front* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). For more on the Zimmerman Telegram and German involvement in Mexico prior to World War II, see Friedrich Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, the United States and the Mexican Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

2. Chester M. Wright, "Strong Action Is Needed to Defeat Sinarquist Order," *Butler County Press*, Hamilton, Ohio, November 21, 1941, 2. On Mexico and the United States during World War II, see María Emilia Paz Salinas, *Strategy, Security, and Spies: Mexico and the U.S. as Allies in World War II* (University Park: Penn State University Press), 2010. On Mexico and the Spanish Civil War, see José Antonio Matesanz, *Las raíces del exilio: México ante la guerra civil española, 1936–1939* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1999).

from US politicians.³ Such condemnation, Sinarquista leaders believed, could lead to political pressure from the “colossus of the North” that could threaten the survival of the UNS.⁴ As a result, a public relations campaign to improve the image of the UNS in the United States could be integral to the survival of the organization.

The Sinarquistas’ fears—and their media strategy—had echoes in recent Mexican history. The United States had repeatedly proven both its ability and willingness to intervene directly in Mexican political movements, and various Mexican political leaders had appealed to the US press to try to improve their fortunes. During and after the Mexican Revolution, for example, competing factions found that the approval or disapproval of the United States could determine the viability of their movements.⁵ As a result, revolutionary leaders sought to influence US policy through public relations campaigns.⁶ Throughout the Cristero War, as I have written elsewhere, Mexican Catholics repeatedly appealed to US politicians through the medium of the US press, both to seek support for the Cristero cause and to obtain official repudiation of the anticlerical Mexican government by the government of the United States. Ultimately, the Cristeros never received the support they sought, which was one of the factors that doomed their movement.⁷

After a brief review of the history of the UNS, this article will examine how Sinarquistas were portrayed in American print media between 1937 and 1945, drawing on the review of numerous articles from mainstream secular newspapers, articles from Catholic newspapers published in cities and towns across the United States, and archival material from both Mexico and the

3. After the writer Betty Kirk published several very negative assessments of the UNS in the US press, a writer for *El Sinarquista* noted that “the results of this campaign are already being felt. Representative Coffee, Democrat of Washington, based on the statements of Kirk, states before Congress that we are a danger for the United States.” “Los Sinarquistas son 3 millones de indios analfabetas y fanáticos,” *El Sinarquista*, July 11, 1943, 3.

4. In a 1965 interview between UNS co-founder Salvador Abascal and scholar James Wilkie, Abascal expressed his opinion about the role of the United States in the Cristero War: “Yankee politics has always demanded the weakening of the Catholic Church in Mexico. The Mexican bishops were aware of this situation, and they could not fight against the colossus of the North, because our pathetic government, in this territory, has been no less than a servant of Washington. The peace agreements of 1929 were made by order of the White House.” James Wallace Wilkie and Edna Monzón de Wilkie, “Oral History Interviews with Mexican Political Leaders and Other Personalities, Mexico, 1964–1965: Salvador Abascal,” University of California-Berkeley, Bancroft Library Manuscripts Collections, MSS M-M 1905, Carton 1, 95.

5. See John Skiriutis, “Railroad, Oil and Other Foreign Interests in the Mexican Revolution, 1911–1914,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 35:11 (2003): 25–51; and Friedrich Katz, “Pancho Villa and the Attack on Columbus, New Mexico,” *American Historical Review* 83:1 (1978): 101–130.

6. Michael M. Smith demonstrates that revolutionary leader Venustiano Carranza paid a publicist, George Weeks, to promote his government between 1913 and 1920. See “Gringo Propagandist: George E Weeks and the Mexican Revolution,” *Journalism History*, 29:1 (Spring 2003): 2–11.

7. Specifically, Cristeros were unable to purchase weapons in the United States legally; a 1924 US presidential proclamation forbade the exportation of arms and munitions of war to Mexico by anyone except the Mexican government. See Julia G. Young, *Mexican Exodus: Emigrants, Exiles, and Refugees of the Cristero War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), chaps. 2 and 4.

United States. Throughout, I examine the ways that Sinarquistas responded to this press coverage, and attempted to cultivate relationships with prominent US Catholics who could improve public perceptions of their organization in the United States.

The article makes three contributions to our understanding of the UNS. First, it examines the role of the US print media in shaping American public opinion about the Sinarquista movement in the United States, and underscores how stories about the UNS reached a surprisingly wide readership, especially during the 1940-45 period. Second, it elucidates how the UNS operated on both sides of the US-Mexico border, both through its US chapters as well as through its constant attention and responsiveness to US print media, notwithstanding its official anti-Yankee position. Finally, while this article does not propose a definitive answer to the question of the true nature of the UNS—was it actually a fascist fifth column?—it does offer a critical examination of these allegations, putting them into the political context in which they were made. Through these contributions, this article extends and challenges a historiographical literature that has, with only a few exceptions, treated the UNS as an entity confined to a national or even regional sphere in Mexico.⁸ Instead, this article describes the ways in which the organization both extended and was perceived beyond Mexico's borders.

HISTORY OF THE SINARQUISTA MOVEMENT

The Unión Nacional Sinarquista was established in May 1937, in a country still reeling from years of violent Church-state conflict—not only the widespread

8. Most published historical studies of the UNS have portrayed the organization as a national or even regional organization largely ignoring its existence outside of Mexico. These studies include Rubén Aguilar V. and Guillermo Zermeño P., *Religión, política y sociedad: el sinarquismo y la Iglesia en México (Nueve Ensayos)* (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana: Departamento de Historia, 1992); José Gustavo González Flores, “Los motivos del Sinarquista. La organización y la ideología de la Unión Nacional Sinarquista,” *Culturales* 3:1 (June 2015): 49–7; Jean Meyer, *El sinarquismo: ¿un fascismo mexicano? 1937–1947* (Mexico City: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, 1975), and *El sinarquismo, el cardenismo, y la Iglesia, 1937–1947* (Mexico City: Tusquets, 2003); Servando Ortoll, “Los orígenes sociales del sinarquismo en Jalisco 1929–1939,” *Encuentros* 1:3 (April–June 1984): 75–119; and Pablo Serrano Álvarez, *La batalla del espíritu: el movimiento sinarquista en El Bajío, 1932–1951* (Mexico City: CONACULTA, 1992); In English, see Jason Dormady, “Sinarquismo and the María Auxiliadora Colonization Experiment,” chapt. 4 in *Primitive Revolution: Restorationist Religion and the Idea of the Mexican Revolution, 1940–1968* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011); Martín Tomás Velázquez, “Radical Catholic Resistance to the Mexican Revolution: The Cristero Rebellion and the Sinarquista Movement” (Ph.D. diss., Texas A & M University, 2011); Hector Hernández, *The Sinarquista Movement: With Special Reference to the Period 1933–1944* (London: Minerva Press, 1999). Two notable exceptions are a master's thesis by Oscar Lozano, “Patria y Nacionalismo en el México de Afuera: The Extension of Sinarquismo into the United States,” (MA thesis: University of Texas at El Paso, 1999); and another by John Smith, “‘True Patriots for the Salvation of the Fatherland’: Sinarquistas and the Struggle for Post-Revolutionary Mexico” (MA thesis: University of New Mexico, 2014). Smith also explores the portrayal of the Sinarquistas in US media. Nathan Ellstrand is currently completing a promising dissertation at Loyola University Chicago about UNS activities in the United States, titled “Reclaiming *La Patria*: Sinarquismo in the United States.”

conflagrations of the Cristero War (1926-29), but also the more sporadic violence of the 1930s known as the Segunda Cristiada. In this context and owing to the still-simmering legacy of the mobilization behind the Cristero Rebellion, the UNS aimed to bring about a Christian social order in Mexico by restoring the Catholic Church as the ultimate authority in Mexican society, and opposing the revolutionary government's policies, in particular its anticlericalism, socialist education policies, and agrarian reform.⁹

The UNS emerged as the public branch of a secretive Catholic organization, Las Legiones/La Base, which had sought to organize Mexican Catholics during the mid-1930s. Within only a few years of its founding, the new organization had grown so rapidly that its membership far outnumbered that of its predecessors, particularly in the central states of Jalisco, Guanajuato, Michoacán, and Querétaro, although it had chapters practically nationwide.¹⁰ In addition to being Mexico's Catholic heartland and the locus of intense fighting during the Cristero War, these states were also the home states of the UNS founders, all of them young, educated Catholic laymen. The city of León, Guanajuato, would serve as the organization's spiritual capital, and was often referred to as "Sinarcópolis" by UNS members. By the early 1940s, the organization had between 300,000 and 500,000 members. During the first half of that decade it would be the country's most visible Catholic popular movement.¹¹

Furthermore, the UNS would also become a transnational organization. It held great appeal for some among the hundreds of thousands of Mexican emigrants in the United States, many of whom came from the regions where the UNS was most popular, and—as I have described elsewhere—had supported the Catholic cause during the Cristero War and the Segunda Cristiada.¹² As the movement grew, the organization established headquarters in El Paso and Los Angeles, as well as numerous chapters in cities throughout Texas and the Southwest.¹³ Each city's committee held its own meetings, and members were charged with the task of growing the organization by recruiting from their own

9. For an excellent explanation of Catholic activism and its relationship to the Catholic Church in Mexico, see Stephen J. C. Andes, "A Catholic Alternative to Revolution: The Survival of Social Catholicism in Postrevolutionary Mexico," *The Americas* 68:4 (2012): 529-562; and Enrique Guerra Manzo, "Las encrucijadas del catolicismo intransigente- democrata (1929-1932)," *Signos Históricos* 14 (July-December 2005): 42-73.

10. José Antonio Urquiza, Brief History of the Legionnaires in Mexico, September 24, 1936, The Catholic University of America, American Catholic History Research Center, National Catholic Welfare Conference Collection [NCWC], Mexican Files, box 140, folder 28.

11. Meyer, *El sinarquismo*, 47.

12. Young, *Mexican Exodus*, chapt. 1.

13. The El Paso and Juárez committees were established as early as 1937. "Communist Raid Fought," *El Paso Times*, November 16, 1938, 12. Lozano dates them to 1939 in "Patria y nacionalismo," 59-61. See Julia G. Young, "Creating Catholic Utopias: Transnational Catholic Activism and Mexico's Unión Nacional Sinarquista," *Catholic Southwest* 29 (December 2018): 3-20. Nathan Ellstrand's forthcoming dissertation will offer a thorough accounting of the number and activities of UNS chapters across the United States.

and other migrant communities. Their fundraising would prove particularly important for the organization's leadership back in Mexico, since migrants were comparatively better paid than their counterparts at home.¹⁴

To its adherents, the UNS presented not only an alternative political and social platform, but also the possibility of recreating an idealized Catholic nation. Indeed, the UNS proposed nothing less than a new social order based on the teachings of the Church. In contrast to revolutionary policies of state-led land redistribution, the UNS envisioned a largely agrarian society, guided by Catholic moral principles, in which families would work cooperatively to farm privately owned land. At the helm of this new, integralist society would be an authoritative Catholic Church, from which all of Mexican society would derive its social norms and rules for living.¹⁵ The Sinarquistas' ideal Mexico would be corporatist—with its conception of an organic collectivist society comprised of synergistic and integrated interest groups. In that sense, it offered a Catholic integralist counterpoint to the labor-driven and agrarian corporatist society proposed by the Revolutionary state.¹⁶

Below (and subordinate to) the Church in the Sinarquista order would be a conservative secular bureaucracy that would exist to uphold individual liberties and private property. Sinarquistas envisioned the traditional family, with the father as head of household, as the basic unit of society. Women also played a significant role in the UNS: female members formed auxiliary women's organizations nationwide, and helped to develop programs of Catholic education for children wherever the UNS had a presence.¹⁷ The UNS was also explicitly anticommunist, framing itself as a bulwark against the global spread

14. The UNS newspaper, *El Sinarquista*, regularly tallied monetary and in-kind donations by UNS chapters in the United States.

15. With its origins in nineteenth-century political thought, particularly that of French Catholic intellectual Charles Maurras, integralism argues for the inseparability—and further, the integration—of Church and state. Circulating throughout Europe, infusing fascist governments in Spain and Italy and igniting movements in Haiti and Brazil as well as Mexico, integralism proposed an alternative to the secular modern state. Margaret Todaro Williams, "Integralism and the Brazilian Catholic Church," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 54:3 (1974): 431–452.

16. On Catholic nationalism in Mexico, see Benjamin Smith, *The Roots of Conservatism in Mexico: Catholicism, Society, and Politics in the Mixteca Baja* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 197–198. The literature on corporatism has tended to focus more on state-level and party-level corporatism, than on alternatives such as the UNS. On corporatism and its relationship to fascist governments in Europe, see Antonio Costa Pinto, *Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Europe and Latin America: Crossing Borders* (New York: Routledge, 2018). On corporatism in Latin America and Mexico, see James M. Malloy, *Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977); and Jeffrey W. Rubin, "Popular Mobilization and the Myth of State Corporatism," in *Popular Movements and Political Change in Mexico*, Ann Craig and Joseph Foweraker, eds. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1990), 247–267.

17. On women in the UNS, see Eva Nohemi Orozco García, "Las mujeres sinarquistas (1937–1962); las manos ocultas en la construcción del sentimiento nacionalista mexicano de derecha," (PhD diss.: University of Texas at El Paso, 2019). See also Roxana Rodríguez Bravo, "El sufragio femenino desde la perspectiva sinarquista-católica (1945–1958)," *Letras Históricas* 8 (2013): 159–184; Rodríguez Bravo, *Mujeres sinarquistas en México. Historia de una militancia católica femenina (1937–1948)* (PhD thesis: Colegio de Michoacán, 2011); and Laura Pérez Rosales, "Las mujeres sinarquistas:

of an atheistic communism that, UNS leaders argued, had already infested Mexico in the form of the leftist Revolution and anticlerical policies—and the religious persecution that it brought about.

UNS growth was most rapid under the leadership of one of its founders, the charismatic Salvador Abascal, who worked largely behind the scenes until taking the helm of the organization in 1940–41, and subsequently spearheading the UNS's colonization efforts in Baja California. Abascal devised the organization's strategy of launching massive Sinarquista demonstrations on the streets of Mexican cities and towns.¹⁸ Many of these marches would end in the arrests of Abascal and other leaders and sometimes in violent encounters with the police or federal forces. When UNS members were killed in such clashes, the organization celebrated them as martyrs murdered by the brutal revolutionary state—a strategy that in combination with the impressive size of their demonstrations helped draw publicity and attract new adherents.¹⁹ By 1943, the organization had extended across Mexico, including urban areas and small towns, as well as into the US Southwest and Midwestern states.²⁰

Another contributing factor to the organization's early success was its comprehensive symbology and identity: it developed its own flag, salute, hymns, armbands, and uniforms. Sinarquistas also honored their own historical heroes, in particular Mexican independence leader and Church defender Agustín de Iturbide, whose monarchical vision for Mexico appealed to the UNS's glorification of Mexico's Hispanic traditions and colonial past. All of this allowed UNS members to participate proudly in an immersive, spiritual, mystical, nationalistic, and patriotic experience.²¹ Under Abascal's leadership,

nuevas Adelitas en la vida política mexicana (1945–1948),” in *Religión, política y sociedad: el sinarquismo y la Iglesia en México (Nueve Ensayos)*, Aguilar and Zermeño, eds., 169–193.

18. Salvador Abascal, *Mis recuerdos: sinarquismo y Colonia Maria Auxiliadora (1935–1944): con importantes documentos de los Archivos Nacionales de Washington* (Mexico City: Tradición, 1980); James Wallace Wilkie, Edna Monzón de Wilkie, and Rafael Rodríguez Castañeda, *Frente a La Revolución Mexicana: 17 protagonistas de la etapa constructiva: entrevistas de historia oral*, Vol. 3, Líderes políticos: Salvador Abascal, Marte R. Gómez, Luis L. León, Jacinto B. Treviño” (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 1995).

19. Hernández, *The Sinarquista Movement*, 209; For an excellent recent article on martyrdom, see Eva Orozco García, “Teresa Bustos, “La mujer bandera”: los caídos Sinarquistas, su simbología religiosa y la mártir que traspasó las barreras de género, *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe* 31:1 (2020): 79–103.

20. A map of Sinarquista headquarters produced in 1943 by the US Office of Strategic Services reveals that the organization, though highly concentrated in west central Mexico, had chapters throughout Mexico and in California, New Mexico, Texas, Illinois, and Indiana. Centers of Sinarquismo in Mexico, US Office of Strategic Services, Research and Analysis Branch, Stanford Libraries, Office of Strategic Services Maps, available at exhibits.stanford.edu/oss-maps/catalog/sb027jq1702, accessed January 8, 2022. For an excellent description of Sinarquista chapters in rural Mexico, see José Orozco, *Receive Our Memories: The Letters of Luz Moreno, 1950–1952* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 24–31.

21. A fascinating repository of Sinarquista songs and imagery is Antonio Martínez Aguayo et al., *Historia gráfica del sinarquismo* (Mexico City: Comité Nacional de la UNS, ca. 1950). For more on Sinarquista mysticism, see Pablo Serrano Álvarez, *La batalla del espíritu*, 286.

the organization promoted a defensive distrust of anything seen as foreign to Mexico's Catholic national identity. It was therefore vocally anti-American, decrying the United States as imperialist, Protestant, and a threat to the integrity of Mexican territory.²² Jews were similarly portrayed as outsiders to Mexico. Anti-Semitism was a defining characteristic of the UNS, whose publications occasionally deployed common Catholic tropes of Jewish conspiracies.²³

Abascal and other UNS leaders always insisted that the organization had no foreign connections whatsoever—and historians with deep knowledge of the UNS archives have argued that there is little to no archival support for charges of foreign control.²⁴ Still, they openly admired and were certainly influenced by *falangismo*, as well as by contemporaneous European fascist and authoritarian movements. Juan Ignacio Padilla, one of the founders of the UNS, stated:

We would be insincere if we denied the influence exercised upon Sinarquism by the totalitarian movements. . . . Of course, the admiration and applause was not for the ideas and systems themselves, lacquered with errors and serious violations of human dignity. What was admired and imitated with frequency was the spirit and iron will of those peoples who, under the direction of undeniably colossal men, elevated their countries . . . to an astounding level of material progress and military power.²⁵

At the same time, Padilla and other leaders were often critical of these movements. As Padilla put it, they were plagued by “errors,” such as the “deification of the Strongman and the State,” that made them unfit for Catholic countries such as Mexico.²⁶

To bring its national vision and social projects to life, the UNS aimed to establish a constellation of rural colonies in Mexico's arid north, which UNS leaders hoped would attract Catholic families from all over Mexico who wished to live according to the organization's cooperative and religious principles. In these settlements, the

22. Sinarquistas' position toward the United States was complicated and evolved over time. While Abascal and other leaders initially took a strongly anti-American stance, Abascal would later state in his autobiography that, “as we are neighbors . . . we cannot be enemies . . . but we are sons of Spain . . . and our heart is strongly Hispanic.” Abascal, *Mis Recuerdos*, 372. The UNS position toward the United States had certainly softened considerably by 1944, as Margaret Shedd describes in “Thunder on the Right in Mexico: The Sinarquistas in Action,” *Harper's Magazine* 190 (April 1945): 414–425.

23. On the UNS and anti-Semitism, see Albert L. Michaels, “Fascism and Sinarquismo: Popular Nationalisms against the Mexican Revolution,” *Journal of Church and State* 8:2 (March 1966): 234–250.

24. Pablo Serrano Álvarez, *La batalla del espíritu*, 344, 346; Hernández, *The Sinarquista Movement*, 196.

25. Juan Ignacio Padilla, *Sinarquismo: contrarrevolución* (Mexico City: Polis, 1948), 218.

26. Padilla, *Sinarquismo*, 218.

UNS leadership promised, families could flourish in utopian Catholic communities in which resources would be shared, while the patriarchal order, private property, and Catholic education would be held sacrosanct. The largest and most successful colony was María Auxiliadora, located in the state of Baja California Sur, and led by Salvador Abascal. In it, the UNS built a church and 60 houses of palm and reeds, and attracted some 260 people, almost all from Michoacán, Guanajuato, and Querétaro. Their daily lives revolved around work and prayer.²⁷ Another colony, Villa Kino in Sonora, attracted some 85 colonists and was organized similarly; there were also three smaller colonies in Sonora and Tamaulipas. The colonization effort was an enormous undertaking for the UNS, and the organization spent significant time and energy to make the colonies a success during the early 1940s, devoting many pages of its binationally distributed weekly newspaper *El Sinarquista* to appeals for funding and new colonists.²⁸

Throughout the period of its rapid growth and the establishment of the colonies, the UNS lacked official endorsement from the Mexican clergy. Indeed, according to one contemporary observer, the Catholic Church in Mexico was “careful to dissociate itself from the movement in any way which might indicate official approval or . . . disapproval.”²⁹ Furthermore, many bishops were dismayed by the rapid expansion of the UNS, since its bellicose rhetoric and massive crowds threatened to alter the carefully negotiated *modus vivendi* between the Church and the state in Mexico.³⁰ While there were certainly some within the clergy who admired the UNS, the officially distant relationship between the organization and the Church stood in contrast to entities like Catholic Action, which received the public endorsement of the hierarchy and since its creation in 1930, had become the Mexican Church’s main vehicle for organizing the laity.³¹

The relationship between the UNS and the Mexican government was overtly antagonistic. The phenomenally fast rise of the UNS, its consistent opposition to the revolutionary state, and its startling plans for colonization naturally raised the alarm among officials and supporters of the revolutionary government, particularly after the violence and tensions between Church and state over the previous decade and a half. This long-held suspicion of the Catholic right and other right-wing organizations was intensified by rising

27. “Cómo vive y prospera la colonia de B. California: seis días en el pueblo sinarquista creado en la desierta península,” *El Sinarquista*, June 17, 1943.

28. Hernández, *The Sinarquista Movement*, 285–286.

29. James A. Magner, “Sinarchism—Mexican Threat or Promise?” *America*, November 24, 1945, 206.

30. Hernández, *The Sinarquista Movement*, 281.

31. Michaels, “Fascism and Sinarquismo,” 245.

authoritarian and fascist movements in Europe, many of which had sympathizers in Mexico (including branches of the Spanish Falange, as well as German and Italian groups).³² In 1941, Mexico's congress created the Anti-Sinarquista Committee in Defense of Democracy to investigate the activities of the UNS; the committee president was Alfredo Félix Díaz Escobar, a congressman from Querétaro, part of the Sinarquista heartland.³³ In the same year, the ruling Partido de la Revolución Mexicana (PRM; later, the PRI) issued a manifesto condemning Sinarquismo that was endorsed by numerous unions and political associations.³⁴

Nevertheless, this antagonism never came close to the outright warfare between the state and Catholic partisans that had occurred in the previous two decades.³⁵ Instead, a much more protracted battle over the legitimacy and the nature of Sinarquismo took place in public print media on both sides of the border. Here, I turn to an investigation of how the UNS was covered in US print media, both secular and Catholic, during the 1940s, paying close attention to the ways that Sinarquistas sought to influence, shape, and capitalize on this coverage.

THE UNS IN THE MAINSTREAM US PRESS

To analyze print media coverage of the UNS during the 1940s, I searched for digitized articles concerning the UNS on a variety of platforms.³⁶ Ultimately, I selected and reviewed 150 newspaper articles from mainstream secular daily newspapers in cities and towns across 39 US states, the vast majority of which were published between 1939 and 1945. Some of these, particularly those printed in smaller local papers, were originally released by newswire services such as Associated Press, and therefore appeared in multiple print outlets nationwide; others were written by foreign correspondents for specific national

32. Monica Rankin notes the 1941 founding of the Comité contra la Penetración Nazi-Fascista en México in *iMexico, la patria! Propaganda and Production during World War II* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 113. See also Ricardo Pérez Montfort, *Hispanismo y Falange: los sueños imperiales de la derecha española* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992); Pérez Montfort, *Por la patria y por la raza: la derecha secular en el sexenio de Lázaro Cárdenas* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, 1993); and Franco Savarino, "The Sentinel of the Bravo: Italian Fascism in Mexico, 1922-35," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 2:3 (2001): 97-120.

33. Hugh Gerald Campbell, "The Radical Right in Mexico, 1929-1949" (PhD diss.: University of California, Los Angeles, 1968), 325; Kenneth Prager, "Sinarquismo: The Politics of Frustration and Despair" (PhD diss.: Indiana University, 1975), 348; John Smith, "'True Patriots for the Salvation of the Fatherland,'" 62-63.

34. Héctor Hernández García de León, "The Sinarquista Movement with Special Reference to the Period 1934-1944" (PhD diss.: London School of Economics, 1990), 276.

35. Serrano Álvarez, *La batalla del espíritu*, 293.

36. These include newspapers.com; *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers* from the Library of Congress at <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>; and ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

or big-city papers. Another 88 articles, which will be consulted in the subsequent section on the Catholic press, came from Catholic news media. Among these, 32 were released by the National Catholic Welfare Conference News Service, a wire service that produced articles for syndication in the Catholic press.

Early coverage of the UNS in the United States was sparse and fairly neutral. Between 1938 and 1940, a few short Associated Press articles reported on instances of violence or political clashes between UNS members and others. Generally, such articles described the UNS as merely an anticommunist organization.³⁷ One article, from El Paso in 1939, for example, described the UNS as a group whose “objects are to fight communism and fascism.”³⁸ To UNS leaders, such a description would have been gratifying, for they generally preferred to identify the organization as Catholic, counterrevolutionary, and anticommunist. Yet such articles were few and far between, and their relatively positive portrayals of the UNS would soon be eclipsed by a comparative avalanche of far more negative press.

By the fall of 1941, and consistently until 1945, journalists and other writers from the United States increasingly turned their attention to the Unión Nacional Sinarquista, publishing hundreds of articles about the organization each year in newspapers around the country.³⁹ There were likely two reasons for this increased interest: first, the UNS had announced its plans to colonize part of Baja California, thus bringing it geographically closer to the US border; and second, the United States had entered the Second World War, and there was greatly heightened concern about right-wing or fascist organizations in the Western Hemisphere, as well as the potential for “enemy aliens” to infiltrate the United States. During this period, the vastly greater part of newspaper coverage of the UNS was strongly negative, drawing overt comparisons between the UNS and foreign fascist movements, with the majority portraying the Sinarquistas as a fascist, potentially foreign-directed, and highly dangerous organization. Many reporters speculated that the UNS represented a threat to the security of Mexico, the United States, and the entire hemisphere. In doing so, they were often reiterating and echoing the charges levied against the UNS

37. “Nineteen Mexican Peasants Slain in Political Rioting,” *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, July 13, 1939, B1; *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, July 13, 1939, 2.

38. “Communist Raid Fought,” *El Paso Times*, November 16, 1938, 12.

39. A July 2021 search on newspapers.com (the most comprehensive online database of digitized newspaper articles in the United States) for the terms “*sinarquista*,” “sinarquist,” and “*sinarquista*” returned 2,105 articles from US newspapers, many of them reprints of syndicated articles from the major newswire agencies. The vast majority of these articles were published between 1940 and 1945, with a peak of 481 articles in 1945. The largest number of news stories appeared in Texas (452) and California (227), and there was also significant coverage in Pennsylvania (138), Arizona (127), and Florida (92), as well as in other parts of the Midwest and Northeast. There was no US state with zero newspaper articles about the Sinarquistas.

by its opponents in Mexico, some of whom served as sources for American foreign correspondents, or published their own articles in the US press.

The most vocal opponents to the UNS within Mexico largely came from within the left-leaning and pro-government Mexican press, labor leaders, members of congress, and other civic leaders.⁴⁰ Alfredo Félix Díaz Escobar, the aforementioned chair of the Anti-Sinarquista Committee in Defense of Democracy, spoke out frequently about the UNS to members of the American media, declaring to one journalist that the UNS was an “Axis-sponsored fifth column” that “obeys a premeditated plan of espionage prepared by the agents of Hitler and is the enemy of Mexico and the world’s democracies.”⁴¹ He also published at least one English-language editorial in the US press, as did other opponents, such as Alejandro Carrillo, the editor of the leftist newspaper *El Popular* and labor leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano.⁴²

The stance of leftist critics of Sinarquismo in Mexico is particularly interesting because during the rise of the Soviet Union, those critics were themselves frequently accused—by Sinarquistas, as well as others within the Mexican Right—of comprising a fifth column of Soviet or “Red” influence within Mexico.⁴³ Yet, in the context of World War II, which saw fascists and right-leaning dictators becoming main enemies of Mexico and the United States, Sinarquistas seemed to represent a much more potent threat than the pro-agrarian, pro-labor, and at times pro-socialist Mexican Left. This was certainly true in the mainstream US print media, and may be why the charges of UNS opponents such as Díaz Escobar were frequently reprinted in the mainstream press.⁴⁴

While dozens of US journalists would publish stories about the UNS during the war years, two in particular did so at length, and their work was widely read and

40. For a comprehensive review of anti-Sinarquista authors and public figures and their publications, see Prager, “Sinarquismo,” 365–369.

41. “Call Colonizers Nazi Shock Troops: Mexican Chamber of Deputies Opposes Lower California Colonization,” *Lawrence Journal-World*, October 15, 1941.

42. Félix Díaz Escobar, “The Spread of Sinarquism,” *The Nation*, April 3, 1943, 156; Alejandro Carrillo, “Crisis in Mexico,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 16 (July, 1940): 321–333; Alejandro Carrillo, “Mexico and the Fascist Menace” (Mexico City: n.p., 1940); Vicente Lombardo, *Fifth Column in Mexico* (New York: Council for Pan American Democracy, 1942); *Synarchism* (New York: Council for Pan American Democracy, 1940). The American Chamber of Commerce also published at least two articles in opposition to the UNS: American Chamber of Commerce, Mexico City, “The Menace of Sinarquism,” *Mexican American Review*, December 1941, 26–29, 81; and “Thumbs Down on Sinarquism,” *Mexican American Review*, March 1943, 24–26.

43. Articles in *El Sinarquista* repeatedly launched such charges against the Mexican government. See for example “¡Imperialismo soviético en la Sría de Educación Pública!” *El Sinarquista*, Janary 6, 1944, 1.

44. See for example “Axis Plot to Enlist Mexicans Charged,” a wire article that was reprinted widely and repeated the rumor that the Sinarquista colonization project was “merely a pretext to facilitate [a] selection of a group of Mexicans to fight the Russians under Hitler’s banner,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 1941, 6.

cited by other journalists. One was Betty Kirk, who was based in Mexico as a foreign correspondent for a variety of US newspapers and published a widely reviewed 1943 book titled *Covering the Mexican Front: The Battle of Europe vs. America*; the other was Allan Chase, an anti-fascist and a supporter of the Spanish Republican cause who also in 1943 published *Falange: The Axis Secret Army in the Americas* to “rave reviews.”⁴⁵

Kirk moved to Mexico in 1936 and lived and worked there until 1943, cultivating connections with the Cárdenas government. From 1941 on, she returned frequently to the topic of the Sinarquistas in her writing, casting them in the pages of the *Washington Post*—in the overtly racialized terms so casually used at the time—as “backward Indian peasants” who were mere puppets of antidemocratic European totalitarian movements.⁴⁶ She reiterated these claims of foreign control for the *Christian Science Monitor*, stating that the Sinarquistas were linked to “international fascism” and labeling them as mere “tools in the hands of Spanish Falangistas.”⁴⁷ In a section of her 1942 book *Covering the Mexican Front*, she laid out a purported exposé of the Sinarquistas, claiming that they “are a direct offshoot of the Falange Española” and quoting a Belgian diplomat who asserted that “their real object is to serve Hitler and the Nazis.” She also raised an accusation, which had circulated widely in the Mexican press, that the UNS was actually organized “by a Nazi, Helmuth Schreiter, a language professor of Guanajuato, who used and is using the young Mexican fanatics merely as a front behind which Hitler can operate in Mexico!”⁴⁸ Kirk further claimed that the UNS was linked to a group of the same name in Vichy France, although there is no evidence to support this claim. She even connected them to Japan, exclaiming that the Sinarquistas were “being assisted by the

45. Joan Maria Thomás, *Roosevelt, Franco, and the End of the Second World War* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

46. Betty Kirk, “Unrest In Mexico: Sowing The Seeds Of Fascism,” *Washington Post*, June 28, 1941, 7.

47. Betty Kirk, “Sinarquista Rise in Mexico Seen as Totalitarian Plot,” *Christian Science Monitor*, June 7, 1941. She also published “Mexico’s Social Justice Party,” *The Nation*, June 12, 1943, 329; and “Mexico’s Party Line,” *Washington Post*, June 21, 1941, 7.

48. Betty Kirk, *Covering the Mexican Front: The Battle of Europe versus America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1942), 324–325. This charge was very common among members of the Mexican government and the Left. Most important was the journalist Mario Gil, who wrote *El sinarquismo: su origen, su esencia, su misión* (Mexico City: Ediciones Club del Libro “Mexico,” 1944), as well as numerous articles in Spanish and English arguing that the UNS was Nazi-directed and that Schreiter, a German professor of languages at the Colegio de Guanajuato, had been the shadow founder of the UNS. According to Hernández, “there was no evidence that Schreiter had any influence on the early stages of Synarchism.” Hernández, *The Sinarquista Movement*, 196. Friedrich Schuler agreed, arguing that Schreiter had had “little influence” on the UNS. Friedrich E. Schuler, *Mexico between Hitler and Roosevelt: Mexican Foreign Relations in the Age of Lázaro Cárdenas, 1934–1940* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 75. Pablo Serrano Álvarez, like Hernández, argues that while the UNS had “fascist or falangist features,” these were superficial in nature and not due to actual connections to foreign movements. “Their ideology as well as their modes of action stemmed from Catholic, nationalist, regional, social, and cultural factors that in the context of *cardenismo* created the conditions for the development of a struggle of the right, in this case, of Catholics. Fascist characteristics cannot be denied either, but this did not imply that the movement was a ‘Mexican fascism.’” Serrano Álvarez, *La batalla del espíritu*, 347.

diabolical Japanese Saka de Ly movement!”⁴⁹ To Kirk, the UNS was exactly as its Mexican opponents, who were also her informants, supposed it to be: a pro-fascist reactionary group that was directed by shadowy leaders from outside Mexico.

Like Kirk, Allan Chase focused on the purported manipulation of the UNS by both Falange and Nazi foreigners. Based on his own interviews with anonymous contacts from Spain and Latin America, he asserted that the Spanish Falange had infiltrated over 20 foreign countries and had a million members outside of Spain—mostly in Latin America—by 1936.⁵⁰ In Mexico alone, Chase claimed, there were “50,000 uniformed, dues-paying members” of the Falange.⁵¹ The Sinarquistas were “a Falange-front organization.”⁵² Furthermore, Chase claimed that the UNS was actively collaborating with Nazi and Italian fascist agents, asserting that Mexico City “has over a thousand Gestapo-trained SIM [Servizio Informazioni Militare] agents working out of no less than eleven offices in the capital alone.”⁵³ The Sinarquistas were therefore not only puppets of the Falange but a part of a widespread right-wing network “aided by Falange specialists,” and were conducting drills “with sub-machine guns, rifles, and other arms kindly supplied by the Nazis via Spanish boats.”⁵⁴ Like Kirk, Chase saw Japanese involvement in addition to Nazi connections: he reported that settlers in the UNS colony in Baja California (which, according to Chase, Mexicans “bitterly refer to . . . as the ‘República Sinarquista’”) were smuggling “valuable Mexican mercury” to Germans and Japanese “who come in submarines.”⁵⁵

Numerous other writers in the English-language press likewise cast the UNS as a fascist organization that was either subordinate or directly linked to European fascist movements. There was particular concern over the origins and sources of UNS funding, and many journalists asserted that the organization could only be funded by Axis powers. For example, the *New York Times* reported in 1943 that the UNS “is looked upon by everyone except its own members as a Fascist spearhead against Mexican democracy that is being financed by some foreign power.”⁵⁶ These charges were reiterated frequently in small and large newspapers across the United States. Despite the frequency of such allegations,

49. Kirk, *Covering the Mexican Front*, 324. The Saka de Ly movement, which Kirk describes as an effort to foment an Indian uprising against “the whites” in both Mexico and the United States, seems to have only one reference outside of her own writing, in an article by William Wentz Jr, “The Nazi-Instigated National Synarchist Union of Mexico,” *Executive Intelligence Review* 31:27 (July 9, 2004), which heavily cites Kirk.

50. Allan Chase, *Falange: The Axis Secret Army in the Americas, 1943* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1943), 26.

51. Allan Chase, *Falange*, 154.

52. Allan Chase, *Falange*, 82.

53. Allan Chase, *Falange*, 160.

54. Allan Chase, *Falange*, 170–171.

55. Allan Chase, *Falange*, 173.

56. John W. White, “Mexican Socialism: Rights And Lefts Seek Control,” *Washington Post*, October 12, 1941, 11.

no journalist ever provided conclusive documentary evidence about foreign financing of the UNS.⁵⁷ Although it is not impossible that the UNS received foreign funds, and more investigation is certainly needed in this regard, it seems more likely that a significant amount of UNS funding came from its members in both Mexico and the United States, who were regularly prevailed upon in the pages of *El Sinarquista* to donate money to support the colonization effort.⁵⁸

Beyond the question of funding, journalists also perceived similarities in the UNS political structure and organization that—to them—could only mean that the organization was a fifth column for European powers, particularly Spain, Germany, and Italy.⁵⁹ In a syndicated article by Marshall Hail, Salvador Abascal was described as the organization's "fuehrer," "who demands and apparently receives blind obedience."⁶⁰ While direct comparisons to Italy were rarer, they also appeared in several articles, including a piece in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* by special correspondent Jack Starr-Hunt, who observed similarities between the UNS embrace of corporatism and Mussolini's labor policies.⁶¹

Many writers focused on aspects of UNS visual symbols and actions to draw direct comparisons between the UNS and European totalitarian movements. This argument was advanced in a *Philadelphia Inquirer* article by Alvadee Hutton, a student journalist visiting Mexico, who finagled both an interview with Abascal and an invitation to a UNS rally. Her article underscored visual similarities between the UNS and Nazism, including "a uniform, and arm-band, and a salute that is similar to the Nazis."⁶² Indeed, the salute, official slogans and the organization of the movement were highly reminiscent of fascism to many writers.⁶³ These observations were repeated frequently in other publications;

57. "Mexico is filled with rumors that the Sinarchists are financed with Nazi and Falangist (Spanish) Funds. One person told this correspondent that Willie Beick Jr, former head of the Beick-Felix drug concern and one of Mexico's strongest Nazis, had given the Sinarchists 1,000,000 pesos. It is difficult to prove such a statement. But it is obvious that funds to finance their Nation-wide activities must come from somewhere." Alvadee Hutton, "Mexican Sinarchists Disavow Nazism But Follow Pattern Closely," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 14, 1941, 13.

58. Nearly every issue of the newspaper contained a page headed "Noticias de toda la República," with reports from UNS chapters across the nation as well as in the United States, and a column listing the donations made by UNS members for the colonization effort, and later for the families of fallen UNS members.

59. Jack Starr-Hunt, "Mexico's Fifth Columnists Show Their Hands; Sinarquistas Gain," *Milwaukee Journal*, January 24, 1943.

60. Marshall Hail, "Mystified Mexican Government Uneasily Watches Rise of Sinarquista Movement: Members Hate an Easy Life; Love Discomfort and Death," *Marshfield [Wisconsin] News-Herald*, October 7, 1941.

61. Jack Starr-Hunt, "Sinarchists of Mexico Building up Power from Discontent of Farmers," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 19, 1941, 1.

62. Alvadee Hutton, "Mexican Sinarchists Disavow Nazism But Follow Pattern Closely," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Tuesday morning, October 13, 1941, 13; Alvadee Hutton, "Mexico Nursing 'Ism' With Close Similarity to Ideologies of Axis," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 13, 1941, 8.

63. In East Liverpool, Ohio, readers of the *Potters Herald* were informed that "The Sinarquist movement . . . drills members, using the Nazi march step. The arm bands are Nazi-Fascist. The songs, it is interesting to note, are the songs of the Spanish Falange. . . . Sinarquismo publishes books, pamphlets and other propaganda matter. And it contrives to show

FIGURE 1

Sinarquistas giving the UNS salute

Strange Mexican Pacifist Group Has Ear-Marks of a Nazi Organization



Right Hand Across the Heart—Like most totalitarian movements, Mexico's mysterious National Sinarquista Union has its own salute, which some of its members are pictured giving, above. The union has a banner, a "fuhrer" and martyrs, too.

But Non-Gun-Toting Party Is Novelty in Mexico

By MARSHALL HAIL
NEA Service Correspondent
EL PASO, Tex. — A strange new mass movement is rising in Mexico, and it has Mexican Government officials guessing.

It is the National Sinarquista Union which, its leaders claim, now has an active membership of 700,000 with branches in the United States and throughout Latin America.

Some critics say the Sinarquista movement may be the forerunner of totalitarian rule. Its leaders say it will be the salvation of faction-torn Mexico.

President Manuel Avila Camacho of Mexico recently warned the Sinarquistas to watch their step.

The word Sinarquista means "without anarchy," an end to rightists and leftists and in-between factions and a "united front" of the "Mexican family." In other words: One party—and one leader.



Source: Article from the *Hope Star*, October 10, 1941.

for example, the *Hope Star* [Arkansas], published a slightly edited version of the previously mentioned wire article by Marshall Hail that pointed out that the UNS "like most totalitarian movements . . . has its own salute." The article was accompanied by a photo of the right-handed Sinarquista gesture (see Figure 1).⁶⁴

Such observations about aesthetic and organizational similarities were not completely inaccurate. As mentioned, Sinarquista leaders such as Abascal and Padilla did express admiration for fascist movements and leaders, imitating

Nazi-Fascist motion pictures. It doesn't miss a trick . . . [it] is a Nazi movement, financed by Nazi money." "Fifth Column Is Still Working in Mexico," *Potters Herald* (East Liverpool, Ohio) September 11, 1941, 5. See also John W. White, "Mexican Socialism: Rights And Lefts Seek Control," *Washington Post*, October 12, 1941, 11; Joseph Driscoll, "Aleman Seeks Mexican Aid on Left and Right," *New York Herald Tribune*, February 12, 1946, 14; and Magner, "Sinarchism—Mexican Threat or Promise," 204.

64. "Strange Mexican Pacifist Group Has Ear-Marks of a Nazi Organization," *Hope Star*, October 10, 1941, 1.

their military and aesthetic style, and Sinarquista society was corporatist in structure, just like the fascist organizations in Europe. Lacking any proof for their assertions, however, US journalists simply equated the similarities between Sinarquismo and fascism with subordination of the UNS to foreign powers, thus negating the possibility that Mexico could have an autonomous right-wing movement that responded to its own historical and political realities.

Over the course of the war years, US journalists—with the help of anti-UNS critics in Mexico—came to perceive the UNS as a fascist organization controlled by outside powers. As a result, they naturally worried that it posed a direct threat to the internal and external security, democracy, and stability of Mexico—and beyond that, to US interests in the region. The sheer size of the UNS, as well as its rapid growth, was a particular area of focus, with numerous journalists frequently remarking on the hundreds of thousands of Sinarquista members as a source of “strength” for the organization.⁶⁵ Given its size and supposed power, journalists expressed fears that the UNS would manage to infiltrate the Mexican government and destabilize its democracy. While the UNS itself claimed that it was not a political party and did not seek political power, its authoritarian, illiberal, and militaristic tendencies certainly did not reassure journalists such as Edgar Ansel Mowrer, who, in an editorial column printed in the *Gazette and Daily* of York, Pennsylvania, cited Allan Chase and others to conclude that “Mexican sinarquistas are wolves in sheep’s clothing. . . [whose purpose is] overthrowing the legitimate Government of Mexico, abolishing all political parties, and establishing a sort of Spanish-type or Portuguese-type dictatorship.”⁶⁶ This focus on the integrity of Mexico’s democracy was somewhat paradoxical, however, given that Mexico’s ruling party had recently managed to install its president, Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940–46), after a highly contested election against right-wing candidate Juan Andreu Almazán, and would continue to hold single-party rule until 2000.

The potential for violence and the actual violent acts of the UNS were also a concern for US writers and their audiences. In a widely syndicated article, journalist Willis Thornton commented that “the announced non-violent

65. From the *New York Times* alone: A 1943 article, quoting Mexican congressman Alfredo Díaz Escobar, reported that the organization had “from a million to a million and a half members” (“Mexican Fascist Unit Said to Have U.S. Link: Anti-Nazi Says Sinarquista Has 50,000 Members in West,” *New York Times*, March 23, 1943, 6), while an article in the following year claimed that “some estimate [sic] from reliable sources would put the membership as high as 3,000,000.” Will Lissner, “Danger to Mexico in Sinarquism Seen,” *New York Times*, June 11, 1944, 20. At the end of the decade, the *Times* printed an article estimating a membership of one million: “Party of Rightists Banned By Mexico: Sinarquista Leaders Declare They Are Outlawed Because Their Strength Is Feared,” *New York Times*, January 30, 1949, 15. In other papers throughout the United States, numerical estimates varied, from several hundred thousand (Paul Winkler, “From the Underground,” *Courier-Post*, Camden, NJ, December 16, 1943) to three-and-a-half million (“States to Gain By Mexican Associations,” *The Missoulian*, July 3, 1943).

66. Edgar Ansel Mowrer, “Fascism in Mexico,” *Gazette and Daily*, York, PA, March 2, 1944, 15.

principles of [Abascal] have produced plenty of violence.”⁶⁷ While there were certainly multiple small-scale violent clashes between the UNS and the government during the early 1940s, US journalists during this period largely seemed to believe that this violence was instigated and funded by foreign powers. In 1943, the *New York Times* repeated charges that the Sinarquista organization and other “fascist elements” had “provoked armed uprisings to further the Axis cause in Mexico.”⁶⁸ This view of the UNS as a violent, sinister organization was also reflected in American fiction of the mid 1940s: at least two popular novels featured Sinarquista antagonists.⁶⁹

However, it seems evident that violent episodes that involved the UNS were either clashes between Sinarquista demonstrators and the Mexican government (these were relatively common and helped to produce a cult of martyrdom around the UNS), or isolated violent confrontations between Sinarquistas and government supporters in the Mexican countryside—such as one which resulted in the assassination of Teresita Bustos in Celaya, Guanajuato, in 1939—rather than instances of Axis-instigated violence.⁷⁰

Still, in the eyes of many in the secular US press, the UNS clearly represented a threat not only to Mexico but also to its northern neighbor, and perhaps even to the entire hemisphere. Several journalists noted correctly that UNS leaders were frequent critics of the United States, and that Sinarquista rhetoric was often virulently anti-American, casting the United States as both materialistic and imperialistic.⁷¹ Naturally, then, for many journalists the Sinarquistas’

67. Willis Thornton, “Leader of Mexico’s 500,000 Sinarquistas Watched as Possible “Front” for Fascists,” *Indiana Evening Gazette*, January 23, 1942, page illeg.

68. “Mexican Fascist Unit Said to Have U.S. Link: Anti-Nazi Says Sinarquista Has 50,000 Members in West,” *New York Times*, March 23, 1943, 6. The reference to other fascist groups may be to the Camisas Doradas, a violent right-wing organization led by Nicolás Rodríguez Carrasco. For more on these, see César Cruz Vences, “La admiración de José Vasconcelos sobre Adolfo Hitler y el Régimen Nazi en la revista Timón” (PhD Diss.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2014), 49–54. See also Alicia Gojman Backal, *Camisas, escudos y desfiles militares: los Dorados y el antisemitismo en México, 1934–1940* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2000).

69. In his mystery novel *Day of the Dead*, Charles Murray portrayed the UNS as a shadowy fascist and fanatical organization, led by a sinister lawyer and funded by Spain, Germany, and “Argentine colonels.” The book’s protagonist, a handsome Irish-Cherokee-Mexican named Angel O’Brien, thwarts the Sinarquistas’ plans to murder President Cárdenas, as well as his love interest, an American tourist, on Mexico’s Day of the Dead. Charles Murray (writing as Cromwell Murray), *Day of the Dead* (Philadelphia: David McKay Company, 1946), 198. Murray based his novel in Pátzcuaro, where he lived for a few months after receiving a Pulitzer Fellowship in 1942 (Greg Lange, “Morgan, Murray (1916–2000),” *HistoryLink.org*, Essay 5021). The book was Murray’s first, but it did well enough to receive a review in the *New York Times*: “Sinarquistas,” December 29, 1946, 110. A 1945 novel by the popular author Alice Tisdale Hobart also portrayed the sinarquistas as a military and fanatical group, “against Protestantism, against democracy.” Alice Tisdale Hobart, *The Peacock Sheds His Tail* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1945). According to a contemporary reviewer, her book was popular enough that it became “a sort of traveling companion for many tourists to Mexico.” James A. Magner, “Sinarchism Today,” *America* 76:19 (February 8, 1947): 513–515.

70. Eva Orozco García, “Teresa Bustos, “La mujer bandera,” 80.

71. Betty Kirk, “Sinarquista Rise in Mexico Seen as Totalitarian Plot,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 1941; Will Lissner, “Danger to Mexico in Sinarquism Seen,” *New York Times*, June 11, 1944, 20.

colonization movement, and particularly the María Auxiliadora colony in Baja California, represented a grave danger to the United States, given its proximity to the border. Writing for the *Washington Post*, John White charged that “the whole [colonization] movement is a scheme to establish a Fascist colony on the Pacific Coast in the interest of . . . the totalitarian countries which are interested in the eventual invasion of the American continent.”⁷² Similar charges were widely repeated in the US secular press.

If the colonization movement was a significant threat, an even bigger one was the existence of UNS chapters within Mexican migrant communities in the United States.⁷³ A *New York Times* writer stated that the UNS had 50,000 members in the United States, while a journalist at the *Washington Post* claimed that the UNS was one of the most “active propagandists” within the country.⁷⁴ In 1945, an editorial in the *York Daily Record* fumed about “fascists . . . right in our very midst,” alerting readers that the organization would be “a serious threat to our democratic way of life . . . particularly if there were numerous cells of fascism in the United States, part and parcel of a fascist government in Mexico.”⁷⁵

Allan Chase was particularly apocalyptic on this issue, asserting that the UNS “has established itself like a cancer in many centers of Mexican population in the United States.” UNS chapters in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, he claimed, were “producing bloodshed and disorder.” In Los Angeles, the UNS was aided by “members of German and Italian organizations dissolved after Pearl Harbor.” To this, Chase added, “the Los Angeles Sinarquist movement has been held directly responsible for a crime wave which broke out among unemployed Mexican youths in 1942, and figured as a prime factor in at least one California murder case.” Further, Chase asserted that the Sinarquistas in the United States were apparently dissuading Mexicans from enlisting in war activities, purchasing war bonds, or supporting the US war effort.⁷⁶ Finally, he

72. John W. White, “Mexican Socialism: Rights and Lefts Seek Control,” *Washington Post*, October 12, 1941, 11.

73. “Sinarquista Leader Denies Organization Tool of Axis,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 17, 1942, 14.

74. “Mexican Fascist Unit Said to Have U.S. Link: Anti-Nazi Says Sinarquista Has 50,000 Members in West,” *New York Times*, March 23, 1943, 6; “Biddle Lists Big Sum Spent on Propaganda,” *Washington Post*, June 12, 1945, 9.

75. Editorial, *York Daily Record*, October 30, 1945, 16.

76. Allan Chase, *Falange*, 174–175. Here, Chase was referring to the Zoot Suit riots, a series of clashes between Mexican “zoot-suit”-wearing youth and US servicemen in Los Angeles. The charge of Sinarquista involvement in these riots was echoed by Josefina Fierro de Bright, one of the founders of El Congreso del Pueblo de Habla Española, a working-class and progressive movement that she founded along with Luisa Moreno in 1938. Mario García, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 172. According to García, Sinarquistas also tried to influence “young Mexican Americans not to sell war bonds or cooperate with the Red Cross and USO,” although unsuccessfully. Fierro de Bright also said that “the Sinarquistas preached against U.S. involvement in the war.” (169) See also Richard Griswold del Castillo, “The Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots Revisited: Mexican and Latin American Perspectives,” *Estudios Mexicanos* 16:2 (2000). Sinarquistas were also participating (at least at the beginning) in anti-draft activities in Mexico. See Thomas Rath, “Que el cielo un soldado en cada hijo te

described a frightening UNS plan to build a brand-new capital city—to be called “Sinarcopolis”—“in what are now the plains of Texas.”⁷⁷

Despite such perceptions, there is little to no evidence of widespread Sinarquista crime or violence in the United States, aside from one report of isolated conflict between Sinarquistas and their Mexican opponents.⁷⁸ Indeed, journalists’ assessments of the US-based UNS chapters have more to do with their preconceptions of the organization as a violent front for foreign powers who wished to destabilize Mexico, and therefore the United States, in the context of the fears and concerns of the American public during the Second World War.

Taken together, the coverage of the UNS in the mainstream secular press that I reviewed was overwhelmingly negative, with a focus on the organization’s purported ties to fascism and Nazism, its violence (or potential for violence), its seemingly sinister and mysterious leadership (particularly Salvador Abascal, who was profiled by several reporters), and its potential threat to the security of the United States. Certainly, to the extent that the general US reading public developed a general perception of the UNS during the 1940-45 period, it was of the Sinarquistas as a fascist, Nazi-influenced, totalitarian threat.⁷⁹

This negative coverage may have influenced—and been influenced by—the stance of the US government, and US government representatives toward the UNS during the war years. Both the US Federal Bureau of Investigation and the

dio . . . : Conscription, Recalcitrance and Resistance in Mexico in the 1940s,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 37:3 (2005): 507–531.

77. Allan Chase, 170. The historian Zaragoza Vargas also contended that this fantasy was articulated in the pages of *El Sinarquista*. There, he states, the Sinarquistas “presented the fantasy of a new Spanish empire, *El Gran Imperio Sinarquista*, whose capital city, Sinarcopolis, was to be built on the plains of west Texas.” Zaragoza Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 190. In reviewing issues of *El Sinarquista* from 1941–1944, I was unable to find this reference to Sinarcopolis; Vargas does not cite the specific issue of the newspaper. I do not believe that there is archival evidence to support UNS plans for domination of US territory. While the UNS did use the term “Sinarcópolis,” it was to describe the city of León, Guanajuato, where the organization was founded in 1937. In response to charges printed in a report circulated by the US Office of Naval Intelligence on October 15, 1941, that the UNS wanted to conquer “large sections of the United States,” Abascal issued a complete denial, making the remarkable—and remarkably anti-Semitic—statement that “We never had such dreams, not even the slightest thought; but we did think, and I still believe, that some day—if it is convenient to Judaism—the United States might be broken into 3 or 4 parts, with Mexico being unable to recover even one inch of territory.” *Mis Recuerdos*, 419, 419 fn10.

78. See Zaragoza Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 190; William E. Wertz Jr., “La Unión Nacional Sinarquista de México: la UNS subvierte a los Estados Unidos,” n.d., Schiller Institute, https://archive.schillerinstitute.com/newspanish/InstitutoSchiller/Literatura/Sinarquismo/uns_subveu.html, accessed January 8, 2022.

79. While I am more interested here in investigating the mainstream secular press in comparison to the Catholic press, there was also coverage of the UNS in strongly left-leaning media outlets. This was, unsurprisingly, extremely negative in tone. One writer in *The Nation* claimed that the UNS was “the Spanish Falanx in guaraches [sic],” quoted in Mario T. García, *Mexican Americans*, 168. In the *New Masses*, Marion Bachrach wrote a long and searing essay on Sinarquists and other fascist Catholic threats in Latin America: “Plotters Against the Church,” *New Masses*, February 8, 1944, 3–6.

Office of Strategic Services (OSS) surveilled Sinarquistas during the war years. The FBI compiled a 2600-document dossier on the UNS and also censored publications sent to the United States by the UNS headquarters in Mexico. The OSS, meanwhile, gathered intelligence in Mexico from “domestic journalistic accounts, consular officers’ assessments, and Mexican informants.”⁸⁰ Furthermore, influential US politicians spoke out against the organization in public. In 1943, US Secretary of State Harold Ickes, speaking at a meeting of the United Jewish Appeal, declared that the Sinarquista movement was “the most important Nazi-Fascist penetration and the most dangerous to the cause of democracy,” and urged vigilance.⁸¹ The following year, US Representative John M. Coffee of Washington charged Sinarquistas with being “in contact with Fascists” in Spain, and accused them of stirring up the ‘zoot-suit’ riots in Los Angeles.”⁸²

SINARQUISTA SELF-ADVOCACY IN THE UNITED STATES

Sinarquista leaders were well aware of the dominant perceptions about them in both Mexican and US media, as well as in the US government, and they expended significant energy fighting back against their portrayal as a fascist, violent, and foreign-controlled movement. Indeed, they almost certainly believed that these perceptions could threaten their very survival, as demonstrated not only by the FBI and OSS investigations, but also by the constant efforts of opponents within Mexico to shut down the UNS.⁸³ The organization, therefore, embarked upon a number of strategies to confront negative press coverage in the United States.

In the pages of its newspaper, *El Sinarquista* (published in Spanish), as well as in many English-language outlets, UNS writers responded vehemently to charges that the organization was affiliated with Nazism, fascism, or the Falange. While the readership of *El Sinarquista* would have been primarily members of the UNS, the paper was distributed in the United States as well, and US journalists

80. Lozano, “Patria y Nacionalismo en el México de Afuera,” 15. While the topic of US government surveillance of the UNS is largely outside the scope of this article, I intend to expand upon this topic in future research. Nathan Ellstrand discusses this topic in his forthcoming dissertation. See also Servando Ortol, “La ‘política de diseminación’ y la colonia sinarquista María Auxiliadora, en el contexto de la Segunda Guerra Mundial,” unpublished paper presented at the 2021 Conference of the Latin American Studies Association, May 27, 2021.

81. “Ickes Denounces Sinarquista Group,” *Gazette and Daily Mail*, York, PA, October 6, 1943, 2.

82. “U.S. Congressman Asks Quick Break with Fascist Spain,” *Nevada State Journal*, Reno, April 16, 1944, 5.

83. Despite this, the Cárdenas and Ávila Camacho governments refused to officially censor the organization until 1944, when *El Sinarquista* published two articles that seemed to call for a military coup, and its publication was banned. Hernández, *The Sinarquista Movement*, 322–333.

read and cited it.⁸⁴ Sinarquista editorialists repeatedly insisted that no outside organization influenced the UNS, that it was strictly a national entity, with a vision only for Mexico. Furthermore, they frequently turned around the accusations against them, charging their opponents in the Mexican government and the Left with being a tool of foreign powers.

To the Sinarquistas, the Mexican Left was merely a front for an imminent communist takeover of Mexico.⁸⁵ The contrast between what they saw as their own organic nationalist movement and a foreign-controlled internationalist Left was expressed clearly in an editorial from 1942:

Sinarquismo is Mexican through and through [*hasta las cachas*]. There they are, proclaiming this truth, the *charros* of San Luis, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Michoacán. They form the vanguard [*descubiertas*] in our splendid marches. . . . This is their battle cry: ¡VIVA MÉXICO! This is their flag: that of Iguala. This is their Queen: the Virgin of Guadalupe. In front of them, how pathetic are the “internationals” with their military outfits, their red-black rags, their withered little banners! You, *charros sinarquistas*, represent Mexico; they, the “internationals,” represent . . . Anti-Mexico!⁸⁶

In *El Sinarquista*, UNS leaders directly confronted press coverage that they found objectionable. In 1941, the newspaper published an article complaining about Alvadee Hutton, the aforementioned female student journalist who, *El Sinarquista* charged, had written “mendacious notes” about the UNS after interviewing Salvador Abascal. According to the UNS, Hutton’s subsequent report, which had appeared in the Mexican newspaper *Excelsior* as well as in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, was a complete misrepresentation of the Sinarquista movement:

It was obvious that *la gringuita* . . . already had the idea to portray Sinarquismo as a movement of the Nazi type . . . [she had] the evident intention of presenting this profound Mexican Movement, which expresses the aspirations of the most oppressed and noble part of our country, as a Hitlerian, fifth-columnist, and antidemocratic organization.”

84. “Los Sinarquistas son 3 millones de indios analfabetas y fanáticos,” 3. In addition to the newspaper *El Sinarquista*, the UNS published *Orden*, an illustrated monthly magazine. According to Prager, pro-Sinarquista articles frequently appeared in publications such as the Catholic-oriented weekly *La Nación*, the semi-monthly *Lectura*, the pro-Catholic popular monthly *Divulgación Histórica*, *La Voz de México*, *Omega*, and *El Hombre Libre*. Prager, “Sinarquismo,” 362-363. According to Mario García, UNS members in the United States would sell copies of *El Sinarquista* after Sunday masses in Mexican neighborhoods. García, *Mexican Americans*, 169.

85. “Es inminente la revolucion roja en mexico,” *El Sinarquista*, April 6, 1944, 1.

86. “Pelando por los Viejos Ideales,” *El Sinarquista*, May 23, 1942, 3.

In response to Hutton's article, the UNS also wrote to *Excelsior* denouncing the article as full of lies and lamenting that the newspaper, as a widely read publication that could influence public opinion in both Mexico and the United States, had not treated the UNS "honorably and with decency."⁸⁷

UNS writers in *El Sinarquista* (who often wrote without bylines) also tried to convince their readers that opponents were planting false information about the organization. In response to an "unfounded" editorial in the *New York Herald Tribune*, which alleged that the UNS was part of the Falange and was following German orders, and that its colonies represented a threat to the security of the borderlands, *El Sinarquista* writers reminded American journalists that they should "not rely on our enemies, because they will share false information." The article accused Mexican labor leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano of being one of the sources for the *Herald Tribune* editorial, and countered that "[these . . .] stupidities do not deserve a refutation. They are vulgar charges."⁸⁸

Only a few months later, the UNS undertook an even more proactive attempt to counter the accusations of its opponents by publishing and distributing an English-language booklet to a variety of American newspapers and magazines that would once and for all "explain the Sinarquista point of view." For the booklet, the UNS crafted a statement that aimed to address all of the typical preconceptions held by US journalists at once: "Sinarquism condemns Communism, totalitarianism, dictatorships, and tyrannies: we repudiate the division of 'leftists' and 'rightists,' of 'revolutionaries' and 'reactionaries.' We repudiate, likewise, the Nazi swastika, the Communistic star, and any other foreign symbol."

Through this pamphlet, the UNS sought to cast itself as a Catholic-nationalist alternative to both the Left in Mexico and worldwide and to right-wing totalitarian movements across the globe. Furthermore, the booklet underscored that communism was an explicitly foreign phenomenon that had created "class hatred" and a "class struggle" in Mexico.⁸⁹ Here, the UNS again attempted to flip the script on US press coverage, by making the same fifth-column accusation against the Mexican government that had accused the Sinarquistas of being under the sway of foreign influence, and simultaneously appealing to those sectors of US public opinion that were concerned with the apparent threat of communism.

87. "El caso de la gringuita pizpireta que escribió notas mendaces," *El Sinarquista*, October 23, 1941, 3. Hutton, like Charles Murray, was in Mexico on a Pulitzer fellowship for journalists. Her piece in *Excelsior* (October 12, 1941) was entitled "Según el Líder Abascal, la agrupación es anti-Nazista."

88. "Vuelve a calumniarnos la prensa de Estados Unidos," *El Sinarquista*, March 26, 1942, 1.

89. Sinarquistas Condemn Communism, and Deny Nazi or Totalitarian Leaning in Statement of Policy," *El Paso Herald-Post*, August 2, 1942, 1.

To further counter US perceptions, the UNS also attempted a public relations tour. According to Nathan Ellstrand, in 1943, two groups of young UNS leaders collaborated with US Catholic clergy to organize a tour of universities in South Bend, Indiana; St. Louis; Chicago and Champaign-Urbana in Illinois; New Orleans; New York; and San Antonio. One group included UNS founding members Juan Ignacio Padilla and Alfonso Trueba, along with Efraín Pardo, a Sinarquista from Los Angeles. These emissaries spoke to a variety of audiences and gave newspaper interviews in which they denied any connections to European fascism and stressed the religious underpinnings of the Sinarquista movement. In their efforts, they had the support of various clergy, including Bishop Edwin V. O'Hara, head of the Inter-American Institute in Kansas City, which facilitated international exchanges.⁹⁰

The goodwill tour was only one of the fruits of a deep relationship that Sinarquista leaders had been cultivating for several years with influential Catholics in the United States. In 1938, UNS representatives traveled to Washington, DC, where they met with William Montavon, director of the legal department at the National Catholic Welfare Council (NCWC), the preeminent organization of the US Catholic hierarchy. In appealing to these US Catholics, the Sinarquistas were following the tactics of Mexican Cristero supporters during the previous decade, who had secured significant moral support and publicity (although never the funding that they wanted) after appealing to Catholic bishops and organizations, including the NCWC and the Knights of Columbus.⁹¹ The relationship between the UNS and the NCWC was ultimately not as fruitful, but it did result in an alliance with Montavon, who did what he could to help promote a better image of the UNS in the Catholic press.

After that visit and throughout the early 1940s, Montavon corresponded regularly with Sinarquista chiefs Gonzalo Campos (1938) and Antonio Santacruz (1938-45). These relationships were extremely cordial, and both men frequently sent him press clippings in which they felt the UNS had been misunderstood or maligned.⁹² To Montavon, it seemed clear that the mainstream press—and as a result, US politicians—were misrepresenting the UNS, and that any resemblance between the Sinarquistas and foreign fascists was merely incidental. In his view, representations of the UNS as a foreign-funded fifth column were rooted in leftist bias among journalists. To counter this supposed bias, Montavon and his colleagues would work

90. Nathan Ellstrand, "The Transnational Sinarquista Movement," IEHS Online: Immigration and Ethnic History Society, March 2, 2020, <https://www.iehs.org/nathan-ellstrand-sinarquista-movement>, accessed January 19, 2022.

91. See Julia Young, *Mexican Exodus: Emigrants, Exiles, and Refugees of the Cristero War*, chapt. 4.

92. This correspondence can be found in the archives of The Catholic University of America, National Catholic Welfare Conference [NCWC], box 71, folder 35, and box 72, folders 1-5.

assiduously to promote a different portrait of the UNS to the US media and influential individuals.

As he wrote to Nelson Rockefeller, then assistant US secretary of State, in 1941, “It is my impression that the Sinarquist movement is being much maligned and that the reason for this opposition is largely to be found in the fact that the Sinarquists are opposed to communism in Mexico.”⁹³ To counter these purported misconceptions about the UNS, Montavon kept close track of events in Mexico throughout the 1940s, compiling information about major Sinarquista conventions and press releases, and following reports of the UNS’s involvement in debates over labor and land redistribution in Mexico, as well as the acrimonious battle between Sinarquistas and the Mexican government over the future of public education.⁹⁴

SINARQUISTA DEFENDERS AND CRITICS IN THE US CATHOLIC MEDIA

Montavon was not the only advocate for the UNS working at the NCWC. Throughout the 1940s (and particularly in 1940-45), NCWC’s Catholic News Service (CNS), which had been founded in 1919 to disseminate news of particular interest to US Catholics, published periodic reports about the Sinarquistas and their activities in Mexico. The News Service articles generally relied on quotes from interview subjects, rather than editorializing, to defend the UNS. For example, one press release quoted a priest in Los Angeles who rejected charges of violence by Sinarquistas in the United States as “absurd” and claimed that the UNS in Mexico was “a very respectable and well-recognized movement to counteract the effects of extreme Communism through lawful means.”⁹⁵ Another press release summarized an official Sinarquista statement that asserted that the UNS “rejects communism, rejects also racism; has no affiliation with any political party either in Mexico or in any foreign country; [and] is against revolution.”⁹⁶

93. William Montavon to Nelson Rockefeller, July 17, 1941, Archives of the Catholic University of America, NCWC, box 72, folder 1.

94. Memorandum from William Montavon on the Second Annual Convention of Synarchist Leaders, December 5, 1940; Memorandum on Federation of Labor, January 17, 1941; Letter from R. M. Walsh to Antonio Santacruz, March 20, 1941.

NCWC, Collection 10, box 72, folder 1.

95. “Charge Sinarquistas Stir up Lawlessness in Los Angeles Denounced,” NCWC News Service, September 4, 1942, Catholic News Archive, thecatholicnewsarchive.org.

96. “Mexico Sinarquists Reply to Charge of Totalitarian Plot,” NCWC News Service, July 21, 1941, Catholic News Archive.

Like the articles about the UNS in the secular US press, Catholic news articles offered no definitive proof that could settle the question of whether the Sinarquistas were a violent, fascist, or foreign-funded organization. Nevertheless, they presented a counterpoint to an increasingly numerous Catholic reading public; CNS articles were generally picked up by Catholic newspapers across the country. They also underscored the same main arguments that Sinarquista leaders made: that the UNS was not Nazi or fascist, but rather that it was an organization run by respectable Mexican Catholics in response to the abuses of the revolutionary government, and for the good of the Mexican people.

During the 1940s, US Catholic newspapers sometimes offered descriptions of the UNS that went beyond simple refutations of the allegations in mainstream newspapers. Specifically, some within the Catholic press put forth the argument that the UNS actually offered the possibility of a healthier democracy in Mexico. In the archdiocesan *St. Louis Register*, for example, the Catholic journalist C. J. McNeill described Sinarquismo as a “Christian democratic movement” that was being “smear[ed]. . . with the stigma of fascism.”⁹⁷ Further, it was actually a “disciplined . . . counterrevolutionary movement.”⁹⁸ McNeill also refuted specific charges made in the media, citing an informant to assert that there were no Nazi founders of the UNS, and explaining the church-state conflict that had given rise to the organization.⁹⁹ This kind of portrayal offered a very different analysis from that in the secular press, underscoring the religious origins and motivations of the UNS, investigating and presenting the organization’s historical background, and highlighting the organization’s alleged potential to improve democracy in Mexico. In the same publication, a different article reiterated this point, arguing that the UNS was comprised of “simply Christians whose idea is to make the nation more Christian by means of the ballot and instruction,” and arguing that it had been unfairly maligned by “the Reds.”¹⁰⁰

It is important to note here that the relationship between the UNS and Mexican electoral politics was in fact quite contentious. For most of the early years of its existence, UNS leaders had discouraged their followers from voting, including during the campaign of opposition presidential candidate Juan Andreu Almazán in 1940, alleging that the election would only result in fraud.¹⁰¹ Only

97. “Here’s Hope for Mexico: Growth of Sinarquismo Frightens Communists,” *St. Louis Register*, April 17, 1942, 7.

98. “Is It Fascism or Step Toward Christian Social Order? Rapid Growth of Sinarquist Movement in Mexico Kicks up Bitter Controversy,” *St. Louis Register*, September 10, 1943, 7.

99. C. J. McNeill, “Did Axis Agent Help Establish Movement in Mexico? Disgust With Failure of Bloody Revolts Led to Foundation of Sinarquist Union,” *St. Louis Register*, September 17, 1943, 9.

100. “Listening in,” *St. Louis Register*, September 24, 1948, 4.

101. After the 1940 election, which was widely regarded as fraudulent, the UNS did assert that Almazán had received the majority vote. Prager, *Sinarquismo*, 283.

after 1944 did the organization begin to promote electoral politics, eventually supporting the creation of a short-lived political party, Fuerza Popular, in 1946.¹⁰² Nevertheless, US Catholic proponents of the UNS saw it as an opposition force potentially capable of putting electoral pressure on a non-democratic regime.

The Jesuit magazine *America*, which had been hailed by the UNS in *El Sinarquista*, was another space that advanced a more positive portrayal of the organization and emphasized its potential for the strengthening of democracy in Mexico.¹⁰³ James Magner, a renowned Catholic author and priest who visited Mexico frequently during the 1930s and 1940s, wrote in its pages that while “enemies of Catholicism saw the specter of the Church in politics and of the Spanish Inquisition looming in the foreground . . . the truth is that Abascal is a man of high character and clean personal record, sincerely desirous of lending his energies to the betterment of the Mexican people.” As a result, the UNS had the potential to “bring just that much closer the realization of a genuine democracy to a country that has suffered so much.”¹⁰⁴

Catholic defenders of the UNS also wrote to secular US newspapers to try to correct what they viewed as erroneous reporting about the UNS. In a 1944 letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, Francis Heltshe, a Catholic priest, refuted rumors of a Sinarquista conspiracy to assassinate President Ávila Camacho, as well as the suspicion that the Sinarquistas were plotting against the government, asserting instead that Sinarquismo was an “open” and “democratic” movement.¹⁰⁵ In a sign of how closely the UNS leadership was monitoring US press coverage, *El Sinarquista* published an article responding to Heltsche’s letter and noting that “fortunately in our neighbor to the North there are decent people that are well aware of what we are and what we want and in this occasion, as in others, they did not fail to raise their voice . . . to defend the dignity of Sinarquismo and the dignity of

102. Pablo Serrano Álvarez, “El Sinarquismo en el Bajío mexicano, 1934-51. Historia de un movimiento social regional,” *Estudios de Historia Moderna y Contemporánea de México* 14, documento 187, <https://moderna.historicas.unam.mx/index.php/ehm/article/view/68856>. Fuerza Popular was banned in 1948 after the UNS held a protest in front of the Hemiciclo de Juárez in Mexico City’s Alameda Popular. Hernández, *The Sinarquista Movement*, 367.

103. This was not surprising, since *America* tended to look the other way in the face of fascism and anti-Semitism, given that its editors perceived Communism to be so much greater a threat to the global Catholic Church. See Charles Gallagher, “‘Correct and Christian’: American Jesuit Support of Father Charles E. Coughlin’s Antisemitism, 1935–1938,” in *The Tragic Couple: Encounters Between Jews and Jesuits*, James Bernauer and Robert A. Maryks, eds. (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013), 297–315. This was not the only Catholic publication that leaned toward the hard right. Patrick Scanlan, editor of *The Tablet*, “was eventually considered the dean of the nation’s Catholic press—the loudest supporter of Fr. Charles Coughlin when the radio preacher descended into his most obvious anti-Semitism in the late 1930s, and also of Sen. Joseph McCarthy during his rise and fall in the 1950s.” *Commonweal* 147:7 (July/August 2020), 12.

104. Magner, “Sinarchism—Mexican Threat or Promise,” 204–206.

105. Francis J. Heltshe, “No Sinarquista Conspiracy: Catholic Chaplain Disagrees with Mexican Labor Delegate,” *New York Times*, May 19, 1944, 18.

our principles.”¹⁰⁶ Paul Dearing, who was the publicity director for the NCWC, also wrote to the *New York Times* in response to a critical article about the UNS. “Sinarquista [sic] is a social movement offering a genuine hope of self-government to Mexicans,” he asserted. Going further in defense of the Sinarquistas than many other writers (and possibly attempting to make the UNS seem more like a pro-democratic movement to American readers), he added that the UNS “is as anti-Fascist as our own Republican Party.”¹⁰⁷

Although the coverage of the Sinarquista movement by Catholic journalists was more favorable than that of mainstream and left-wing journalists, some Catholics were more skeptical about the movement. In the *Saint Louis Register*, H. L. Moore offered a somewhat qualified critique, claiming that “not enough is known about sinarquismo to give it a completely clean bill of health.” While Moore defended the organization from writers like Allan Chase, he also stated that the “Catholic attitude is one of interest but of watchful waiting. . . . There has been no minimizing among US Catholics of certain dangers. . . . in the movement.”¹⁰⁸

A more direct and impactful critique of the UNS came from Fr. Edward Skillin, who had been a prominent Catholic critic of Franco during the Spanish Civil war and was the editor of the progressive Catholic magazine *Commonweal*. In a 1944 article, he asserted that the UNS was “authoritarian and highly centralized . . . it requires blind obedience on the part of its members.” Making a clear rhetorical link between the UNS and Franco’s Spain, Skillin argued that the UNS’s secrecy meant that it could easily be co-opted by a “*jefe* or *caudillo*,” and if it were to gain power, “we should once again have a dictatorial state adorned with Catholic symbols and forcibly repressing all opposition . . . to the terrible detriment of the Church.” In using the phrase “once again,” Skillin was clearly making a comparison—and a direct criticism—of Franco’s Spain, where the Catholic Church openly complied with a violent dictatorial regime in return for the total repression of anticlerical elements of Spanish society. He was also rowing against the current of contemporary US Catholic opinion, which largely supported the Franco government.¹⁰⁹

106. “El Sinarquismo enjuiciado por un extranjero,” June 8, 1944, 3.

107. Paul Dearing, “Letters to the Editor: Pro-Sinarquista,” *Washington Post*, July 25, 1943. Dearing also wrote “Sinarquism in Mexico,” *Current History* 5 (November 1943): 247. Other Catholic defenders included H. J. Wirtenberger, “In Defense of the Sinarquistas,” *Latin-American Monthly* (August 1942); Eugene W. Shiels, “Left Wing Smear Hits Sinarquista,” *America* 69:19 (August 14, 1943); and Richard Pattee, “Synarchism—A Threat or a Promise?” *Columbia* 29 (January 1945), 3–4, 13–14. See Prager, “Sinarquismo,” 373.

108. H. L. Moore, “Sinarquism Not Presented Well by Chicago Writer,” *Catholic Advance*, February 4, 1944, 2.

109. Edward Skillin Jr., “Notes on Sinarquism: Mexican Movement of National Regeneration,” *Commonweal* 40 (June 9, 1944), 178. Catholics in the United States tended to support Franco in the Spanish Civil War, although *Commonweal* split from this opinion. David J. Valaik, “American Catholic Dissenters and the Spanish Civil War,” *Catholic Historical Review* 53:4 (1968): 537–555.

Skillin's article was approvingly quoted in the secular press.¹¹⁰ By contrast, however, most Catholic press coverage of the Sinarquistas was still more positive, and numerous Catholic writers pushed back against Skillin's portrayal of the UNS.¹¹¹ Sinarquistas back in Mexico certainly noted this largely positive coverage and occasionally touted it in the pages of *El Sinarquista*, with one writer noting that "although there are in the United States newspapers that publish malevolent and false reports, there also exists an honorable press that presents Sinarquismo as it actually is before American public opinion."¹¹² Indeed, to some UNS leaders these efforts to improve perceptions of the UNS in the US media were working, perhaps lending hope that the organization would receive more legitimacy within the wider US public. Ultimately, however, the fragmentation and decline of the organization during and after 1944 would render the question of US approval (or lack thereof) moot.

CONCLUSION

After 1945, press coverage of the UNS in the United States diminished significantly. This is partly related to the fact that the organization had already begun to decline in size and influence. By 1944, the Sinarquista colonies had collapsed due to lack of funding, farming expertise, and population. During the same year, there was a major fracture within the leadership of the Unión Nacional Sinarquista, with Salvador Abascal ultimately leaving the movement, along with many of his followers. Meanwhile, Mexico's Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) had begun to coalesce as a viable electoral option for Mexicans (and Catholics) on the right, and, finally, President Miguel Alemán Valdés (1946-52) explicitly adopted a platform of anticommunism.¹¹³

110. See for example Edgar Ansel Mowrer, "Making up Our Minds about Sinarquism," *Nebraska State Journal*, June 20, 1944, 6; and Will Lissner, "Danger to Mexico in Sinarquism Seen," *New York Times*, June 11, 1944, 20.

111. According to Kenneth Prager, after the publication of Skillin's article "a lively debate ensued. Skillin's contention that the UNS was authoritarian and tyrannous was violently challenged by Frank Gross Jr. and Right Reverend Luigi Ligutti, who condemned the former's assertion as being fallacious, totally unobjective and poorly documented." Prager, "Sinarquismo," 372-373.

112. "La prensa honrada de los Estados Unidos sale en defensa del Sinarquismo," *El Sinarquista*, May 14, 1942, 3. The article cited and provided a translation of a 1942 article entitled "Los Mexicanos se organizan para un orden nuevo," written by W. Eugenio Shiels in the Jesuit magazine *America*.

113. Hernández, *The Sinarquista Movement*, 368. On the rise of the PAN, see Yemile Mizrahi, *From Martyrdom to Power: The Partido Acción Nacional in Mexico* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003). The organization continued to exist, on and off, throughout the twentieth century. After a fallow period in the 1950s and 1960s, the 1970s saw a reorganization, and a new generation of leaders organized the Partido Demócrata Mexicano (PDM) as the party "of and for the Sinarquistas." The party went on to participate in state elections in 1979 and 1982, doing particularly well in the Bajío. Serrano Álvarez, *La batalla del espíritu*, 308. For more on the PDM, see Alfonso Guillén Vicente, "Partido Demócrata Mexicano," in Octavio Rodríguez Araujo, *La reforma política y los partidos en México* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1979), as well as the essay by Rubén Aguilar V. and Guillermo Zermeño P., "Religión y política en el caso de la militancia del partido demócrata mexicano (PDM). Una aproximación," in *Religión, política y sociedad*, Aguilar y Zermeño, eds., 273-304. Today, there are still people and groups in Mexico who identify as Sinarquistas, with several social media pages that claim to represent the UNS, including a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/Union->

Perhaps equally important for the US press, however, was the end of World War II and the start of the Cold War. This meant that the threat of an Axis fifth column was suddenly not nearly so frightening or attention-grabbing to many Americans; instead, the American public would grow increasingly concerned about potential communist infiltration in government and society. The fate of Allan Chase, the writer who had warned Americans of the threat of the Falange in Latin America and accused the Sinarquistas of being their puppets, attests to this shift. In 1953 he was called to testify before Senator Joseph McCarthy's Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, and grilled about his suspected communist ties.¹¹⁴

Yet, at the tail end of the stormy debate over the nature of the UNS, there were at least a few instances of more nuanced press coverage, in which writers paid closer attention to the religious roots of the UNS and echoed some of the distinctions that UNS leaders articulated between themselves and European fascism. This change came at least in part because the organization significantly downplayed its previous anti-American stance. In 1945, for example, one journalist in the *New York Times* noted that UNS representatives frequently spoke out against communism, Nazi fascism and "pseudo-liberal democracy," all of which they saw as opposed to the teachings of Christianity.¹¹⁵

The premier example of this more moderate tone was journalist and novelist Margaret Shedd's long investigative article, "Thunder on the Right in Mexico," published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1945. In it, she delved into the origins and goals of the UNS, interviewing its leaders and embedding herself in several Sinarquista marches in order to observe its participants and practices. In her assessment, while she clearly perceived fascist, Falange, and Nazi influences (and hinted at, but did not substantiate, allegations of Nazi funding), she also understood and highlighted the UNS's Catholic and Mexican origins and goals. Shedd also exhibited some familiarity with the long history of both Church-state conflict and land tenure in Mexico and connected the Sinarquista movement to both of these issues, directly linking them to the Cristero fighters of the previous decade. Shedd's article offered its readers much of what so much of the mainstream secular media coverage of the UNS during the prior years had lacked: a critical portrayal of the Sinarquistas that took into account

Nacional-Sinarquista-130282460319080/), an Instagram account (https://www.instagram.com/union_nacional_sinarquista/), and a Twitter account (<https://twitter.com/UNSmx>).

114. Executive Sessions of the US Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, Vol. 2, 1953, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-107SPRT83870/html/CPRT-107SPRT83870.htm>, accessed January 8, 2022.

115. "Sinarquista Praises U.S.: New Leader Supports a 'Solid, Disinterested Friendship,'" *New York Times*, May 31, 1945, 3.

the Mexican context in which the organization arose, without ignoring the movement's ideological debt to global fascism.

Yet this more nuanced portrayal was not what the majority of the American reading public encountered during the war years. Despite the best efforts of the UNS, which tried to change the narrative about the Sinarquista movement by building relationships with prominent US Catholics and responding to common charges against it in the print media, a much larger American readership had encountered negative descriptions of the UNS in their daily newspapers, in prominent national magazines, or in nonfiction books such as those by Betty Kirk and Allan Chase. As a result, a majority of the American public read about an organization that was dangerous, subversive, antidemocratic, fascist, suspiciously religious, and most frightening of all, a possible fifth column for the Axis powers that threatened the entire Western Hemisphere.

Even in the Catholic press, the secular media always set the terms of the debate: Catholic coverage of the UNS was largely focused on responding to and refuting the charges of foreign involvement and reassuring leaders that the movement was headed by decent people. In the end, the Sinarquistas never received widespread positive coverage outside of the Catholic media.¹¹⁶ To the extent that Sinarquistas are remembered in US popular consciousness, they seem to be linked inextricably with fascism and other sinister forces.¹¹⁷

Nevertheless, the story of the Sinarquistas' game of tug-of-war in the US press helps illuminate two key facts about the Unión Nacional Sinarquista. First, despite its vocally anti-American stance for much of the early 1940s, it closely monitored US public opinion about the organization and took actions to improve public perceptions of the UNS in the United States (such as touring universities and lobbying the NCWC), most likely because UNS leaders believed that support from US Catholics could help counter negative press and perhaps even forestall the condemnation of the US public and potential state intervention. After all, as Margaret Shedd pointed out at the time, "the official attitude of the United States is the question of first importance to anyone who thinks of making a revolution in Mexico"¹¹⁸

116. The UNS's relationship with influential US Catholics seems to have weakened after 1945, when Antonio Santacruz, who had regularly corresponded with William Montavon, stepped away from the movement. William Montavon to Antonio Santacruz, July 10, 1945, NCWC, Collection 10, box 72, folder 4.

117. In *This Storm*, a recently published novel set in 1940s Los Angeles, author James Ellroy describes the Sinarquistas as a fiendish right-wing Mexican group involved with arms-trafficking and murder in the city. James Ellroy, *This Storm* (New York: Vintage, 2020)

118. Shedd, "Thunder on the Right," 422.

Second, the story of the US press coverage of the UNS highlights the transnational nature of the Sinarquista organization itself, and the centrality of a transnational public opinion to the project of remaking Mexico's Catholic nation. Not only did the UNS, which claimed to be an explicitly Mexican nationalist organization, have chapters across the United States—a fact that is only recently beginning to draw the full attention of historians—but its leadership also routinely traveled to and throughout the United States to try to influence public opinion, with members of the organization moving comfortably within American Catholic circles and working to influence the US media landscape. Indeed, although it was perhaps contradictory given their nationalist and anti-American ideologies, UNS members understood perfectly well that in order to fulfill their ultimate aim of founding a Catholic nation in Mexico, they needed to push back against negative perceptions of their organization in the United States.

Finally, this history of competing media narratives can also help us to chart new directions for the scholarly study of the Sinarquistas. To some extent, the question that dominated press coverage of the Sinarquistas in the 1940s—were they Nazis, fascists, or something else?—continues to infuse scholarly debates. It is certainly a relevant question. Yet it also can distract from a deeper examination of the organization's connections to Mexican Catholic history, its outgrowth from the Cristero War and other episodes of Church-state conflicts in Mexico, and its possible connections to other contemporaneous global Catholic movements, such as Catholic integralism.

Of course, scholarly understandings of the Sinarquistas are far more nuanced than press coverage ever was, and an ample and growing historiography of the Sinarquistas has expanded far beyond any simplistic question. Recent studies on women and the Sinarquista movement, on the transnational aspects of the UNS, and on the activities of the organization after the 1940s all promise to move the research in new directions.¹¹⁹ Yet there is still work to be done on the question of the manifold intellectual and religious origins of the movement. The Sinarquistas saw themselves as the inheritors (and restorers) of a Catholic order that went back to the era of Spanish sovereignty over Mexico. Their critics on both sides of the border saw them as a sinister foreign-influenced movement that existed purely to undermine Mexico's revolutionary government, and possibly that of the United States as well. A fuller investigation of the UNS's own historical narratives of Mexico—their chronology, their legends, and their historical heroes—may help to further

119. Orozco García, "Las mujeres sinarquistas (1937–1962);" Ellstrand, "Reclaiming *La Patria*;" Orozco, *Receive Our Memories*; see also the contributions by Luis Herran Ávila and Gema Santamaria in this special issue.

historical understandings of the movement's formation, motivations, and expansion during the 1940s and beyond, and to take us even further beyond the one-dimensional debates that dominated media coverage then, and still inform contemporary perceptions of the Sinarquista movement today.

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