



Mark Lawrence. *Insurgency, Counter-insurgency and Policing in Centre-West Mexico, 1926-1929: Fighting Cristeros.* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 208 pp. \$115.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-350-09545-8.

Reviewed by Sergio Maldonado (University of California Riverside)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Mark Lawrence's *Insurgency, Counter-Insurgency and Policing in Centre-West Mexico* is an excellent book focused on the civil-military operations in Zacatecas during Mexico's Cristero rebellion. Lawrence explores the dynamics of the asymmetrical warfare that took place, from guerrilla tactics to aviation operations, to demonstrate that the local responses from the Federal forces and the Cristero rebels were similar, resulting in a protracted war of attrition. Using Carl von Clausewitz's escalation dominance theory, the book illustrates that although the rebellion was weak in the conventional setting of warfare, their asymmetrical tactics "drew the Federation into a war on their terms," placing the belligerents on equal footing (p. 63). However, what makes this book stand out is not the use of von Clausewitz's theory, but rather Lawrence's use of oral histories, which contrasts with Federal and institutional collective memory of the Cristero War. Lawrence illustrates that those who fought, and those caught up in its tumult, did not always subscribe fully to the ideology of secularism or Catholicism, asserting that this war was sometimes waged along disputes between neighboring communities in and around Zacatecas and Los Altos. Because of these disputes, the military responses went from strategic operations to the heavy-handed tactic of reconcentration. Lawrence's ability to weave these sources together

results in a deeply interesting study that many historians of modern Mexico will find insightful.

Insurgency, Counter-Insurgency and Policing in Centre-West Mexico spans six chapters. Chapter 1 contextualizes and places the study within modern Mexican history and explains that Mexican military history has been relegated to the periphery of scholarly attention. Lawrence asserts that "new military history has not advanced much in the Mexican historiography, in part because historians have too readily accepted the state's own claims that it demilitarized quickly after the 1910-20 revolution" (p. 3). Lawrence's claim, however, might prove too broad of a generalization. Historian Aaron W. Navarro has demonstrated that the Mexican Federal government endeavored to dismantle its military over a sixteen-year period, from 1938 to 1954.[1] Chapter 2 explains that the antecedents of the Cristero War began with the suspension of Catholic worship in 1926, the Yaqui rebellion in northern Mexico, revenge killings, and the overreach of the Federal government's forestry law. Chapters 3 and 4, the highlight of Lawrence's monograph, analyze the Federal government's use of paramilitary groups on the battlefield, reconcentration policies, the creation of free-fire zones, and noncombatants. The special attentions paid to those who did not take up arms in these two chapters is particularly interesting. Lawrence ex-

plores the plethora of reasons why noncombatants allied themselves with the Cristeros and posits that those reasons were often tied to religion, anti-state culture, or racial divides. Other historians, such as Christopher R. Boyer, have shown similar findings about the *Campesinos* in the western state of Michoacán, buttressing Lawrence's findings even further.[2] Chapters 5 and 6 analyze the war's economic effect in regions free of fighting. Their central focus is on the civil-military relationship of the region, and the passive forms of resisting or assisting Federal authorities. Lastly, they explain how the war came to its end with *La Segunda*—a period after the armistice of 1929—in which a few Cristero veterans called for a doomed return to arms.

All six chapters include an analysis of Federal and rebel leaders as well as the significant military events. Lawrence's oral methodology found throughout the chapters, however, is what makes his book compelling. Rather than only focusing on the military or rebel accounts of the events that transpired, the book peers into the everyday life of people who were caught up in the war. The book demonstrates that Federal actions such as aerial bombing campaigns, the killing of civilians in free-fire zones, or reconcentration policies had lasting psychological effects that colored the collective memory of those who survived the war. As a result of these actions, many who were at first not opposed, or at least indifferent, to the military campaign against the Cristeros ended up opposing the Federal government. The book dives even deeper to unearth the experiences of people who are often excluded from national memory, like Josefina Arellano, who "defied Federal orders" of the reconcentration to return home after the death of her 10-month-old baby (p. 62). Compounded with other sources such as British consul reports, the book also successfully demonstrates that some of the Federal paramilitary groups, such as the *agrarias*, were fervent Catholics yet still took up arms against the Catholic rebels. What the book demonstrates, then, is that those who participated in the

war often had divergent reasons for doing so and were, at times, pushed into conflict because of Federal military action.

Counter-Insurgency and Policing in Centre-West Mexico adds nuance to an interesting period in modern Mexican history. Lawrence's use of oral histories makes this book all the more compelling. Including these voices deepens our understanding of the conflict, and grants those who were often relegated to the periphery the scholarly attention they deserve. Furthermore, the accessibility of the book paired with firsthand accounts creates a visceral experience rarely found in other books. Lawrence's methodology thus helps us understand just how bloody and complicated the Cristero War was. When it comes to the historiography, Lawrence perhaps overstates the lack of scholarly attention that the Mexican military has received, claiming that most historians accept the fact that Mexico demilitarized after the 1910 Revolution. Regardless, *Insurgency, Counter-Insurgency and Policing in Centre-West Mexico* proves to be an important book in the field of modern Mexican history.

Notes

[1]. Aaron W. Navarro, *Political Intelligence and the Creation of Modern Mexico. 1938-1954* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

[2]. Christopher R. Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán, 1920-1935* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

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