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“The Most Dangerous Fifth Column in the Americas:” U.S. Journalists and Mexico’s Unión Nacional Sinarquista during World War II

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Abstract: Between 1937 and 1945, numerous American journalists became gravely concerned about a rapidly growing Mexican Catholic right-wing movement, the Unión Nacional Sinarquista (UNS). Founded in 1937, the UNS spread rapidly across Mexico and by 1941, the Sinarquistas had formed numerous chapters in the United States as well. This coincided with the U.S. entry into World War II, and a heightened concern about the potential threat represented by immigrants loyal to Axis powers. Thus, U.S. journalists devoted significant coverage to the Sinarquista movement, casting it as a Fifth Column movement that was taking money, arms, and direct orders from enemies of the United States. In doing so, journalists largely downplayed the inherently Catholic character of the movement, as well as its deep roots in Mexican Church-state history, interpreting it instead within the framework of contemporary geopolitics. As a result, U.S. media consumers received an incomplete portrait of this particular religious “other”. In this article, I focus on the writings of the journalists Allan Chase and Betty Kirk, in order to assess how and why religion and religious belief was de-emphasized in influential media portrayals of the UNS, and why this matters for historians and journalists interested in religious movements.

Keywords: Mexico; Unión Nacional Sinarquista; Fifth Column; World War II; journalism



Citation: Young, Julia G.. 2023. “The Most Dangerous Fifth Column in the Americas:” U.S. Journalists and Mexico’s Unión Nacional Sinarquista during World War II. *Religions* 14: 106. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010106>

Academic Editor: Natalie Khazaal

Received: 12 September 2022

Revised: 7 December 2022

Accepted: 30 December 2022

Published: 12 January 2023



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1. Introduction

In the wake of Pearl Harbor, the American public became terrified of further attacks on U.S. soil. Journalists, politicians, and intelligence agents amplified these fears throughout the early 1940s, publishing a constant stream of reports about actual and potential threats to U.S. security: German U-boats in the Atlantic, Japanese parachutists in the Pacific, Axis spies planted in U.S. cities, and—perhaps most frightening at all—a so-called “Fifth Column” comprised of a group of internal enemies who might rise up to destroy the United States from within (Friedman 2003; MacDonnell 1995).

One of the sources of this Fifth Column panic—largely forgotten by Americans today—was a rapidly growing Mexican Catholic organization, the Unión Nacional Sinarquista. During the war years, many people in the United States, particularly journalists, came to believe that the UNS was a fascist movement that had been founded with the help of a German spy, and was directed and controlled by shadowy Axis powers. Since its launch in 1937, the organization’s members—known as Sinarquistas—had been turning up by the tens of thousands at demonstrations in cities and towns in Mexico. During these events, they marched in formation singing hymns of martyrdom, right arms crossed over their breasts in a manner that seemingly echoed infamous Nazi and fascist salutes. Under the direction of their most charismatic leader, Salvador Abascal, the Sinarquistas had also founded new colonies in the desert northlands of Baja California and Sonora—uncomfortably close to the vulnerable U.S.-Mexico border, at least in the eyes of American observers.

Of even greater concern to those who feared a Mexican Fifth Column was the fact that the Sinarquistas had, by 1941, formed numerous chapters in the United States, particularly

in Mexican barrios in cities like Los Angeles, El Paso, and Chicago. For all these reasons, the journalist Betty Kirk, a foreign correspondent whose writing on Mexico was widely read at the time, called the Sinarquista movement “the most dangerous Fifth Column in the Americas” (Kirk 1942, p. 315).

In hindsight, it is apparent that such fears were misplaced. Mexico’s UNS never invaded the United States, nor did Mexican Sinarquistas in the United States ever launch a Fifth Column movement. On the contrary, today Mexico is remembered not as an enemy of the United States, but rather as a contributor to the Allied cause in World War II, most notably for the heroic flights of the Aztec Eagles, the 201st Fighter Squadron of the Mexican Expeditionary Air Force (Schwab 2002). Several hundred thousand Mexican Americans, for their part, served valiantly in the U.S. armed forces during the war.¹

Yet, the panic over Mexican Sinarquistas in the U.S. media is nevertheless a useful case study for scholars of Mexican and U.S. history, religion, and journalism. In what follows, I first discuss the wider context for Fifth Column fears in Mexico and Latin America, engaging with the work of other historians who have demonstrated both how pervasive such fears were, and how often they were exaggerated or relied on flawed information. Next, I discuss how and why many U.S. journalists came to view the Unión Nacional Sinarquista as such a significant threat during the war years, referring briefly to my previous research on the topic. Then, I focus in particular on the work of Allan Chase and Betty Kirk, two journalists whose warnings about the UNS were among the most widely read and cited—and the most sensational—in the media at the time.

Finally, I turn to a review of archival and historiographical evidence in order to properly assess the charges that the Sinarquista movement was an Axis-sponsored fifth-column movement. Here, I argue that Chase, Kirk, and other U.S. journalists writing about the Sinarquistas during the 1940s misunderstood the origins and goals of the organization, largely because they lacked awareness of its deep religious roots and its historical continuity with the ongoing religious conflict (in particular the Cristero War of 1926–1929) in Mexico. Instead, they contextualized the UNS within the framework of the contemporaneous conflict in Europe, perhaps because they and their audiences were more familiar with the ongoing conflagrations in Europe than with religious conflicts in Mexico. In conclusion, I discuss how the story of this misunderstanding can be useful for journalists and scholars interested in writing about religion today.

This article offers contributions to scholarship on U.S. media history; Mexican Catholic history; and contemporary media studies. First, it offers a window into the practices and rhetoric of U.S. journalists reporting on purported Fifth Column threats in Mexico and the United States during World War II.² Second, it works to correct the historical and historiographical record on the Unión Nacional Sinarquista, which in reality was neither an Axis-directed organization nor a Fifth Column movement, but was rather a Catholic nationalist movement with deep roots in Mexico’s ongoing Church-state conflict that formed in parallel with other integralist movements worldwide. Finally, this article offers a cautionary tale for present-day journalists, who might find the story of the Sinarquistas useful as they investigate the connections between religion and religious movements and contemporary political events.

2. The U.S. Media and Fifth Column Fears during World War II

During the Second World War, the U.S. media, the government, and the public were gripped with “hysteria” about an Axis Fifth Column capable of overcoming the United States from within (MacDonnell 1995, p. vii). While the majority of this anxiety focused on the threat of internal enemies, especially immigrant communities within the United States (and would lead to the tragic and infamous program of Japanese internment camps, among other outcomes), there was also vivid concern about security threats to the United States from external enemies within the Western hemisphere, specifically from Latin America and Latin Americans.

During World War II, the U.S. press frequently portrayed Latin America as a region teeming with Nazi and fascist infiltrators, Axis sympathizers, and totalitarian political parties. Books such as Carleton Beal's *The Coming Struggle for Latin America* (1938) and Hugo Fernández Artucio's *The Nazi Underground in South America* (1942), in addition to countless newspaper and magazine articles, helped convince American audiences that the region, with its substantial communities of German and Japanese immigrants, could become the next front in the war. So many publications flooded the market that, a few years later in 1948, the political scientist and editor Heinz Eulau would lament in the pages of *The Antioch Review* that "prophesies of danger and counsels of security have appeared in monotonous succession . . . Without exception, these authors claim to unveil, hemispherically or country by country, chapter and verse on totalitarian intrigues and conspiracies" (Eulau 1948, p. 108).

This media panic was fueled by faulty intelligence, fretful politicians, a terrified American public, and journalistic practices that fell far short of the standards for investigative journalism that are commonly maintained today. During World War II, officials and the government bureaucrats they worked for were gravely concerned about the possibility of Axis "espionage, sabotage, and military operations" throughout the region (McConahay 2018, p. 106). The U.S. State Department was certain that Germany planned to take over Latin America, and attack the United States from there (Paz 1997). President Roosevelt was convinced at one point that the Germans intended to take over Latin America and carve it into "vassal states" (McConahay 2018, p. 177; See also MacDonnell 1990; as well as Bratzel and Rout 1985). And the FBI believed that "the Germans planned to unite with Spanish fascist disciples of Francisco Franco in the region to bring about the return of Spain's former colonies to the mother country" (Friedman 2003, p. 64). Moreover, U.S. intelligence also focused on immigrant populations from enemy countries—particularly Germans, Japanese, and Italians—living in Latin America.³

So profound and widespread were these concerns that the United States would eventually launch a program with cooperating Latin American countries to round up these populations and bring them to the United States to be interned in detention camps along with U.S. residents and citizens of Japanese and German descent—one of the more tragic results of pervasive fears of Western Hemisphere Fifth-Columnists (See McConahay 2018, chps. 5–7; Friedman 2003, chps. 4–5; García 2014; Becker 2018).

Yet, as most scholars have concluded, the narrative of a continent teeming with saboteurs, spies, militants and Axis Fifth Columnists with the goal and the capacity to overthrow the United States was simply wrong.⁴ Instead, the fears circulating in the press were largely based on flawed and faulty intelligence reports. Agents from a number of intersecting and overlapping agencies, including the State Department, military intelligence, the FBI, and the SIS (Special Intelligence Service) produced reports that were full of errors, misunderstandings, and misinformation. The factors behind this flawed intelligence included agents' lack of Spanish-language competence; the common use of paid informants (which meant that intelligence agents often relied on people who were motivated to exaggerate threats in order to receive payment for their services) and the fact that the best intelligence agents were working in the European theater and not within the Western hemisphere, as Latin America was considered to be an inferior posting at the time (Friedman 2003, pp. 61–69).

Indeed, many U.S. intelligence agents working in Latin America lacked a sufficient understanding of the complex landscape of Latin American politics. Instead, they tended to view Latin America "a vulnerable, dependent region" whose residents were "helpless". To them, the only "real actors" were the foreigners—Europeans and Asians—in Latin America (ibid., p. 4). This tendency to view Latin America and Latin Americans as simple dupes of foreign ideologies, rather than as autonomous people with political agendas of their own "created a predisposition to see a Nazi plot behind every incident of political unrest, a German hand pulling the strings of so many Latin American puppets" (ibid., pp. 49–50).

Despite the flaws in intelligence coming from Latin America, the media ran with the story of Latin American invasion and the Fifth Column threat. The American public, for its

part, responded with “eager consumption of an outpouring of films, comic books, radio programs, and pulp fiction on the Fifth Column theme” (ibid., p. 53). In addition to the plethora of books on the matter such as those discussed previously, journalists participated gullibly in a “cycle of disinformation”, regularly publishing “off-the-record briefings of correspondents by U.S. embassies [that] later appeared as dramatic, unsourced stories in papers sold in the United States”. These news stories then made their way back into government reports (ibid., p. 56).

Today, this kind of uncritical publication of government-produced sources would be considered bad journalistic practice. During the war years, however, investigative journalism as a whole was in a fallow period, bearing little resemblance to the hard-hitting writing produced by the muckrakers of the late nineteenth century and the Watergate-era journalists of the 1970s. As a result, there was insufficient questioning of authority and a more credulous approach to intelligence sources (Feldstein 2006). This credulity—or at least acceptance of what were clearly outlandish claims about the Fifth Column threat—is evident in the narratives of American journalists who wrote prolifically about Mexico’s Unión Nacional Sinarquista.

3. Mexico, the Sinarquistas, and the U.S. Media

During the War years, numerous U.S. journalists and writers repeatedly warned of potential Fifth Column threats within Mexico. The country not only had sizable communities of German, Italian, and Japanese immigrants who could potentially (in the eyes of these journalists) become Fifth-Columnists, but also shared a long and largely ungarded land border that could be infiltrated by such an enemy (Paz 1997, p. 207). Indeed, prominent U.S. journalists—particularly those belonging to the political left—had long kept a close watch on Mexico, interpreting its political developments for an American audience still alert after the country’s recent revolution of 1910–1920.⁵

Given the larger context of fear and anxiety over a Fifth Column threat, it is no surprise that U.S. journalists increasingly focused on Mexico’s growing Sinarquista movement. As stated above, the movement seemed to many to fit the definition of an Axis-led Fifth Column organization. On the surface, at least, it seemed to echo and mimic the tropes of Nazi and other fascist movements: it had developed its own ideology, symbols, flag, and salute; it had grown incredibly rapidly, claiming 500,000 members by the early 1940s and hundreds of chapters throughout the country and in the United States; its adherents marched in formation by the thousands (and sometimes tens of thousands) in cities and towns across Mexico. Its origins were mysterious, and its founders seemed to have ties to a German expatriate (See Leinert 2002). Most importantly, its rise in Mexico coincided roughly with the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the rise of the Axis powers during the Second World War (1939–1945).

To U.S. journalists during World War II, the rapidly growing Sinarquista movement represented a startling indication that Axis powers were at work in Mexico, and within Mexican communities in the United States.⁶ As a result, the UNS drew sustained and intensive media attention between its founding in 1937 and the end of World War II. Indeed, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, a majority of the articles in the mainstream secular press (i.e., not in the Catholic press) highlighted the similarities between the UNS and fascist or Nazi movements, while many asserted that the movement was directed by Axis powers. As a result, many journalists became convinced—and certainly convinced their readers—that the UNS was a dangerous organization that had the potential to either overthrow Mexico’s government (and therefore gain control of Mexico) or infiltrate the United States through its U.S.-based chapters. Between 1940 and 1945, at least 2105 articles were published in the secular media, the vast majority of which discussed the UNS in alarmist terms and focused on its potential for violence in Mexico or in the United States.⁷

The journalists Allan Chase and Betty Kirk produced important examples of this type of writing, and it is worth examining the life and writing of each in greater detail for several reasons. First of all, they produced lengthier analyses of the UNS than did

most of the newspaper articles covering the organization during the war years. More importantly, however, their books were particularly influential, reaching a wide readership and receiving citations and reviews in the U.S. press. Chase's *Falange: The Axis Secret Army in the Americas* (Chase 1943) was, in the author's own words, a "runaway best seller".⁸ Other scholars noted that the book received "rave reviews",⁹ "For her part, Betty Kirk's *Covering the Mexican Front: The Battle of Europe vs. America* (Kirk 1942), as well as her numerous newspaper articles about Mexico and the Sinarquistas, were widely read and cited by other writers and journalists."¹⁰

The extensive reach of these published works meant that both Chase and Kirk's journalism was particularly important in generating a portrait of the Unión Nacional Sinarquista that dramatically inflated the organization's international connections and influence; described in certain terms threats that never came to pass; and relied heavily both on U.S. intelligence reports that were deeply flawed, and on information from Mexican informants who were opponents of the organization. Neither writer interviewed supporters of the organization in order to obtain a more balanced perspective on the motivations of its followers. Nor did they delve deeply into Mexican history, in particular the Mexican religious history that, as I will argue later, is necessary for an understanding of the origins and development of the Sinarquista movement.

This is not to say that Chase and Kirk were inferior journalists; far from it. Rather, both writers, like so many of their contemporaries, were operating in the context of a global emergency—the Second World War—and the widespread fears of Axis infiltration of Latin America. As a result, they viewed the Sinarquistas through a binary lens. A brief examination about their lives and background, in combination with a review of their writing on the UNS, is helpful in understanding why they—and other journalists like them—came to perceive the Unión Nacional Sinarquista as an existential threat to the United States and the Western Hemisphere.

4. Allan Chase and the Specter of Spanish Fascism

Born in Manhattan in 1914, Allan Chase was a child prodigy and a ferocious reader. With a library card before he was five and permission from his father, a teacher, to check out books from the adult shelves at the 42nd street library, Chase eventually dropped out of college after being caught ghostwriting theses for other students. After adding ten years to his age, he managed to get hired as a Hearst journalist, a magazine writer, and an editor.¹¹

In 1934, Chase became a member of the Communist party, perhaps inspired by youthful zeal: "at the time I was twenty or twenty-one", he would recall later, "and I thought I knew all there was to know, all the answers, and no one had to tell me".¹² Although afterwards he would claim that his time as a card-carrying Communist was brief, throughout the rest of the 1930s and into the early 1940s, Chase would become increasingly involved with the cause of the Spanish republic, working closely with refugees from Spain.¹³ At age thirty, he published his first book, *Falange: The Axis Secret Army in the Americas*.

Written in an urgent tone and brimming with bold claims, it is no wonder that *Falange* found an ample readership when it was published in 1943. Chase claimed that his sources were Spanish Republicans and antifascists, but only described one, a man named Esteban, who met him "in a café somewhere between Key Largo and Buenos Aires" and gave him microfilmed documents "taken from a supposedly secret vault the Falange maintained in the Western Hemisphere" (Chase 1943, p. viii).

The book purported to describe the formation of the Falange in Latin America, with chapters on Cuba, the Caribbean, Puerto Rico, Mexico, South America, and the United States. To Chase, Spain's neutrality was no more than a myth, and Franco's Spain was working in complete solidarity with Nazi Germany. Indeed, he asserted that the Spanish Falange was merely a front for the Nazis, and its branches in the Americas—the *Falange Exterior*—were secretly directed by General Wilhelm von Faupel, Hitler's ambassador in Madrid, who had established "a remarkable network, extending from Havana to Buenos Aires, from Lima to Manila . . . capable of concerted espionage, political diversion, arms

smuggling, and anything that any other Fifth Column in history had accomplished" (Chase 1943, p. 31).

Throughout the book, Chase breathlessly described the activities of supposed Falange chapters and individuals in Latin America, arguing that almost every country was full of uniformed *falangistas*, almost all of whom were of Spanish descent, working to advance the Axis cause. "Wherever you turn in Latin America . . . the Falange Exterior hits you between the eyes", he asserted (Chase 1943, p. 207). Based on his own interviews with anonymous contacts from Spain and Latin America, he stated that the Spanish Falange had infiltrated over twenty foreign countries and had a million members outside of Spain—mostly in Latin America—by 1936 (ibid., p. 26). By exposing the activities of the Spanish Falange in the Western hemisphere, Chase hoped that the U.S. would finally stop appeasing Falangist Spain and work to fight against it as forcefully as it fought against Germany (ibid., p. 257).

In his chapter on Mexico, Chase claimed that the Falange in that country had about 50,000 "uniformed, dues-paying members" (ibid., pp. 153, 163). Moreover, he asserted that there were Nazi cells and Gestapo-trained agents all over Mexico. This combined Spanish-German presence meant that Mexico had "more 'front' organizations than any other country in the world" (ibid., pp. 153, 163). The most important and powerful of these—responsible for carrying out the unified agenda of the Falange and the Nazis—was none other than the Unión Nacional Sinarquista.

In the pages of *Falange*, Chase claimed that the UNS had been organized by a Nazi agent named Hellmuth Oskar Schreiter, as well as the brothers José and Alfonso Trueba Olivares, two "powerful Spanish *hacendados* [wealthy landowners]" who were also leaders of the Spanish Falange in Mexico (ibid., pp. 166–67). The organizational structure and goals of the UNS, he asserted, were exactly the same as those of the Nazis, and in fact, Chase argued, the organization was run behind the scenes by Nazi agents, who were subsequently replaced by Falange militants and advisers (who themselves were puppets of the Nazis).

By 1943, Chase stated, the UNS had some 500,000 members across the country, and its major aim was to overthrow the leftist Mexican government of President Lázaro Cárdenas and replace it with a corporate state led by a supreme leader, who could ultimately bring the country back under Spanish domination (and therefore German control, since the Falange, to Chase, was merely a front for the Nazis). The movement aimed to win over both *hacendados* and landless peons—the former by promising war on Cárdenas's plan for land redistribution; the latter through "[m]ysticism, violence, marches, military demonstrations—the cheapest sort of circus" (ibid., p. 170).

Beyond the destruction of the current Mexican government and reversion to Spanish rule, Chase argued, the Sinarquistas also had grand designs for the lands formerly occupied by Mexico. Indeed, the UNS aimed to create "a new Spanish domain—El Gran Imperio Sinarquista—with a brand new capital city, "Sinarcopolis", built in what are now the plains of Texas" (ibid., p. 170). This seemingly grandiose dream might actually come to fruition, Chase argued, because the Sinarquistas had been receiving military training from "Falange specialists" who had taught them for the past six years; furthermore, the UNS was well armed, thanks to shipments of "sub-machine guns, rifles, and other arms kindly supplied by the Nazis via Spanish boats" (ibid., p. 171).

As evidence for future Sinarquista violence and potential invasion of the United States, Chase pointed out that the UNS had already begun staging operations all over the north of Mexico: after Mexico entered the war in 1942, "Sinarquist storm troops", as he called them (echoing the term used for the paramilitary wing of the Nazi party), had attacked a number of northern villages with the battle cry "Death to compulsory military service and Cardenas" (ibid., p. 172). Even more worrisome to Chase, in 1941 the UNS had established its colony in Baja California, where they had created "a state within a state" into which they allowed "German and Japanese submarines for smuggled shipments of valuable Mexican mercury" (ibid., p. 173). As a result, Chase surmised, the UNS was nearly ready to take over the north of Mexico and expand from there into the Southwest United States.

Even more alarming to Chase was the fact that the Sinarquista movement had “established itself like a cancer” in communities of Mexican immigrants across the United States. There as in Mexico, he claimed it was aided by German immigrant groups, and he asserted that U.S.-based Italian fascist organizations were working with the American Sinarquista chapters as well. According to Chase, the UNS in the United States were already “producing bloodshed and disorder” by “inciting loyal Mexican-Americans to treason”. He noted that the organization was particularly well established in Los Angeles, where it was “directly responsible for a crime wave which broke out among unemployed Mexican youths in 1942”, and had even led to “at least one California murder case” (ibid., pp. 173–74).

Even worse, Chase claimed, the Sinarquistas in the United States were actively fomenting Mexican immigrant opposition to the war effort, as well as their support for Spanish fascism. To Chase, the Unión Nacional Sinarquista represented an urgent threat, perhaps even more so than all the rest of the Falange outposts that he described in the rest of his book, for it had helped to establish “on the borders of the United States of America one of the most dangerous Axis centers in the entire world” (ibid., p. 150).

5. Betty Kirk and the Fifth-Column Threat

While Allan Chase’s sensationalist *Falange* helped draw Americans’ attention to the potential dangers of Axis activities in Mexico, I have found no evidence indicating that Chase himself had ever lived or traveled in the region before publishing his book. This was certainly not the case for Betty Kirk, an accomplished and astute foreign correspondent who spent six years living and working in Mexico City (ca. 1936–1942). Born in 1904 to a middle-class family, Kirk moved from Kentucky to Oklahoma as a child and graduated from the University of Oklahoma in 1928—a rarity for a woman at the time—after studying English and journalism. She then became a reporter in Oklahoma City, eventually moving to New York City, where she began contributing to *Cosmopolitan* magazine. She quickly rose to prominence as a correspondent, eventually writing for *Life*, *Variety*, the *Chicago Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *London Times*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Vanity Fair*, and other newspapers and magazines.¹⁴

According to family members, Kirk was a sophisticated and intelligent person, with a deep interest in international and national politics. At some point in her professional career she met Josephus Daniels, a newspaper publisher and subsequently, from 1933 to 1941, the United States ambassador to Mexico under President Franklin Roosevelt. Indeed, according to family members, it may have been her correspondence with Daniels that convinced Kirk to move to Mexico in 1936.¹⁵

Although she had initially planned to make a short visit, Kirk would ultimately stay in Mexico for six years (Maxwell 1943, p. 9). There, she developed a wide network of contacts and associates, including many high-ranking figures in the Cárdenas administration. She would also become one of the founders of the Foreign Correspondents Association in Mexico.¹⁶ Throughout her residence, she continued to file articles for the print media outlets in the United States and England, many of which warned of fascist threats to Mexico, and especially of the danger that the Unión Nacional Sinarquista presented (See, for example, Kirk 1939, 1941a, p. 7; 1941b, 1941c, p. 7; 1943, p. 329). In 1942, she published her book about the country, *Covering the Mexican Front: The Battle of Europe vs. America*.

In the book, Kirk asserted her belief that Mexico was a centrally important country, for it represented “the political barometer of the twentieth century”. Having emerged from a massive social revolution in 1910–1920, the country was now vulnerable to the European inventions of fascism and Communism (Maxwell 1943, p. 9). If Mexico should veer too closely to one side or another, this would invite disaster not only for Mexico, but for the United States as well. To Kirk, Lázaro Cárdenas and his government represented a third path—a Mexican Socialism—which offered a path forward for the rest of the world, away from European ideologies and towards a truly American one.

This Mexico that Kirk described—a country precariously balanced between two opposing foreign ideologies—was in imminent peril of teetering irrevocably towards European

fascism. Like Chase, Kirk strongly believed that Mexico had been infiltrated by Nazi and Falange agents, and that the Unión Nacional Sinarquista was a front group with the aim—and the potential power—to overthrow Mexico and do grave, if not fatal harm to the United States. As she put in *Covering the Mexican Front*, “Mexico is the Achilles’ Heel of the United States; any enemy nation which could control her, through either military or political occupation, could have won a major battle” (Kirk 1942, pp. xvii–xviii). While her book covered many other topics than just the Sinarquistas, she did devote significant attention to them throughout the book, in particular in a section entitled “The Sinarquistas: Mexico’s New Conquistadors” in Chapter VII, “Europe versus America”.

Perhaps because Kirk lived in Mexico and had a rich network of contacts there, she developed a somewhat fuller profile of the UNS than had Allan Chase. Most notably, she had a firmer (albeit incomplete) grasp of the organization’s Mexican and religious roots, and did not present it as a mere front group organized and directed exclusively by Axis agents. In Kirk’s telling, the UNS rank-and-file comprised peasant Catholic “ruffians, looters, and assassins” some five hundred thousand strong, that aimed to wrest control of the Mexican Catholic Church from more liberal and modern Catholics such as Archbishop Luis María Martínez. The Mexican leaders of the organization were “young, cultured, and intelligent. In their burning eyes gleams the fanaticism of reformers and martyrs” (ibid., p. 317). And the “force” behind the UNS were the “old hacendados, the big industrialists, the reactionaries, and the allied clergy who have promoted and spread fascism over the face of the earth” (ibid., pp. 323–24).

Like Chase, Kirk believed the Sinarquistas to be highly capable of violence, citing as evidence a clash in July 1941 between UNS members and village police in Michoacán (ibid., pp. 319–20). She feared that it would only be a short time before they would “march over the face of Mexico” (ibid., p. 323).

In addition to being inherently violent and authoritarian, the Sinarquistas, in Kirk’s telling, had welcomed both Nazi and Falange infiltration of Mexico (ibid., pp. 134–35). And she was certain that this infiltration had already happened: she reported that both the Nazis and the Falange were operating openly in the country, with secret agents from both Germany and Spain helping to facilitate an Axis takeover of Mexico (ibid., p. 285). Kirk also claimed that the Japanese were there as well, with some six thousand Japanese residents forming a Fifth Column of their own that was supposedly called the “Saka de Ly” movement, and was said to be collaborating with the other Axis representatives (ibid., pp. 289, 291).

The Sinarquistas, according to Kirk, were collaborating with all of these Fifth Column groups. Kirk also reiterated the common charge (also echoed in Chase’s book) that the Sinarquistas had been founded by Helmuth Schreiter, the language professor in Guanajuato, “who used and is using the young Mexican fanatics merely as a front behind which Hitler can operate in Mexico!” (ibid., p. 325). Moreover, it was also receiving support from the Saka de Ly movement, as well as from Spain. While Kirk viewed the UNS as more than mere puppets of the Falange, as Chase had charged, its interconnections with Axis powers in Mexico meant that it was a supremely dangerous Mexican group:

“The Sinarquista movement is rising like a flood which may some day engulf Mexico in bloody civil war. For in the Sinarquistas the whole appalling picture of the Fifth Column—of Falangistas, Japanese, and local Quislings, all directed by the Nazis—comes into focus” (ibid., p. 326).

Like Chase, Kirk was also gravely concerned about Sinarquistas in the United States. She discussed them briefly in *Covering the Mexican Front*, in which she stated that there were already three or four thousand UNS members there, and that they were actively opposing the war effort and serving as a “Fifth Column planted within our borders” (ibid., p. 318). In subsequent article on the Sinarquistas, “The Black Circle of Sinarquismo”, written for *Collier’s* in 1943 but seemingly unpublished, she was even more apocalyptic in her assessment of the movement’s potential impact on the United States, arguing that “it has infiltrated into every Spanish speaking community in the southwest and admittedly

reached as far north as Indiana Harbor, Indiana. Contributions even come from New York and Chicago and its defenders are found as far north as Boston”.

Because of its its supposed alliance with dangerous foreigners already present in Mexico and its presence among migrant communities north of the border, the movement represented to Kirk a grave danger to the United States, as well as to the world. “Sinarquismo”, Kirk exclaimed, “must be treated in the full light of day for what it is—a black circle of Fascism seeking to strangle democracy on three continents”.¹⁷

6. Assessing the Fifth-Column Narrative about the UNS

As a result of the writings of Chase, Kirk, and many other journalists who took a similar approach, U.S. readers received the frightening impression that the Unión Nacional Sinarquista was nothing less—and little more—than a Fifth Column movement directed by Axis forces, and that the Mexicans and Mexican immigrants who joined the UNS were being manipulated by these foreign forces into harming the United States. To some extent, this impression—at least about the UNS—still survives to this day, and prevents scholars from fully understanding both the deep religious and historical roots of the Sinarquista movement, and the continuous appeal to conservative Catholics of its integralist and nationalist vision.

Given the context of the media and intelligence landscapes during the war years, then, it is clear that the narratives put forth by Chase and Kirk were largely products of the Fifth Column panic endemic within U.S. media during the war years. Both of them—as well as many other journalists at the time—described the Unión Nacional Sinarquista as primarily a front organization for the enemy. While that “enemy” might be German Nazis, the Spanish Falange, the Japanese “Saka de Ly” movement, or Italian fascists, it was never wholly Mexican. Rather, these narratives emphasized—and exaggerated—the organization’s international connections and influence, and simultaneously downplayed the possibility that the organization might have arisen as the result of events and actors within Mexico.

Today, the scholarship on the Sinarquistas largely concurs that there is no evidence that the UNS had any connections to the German Nazis or to the Spanish Falange beyond the often-repeated charge that the organization was founded by Helmuth Schreiter. While Schreiter was a real person and did have connections to several of the founders of the UNS, he did not direct the organization. And while there were certainly Nazi and Falange secret agents working in Mexico during the war years, they largely worked to transmit intelligence about resources and military operations within Mexico.¹⁸ Neither I nor any other scholars researching the UNS have found conclusive proof that the organization had any direct connections to Nazi Germany or its government, or to the Falange or the Spanish government.

Both writers also confidently predicted acts of violence and subversion that never came to pass. It is certainly true that the Sinarquistas participated in violence, but this was generally a result of clashes with federal troops or the police, or relatively small battles with *agraristas* (supporters of the government’s land distribution policy).¹⁹ In other words, Sinarquista violence was motivated by local and regional concerns, not by the larger goal of overthrowing the United States. Moreover, this violence was too localized to represent any real threat to national stability. Indeed, Chase’s claims about violence were so overblown that they prompted Alfonso Junco, a Mexican conservative, to write mockingly in *America Magazine*:

“We have not seen anything of this “war”, not even smelled its powder-smoke. Evidently, with all this reported smuggling of firearms going on, our government agents must be dreaming, with their heads in the clouds . . . Only the eagle-eyed Chase is on the job, while the guardians of democracy are either careless or asleep” (Junco 1943, p. 292).

While Junco was ideologically aligned with the Sinarquistas and therefore likely to be biased towards them, in this case, he was right to point out that the violence predicted by Chase simply did not materialize. Other claims of made by Chase, Kirk, and many other journalists in the U.S. press are relatively easily disproven. The UNS and its leaders had neither the will or the ability to launch a military takeover of the U.S. Southwest, as Chase had stated, and “El Gran Imperio Sinarquista”—the name he claimed that they would call this new territory—is not a term that appears anywhere else in primary or secondary sources about the UNS. Furthermore, “Sinarcopolis”, the supposed capital of the new empire, was a term that the UNS applied to the city of León, Guanajuato, but never to a planned U.S.-based community, as Chase had claimed.

Chase’s concerns about Sinarquista colonies in northern Mexico were also unfounded: UNS communities were simply too small and poor to represent a security threat to either Mexico or the United States: Maria Auxiliadora, the UNS colony in Baja California, never attracted a large enough population to become self-sufficient, and ultimately collapsed after the UNS failed to raise sufficient funds to keep it going.

Like many members of the media in Latin America, both Chase and Kirk appeared to have relied heavily on intelligence reports that were erroneous or at least deeply flawed. This was certainly true of Chase, who cited no sources (apart from his contact “Esteban”), and who most likely relied on an informant who shared FBI reports. Indeed, a later scholar has commented that many of Chase’s theses in *Falange* “came from inflated reports that the Spanish Republican exile shared with the FBI and from the investigations themselves, also inflated, that the FBI received daily from all its agents scattered around from the Rio Grande to Patagonia” (Cabrera 2021, p. 49).

For her part, Kirk—who lived and worked in Mexico for six years—certainly conducted many more interviews with Mexican subjects. Still, she did not interview any of the founders or members of the UNS. Rather, her conclusions about the organization seemed also to have relied largely on interviews with members of the Cárdenas administration, as well as on the unfounded intelligence reports also used by Chase. For example, when she noted that there were “14,763 agents of the SIM and the Falange” operating in the Western Hemisphere, she was citing the same number as Allan Chase did (Kirk 1942, p. 285).

Beyond relying on biased, exaggerated, or simply incorrect sources, neither Chase nor Kirk delved particularly deeply into Mexican history. Again, Chase was the worse offender in this regard, framing the UNS as a wholly externally run organization that had somehow managed to gain control of the minds of Mexico’s peasant class. Kirk, by contrast, was well aware of the history of the Church-state conflict in Mexico, and incorporated that history into her analysis.²⁰ Still, to both writers, the Sinarquista rank-and-file themselves were either duplicitous foreign stooges or deluded peasants. The possibility that this was a true religious movement, in a country where Catholics had actually experienced persecution from the state (especially in Veracruz and Tabasco) was not considered.

Yet, this history of church-state violence, as I and other scholars have argued, is most essential for understanding the origins and development of the Sinarquista movement.²¹ Indeed, the UNS was a Mexican organization whose historical roots lay in the long history of anticlericalism and Church-state conflict in Mexico (See Young 2020, pp. 234–56). As I and others have written, its roots can be found in the battle between Church and state that culminated in Mexico’s Cristero War (1926–1929) and Segunda Cristiada (1934–1940). After Catholic partisans realized that they would not be able to overthrow the Mexican state by means of violence, they turned to other forms of resistance. The UNS arose as a purportedly peaceful organization whose goals were to install 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.²²

It is for this reason that the organization’s goals were not to implement a Nazi or Falange state in Mexico, nor to take over the United States on behalf of Axis powers. Instead, the UNS was primarily a Mexico-centered organization whose aims were to

provide an alternative to the Mexican revolutionary government, to resist the reforms of the Cárdenas government, to advance its Hispanist and conservative vision, and to resist what its leaders perceived to be the imminent threat of a communist takeover in Mexico (See [Álvarez 1992](#), vol. 1, p. 350). It was clearly influenced by authoritarian and fascist movements at the time, but its principal focus was not on the control of territory or the military takeover of Mexico or its neighbors.

Although the Sinarquista movement would fragment by the mid-1940s, with conflicts between its leaders leading to a massive decline in membership, it would survive as a small but significant conservative religious organization in Mexico, forming one base for Mexican right-wing Catholics interested in resisting the liberalizing tendencies of some Catholic leaders in the decades leading up to and beyond the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, the organization was—and still is—a home for Catholic integralists (who believe in the integration of Church and state) who repudiate the supposed depredations of modernity and yearn for a time when Catholic monarchs controlled Mexico and other parts of the world.²³

In summary, neither Chase nor Kirk presented a full or accurate portrait of the Unión Nacional Sinarquista. Instead, they contributed to the dominant impression in the media that the organization was nothing more than a Fifth Column threat to the United States. While other journalists—in particular the Catholic media—presented a far more favorable assessment of the UNS, their views were not widely distributed in the mainstream newspapers across the United States. Their fearmongering over the UNS frustrated writers like Junco, who called Chase's book "a giant trash can of wild assertions" and lamented that it would nevertheless "enjoy a far greater circulation" than Junco's own statement ([Junco 1943](#)). And indeed, he was right. While a few balanced and investigative (yet critical) journalistic pieces about the UNS appeared in the U.S. media, they were rare, appeared only at the end of the war, after the hysteria of the Fifth Column panic had died down.²⁴

7. Conclusions/Contributions

After writing their respective books, both Allan Chase and Betty Kirk would not publish anything else about Mexico or the Sinarquistas. Coverage of the organization by other journalists would likewise decline precipitously.²⁵ In a twist of fate that demonstrates how quickly the United States pivoted from hysteria over the Axis to panic over the Soviets, Allan Chase would afterwards find himself blacklisted by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s as a consequence of his membership in the Communist Party and his work for the Spanish Republic, as well as—he later stated—his authorship of *Falange*. After spending nearly 20 years on the blacklist, he became a science writer and independent scholar, publishing widely reviewed books such as *The Biological Imperatives: Health, Politics, and Human Survival*, and *The Legacy of Malthus*, among others.²⁶

Betty Kirk, after briefly leaving Mexico to marry and live in Philadelphia, eventually divorced and moved back to Mexico City in 1950. There, she continued to work on a book called *Finding a Faith*, which was ultimately never published, as well as various other writing projects. Her family members recalled that she stated she feared mysterious "enemies" when she lived in Mexico City—perhaps the Sinarquistas—but she nevertheless remained there until her death in 1984.²⁷

In highlighting and critiquing the work of Allan Chase and Betty Kirk—two people who lived remarkable lives and wrote books that caught the attention of many—I do not intend to malign their reputations as journalists. Rather, I hope to have demonstrated that their narratives offer a window into the practices and rhetoric of the many U.S. journalists reporting on the Unión Nacional Sinarquista—and more broadly, on purported Fifth Column threats in Mexico and Latin America—during World War II. The fact is that the work of Chase, Kirk, and other reporters who wrote about the Sinarquistas must be understood not as a reliable source base that can tell us about the nature of this Mexican Catholic organization. Rather, such work must be treated as a product of the time in which it was published—a time in which journalists working in and on Latin America were swept

up in a panic over national security and the fear of mysterious and seditious Fifth Column movements within the United States and throughout the Western hemisphere.

The story of U.S. media coverage of the UNS offers several lessons for historians. First, historians relying on media sources and intelligence documents from the World War II period must balance these sources with archival material and documents produced by the objects of study themselves. In the case of the UNS, this practice is necessary in order to accurately assess the nature of an organization which was neither an Axis-directed organization nor a Fifth Column movement, but was rather a Catholic nationalist movement with deep roots in Mexico's ongoing Church-state conflict. And while this may seem like a rather obvious point, it is unfortunately quite common to see casual references to the Unión Nacional Sinarquista as a Nazi or Axis-directed groups, even in recent publications.²⁸

Finally, this article may offer a cautionary tale for contemporary journalists, who might find the story of the Sinarquistas useful as they consider how to report on political and social movements during times of war. While journalistic practices have become more standardized since the 1940s, it is still quite easy to think of moments in recent U.S. history when journalists have been swept up in a panic about national security that has impeded their dispassionate assessment of the facts; most recently, in the years after 11 September 2001, both the media and U.S. intelligence agencies contributed to the widespread criminalization of Muslim immigrants to the United States, casting them all as potential terrorists, without developing a sophisticated understanding of their religious identities and goals.

In 2001 as during World War II, journalists relied on sources that purported to offer raw intelligence, but were instead deeply flawed. While it is too much of a stretch to make direct connections between the story of the Sinarquistas and more recent media panics over national security, it is certainly safe to say that the story of the Sinarquista Fifth Column is a reminder that contemporary journalists would do well to be as objective and as critical as possible—and to step away from the maelstrom of moral panic—when writing about religious groups in a time of national security fears.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: The author is grateful to the two anonymous reviewers of this article, to Natalie Khazaal for her invitation to contribute to this Special Issue.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ del Castillo (2008). For more on Mexican public opinion during World War II, see Ortiz Garza (2007), Jones (2014); Rankin (2009).
- ² One model for this article is Britton (Britton 1978–1979). Britton analyzes the journalistic work of Carleton Beals, Earnest Gruening, and Frank Tannenbaum, finding that the three leftist writers were sympathetic to the Mexican Revolution and criticized the position of the U.S. State Department, which sought to defend American property rights in the country. Their published positions “became an important factor in United States-Mexican relations”, and gained broad acceptance among the American public and in scholarship on Mexico (pp. 124, 136).
- ³ On espionage and subversives in Latin America during the war years, see Bratzel and Rout (1986); Hilton (1981); Cedillo (2010); Schoonover (2008); McGaha (2009).
- ⁴ According to Friedman, no record of a German plot to invade America from Latin America has ever been found. He notes that “Nazi Germany’s attitude toward Latin America can . . . be summed up as largely one of neglect”. Additionally, when Hitler did “make a rare reference to Latin America . . . it was merely to dismiss the region as the epitome of racial mixing” (Friedman 2003, p. 46).
- ⁵ For more on American journalists in Mexico prior to the 1940s, see Britton (1978–1979); Beals (1923); Britton (1995); Velasco (1999); O’Neill (2016).
- ⁶ For more on how and why the UNS came to be seen as a Fifth Column threat, see Ellstrand, “Reclaiming *la Patria*”, Chapter Four. Ellstrand demonstrates that opinions held by the media were also held by members of the government; the United States Office of the Coordinator of Information, for example, “surveilled the movement in Mexico . . . as well as in the United States” and

concluded that the UNS was a threat to both countries and a “well-developed fascist movement controlled by the Axis and ready for social and military activities” (Ellstrand 2022, p. 170).

For a representative sample of such articles, see (New York Times 1943; Wright 1941, p. 2; The Bismarck Tribune 1941); I am building here upon research conducted in April 2022 for an article entitled “Fascists, Nazis, or Something Else?: Mexico’s Unión Nacional Sinarquista in the US Media, 1937–1945,” (Young 2022). I conducted a 2021 search on newspapers.com (the most comprehensive online database of digitized newspaper articles in the United States) for the terms “sinarquista”, “sinarquist”, and “sinarchista”. As I stated in that article, my search “returned 2105 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”. (Young 2022, p. 239, fn 39).

Letter from Allan Chase to Jerry (no last name visible) (Chase 1977, 16 September). Allan Chase Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Box 1.

Thomás (2011, p. 48). Katia Figueredo Cabrera noted that Chase’s book “became the main text of anti-Franco propaganda [in Europe], indicating that it found an audience outside the United States, as well. Cabrera (2021, p. 49). See also (Mowrer 1944b, 2C; 1944a, p. 15; Booth 1944, p. A-25).

Eulau (1948). Eulau called Kirk’s book “the best account of Modern Mexico”, p. 112; The columnist Elsa Maxwell wrote about Kirk’s book tour, in which she stopped at the home of former Mexican Ambassador Josephus Daniels (Maxwell 1943, p. 9). *Covering the Mexican Front* was cited by multiple other contemporaneous journalists and scholars, and continues to be cited by scholars today; a rough idea of these citations can be found through a Google Scholar search, which reveals 95 citations from a wide range of publications (Available: https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C47&q=%22b+kirk%22+%22covering+the+mexican+front%22&btnG=, accessed on 29 December 2022).

Letter from Allan Chase to Jerry (no last name visible), 16 September 1977. Allan Chase Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Box 1.

As late as 1945, he served as the secretary of the America Committee for Spanish Freedom. Executive Sessions of “Testimony of Allan Chase”, Thursday, 2 July 1953, U.S. Senate, Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, Washington, D.C. Available: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-107SPRT83870/html/CPRT-107SPRT83870.htm> (accessed on 29 December 2022).

“... by the time I realized what I had gotten into, I picked up my hat and feet and ran” Testimony of Allan Chase”, Thursday, 2 July 1953, U.S. Senate, Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations, Washington, D.C. Available: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-107SPRT83870/html/CPRT-107SPRT83870.htm> (accessed on 29 December 2022).

“Biographical Note”, Finding Aid, Betty Kirk Collection, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Western History Collection. Available: <https://lib.ou.edu/sites/default/files/KirkBetty.pdf> (accessed on 29 December 2022).

Author interview with Phillip Kirk (nephew of Betty Kirk) (Young 2021, March 11).

“Biographical Note,” Finding Aid, Betty Kirk Collection, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Western History Collection. Available: <https://lib.ou.edu/sites/default/files/KirkBetty.pdf> (accessed on 29 December 2022).

Kirk (n.d., probably 1943), Betty Kirk Collection, University of Oklahoma Libraries, Western History Collection, Box 3, Folder 9.

Paz (1997, p. 149). Nazis also launched propaganda campaigns in Mexico to generate support for Germany (Rankin 2009, p. 21).

On Sinarquista violence, see García (2020); as well as Maldonado (2023).

Kirk (1942, chp. V, “The Church *versus* Religion, pp. 124–39). In this chapter, Kirk asserted that “a powerful and ruthless faction in the Mexican clergy continues to work against the government and the Archbishop and for Hitler and Franco. This hidden struggle for power is now centered in the peasant Sinarquistas, whom both groups are struggling to control”, p. 138.

Major studies of the Sinarquistas include Rubén and Guillermo (1992); Villegas (2020); Meyer (1975, 2003); Ortoll (1984); Álvarez (1992). In English, see Dormady (2011, chp. 4); Hernández (1999); Newcomer (2004); and Velázquez (2011). For further information on the UNS in the United States, see Young (2018); Ellstrand (2022); Lozano (1999); Smith (2014). Both Smith and Ellstrand also explore the portrayal of the Sinarquistas in US media. In general, most of these scholars—in particular Meyer, Serrano Álvarez, Hernández, Dormady, and Ellstrand—concur that the Sinarquistas were not fascist, nor were they receiving directives from the Spanish Falange, the Nazis, or other Axis powers, although their views did align with fascist ideology, and their leaders occasionally expressed admiration for Axis leaders as well as Franco.

For a further explanation of Catholic activism and its relationship to the Catholic Church in Mexico, see Andes (2012).

For a further discussion of the UNS, the far right, and integralism in Mexico, see Campos Lopez et al. (2020). For more on the evolution of the Mexican Catholic right in the latter half of the twentieth century, see Ávila (2022).

Two examples of such measured and thorough journalism are Skillin (1944) and Shedd (1945).

A December 2022 search on Newspapers.com reveals only 88 articles about the UNS from the period between 1946 and 2022.

- ²⁶ Letter from Allan Chase to Jerry (no last name visible) (Chase 1977, 16 September). Allan Chase Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Box 1.
- ²⁷ Author interview with Phillip Kirk (nephew of Betty Kirk) (Young 2021, March 11).
- ²⁸ This is true even in books that are otherwise quite well researched and written, such as McConahay's *The Tango War*: "Militants of the rightist National Union of Synarchists, a huge Catholic peasant movement against Cárdenas reforms [sic] such as secular education, maintained connections to the Nazis and the Japanese. They marched with the same strong-arm salute". (McConahay 2018, p. 172). And Monica Rankin states that the Sinarquistas "formed alliances with local Falange representatives [and] the group's policies dovetailed with Nazi rhetoric". She also cites FBI reports that concluded that the Sinarquista movement "posed a threat to hemispheric security". (Rankin 2009, p. 35).

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