

For Greater Glory and the falsification of Mexican history

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Directed by Dean Wright, written by Michael Love

The film *For Greater Glory* presents a distorted version of the Cristero [Christ's Army] War (1926-1929), a civil war between peasant guerrillas defending the Catholic Church and the Mexican state. It is currently being shown in theaters across the US.

The film, directed by Dean Wright, hijacks a complex social conflict and turns it into a David and Goliath story of good guys versus bad. In so doing, it whitewashes the historically reactionary role of the Catholic Church in Mexico. One cannot imagine how such an approach would convince or educate any viewer, including those not at all familiar with the history of this conflict.

For Greater Glory is the story of General Enrique Gorostieta (Andy García,) the top Cristero commander. Gorostieta is hired by the National League for the Defense of Religious Freedom [*Liga nacional para la defensa de la libertad religiosa*—LNDLR]. Leaders of that organization are portrayed coordinating a response to an anti-Catholic law passed in June 1926 with petitions, protests, an economic boycott and, ultimately, by organizing the Cristero rebellion, misrepresented as simply a popular and spontaneous response to government persecution of Catholics.

In addition to limiting the church's property rights, the 1926 legislation sponsored and spearheaded by President Plutarco Elías Calles, restricted religious activity, banned political involvement by church officials and prohibited foreign priests from working in Mexico.

The film portrays General Gorostieta as a wealthy factory owner, devoted to his wife and daughters, but who does not share his wife's deep Catholic faith. He accepts the commission offered by the LNDLR in part because it is a lucrative post, in part because of his appetite for adventure and also out of love for his wife. Tulita (Eva Longoria) is a faithful Catholic. She proudly agrees to her husband's appointment and hopes that he will become more pious as a result of the experience.

Interacting with García—whose character evolves from studied agnosticism to religiosity—are Victoriano Ramirez (Oscar Isaac), a 'sure shot' and undisciplined commander; Father Vega (Santiago Carrera), beset by guilt for having torched a rail car with people inside; the League leaders in Mexico City; President Calles (Ruben Blades); and the US ambassador to Mexico, Dwight Morrow (skillfully portrayed by Bruce Greenwood).

An aging Peter O'Toole plays Father Christopher, a foreign priest whose execution motivates teenager José Luis Sanchez del Río (Mauricio Kury) to join the Cristeros. Luis and General Gorostieta become like father and son.

For Greater Glory has scenes of violence common to summer action films. The camera follows the Cristero forces through bloody engagements, entering villages destroyed by federal forces and avenging executed church officials. The heroes mostly emerge unscathed while their bullets hardly ever miss.

In the background are negotiations between Calles and Ambassador Morrow over the rights of US oil companies in Mexico. Morrow brokers the agreement between the Catholic Church, the Vatican and Calles that officially ends the Cristero War in 1929.

The initial scenes of tranquil city life seem unreal, considering that Mexico was in the third decade of revolution and civil war. Even as the action shifts from the city to the field of battle, the viewer learns nothing of the conditions of life of the peasant and Indian soldiers who did the actual fighting and dying.

As befits a one-dimensional propaganda film, the performances are mostly flat and cartoonish; from García as the cigar-chomping commander, to Catalina Sandino, playing a courageous, good-looking ammunitions smuggler, to Kury as the boy who joyfully chooses to become a martyr for Catholicism.

Latin American and US actors came together for this movie, filmed in Mexico. It is the directorial debut of Dean Wright, visual effects producer on the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and visual effects supervisor for *Chronicles of Narnia*. Pablo Barroso, *For Greater Glory's* producer, founded a Mexican production company that—according to the film's production notes—was “created as part of a ministry that produces films to convey messages of faith and family values.”

The Catholic Church greeted the release of *For Greater Glory* enthusiastically. In Los Angeles, Archbishop José Gomez co-hosted a Hollywood premier at the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. In attendance was what one publication called “a who's who” of entertainment and Catholic leaders.

Gomez and other US bishops promote the message that the movie is about the persecution of Catholics. It carries a “timely message” about religious liberty, according to Gomez. It is said that the audience erupted with spontaneous chants of ‘¡Viva Cristo Rey!’ [Long Live Christ the King!] at the end of the L.A. screening.

The movie's Mexican opening coincided with Pope Benedict XVI's visit in April. Catholic schools took their students, nuns and priests to see it, and urged everyone else to follow suit.

It is ironic that a movie that purports to represent a popular struggle in defense of religion pointedly ignores the main protagonists: the peasants themselves, both as individuals and in their collective action. Throughout the movie, neither the peasant forces, nor the government soldiers that are sent against them are ever depicted as real human beings.

This movie's celebration of faith and charisma—reduced to the cry ‘Long Live Christ the King!’—is a crude effort to obscure the underlying class conflicts that gave rise to the real *Cristeros*, a social movement that is not widely understood.

In the 1920s, despite the promises and the reforms that came out of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917, conditions had barely changed in rural México; the mostly Indian peasantry and agricultural workers were locked in a day-in and day-out struggle against the landlords.

In East Los Angeles, two elderly witnesses of the Cristero War offered

the WSWs a few recollections.

Matiana, 96, spent her childhood in Jalpa, a city in Southern Jalisco, located in the center of the Cristero rebellion.

“I was a child during the Cristero war. People lived in fear of Cristero soldiers riding into town because of the looting. A couple times Cristeros rode their horses into the church and robbed whatever they could,” said Matiana.

Conditions of life were very difficult. “My father was not as Indian in appearance [*aindiado*],” she continued, “as most of the people in Jalpa were. He could read and write and made his living as a peddler. Even though by standards of the time we were richer than others we were still very poor, living mostly on beans and tortillas in a two-room adobe home with dirt floors, with no running water or electricity. My mother died when I was eight years old. Since I was the only girl I had to cook and clean for my father and my brothers.”

In 1926 Nicolás, now 103, was a 17 year-old farmer. He lived in Durango:

“Priests would travel from place to place seeking refuge. They would hide in caves, where people that needed baptisms would seek them out. Out of sympathy and pity people helped them hide as they moved north.

“I was a farmer,” he went on, “and with my family tended corn and other crops. Those were hard times. At times there was no food. We would try to add to our diet by hunting deer and rabbits in the hills, and looking for wild honey. There were no schools so I never learned how to read and write.”

Victorious in the Mexican Revolution, the Constitutionalist Army, led by Venustiano Carranza, Álvaro Obregón and Calles, had defeated the peasant armies of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. The new regime was incapable of resolving a central issue over which the Revolution had been fought, the redistribution of land.

For that reason, the Cristeros’ demands were both religious and *economic*, reflecting in a distorted fashion the dissatisfaction of oppressed layers with the Revolution, and centered around the defense of Indian communities and the distribution of lands. [1] In 1929, once the conflict was settled with Calles, the Catholic Church, which had no interest in the peasant and Indian demand for land, abandoned the oppressed.

The Mexican church established the LNDLR, together with the Catholic Action Mexican Youth (ACJM), to give organizational form to an alliance with the most conservative layers of Mexican society, and to fight against the policies of the new regime, which it considered “Jacobin.” Later on, in the 1930s, the Vatican designated Mexico, Spain (before Franco) and the USSR as the “terrible triangle” of anti-Catholicism.

The LNDLR claimed that the Cristero movement was neither left nor right, but “came from above.” Leaving aside the mystical nonsense, in fact, the church’s record had been one of consistent support for reaction. The Catholic Church in Mexico had openly and in active alliance with the big landowners formed the Catholic Party as a weapon against the Revolution.

In the 1930s the LNDLR would turn toward fascism and engage in a campaign to terrorize and murder schoolteachers that it considered socialist. One of its members, León Toral, assassinated General Obregón—like Calles, an opponent of the Catholic Church—in 1928.

Meanwhile, the exploitation of the peasant continued. His existence was totally dominated and regulated by landowners. They would determine his wage, his food, his dress and every aspect of his life under penalty of imprisonment, or death.

The slow and erratic pace of land distribution under Carranza, Obregón and Calles confirmed to the peasantry the military government’s timidity in confronting the large and powerful landowners.

Conditions were particularly brutal in those regions most closely integrated into the world market—such as the sisal plantations in Yucatan. One observer described the conditions in that area, to which the Porfirio

Díaz regime (1876-1880 and 1884-1911) had force-marched thousands of Yaqui Indians from northern Mexico to meet the labor demands of the planters:

“Most of these people, prisoners or free, quickly learned the debt system. Men were kept in barracks and marched to work by armed and mounted guards, encouraged by majordomos with whips, marched back, and locked in at night... These places were vast agricultural factories with tens of thousands of acres under cultivation, run along scientific lines, geared for total output.” [2]

Extracting a significant piece of the pie from this brutal exploitation was the Catholic Church. The bishop of Mérida, for instance, rode in a gold-plated carriage, encrusted with jewels, an imitation of the carriage given by the Russian tsar to Pope Leo XIII.

The immense properties of the church constituted an important source of economic stagnation and social instability. Efforts in the 19th century to force the church to rent out its land to others, let alone to surrender ownership, met with fierce opposition.

According to historian Jesús Silva Herzog the peasantry and the working class confronted a “demonic triumvirate:” the great landowners, the military, and the Church. “Three tragic words define Mexican history: haciendas, sacristy and barracks.” [3]

Lacking a revolutionary party and isolated from the workers, the rebellion of Mexican peasants was hobbled by the Catholic Church. Desperate peasant and Indians threw themselves into battle during the Cristero War ideologically imprisoned by Catholic dogma.

Had the Cristero War merely pitted the government of President Calles against the Catholic establishment, it is unlikely that the unprecedented brutality—the mass repression of peasants, the burning and looting of their towns—would have taken place.

Historically, ruling classes reserve this kind of gross brutality to the rebellion of the most oppressed: peasants, workers or slaves. The movie closes with a photograph of peasants hung from telegraph poles into the distance. Over 90,000 people were killed out of a population of 15 million as a result of this war.

[1] Avitia Hernandez, Antonio; *El caudillo sagrado*; 2006; PDF Document; http://www.bibliotecas.tv/avitia/El_Caudillo_Sagrado.pdf; see introduction, pages 3-30

[2] Reed Nelson, *The Caste War of Yucatán*, 1964, Stanford University Press, 232-233

[3] Jesús Silva Herzog, *Breve Historia de la Revolución Mexicana*, 1985, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 30--the book can be found online: [<http://www.carmagsonora.gob.mx/pagina/modules/news/Secundaria%20Bibliografias/Breve%20Historia%20de%20la%20Revol%20Mex...Antec.pdf>]



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