

# Legacies of Resistance: Mobilization Against Organized Crime in Mexico

Comparative Political Studies  
2021, Vol. 54(9) 1565–1596  
© The Author(s) 2021  
Article reuse guidelines:  
[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](http://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)  
DOI: 10.1177/0010414021989761  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/cps](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/cps)



Javier Osorio<sup>1</sup>, Livia Isabella Schubiger<sup>2</sup>,  
and Michael Weintraub<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

What are the legacies of armed resistance? Why do some communities engage in armed mobilization in response to violence, disorder, and insecurity, while others under very similar conditions do not? Focusing on mobilization against organized crime in contemporary Mexico, we argue that historical experiences of armed resistance can have lasting effects on local preferences, networks, and capacities, which can facilitate armed collective action under conditions of rampant insecurity in the long run. Empirically, we study the Cristero rebellion in the early 20th century and grassroots anti-crime mobilization in Mexico during recent years. Using an instrumental variables approach, we show that communities that pushed back against state incursions almost a century earlier were more likely to rise up against organized crime in contemporary times.

## Keywords

historical legacies, organized crime, self-defense forces, Mexico, conflict processes

---

<sup>1</sup>University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA

<sup>2</sup>Duke University, Durham, NC, USA

<sup>3</sup>Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia

## Corresponding Author:

Javier Osorio, University of Arizona, 125 Social Sciences Building, Tucson, 85721-0027, AZ, USA.

Email: [josorio1@arizona.edu](mailto:josorio1@arizona.edu)

## Introduction

In armed conflicts around the globe, ordinary citizens organize civil militias to resist powerful armed actors, often with important and long-term effects (Bateson, 2013; Jentzsch et al., 2015; Schubiger, 2020). The *Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá* in Colombia,<sup>1</sup> the *comités de autodefensa* in Peru, or the Civilian Joint Task Force in Nigeria, among many others, are cases in point. Such forces also play an important role *beyond* civil wars, in the context of pervasive criminal violence. Despite their prevalence, and despite the wide-ranging social, political, and economic effects that they occasion at both the local and national levels, we know little about the conditions under which such mobilization is more likely to occur. Why do some communities engage in armed mobilization in response to violence and predation, while others under very similar conditions do not?

In this article, we argue that communities that have historically been affected by outside threats and successfully fought back, may draw on these experiences even generations later to organize armed self-defense campaigns when facing contemporary threats. If institutional transmission belts persist, past experiences with armed mobilization can help communities overcome barriers to collective action via intra- and inter-generational political socialization, preserved organizational and tactical legacies, and cross-generational social networks of trust. This, we argue, can help explain variation in community resistance in the long run.

Empirically, we study the legacy of one particular armed political movement in 1920s Mexico—the *Cristero* rebellion—in which ordinary citizens took up arms to resist anti-Catholic repression efforts by the Mexican state. We contend that path-dependent processes following the *Cristero* rebellion produced enduring mobilizational legacies that, together with a particular confluence of events in the contemporary period, partially explain variation in communities’ participation in the self-defense (*autodefensa*) movement that emerged against organized crime in Mexico.<sup>2</sup>

Using novel data on the *Cristeros* and contemporary self-defense forces, we find a positive relationship between the pro-Catholic *Cristero* rebellion in the 1920s and contemporary *autodefensa* mobilization. This result holds after controlling for an extensive set of potential confounders, including historical covariates from the 15th, 16th, 19th, and early 20th centuries. Moreover, we rely on an instrumental variable approach that exploits variation in local Catholic bishops’ ideologies preceding the *Cristero* uprising, and also address spatial interdependence. Alternative explanations—specifically, that communities historically engaged in the *Cristero* rebellion simply face more contemporary crime and more drug-trafficking organizations, or that self-defense mobilization is driven by inequality—produce inconsistent results.

This paper contributes to the literatures on vigilante group formation (Bateson, 2013, 2020; Phillips, 2017); historical legacies of conflict (Balcells, 2012; Lupu & Peisakhin, 2017; Rozenas et al., 2017; Weintraub et al., 2015); and the dynamics of order, repression, and criminal violence (Barnes, 2017; Dell, 2015; Kalyvas, 2015; Lessing, 2015; Osorio, 2015; Osorio et al., 2018a, 2018b; Sullivan & Elkus, 2008). We address these contributions in turn. First, we add to an emerging literature on self-defense group formation in response to organized crime, which tends to posit either economic explanations for vigilante appearance (Phillips, 2017) or focus on the ineffectiveness of state institutions in providing justice (Godoy, 2006). Few look to historical legacies to explain contemporary mobilization of self-defense groups (for important exceptions see Bateson, 2013, 2020; Ley & Trejo, 2019; Wolff, 2020).<sup>3</sup> Second, we contribute to the literature on the legacies of important historical events, particularly those involving violence (Bateson, 2020; Daly, 2012; Osorio et al., 2018a; Rozenas et al., 2017; Zhukov & Talibova, 2018). We study a particular kind of historical legacy and show that efforts to shield a religious group from state repression had lasting effects on local communities' propensity to rise up against radically different external threats.<sup>4</sup> This should invite a reflection about what kinds of historical events prime communities to engage in future instances of collective action, a question addressed below. Third, the paper contributes to the literature on the Mexican Drug War (Dell, 2015; Kalyvas, 2015; Osorio, 2015), which has largely neglected the puzzling variation in mobilization against organized crime.<sup>5</sup>

We begin by developing a theoretical argument for explaining how legacies of high-risk resistance can shape future mobilization against disparate threats. The following section describes the Mexican context, particularly the *Cristero* rebellion in the 1920s, the shift toward predation by drug cartels following the Mexican state's crackdown, and finally, the "wave" of *autodefensa* mobilization in the early 2010s. Next, we describe our empirical strategy and the data we use to test the relationship between the *Cristeros* and *autodefensas*. The following section presents results and robustness checks, while the final one concludes with avenues for future research.

## **Violence and Local Order**

While the ideal-typic Weberian state is characterized by the legitimate monopoly of violence, in many contexts state presence is unevenly distributed geographically and state institutions are captured by non-state armed groups (O'Donnell, 1993; Risse & Stollenwerk, 2018). Deals struck between armed actors can provide some measure of predictability, yet the outcome may be violent and economically and socially stifling to local residents.

In such cases, communities may opt to take matters into their own hands (Jentzsch et al., 2015). The militarization of civil society in the form of armed self-defense groups has occurred in countries as different as Sierra Leone (Civil Defense Forces), Iraq (Mahdi Army), Nigeria (Bakassi Boys), Peru (*rondas campesinas*), and South Sudan. While such groups display tremendous diversity in their organization, goals, ideology, and relationship to local and national elites, they are often politically autonomous—at least in their early stages—and yet are able to grow quickly in size and strength.

The type of armed resistance we theorize here is a particular form of collective action: it does not seek to advance a revolutionary political cause, as rebel groups often do, nor is it chiefly directed at achieving economic goals, as is the case for most criminal organizations. It is primarily protective and parochial in nature, seeking to return to a *status quo ex ante*, prior to radical changes in local security conditions, typically in response to external threats. Yet not all communities have the same propensity to challenge powerful actors that undermine local security, whether those actors are state agents, rebel groups, or criminal organizations. We argue that historical processes of armed mobilization alter collective preferences, social networks, and mobilizational resources that shape whether communities opt to organize in response to external predation and threats.

Regardless of history, we assume that communities are more likely to develop shared preferences for resistance where the *status quo* has deteriorated rapidly and such change can be attributed to an external threat. Where predatory actors severely disrupt daily activities, target community members with high levels of violence, and apply rules arbitrarily, we expect local communities to have incentives to rise up. While armed groups often use extortion and protection rackets to harness economic benefits (Moncada, 2018), particularly exploitative armed groups can trigger resentment among ordinary citizens and local elites, especially if local conditions worsen dramatically and rapidly. Where armed groups are extremely violent and rapacious, such that even compliance with imposed rules is not rewarded, we should expect communities to be more willing to rise up.

Contemporary preferences, however, are not exclusively fashioned *de novo*, but are also shaped by the past. We build on the assumption that legacies of violence and collective action shape contemporary perceptions and behaviors in patterned and even inter-generational ways (Bateson, 2013; Daly, 2012; Finkel, 2015; Ley & Trejo, 2019; Lupu & Peisakhin, 2017; Osorio et al., 2018a; Zhukov & Talibova, 2018).

An outside threat to the community provides a rupture in the quotidian practices of its inhabitants (Vargas Castillo, 2019), creating uncertainty that

demands an adaptation of communal practices and suggests the need to confront novel challenges. In determining whether and how to fight back, residents must decide what approach is likely to work and is socially acceptable at the same time. We argue that socially proximate instances of mobilization (e.g., from the same community) are likely to be assigned greater “weight”—even if temporally removed—than temporally proximate instances of mobilization from socially distant locales. Residents are likely to have greater access to discourses about prior mobilization that took place in socially proximate locales when compared to distant places. Moreover, a course of action that was part of a community’s repertoire in the past is more likely to be socially acceptable in the present.

Shared preferences are insufficient to explain how communities overcome hurdles for high-risk collective action. Mobilizing for defense involves dangerous political activities, including clandestine organization and logistical support, even among those who may never formally take up arms. We argue that past experiences likely influence communities’ *ability* to overcome these challenges as well. First, previous armed mobilization can help communities overcome barriers to collective action via inter-generational networks of trust (Tilly, 2005). The shared experience of high-risk mobilization can forge and consolidate strong social relationships loaded with a sense of mutual trust, and this trust can be transmitted from one generation to the next (Dohmen et al., 2011; Ljunge, 2014; Nunn & Wantchekon, 2011). Such networks play important roles in the sharing and protection of information necessary for organized resistance (Finkel, 2015), and help sustain collective memories that facilitate mobilization later on (Villamil, 2020). Social networks also shape collective notions of threat critical for mobilization decisions (Shesterinina, 2016, p. 422). In short, high-risk mobilization has the potential to durably affect local networks, thereby facilitating armed mobilization against future—and distinct—external threats.

Second, armed mobilization requires know-how (Bateson, 2016; Finkel, 2015; Tilly, 2003). Applying force against foes requires tactical and organizational skills such as training in firearms, patrolling, surveillance, and detaining perceived enemies. We expect communities with prior armed activity—through preserved organizational and tactical legacies—to possess skills to help organizing and initiating armed self-defense. Repertoires are “learned cultural creations” that can revive and adapt for multiple purposes (Tilly, 1995, p. 42). Thus, organizational legacies of violence—the know-how for armed resistance, tactical repertoires, and collectively-shared blueprints for mobilization—are more available to communities that successfully mobilized against past threats.

Legacies of resistance do not always reactivate once external threats return. Preserving collective memories requires reliable transmission belts for conveying lessons learned, for example via the persistence of institutions that champion and lionize prior mobilizations (Acharya et al., 2016, p. 37). Songs, rituals, and heroic tales of resistance preserved in community organizations and churches, for example, may provide a robust space for preserving collective identities centered around self-reliance and autonomy over time (High, 2009). Where such transmission belts persist, past experiences with armed mobilization help communities overcome barriers to collective action via inter-generational socialization that preserves the networks and repertoires of contention (McAdam et al., 2001; Tarrow, 1998) described above.

The type and outcome of prior mobilization also matters: communities that successfully mobilized to protect themselves against a *major* and *external* threat in prior periods are more likely to reactivate mobilization should new threats emerge. By contrast, where historical threats were less alarming or where mobilization efforts met defeat, communities should be less likely to emulate the past, and the legacy of past mobilization efforts reduced.

In sum, we argue that communities that were historically targeted by a perceived outsider, and that have experience fighting back, are more likely to organize armed self-defense campaigns when facing contemporary threats. We expect this to hold even if current threats differ radically from those encountered in the past. If institutional transmission belts persist, past experiences with armed mobilization can help communities overcome collective action barriers via intra- and inter-generational political socialization, preserved organizational and tactical legacies, and cross-generational social networks of trust.

We evaluate the core empirical implication of our theory in Mexico, and argue that ordinary citizens' mobilization into the *Cristero* rebellion in the 1920s facilitated vigilante mobilization against organized crime nearly 100 years later. The *Cristero* rebellion was an uprising of pro-Catholic communities against Mexican authorities, directed against repressive government actions to curb the influence of the Catholic Church. The peaceful resistance of pro-Catholic citizens against anti-clerical measures enshrined in the 1917 Constitution and subsequent anti-Catholic laws escalated to armed rebellion in the mid-to-late 1920s. The legacies of this uprising, we argue, made it easier for citizens to overcome collective action problems in the name of self-protection when criminal violence spiked nearly a century later, a consequence of state-led crackdowns against DTOs.

It is important to underscore that we do not directly test the mechanisms connecting the *Cristero* rebellion to the *autodefensas* in the empirical section.

We do, however, rule out prominent alternatives, leaving our mechanisms as strong potential contenders to explain the positive relationship between *Cristeros* and self-defense mobilization that our results show. Rather than arguing against the possibility that other armed movements might have produced similar legacies, we focus on the *Cristero* rebellion because of its particular substantive and theoretically salient characteristics, outlined below. Moreover, while empirically identifying the causal effects of other armed movements is outside the scope of our paper, in the conclusion we suggest avenues for future research.

## The Cristero Rebellion

During the 19th century, successive Liberal governments in Mexico undertook efforts to regulate church and state relationships, intended to undermine the power of the Catholic Church (Espinosa, 2003). The violence of the 1910 revolution paused these endeavors for more than a decade. Having coalesced under the National Revolutionary Party (PNR in Spanish), victorious post-revolutionary leaders resumed these efforts in a more combative manner following the revolution.

The so-called “Calles Law,” signed on June 14, 1926, by President Plutarco Elías Calles, imposed penalties for priests and other individuals violating anti-clerical provisions enshrined in the 1917 Constitution. Sanctions included fines for wearing clerical garb in public and the imprisonment of priests who spoke out against the government (Bailey, 1974). Alongside these measures, the state weakened the Catholic Church by confiscating properties and closing religious institutions, including Catholic schools. These measures helped galvanize anti-government mobilization, most notably via the *Liga Nacional por la Defensa de la Libertad Religiosa* (LNDLR), uniting Catholic civil society and political organizations (Purnell, 1999). A core feature of mobilization included standing guard against potential incursions by the government: “[i]t is the age of permanent assemblies, the moment in which a whole town stands guard, night and day, men, women, children, and the elderly, in their churches. Meanwhile the pilgrimages, processions, and public displays of penitence bring many people together and become a kind of non-violent uprising that scoffs at the government’s laws” (Meyer, 1973, p. 102).<sup>6</sup>

Public discontent about anti-clerical policies magnified animosity caused by agrarian reform, multiplying social exasperation (Gavi, 2009). The political conflict escalated quickly in 1926 following an anti-government economic boycott, Catholic teacher resignations at secular schools, and a wave of arrests and targeted assassinations of priests by the state (Meyer, 1973).

By August of 1926, several Mexican states had armed uprisings. In Guadalajara, for example, Catholics entrenched in a church exchanged gunfire with government troops, resulting in 18 deaths. A day later in Sahuayo, Michoacán, over two hundred government troops stormed the town, killing its priest and vicar, while a week and a half later in Chalchihuites, Zacatecas, government troops killed the local leader of the *Asociación Católica de la Juventud Mexicana* (ACJM) in an attempt to curtail pro-Catholic activities (Tuck, 1982, p. 40). Rebel mobilization occurred swiftly. The main ACJM leader capitalized on popular discontent to mobilize what would become one of the central *Cristero* fronts (Young, 2015, p. 55). In Guanajuato, after government troops defeated a local uprising, a retreat into the mountains allowed the group to reorganize as a guerrilla force. The uprising was particularly successful in Michoacán, where it included 12,000 men, approximately 25% of all insurgents (Meyer, 1973, p. 17).

Rough terrain and lack of railroads for quickly mobilizing government troops favored the *Cristero*'s fighting style (Meyer, 1973, p. 191). Initial rebel successes, staged from the *Sierra Madre* mountains, helped increase recruitment and drew concern from the United States: the U.S. government provided arms to the Mexican government and pushed for a negotiated agreement. The ultimate political settlement, reached in June 1929, allowed churches to reopen, provide religious education, and pursue legal reform. While it is difficult to reliably estimate the size of rebel forces, figures indicate that 50,000 combatants fought for the Catholics (Meyer, 1973, p. 90).

Mexico had experienced several violent uprisings before, but the character of the *Cristero* rebellion was unparalleled in several ways. First, it was a mass movement driven by grassroots religious associations. The Catholic Church generally played a small role in organizing the military effort, and elites lacked the outsized role they had occupied in the Independence War. This grassroots character also had tactical implications: guerrilla warfare was paramount, in contrast to major Mexican military confrontations against the U.S. or France, and in contrast to the large armies in the Mexican Revolution. Moreover, the *Cristero* rebellion was directed against intrusive policies of the Mexican state, rather than specific rulers (e.g., Porfirio Díaz, Maximiliano I, or Victoriano Huerta), and it lacked a revolutionary or secessionist aim. Instead, communities rejected state intervention that was deeply disruptive to their traditional way of life, in which religion played a crucial role. The *Cristeros* fought to protect their communities and traditional practices, implementing tactics to shield them from external incursions. The *Cristero* movement was, in other words, parochial in terms of its local orientation and religious connotation, thereby setting it apart from prior Mexican armed movements.

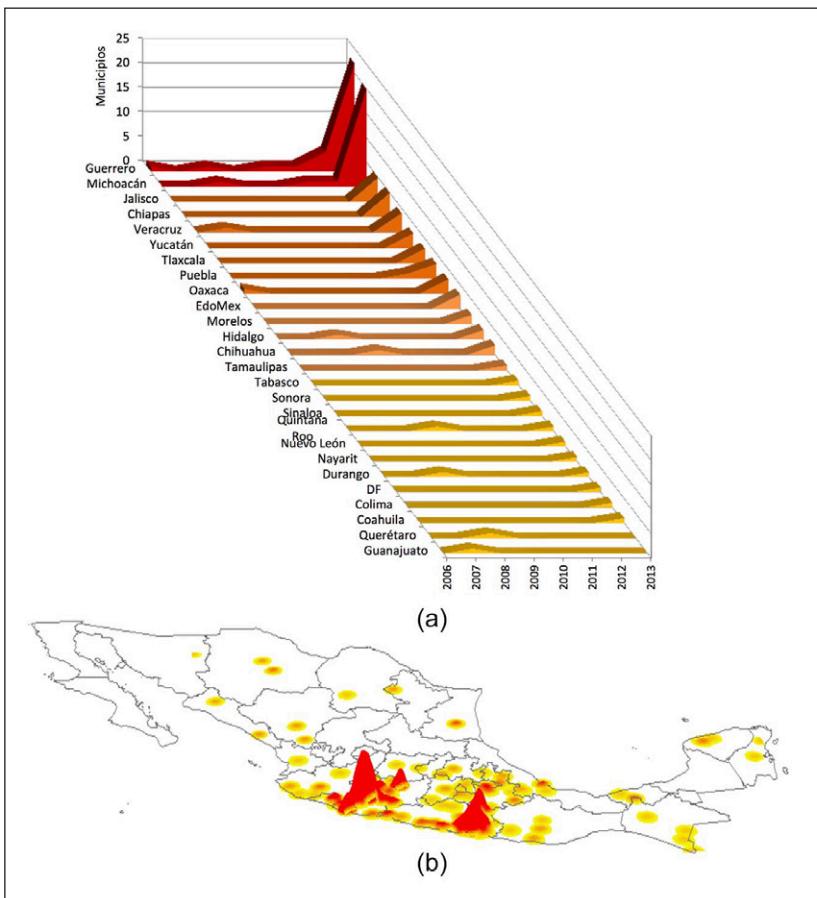
## The War on Drugs and the Escalation of Violence

In December 2006, then-president Felipe Calderón launched a full-fledged offensive against drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs) in Mexico. In contrast to his predecessors, Calderón made the country-wide war on drugs the centerpiece of his administration, deploying the military in major operations against DTOs. Calderón's punitive approach played a major role in the escalation of violence between criminal groups (Dell, 2015; Durán-Martínez, 2017; Guerrero, 2011a; Lessing, 2015; Osorio, 2015). Punitive law enforcement disrupted transnational DTO operations, limiting DTOs' income. This increased not only violence between state actors and DTOs, but also violent competition between DTOs and it escalated DTO-led predation against ordinary citizens. External developments further escalated violence. First, Colombian interdiction efforts disrupted the Mexican cocaine market, hindering DTOs' income (Castillo et al., 2020). Second, the expiration of the U.S. assault weapons ban increased the availability of guns (Dube et al., 2013). Racketeering and kidnapping grew to unprecedented levels (Guerrero, 2011b, 2011c).

This predatory shift transformed relationships between DTOs and their host communities. Before this escalation, drug lords were often considered benefactors in host communities, providing public goods (e.g., jobs, parties, churches, or sports facilities) in exchange for social protection and cooperation. Recent studies have revealed the extent of the social embeddedness of criminal organizations in Mexico and elsewhere (Arias, 2017; Magaloni et al., 2019). Yet as a result of the government's punitive efforts, criminal organizations quickly replaced this symbiotic relationship with community predation, reinforced by exemplary violence against those refusing their terms.

## Mobilization Against Organized Crime in Mexico

Recent self-defense groups emerged in at least two waves in Mexico, responding to distinct sources of insecurity. The first emerged in the late 1990s to counter common crime as well as harassment from government authorities. These groups—not precisely vigilantes, given their regulation under customary law—were geographically contained, and mobilized principally in Guerrero and in indigenous and agrarian communities, drawing on experience garnered through communal policing (Gómez Durán, 2012; Ley & Trejo, 2019; Rea, 2012). The second set mobilized in the early 2010s in response to violence and crime perpetrated by DTOs, following the Calderón crackdown. These vigilantes had more maximalist goals, seeking to rid their



**Figure 1.** Concentration of *Autodefensas* in Mexico: (a) expansion of *Autodefensas* in Mexico, 2006–2013 and (b) hot-spots of *Autodefensas* in Mexico, 2006–2013.

communities of organized crime, to curtail extortion of local businesses, and to construct a different kind of political and social order that purged corrupt local politicians and law enforcement agents (Rea, 2013). As Panel (a) in Figure 1 shows, *autodefensa* mobilization between 2006 and 2013 was particularly concentrated in the states of Guerrero and Michoacán.<sup>7</sup> Yet, similar self-defense groups mobilized in nearly *every* Mexican state, with concentrations in Jalisco, Chiapas, and Veracruz by 2012 and 2013. A heatmap of *autodefensa* prevalence appears in Panel (b) of Figure 1.

The surge of self-defense groups in 2013 generated ambivalent reactions of repression and support from the government, which eventually realized the advantages of collaboration. Initially, Mexican authorities repressed *autodefensas* in Michoacán but soon recognized their claims and began cooperating with them, gathering local intelligence and conducting joint patrols. After the governor of Michoacán resigned in 2014, the federal government appointed a “Commissioner for Security and Development,” who served as *de-facto* governor. In this context, the government tried to regularize the disparate *autodefensa* groups by reviving an old statute of the post-revolutionary era to incorporate such groups into the Mexican Army as “Rural Defense Forces” (Sánchez Talanquer, 2018). Of the estimated 20,000 *autodefensa* members, only about 3,000 individuals registered as *Rurales* (AFP, 2014). These groups remained with unclear chains of command and operational protocols, and no regular resource transfers or salaries provided by the government (Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, 2016).

Despite their original goals and initial mobilization success, many *autodefensa* groups have since fragmented or been coopted by organized crime (García, 2019; Wolff, 2020).

## Potential Legacies of the Cristero Rebellion

How might the *Cristero* rebellion help explain variation in contemporary mobilization of *autodefensas*? The *Cristero* uprising provided a successful experience of resistance against hostile external forces deemed disruptive to traditional social organization. At its core, the rebellion sought to maintain the religious, social, and economic *status quo* by confronting repressive policies. This experience likely generated lasting changes in local attitudes—a strong sense of self-determination, but also distrust and watchfulness toward the state and external actors—through knowledge transmission processes (Schönpflug, 2008). It also left imprints on patterns of collective violence in subsequent years (Guerra Manzo, 2005; Meyer, 2003; Santamaría, 2019).

The attitudinal, social, and organizational legacies of the *Cristero* rebellion, we argue, made it easier for communities almost one century later to mobilize against organized crime. There are several indications of transmission mechanisms connecting *Cristeros* with self-defense forces. Leaders of the *autodefensa* have made explicit reference to the *Cristero* rebellion: the autobiography of José Manuel Mireles, the most prominent leader of the *autodefensas* movement, underlines the importance of oral histories from the *Cristero* times: “[t]he following story about a bloody episode of Mexican

history, the *Cristero* War, was told by grandpa in this way . . .”<sup>8</sup> (Mireles Valverde, 2017, p. 32). These narratives provided lessons about repertoires of mobilization. The rich Mexican folk music tradition includes several popular songs (“*corridos*”) recounting the adventures of *Cristero* leaders (INAH, 2002; Ochoa Salazar, 1993). Complementing these heroic tales, the Catholic Church likely provided another reliable institutional transmission belt for preserving a strong spirit of self-reliance and autonomy in communities that featured *Cristeros* (Meyer, 1973; Tuck, 1982). Moreover, Wolff (2020, p. 42) highlights, based on ethnographic research in Michoacán, how networks linked to *autodefensa* groups tended to coalesce around the Catholic Church.<sup>9</sup>

## Empirical Strategy and Data

We present two main empirical approaches to estimate the effect of the *Cristero* rebellion. First, we rely on simple OLS estimations to assess whether the *Cristero* rebellion is correlated with the presence of contemporary self-defense forces. The main model specification is:

$$Y_i = \alpha_1 + \beta Cristero_i + X_i \delta_1 + \varepsilon_{1i} \quad (1)$$

Here,  $Y_i$  represents whether a given municipality  $i$  experienced *autodefensa* mobilization in 2013,  $X_i$  is a vector of observables,  $\varepsilon_{1i}$  an error term, and  $Cristero_i$  an indicator for past *Cristero* mobilization in municipality  $i$ . We include a range of historical covariates that are plausibly correlated with both the *Cristero* rebellion and subsequent dynamics of mobilization and violence. We describe these variables in the data section. Despite the inclusion of a large battery of controls, our largest concern remains the possibility of unobserved confounding, such that  $\text{cov}(Cristero_i, \varepsilon_{1i} | X_i) \neq 0$ .

In our second approach, we seek to address this challenge by relying on an instrumental variable (IV) approach. We exploit the fact that only three of 38 Mexican bishops during the pre-*Cristero* period supported what would become the *Cristero* rebellion,<sup>10</sup> and that residing close to one of those bishops likely increased the probability that a municipality would rebel.

Bishops in Mexico were divided among three camps prior to the *Cristero* war: (a) a majority who supported suspending mass as a protest against restrictive government measures and deferred to the Vatican on how to proceed; (b) a minority who, in response to the Calles Law, believed it best to accept the restrictions imposed by President Calles and to maintain amicable dialogue with the government; and (c) a minority who expressed a

radical commitment to Church independence and a willingness to achieve “martyrdom” if necessary (Mutolo, 2015, pp. 165–166). Despite these divisions, the different factions sought to coordinate a unified response to the Calles Law, resulting in the decision to suspend mass as a symbolic protest against government efforts to curtail Church power. Yet the incipient armed mobilization undertaken by the LNDLR divided the priests even further: while three bishops had already spoken publicly in favor of armed revolt prior to the initiation of armed rebellion, they became increasingly vocal over time. These bishops provided political and moral support to insurgents, and eventually also supported the rebellion with access to crucial networks, money, and arms (Mutolo, 2015, p. 176). Our approach exploits the fact that municipalities closer to a radical bishop were more likely to rise up. We address the relevant assumptions and potential threats to the validity of this approach below.

Our instrument,  $Bishop_i$ , is the distance from a municipal capital to the nearest of the three bishops who expressed support for the *Cristero* rebellion prior to the conflict’s start, in kilometers (logged). In order to be a valid instrument, distance to a rebellious bishop has to be correlated with the *Cristero* rebellion:  $\text{cov}(Bishop_i, Cristero_i | X_i) \neq 0$ . Moreover, the instrument must not be correlated with the error term, such that  $\text{cov}(Bishop_i, \varepsilon_{2i} | X_i) = 0$ .

The impact of the instrument on the “treatment” is assessed in the first stage:

$$Cristero_i = \alpha_2 + \lambda Bishop_i + X_i \delta_2 + \varepsilon_{2i} \quad (2)$$

where  $Cristero_i$  again represents whether a municipality  $i$  experienced the *Cristero* rebellion in the 1920s, and  $Bishop_i$  denotes the distance to the closest rebellious bishop prior to the start of the *Cristero* campaign. The reduced form can be written as:

$$Y_i = \alpha_3 + \eta Bishop_i + X_i \delta_3 + \varepsilon_{3i} \quad (3)$$

Finally, the second stage is obtained by replacing the endogenous regressor in (1) with the fitted values from the first stage (2):

$$Y_i = \alpha_4 + \gamma \widehat{Cristero}_i + X_i \delta_4 + \varepsilon_{4i} \quad (4)$$

The covariates, captured in the  $X_i$  term, are consistent across equations.

For the IV approach to give valid estimates of the local average treatment effect, several assumptions must be met, not all of which are directly testable (Angrist et al., 1996; Keele & Minozzi, 2013; Sovey & Green, 2011). First, as

mentioned above, the instrument must be *relevant*, meaning that the bishops instrument has to be correlated with the *Cristero* mobilization. The relevance of the instrument can be assessed empirically in the first-stage relationship. As we show below, the relevance of our instrument is high and robust. Second, the assumption of *independence* requires the instrument to be “as-if” randomly assigned (Dunning, 2012), or at least conditionally independent (Sovey & Green, 2011). As our instrument is non-randomly assigned, and because we are able to control for a large number of covariates, we invoke the conditional independence assumption. Third, the instrument must meet the *exclusion restriction*, which is met if the distance to the nearest rebellious bishop has no effect on contemporary *autodefensa* mobilization other than through the channel of the *Cristero* rebellion (Sovey & Green, 2011).

We consider the conditional independence and exclusion restriction assumptions to be plausible for a few reasons. While bishop assignment is not random, and theoretically the Catholic Church may have sent particularly extreme, rebellious bishops to places where there was an increased likelihood of the Church successfully mobilizing against state authority, a number of facts speak against this explanation. Following the First Vatican Council in 1870, the Papacy sought to centralize authority, in response to perceived threats to its authority shroud in liberalism, secularism, and communism (Wright-Rios, 2009). This meant increased control *from Rome* over the assignments of cardinals, archbishops, and even bishops. Attempts to remove local discretion over appointments were codified in the Church’s 1917 Code of Canon Law, which synthesized and streamlined individual clergy rules and regulations, including those pertaining to “the law of persons” that established clear guidelines for clergy, religious people, and laity. The Pope would now exercise freedom to name *all* bishops throughout the world (Meyer, 2005, p. 4). This centralization of the naming of bishops undercuts the likelihood that bishops were sent purposefully to challenge the government in locations ripe for religious conflict, given that the Pope and others in Rome likely were not sufficiently well-versed on the particular social and political dynamics in Mexico at very local levels. Moreover, the naming of the three rebellious bishops had occurred years prior to the initiation of the *Cristero* conflict.<sup>11</sup> The fact that the distribution of bishops’ and priests’ ideologies across space is plausibly exogenous to local dynamics has been leveraged in other contexts to study how resistance to dictatorships affects state repression (Edwards, 2020) and the conditions under which opposition groups organize against repressive regimes (Amat, 2020).

Another reason to doubt this explanation is that the Catholic Church in Mexico in the years prior to the *Cristero* rebellion sought institutionally to

*distance* itself from political fights with the Mexican state. Following a set of highly destructive struggles against liberal reformers in the late 1800s, which eviscerated much of the Church's political and economic clout in Mexico, the Church was dealt a stinging blow during the Mexican Revolution when it supported the reactionary and later-defeated Huerta regime (Wright-Rios, 2009). This support increased acrimony toward the Church and contributed to the anti-Catholic measures enshrined in the 1917 constitution by the victorious revolutionary government, the enforcement of which by Calles would later ignite the *Cristero* rebellion (Andes, 2016). In short, the Church had become risk-adverse when confronting Mexican state authority.

Moreover, we do not expect that the pro-*Cristero* bishops had a direct, long-term effect on, or that their presence was correlated with unmeasured causes of, autodefensa mobilization. By 1927, the Mexican government had engaged in widespread expulsions of Catholic bishops, regardless of their political orientation, over and beyond the three rebellious bishops (Meyer, 1973). Of the three pro-*Cristero* bishops, one was expelled by the Mexican government, one fled Mexico due to personal threats, and the third went into hiding prior to the *Cristero* rebellion (Bailey, 1974). Two of the three rebellious bishops died in the ten years following the *Cristero* rebellion, and another did not return to Mexico until 1944 (Mutolo, 2005), making it unlikely that they continued to have an effect on promoting communal organizational activity once the rebellion ended.

Is it possible that rebellious communities influenced the bishops' views toward the conflict, rather than the other way around? This cannot a priori be ruled out. However, in addition to our ability to control for a wide variety of covariates, historical evidence does not seem to support this interpretation. The three rebellious bishops had expressed antipathy toward the government's efforts to undermine the Church before communal resistance emerged. José de Jesús Manríquez, for example, denounced the Calles Laws in 1925, despite general indifference to these actions in his home region prior to aggressive government efforts to implement them (Mutolo, 2005). González y Valencia, despite serving as bishop in Durango, was living in Rome between 1926 and 1927, that crucial period when government actions fomented grassroots resistance and local populations became increasingly radicalized (Barquín, 1967); his positions on the Calles Laws were already known when he was named to serve as representative of the Mexican bishops to the Vatican in 1925, to begin in 1926. While political and financial support from his perch at the Vatican would ultimately provide symbolic and financial support for the *Cristeros* in his home territory of Durango and surrounding areas, it is unlikely that the local population would have helped radicalize him prior to the period of polarization in the run-up to the conflict.

Leopoldo Lara y Torres was the only of the three rebellious bishops to remain in Mexico, in hiding, during the *Cristero* war; his early response to the Calles Law via a public letter to President Calles in March 1926 hearkened back to his support for the bishops' protest in 1917, nearly ten years before the conflict (Lara, 1954).

In short, while it is impossible to prove the validity of our core assumptions—conditional independence and exclusion restriction—in a definite way, the qualitative evidence does not seem to support a bottom-up mechanism, and we are able to control for an extensive set of community characteristics. Nor does it seem likely that the rebellious bishops had a lasting effect beyond the *Cristero* uprising. Nevertheless, we recognize that we cannot conclusively dismiss these possibilities.

The fourth IV assumption, *monotonicity*, implies that there were no “defier” communities that, in response to being closer to bishops favorable to the rebellion, were *less* likely to engage in the *Cristero* rebellion as a result (Angrist et al., 1996).

Finally, the stable unit treatment value assumption (SUTVA) must hold, implying that the treatment of one unit has no effect on other units (Sovey & Green, 2011). As in most social scientific research, this assumption is potentially problematic. Moreover, two-stage least squares (2SLS) is biased in the presence of unmodeled interdependence (Betz et al., 2019), even if the instrument is randomly assigned. Thus, while we cannot rule out all sources of SUTVA violations, it is crucial to account for spatial interdependence. Below we report results from spatial two-stage least squares (S2SLS) models in addition to approaches not accounting for spatial interdependence. In the S2SLS we (a) instrument for the endogenous predictor (*Cristeros*) using distance to the closest rebellious bishop; (b) do not restrict the spatial effect to be zero so we can estimate the magnitude of the spatial autocorrelation in the spatial lag and the error terms; and (c) use a spatial heteroskedasticity and autocorrelation consistent estimator that generates a matrix of spatial instruments from the exogenous variables to address potential endogeneity introduced by the spatial interdependence of the outcome (Betz et al., 2019; Kelejian & Prucha, 2007; Piras, 2010).

## Data

Our dependent variable, *Autodefensas*, is coded dichotomously taking the value of 1 when the media reported vigilante group presence at the municipal level in 2013, and 0 otherwise. To build this variable, we used Eventus ID, a computerized protocol for event coding from news reports written in Spanish (Osorio & Reyes, 2017). To minimize concerns of coverage bias

from individual newspapers (Davenport, 2009; Davenport & Ball, 2002), we gathered daily reports from five Mexican newspapers<sup>12</sup> between January 1st and December 31st of 2013. As Panel (a) in Figure 1 shows, 2013 marked an unprecedented surge of *autodefensas*. By focusing on *autodefensa* mobilization in 2013, we are able to distinguish between this earlier wave of more locally-generated, autonomous mobilization from the involvement of government and criminal groups in *autodefensa* activity in 2014 and subsequent years.

Eventus ID is a supervised coding protocol that relies on dictionaries of actors and toponyms to identify actors' presence in specific locations as mentioned in news stories. A similar approach has been used to geo-locate the violent presence of armed actors elsewhere (Osorio et al., 2019). To build the actors dictionary, we relied on our knowledge of the *autodefensas* movement and complemented it with Named Entity Recognition software (The Stanford Natural Language Processing Group, 2014), which helped identify additional *autodefensa* groups. The locations dictionary relies on an exhaustive catalog of location names from the Mexican Census Authority (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2011). Applying this coding protocol<sup>13</sup> allowed us to process vast volumes of text and identify the presence of self-defense forces in 229 municipalities; most were geographically concentrated in the states of Michoacán (22.7%) and Guerrero (19.2%), while the rest are distributed across other states.

The main independent variable is *Cristero Brigades*, a dummy taking a value of one for municipalities that had the presence of *Cristero* brigades fighting in 1929, and 0 otherwise. To code this variable, we digitized and geo-referenced military maps of the *Cristero* rebellion presented by Meyer (1973, p. 12), the most authoritative work on the topic. Figure 2 displays the geographic distribution of this variable. The Appendix shows the robustness of our results using a different map of *Cristero* activity, to code the variable *Cristeros*, which provides a more aggregated measure of the same phenomenon.

As mentioned above, our instrumental variable *Distance to pro-Cristero Bishop* is the distance from each municipality capital to the closest of the three rebellious bishops, measured in kilometers. We coded individual bishop data using in-depth historical accounts from Mutolo (2005, 2015).

We include a range of historical covariates. For a more elaborate description of many of these covariates, see Osorio, Schubiger and Weintraub (2018a) where we present some of these data for the first time. The baseline specification considers a set of covariates related to infrastructure, prior armed campaigns, and geography. Other specifications additionally include information on socio-demographics of the early 20th century, as well as various colonial and pre-colonial characteristics.



**Figure 2.** Location of Cristero brigades in 1929.

Covariates related to infrastructure capture the state's historical ability to project power. *Railways* takes the value of one if a municipality included a railroad line in 1919, and zero otherwise.<sup>14</sup> *Telegraphs* is a dichotomous variable measuring whether a given municipality had a telegraph line in 1919.<sup>15</sup> Both variables are based on maps provided by Great Britain's Naval Intelligence Division that we digitized and geo-referenced (Great Britain. Naval Intelligence Division, 1919). We also take into account episodes of violence, both insurrections and foreign invasions, that took place before the *Cristero* war. Four dummy variables indicate the municipalities where the main Mexican independence campaigns took place between 1810 and 1821: *Hidalgo and Allende insurgency* (1810–1811), *Morelos insurgency* (1810–1815), *Mina insurgency* (1817), and *Guerrero insurgency* (1816–1821). The maps for these data come from García de Miranda and Falcón de Gyves (1972). *French intervention* codes municipalities with operations of the French Army, the Imperialist Mexican Army, and the Republican Army during the French Intervention (1862–1867). We also used maps from García de Miranda and Falcón de Gyves (1972) to generate these data. *Rurales* indicates whether a given municipality had a rural police force in 1910, during the rule of Porfirio Díaz.<sup>16</sup> To code this variable, we digitized and geo-referenced maps from Vanderwood (1992, p. 123).

The analysis also considers geographic variables. *Elevation* indicates the altitude of each municipality, measured in meters above average sea level, serving as a proxy for rough terrain. *Distance to the state capital* measures a municipality's distance to the capital of its corresponding state. Both measures are logged. Not all geographic regions in Mexico offer equally fertile grounds for cross-border activities such as trafficking, which is relevant as it might be correlated both with historical armed uprisings and subsequent dynamics of violence and crime. *Gulf* and *Pacific* represent areas favorable to shipments arriving from South America and take the value of 1 for the three adjacent municipalities located along the Gulf of Mexico or the Pacific coast, and 0 otherwise. *North* indicates the belt of municipalities located along the Mexico–U.S. border; during the pre-*Cristero* period these municipalities were shaped heavily by cross-border trade, and were also affected by the Mexico–United States Border War (1910–1919) and the “Pancho Villa Expedition” (1916–1917). We generated these variables using GIS data from INEGI (2011).

In addition to the basic covariates, we include socio-demographic controls, as well as colonial and pre-colonial characteristics. We rely on the 1930 Mexican Census (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 1930), which includes data on *population density*, the percentage of *rural population*, *Catholic population*, as well as *illiterate population* as measured in 1921. We also include the number of federal *government officials* and the number of *police officers* per 10,000 inhabitants in 1928. Moreover, we add a measure of the average number of *members per workers' unions* in 1919, and the percentage of the *area dedicated to agricultural activities* in 1927. These variables are measured at the state level.

We further include a set of characteristics related to the Spanish Colony. *Localities XVI* indicates the number of settlements present in a municipality in the 16th century, from a set of maps by Cook and Simpson (1948), which we digitized and geo-referenced. We also consider religious settlements, measured by the number of *Franciscan*, *Dominican*, *Augustinian*, and *Jesuit* missions at the municipal level using data from Waldinger (2017).

Finally, to capture pre-colonial characteristics, we digitized a map produced by Mexico's *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* (INAH) indicating the location of archaeological zones (INAH, 2013). We also include data on the Triple Alliance, a military alliance of city-states (Méjico Tenochtitlán, Texcoco, and Tacuba) in the 15th and 16th century, as well as the location of the Chichimeca culture—a nomadic group known for fiercely resisting Spanish invasions in the 16th century (Gradie, 1994)—using data from Waldinger (2017). Table A1 in the Supplemental Appendix provides descriptive statistics for all variables.

## Results

We begin with a linear probability model (OLS) applied to all Mexican municipalities where the 2013 *autodefensa* mobilization (0/1) is the outcome variable and the municipal presence of *Cristero* brigades in the early 20th century the main predictor. While we prefer OLS over logistic regression (Angrist & Pischke, 2009), our results are nearly identical using a logit estimator.<sup>17</sup>

Model 1 in Table 1 provides results from a bivariate regression.<sup>18</sup> Models 2 to 5 progressively include more controls: Model 2 introduces the basic covariates (infrastructure, prior armed campaigns, and geography), Model 3 the sociodemographic variables, Model 4 colonial characteristics, and Model 5 pre-colonial variables. The results of the full specification (Model 5) indicate that municipalities with a history of engagement in the *Cristero* rebellion have a 6.6 percentage point higher probability of rising up against organized crime in the contemporary period. This is remarkable, given that the average probability of *autodefensa* mobilization is 9%.

Figure 3 offers an overview of the results of the *Cristero Brigades* variable across Table 1, with 90% confidence intervals marked with a thick line, and 95% confidence intervals with a thin line. The graph shows that the effect of the *Cristero* rebellion on *autodefensas* is highly consistent across the five model specifications.

One concern regarding the relationship between *Cristeros* and *autodefensas* is the spatial clustering of municipalities engaged in the *Cristero* rebellion. To mitigate the concern of spatial interdependence driving our results, we use a spatial lag model to take into consideration the geographic proximity of *autodefensa* groups. For space considerations, we present the results in Table A4 in the Supplemental Appendix. The spatial lag approach replicates the procedure of accumulating sets of covariates prior to reaching the full model specification, while considering the spatial autocorrelation of *autodefensas* in neighboring municipalities. The *Cristero* brigades variable remains significant, and the full specification indicates a 5.7 percentage point increased probability of *autodefensa* mobilization.

Table 2 presents the results of a 2SLS approach using *Distance to Pro-Cristero Bishops* as the instrument. The first stage shows that municipalities closer to Pro-*Cristero* bishops are more likely to have *Cristero* brigades; the Kleibergen-Paap rank Wald F-statistic indicates that the instrument is strong. In line with theoretical expectations, the second stage shows that *Cristero* mobilization (instrumented) significantly increases the propensity of contemporary *autodefensas* resisting criminal organizations. Finally, the reduced form results indicate that the instrument is negatively correlated with the outcome, as expected.

Finally, we use a spatial instrumental variables model that takes into account spatial autocorrelation both in the dependent variable and the error

**Table I.** Cristero Rebellion and Autodefensas (OLS).

Model	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Cristero brigades	0.081*** (0.016)	0.065*** (0.016)	0.067*** (0.018)	0.059*** (0.018)	0.066*** (0.018)
Infrastructure	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Armed campaigns	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Geography	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Socio-demo.	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Colonial	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Pre-colonial	No	No	No	No	Yes
Constant	0.073*** (0.006)	0.167** (0.070)	0.370*** (0.136)	0.360*** (0.136)	0.363*** (0.138)
Observations	2,456	2,456	2,456	2,456	2,456

Infrastructure: Railways and telegraphs.

Armed campaigns: Rurales, insurreccions of Morelos, Mina, Hidalgo, and Guerrero, and French invasion.

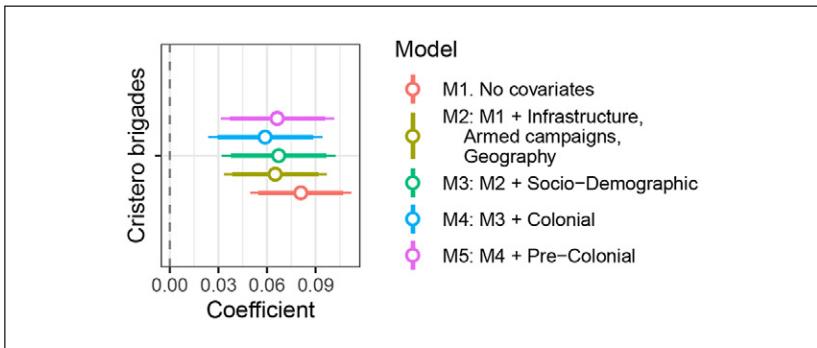
Geography: Elevation, distance to state capital, Gulf, North, and Pacific.

Socio-demographics: Population density, rural population, Catholics, illiteracy rate, government officials, police officers, agricultural area, and members per union.

Colonial: Localities in XVI Century, Franciscan, Dominican, Augustinian, and Jesuit missions.

Pre-colonial: Archaeological zone, Triple alliance, and Chichimecas.

+ $p < 0.10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Robust standard errors in parentheses.



**Figure 3.** Cristero rebellion and autodefensas.  
OLS estimates with 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

**Table 2.** Cristero Rebellion and Autodefensas (2SLS).

Model:	First stage Brigades (1)	Second stage Autodefensas (2)	Reduced form Autodefensas (3)
Dependent variable:			
Distance to pro-Cristero bishop	-0.044*** (0.004)		-0.016*** (0.004)
Cristero brigades		0.359*** (0.087)	
Infrastructure	Yes	Yes	Yes
Armed campaigns	Yes	Yes	Yes
Geography	Yes	Yes	Yes
Socio-demographics	Yes	Yes	Yes
Colonial	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pre-colonial	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.754*** (0.138)	0.189 (0.150)	0.460*** (0.139)
Kleibergen-Paap rank	136.66		
Wald F statistic			
Observations	2,456	2,456	2,456

See details about control variables in Table 1.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ . Robust standard errors in parentheses.

terms. Table 3 reports the results from the full specification with all controls. The first stage shows, again, that localities closer to pro-Cristero bishops have a higher propensity of experiencing Cristero brigade activity than municipalities further away. The second stage results indicate that Cristero mobilization (instrumented) significantly increases the probability

**Table 3.** Cristero Rebellion and Autodefensas (S2SLS).

Model: Dependent variable:	First stage brigades (1)	Second stage autodefensas (2)	Reduced form autodefensas (3)
Distance to pro-Cristero bishop	-0.039*** (0.004)		-0.011** (0.003)
Cristero brigades		0.192*** (0.045)	
Infrastructure	Yes	Yes	Yes
Armed campaigns	Yes	Yes	Yes
Geography	Yes	Yes	Yes
Socio-demographics	Yes	Yes	Yes
Colonial	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pre-colonial	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	0.629*** (0.142)	0.055 0 (0.127)	0.153 0 (0.134)
$\lambda$	0.582*** (0.134)	1.182*** (0.143)	1.226*** (0.156)
$\rho$	0.147 (0.095)	-0.690*** (0.127)	-0.541*** (0.124)
Observations	2,456	2,456	2,456

See details about control variables in Table 1.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ . Robust standard errors in parentheses.

of contemporary *autodefensa* presence, even after taking into account spatial autocorrelation. The reduced form results remain in line with our expectations as well.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, as an additional robustness check, we consider an alternative measure of the *Cristero* variable, which implies a broader area associated with the *Cristeros'* presence, using data from Meyer (1973) (see Figure A1 in the Supplemental Appendix). The results remain stable from the basic specification to the full model (see Table A9 in the Supplemental Appendix). The estimate for the alternative *Cristeros* measure in the full model is smaller than the *Cristero* brigade measure, yet still positive and significant.

## Alternative Explanations

Next, we consider alternative explanations for our findings. We explore correlations between our independent variable and several outcomes to tentatively evaluate competing claims. First, in keeping with the argument made by Phillips (2017) that inequality produces self-defense forces, the effect of *Cristeros* on self-defense formation may run through inequality. That is, the temporally distant *Cristero* rebellion may be associated with increased economic inequality over the long-term, which in turn may have increased the probability of a municipality mobilizing self-defense forces. To evaluate this

possibility, we test whether, after controlling for the full set of control variables, the *Cristero* rebellion is associated with increased inequality at the municipal level in the contemporary period, using data from Phillips (2017). As the results in column 1 of Table A7 in the Supplemental Appendix show, we do not find this to be the case: the presence of *Cristero* brigades does *not* predict contemporary inequality.

Second, the *Cristero* rebellion may simply be positively correlated with crime in the long run, thus explaining higher levels of *autodefensa* mobilization against crime in formerly-*Cristero* areas. We assess this possibility by analyzing the effect of *Cristero* brigades on the total number of crimes in 2013 with data from Mexico's *Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública* (SNSP, 2015). We find no evidence that this is the case. As column 2 of Table A7 in the Supplemental Appendix shows, after controlling for the full battery of controls, areas affected by the *Cristero* rebellion are neither more nor less violent in the contemporary period when compared to areas not affected by the *Cristeros*.

Following this line of thought, it may be the case that municipalities where the *Cristeros* were active are more severely affected by the presence of DTOs than other regions, which increased the *demand* for self-defense. To evaluate this possibility, we consider the total number of DTOs active in a municipality in 2010 with data from Osorio (2015). The lack of statistical significance in column 3 of Table A7 in the Supplemental Appendix indicates that, after controlling for a rich set of confounders, the presence of *Cristero* brigades is not associated with higher levels of contemporary DTOs.

In the Appendix we perform parallel exercises to test these alternative explanations using a spatial lag, 2SLS, and S2SLS models, and using our two different measures of the *Cristero* rebellion. We find inconclusive evidence to either support or refute these alternative explanations. A summary of these additional results can be found in Supplemental Table A10 and in our replication files.

## Conclusion

Organized violence profoundly reshapes social networks and institutions (Wood, 2008), often in lasting ways, both in civil wars and areas deeply affected by organized crime. We contribute to the research program on the legacies of violence by showing, for the case of anti-crime mobilization in Mexico, that where residual mobilizational resources from past collective action can be harnessed, armed resistance to urgent threats is more likely to emerge.

Future research can proceed along a number of parallel tracks. First, it is crucial to identify what types of armed mobilization are most likely to produce the kinds of long-lasting effects we describe. As stressed in the theory section, we should not expect all armed mobilizations to be "created equal": some likely have long-lasting effects while others do not. In the Mexican case, our

contribution has focused on the legacy of the *Cristero* rebellion, both for theoretical reasons and since an isolation of the causal effect of other insurgencies was beyond the scope of our empirical strategy. However, future work should more closely consider the legacy of other historical events. Likewise, it is important to study violent *and* non-violent forms of collective action side-by-side. We know little about the historical legacies of non-violent community protection strategies, so future work should push in this direction. Second, while our empirical strategy aimed to address core threats to causal inference, future research could scrutinize the validity of the underlying assumptions of our approach in further depth. Third, the theorized causal mechanisms, and additional mechanisms suggested by the civil war and organized crime literature, ought to be tested empirically, both for the Mexican case and other contexts of widespread organized criminality (Barnes, 2017; Kalyvas, 2015). Teasing out additional observable implications to be tested quantitatively will also help evaluate the relative weight we should assign to different theoretical wagers. Finally, continuing to refine our theoretical mechanisms while establishing scope conditions for historical legacies' impacts on contemporary outcomes will help advance our understanding of substantively important processes and events.

### Acknowledgments

This paper previously circulated as “Historical Legacies of Conflict: From the Cristero Rebellion to Self-Defense Forces in Mexico.” We thank participants at the Yale University “Old and New Challenges to Mexican Democracy” conference, as well as Pearce Edwards and Luke Keele for helpful feedback. We thank Miguel Cuadros and Christine Sylvester for excellent research assistance. This paper is part of a larger project on autodefensa mobilization in Mexico and uses data on autodefensas collected in connection with that project.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### ORCID iDs

Javier Osorio  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4548-7794>

Michael Weintraub  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2918-6588>

### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online at the *CPS* website <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/0010414021989761>

## Notes

1. The predecessor of the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC).
2. We use the terms *autodefensas*, vigilantes, and self-defense forces interchangeably.
3. Wolff (2020) highlights the role of past conflicts in his ethnographic study of collective identities, strategies, and resistance narratives among self-defense groups in Mexico.
4. Bateson (2013) shows how civil war-era forms of self-defense in Guatemala explain contemporary vigilantism.
5. Two exceptions are Phillips (2017) and Ley and Trejo (2019).
6. Our translation.
7. We discuss coding procedures in the Appendix.
8. Our translation.
9. Describing narratives and repertoires of resistance in Michoacán, Wolff (2020) argues that indigenous self-defense leaders often invoked the Purépecha history, while the *Cristero* rebellion featured prominently in the mostly non-indigenous *autodefensa* leaders' mobilizing narratives.
10. González y Valencia, archbishop of Durango, in the state of Durango; Leopoldo Lara y Torres, bishop in Tacámbaro, in the state of Michoacán; and José de Jesús Manríquez y Zárate, bishop in Huejutla, in the state of Hidalgo.
11. González y Valencia was named archbishop of Durango by the Pope in 1924, and spent 1926 and 1927 as representative of Mexican bishops to the Vatican; Leopoldo Lara y Torres was named by Pope Benedicto XV as the first bishop of Tacámbaro in 1920, after having presided over a parish in Celaya, Guanajuato; and José de Jesús Manríquez was named the first bishop in the new diocese of Huejutla in 1922. Manríquez and González were friends from seminary and stayed in close contact even as González went to Rome following his expulsion from Mexico in 1927 (Mutolo, 2005).
12. La Jornada, El Sol de México, Milenio, Reforma, and El Universal.
13. See the Appendix for details.
14. The Mexican Army could only deploy troops to areas well-connected by Mexico's limited railroad network (Meyer, 1973), hindering its actions.
15. Telegraph lines located along railway lines are excluded.
16. Rurales provided important policing functions (Sánchez-Talanquer, 2018).
17. See Table A2 in the Supplemental Appendix.
18. See Supplemental Table A3 for full results with coefficients reported for control variables.
19. Supplemental Table A8 presents the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) for the different models used in this study.

## References

- Acharya, A., Blackwell, M., & Sen, M. (2016). "The Political Legacy of American Slavery." *Journal of Politics*, 78(3), 621–641.
- AFP. (2014). *Mexico legalises vigilantes, handing weapons to farmers in bid to fight drug cartel Knights Templar*. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-05-11/mexico-legalises-vigilantes-fighting-drugcartel-knights-templar/5444654>

- Amat, C. (2020). *The hydra effect: When repression creates new opposition against authoritarianism* (Working Paper).
- Andes, S. J. C. (2016). *Local Church, global Church*. CUA Press.
- Angrist, J. D., Imbens, G. W., & Rubin, D. B. (1996). Identification of causal effects using instrumental variables. *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 91(434), 444–455.
- Angrist, J. D., & Pischke, J. S. (2009). *Mostly harmless econometrics: An empiricist's companion*. Princeton University Press.
- Arias, E. D. (2017). *Criminal enterprises and governance in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bailey, D. C. (1974). *Viva Cristo Rey!: The Cristero rebellion and the Church-state conflict in Mexico*. University of Texas Press.
- Balcells, L. (2012). The consequences of victimization on political identities: Evidence from Spain. *Politics and Society*, 40(3), 311–347.
- Barnes, N. (2017). Criminal politics: An integrated approach to the study of organized crime, politics, and violence. *Perspectives on Politics*, 15(4), 967–987.
- Barquín, A. (1967). *José María González Valencia: Arzobispo de Durango*. No. 75. Editorial Jus.
- Bateson, R. (2013). *Order and violence in postwar Guatemala*. Yale University.
- Bateson, R. (2016). *How civil wars produce durable local institutions* (Working Paper).
- Bateson, R. (2020). *The politics of vigilantism*. Perspectives on Politics (Working Paper).
- Betz, T., Cook, S. J., & Hollenbach, F. M. (2019). Spatial interdependence and instrumental variable models. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 8(4), 1–16.
- Castillo, J. C., Mejía, D., & Restrepo, P. (2020). Scarcity without Leviathan: The violent effects of cocaine supply shortages in the Mexican drug war. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 102(2), 269–286.
- Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos. (2016). *Informe Especial sobre los Grupos de Autodefensa en el Estado de Michoacán y las Violaciones a los Derechos Humanos Relacionadas con el Conflicto*. [https://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/all/doc/Informes/Especiales/2016\\_IE\\_gruposautodefensa.pdf](https://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/all/doc/Informes/Especiales/2016_IE_gruposautodefensa.pdf)
- Cook, S. F., & Simpson, L. B. (1948). *The population of Central Mexico in the Sixteenth Century*. University of California Press.
- Daly, S. Z. (2012). Organizational legacies of violence: Conditions favoring insurgency onset in Colombia, 1964–1984. *Journal of Peace Research*, 49(3), 473–491.
- Davenport, C. (2009). *Media bias, perspective, and state repression: The Black Panther Party*. Cambridge University Press.
- Davenport, C., & Ball, P. (2002). Views to a kill: Exploring the implications of source selection in the case of Guatemalan State Terror, 1977–1995. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 46(3), 427–450.
- Dell, M. (2015). Trafficking networks and the Mexican drug war. *The American Economic Review*, 105(6), 1738–1779.
- Dohmen, T., Falk, A., Huffman, D., & Sunde, U. (2011). The intergenerational transmission of risk and trust attitudes. *The Review of Economic Studies*, 79(2), 645–677.

- Dube, A., Dube, O., & García-Ponce, O. (2013). Cross-border spillover: U.S. Gun laws and violence in Mexico. *American Political Science Review*, 107(3), 397–417.
- Dunning, T. (2012). *Natural experiments in the social sciences. A design-based approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Durán-Martínez, A. (2017). *The politics of drug violence: Criminals, cops and politicians in Colombia and Mexico*. Oxford University Press.
- Edwards, P. (2020). *Social institutions and resistance to dictators: Evidence from Argentina's dirty war* (Working Paper).
- Espinosa, D. (2003). Restoring Christian social order: The Mexican Catholic Youth Association (1913–1932). *The Americas*, 59(4), 451–474.
- Finkel, E. (2015). The Phoenix effect of state repression: Jewish resistance during the Holocaust. *American Political Science Review*, 109(2), 339–353.
- García, D. A. (2019). *Busca Gobierno Desarticular Autodefensas Coptadas por el Crimen Organizado*. <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2019/02/18/politica/013n1pol>
- García de Miranda, E., & de Gyves, Z. F. (1972). *Nuevo atlas Porriúa de la República Mexicana*. Editorial Porriúa.
- Godoy, A. S. (2006). *Popular injustice: Violence, community, and law in Latin America*. Stanford University Press.
- Gómez Durán, T. (2012). *Entre las Cenizas: Historias de Vida en Tiempos de Muerte*. Sur Ediciones chapter El Pueblo que Espantó al Miedo.
- Gradie, C. M. (1994). Discovering the Chichimecas. *The Americas*, 51(1), 67–88.
- Great Britain. Naval Intelligence Division. (1919). *A Handbook of Mexico*. Great Britain. H.M. Stationery Office. [https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/mexico\\_handbook\\_1919.html](https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/mexico_handbook_1919.html)
- Guerra Manzo, E. (2005). El fuego sagrado. La segunda Cristiada y el caso de Michoacán (1931–1938). *Historia Mexicana*, 55(2), 513–575.
- Guerrero, E. (2011a). *La Raíz de la Violencia*. Nexos. <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2099328>
- Guerrero, E. (2011b). *Security, drugs, and violence in Mexico: A survey* (Technical report). 7th North American Forum Washington, D.C.
- Guerrero, E. (2011c). *Violencia y mafias*. Nexos. <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=14469>
- High, C. (2009). Remembering the auca: Violence and generational memory in Amazonian Ecuador. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15(4), 719–736.
- INAH. (2002). *Corridos de la Rebelión Cristera: Testimonio Musical de México Num. 20*. <https://mediateca.inah.gob.mx/repositorio/islandora/object/disco:13>
- INAH. (2013). *Zonas Arqueológicas abiertas al público*. <http://www.geoportal.inah.gob.mx/?pageid=839>
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía. (1930). *Anuario estadístico y geográfico de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos*. [http://internet.contenidos.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/productos/prod\\_serv/contenidos/espanol/bvinegi/productos/censos/poblacion/1930iter/mex/CPMEX30I.pdf](http://internet.contenidos.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/productos/prod_serv/contenidos/espanol/bvinegi/productos/censos/poblacion/1930iter/mex/CPMEX30I.pdf)
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía. (2011). *Marco Geoestadístico Nacional*. <https://www.inegi.org.mx/temas/mg/>

- Jentzsch, C., Kalyvas, S. N., & Schubiger, L. I. (2015). Militias in civil wars. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59(5), 755–769.
- Kalyvas, S. N. (2015). How civil wars help explain organized crime—and how they do not. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59(8), 1517–1540.
- Keele, L., & Minozzi, W. (2013). How much is Minnesota like Wisconsin? Assumptions and counterfactuals in causal inference with observational data. *Political Analysis*, 21(2), 193–216.
- Kelejian, H. H., & Prucha, I. R. (2007). HAC estimation in a spatial framework. *Journal of Econometrics*, 140(1), 131–154.
- Lara, L. (1954). *Documentos para la historia de la persecución religiosa en México*. Editorial Jus.
- Lessing, B. (2015). Logics of violence in criminal war. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59(8), 1486–1516.
- Ley, S., Mattiace, S., & Trejo, G. (2019). Indigenous resistance to criminal governance: Why regional ethnic autonomy institutions protect communities from Narco Rule in Mexico. *Latin American Research Review*, 54(1), 181–200.
- Ljunge, M. (2014). Trust issues: Evidence on the intergenerational trust transmission among children of immigrants. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 106, 175–196.
- Lupu, N., & Peisakhin, L. (2017). The legacy of political violence across generations. *American Journal of Political Science*, 61(4), 836–851.
- Magaloni, B., Robles, G., Matanock, A., Diaz-Cayeros, A., & Romero, V. (2019). Living in fear: The dynamics of extortion in Mexico's drug war. *Comparative Political Studies*, 53(7), 1124–1174.
- McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., & Tilly, C. (2001). *Dynamics of contention*. Cambridge University Press.
- Meyer, J. (1973). *La Cristiada. 1 -La Guerra de los Cristeros*. Siglo Veintiuno Editores.
- Meyer, J. (2003). *El Sinarquismo, el Cardenismo y la Iglesia*. Tusquest.
- Meyer, J. (2005). *La Iglesia Católica en México 1929-1965*. <https://cide.repositorio-institucional.mx/jspui/bitstream/1011/169/1/000060392documento.pdf>
- Mireles Valverde, J. M. (2017). *Todos somos autodefensas*. Grijalbo.
- Moncada, E. (2018). The politics of criminal victimization: Pursuing and resisting power. *Perspectives on Politics*, 18(3), 706–721.
- Mutolo, A. (2005). El Episcopado Mexicano Durante el Conflicto Religioso en México de 1926 a 1929. *Cuicuilco*, 12(35), 117–136.
- Mutolo, A. (2015). La Polarización del Episcopado Mexicano en la Firma de los Arreglos. In J. L. S. Fernández & Ó. C. Barney (Eds.), *Los Arreglos del Presidente Portes Gil con la Jerarquía Católica y el Fin de la Guerra Cristera. Aspectos Jurídicos e Históricos* (pp. 165–178). Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas.
- Nunn, N., & Wantchekon, L. (2011). The slave trade and the origins of mistrust in Africa. *American Economic Review*, 101(7), 3221–3252.
- Ochoa Salazar, Á. (1993). Tres Corridos Cristeros del Noreste Michoacano. *Relaciones*, 54, 153–165. <https://colmich.repositorioinstitucional.mx/jspui/bitstream/1016/57/1/OchoaAlvaro1993.pdf>

- O'Donnell, G. A. (1993). On the state, democratization, and some conceptual problems: A Latin American view with glances at some post-communist countries. *World Development*, 21(8), 1355–1369.
- Osorio, J. (2015). The contagion of drug violence: Spatiotemporal dynamics of the Mexican war on drugs. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 59(8), 1403–1432.
- Osorio, J., Mohamed, M., Pavon, V., & Brewer-Osorio, S. (2019). Mapping violent presence of armed actors in Colombia. *Advances of Cartography and GIScience of the International Cartographic Association*, 1(16), 1–9.
- Osorio, J., & Reyes, A. (2017). Supervised event coding from text written in Spanish: Introducing eventus ID. *Social Science Computer Review*, 35(3), 406–416.
- Osorio, J., Schubiger, L. I., & Weintraub, M. (2018a). Disappearing dissent? Repression and state consolidation in Mexico. *Journal of Peace Research*, 55(2), 252–266.
- Osorio, J., Schubiger, L., & Weintraub, M. (2018b). *Vigilante mobilization and local order: Evidence from Mexico* (Working Paper).
- Phillips, B. J. (2017). Inequality and the emergence of vigilante organizations: The case of Mexican autodefensas. *Comparative Political Studies*, 50(10), 1358–1389.
- Piras, G. (2010). sphet: Spatial models with heteroskedastic innovations in R. *Journal of Statistical Software*, 35(1), 1–21.
- Purnell, J. (1999). *Popular movements and state formation in revolutionary Mexico: The agraristas and Cristeros of Michoacán*. Duke University Press.
- Rea, D. (2012). *Entre las Cenizas: Historias de Vida en Tiempos de Muerte*. Sur+Ediciones.
- Rea, D. (2013). *El Pueblo en Rebeldía*. Gatopardo. <https://gatopardo.com/reportajes/el-pueblo-en-rebeldia/>
- Risse, T., & Stollenwerk, E. (2018). Legitimacy in Areas of Limited Statehood. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 21, 403–418.
- Rozenas, A., Schutte, S., & Zhukov, Y. (2017). The political legacy of violence: The long-term impact of Stalin's repression in Ukraine. *Journal of Politics*, 79(4), 1147–1161.
- Gavi, J. L. S. (2009). La fuerza de lo religioso y su expresión violenta. La rebelión cristera en el estado de Puebla, 1926–1940. *Ulúa. Revista de historia, sociedad y cultura*, 14, 121–165.
- Sánchez-Talanquer, M. (2018). *Legacies of revolution: Popular militias and the rule of law*. [https://sancheztalanquer.com/docs/militias\\_SanchezTalanquer.pdf](https://sancheztalanquer.com/docs/militias_SanchezTalanquer.pdf)
- Santamaría, G. (2019). Lynching and the politics of state formation in post-revolutionary Puebla (1930s–50s). *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 51(2), 499–521.
- Schönpflug, U. (Ed.). (2008). *Cultural transmission. Psychological, developmental, social and methodological aspects*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schubiger, L. I. (2020). State violence and wartime civilian agency: Evidence from Peru. *Journal of Politics*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1086/711720>

- Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública. (2015). *Incidencia Delictiva del Fuero Común*. <https://www.gob.mx/seasnsp/acciones-y-programas/incidencia-delictiva-87005>
- Shesterinina, A. (2016). Collective threat framing and mobilization in civil war. *American Political Science Review*, 110(3), 411–427.
- Sovey, A. J., & Green, D. P. (2011). Instrumental variables estimation in political science: A readers' guide. *American Journal of Political Science*, 55(1), 188–200.
- Sullivan, J. P., & Elkus, A. (2008). State of Siege: Mexico's criminal insurgency. *Small Wars Journal*, 12(4).
- Tarrow, S. G. (1998). *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- The Stanford Natural Language Processing Group. (2014). *Stanford named entity recognizer*. <http://nlp.stanford.edu/software/CRF-NER.shtml>
- Tilly, C. (1995). *Popular contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834*. Harvard University Press.
- Tilly, C. (2003). *The politics of collective violence*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tilly, C. (2005). *Trust and rule*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tuck, J. (1982). *The holy war in Los Altos: A regional analysis of Mexico's Cristero Rebellion*. University of Arizona Press.
- Vanderwood, P. J. (1992). *Disorder and progress: Bandits, police, and Mexican development*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Vargas Castillo, A. (2019). *The legacies of wartime rule in Colombia* (PhD dissertation).
- Villamil, F. (2020). Mobilizing memories: The social conditions of the long-term impact of victimization. *Journal of Peace Research*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343320912816>
- Waldinger, M. (2017). The long-run effects of missionary orders in Mexico. *Journal of Development Economics*, 127, 355–378.
- Weintraub, M., Vargas, J. F., & Flores, T. E. (2015). Vote choice and legacies of violence: Evidence from the 2014 Colombian presidential elections. *Research & Politics*, 2(2), 2053168015573348.
- Wolff, M. J. (2020). Insurgent vigilantism and drug war in Mexico. *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 12(1), 32–52.
- Wood, E. J. (2008). The social processes of civil war: The wartime transformation of social networks. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 11(1), 539–561.
- Wright-Rios, E. (2009). *Revolutions in Mexican Catholicism: Reform and revelation in Oaxaca, 1887–1934*. Duke University Press.
- Young, J. G. (2015). *Mexican exodus: Emigrants, exiles, and refugees of the cristero war*. Oxford University Press.
- Zhukov, Y. M., & Talibova, R. (2018). Stalin's terror and the long-term political effects of mass repression. *Journal of Peace Research*, 55(2):267–283.

## Author Biographies

**Javier Osorio** is an Assistant Professor in the School of Government and Public Policy at the University of Arizona. His articles have been published in the *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *International Interactions*, among other outlets.

**Livia Isabella Schubiger** is the Douglas and Ellen Lowey Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Duke University. Her articles have been published or are forthcoming in the *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, among other outlets.

**Michael Weintraub** is an Associate Professor in the Escuela de Gobierno at Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, and he directs the Security and Violence Area of the Center for the Study of Security and Drugs at the same university. His articles have been published or are forthcoming in the *Journal of Politics*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, among other outlets.