An Investigation into Mexican Communism: How did the ideological shift between the presidencies of authoritarian Plutarco Elías Calles and his successor, leftist Lázaro Cárdenas, highlight the effectiveness of the PCM's pseudo-Marxist movement (1924-1940)?

IB Candidate Code: kfm664

IB History HL

May 2023

Total Word Count: 2199

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A - Identification and Evaluation of Sources

The members of the Mexican Communist Party (PCM) were not simply Bolshevik puppets or Trotskyist militants. In their glory days, they were a temporarily-illegal, ideologically-robust political movement that found its democratic-socialist niche between working-class communism and anti-imperialist libertarians.[1] Leading protests against Laborists, purporting Cárdenas' 1930s land redistribution efforts, and redefining the perspective on the bourgeois revolution were just some of its early-century triumphs that defied the socialist status quo of totalitarianism.[2] This paper will examine the subsequent question: **How did the ideological shift between the presidencies of authoritarian Plutarco Elías Calles and his successor, leftist Lázaro Cárdenas, highlight the effectiveness of the PCM's pseudo-Marxist ideas (1924-1940)?**

Source One

In Chapter 20 of "Los intelectuales y el poder en México" (1991), Barry Carr evaluated the differences between missionized Bolshevik communism and the altered more-libertarian Marxist ideas that thrived in 1930s Mexico.[3] Barry Carr is a Marxist historian for LTU-Austrilia and a visiting professor at UC Berkeley **(Origin/Context)**.[4] Carr's purpose was to offer insight and an alternative perspective on Mexican communism in a historiography field that, as he states, has been unevenly covered by Western writers who present only concerns regarding the PCM's

[1] Carr, Barry. "The Development Of Communism And Marxism In Mexico.: A Historiographical Essay." In Los Intelectuales y El Poder En México: Memorias de La VI Conferencia de Historiadores Mexicanos y Estadounidenses = Intellectuals and Power in Mexico, edited by Roderic A. Camp, Charles A. Hale, and Josefina Zoraida Vázquez, 1st ed., 75:377–94. Colegio de Mexico, 1991. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv513805.23.
[2] Schmitt, Karl M.. Communism in Mexico: A Study in Political Frustration. New York, USA: University of Texas Press, 1965. https://doi.org/10.7560/731950
[3] Barry Carr, "Barry Carr | La Trobe University - Academia.edu," latrobe.academia.edu, accessed January 19, 2023, https://latrobe.academia.edu/BarryCarr.
[4] Ibid.

evolving cultural Marxism **(Purpose)**.[5] The value of Carr's nuanced evaluation of the PCM is that it emphasized the disillusionment of Mexican establishment political rhetoric and the reactionary nature of Mexican leaders that led to the communist-alignment-by-force of agrarian workers **(Value)**. A **limitation** of the source is the lack of documentation and specific biographical data from the period. While Carr produced a scholarly and novel look at the intricacies between tamed Mexican Marxism and other preconceptions of timely communism, he failed, due to a dearth of available accounts, to explain the origins of crucial PCM leaders and the underlying interwoven experiences that formed the disdain for the inequity behind the Mexican Revolution **(Limitation)**.

Source Two

In the Journal of Latin American Studies article "Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?" (1994) Alan Knight evaluated the evolution of support within the PCM for Cárdenas and his pseudo-Marxism throughout the course of his presidency. Knight is a historian of Latin America and a former professor at the University of Oxford **(Origin/Context)**.[6] Knight's purpose was to explain how Cárdenas, in an attempt to maintain his ousting of Calles, had to appeal to a "spurious radicalism" that conformed to much of the dirigisme and collectivism that had been preached by the PCM leading up to the 1930s **(Purpose)**.[7] The value of Knight's unique focus on Cárdenas' power-driven leftism is that it emphasizes the political corruption of both Calles and Cárdenas whose policies were more an appeal to populism, in Cárdenas' case the workers' movement of the PCM, as opposed to grounded agendas.[8] This approach would expand public

[5] "Barry Carr | La Trobe University - Academia.edu,".
[6] "Professor Alan Knight," www.area-studies.ox.ac.uk, accessed January 20, 2023, https://www.area-studies.ox.ac.uk/people/professor-alan-knight.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

distaste for socialism and grant conservatives greater power in the 1940s **(Value)**.[9] A **limitation** of the source is that it lacks the necessary primary sourcing to discern its inferred motives such as whether Cárdenas was pressured or persuaded toward his communist experiment **(Limitation).**

Word Count: 492

[9] "Professor Alan Knight,"

B - Investigation

The 1910 Revolution and Mexican Communism

The problem with the 1910 Mexican Revolution was that Francisco Madero did not have propaganda-driven longevity, ideological composition, or factional control of later-decade, fellow-revolutionary Vladimir Lenin.[10] His upper-class democratic idealism faced little scrutiny when he distributed revolutionary manuscripts (Plan de San Luis Potosí) and raided garrisons[11] in a bloody revolt against Díaz's dictatorship of wealthy landowners and U.S-industrialists.[12] Yet, when Madero was elected to the presidency after President Díaz resigned (1911), his economic reforms were too elitist and his weak government spurred U.S.-backed intervention. Madero's do-nothing radicalism would define the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) as it became an endless power struggle between dictators and an anarchical populace.[13]

Following the Russian Revolution, Lenin's First Comintern Congress sent Bolshevik organizer Mikhail Borodin to foster communist support among Mexico's political factions.[14] During this exhibition, Borodin met Indian-nationalist and founder of the failed 1917 Mexican Socialist Workers' Party (PSO), M.N. Roy.[15] In the Summer of 1920, Borodin sent Roy to the Second Comintern Congress where he brought the Latin American perspective to the forefront of European socialism.[16] Roy debated and compromised with Lenin over the imperialist implications of a national bourgeoisie. Afterward, Lenin suggested the PSO suffered from a

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[10] Womack, John. "Francisco Madero and the Mexican Revolution". Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969.
[11] Madero's, Francisco. n.d. "The Rise of Francisco Madero - The Mexican Revolution and the United States | Exhibitions." Library of Congress. Accessed February 17, 2023. https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/mexican-revolution-and-the-united-states/rise-of-madero.html.
[12] Katz, Friedrich. The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, the United States, and the Mexican Revolution. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1981
[13] Knight, Alan. "The Mexican Revolution". Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
[14] Ibid
[15] M. N. Roy's Memoirs (Bombay, 1964); Manuel Gómez, "From Mexico to Moscow," Survey, no. 53 (October 1964); for the interview with Woog see Oposición, no. 58, October 15-31, 1973, pp. 19-20.
[16] Botz, Dan La. 2018. "The Communist International, the Soviet Union and Their Impact on the Workers' Movement in Latin America". World Tensions 13 (24): 82. https://doi.org/10.33956/tensoesmundiais.v13i24.360.

failure to recognize Mexico's rural-indigenous proletariat and proposed the creation of leftist *peasant soviets* to ease internal anarchy.[17] With this new strategy for communist expansion, the PSO reformed into the Mexican Communist Party (PCM) and forged a new democratic-socialism pinned between American industrialism and lingering revolutionary authoritarians.[18,19]

[17] Ibid., 82-84.
[18] Schmítt, 4-5.
[19] Botz, 85.

The Rise, Resentment, and Failures of Calles

Following the presidency of Obregón, Plutarco Elías Calles, the latest reformist-strongman president, sought to end the cycle of anarchy with his"Laborist" Party of unions he electorally garnered as Secretario del Interior.[20] After his election, he enforced authoritarian stability that relied on the agrarian capitalist state, as opposed to the PCM's proposed industrial nationalization. Inspired by Germany's post-WWI social democracy, he ensured support through populist rhetoric, the expulsion of factional opposition, and *Callismo* ("big capital in alliance with imperialism") propaganda.[21,22,23,24]

As Calles' list of enemies grew, leftist-PCM labor groups developed a strong populist backbone.[25] The PCM's odd alignment with peasant Mexican Catholics was a result of a larger disagreement with Calles' anticlericalistic, socialist interpretation of the 1917 Constitution.[26] Through this mandate, Calles restricted religious practice, strengthened his Confidential Department of Intelligence, and seized Catholic property.[27] This struggle eventually escalated into the *Cristero* War (1926-1929) that claimed 100,000 lives and internationally humiliated

[20] Womack, "The Mexican Revolution", p. 200
[21]Buchenau, Jürgen, and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. "Plutarco Elías Calles and Revolutionary-Era Populism in Mexico." In Populism in Twentieth Century Mexico: The Presidencies of Lázaro Cárdenas and Luis Echeverría, edited by Amelia M. Kiddle and María L. O. Muñoz, 38–57. University of Arizona Press, 2010. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2qnx5q4.8.
[22] De los Santos, René Agustín. "'The Future of Our History': Rhetorics of Transformation and Power in Plutarco Elías Calles' 1928 'Informe.'" Rhetoric Society Quarterly 45, no. 3 (2015): 199–211. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24753672
[23] Mendez, Jean. "The Anti-Calles Drive in Mexico (August 1935)," August 1935. https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/ni/vol02/no05/mendez.htm.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Botz, 82-84.
[26] Young, Julia G. "The Calles Government and Catholic Dissidents: Mexico's Transnational Projects of Repression, 1926–1929." The Americas 70, no. 1 (2013): 63–91. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26361022.
[27] Ibid., 65-66.

Mexico.[28,29,30,31,32,33] This alliance, although hypocritically anti-communist, gave the PCM a foothold of support within the peasantry and poked holes in Calles' illusion of imperialist/capitalist prosperity. This conflict ultimately shifted the public disdain not toward socialist policy, but rather toward Calles himself. Later, Western Orthodox historian Hannah Arendt would associate Calles' repressive "stability" with totalitarianism akin to that of Nazi Germany.[34] But even historians lacked the regional PCM insight necessary to explain how Arendt's glorified "bourgeois-democratic societies" imposed the very capitalist foreign practices that permitted the proletariat persecution of *Callismo.*[35,36] These movements added to a growing Anti-Calles drive that combated bourgeoisie capital with an almost "No True Scotsman" populism.[37]

By 1927, the Calles administration had done little to disrupt the Mexican oil industry, of which 75% was controlled by foreign investors (e.g. Standard Oil), or corrupt corporate landowners. Eroding Calles' initial columns of support, exploited industrial workers unionized into the PCM-aligned Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM) and National Peasant Confederation (CNC). They protested Veracruz's poor working conditions/wages in the

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[28] Van Hove, Brian (1994). "Blood-Drenched Altars". Faith & Reason. Eternal Word Television Network.
[29] Ibid., 69.
[30] Meyer, Jean A (2013). *La Cristiada: the Mexican people's war for religious liberty*. Garden City Park, NY: Square One Publishers. p. 153. ISBN 978-0-7570-0315-8. OCLC 298184204
[31] Olszyk, Nick. 2012. "The Story, Martyrs, and Lessons of the Cristero War." Catholic World Report. https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2012/06/01/the-story-martyrs-and-lessons-of-the-cristero-war/.
[32] Young, 69-75
[33] Young, 98
[34] Botz., 69-70.
[35] Mendez.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Manninen, T.W. (2018). No True Scotsman. In Bad Arguments (eds R. Arp, S. Barbone and M. Bruce). https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119165811.ch91

Oil Workers' Strike (1927) and rebelled against Morelo landowners in the Escobar Rebellion (1929).[38,39,40,41,42,43]

Rebels gather around a machine gun captured from Mexican troops in Juarez during the Escobar Rebellion (March 1929)[44]

Such assaults on the integrity of Calles-backed state governments fostered greater distrust amongst increasingly-Marxist workers. In addition, these protests disrupted key imperialist industries. While the Escobar Rebellion highlighted the abuses of human rights under Calles' crackdowns, the oil strikes muckraked the awful treatment of workers facilitated by foreign capitalist powers. By finally curating Lenin's vision of *peasant soviets*, the PCM grew in collective support.[45,46]

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[38] Mexican Government. "Report on the Oil Industry." Mexico City: Government Printing Office, 1927.
[39] Meyer, Lorenzo. "The Birth of a New Industry: American and British Oil Interests in Mexico, 1917-1931." Journal of Latin American Studies 21, no. 1 (1989): 109-130.
[40] Knight, Alan. "Popular Culture and the Revolutionary State in Mexico, 1910-1940." Hispanic American Historical Review 74, no. 3 (1994): 393-445.
[41] Camp, Roderic Ai. "Mexican Political Biographies, 1884-1935." Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982.
[42] Ragsdale, Kenneth Baxter (2010). Wings over the Mexican Border: Pioneer Military Aviation in the Big Bend. University of Texas. ISBN 0292787812.
[43] Fagen, Patricia W. "Labor and the Mexican Revolution: The Oil Workers of the Gulf Coast." Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989.
[44] "Three Days in March: El Paso, the U.S. Army, and the Escobar Revolution of 1929 – the Campaign for the National Museum of the United States Army." n.d. Accessed March 13, 2023. https://armyhistory.org/three-days-march-el-paso-u-s-army-escobar-revolution-1929/.
[45] Fagen.
[46] Botz, 83

Banning the PCM and its Lasting Role in Maximato

After his formal presidency ended in 1928, Calles, restricted by constitutional limitations on consecutive terms, stepped down to *de facto* executive as his successors, presidents Gil, Rubio, and Rodríguez, were all politically allegiant to the Calles-led National Revolutionary Party (PNR).[47,48] The following six-year period of phantom authoritarianism was titled *Maximato* after Calles's presence as *el Jefe Máximo*.[49]

With the PCM outlawed by Calles (1925) and the Great Depression on the horizon, Mexican communists led revolts, organized strikes, and launched agrarian peasant campaigns that granted further publicity to Marxist reform.[50] Leading member of the PCM, CROM, and later-founder of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), Vicente Toledano, would emerge during the *Maximato* as an important reformist.[51]

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[47] Meyer, Lorenzo, Rafael Segovia, Alejandra Lajous, LORENZO MEYER, RAFAEL SEGOVIA, and ALEJANDRA LAJOUS. "EL MAXIMATO." In Historia de La Revolución Mexicana, Período 1928-1934: Los Inicios de La Institucionalización : La Política Del Maximato, 1st ed., 12:85–188. Colegio de Mexico, 1978. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv233nmh.5. (Written in Spanish)
[48] "MEXICO: Solution Without Blood". Time. 20 April 1936. Archived from the original on 25 November 2011.
[49] Meyer, Lorenzo, and Michael C. Meyer. "El Jefe Máximo." In Mexico and the United States, edited by Lee Stacy, 195-216. University of Georgia Press, 2003.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Connell-Smith, Gordon. "The Mexican Revolution and the Vicente Lombardo Toledano Papers." The Americas 67, no. 3 (2011): 345-368.

Vicente Toledano (in the middle) at a CTM protest for Cardenas' economic and political independence.[52]

His youthful appeal and striking-pressure forced Callista-President Gil to concede both curricular autonomies to the University of Mexico and rail union recognition for over 100,000 workers all between 1929 and 1930.[53,54,55] Toledano defied the dogmatic view of Trotskyists, like Bulgarian essayist Christian Rakovsky, who believed the global communism had fallen to an "unremovable and inviolate oligarchy". Toledano's strategy of forcing concessions by disrupting institutions marked the beginning of a larger breakdown in Callista hardline policy. PCM's Mexican youth, especially those at the University of Mexico, began perceiving the Calles presidency as a betrayal of the revolution and occupied their birthright to Mexico's political future with relentless persistence.[56]

[52] "Memoria Política de México." n.d. Www.memoriapoliticademexico.org. Accessed March 14, 2023. https://www.memoriapoliticademexico.org/Biografias/LTV94.html.
[53] Burke, Michael E. "The University of Mexico and the Revolution, 1910-1940." The Americas, vol. 34, no. 2, 1977, pp. 252–73. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/981357. Accessed 17 Feb. 2023.
[54] Ibid., 265-266.
[55] Pozas, Ricardo. "El Movimiento Ferrocarrilero de 1930." Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1975. (Written in Spanish)
[56] Burke, 265.

While large-scale PCM protests placed pressure on the national government, Governor Adalberto Tejada used this instability to implement grassroots agrarian reform in Veracruz.[57,58] His small-scale reform established agrarian judiciaries/courts for land disputes, negotiation unions, and pathways for peasant land ownership/redistribution.[59] Most importantly, he encouraged peasants to form *ejidos* (communal farms) to collectivize their labor. By the end of his term in 1932, 94.3% of Veracruz municipalities had applied for *ejidal* lands.[60] Although the PCM expedited the collapse of *Maximato*, pioneers like Governor Tejada demonstrated that Marxist policies were more than the false promises of Calles and that real agrarian reform could modernize Mexico's rural communities.

[57] Connell-Smith.
[58] Ginzberg, Eitan. "State Agrarianism versus Democratic Agrarianism: Adalberto Tejeda's Experiment in Veracruz, 1928-32." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30, no. 2 (1998): 341–72. http://www.jstor.org/stable/158529.
[59] Ginzberg, Eitan. "Formación de La Infraestructura Política Para Una Reforma Agraria Radical: Adalberto Tejeda y La Cuestión Municipal En Veracruz, 1928-1932." *Historia Mexicana* 49, no. 4 (2000): 673–727. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25139299. (Written in Spanish)
[60] Ginzberg 1998, 351.

The New Direction of Cárdenas and his Socialist Redefinition to the Revolution

The lingering power of Calles, which had been eroding through each changing *Maximato* executive, ended with the 1934 presidential election of General Lázaro Cárdenas. Although Cárdenas began his term as an apparent Calles-loyalist, his ideology vastly differed from that of *Callismo* in that he viewed socialism as more than just electoral rhetoric.[61,62,63] Although he did not agree with communist absolutism, he cited Marxist policies as he spoke of his "workers' democracy" built upon a peasant-owned social-capital economy.[64,65]

Cárdenas' presidency (1934-1940) represented a definite shift in Mexican domestic policy that embodied years of PCM efforts.[66,67] This change was exemplified through Cárdenas' expulsion of Callistas, resurrection of socialist voices, and incorporation of Tejadan-agrarian reforms. Previously, Marxists were painted as opportunists who sought to dismantle *Maximato* stability.[68] Under Cárdenas, spheres of leftist discourse were reopened.[69] In 1935, the PCM was formally unbanned.[70] In 1936, Cárdenas used Calles' originally-anticleric intelligence network to involve Calles' in a railroad bombing conspiracy and deport him to the United States.[71] This swift deposition of Calles and his league of Callistas set the tone for his presidency. He would not be marred by foreign capitalists or empathetic to the ignorance that had disenfranchised the working class. As Latin-Communist Hernan Laborde accounted at the 1935 Communist

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[61] 6
[62] Cline, *United States and Mexico*, p. 217.
[63] Mendez.
[64] Weston, Charles H. "The Political Legacy of Lázaro Cárdenas." *The Americas* 39, no. 3 (1983): 383–405. doi:10.2307/981231.
[65] Ibid, 386.
[66] Ibid, 389.
[67] Tuck, Jim. "Mr. Clean: the phenomenon of Lázaro Cárdenas (1895–1970) : Mexico History". Mexconnect.com.
[68] Schmitt, 7-15.
[69] Ibid., 16.
[70] Knight, Alan. "Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?" Journal of Latin American Studies 26, no. 1 (1994): 73–107. http://www.jstor.org/stable/157859.
[71] "MEXICAN COUP". Weekly Times. No. 3577. Victoria, Australia. 18 April 1936. p. 9 (FIRST EDITION). – via National Library of Australia.

International Congress, the PCM's original disdain for Cárdenas, embodied in their "Neither with Calles nor with Cárdenas" campaign, was slowly revised upon his unexpected liberation of Marxist voices and opposition toward the "bourgeois-landward cliques" that prevented earlier reform.[72,73]

A linocut (depiction) of President Lázaro Cárdenas and his implementation of agrarian reform through the ejidal system[74]

The two-decade-long focus of the PCM on the proletariat of peasant workers and indigenous farmers came to fruition within Cárdenas' systematic reforms.[75,76] With the old Callista guard removed, Cárdenas expanded earlier PCM experiments.[77] With the full backing of Toledano's worker unions, Cárdenas nationalized the Mexican oil industry (1938) and constitutionalized Tejada's *ejidal* system. Through adhering to the needs of the peasantry and

[72] Laborde, Hernan. "The Communist: A Magazine of the Theory and Practice of Marxism-Leninism," January 1936. 72-83. https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/communist/v15n01-jan-1936-communist.pdf.
[73] Laborde, 74.
[74] Bastar, Luis. 1947. "Lázaro Cárdenas and the Agrarian Reform, 1934–40 (Lázaro Cárdenas Y La Reforma Agraria, 1934-1940) | LACMA Collections." Collections.lacma.org. 1947. https://collections.lacma.org/node/207536.
[75] Schmitt, 16-19.
[76] Weston, 389.
[77] "MEXICAN COUP" 1936.

reclaiming imperialist wealth, his populist action portrayed the effectiveness of long-term union-building and the regional development of Marxist ideas.[78,79,80,81]

The PCM's Bubble of Ideological Independence

The early Mexican Communist Party, although conflicted in its rise to influence, was less a puppet for its forefathers in Moscow and more a collective sphere of natively-Mexican socialist voices that praised action over appeasement.[82] Throughout the *Maximato* period and leading into the Cárdenas presidency, the PCM, and Mexico along with it, moved away from Stalinist-Callista authoritarian enforcement and sought a democratic means to nationalize industrial development.[83] While other leaders retrofitted the ethos of the "Revolution" to match their political ambition, the PCM pushed for reformists like Cárdenas to meet populism with purposeful action.[84] As Lenin had originally theorized to Roy, Marxist success in Mexico was reliant upon leaders that galvanized the deeper proletariat of indigenous working peasants, fended off foreign interests, and embraced Mexican-controlled business.[85]

Word Count: 1429

[78] Aguilar García, Javier. "Luis Napoleón Morones", in *Encyclopedia of Mexico*, vol. 2, p. 955. Chicago: Fitzroy and Dearborn 1997.
[79] Maurer, Noel (2011). "The Empire Struck Back: Sanctions and Compensation in the Mexican Oil Expropriation of 1938". The Journal of Economic History. 71 (3): 590–615. doi:10.1017/S0022050711001859. ISSN 0022-0507. S2CID 153774511.
[80] "Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?" 1994, 82.
[81] Ibid., 82, 90.
[82] Schmitt, 11-14.
[83] Mendez.
[84] Knight 1994, 98-101.
[85] Botz, 82-84.

C - Reflection

While translating Spanish Archivo General documents and Communist International proceedings in an effort to expand my understanding of PCM impact, I was confronted with many of the same **methods**, **challenges**, and **limitations** historians face as they challenge consensus perspectives while maintaining, in the best cases, a higher objectivity. One of the **methods** I used to bridge the gaps in my research on the early PCM was to consult Communist International publications, as opposed to often unsourced/uncredited native sources, for specific names of communist missionaries, ideological leaders, and party leaders. One key document on the nature of PCM founder M.N. Roy's debates with Lenin over the critical differences between communism in Europe and Latin America provided early personalized context to historian Barry Carr's broader description of Mexican Communism.[86,87] By using these **sourcing methods**, I used a secondary **method** of identifying consistent figures present throughout the scope of my study (1924-1940), like Vicente Toledano, whose historical protest contributions had clear implications on later Cárdenas policy.

In other instances, this solution of connecting primary sources to contextualize scholarly sources posed a **challenge** to my research. With conflicting records of party hierarchies during Cárdenas presidency and many different opinionated unions, it was often hard to tell if one strike or perceived event was consistent with the consensus opinion. This proved to be a significant **limitation** to the efficient essay structure necessary to present a focused argument on the effectiveness of the PCM's campaign. Instead of trying to define the motives of the disjointed PCM as a whole, I followed communist philosophy and policies, such as the ejidal system, as they gained popularity, and ultimately passage, during Cardenas' rise to power.

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[86] Botz, 82-84.
[87] Carr.

Word Count: 278

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