

# **The Two Californias During World War II**

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# The Two Californias

## During World War II

By MICHAEL MATHES

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THE RELATIONSHIP OF California to Mexico is unique. California has the highest Mexican population of any area outside of Mexico, and ties with Baja California are very strong due to a long history of tourism and economic exchange. During the post-World War I period, millions of Californians availed themselves of gambling, drinking, hunting and fishing, and beach facilities in Baja California. Furthermore, manufactured articles, machinery, automobiles, gasoline and oil, and many basic staples were shipped into the duty-free zone of Baja California from Los Angeles and San Diego to supply the rapidly growing towns of Tijuana, Ensenada, and Mexicali, as well as the rural areas. Defense co-operation, however, was as yet untried, and, due to a long history of diplomatic and military conflict between the United States and Mexico, was considered by many as untenable.

Prior to World War II, a Mexican naval base had been established at Isla Margarita on Bahía Magdalena, as had a naval station at Bahía Pichilingue, along with five airfields of commercial length, all in Baja California.<sup>1</sup> These bases formed the nucleus for the defense of the area, and were open to the temporary use of United States vessels and aircraft.<sup>2</sup>

It is then not surprising that many in Mexico as well as in the United States felt misgivings when it was announced, on September 11, 1941, that President Manuel Avila Camacho had given his consent to the right wing, allegedly Nazi sympathizing, Unión Nacional Sinarquista (UNS) to found a colony on Bahía Magdalena, notwithstanding the planned enlargement of the naval base located there.<sup>3</sup> Following the Japanese attack on the United States, and the declaration of war by that

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nation, fear of invasion of the West Coast was foremost in the minds of the people of both Californias. Despite this fear, the UNS colony, *María Auxiliadora*, was founded on December 12 by four hundred and fifty colonists under Salvador Abascal.<sup>4</sup>

In order to fortify Baja California against possible attack or sabotage, General Lázaro Cárdenas was recalled from retirement on December 10, and appointed commandant of the Pacific Zone. Although Mexico had not declared war against the enemies of the United States, Cárdenas immediately ordered the reinforcement of troops in Baja California;<sup>5</sup> and, disembarking at Nogales, Sonora, two battalions of fifteen hundred troops were moved by train to San Diego, California, and thence to Tijuana, Baja California.<sup>6</sup>

This immediate defensive action came none too early. Since the declaration of war by the United States on Japan, the Japanese Association of Baja California had increased activity following their November meeting at which a letter from Hideki Tojo was read by Military Attaché Captain Hamaka.<sup>7</sup> This activity, due to the large number of Japanese, both in Mexicali and Ensenada, along with those operating fishing boats along the coast, led to a close vigilance being placed on Baja California by Mexican air and sea patrols.<sup>8</sup>

This defense co-operation with the United States for the protection of the West Coast, notwithstanding Mexico's neutrality, was greatly appreciated in California. Following the announcement of the patrol and fortification of Baja California, Senator Sheridan Downey stated before the Senate that "Mexico today gives us proof for the righteousness of our course. Mexico could have seriously endangered our military position in this war."<sup>9</sup> Soon thereafter Cárdenas optimistically reported from Ensenada that there were no Japanese bases or hideaways in Baja California.<sup>10</sup>

Following this announcement, however, on January 2, 1942, Presidents Manuel Avila Camacho and Franklin D. Roosevelt, by executive agreement, set up the Mexico-United States Defense Board to study defense problems.<sup>11</sup> Following the creation of this board, nine Mexican air patrols began daily operation in the Pacific from Isla de Cedros northward, and Mexican gunboats protected United States minefields along the coast.<sup>12</sup>

Due to the severance of Mexico's diplomatic relations with Japan the

preceding December 8, all Japanese along the Mexican coast were ordered to move one hundred kilometers inland between December 31 and January 15.<sup>13</sup> This time limit was extended, however, and defense measures were given priority planning.

Following his defense conference with the governors of Baja California, Sonora, Sinaloa, Nayarit, Jalisco, Michoacán, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Chiapas, held in Mazatlán from January 18 to 20,<sup>14</sup> Cárdenas went to San Diego where from January 23 to 28 he attended joint conferences on defense. The results of these conferences were strict controls on fishing, joint air and sea patrols north of Mazatlán, and daily reports to San Francisco by Colonel Luis Amalillo Flores, military attaché in Washington.<sup>15</sup> In Baja California, regular troops and one thousand volunteer militia, all under orders from General Macías Valenzuela, were assigned to the construction of roads, telephones and telegraph lines, and gun emplacements. To serve as a command post and civil defense center, the Hotel Riviera del Pacífico in Ensenada was taken over as an emergency measure.<sup>16</sup>

Reports from these newly established Baja California defense stations of Japanese aircraft and submarines along the California coast in February of 1942 brought a new surge of military activity in Baja California. Following many days of intensive patrol, Cárdenas reported that neither submarines nor aircraft had used Baja California as a base; however vigilance and restrictions would be increased.<sup>17</sup> The results were the arrest of eighteen Japanese within the one hundred kilometer restricted zone and the surveillance of firms on the United States Proscribed List of Certain Blocked Nationals.<sup>18</sup>

Notwithstanding active co-operation with the United States throughout the early months of 1942, Mexico had remained cautious regarding formal commitment to the conflict. However, following the torpedoing of the Pemex tankers *Potrero del Llano* on May 15 and *Faja de Oro* on May 20, the question of war was placed before the National Congress. On June 1 following a near unanimous vote, President Manuel Avila Camacho decreed that "The United Mexican States are found in a State of War with Germany, Italy, and Japan."<sup>19</sup>

The result of this decree was a state of emergency in the entire nation. Concern over political ideology became greater in both Californias. The right wing UNS had gained a foothold in California and

membership was reported to be as high as fifty thousand.<sup>20</sup> On August 12 Guy Nunn of the War Manpower Commission, speaking in Los Angeles, accused the UNS of criminal and Fifth Column activity, and thus notified the residents of California of the existence of the organization.<sup>21</sup>

Much of the rise of the UNS in California can be attributed to the militancy of the members of that group among the new immigration of Mexican Nationals brought about by the Convention on Contracting Mexican Laborers to be Employed in Agriculture in the United States of August 4. This agreement called for the contracting of seventy-five thousand agricultural workers (*braceros*).<sup>22</sup> On September 29 fifteen hundred workers, the first under this unique agreement, arrived in California.<sup>23</sup>

The initiation of the bracero program was a high point in Mexican co-operation with the United States, and promotion of further co-operative efforts came in a speech given in Spanish by Vice President Henry Wallace on September 16 in Los Angeles. Wallace spoke of a "kinship" of California and Mexico, and called for strong unity of action.<sup>24</sup>

This unity was forthcoming, and by December, 1942, Mexican air-force officers were attending courses at March Field, California, and plans for greater security were in preparation.<sup>25</sup> Along with training, to enable both nations to build a stronger military force, an agreement allowing the reciprocal conscription of resident nationals was signed January 22, 1943. This agreement exempted students and border crossers, and guaranteed equal benefits and rights.<sup>26</sup>

These manifestations of the Good Neighbor Policy were strengthened by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's visit with President Manuel Avila Camacho on April 20 in Monterrey, Nuevo León.<sup>27</sup> The visit had been preceded by the christening of liberty ships in commemoration of great Mexican patriots. In Wilmington, California, on April 14, the *Miguel Hidalgo*, built by the California Shipbuilding Corporation, was christened by the wife of General Felipe Rico, commandant of the Second Military Zone, Ensenada, Baja California.<sup>28</sup>

Countering this goodwill between nations were the zoot-suit riots of June 4 through 7 in Los Angeles. In these riots many Mexican-Americans were beaten by United States servicemen, and soon the problem of

conflict spread to San Diego and other areas. Little was done to right the wrongs done to the innocent due to the formation of public opinion by the local press and public officials. A tendency toward anti-Mexican feelings and extremist patriotism was evidenced by articles in the Los Angeles *Times*, *Examiner*, *Herald Express*, and *Daily News* which were strongly biased toward the United States servicemen and tended to group all Mexicans by generalities. Mayor Fletcher Bowron and Chief of Police C. B. Horrall tended to be apathetic and remained silent in regard to the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Office "Ayers Report" which attributed the cause of the riots to "biological" tendencies of the Mexican-American. Laws prohibiting the wearing of zoot-suits were passed; however danger remained due to public opinion. Protests from Minister Rafael de Colina and Ambassador Francisco Castillo Nájera, nevertheless, sobered the Los Angeles officials and press.<sup>29</sup>

Much of the basis for the riots was blamed upon UNS activity, and Inspector General of Mexican Consulates in the United States, Adolfo de la Huerta, notwithstanding a lack of evidence, fully blamed the UNS and other right wing groups.<sup>30</sup> Baltasar Luna in Los Angeles and Antonio Martínez in San Francisco were reported as UNS leaders, but they apparently had no part in the riots. More highly fanatical left wing organs went so far as to accuse Ignacio E. Lozano, publisher of the Los Angeles Mexican daily, *La Opinión*, and the Catholic diocesan newspaper, *The Tidings*, of supporting Nazism which the leftists held to be equal with Sinarquismo.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the social and political controversy which came about due to the rising Mexican population, the continuing influx of braceros brought needed aid to California. By the fall of 1943, some 233,000 braceros had come to the state, and contracts for more were continually being drawn up.<sup>32</sup> The bracero had also branched from agricultural labor,<sup>33</sup> and 3,325 men, 72 percent of the track force, were employed by the Southern Pacific Railroad.<sup>34</sup>

As with the conservation of labor through braceros, Mexico and the United States were also interested in the conservation of natural resources and increased production. The Treaty for the Utilization of the Waters of the Colorado, Tijuana, and Rio Grande rivers was, however, also the result of a long legal conflict between California and Mexico over the Colorado River.<sup>35</sup> The treaty, nevertheless, allowed Baja Cali-

fornia to receive an adequate amount of water, and the conflict was ended on February 3, 1944.<sup>36</sup> As a result of the provisions of the treaty, new irrigation works were jointly constructed along the Colorado River, and the Rodríguez Dam on the Tijuana River was completed.<sup>37</sup>

The water treaty brought a new growth of agriculture in the north of Baja California; however agricultural attempts by the UNS, lacking any form of support, were waning. In June Salvador Abascal, founder of María Auxiliadora, separated from the party; however he remained with the colony.<sup>38</sup> His attempts to retain a following in Baja California failed nevertheless, for his colony had only cultivated sixty hectares; and of the 450 original settlers, only 246 remained.<sup>39</sup>

The labors of the braceros in the United States were, on the other hand, highly successful. By the fall of 1944, some 63,348 braceros were at work in the United States, and 115,000 had been contracted in addition to 50,137 railroad workers contracted.<sup>40</sup>

Mexican Nationals in the United States military service had also distinguished themselves as recipients of the Silver Star, Soldier's Medal, and Purple Heart.<sup>41</sup> Many of the 13,632 men serving by 1944 were killed, missing, or wounded in the European and Pacific theaters.<sup>42</sup> Mexico as a nation also contributed in December of 1944 by sending an airforce squadron to the Philippine Islands.

As World War II neared its end, preparations were made for the adjustments of peacetime. Following the Chapultepec Conference in Mexico, D.F., the Conference of the United Nations was called in San Francisco, California. Being a signatory to the Atlantic Charter<sup>43</sup> and a combatant in World War II entitled Mexico to the privileges accorded to such a nation, and on April 22, 1945, Secretary of Foreign Relations Ezequiel Padilla, along with Ministers Manuel Tello and Francisco Castillo Nájera, were received in San Francisco.<sup>44</sup> On June 26, 1945, the Mexican delegation signed the Charter of the United Nations and joined the co-operative effort for peace.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, for Mexico, World War II had formally ended; however co-operation between the two nations and between the two Californias had not ceased. A major cause for contention, water distribution, had, for the time, been solved, and California found a greater need for Baja California's co-operation through the continuation of the bracero program. Due to wartime need and population growth, Baja California

found a greater economic dependence on California, but, because of wartime improvements in roads and accommodations, Californians increased their travel and expenditures in Baja California. Furthermore, the development of Baja California agriculture has found a complement in a ready market in California. The postwar years have witnessed a continuation of co-operation originally caused by wartime necessity which remains strong between the two Californias.

NOTES

1. *Seis Años de Gobierno al Servicio de México 1934-1940*, Secretaría de Gobernación (México, 1940), pp. 92, 415.

2. "Mexico Goes to War," *Scholastic*, 41 (14 Sept. 1942), 15; see also *New York Times*, 1 Jan. 1942, p. 51.

3. Eduardo J. Correa, *El Balance del Avila Camachismo* (Mexico, 1946), pp. 77, 88-90. The Chamber of Deputies called for revocation of the permit on 14 October 1941; however, it was upheld by the Senate two days later. See also *New York Times*, 13 Sept. 1941, p. 6, and 15 Oct. 1941, p. 9; also, Mario Gill, *Sinarquismo* (2nd ed.; México, 1944), p. 163.

4. Gill, *op. cit.*, p. 515.

5. Correa, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

6. "Teamwork in Mexico," *Time*, XXXVIII (29 Dec. 1941), 21; see also *New York Times*, 10 Dec. 1941, p. 6, and 21 Dec. 1941, p. 33.

7. Over three hundred persons, including veterans of the Japanese military, attended. Betty Kirk, *Covering the Mexican Front* (Norman, 1942), p. 289.

8. Major Japanese concerns were Kagai Kogoyo Kaisha (land development), Tajio Sangy Kaisha (fishing), Nocabuchi representing Iwai and Mitsui (Ojo de Liebre salt development). See Harry Bernstein, "Mexico's War with Japan," *Far Eastern Survey*, XI (30 Nov. 1942), 345.

On 30 December, 50 Japanese fishing boats were in operation along the Baja California coast. See *New York Times*, 30 Dec. 1941, p. 10.

Gunboats were called from the Gulf of Mexico through the Panama Canal for patrol in the Pacific. See *New York Times*, 9 Dec. 1941, p. 22.

9. *New York Times*, 10 Dec. 1941, p. 7.

10. *Ibid.*, 3 Jan. 1942, *passim*. See also Alice Leone Moats, "Mexico Pitches In," *Colliers*, III (2 Jan. 1943), 34.

11. The board was under Brigadier General Manuel S. González, Brigadier General Tomás Sánchez Hernández, Lieutenant General Stanley B. Embick and Vice Admiral Alfred W. Johnson. See *Memoria. Septiembre de 1941-Agosto de 1942*, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (México, 1942), I, 529. (Hereinafter cited as *Memoria*. date.)

The board began official functions on 27 February 1942 following Executive



Order 9030. See *Acts of 77th Congress Second Session January 5, 1942 to December 16, 1942*, United States Code and Congressional Service (Saint Paul, 1942), p. 258.

12. *New York Times*, 7 Jan. 1942, p. 10.

13. Correa, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *New York Times*, 23, 25, 26, 29 Jan. 1942.

16. *Ibid.*, 21 Feb. 1942, p. 7. See also Moats, *op. cit.*, p. 30. Also from personal observations of the author.

17. *New York Times*, 5 Mar. 1942, p. 3.

18. *Ibid.*, 15 Mar. 1942, p. 27, and 19 Mar. 1942, p. 3.

19. *Memoria. 1941-1942*, I, 227, 271-2.

20. Felix Díaz Escobar, "The Spread of Sinarquism," *The Nation*, 156 (3 April 1943), 487. Cf. Edward Skillin, Jr., "A Note on Sinarquism," *Commonweal*, XL (9 Jun. 1944), 178, who reports 3,000 UNS members in the United States. On 1 November 1937, the Southern California Regional Committee was set up in Los Angeles. See Betty Kirk, "Mexico's Social Justice Party," *The Nation*, 156 (12 June 1943), 329.

21. Betty Kirk, "Mexico's Social Justice Party," p. 329.

22. *Memoria. 1942-1943*, I, 539-65. Braceros brought over \$300,000,000MN per annum into Mexico. Tarsicio Márquez Padilla, *Consideraciones sobre la interpretación mexicana de la política del Buen Vecino* (México, n.d.), p. 79. Cf. Lesley Byrd Simpson, *Many Mexicos* (Berkeley, 1957), p. 311, who shows only 50,000 contract workers.

23. Robert C. Jones, *Los Braceros Mexicanos en Los Estados Unidos durante El Periodo Bélico* (Washington, 1945), p. 3.

24. Henry A. Wallace, "Mexican Independence and New World Ideals thru More Freedom," *Vital Speeches*, VIII (1 Oct. 1942), 740-2.

25. *New York Times*, 1 Nov. 1942, p. 1.

26. *Memoria. 1942-1943*, I, 3, 23, 173, 182, 254-64, 294. See also 57 *U.S. Stat. at L.* (1943), 973. The agreement was the final result of negotiations resulting from the decree of 22 October, and 23 November 1942, permitting Mexican citizens to serve civilly or militarily in favor of belligerents. Up to August 1943, 11,215 men served in the United States. See also, *Desde México*, 15 Nov. 1942.

27. *Memoria. 1942-1943*, I, 404.

28. *Ibid.*, I, 499.

29. *New York Times*, 10, 11 June 1943. Protests were also made in México, D.F. See *New York Times*, 16 June 1943, p. 23; Carey McWilliams, "The Zoot-Suit Riots," *New Republic*, 109 (31 June 1943), 212-20; "Pachuco Troubles," *Inter-American*, II (Aug., 1943), 5; Ruth D. Tuck, "Behind the Zoot Suit Riots," *Survey Graphic*, XXXII (Aug. 1943), 313-16; "Zoot Suits and Service Stripes: Race Tension Behind the Riots," *Newsweek*, XXV (21 June 1943), 35-40.

30. *New York Times*, 22 June 1943, p. 23; see also, "Pachuco Troubles," *op.*

*cit.*, p. 5; Lloyd Nallen, "Axis Propaganda in Latin America," *Current History*, 5 (Sept., 1943), 35-9; Skillen, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-8.

31. Porfirio Riviera was named as leader in Bakersfield as was Pedro Villaseñor in Los Angeles. Many Los Angeles Catholic priests, among them the Claretian Fathers and Father Manuel A. Canseco (Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish), were accused of ties with the UNS. Heinz H. F. Eulau, "Sinarquismo in the United States," *Inter-American*, III (March, 1944), 25-7.

32. *Desde México*, 20 Jan. 1943 and 31 Aug. 1943; see also Anne Roller Issler, "Good Neighbors Lend a Hand," *Survey Graphic*, XXXII (Oct., 1943), 390; Carey McWilliams, "They Saved the Crops," *Inter-American*, II (Aug., 1943), 10; Correa, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

33. *57 U.S. Stat. at L.* (1944), 1359. The agreement to extend contract workers to fields other than agriculture was passed on 24 February 1943.

34. "Mexicans Assist," *Business Week* (14 Oct., 1944), p. 54.

35. *Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate Seventy-ninth Congress First Session on Treaty with Mexico Relating to the Utilization of the Waters of Certain Rivers*, U.S. Congress, Senate (Washington, 1945), *passim*.

36. *59 U.S. Stat. at L.* (1945), 1210. In force, 3 November 1945.

37. Simpson, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

38. Gill, *op. cit.*, p. 191; Joseph H. L. Schlarman, *Mexico: A Land of Volcanoes* (Milwaukee, 1959), p. 133.

39. Gill, *op. cit.*, p. 191; see also Nathan L. Whetten, *Rural Mexico* (Chicago, 1948), p. 315.

40. Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 15, 42; also Correa, *op. cit.*, pp. 226, 229.

41. *Desde México*, 15 May 1944.

42. *Memoria. 1943-1944*. pp. 37-92.

43. *Treaties in Force*. U.S. Department of State (Washington, 1959), p. 181.

44. *Memoria. 1944-1945*, I, 145-79. Also, *59 U.S. Stat. at L.* (1945), 1031

45. *Mexico News*, 30 April 1945. Also, *59 U.S. Stat. at L.* (1945), 1031.