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The Los Angeles “Zoot Suit Riots” Revisited: Mexican and Latin American Perspectives

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The so-called Zoot Suit riots in Los Angeles in June of 1943 made Latin Americans more aware of the negative racial attitudes within the United States toward Mexicans. Through the publicity surrounding the riots, they also first learned of the existence of a large ethnic group of Mexican origin. This knowledge, however, often came with an additional message that the Mexican American culture was not worthy of esteem by respectable people.

Los disturbios llamados “Zoot-Suit” que ocurrieron en Los Angeles en Junio 1943 hizo saber a los latino americanos que las actitudes de los norteamericanos hacia los mexicanos no eran muy positivas. A través de la publicidad durante los disturbios, aprendieron por la primera vez de la existencia de un gran grupo étnico de origen mexicano en los Estados Unidos. Desgraciadamente esta información vino con otro mensaje que la cultura de los mexicoamericanos no era digna de honor por la supuesta gente decente.

In June of 1943 hundreds of U.S. military personnel went on a two-week rampage in Los Angeles, California, attacking scores of Mexican American youth who wore the Zoot Suit style of dress. This civil disturbance was significant in a number of ways: it was one of the largest civil disorders involving Mexican Americans up to that time; the news of the violence made many Latin Americans aware, for the first time, of the plight of Mexicans in the United States; and finally, the disturbance was a dramatic event marking a watershed in the cultural history of Chicanos. For the first time, according to the 1940 census, a majority of U.S. Spanish-speaking people were native-born U.S. citizens. Hereafter, their society could not be easily dismissed as being composed mostly of Mexican immigrants. This episode in American history has been interpreted by Chicano historians as one in a long series of anti-Mexican reactions moti-

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vated by wartime frustrations and racial stereotyping against Mexican-American youth. Soon after the event, analysts recognized that systematic discrimination in education, employment, housing, and social services were the root causes of this violence and that the news media, police, and local, state, and federal government officials were responsible for fueling an anti-Mexican atmosphere.¹

This episode in Los Angeles's history has come to be called the Zoot Suit riots, when in fact the week-long disturbance was not a riot by Mexicans Zoot Suiters but more accurately an attack by U.S. military personnel against young Pachuco. While there have been a number of studies of this event, in terms of its political and psychological implications, no one has paid much attention to how it was interpreted in Latin America and Mexico.² Yet there is a considerable body of information on these topics that has not been fully exploited by historians. Thanks to files in the archives of the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores in Mexico City, it is possible to examine, in more detail than previously, how the Mexican government responded to this affair. There are also available voluminous files from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of State dealing with the possible involvement of foreign agents in the affair as well as in-depth analysis of the social and political situation surrounding the Mexican community in Los Angeles. Finally there are the little-known or analyzed responses of the Mexican and Latin American press during and after the riots. Spanish-language newspaper commentary and reporting about the disturbances provide another vantage point from which to assess the international importance of this event.

From these sources it is apparent that the riots were an embarrass-

1. See Rudolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 255–58. The Sleepy Lagoon case and the growing hysteria surrounding Pachuco “gangs” in Los Angeles in the year prior to the riots were important as well. See the classic study by Carey McWilliams, *North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States* (1949; New York: Greenwood Press 1968), 247–51.

2. While there are a number of interpreters of the Zoot-Suit phenomenon, serious historical studies of the riot itself have been minimal. The only published monograph is by Mauricio Mazón, *The Zoot-Suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984). In this book he reviews the historiography of interpretation of the Zoot Suiters (115–21). Other histories are unpublished dissertations, master's theses and special reports and papers: California Legislature, *Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities in California, Second Report* (Sacramento, 1945); Marilyn Domer, “The Zoot-Suit Riot: A Culmination of Social Tensions in Los Angeles” (M.A. thesis, Claremont Graduate School, 1972); Dale Drum, *Report on Pachuco Gang Activities in the City of Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Navy Recruiting Station and the Office of Naval Officer Procurement, 1951); Alfredo Guerra Gonzalez, “Mexicano/Chicano Gangs in Los Angeles: A Sociohistorical Case Study” (Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1981); Solomon James Jones, “The Government Riots of Los Angeles, June 1943” (M.A. thesis, UCLA, 1969).

ment for both the Mexican and U.S. governments. Because of their wartime alliance against the Axis powers, the Mexican government could not adopt a strong position protesting the disturbances. Moreover the Mexican government had a long policy of advocating nonintervention in the affairs of other countries and did not wish to depart from this policy over an event of questionable importance to the Mexican nation. Thus the Mexican government's initial statements of concern were not followed by formal proceedings that produced either a diplomatic protest, a public apology from U.S. officials, or payment for damages. The riots sparked an intense effort on the part of the U.S. government to find foreign agents who might be responsible for provoking the riot, as well as denial of the possible role that race may have played. The disturbances created diverse reactions in Mexico and Latin America ranging from anti-government protests to anti-Pachuco diatribes. Many Latin American students seemingly identified with the Mexican youths who were the victims of the riots. Despite the best efforts of both the Mexican and U.S. governments, the Zoot Suit disturbances were often presented in the Latin American press as proof of the racial prejudice of Americans toward Indian stock mestizos. Latin American journalistic statements about these Mexican Americans sometimes revealed a class prejudice of the upper, educated elite for whom the so-called Pachucos were an embarrassment. The riots were the first time that the general public in Mexico and Latin America was introduced to the ethnic problems of Mexican Americans. The "Pachuco Riots," as they were termed in the Latin American press, initiated the first international recognition of the social and political realities that Chicanos faced within the United States.

During the late 1930s and war years, young Mexican Americans in California were usually called by the media either "Mexicans" or "Pachucos," depending on the circumstances. The term Chicano was almost exclusively used by barrio residents to refer to recently arrived Mexican immigrants. The Pachucos had created a distinctive youth subculture among younger Mexican Americans who were in the process of rebelling against their parent's conventional values. They adopted their own music, language, and dress. For the men, the style was to wear a zoot suit—a flamboyant long coat, with baggy pegged pants, a pork pie hat, a long key chain, and shoes with thick soles. They called themselves Pachucos, a word of uncertain origin, but generally referring to U.S.—born, Mexican youth who dressed in a distinctive style and spoke *Calo*, a highly inventive slang composed of English and Spanish.³ Undoubtedly *pachuquismo* had its

3. The classic critique of the Pachuco appears in Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico* (New York, 1961), Ch. 1; For contemporary interpretations of this phenomenon see Beatrice Griffith, *American Me* (Westport: Greenwood Pub

origins in poverty and racism, and Pachuco gangs were bound to territories as much by discrimination as by love of the barrio.

In the early 1940s, especially in Southern California, hysteria had been mounting over Pachuco gangs, including periodic mass arrests accompanied by sensationalist stories in the *Los Angeles Times*. In the summer of 1942, the Sleepy Lagoon case made national news, when nine teenage members of the 38th street gang were put on trial for the murder of José Díaz in an abandoned quarry pit. The case generated an outburst of anti-Mexican sentiment; the press and the police began to characterize Mexican American youths as “baby gangsters” and Pachuco hoodlums. Ultimately the nine young men were convicted and sentenced to long prison terms at San Quentin.

Soon after the Sleepy Lagoon case, in Los Angeles, San Jose, Oakland, Delano, San Diego, and elsewhere, a series of violent incidents took place between U.S. service personnel and Zoot Suit-wearing Mexicans and other minorities. The most serious outbreak of violence took place in Los Angeles when, for more than a week after June 5, 1943, hundreds of servicemen went on a rampage through East Los Angeles and the downtown district. Carey McWilliams, a lawyer and eye witness, described the scene in his book *North from Mexico*:

Marching through the streets of downtown Los Angeles, a mob of several thousand soldiers, sailors, and civilians, proceeded to beat up every zoot suiter they could find. Pushing its way into the important motion picture theaters, the mob ordered the management to turn on the house lights and then ran up and down the aisles dragging Mexicans out of their seats. Streetcars were halted while Mexicans, and some Filipinos and Negroes, were jerked out of their seats, pushed into the streets and beaten with a sadistic frenzy.⁴

At one point, the servicemen hired taxicabs and drove through the Mexican barrio stripping and beating youths at random. They were followed by the police who arrested the Pachucos for public disturbance. The riots lasted more than ten days and resulted in the beatings of hundreds of Mexican youth. That no one was killed was a miracle.

Mexican Government's Response

On June 10, 1943, the Mexican ambassador in Washington D.C., Dr. Francisco Castillo Najera, and the Minister of Foreign Relations in Mexico City,

lishing, 1948), 15–28; George I. Sanchez, “Pachucos in the Making,” *Common Ground* 4, (Autumn 1943), 13–20; Ruth D. Tuck, *Not with the Fist: Mexican-Americans in a Southwest City* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1974); also Ralph H. Turner and Samuel J. Surace, “Zoot-Suiters and Mexicans: Symbols in Crowd Behavior,” *American Journal of Sociology* 62 (1956), 14–24.

4. McWilliams, *North from Mexico*, 249.

Lic. Ezequiel Padilla Peñalosa, received copies of a coded telegram sent by the Mexican consul in Los Angeles. In the cable, the consul, Alfredo Elías Calles, reported that in the previous week riots against Mexicans had taken place in the City of the Angels. Specifically, he told of how U.S. soldiers and sailors were attacking Mexican nationals within the “*barriadas Mexicanas*” or the Mexican section of the city. Calles stated that, thus far, the police had not been able to control the violence and that it had spread from attacks against supposed delinquents to Mexicans in general, including women and children. The consul related that he had protested energetically to the mayor, sheriff, chief of police, and naval authorities, all of whom had promised to quell the disturbances but, as of the date of the telegram, nothing had been done. The consul took note of how the American press was sensationalizing the riots instead of criticizing the illegal activities of the service men.⁵ This one page telegram was the first official Mexican government notice of the infamous Zoot Suit Riots of 1943, the first urban riot in Los Angeles’s history to be directed against Mexicans.⁶ For the next month, these disturbances would pose a potential problem for U.S.- Mexico relations having the ability to damage the U.S. alliance with other Latin American countries and endanger Mexico’s participation in the war effort.

It took four days for the Mexican government to formulate a response to the events in Los Angeles. This delay was most likely due to the desire of the Mexican government to be judicious in its actions. As a wartime ally of the United States, Mexico was benefiting economically from good relations with the Colossus of the North and was not anxious to raise problems. For the past several years there had been growing economic

5. Alfredo Elias Calles to the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE), 10 June 1943, “Disturbios Raciales en Los Angeles, California,” Archivo de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Mexico City, File III 651-1 (hereafter cited as SRE Archives). This telegram is reported by Solomon Jones as being sent June 8. See Jones, “The Government Riots of Los Angeles, June 1943” (M.A. thesis, UCLA, 1969), 38. Consul Elias Calles knew firsthand of the riots. He had attended a meeting on June 7, 1943, of the Citizens’ Committee for Latin-American Youth, sponsored by the County Board of Supervisors. At this meeting the details of the early days of the riot were recounted.

6. There were several vigilante mobs that threatened riot against Mexicans in the 1850s. A “riot” is usually defined as a violent public disorder caused by a large crowd of persons. Under that definition Los Angeles arguably has had five large riots in its modern history. The first was a public rampage against the Chinese in 1870, when five hundred citizens burned the local Chinatown and killed 19 Chinese. The second large-scale violent riot was the Zoot Suit Riot in 1943. No one was killed in that riot but there were several injuries. Subsequent large-scale public disturbances have been the Watts Riot in 1965, the Chicano Moratorium Riot in 1970, and the Los Angeles Riot of the summer of 1992. Notably all of the major riots in Los Angeles’s past have been in non-white areas of the city, largely involving racial strife with violence mainly directed against non-white citizens.

cooperation between the two governments. The United States and Mexico had just signed a historic contract labor agreement that would be the basis of the Bracero program. This program promised to relieve Mexican unemployment and funnel millions of dollars in remittances back to Mexico. At the same time the Mexican braceros would free hundreds of thousands of U.S. workers, mostly Mexican Americans, to be drafted into the military to help fight Germany and Japan. The United States was also buying massive quantities of Mexican exports to fight the war. This increased demand for Mexican exports would become the basis for the post-war Mexican Miracle, a tremendous expansion of Mexico's industrial base. In the year previous to the Zoot Suit riot the United States and Mexico had signed the Bateman-Suárez agreement which established more formal grounds for economic cooperation. In August 1941, the Export-Import bank announced a \$6 million loan for the construction of a steel mill in Mexico and the investment of another \$30 million on road construction. When the war started in December 1941, many in both countries wanted to expand the program. On February 19, 1943, the Rockefeller Foundation concluded an agreement to work with the Mexican government to improve the varieties of corn and other crops setting the stage for a massive infusion of capital to improve Mexico's agriculture.⁷ Finally by June 1943, the two countries were engaged in the final rounds of negotiating a new treaty to regulate the waters of the Rio Grande and Colorado Rivers. This pact was seen as essential for the development of the Mexican north. Economically, the Mexican government was at a crossroads in its relations with the United States and had much to lose if relations were to turn sour.

Indeed a few months before the Los Angeles riot, a minor diplomatic incident had demonstrated the Mexican government's anxiety to placate the United States. On April 6, 1943, Eduardo Villaseñor, the head of the Banco de México, gave a speech at the Escuela Nacional de Economía wherein he criticized the increasing cooperation between President Manuel Avila Camacho's government and the United States. He spoke disparagingly of the pro-U.S. terms of various agreements between the two countries and condemned the lack of Mexican independence in development planning. Later to the press, Villasenor claimed that his speech had been approved by President Avila Camacho but that it had been opposed by the Foreign Minister Ezequiel Padilla.⁸ In an emergency meeting, U.S. Ambassador George Messersmith met with President Avila Ca-

7. Stephen R. Niblo, "The Impact of War: Mexico and World War II," Latrobe University Institute of Latin American Studies, Occasional Paper, no. 10, (Australia: LaTrobe University, 1988), 8. See also his larger study, *War, Diplomacy, and Development: The United States and Mexico, 1938-1954* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1995).

8. Niblo, "The Impact of War," 28.

macho and received assurances from the Mexican president that the speech did not reflect his views and that he opposed it. President Avila Camacho told the ambassador that there were nationalists within his cabinet and that he would work to control their flights of rhetoric. After speaking to the president, Ambassador Messersmith wrote to Hull:

The president here is in my opinion perhaps the firmest and soundest friend, and the most powerful, that we have in the American Republics. . . His whole policy is firmly based in the most complete collaboration with the United States for the present and for the future.⁹

The delay in the formal response of the Mexican government when it received news of the Los Angeles riots in June 1943 may have been influenced by the government's uncertainty over the nationality of the victims. When the riots began, Adolfo de la Huerta, the inspector general of the consulates, sent his own report to the government. He related that after five nights of continuous violence, hundreds of old and young people "of Mexican extraction" had been wounded. He said that the U.S. military police had intervened and promised to stop the disturbances. Additionally, De la Huerta reported that Governor Earl Warren had asked the attorney general to investigate. De la Huerta also blamed the American press for its whipping up anti-Mexican sentiment.¹⁰ The phrase used by De la Huerta to describe the victims was "of Mexican extraction" whereas the Mexican consul in Los Angeles, a day after the outbreak of hostilities, had clearly stated that these were attacks on Mexican nationals. This point was to be important in the subsequent weeks and months as it slowly became clear that most of the casualties were not Mexican nationals and hence, it was argued, they were not the concern of the Mexican government.¹¹ The first formal response of the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (the Secretary of Foreign Relations) was to cable the Mexican ambassador in Washington D.C., Dr. Castillo Najera, to instruct him to meet with Secretary of State Cordell Hull as soon as possible. At that meeting Castillo Najera was to inform Hull that the Mexican government was refraining from making any formal protest about the incident until it had all the information in hand. Until then, the Mexican government would trust in the ultimate

9. *Ibid.*, 29.

10. Adolfo de la Huerta to C. Lic. Ezequiel Padilla, June 10, 1943, SRE Archive.

11. This issue of citizenship or nationality in any case was basically a political one since the Mexican Constitution (Chapter II, Article 30, A II) stated "they are Mexican by birth: Those who are born abroad of Mexican parents, of a Mexican father and foreign mother, or of Mexican mother and unknown father." My translation of *Novedades* June 22, 1943, 1. If any victim was U.S.-born of Mexican parents he was considered a Mexican citizen by the Mexican Constitution until he renounced his citizenship.

justice of the U.S. government. Castillo Najera was to ask Hull to make a public statement condemning the riots. Finally the Mexican ambassador was to warn Hull that the news of the riots would spread throughout Latin America making it possible for Axis agents to score a propaganda victory.¹² Even before these instructions had been sent to Castillo Najera, the Secretaría de Relaciones had established a clipping file in which it began to collect stories on the riots that were appearing in various Latin American newspapers.

Prior to his meeting with Castillo Najera, Hull had been receiving reports about the riots from the military as well as the civilian authorities in Los Angeles which de-emphasized the racial nature of the violence. As early as June 6, Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Bowron had sought to assure Secretary of State Hull that the disturbances could be handled locally and that the riots “. . . were in no way directed against persons of Mexican descent.”¹³ This denial emerged as Los Angeles’s civic leaders, including the press, began to realize that the riots were creating an international incident that could hurt the war-time U.S.-Latin American alliance. After the first few days of the rioting, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Daily News* denied the racial motivations behind the riots and downplayed their significance. These had been two of the most important newspapers that had encouraged the riots through their lurid headlines and reporting on the Zoot Suiters.¹⁴ Churchill Murray, the Los Angeles representative of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, an agency dedicated to improving United States-Latin American relations also denied the racial factor when he wrote, “The riots at Los Angeles formed a purely local and non-racial situation. The frequency of Spanish names among the ‘zoot-suit’ element was without actual significance to relations between Mexico and the United States because most of the civilian figures in the clashes with men of the armed service are American citizens.”¹⁵ To the Mexican consul in Los Angeles, Alfredo Elías Calles, however, it was clear that the Mexican population of the city was being threatened. His office printed and distributed a large number of circulars in Spanish warning all Mexican nationals to remain at home after dark “to avoid unpleasant happenings.” The circular stated that “We are confident that the civil and military authorities will soon remedy this unpleasant situation.”¹⁶

Needless to say the State Department was not anxious to upset re-

12. Coded Cablegram from the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores to the Mexican Embassy, Washington D.C., June 14, 1943, in SRE Archive.

13. Los Angeles *Daily News*, 6 June 1943, 9, quoted in Solomon Jones, “The Government Riots of Los Angeles, June 1943,” (M.A. thesis, UCLA, 1969), 37.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Los Angeles Examiner*, 10 June 1943, 9.

16. *Ibid.*, 9 June 1943, 11.

lations between the two countries. Prior to the formal meeting on the matter, Mexican Ambassador Francisco Castillo Najera sought to reassure the U.S. government that Mexico did not intend to present a formal protest. He stated that he thought that the situation had improved and that the crisis was past and that, in any case, more than "90 percent of the 'so called' pachucos were United States citizens" and only a few Mexican national had been involved.¹⁷ The meeting between Hull and Castillo Najera was held on June 15. After Najera expressed his concern about the riots, Secretary Hull assured the Mexican ambassador that a full investigation would be made into the affair and "expressed deep regret about any injuries that might have been sustained." Hull blamed the riots on both the Zoot Suit element which he characterized as of "questionable character and possess a spirit of lawlessness" and on a handful of service men out of more than eight million in arms, "who occasionally gets out of hand and commits some lawless act." At the end of the meeting he urged the Mexican ambassador to try to influence the Mexican press "to adopt this view and make it clear along with other facts."¹⁸ Two days after the meeting the Department of State promised a full investigation into the disturbances. A press release read, in part: "If as a result of those investigations it is found that there are cases involving Mexican citizens (and none have yet been found) the resulting claims will be expeditiously handled by this government in accordance with principles of international law and the principles of justice and equity which the two governments jointly uphold."¹⁹ Within a few days of this statement the promised inquiry was completed and the secretary of State reported that "investigations revealed no cases where Mexican citizens were involved in recent fights in Los Angeles."²⁰ The Los Angeles County Grand Jury's investigations, which began about a week after the disturbances began, sustained this conclusion. In addition to interviewing many

17. *La Opinion*, 12 June 1943, 1.

18. Memorandum of Conversation, Cordell Hull, Department of State, 15 June 1943, Purport File No. 811.4016/596.

19. *Los Angeles Examiner*, 13 June 1943, 4:4. Just prior to the issuance of this statement Philip Bonsal an official in the Department of State transmitted a brief report on the status of the "Zoot Suit" disturbances to the Secretary Hull. In this report Bonsal indicated that the United States Ambassador Messersmith had learned that the Foreign Minister, Castillo Najera "had been forced by public opinion and necessity to defend himself and the President from adverse newspaper comment to make a strong statement regarding the "zoot suit" incidences." He further noted that as yet neither the Mexican consul in Los Angeles nor the mayor knew of any Mexican nationals who had been involved in the disturbances. See Philip Bonsal to Mr. McGurk, Department of State, 17 June 1943, 2, Purport File No. 811.4016/585.

20. 17 June 1943, 4 in Jones, "The Government Riots," 39; the next day Hull phoned Mayor Fletcher Bowron and reiterated that no Mexican national had suffered damages.

of the civilian and military officials who had been in charge during the riots, the Grand Jury had also interviewed several Mexican officials, including President Avila Camacho's chief aid, Zuno Fernández.²¹

One day after the meeting between the Mexican ambassador and Cordell Hull, the Mexican foreign ministry issued a formal statement of its position on the affair. The press release, reprinted in Mexico City newspapers and in the Spanish-language newspapers in the United States stated that the Mexican government was gathering information about the "regrettable events taking place in Los Angeles between the Zoot-Suiters and groups of North American sailors." The Mexican government asserted that it had received "reports of damages suffered by some of our nationals" and that accordingly it had informed the State Department that, after an official investigation into the riots, the Mexican government would demand punishment for those responsible and indemnification of the victims.²² This statement was then sent out to the various consulate offices throughout the United States and Latin America. The Mexican foreign office also sent instructions asking consular officials to report on any newspaper articles about the Zoot Suit riots appearing in the local Latin American press. The officials were instructed not to discuss the Los Angeles disturbances. They were to observe not instigate local reaction.²³

Other than this statement of concern, and faith in the ultimate indemnification of the victims, the Mexican government made no further official protest or demand for a more thorough investigation into the riot. The strongest position it took was the one issued on June 16 where the government announced that it trusted the U.S. government to investigate the affair and punish those found guilty. Evidently, the Mexican government did not gather independent sources of information in Los An-

21. Domer, "The Zoot-Suit Riots," 110.

22. On the day of the publication of the Mexican government's position on the riots, Vicente Lombardo Toledano gave a lengthy statement on the riot characterizing the riots as "a deliberate attempt to destroy the unity and harmony between the Americans and Mexicans living in California and to destroy the Good Neighbor Policy. . ." He reviewed the growing hysteria in Southern California regarding Pachuco gangs and compared it to the tactics of the Nazis. See Messersmith to Hull, 16 June 1943, "Memorandum of Conversation with Mr. Bonsal of the Department with regard to the Pachuco Incidents in Los Angeles" and clippings from *Excelsior*, Purport File No. 811.4016/567. For the Mexican government's internal handling of the affair "Circular a nuestras misiones diplomaticas," 17 June 1943, SRE Archives.

23. The other instructions are alluded to in the communiqué by Juan Manuel Alcaraz Tornel, the Chargé d'affaires in Peru to the SRE on 22 June 1943. The instructions were No. 51444 given on 17 June 1943. Despite these instructions regarding discretion, there were leaks. On June 22, 1943, for example the Lima newspaper *Las Novedades* published an article which was a reprint of the Mexican ambassador's report on the riots to his government.

geles. At least no instructions to do so came from Mexico City and so far no file has been found showing any effort to find and document the mistreatment of Mexican nationals.

Regarding the collection of evidence of mistreatment, it appears that the Mexican consul in Los Angeles was prepared to present a specific list of grievances but never did so. In July 1943 the State Department sent William Blocker, the United States consul general in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, to Los Angeles to interview the Mexican consular officials regarding the zoot suit riots.²⁴ Blocker met with Mayor Bowron; Sheriff Biscailuz; Edward Duran Ayers, chief of the Bureau of Foreign Relations Office of the Sheriff's Office; Adolfo de la Huerta, inspector general of the Mexican consulates; Alfredo Elías Calles, the Mexican consul at Los Angeles; Adolfo de la Huerta Jr., the vice consul; and a number of other officials. Blocker found Consul Calles evasive and noncommittal regarding their actions during the riots. Blocker reported: "It was obvious that they (the Mexican officials) held the belief that the Zoot Suit incidents resulted from social and local economic conditions arising from the failure of state and county facilities for juvenile correction to keep pace with the population, and that this afforded an opportunity for Axis propagandists or Fifth Column members to take advantage of loosely organized gangs in Los Angeles County. . . ." ²⁵ De la Huerta emphasized that Pachuco gangs were the product of discrimination, racism, and segregation. He was told that the parents of young people kept in contact with his office asking assistance on the grounds of the dual citizenship of their children. He told Blocker that several Mexican social groups or mutual aid societies were preparing lists of cases of discrimination and segregation that they would present later. This never occurred, at least with respect to the Zoot Suit disturbance. While De la Huerta may have wanted to pursue a more activist role in protesting the mistreatment of Mexican Americans, his efforts were not supported by the Mexican foreign relations office.²⁶

This non-intervention policy provoked criticism from Mexican nationalists. On June 13, *El Excelsior*, a pro-government newspaper in Mexico City, severely criticized the government's handling of the whole affair. In an editorial, Diego Tinoco Ariza rebuked Mexican Ambassador Castillo Najera and the foreign relations office for a lack of action prior to the riots, since there had been so much anti-Mexican sentiment in

24. State Department Report, "Zoot Suit Disturbances at Los Angeles, California," 3 August 1943, Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, Purport File No. 811.4016/615.

25. *Ibid.*, 2.

26. Indeed, Blocker considered De la Huerta to be a radical "prone to seize the slightest pretext as a basis of complaint charging racial discrimination." *Ibid.*, 15.

the press. "The Ambassador had exactly ten months to do something to diminish the mounting hatred of which our compatriots were the victims," he wrote.²⁷ The riots, Tinoco Araiza argued, were another example of American racism, similar to the activities of the Ku Klux Klan in the South. The riots provided an occasion to contrast Mexican culture with that of the *norteamericanos*. The writer concluded that *mestizaje*, or the mixture of races that had been going on for four hundred years, insured that Mexico would be free of "racial obsessions" of its northern neighbor.

The U.S. ambassador to Mexico, George S. Messersmith, worked to lessen the Mexican press' coverage of the racial nature of the riots. On June 18, 1943, the Mexico City edition of *Time Magazine* had a story about the "Zoot-Suit War" describing the melee between U.S. service men and "Mexicans." The article pointed to the fact that the Los Angeles police assisted the rioting servicemen and arrested the beaten Zoot Suiters.²⁸ Ambassador Messersmith wrote the secretary of state the next day informing him that the *Time* magazine article "treats the zoot-suit disturbances in such a way as to make it appear as an anti-Mexican movement and blames the police for encouraging attacks on Mexicans and accuses the military authorities of laxity."²⁹ In his dispatch Messersmith told of his "informal conversations" with several members of the Mexico City press where he understood their willingness to "treat the zoot-suit disturbances as a trouble between bands of hoodlums without any particular significance as being anti-Mexican."³⁰ Messersmith said that the Mexican press had agreed to "indicate in their editorials that the whole matter has been given too much importance." The American ambassador thought he had succeeded "in quieting resentment here and in having the subject treated as a question for the police and other authorities of Los Angeles and not as an international incident assuming disquieting proportions as a case of racial discrimination."³¹ Ambassador Messersmith ended his dispatch by suggesting that the secretary of state discuss the whole matter with editors of *Time* magazine to suggest that they needed a change in their future coverage of such events.

Despite the efforts of the U.S. ambassador, the Zoot Suit disturbances in Los Angeles did become front page news in Mexico City and led to

27. *Excelsior*, 13 June 1943, 4.

28. *Time Magazine*, 21 June 1943, 4. Evidently, the Mexico City edition appeared before this date as it was cited by Ambassador Messersmith in his dispatch of June 19, 1943.

29. Ambassador Messersmith to Secretary of State, 19 June 1943, "Disturbances in Los Angeles Involving Mexicans," File no. 10848, Purport file 811.4016/570. United States Department of State Archives.

30. *Ibid.*, 1.

31. *Ibid.*

public demonstrations against the Mexican and U.S. government's actions. Some newspapers used the government's handling of the riots to criticize minister of Foreign Relations, Ezequiel Padilla, charging that he "did not complain early enough or firmly enough after the fighting broke out in Los Angeles between the United States sailors and young civilians, many of them of Mexican descent."³² *Novedades*, a Mexico City daily, ran a front-page banner headline on June 20: "Foreign Minister Ezequiel Padilla Is to Blame for the Scandalous Acts against the Mexican Race." The story subsequently charged Padilla of being responsible for perpetuating anti-Mexican acts in the United States by his failure to take a harder line towards the government of that country.³³ Criticism of the government's handling of the riots eventually resulted in a street protest by students from the National Autonomous University of Mexico on June 24, 1943. The demonstration was announced in a flyer that proclaimed that the riots had been caused by "Hearst interests, the Ku Klux Klan, United States imperialists, Fifth Columnists of all kinds, and those interested in bringing about a victory for Hitler, who therefore have provoked these street riots in which our compatriots have suffered great injuries."³⁴ Two days before the demonstration, two Mexican youths, dressed in the zoot suit mode who were passing by the School of Medicine in downtown Mexico City were beaten and stripped of their clothes.³⁵ Although no one was arrested in this incident, it revealed that some mexicanos harbored anti-Pachuco sentiments. Five hundred students assembled in the School of Law on June 24. After marching downtown chanting "Down with Roosevelt and Padilla," the students assembled in front of the Ministry of Foreign Relations. There they were met by the university president, Rodolfo "Brito" Foucher, who spoke in defense of Roosevelt but against North American racism. He said that Mexicans could not be military allies of a nation that encouraged racism (and) ". . . the North American public [must] realize that the people of Mexico, mostly of mixed Indian and Spanish blood, cannot fight in this war with enthusiasm on the same side of a country that harbors racial prejudice." He continued, "As for the people (Anglo Americans in the United States), and above the people of the Southwest of the United States, it is indubitable that they are possessed by a deep prejudice against the racially-mixed Mexican population. . . ." ³⁶ After his speech the students marched towards the American embassy but were blocked by the police. They then proceeded

32. *Hollywood Citizen News*, 22 June 1943, 5; quoted in Jones, "The Government Riots," 39.

33. *Novedades*, 20 June 1943, 1.

34. *Inter-American*, July 1943, 6.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Excelsior* 26 June 1943, 6:3a.

downtown towards the Zócalo. According to one observer, “the students marched through the downtown area booing, jeering, and hissing every store that displayed American signs. Sanborns, an American-owned restaurant, was the target of a particularly violent demonstration as some of the students entered and attacked an American who was having lunch.”³⁷ The students ended the demonstration by establishing a Committee for the Defense of Mexicans Abroad (Comité de Defensa de los Mexicanos de Afuera), whose goal was to protest the mistreatment of Pachucos as well as the race riot against African Americans in Detroit, Michigan and to protest the actions of the Mexican government that exhibited “a lack of patriotism.”³⁸

Despite street demonstrations and editorial goading, the Mexican foreign ministry did not pursue a more active policy regarding the riots. In fact the next day, the official party, the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR), issued a communique denouncing the demonstrators, claiming that they were irresponsible agitators who “do not represent true students, and even less the Mexican people.” They further labeled the demonstration “an act of treason to the country” and said that they were only trying to disrupt Mexico’s relations with an ally during a war time.³⁹ Later, the CTM (Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos), the government supported labor union, condemned Brito Foucher for fostering “an atmosphere that favors tumults and criticism leveled at the North America.”⁴⁰ In Los Angeles a government representative met with the consul general to try to convince him to issue a press statement about the cooperation of the local authorities in the handling of the Zoot Suit Riots. The United States representative (not named in the FBI documents) was to arrange a press conference in which “The Mexican official will be called upon for a statement, and they hoped to get a very favorable one at that time.”⁴¹ Some conciliatory articles began to appear in the Spanish language press in Los Angeles. For example on June 19, *La Opinión*, the leading Spanish-language newspaper in Southern California

37. *New York Times*, 26 June 1943, 28; quoted in Jones, “The Government Riots,” 39–40; *The Inter-American*, August 1943, 5.; for a detailed report on the student disturbances see Memorandum June 26, 1943 From American Embassy to United States Department of State, Purport file no. 811.4016/590.

38. *Excelsior*, 26 June 1943. This committee was perhaps the first non-governmental organization in Mexico to recognize the realities surrounding the Mexican American communities in the United States.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Edward Trueblood to Cordell Hull, 28 June 1943, Memo. No. 11,015, Purport file no. 811.4016/592, 2.

41. Memo to Director from Los Angeles Agent, Re: Mexican Youth Gangs, 15 July 1943, p. 1.

reprinted an article that had first appeared in *El Nacional*, in Mexico City. The article reported that, "there is no doubt that the (U.S.) investigators will arrive at a just decision. . . . The provocateurs of hate cannot destroy the Good Neighbor Policy, nor can they distract either of the countries from their war against the Axis."⁴² A few days later, Lic. Ezequiel Padilla, the head of the foreign ministry sought to justify the attitude of the Mexican government toward the recent Pachuco Riots. In answer to critics publishing in local Mexico City newspapers, he said that he had sent instructions to the consul in Los Angeles "authorizing the full protection of the office to any compatriots being affected." Further he said that the problem of the riots should be considered "as a manifestation of racial segregation but that instead of limiting itself to useless discussions on this theme, [he preferred] to demonstrate his interest in mediating concrete actions that would lead to negotiations that will have positive results." He also indicated that, as a result of the riots, the Mexican government had decided that, in the future, Mexican braceros working in the United States "would be predicated on their not suffering any discrimination."⁴³

About a month after the end of the disturbances, the Mexican government sent a memorandum to the U.S. State Department outlining anti-Mexican incidents that had taken place in the United States.⁴⁴ A day later Mexican Ambassador Castillo Najera met with Cordell Hull, and the secretary of state assured him that "the matters discussed in the memorandum would receive appropriate attention."⁴⁵ As a result a meeting was held on July 28 in Washington between representatives of the Mexican government and the Department of Justice, there were discussions about various incidents of mistreatment of Mexicans in the United States but all of the discussion involved anti-Mexican incidents that had taken place in Texas. The Zoot Suit Riots were not an item for discussion. The Justice Department official said that if the Mexican ambassador learned of any specific cases of the mistreatment of persons of Mexican descent but not citizenship (referred to in the translation as "*doble nacionalidad*" or dual citizenship), he should communicate that information to the Justice Department.⁴⁶ This left the door open for the Mexican government to present cases of mistreatment of Mexican Americans as well

42. *La Opinion*, 19 June 1943, 1.

43. *Ibid.*, 16 June 1943, 1, 8.

44. Memorandum no. 4253, 23 July 1943, Mexican Embassy to Department of State, Purport file no. FW 811.4016/673.

45. Memorandum of Conversation, Secretary of State Hull and the Mexican Ambassador, 24 July 1943, Purport file no. FW811.4016/637.

46. Memorandum, 28 July 1943, Mexican Embassy in Washington and the Justice Department, SRE Archive.

as Mexican nationals to the Justice Department. Indeed, during the height of the riots, representatives of the Los Angeles Committee for American Unity approached the Mexican consulate with an offer to help gather affidavits of victimized Mexican-Americans and Mexican nationals. This offer was turned down and there is no evidence that any cases were ever brought forward.⁴⁷

United States Investigations of Foreign Agents Involvement

The outbreak of violence in Los Angeles caused the state and federal officials to begin investigations into the role of foreign agents who might have acted as provocateurs in the disturbance. The fear of negative foreign reaction to news of the Zoot Suit Riots, expressed by California's Senator Sheridan Downey was echoed by others on the national scene and so, under urging from local and state authorities, the state government began its own investigation even while the riot was underway.⁴⁸ For many years the agency had been tracking the activities of suspected and known communists in Southern California and, not surprisingly, they focused on them as the source of possible leads. But by June 1943 things had become more complicated. Russia was at war with Germany and the Communist Party was ostensibly an ally of the United States. Accordingly, the agents reported that Communist organizers were urging that telegrams be sent to the U.S. attorney general stating that the Pachuco Riots were Fascist inspired.⁴⁹ *The People's World*, the Communist Party newspaper in Los Angeles, charged that the Sinarquista Party, a Fascist organization based in Mexico, was behind the riots.⁵⁰ Rather patriotically, the *People's World* wrote, "How else is it to be explained, the shameful and utterly un-American spectacle of American sailors and soldiers dis-

47. Memorandum to Director Re: Mexican Youth Gangs, 11 June 1943, 3, SRE Archive. The Los Angeles Committee for American Unity was classified as a Communist front and its activities were closely monitored by the F.B.I. On June 8, 1943, for example the agent reported that they had met and promised to send a telegram to the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (CTM) in Mexico urging them to make protests to Washington regarding the treatment of Mexicans. "Los Angeles Committee for American Unity," Report, Los Angeles, 14 June 1943, 3 (Obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, FIA).

48. *Los Angeles Herald-Express*, 9 June 1943.

49. Agent telegram to Director, 10 June 1943, Los Angeles, (FIA).

50. The Sinarquistas were organized into the Union Nacional Sinarquista in 1937 by Salvador Abascal, Manuel Zeremeño, and Jose Urquizu in Guanajuato, Mexico with the help several Germans. They were dedicated to opposing Communism in Mexico and the Southwest as well as re-invigorating the Catholic Church. In Southern California there were about a dozen branch organizations of the Sinarquistas, most of them composed of middle-class Mexicans. See California Senate, *Report of Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities in California to California Legislature*, Sacramento, California 1943, 201-2.

gracing their uniform by engaging in mob attacks against Mexican and Negro youth on the streets of that city.”⁵¹ An FBI agent reported that one party member (not identified by name) was a member of the 19th Congressional District Section of the Communist Party and that he had “gone to the aid of the ‘Zoot Suiters’” during the riot. Along with other Communist leaders, he was helping the Mexican American Youth Victory Clubs to “formulate a program to carry on the fight against police brutality and discrimination directed against Zoot Suiters.”⁵² The local Communist party proceeded on the belief that the riots were organized and fomented by the Union Nacional Sinarquista. Meanwhile the Mexican government was discouraging “left wing action” and discounting the possibility of Sinarquista involvement.⁵³ This was despite the publication of several newspaper accounts that accused Axis agents of fomenting racial antagonisms just prior to the riots. On June 9, for example, the *Los Angeles Daily News* published a story by John Upton Terrell which bluntly accused Nazi agents as being “active in fomenting gang warfare in Los Angeles.”⁵⁴ Yet the investigations never produced any evidence to substantiate these charges. Instead they focused on the activities of the known Communists in the Los Angeles area. In February 1944 they finally concluded that there was “no evidence of foreign inspired agitation revealed among Zoot Suiters.”⁵⁵

The next year, a California Senate investigation into un-American activities during the war reached somewhat different conclusions. The Tenney Committee, formally known as the Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities, agreed with the findings that the Communist Party in Southern California had manufactured the rumors of Fascist fifth-column involvement in the riot. Established by the California Assembly and Senate, the committee was headed by State Senator Jack B. Tenney of Los Angeles, a politician who built his career by playing to wartime

51. *The People's World*, 9 June 1943, 1.

52. Memorandum for the Director, Los Angeles, California, 11 June 1943, Re: Mexican Youth Gangs a.k.a. “Zoot-Suiters” and “Pachucos,” 3, SRE Archive.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Los Angeles Daily News*, 9 June 1943, quoted in Memorandum for the Director, 14. The FBI traced the origin of this story to Mexico City and attributed it to anti-Sinarquista propaganda there (FIA).

55. “Mexican Gangs, a.k.a. ‘Zoot-Suiters’ and Pachucos,” Los Angeles, 28 February 1944, 1, (FIA). An earlier report dated 14 January 1944 had concluded that there was “no evidence of foreign inspired agitation among the Spanish Speaking-Mexicans other than from the Communists.” “Zoot Suiters. Racial conditions (Spanish-Mexican Activities) in Los Angeles Field Division,” 14 January 1944, 1 (FIA). This report of more than sixty pages, is perhaps the most detailed study of the war time social and political structure of the Los Angeles Mexican American community.

hysteria and anti-Communist fears. The committee went further than implying that Communists had prolonged the riots by openly criticizing the police and servicemen's actions in their newspapers and thereby increasing racial antagonisms.⁵⁶ While accusing Nazi agents in fomenting the trouble, the Communist press also published a statement that the conditions of poverty and discrimination in the Mexican barrios made such an anti-Mexican riot almost inevitable. In editorials the Communist press compared the Mexican situation in Los Angeles to that of Negroes in the South.⁵⁷ All this was proof to the members of the Tenney Committee that foreign agents were indeed at work in contributing to the riots, but it was the Communists not the Nazis.

The members concluded that "the Sinarquistas had nothing to do whatever with the agitation and fomenting of the 'zoot suit' disturbances in Los Angeles and that ". . . the Communist Party selected this organization (the Sinarquistas) for the public spotlight as it went about its vicious work creating a Mexican 'minority' in California." Finally, the Senate Committee did not blame the local media's yellow journalism for whipping up hatreds but rather placed the onus squarely on the Communist press along with Al Waxman's *Eastside Journal*. Together, in the words of the committee, "they played an important part in the agitation of the Mexican Pachucos, both in preparing for the riots and in keeping the issue alive when the violence had ceased."⁵⁸

Thus, ultimately, state and federal agencies, because of a long history of anti-communism, attributed the riots, neither to the military's lack of discipline, nor to the police department's anti-Mexican attitudes. They did not mention the hysteria that the Hearst newspapers and the *Los Angeles Times* created, nor to the poverty and racism that Mexicans endured, but rather the investigators blamed the Communist Party in California, acting as an agent of a foreign power. This denial of the root causes of the violence directed towards Mexican youth had been echoed in the Los Angeles Grand Jury's findings and the statements of Los Angeles Mayor

56. "There is also considerable evidence of the Party's desire to play up the race angle with a view toward extending its influence among the Mexican minority group in California." *Ibid.*, 9. The bias of the Committee was apparent from the start. On June 23, 1943, Chief Investigator Combs for the Tenney Committee was quoted in a newspaper story as saying that "the Communists and Communist organizations beyond a doubt took an active part in fostering the recent "zoot suit" outbreaks in Los Angeles." *Los Angeles Evening Herald Express*, 23 June 1943, quoted in "Mexican Gangs, a.k.a. "Zoot-Suiters" and Pachucos," 12.

57. *Ibid.*, 10.

58. California State Senate, *Report of the Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities in California* (Sacramento, 1945), 210.

Fletcher Bowran regarding the riots.⁵⁹ No evidence of Communist organizing activities among Pachucos was ever presented. After all, the servicemen, not the Pachucos, instigated the Pachuco riots.

The Latin American Journalistic Reactions

Latin Americans had other concerns regarding the riots, which reflected a diversity of class and political interests. Aside from the diplomatic exchanges previously discussed, another source that yields insight into the *mentalite* of the Latin American public were the editorials and articles that appeared in the popular media. Of course, one should be suspicious of relying on newspapers as sources of opinion. In both the United States and in Latin America since, the public opinion expressed in newspapers has always been influenced by political and economic pressures, and at times, by concerns over advertising. In Mexico, the government has had a long interventionist tradition *vis-à-vis* the news: over the decades it had developed subtle and not so gentle ways of influencing what was printed. Most reporters depended on government stipends to supplement their meager paychecks; and many newspapers depended on government subsidies and advertising.⁶⁰

In Mexico there is some evidence that the Mexican federal government sought to control the media during the Zoot Suit disturbances. The reaction to the riots by Mexican nationalists threatened to embarrass the Avila Camacho government's pro-U.S. stance.⁶¹ As already noted, the Mexican foreign ministry became a target for mass demonstrations and crit-

59. See in particular Mayor Fletcher Bowman to Mr. Philip W. Bonsal, Chief, Division of the American Republics, State Department, 3 August 1943, 4, Purport file 811.4016. Mayor Bowron stated that "the acts of the local citizens, the local police, and members of the armed forces, regrettable though the occurrences may have been, were not prompted by prejudicial or even unfriendly feeling toward the Mexican people." The Grand Jury report, appended with Bowron's was a study of Mexican juvenile crime in Los Angeles and there was no specific mention of the riot. Generally the Grand Jury believed that the Zoot Suit was correctly interpreted as an emblem of gangsterism and denied any role to racial discrimination in causing juvenile crime. "The Jury finds that juvenile crimes do not have for their motive or reason class or racial hatred or discrimination . . . The Jury finds, from evidence submitted to it, that the use of liquor to a large extent and marihuana to a small extent are major causes of juvenile crime."

60. See the discussion of this in Michael B. Salwen and Brice Barrison, *Latin American Journalism* (Hillsdale: L. Erlbaum Assoc., 1991).

61. See for example, Herbert S. Bursley, counselor of Embassy, Mexico City to Cordell Hull, Secretary of State, 26 June 1948, Purport File 811.4016/590. Bursley reports: "The Mexican Government had endeavored to persuade, apparently with considerable success, the local papers to create the disturbances in Los Angeles and the race riots in Detroit as calmly as possible."

ical media comment. Leftists demanded that the government take a strong position against the North American racism that the riots seemed to express. Additionally, the U.S. government through its embassy officials in Mexico City sought to control the anti-American sentiment by urging restraint in printing stories originating in the U.S. media that were being circulated in Mexico and Latin America.⁶²

During June and July 1943, the Mexican foreign ministry collected newspaper clippings and forwarded them to their Latin American consulates. The Mexican government also collected clippings from the local Mexico City press. The first major article to appear in the Mexico City press was an article in *La Prensa* on June 14, 1943 that was critical of the Pachucos. The banner headline read, "Without Being Truly Mexicans, They Are an Embarrassment to Our Republic."⁶³ The article went on to say that the Pachucos (also called "Tarzanes") were "a real affront to our country" and that "they are almost always mestizos of Mexican and Negro, or Mexican and Chinese or Filipino; the great majority of them are not Mexicans by birth or nationality." The article stated that these "vagabonds" were illegitimately trying to get the protection of the Mexican government. This was the first negative Mexican interpretation of the Pachucos to appear in print. Its general thrust, that the Pachucos were not real Mexicans would reappear again in the popular media and in academic treatises. The theme of racial degeneracy, however, does not seem to have continued.⁶⁴

Other Mexico City periodicals seemed to distance themselves in regarding Pachucos as Mexicans but were also critical of the North American racism that had triggered the riots. *El Excelsior*, perhaps the most widely read newspaper in the capital, published a piece on June 17 under the headline "No Mexican Has Been Injured in Los Angeles."⁶⁵ This article reported that the U.S. State Department had assured the Mexican government that no Mexican citizen had been affected by the riots. The U.S. authorities had promised rapid compensation for any damages to

62. Here see the previously cited memorandum, Amabassador Messersmith to Secretary of State, 19 June 1943, "Disturbances in Los Angeles Involving Mexicans."

63. *La Prensa*, 14 June 1943, 1. This and other Latin American newspaper articles subsequently cited are in the SRE file III 651-1 and are clippings, some of which did not include the page number.

64. The most famous critique of the Pachuco is the well-known first chapter in Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, which ironically used the Pachuco as an archetype for exploring Mexican identity. The theme of the Pachuco being an embarrassment and an affront to "decent" Mexicans was made by the Mexican-American historian Manuel Servín in "The Post-World War II Mexican-Americans, 1925-1965: A Nonachieving Minority," in *An Awakening Minority: The Mexican Americans*, ed. Manuel Servín (Beverly Hills, 1974), 168. For Mazón, both Paz and Servín illustrate the theme of annihilation: "Both managed to sever the connection between zoot-suiters and the cultural identity of Mexicans," 116-17.

65. *Excelsior*, 17 June 1943, 1

Mexican nationals, but as of yet, not a single Mexican citizen had come forth. The article quoted Eleanor Roosevelt who had said that the Pachuco riots probably had their origins in long-term discrimination against Mexicans in that part of the country. *El Popular*, another Mexico City newspaper, reprinted a translation of an article written by Carey McWilliams for *The New Republic*.⁶⁶ This was an analysis by one of the leading champions of the Mexican youths in Los Angeles. He blamed the riots on chronic discrimination, poverty, journalistic sensationalism, and police racism. McWilliams pointed out that no more than half of the victims were wearers of the zoot suit, and that, contrary to police public pronouncements, there were no Zoot Suit gangs in Los Angeles in an organized sense and that "98 percent of the Mexican youth in Los Angeles is American-born, American-raised, American-educated."⁶⁷ After the riots ended the Mexican press continued to analyze the implications of this. By late June, *Excelsior*, the leading pro-government newspaper in Mexico City, was blaming the riot on racism and the pernicious influence of Hearst's yellow journalism. *Excelsior*'s columnist wrote: "As our readers already know, the riots were a typical case of racial discrimination, a branch of the vile prejudice that the Hitlerites and their accomplices have elevated to a supreme law of human society."⁶⁸

The Mexican border regions were especially concerned about the significance of events. Monterrey, Nuevo Leon's *El Norte*, on June 22 compared the beatings of Mexicans in Los Angeles to the activities of the Nazis in Europe. *El Norte* pointed out that Article 30 in the Mexican Constitution provided that "any person is a Mexican citizen whose parents are Mexicans, whether they are born within or outside the Republic . . ." and criticized the Mexican government's lack of action after the riot. The newspaper called on the government to "formulate an energetic protest to the American Government for the outrages and brutalities committed on our Countrymen."⁶⁹

It took only a few days for Latin American newspapers outside of Mexico to learn about the riots through the wire services. The newspaper clippings gathered by the Secretaría de Relaciones were probably not all the articles that appeared, but they formed a good cross section. In general these papers followed the class bias prevalent in the Mexican media: that the Pachucos were children of uneducated working class migrants. On June 10, *El Crisol*, a daily newspaper in Havana, Cuba, reported that there was a "civil war" between American soldiers and the "Chucheros" (Pachu-

66. *El Popular*, 10 July 1943.

67. *New Republic*, 21 June 1943, 819.

68. *Excelsior*, 23 June 1943.

69. *El Norte* (Monterrey, Nuevo Leon), 22 June 1943.

cos).⁷⁰ The next day, the Havana paper reported that Nelson Rockefeller, the Coordinator of Interamerican Affairs had sent a personal delegation to Los Angeles to seek a solution to the crises. This article was accompanied by a photograph of people, evidently Zoot Suiters, running through the streets being pursued by men in uniform. While the Cuban writer for *El Crisol* realized that the “Chucheros” were of Mexican origin, he did not emphasize it. He seemed to believe that the Pachucos were some kind of organized guerilla force and reported that a “Chuchero” leader in Arizona, Manuel Lopez Romero, “the reputed boss of the Chucheros in Arizona” had been sentenced to five years in prison after being convicted of more than one hundred assaults. The idea that there could be a “boss” of all the Pachucos in Arizona gave the impression that they were some kind of large-scale organized criminal gang.⁷¹ Later *El Crisol* reported that the “Chucheros” had sent representatives to the police with a white flag to ask for peace, reinforcing this image of the riots as a war between armies.⁷² The distorted view of what was actually occurring in the Southwest probably was due to the lack of knowledge about the nature of Mexican American society. The Cuban newspaper reporters projected their own experience with American organized crime. They could not conceive of the Pachucos as a youth subculture of an oppressed Mexican origin ethnic group. Such a concept was completely foreign to them.

Confusion and lack of understanding regarding the events in Los Angeles shaped the Latin American media’s puzzlement over how to view the Pachuco. In some cases they simply republished the Mexican media’s views, as in the case of El Salvador’s *Diario Latino*, which reprinted the analysis of Mexico City’s *El Universal*:

The first Mexican immigrants in California never wanted to become citizens but the majority of their children were made so by birth, at the same time their grandchildren did not accept their north American nationality through ignorance, thus creating an extraordinary undefined generation. Statistics show that this third generation of Mexican descent in California do not know Spanish and are ignorant about Mexico.⁷³

The Mexican ambassador to El Salvador collected many more stories appearing in local newspapers, all of them seemed to follow the Mexican press in emphasizing the non-Mexicaness of the Pachucos.⁷⁴

70. *El Crisol*, 20 June 1943.

71. *Ibid.*, 14 June 1943.

72. *El Crisol*, 14 June 1943.

73. *Diario Latino*, 14 June 1943 reprint of an article in *El Universal* (n.d.), SRE Archive.

74. News clipping were forwarded from *Diario de Hoy*, 23 June 1943; *Prensa Grafica*, 14, 15, 24 June 1943; *Diario Latino*, 12, 14, 24 June 1943; *Nuestro Diario* (Guatemala), 25 June 1943

Other Latin American press reaction emphasized the racial overtones of the civil disturbances. *El Día* in Quito, Ecuador, ran a story with the headlines, "In the City of Los Angeles there Has Been One of the Biggest Race Riots of Recent History."⁷⁵ Lima, Peru's, *Las Novedades* ran a long article emphasizing the racial aspects of the riots, noting that white Zoot Suiters had not been attacked. They also criticized the Mexican foreign office for their slow reaction to the riot.⁷⁶

Still other Latin American newspapers were concerned with possible Fascist involvement in the affair. This concern mirrored the fears of some in California. In late June, Senator Jack Tenny urged the California legislative committee to investigate the possible involvement of members of the Communist Party, the Nazi Bund and other Fascist organizations in the riots.⁷⁷ Representatives of the Mexican government had suggested that Fascist provocateurs were involved in the riots and this had been picked up in the media. *Aborra* in Caracas, Venezuela, demanded in an editorial that the United States clearly explain the situation to Latin Americans, suggesting that the riot, "could be the beginning of a Nazi-fascist campaign to take advantage of the situation."⁷⁸ Peru's *Las Novedades* reprinted Mexican Ambassador Adolfo de la Huerta's report in which he expressed full confidence in the abilities of the U.S. officials to conduct an impartial and honest investigation into the affair but opining that they would "undoubtedly find the work of Fascist agents who have been active everywhere trying to destroy continental solidarity."⁷⁹ *El Avance* (Cuba) reported that the Mexican foreign office had declared that "there were no reasons to believe that the Sinarquista Party (A Mexican Fascist party) has intervened in any way what-so-ever into the recent disturbances."⁸⁰

Conclusion

The international implications of the Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots was that it heightened Latin American's awareness of racial attitudes within the United States regarding Mexicans and Latin Americans. While only a small number of Latin Americans probably read or knew about the riots, they

75. *El Día*, 13 June 1943.

76. *Las Novedades*, 20, 21 June 1943.

77. The final report of this committee concluded that Mexican Sinarquistas had played no role in the riots but that the Communists were probably responsible for the riots. See Domer, "The Zoot Suit Riot," 102 for a quote from *Hollywood Citizen News*, 21 June 1942.

78. *Aborra*, 22 June 1943.

79. *Las Novedades*, 27 June 1943.

80. *El Avance*, 9 July 1943.

provided some insight to the status and problems of the Mexican communities within the United States, including the U.S. born children of Mexican immigrants. There is no evidence that the journalistic responses collected by the Mexican government were ever transmitted to the U.S. State Department, but undoubtedly the U.S. government was painfully aware of the propaganda coup that these articles handed the Axis Alliance. The English language *Inter-American Monthly* made the U.S. authorities aware, if they had not been so before, that "the Latin-American press used the riots as a basis for attack on the United States Racial Policy" and that Latin American journalists "decried the violence as a type of Hitlerian racial intolerance . . ." ⁸¹ The threat of fracturing or seriously damaging the war-time alliance between the United States and Mexico or of giving the Axis propaganda to win the sympathies of the Latin American public made the U.S. government take the riots very seriously. In addition to local and state investigations into the causes of the riots, the FBI was to investigate the involvement of foreign agents. Special instructions had been issued to the military commanders and within a few days Los Angeles became off limits to military personnel.

Ten days after the conclusion of the Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles, massive race riots against African Americans exploded in Detroit. Eventually, 23 persons were killed, 530 injured and 1300 arrested in what was, up to then, the bloodiest urban race riots of the twentieth century. Yet this civil disturbance did not preoccupy the federal government or international journalistic community to the same degree as the Los Angeles riots of 1943. Because of the need for war-time hemispheric alliance, what otherwise might have been merely one more anti-Mexican episode in California's history became an international incident of some importance.

The fact that the Mexican government did not intervene more strenuously on behalf of their nationals, some of whom undoubtedly were victims in the violence, is understandable in terms of the new relationship that the Mexican government hoped to forge with the United States. The Mexican government had a long policy of not intervening in the affairs of other countries and thus proceeded cautiously. Good relations with the North Americans were essential in order to continue with Mexico's economic progress. Anti-Pachuco sentiment expressed in some Mexico City newspapers also served to rationalize a policy of non-intervention. Mexican-American youth were stigmatized as being traitors to their culture (not speaking good Spanish) and, paradoxically, to their adopted

81. *Inter-American Monthly*, August 1943, 5, quoted in Jones, "The Government Riots," 39.

country (by not being loyal U.S. citizens). The message from some media critics was that, even if they were Mexican citizens, they were not worth the protection of the Mexican government. The Mexican government seems to have agreed. No protests or claims were forwarded by Mexican officials even though the Justice Department left the door open for claims on behalf of those of Mexican descent.

The Zoot Suit Riots made the Mexican and Latin American public more aware that there was an ethnic culture of Mexican descent within the United States and that it was victimized by racism and discrimination. Unfortunately, this knowledge often came with an additional message that this ethnic culture was not worthy of respect by respectable Mexicans. It would be several decades before the Mexican intelligentsia would begin to transcend the negative stereotypes first made so prominent by the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943.