

“A Revolution of the Poor, for the Poor and by the Poor” Making Revolution in Rural Cold War Mexico

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L’auteur

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Abstract

Recent publications on popular movements and armed struggle in post-1940 Mexico undermine state claims of exceptionalism within a Cold War Latin American context characterized by military dictatorships and undemocratic rule. In the impoverished, largely rural southwestern Mexican state of Guerrero, state violence and terror in response to reformist demands and movements based on the 1917 Constitution generated two separate rural guerrilla movements led by schoolteachers. Led by Lucio Cabañas, the Party of the Poor waged revolution for seven years beginning in the late 1960s. It would take a violent and brutal “Dirty War” to defeat the peasant guerrillas. This article explains how and why the revolutionary organization emerged and explores its radical visions for a Mexico “governed by the poor.”

Key Words: Guerrilla; Guerrero; Campesino; Socialism; Lucio Cabañas; Party of the Poor.

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During the “long 1960s”¹ in the Mexican state of Guerrero, a mostly rural and impoverished region geographically marked by a long Pacific Ocean coastline and the Sierra Madre del Sur highlands, the constant violent repression of social movements that protested the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)’s authoritarian political model and inequitable capitalist modernization program propelled an uneven process of popular political radicalization. The waging of state terror against dissidents by state police forces, the Mexican military, and cacique paramilitaries led some *guerrerenses* to adopt armed struggle as an urgent, practical matter of self-defense and, gradually, a revolutionary means to enable the overthrow of the PRI and the creation of a socialist state in Mexico. The Party of the Poor (PDLP) represented one such insurrectionary effort. Led by Lucio Cabañas—a native of Guerrero, rural schoolteacher trained in Ayotzinapa, Mexican Communist Party (PCM) militant, union organizer and participant in peaceful social movements during the late 1950s and early 1960s—the PDLP would wage a “war of the poor against the rich and the Government of the wealthy” from 1967 until the end of 1974.² In addition to executing regionally hated caciques and state police agents, the PDLP—through its armed wing, the Peasant Brigade of *Ajusticiamiento* (BCA)—conducted a series of highly publicized and impactful ambushes of military convoys in the Guerrero mountains. In contrast to the vast majority of an estimated forty guerrilla movements that emerged in Mexico during the 1960s and 70s, this guerrilla group managed to forge an important network of popular support anchored in the campesino communities of coastal and highland Guerrero and extended to urban cells organized in the cities of Acapulco, Chilpancingo, and Mexico City.³ Indeed, it was this expansive level of popular support—and the group’s locally defined revolutionary socialism—that worried military intelligence officers and spy agents. Could the PDLP’s revolution against “the dictatorial government of the rich” and their effort to create a political organization of power “in which the poor govern everything,” spread beyond the confines of Guerrero and interface with concurrent urban social movements?⁴ Could their homegrown vision of socialist revolution, fuelled by desires for vengeance both old and new, make Lucio Cabañas “the spokesman for similar [campesino] demands in other parts of the country?”⁵

In my book, *Specters of Revolution* and elsewhere, I chronicle in detail the historical emergence and development of the PDLP (and a separate coterminous Guerrero guerrilla group, the National Revolutionary Civic Association), contextualizing the

¹ The title of this article comes from Jacobo Silva Nogales, *Lucio Cabañas y La Guerra de los Pobres*, Mexico City, Rizoma Cooperativa/Deriva Negra, 2014, p. 33. Jaime Pensado, *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long 1960s*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2013.

² Alejandra Cárdenas, interview with the author, 23 April 2007. PDLP survivors would attempt to reform and reorganize the revolutionary group as early as 1975. For post-Cabañas PDLP history see the interviews and work done by Silva Nogales, including, *Lucio Cabañas y la Guerra de los Pobres...*, *op. cit.*

³ Fernando Calderón and Adela Cedillo, “Introduction: The Unknown Mexican Dirty War,” in Fernando Calderón and Adela Cedillo (eds.), *Challenging Authoritarianism in Mexico: Revolutionary Struggles and the Dirty War, 1964-1982*, New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 5.

⁴ AGN, DFS 80-21-72, Legajo 1, pp. 105-106.

⁵ The quote is from Fausto Cantú Peña, director of INMECAFE (state owned company that purchased coffee directly from campesino producers) during the 1970s. Alberto Carbot, *Fausto Cantú Peña, Café para todos*, Mexico City, Grijalbo, 1989, pp. 97-98.

revolutionary organization within a longer history of popular struggle in Guerrero.⁶ To understand the historical development and the insurrectionary practice of the PDLP as a “poor people’s revolution,” I posit two main arguments. First, the group emerged from a 1960s history of popular movements that were organized to demand the actualization of political and socio-economic rights enshrined in the 1917 Mexican Constitution only to confront different targeted and mass forms of terror unleashed by caciques and state forces. Such terror, in turn, led to the radicalization of political ideas and tactics and the assessment that, to quote schoolteacher and guerrilla leader Genaro Vázquez, “the electoral path does not solve [working class and campesino] problems and the secret, universal vote is a bourgeois trick.”⁷ The eventual adoption of Marxism “as a theory of how to understand and act in the world”⁸ generated both insurgent critical thinking and a solution that melded theory and practice: the need for a new revolution anchored, in part, on an older 1910 version that was betrayed by the PRI. Second, the revolutionary politics of imagination forged by the PDLP in the course of revolutionary struggle contained both older local-regional campesino translations of social democracy, radical agrarianism, and Cardenista populism and transnational guerrilla New Left visions based on socialism, direct action, national liberation, and anti-imperialism.⁹ This sort of creative, non-sectarian political engagement that broadened the definition of the revolutionary protagonist (“the poor”) and depended upon the initiative and participation of rural communities helps elucidate why the PDLP managed to obtain poor and middling campesino support for “a revolution of the poor, for the poor, and by the poor.” In this article, I will first outline the history of the PDLP and then briefly analyze its heterodox revolutionary imaginary and practice. The PDLP, like all of the Mexican guerrilla movements organized during the 1960s and 70s, was the most isolated in Latin America, having emerged in a country that retained friendly, diplomatic ties to revolutionary Cuba despite U.S. pressure and touted its “revolutionary,” “Third Worldist” credentials on the international stage.¹⁰ Actions like the widely publicized visit of Dr. Salvador Allende to Mexico in December 1972—a trip that included a speech at the Universidad de Guadalajara during which the Chilean president reprimanded Mexican students and defended President Luis Echeverría (1970-1976)—and the acceptance of South American exiles fleeing military dictatorships enhanced the PRI’s international image as a “radical” ruling party.¹¹ And yet, despite facing transnational isolation and the violence of a state that would eventually develop into a broad and

⁶ Alexander Aviña, *Specters of Revolution: Peasant Guerrillas in the Cold War Mexican Countryside*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁷ Francisco Gómezjara, “El proceso político de Genaro Vázquez Rojas hacia la guerrilla campesina,” *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales*, 88 (April-June 1977), pp. 113-114.

⁸ Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 182.

⁹ Cuba and Vietnam figured importantly in these New Left visions of direct action and revolutionary struggle (as did Maoism, though on a lesser scale), but local and national political contexts shaped how these examples were translated on the ground. Aviña, *Specters...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-77; Adela Cedillo, “Armed Struggle Without Revolution: The Organizing Process of the National Liberation Forces (FLN) and the Genesis of Neo-Zapatism (1969-1983),” in Calderón and Cedillo, *Challenging...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 148-166; Matthew Rothwell, *Transpacific Revolutionaries: The Chinese Revolution in Latin America*, London, Routledge, 2013, pp. 28-47.

¹⁰ Calderón and Cedillo, “Introduction,” *op. cit.*, p. 5. For an excellent study on Mexico-Cuba relations during the 1960s see Renata Keller, *Mexico’s Cold War: Cuba, the United States, and the Legacy of the Mexican Revolution*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

¹¹ For the full speech see, http://publicaciones.anuies.mx/pdfs/revista/Revista19_S2A2ES.pdf.

brutal counterinsurgency effort responsible for the documented disappearance of at least 600 guerrerenses, the PDLP organized a popularly supported revolutionary effort fueled by memories of past revolutions betrayed and contemporary longings for vengeance borne from repressive state actions. In the process of struggle, from the incipient moment of taking up arms “because the government came to assassinate, to burn, to kill, to execute”¹² to the incomplete formation of a politico-military organization, the PDLP created an original revolutionary project that sought a socialist world “without that grand theft...the exploitation of the poor by the rich.”¹³

“The people will not tolerate a massacre...”¹⁴

In the dark days of early 1968, months after state police forces and paramilitary gunslingers carried out two separate massacres of protestors in coastal Guerrero, ex-guerrilla Luis León Mendiola recalled the arduous effort to organize rural, communal support for an embryonic guerrilla force. This radical intent to create what would become the insurgent PDLP drew from a local subaltern political lexicon that had long described class warfare in the region between *campesinos*, landed elites and *caciques* (political bosses) as a struggle between the rich and the poor. The decision “to side with the poor against the rich,”¹⁵ as León Mendiola described the stark choice offered to potential guerrillas and supporters in early 1968, created a sort of historical solidarity with past regional movements that previously embraced armed struggle tactically when confronted by political violence and economic dispossession. Some peasant memories in this coastal region of southwestern Mexico even remembered 1910 Zapatismo as an initial “party of the poor” engaged in struggle against a “rich class” intent upon usurping campesino lands—a struggle thereafter repeated during agrarian reform efforts of the 1930s.¹⁶ When Cabañas and a small group began clandestinely traveling the coastal highlands in mid-1967 seeking guerrilla adherents they, in effect, sought to reactivate an older revolutionary struggle within a new, contemporary social-political context that urgently demanded direct action in the face of state terror. The idea of a party of the poor waging class struggle against the rich thus long predated the emergence of the actual guerrilla PDLP. In the realm of popular memory and politics, the PDLP, to quote Antonio Gramsci, already existed in campesino “consciousnesses and wills” like “a canto exists in the imagination of the poet before it does on the printed page.”¹⁷

Critically engaging what PDLP guerrillas and their supporters said, wrote, did, and remembered thus reveals both a long history of campesino efforts to make manifest the theoretical, constitutional gains of the 1910 revolution in their everyday lives; and a 1960s history of state and cacique violence executed against guerrerense social

¹² Suárez, *Lucio Cabañas...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 198-199.

¹³ Lucio Cabañas quoted in Luis Suárez, *Lucio Cabañas, el guerrillero sin esperanza*, Mexico City, Grijalbo, 1985, p. 157.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 55.

¹⁵ Luis León Mendiola, *Mi testimonio acerca del Partido de los Pobres en el Estado de Guerrero*, unpublished, 2004, p. 20

¹⁶ Andrea Radilla Martínez, *Poderes, saberes y sabores: Una historia de resistencia de los cafecultores, Atoyac, 1940-1974*, self-published, 1998, pp. 103-105; Suárez, *Lucio Cabañas...*, *op. cit.*, p. 56; Armando Bartra, *Guerrero Bronco: Campesinos, ciudadanos y guerrilleros en la Costa Grande*, Mexico City, Era, 2000, pp. 108-111.

¹⁷ Antonio Gramsci, “One Year of History,” *Il Grido del Popolo*, 16 March 1918, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/1918/03/one-year.htm>.

movements who organized to demand the end of boss political rule, economic justice and social democracy as defined in the 1917 Constitution. From 1959-1967/68 such social movements demonstrated that “with the Mexican Constitution in hand, [they worked] within the Law.”¹⁸ For such efforts, regional and national PRI elites responded by choosing political intransigence and hardening over negotiation, evidenced by a ready willingness to make massacres and everyday forms of terror throughout the turbulent decade. “All we asked the government for,” an ACNR campesino guerrilla recounted in 1971, “was justice. We did so through petitions. Nothing provided resolution. On the contrary, the government threw the *federales* at us to finish us off.”¹⁹ Political violence and terror shaped the development of two separate guerrilla movements—with long historical memories—in Guerrero by the late 1960s.

If the 1917 Constitution promised a socialized democracy for Guerrero and all of Mexico, some campesinos remembered President Lázaro Cárdenas’ tenure (1934-1940) as the actual moment when promises were made good; when, as the president *michoacano* declared in 1934, “progress would be socialized [and] campesinos would constitute the principal beneficiaries of economic development.”²⁰ Though the assassinations of twenty-six campesino leaders in 1938 (along with constant cacique resistance to agrarian reform throughout the 1930s) portended a bleak future, the Cardenista years encouraged campesino organization and mobilization beyond 1940 to demand agricultural technology, irrigation, credit, infrastructure, schools, health clinics, and roads as institutionalized rights.²¹ But as the post-1940 PRI shifted politically to the right, and adopted an inequitable economic development path based fundamentally on rapid industrialization and import substitution subsidized by the countryside, small and middling campesinos in Guerrero increasingly experienced political marginalization and increased economic exploitation. Their ability to “veto” elite or cacique designs in the form of “fiercely competitive” municipal elections or mass civil disobedience, as historian Paul Gillingham argues for the 1940s and early 50s, gradually lessened within regional and national contexts shaped by one party political rule and an emerging global Cold War.²²

By the time a despotic military governor took gubernatorial power in Guerrero in 1957, rural communities that possessed decades of revolutionary memories and an array of popular protest modalities would discover a national PRI well-versed in authoritarianism and the dark arts of repression. Indeed, it honed such lessons, as historian Gladys McCormick has recently demonstrated, in rural regions like the *guerrereense* countryside before applying them to urban centers in the 1960s.²³ The PRI did so because the countryside consistently witnessed popular resistance against the party’s rightward shift after 1940. Rural schoolteachers often played key roles in

¹⁸ *La Verdad*, 5 March 1961, quoted in Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Dirección Federal de Seguridad (DFS) 100-10-1-16-2-62, Legajo 10, p. 215.

¹⁹ Aviña, *Specters...*, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

²⁰ Lázaro Cárdenas quoted in Radilla Martínez, *Poderes...*, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

²¹ Bartra, *Guerrero Bronco...*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

²² Paul Gillingham, “Maximino’s Bulls: Popular Protest after the Mexican Revolution, 1940-1952,” *Past and Present* 206 (February 2010), p. 180.

²³ Gladys McCormick, *The Logic of Compromise: How the Countryside was Key to the Emergence of Authoritarianism*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2016, pp. 162-183.

helping to lead and organize such resistance efforts.²⁴ Formed in rural teachers training colleges (*normales rurales*), institutions established in the decades after the 1910 Revolution with an emphasis on socialist education, these teachers worked in impoverished communities and witnessed firsthand the consequences of PRI policies—and of popular efforts to challenge such policies. Such experiences, combined with the *normales rurales*' socialist pedagogy, “the poverty from which students originated, the state’s abandonment of the countryside after 1940... all imbued rural educators with a righteousness that fueled involvement in political struggles.”²⁵ As a normalista student in Ayotzinapa during the tumultuous late 1950s, a historical moment also rocked by the Cuban Revolution, Cabañas cited the normal rural as the birthplace of his political consciousness.²⁶

That General Raúl Caballero Aburto lacked the necessary political skill and deftness to serve out the entirety of this gubernatorial term (1957-1961) made him the rule, not the exception, in Guerrero’s history. Until that point, only three governors in the state’s history had successfully completed their mandate in the face of popular protest and power struggles between entrenched local-regional caciques. After two years in office—a tenure characterized by nepotism, corruption, graft, heavy handed interference in municipal politics, and the use of state police forces to harass and assassinate opponents and dissidents—the general faced a state-wide, multi-class civil disobedience campaign.²⁷ United by one demand, the removal of Caballero Aburto from office, middle-class professionals, teachers, students, campesinos, housewives, Mexican revolution veterans, low-ranking state bureaucrats, unions, local opposition politicians and disaffected PRI militants (and most likely some rival caciques as well) began to mobilize and organize in 1959. With the Guerrero Civic Association (ACG) and its young leader, schoolteacher Genaro Vázquez at the fore—as part of a broader organization called the Coalition of Popular Forces (COP)—this *cívico* movement used a variety of direct actions and consciousness-raising tactics to make visible on regional and national levels the violent despotism of the governor throughout 1959 and 1960. *Cívicos*, including Cabañas as an Ayotzinapa student leader, put into practice legally-enshrined democratic definitions of citizenship by directly challenging what they referred to as Caballero Aburto’s “betrayal” of the Mexican Constitution. In the words of one prominent movement leader, Dr. Pablo Sandoval Cruz, the effort to unseat the general, “...was a movement that still believed in a system of government borne from a popular revolution. It was an entire people that demanded a change in the system of government in favor of another more democratic one.”²⁸

The dramatic conclusion to the 1960 *cívico* movement foreshadowed what was to come in Guerrero. Though the Mexican Federal Senate would vote to remove Caballero Aburto in early January 1961, it occurred only after military forces

²⁴ Of course, not all teachers became political, grassroots activists. For examples of teachers becoming caciques see Paul Gillingham, “Ambiguous Missionaries: Rural Teachers and State Facades in Guerrero, 1930-1950,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 22:2 (2006), pp. 331-360.

²⁵ Tanalís Padilla, “Rural Education, Political Radicalism, and Normalista Identity in post-1940 Mexico,” in Benjamin Smith and Paul Gillingham, eds., *Dictablanda: Politics, Work and Culture in Mexico, 1938-1968*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2014, p. 342.

²⁶ Suárez, *Lucio Cabañas...*, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

²⁷ For assessments of Caballero Aburto’s ruling style made by spy agents, see AGN, DFS 100-10-1, Legajo 7, pp. 90, 93-94; AGN, DFS 48-54-60, Legajo 1, pp. 1-3, 17, 122.

²⁸ Pablo Sandoval Cruz, *El movimiento de 1960 en Guerrero*, Chilpancingo, Universidad Autónoma de Guerrero, 1999, p. 65.

stationed in the state's capital city of Chilpancingo opened fire on unarmed protestors on 30 December 1960, killing twenty-one and wounding forty more (two soldiers also died). State forces detained fifty-five protestors, torturing them while in detention, and other military units violently stormed a university building occupied by students allied to the anti-Caballero Aburto movement. The students subsequently experienced physical assaults while housed in the city's municipal jail.²⁹ Despite the repression—and efforts by the PRI to mollify popular anger and coopt important movement leaders—the *cívico* movement continued to organize direct actions after the installation of an interim governor in January 1961 seeking to institutionalize the grassroots direct democratic initiative forged in the struggle against the general. From 1961 to the end of 1962, the ACG ruled in nearly two dozen municipalities, organized campesinos in a series of land invasions, and transformed itself into an opposition political party to run against the PRI in the 1962 state elections. With a social democratic message that demanded an end to the PRI's undemocratic "caudillo methods," the actual application of agrarian reform, and social justice, the ACG framed the elections as the moment to "save" the 1910 revolution from the "opportunists" and the "new rich" that dominated the ruling party.³⁰ After the PRI declared electoral victory in December 1962, and the ACG protested alleging fraud and voter intimidation, another massacre of ACG militants occurred in the city of Iguala on 30 December 1962. Officials charged Vázquez with murder, forcing him to go underground, while thousands of soldiers entered the state to restore "order" through the use of terror in 1963. According to the leftist magazine *Política*, soldiers razed homes, tortured campesinos, destroyed entire communities, and assassinated campesino leaders "for the 'crime' of having participated in the political opposition."³¹ Considering the intensity, methods, and scale of repression, the dirty war in Guerrero arguably began in 1963.

For the rest of the decade, forming part of the political opposition or engaging in social activism proved dangerous for activists like Vázquez and Cabañas. Reformist, constitutional efforts to reform Mexico's authoritarian political structure or an economic program dubbed "miraculous" by foreign observers while it plundered the countryside failed, sometimes violently. By the time the military brutally ended the Mexico City student movement on an October night in 1968 in the Tlatelolco plaza, regions like the Guerrero, Morelos and Chihuahua countryside had already experienced the most violent and coercive facets of PRI rule. Vázquez iterated this historical lesson in a September 1968 communique to Mexico City intellectuals and students that warned "the government of [President Gustavo] Díaz Ordaz was planning to violently smash the student movement *a sangre y fuego*."³² Cabañas, after actively participating with the ACG in the 1962 state elections, continued to organize campesino communities and work with PCM electoral and unionizing efforts in the years after the Iguala massacre. As a rural schoolteacher in coastal Guerrero, his highly effective collaboration with campesino communities defending communal rights to forestry resources against logging companies won him popular acclaim—and a cacique-prompted exile to the state of Durango in 1965. When his incessant

²⁹ AGN, DFS 100-10-1, Legajo 7, pp. 102-104; and Salvador Román Román, *Revuelta cívica en Guerrero (1957-1960): La democracia imposible*, Mexico City, Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana, 2003, pp. 555-569.

³⁰ AGN DFS 100-10-16-2, Legajo 10, p. 204; AGN, DFS 100-10-16-2, Legajo 1, pp. 8-10, 106-107, 144.

³¹ "Terror en Guerrero," *Política*, 15 May 1963, quoted in Bartra, *Guerrero Bronco*, 99-100.

³² Antonio Aranda Flores, *Los cívicos guerrerenses*, Mexico City, Luysil, 1979, p. 129-134.

organizing of rural communities created problems for elites in the northern state—and the protests of teachers and families of schoolchildren in Guerrero that demanded his return provided additional pressure—the popular communist schoolteacher returned to his native land.³³ Unsurprisingly he soon became embroiled in a local conflict between the parents of poor schoolchildren and an unpopular, exacting primary school rector in early 1967 in the city of Atoyac. At bottom, the conflict involved local manifestations of class struggle, with the poor campesino parents and their teacher allies pitted against the school rector backed by landed and merchant interests. After days of threats of violence made by local caciques and the arrival of the hated state police (*judiciales*), on 18 May 1967 police agents opened fire on protesting parents and teachers gathered in the Atoyac plaza. The bullets started just after Cabañas had taken a microphone to speak. Five protestors and two police officers died in the shooting.³⁴

There was much rage and popular desire for vengeance when another massacre occurred in Acapulco—killings between twenty-three and forty copra-producing campesinos in August 1967—shortly thereafter.³⁵ Such violence, popularly perceived as the handiwork of coastal caciques, only intensified a local process of political radicalization that had begun during the effort to unseat the primary school rector in April-May 1967. Public calls for a “Party of the Poor” and “death to the Party of the Rich” preceded the 18 May massacre, as Fabiola Eneida Martínez Ocampo notes in her excellent study.³⁶ Violence exercised by state police forces and elite caciques only exacerbated a will to act. As Cabañas used a broad network of communist schoolteachers, sympathetic campesinos, and extensive familial connections scattered throughout coastal Guerrero to escape state persecution, government spies reported the appearance of radical graffiti (in black and red paint) on the walls of Atoyac; death threats made against wealthy merchants and caciques; rumors of a developing armed group led by Cabañas, traveling throughout the mountain communities “spreading communist ideas” and calling for attacks against “rich people who...exploit the poor and campesinos.”³⁷ Indeed, the last report proved accurate. In his own words, Cabañas recalled how he and a few companions organized meetings with campesinos to convince them of the necessity and tactical utility of organizing a rural, clandestine guerrilla group. Waiting for a “mass, open insurrection...led by some general...scheduled for a precise date” would only lead to a quick defeat, the schoolteacher argued. They had to convince an enraged rural population that “wanted to immediately vent its anger and fire some bullets, not remain in the mountains, in the wild like little animals, in a guerrilla struggle.”³⁸

That guerrilla struggle would gradually and covertly come to fruition by 1968; led by a political organization, the PDLP, and its armed wing, the BCA, supported and sustained by dozens of rural communities in coastal Guerrero. The first “armed self-defense” phase of this struggle, from late 1967 to early 1972, involved secretly organizing a popular campesino base of support, avoiding capture, kidnapping caciques for ransom, executing hated cacique and state police gunslingers, and

³³ Aviña, *Specters...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-105.

³⁴ Fabiola Eneida Martínez Ocampo, “Los alzados del monte: historia de la guerrilla de Lucio Cabañas,” Licenciatura thesis, Universidad Autónoma de Mexico, 2009, pp. 90-105.

³⁵ AGN DFS 100-10-1-67, Legajo 7, p. 175.

³⁶ Fabiola Eneida Martínez Ocampo, *Los alzados del monte: historia de la guerrilla de Lucio Cabañas*, Tesis de Licenciatura, UNAM, 2009, p. 96; AGN DFS 100-10-1, Legajo 24, p. 42.

³⁷ AGN DFS 100-10-3, Legajo 25, p. 312; AGN DFS 100-10-1, Legajo 25, p. 338.

³⁸ Cabañas quoted in Suárez, *Lucio Cabañas...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60.

expanding the armed struggle's area of political influence. Cabañas heavily depended on schoolteacher, PCM, and family networks during this phase to consolidate, grow and arm the fledgling PDLP and BCA. Elders like Petronilo Castro Hernández (a veteran of the 1910 Revolution who disappeared in 1972) and José Antonio Palós Palma (a Spanish Republican exiled soldier and medic) provided military advice and helped organize clandestine cells in the highland communities that logistically and politically linked the PDLP to its base of support. By 1969 the BCA had ambushed state police forces (*judiciales*) that the guerrillas compared in a communique "to the White Guards used by Porfirio Díaz to destroy the people's freedoms" and executed four police sergeants and caciques accused of killing campesinos.³⁹ That same year the guerrillas organized its first broad assembly that included the participation of thirty-five communities and individuals from non-violent leftist organizations like the PCM and the Revolutionary Teachers' Movement (MRM). A series of proposals agreed upon by the assembly participants shed light on the political and strategic positions of the PDLP that remained constant throughout its period of armed struggle: support for all forms of popular struggle (armed and non-violent) and organizations against the PRI; respect for the political and tactical autonomy of armed revolutionary organizations; the avoidance of sectarian political stances and positions; and, the establishment of socialism constituted the goal of the PDLP's armed struggle in Mexico.⁴⁰

This first phase, akin to the "gathering forces in silence" strategy practiced by the Sandinistas in late 1960s Nicaragua, ended on 25 June 1972 when nearly two-dozen guerrillas ambushed a military convoy near the small town of San Andrés de la Cruz, killing ten soldiers and wounding two.⁴¹ Ex-guerrilla Jacobo Silva Nogales contends that the decision to adopt an offensive "guerrilla warfare" strategy emanated from popular demand in the region—a demand made in the midst of an increasingly violent and expanding military repression that the PDLP heeded and acted upon.⁴² Having published and distributed the group's first manifesto (*primer Ideario Pobrista*) earlier in March, the ambush of the military convoy demonstrated a first offensive step in the goal to "overthrow the government of the rich class" and "create a new government of and for the poor."⁴³ Guerrillas from another group, the Movement of Revolutionary Action (MAR), also participated in the first ambush. An organization that emerged from Mexican students who studied at the Patrice Lumumba People's Friendship University in Moscow, and which later received military training in North Korea, the MAR provided the BCA guerrilla with key tactical advice and training. A graduate from Ayotzinapa and "*marinero*" guerrilla leader Wenceslao García José (disappeared in 1975) provided the initial connection between the MAR and the PDLP. Surprised at the audacity of the attack and struggling to develop a coherent counterinsurgency plan amidst low troop morale while violently lashing out at communities located near the ambush site, the military seemed unprepared for a second BCA ambush on 23 August 1972 that resulted in eighteen military deaths.⁴⁴

³⁹ AGN DFS 100-10-1, Legajo 33, pp. 179-180.

⁴⁰ Martínez Ocampo, *Los alzados...*, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

⁴¹ Thomas Wright, *Latin America in the Era of the Cuban Revolution*, Westport, Praeger, 2001, p. 170.

⁴² Silva Nogales, *Lucio Cabañas...*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁴³ AGN, DFS 100-10-16-4, Legajo 6, pp. 230-31.

⁴⁴ AGN, DFS 100-10-16-4, Legajo 1, p. 12; Versión Pública (VP), "Lucio Cabañas Barrientos" (LCB), DFS File 5, 11-235, Legajo 23, p. 66-69 ("Interrogation of Wenceslao García José"); DFS 1001-10-16-4, Legajo 5, p. 226; AGN, Secretaria de Defensa Nacional (SDN) box 98, file 292, pp. 16-17, 91-21.

In the days after the second ambush, military intelligence officials secretly proposed the implementation of a broad based socio-economic development program for the state of Guerrero “to reduce discontent and, above all, to undermine the region’s support for those who oppose the Government through illicit means.”⁴⁵ A month later, the state governor announced such a plan, even as regime officials publicly denied the existence of guerrillas, that promised roads, electrification, schools, hospitals, credit, potable water, and the undermining of caciques by recapitalizing state companies that directly purchased coffee and copra (the main products of the region) from small and middling campesinos at fair prices. At the same time, thousands of soldiers poured into Guerrero, thereby demonstrating the beginning of a more sophisticated (though inconsistent) counterinsurgency approach that demonstrated some semblance of PRI understanding of the roots of armed struggle while practicing terror against communities and individuals suspected of supporting the PDLP. Despite (or because of) the use of torture, disappearances, extralegal assassinations, death flights and the restricting of food and medicines into coastal Guerrero by the military and state police, the PDLP grew (in size and in geographic influence) from the end of 1972 until mid-1974. By early 1974, after Cabañas had left the group for a couple of months to seek medical treatment in early 1973 and returned to quell internal political divisions and ideological differences with urban guerrillas hosted by the PDLP, the armed group had shifted its primary emphasis from ambushes to extending its popular base of support in the face of expanding state violence. Working with their clandestine cells in communities, the PDLP guerrillas organized a series of assemblies in rural communities during which they explicated their motivations for revolution and sought recruits. While they failed to establish the sort of liberated zones seen later in Central American guerrilla struggles, the PDLP did essentially operate as a sort of mobile shadow force, flouting a widespread military presence with the help of many rural communities. They could still mount ambushes against military convoys and, controversially, executed a number of accused spies and informants working for the military.⁴⁶ By early 1974, the PDLP had managed to forge a clandestine network in coastal Guerrero that linked highland communities to urban centers in Acapulco, Chilpancingo, and Mexico City. Former militants estimated the support of nearly 150 communities with the assistance of 1,500 urban activists sustaining anywhere from 100-150 armed fighters—including twenty *guerrilleras*.⁴⁷ Yet the military’s strategy of brutally targeting the PDLP’s civilian base of support and corralling its zone of influence to coastal Guerrero, produced guerrilla fears that such terror would successfully isolate them and thus led to a drastic action in May 1974: the kidnapping of influential PRI politician, cacique and future state governor Rubén Figueroa after agreeing to meet with him. Erroneously believing that President Echeverría would negotiate for his *compadre*’s release, the PDLP demanded the withdrawal of military units from coastal municipalities, 50 million pesos, the release of all prisoners held in Guerrero jails and all political prisoners nationwide, among other demands. While

⁴⁵ AGN, SDN box 92, folder 292, pp. 16-17.

⁴⁶ VP, “LCB,” DFS File 4, 100-10-16-4, Legajo 9, pp. 19-22.

⁴⁷ Rafael Aréstegui provides a higher estimate of 240 fulltime and temporary fighters. Rafael Aréstegui, *Campesinado y lucha política en la Costa Grande de Guerrero*, Tesis de Maestría, Universidad Autónoma de Guerrero, 1984, p. 129, cited in Bartra, *Guerrero bronco...*, *op. cit.*, p. 171; Francisco Fierro Loza, *Los papeles de la sedición y la verdadera historia político militar del Partido de los Pobres*, Chilpancingo, Unpublished thesis, 1984, p. 17; Laura Castellanos, *México Armado: 1943-1981*, Mexico City, Era, 2007, pp. 138-139; AGN, DFS 100-10-16-4, Legajo 9, p. 266.

the act gave the group national exposure, it also solidified regime resolve to annihilate the PDLP. Horrific levels of state repression mounted in the search for Figueroa and produced the torture-derived intelligence necessary to rescue the cacique and fatally disarticulate the guerrilla group by September 1974.⁴⁸ After several engagements with Cabañas and the surviving guerrilla remnants in October and November—the guerrilla leader claimed the killing of dozens of soldiers in skirmishes that took place between August and October in his last communique—military units killed the communist schoolteacher on 2 December 1974. Two accompanying schoolteachers-turned-guerrillas were also killed and buried in clandestine graves while soldiers captured fifteen-year-old Marcelo Serafín Juárez. A photograph shows the teenager alive, before disappearing at the hands of military agents. Another photograph from that last combat, one that brings to mind Emiliano Zapata’s final photograph in April 1919, shows the body of a lifeless Cabañas on the ground with a group of soldiers posing with their trophy.⁴⁹

A World Without “the Exploitation of the Poor by the Rich”

In forming an original revolutionary socialist project that sought to create, first in Guerrero and then nationally, a “self-government of the producers,” the PDLP forms part of a silenced people’s history of “mass mobilization” termed by Bruno Bosteels as “the Mexican Commune.”⁵⁰ Amidst a brutally violent military occupation that prevented the full actualizing of a geographically liberated zone, the guerrillas led by Cabañas and sustained by a network of rural campesino communities nonetheless developed (or recovered) a homegrown socialism based on the latter’s historical and cultural experiences—and, crucially, expressed in their language, in their understanding of class struggle as a long-held conflict between the exploiting rich and the exploited poor, fired by the need for vengeance against murderous state forces as a way to obtain justice and recover communal dignity. PDLP revolutionary practice necessitated the processual imparting of *ajusticiamiento*—the use of redemptive revolutionary violence against perceived class enemies—to free Mexico from an oligarchic “bad government” in the service of violent caciques and foreign capital in order to create a new state form. This new horizontal form, a direct grassroots democracy in which the “poor” determined political and economic organization and sustained by armed, unmediated popular power, found its echo in subversive pasts. History, or rather a radical reading of Mexican history that posited the “Commune” at the center, thus added urgency to national liberation since the PRI had long “betrayed” the 1910 Revolution as expressed in PDLP communiqués: “[our] new revolution is inspired by the example of selfless defenders of the homeland like Cuauhtémoc, Hidalgo, and Juárez...Zapata is our guide and the people our support.”⁵¹ If, to paraphrase Regis Debray, Fidel Castro read José Martí before Lenin, then

⁴⁸ AGN, DFS 80-84-74, Legajo 1, p. 4, 12, 23; AGN, SDN box 100, file 299, pp. 3, 159-168, 702, 705; AGN, SDN box 100, file 298, pp. 68, 183, 206-207, 245, 248, 256.

⁴⁹ AGN, SDN box 98, file 293, p. 153.

⁵⁰ Karl Marx, “The Civil War in France,” accessed at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm>; and Bruno Bosteels, “The Mexican Commune,” in Shannon Brincat (ed.) *Communism in the Twenty-First Century*, Vol. 2, Santa Barbara, Praeger, 2013, pp. 161-189.

⁵¹ AGN, DFS 100-10-16-4, Legajo 5, p. 59; and AGN DFS 100-10-16-4, Legajo 4, p. 365.

Cabañas read José Maria Morelos, Juan Escudero and Emiliano Zapata before Che Guevara.

The PDLP published, in Guerrero and national newspapers, its first Ideario in March 1972 as part of the negotiations for them to release the kidnapped son of an influential regional cacique. Containing fourteen points and starting with the overthrow of the “rich class” and the formation of a “government of peasants, workers...and revolutionary professionals,” the guerrillas called for “the expropriation of factories, buildings, machinery, transportation and landed estates and their return to laborers;” the formation of armed workers tribunals to “ensure the application of laws and the protection of their interests;” and that the poor and workers control the means of communications. Additional points essentially represent a diagnosis of post-1940 PRI failures and unwillingness to deliver key services to the countryside like health clinics, schools, adequate housing, potable water, agricultural technology and infrastructure, and credit. Demands for the actual application of land redistribution, worker rights and control over production, and economic nationalism reveal the persistence of national and locally-specific memories and legacies of radicalism: the “Acapulco Commune” led by Juan Escudero, the “Lenin of Guerrero,” during the late 1910s and early 1920s; the 1920s guerrilla uprisings led by Valente de la Cruz and the Vidales brothers that attacked the region’s ruling class; the low-intensity class warfare of the 1930s between campesinos and landed elites; and the subsequent radical interregnum represented by Cardenismo and land redistribution. The final points of the Ideario, in arguing for the “liberation” of women and ensuring equal rights, along with actualizing the economic and political rights of “those campesinos that the rich class calls ‘indians,’” anticipated later guerrilla movements in Central America and Chiapas.⁵²

In sum, these demands—socialist, potentially anticapitalist, and rooted in the everyday lives and historical experiences of Guerrero’s campesinos—represent what PDLP guerrillas believed would move subaltern communities to join their armed struggle within *and* beyond the confines of Guerrero. Indeed, their adoption of “the poor” as the revolutionary protagonist reflected an effort to fuse the particular conditions of their region with the universal struggle, as they explained in the closing of the Ideario, “of poor peoples throughout the world that fight against the same sort of foreign domination that sustain the rich classes.”⁵³ And though the PDLP suffered military defeat at the hands of “a stronger, more ruthless enemy,” to quote from John Beverley’s broader assessment of the Cold War Latin American armed left, it left behind subversive, egalitarian ideals that continue to shape popular movements and resistance in Guerrero and beyond.⁵⁴ In a horrific neoliberal present shaped by “drug wars” and tens of thousands of murders and disappearances, including the disappearance of forty-three Ayotzinapa students in September 2014, perhaps one

⁵² AGN, DFS 100-10-16-4, Legajo 6, pp. 230-231. The PDLP published a second Ideario in early 1973 when Cabañas was away seeking medical treatment. This document reflects a more doctrinaire Marxist-Leninist program for revolution and transformation, radically different from the first Ideario, and generated intense internal division and discussion.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ John Beverley, “Rethinking the Armed Struggle in Latin America,” *Boundary 2* 36:1 (2009), p. 58.

legacy of the PDLP is to set “alight the sparks of hope in the past.”⁵⁵ As one Chilpancingo market vendor told journalist Diego Enrique Osorno when he asked her why she didn’t sell Lucio Cabañas tee shirts: “the government will come around to harass us...they think that if we don’t sell his shirts, there will be no more Lucios in Guerrero. If they only knew.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” accessed at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>.

⁵⁶ Diego Enrique Osorno, *El Cartel de Sinaloa: Una historia del uso político del narco*, Mexico City, Grijalbo, 2011, p. 83.