



A Narco History

HOW THE
UNITED STATES
AND MEXICO JOINTLY
CREATED THE
"MEXICAN
DRUG WAR"

**CARMEN BOULLOSA
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OR Books
New York • London

Published by OR Books, New York and London

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First printing 2015

Cataloging-in-Publication data is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-939293-79-4 paperback

ISBN 978-1-939293-80-0 e-book

Cover and text design by Bathcat Ltd.

Typeset by AarkMany Media, Chennai, India.

FOR THE DEAD, THE DISAPPEARED,
THE CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND.

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INTRODUCTION

The Forty-Three

Ayotzinapa is a small village, located near the town of Tixtla, in a remote and mountainous region of Guerrero, a state in the south of Mexico. Though best known in the U.S. for its Pacific coast port city of Acapulco, a famed tourist resort since the 1950s and 1960s when stars like John Wayne, Elizabeth Taylor, Frank Sinatra, and Lana Turner flocked there, Guerrero is a poor state, and Ayotzinapa lies in one of its poorest regions.

The village is built around a teacher training school. Its construction dates to 1933, when a colonial era hacienda was transformed into an institution that aimed to educate the isolated, low-income population of rural Mexico. It was one of a network of “normal schools” imbued with a vision of social justice rooted in the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920). These schools were tasked with educating their students in both literacy and politics: ultimately in creating students who could transform their society. Ayotzinapa’s alumni include two 1950s graduates—Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vázquez—who became famous leaders of agrarian guerilla insurgencies during the 1960s and 1970s. The school today celebrates this tradition. Its buildings feature murals of Marx and Che and its entryway bears the inscription: “To our fallen comrades, who were not buried, but seeded, to make freedom flourish.”

Much of the radical energy of the 522 students (all male, between eighteen and twenty-four years old, many of Indian descent) goes into preserving the school itself. It has been widely believed that the authorities want to shut it down, along with the other sixteen rural teachers’ schools, despite the fact that roughly a fifth of Guerrero’s 3.4 million citizens do not know how to read or write. Students are given one peso a day (about seven U.S. cents) for their personal expenses, and the funds allotted for meals and housing are skimpy. To survive, the students grow much of their own food, raise chickens, look after dilapidated buildings, and share bare rooms containing more occupants than beds.

Periodically they head into nearby cities and towns to *botear*—or “pass the can”—to raise money for the school. They also hold demonstrations to push for more funding, and for the creation of more jobs for those who obtain their degree. In 2014, allotments were trending down, and the students were up in arms. “If we don’t demand things, nothing comes,” said one nineteen-year-old student. “We just get leftovers.”

Occasionally they have “borrowed”—forcibly commandeered—commercial buses from national companies. The state doesn’t provide enough vehicles, and it’s a long walk to the schools in remote hill towns where they do their practice teaching, or to the cities where they go to fundraise and demonstrate. More aggressively, they have used the buses to blockade tollbooths along the superhighway that runs from Acapulco north to Mexico City, the nation’s capital; at these temporary barriers they chant protest slogans and demand contributions from infuriated drivers. As these buses (and their drivers) have always been returned, the authorities, to the annoyance of the companies, have basically tolerated the practice.

On Friday afternoon, September 26, 2014, at the end of the second week of classes, roughly a hundred students—almost all freshmen—went on an expedition. Details of the trip’s purpose, its progress, and even its horrific outcome are still unclear, which is amazing considering the national and indeed global attention that has been riveted on it. Nearly every aspect of what happened that day is contested—partly due to the usual Rashomon effect of contradictory witness accounts, partly due

incompetence, corruption, and lies. There is no universally accepted account of what happened those students during that day—particularly to forty-three of them. The following Introduction draws on the findings of many independent journalists (among them surveys by John Gibler and Esteban Illades), the recollections of student participants, the confessions of alleged perpetrators, and the evidence and analysis presented by official investigative bodies. It is “a” history” —not “the” history—of that 48 hour period, and, as we will see, has been subject to challenge.



On September 20, 2014, at a conclave attended by students from the network of normal schools, it had been agreed that on Thursday, October 2, students from various institutions would assemble in Ayotzinapa and from there travel together up to Mexico City, 240 driving miles to the north. There they would attend a demonstration held each year to commemorate the students massacred during the demonstration in 1968. The convoy would need approximately twenty-five buses, and the Ayotzinapans promised to “borrow” them all. On September 22, a group of students drove down from the hills and headed west on a valley road for about ten miles, to Chilpancingo, the capital city of Guerrero, which sits on the Acapulco–Mexico City highway. There they took possession of two more buses. But on a return visit the following day they were repulsed by federal police. On September 23 they headed to a less well-defended locale, and returned with two more. But this left them far short of their goal, and they decided to dispatch a much bigger contingent the following day.

The task was turned over to roughly a hundred freshmen, who had only been at the school for two weeks, barely enough time to get their hair cropped (an initiation ritual). The short-haired task force would be commanded by eight seasoned second- and third-year veterans of former bus-fishing campaigns. The students headed north in two buses toward the city of Iguala (population 118,000). Before arriving, the leadership, headed by Bernardo “El Cochiloco” Flores, decided to split up. One bus swung right onto a road heading east toward the town of Huitzuco (population twenty thousand) and parked at a roadside restaurant, a likely pit-stop for buses heading toward Iguala. The other continued north, halting short of the city at a highway toll booth, where the Ayotzinapans succeeded in snaring an Iguala-bound passenger bus. Coming to terms with the operator, ten students boarded the third vehicle, and headed on to a bus terminal in the city center, arriving around 8:00 p.m.

There the youths encountered two unpleasant surprises. First, after the passengers had disembarked the bus driver went off to apprise the bus company, saying he’d be right back, but he didn’t return, and the students discovered he’d locked them in. The inexperienced youths, panicky, called El Cochiloco in his bus outside the city, who immediately headed to their assistance. In the meantime the students had broken the windows and exited. The second surprise was that municipal policemen had arrived and were heading toward them with guns drawn and cocked. At just this moment, the first fifty reinforcements arrived; minutes later another thirty brought them to their full and formidable complement of ninety or so, armed with rocks grabbed on the way. The police decided to retire. But something unusual was clearly afoot. There was a long history of bad blood between the Iguala police and the radical students, but gunplay, though not unheard of, was not customary. What the students didn’t know (though there are conflicting opinions as to who knew what, when) was that the police were on hyper-alert because there was a massive public event underway a few blocks from the station being run by Iguala Mayor José Luis Abarca and his wife María de los Ángeles Pineda Villa.



The mayor and his wife were not people to trifle with. Abarca was closely linked to a violent drug trafficking gang, the Guerreros Unidos (“United Warriors”), which had been a military arm of the once powerful Beltrán Leyva Organization. When the latter collapsed in 2009, leaving the Guerreros to their own devices, they took over the production and processing of opium paste (the base for making heroin) and shipped it directly to Chicago, secreted in commercial passenger buses. The Guerreros Unidos supplemented this income stream with collateral criminality, notably kidnapping and extortion, both in Iguala itself—where they were notorious for donning masks at night and grabbing people on the street and giving them an hour to come up with \$1000—and throughout Guerrero. They also did battle with other fragments of the progenitor Beltrán Leyva cartel, notably a gang called Los Rojos (The Reds), for control of the drug trafficking business in Guerrero. The incessant shootouts, which filled mass graves in the countryside, helped drive the state’s murder rate to sixty-three for every one hundred thousand inhabitants, approaching that of Honduras, the homicide capital of the world.

Abarca’s principal connection to the Guerreros came courtesy of his wife. Pineda came from a family of drug dealers—her father and three brothers had worked with the Beltrán Leyva Organization in its heyday, then became Guerrero warriors (two brothers died in battle in 2009). Federal police opened a case against María de los Ángeles herself in 2010 for “*delitos contra la salud*” (drug trade related crimes), but dropped it for reasons unknown.

Abarca had started his business career as a sandal salesman in the local market, but had a meteoric rise. Using mysteriously assembled funds, he became a major property owner, acquiring real estate, jewelry stores, and a shopping mall (the land for which was donated by the Ministry of Defense after intense lobbying on Abarca’s behalf by officials of Guerrero state). He snared the mayoralty in 2011 despite warnings that putting him in office meant turning the city over to organized crime. (One of those protestors was found dead a few weeks after Abarca assumed office). The new mayor proceeded to stuff eleven relatives onto the city payroll. He made his cousin Felipe Flores chief of police, and it was generally believed that the department was now a de facto branch of the Guerreros Unidos, which in addition to extorting the citizenry, used Iguala as a base for their drug trafficking, and provided the mayor with muscle when needed.

In May 2013, Abarca had turned them loose on local activist Arturo Hernández Cardona, who had led a demonstration in Iguala by aggrieved farmers and miners. According to witnesses, Abarca arranged the kidnapping and torture of Hernández Cardona, and then showed up personally to inform the victim, “You fucked with me, so I will have the pleasure of killing you,” just before shotgunning him to death. The Ayotzinapans, who had had close ties with Hernández Cardona, demonstrated in front of town hall. The local Catholic bishop, Raul Vera, called for an investigation into the killing. He even took the case to human rights organizations in the U.S.—but the authorities decided the mayor was constitutionally immune from prosecution, and nothing was done. Impunity had been formalized. “Butchers have come into power,” Bishop Vera said, and indeed it is very hard to discern where the state ends and the criminals begin.

It is even harder in the case of the mayor’s wife. When she and her husband came to municipal power in 2012, it was María de los Ángeles herself who, according to one of the gang’s leaders, became Iguala’s “key operator,” the organizer of the city’s dark side. In her daylight role as first lady, however, Pineda loved to play Lady Bountiful. She had endless photos taken of herself posing with the beneficiaries of her benevolence. And on September 26, 2014, she was due to give her annual report as president of the local chapter of the National System for Integral Family Development, a state-funded organization. According to many observers, she also intended to use the occasion to launch a campaign to succeed her husband as mayor. The ceremony, held in the downtown Civic Plaza, was to be followed by an open-air party. To ensure an imposing audience, they brought in four thousand

acarreados, poor people rewarded for attending and applauding. This gathering was in full swing when word arrived that Ayotzinapa students were once again in town, possibly intent on ruining her big day. The imperious first lady—stylistically a cross between Marie Antoinette and Maleficent (the Disney villain)—spewed abuse about the students, with whom she had crossed swords before: “filthy criminals,” “hustlers,” and “profiteers” were among the sputtered adjectives. Then either she or the mayor gave the order to “Stop them, contain them, and teach them a lesson.”



Meanwhile, back at the terminal, the massed one hundred students discarded the bus with broken window and commandeered two new ones. Sure that the police would be back, they decided to get out of town as fast as possible. The caravan of now four buses proceeded north on a main north-south street, through thickening traffic, heading straight for the Civic Plaza.¹ It seems like they intended to make a right turn just before it, and head east to an entrance to the *periférico*, the circumferential highway that would take them back to Ayotzinapa. Only one bus was able to do so before police cars began pouring into the area. The remaining three vehicles had no choice but to plow straight ahead past the Plaza, where the event was just breaking up, and make for another entrance to the highway. The police gave chase, running behind and alongside them, shooting in the air, until other patrol cars cut in ahead of the procession, just before the on-ramp, forming a barricade and boxing in the three buses.

Then they began shooting to kill. They were joined in this by reinforcements dispatched by the police department of the neighboring town of Cocula, which was even more a creature of the Guerreros Unidos than was the Iguala department. In addition, two unmarked cars showed up, out of which stepped some masked men in black commando outfits, almost certainly Guerrero members who began firing bursts from semi-automatic weapons. Several students were killed or wounded, and twenty-five to thirty were rounded up (principally from the last bus in line) and driven off in police vans.

Others scattered into the night, seeking shelter. Some were succored by householders—one elderly woman took in a group of students, a “gentleman” rescued another group—others were spurned. One contingent of students carried a wounded comrade to a nearby clinic. A doctor agreed to call an ambulance. Instead he phoned the army. The 27th Infantry Battalion had a garrison at Iguala, in part to deal with thugs like the Guerreros Unidos, but they proved anything but helpful. Around midnight they showed up in full battle gear, lined the students up against a wall, took their data and photos, confiscated their cell phones, and threatened to turn them over to the municipal police, saying, “You had the balls to stir things up, so have the balls to pay the price.” In the end, however, they let them go.

All these in flight from the blocked column of buses were profoundly fortunate compared to another of their colleagues, Julio César Mondragón, known as “El Chilango,” meaning he came from Mexico City, an unusual home town for an Ayotzinapan. Sometime during that dark night he was captured by persons unknown. They tortured him, gouged out his eyes, ripped the skin from his face, then shot and killed him and dumped his body in the street.²



In the meantime, the lone bus that had gone off on its own suffered the same fate as the ambushed tri- Intercepted just before reaching the highway and making their escape, they were surrounded by police

who began shooting at them. Some of the students shouted out they were not criminals, but students thinking perhaps they'd been misidentified, to which the police responded, "We don't give a fuck." Others gathered rocks to throw, but with the arrival of more patrol cars, they broke and ran. Some escaped, two were killed, several were wounded, and around ten of them were captured and bundled into police cars.

At roughly the same time, in a quite different part of the city, another bus, also full of youngsters, was shot up by the police, thinking they were Ayotzinapans. They were in fact soccer players from Chilpancingo, in town to play against Iguala, and having won their match, were on their way home to celebrate. Two aboard the bus were killed (the chauffeur and one of the passengers) and several were wounded. The police, realizing their mistake, called an ambulance.

At that point the police had killed six and injured twenty-three.



Throughout all this mayhem, Guerrero's Governor Ángel Aguirre was receiving phone calls from state officials reporting on the shootings in Iguala. It's not known whether the governor talked with the mayor, but he had talked that day with the mayor's wife (with whom, people say, he was having an affair; Pineda also appears to have channeled funds into Aguirre's gubernatorial campaign). In the end, the governor decided against intervening in the police assaults; it was not in his jurisdiction, he would say.

The mayor would claim to have been entirely out of the loop that evening. He allowed as how he had heard that students were disturbing the peace downtown, but insisted he had only ordered the police not to respond to their "provocations." While the bus shootings were happening, Abarca argued, he could not have been involved, as his wife's post-event party was in full swing: "I was dancing," he said, and even reeled off the ditties he and his wife had danced to. After which he had gone home and slept soundly. In fact he and Pineda were on the case throughout the night, with ten calls registered from his cell phone and twenty-five from hers, the last of which was placed at 3:00 a.m.

Also burning up the wires that evening was Gildardo "El Cabo Gil" López, the number two man in the Guerreros Unidos, whose particular remit was as liaison with the Iguala and Cocula police departments. El Cabo Gil arranged for the captured students to be sent to his home in Loma de Coyote, a village west of Iguala on the road to Cocula. He in turn contacted his superior, Sidron Casarrubias Salgado, the reigning boss of the Guerreros Unidos. The message he texted said that "Los Rojos are attacking us!"—adding yet another layer of complexity to the swirling events of that evening. El Cabo Gil was perhaps especially sensitive to possible incursions by Los Rojos, his father having been killed by the rival gang, but it's hard to see how he could have come by that notion in this instance, given that the police with whom he was in touch were under no such delusion. In any event, Casarrubias returned a BlackBerry message: "Stop them, at any cost."

At this point, control of the operation was transferred to the gangsters. The police departments delivered two groups of students, some thirty that had been captured at the caravan, another ten who had been rounded up at the second confrontation site, and then departed. The students were tied up with rope or wire, and packed into two pick-up trucks, a Nissan Estaquita and a 3.5-ton Ford. More were piled on top of one another in the Ford; the five who didn't fit were laid out in the Nissan. The trucks, flanked by a sixteen-man motorcycle escort, headed toward Cocula, then branched off on a bumpy dirt road that led to a garbage dump, arriving between 12:30 and 1:00 a.m. It was drizzling—no more than seven millimeters accumulated during the night—and it was dark, the only lights being those of the trucks and motorcycles.

The sixteen gangsters dragged the students from the trucks onto the ground near the edge of

ravine. Roughly fifteen of them had died en route, apparently from asphyxiation. Roughly thirty were still alive, crying and screaming. These were then, according to one of the confessed perpetrators, “interrogated.” The Guerreros claimed they demanded to know if the students had a Los Rojos connection, which they of course denied, until under beatings and torture one cracked and “confessed,” after which, around 2:00 a.m., they were shot, one after another. (We do not know if all were killed before the final stage; one can only hope so.)

Then the bodies were heaved down to the bottom of the ravine, where they were stacked, like cordwood, in alternating layers. The resulting tower of bodies was doused in diesel fuel and gasoline and set on fire. The blaze was kept burning through the night and into the following afternoon. Saturday, September 27, perhaps fifteen hours or so, by feeding the flames with whatever inflammable materials happened to be in the dump—paper, plastic, planks, branches, tires—and with a continuous supply of diesel fuel ferried in by motorcycle. Finally the bodies were reduced to ashes and bits of bone, which were then pulverized. “They’ll never find them,” El Cabo Gil texted to Casarrubias.



Before concluding this narrative, we must note it is being challenged by those who propose a counter narrative which is even more horrible than this one. It argues that the students were in fact captured by the army, taken to the battalion’s barracks, and there killed and burned in the military’s professional-grade crematorium. Proponents do not advance a scenario that lays out how this came to happen—presumably it would have involved a transfer not to gangsters but to soldiers—and their hypothesis, they acknowledge, requires accepting that an elaborate cover-up ensued at the highest levels of government.

This is not inherently implausible. The army has long been at loggerheads with leftists; indeed decades ago they were responsible for the killing of Ayotzinapa guerilla graduate Lucio Cabañas, but only after he had humiliatingly held out against several years of massive military campaigns. More recently, they’ve been accused of using excessive and indiscriminate force against civilians, including torture, and specifically of committing a particular massacre and then altering the crime scene to cover up their culpability. There’s also the question of how a narco municipality managed to exist with an army garrison in town.

It’s possible to imagine that they arrested those they considered as dangerous radicals, perhaps just to “teach them a lesson,” and then, when they realized admitting this might be politically problematic, decided to eliminate the students and pin the blame on gangsters. Federal authorities also have a dismal track record when it comes to admitting official wrongdoing, and conceivably could have participated in a cover-up, which included torturing the captured gangsters into taking the fall.

This scenario has been adopted by substantial numbers of Mexicans, and crowds have been demanding the military open the barracks to inspection. We do not find this narrative persuasive given the large number of people who would have had to participate in such a mammoth conspiracy and the as yet complete absence of evidence for such an approach. But if it should prove to be true and the military and the federal state were responsible for this particular mass murder, the ramifications would be immense. And even if it’s not, the conviction that it might be suggests how profoundly alienated much of the population has become from the established order.



All of these horrific details of the gangster-run massacre only emerged six weeks later, after ke

participants were caught and had confessed. In the interim, from September 27 on, with the student fate as yet unknown, a hunt got underway to find the vanished forty-three, spurred by the student distraught parents who desperately hoped their children had been “only” kidnapped and hidden away. “They Took Them Alive, We Want Them Back Alive” became the endlessly chanted demand.

On September 28, all 280 members of the Iguala Police Department were brought in for questioning after which twenty-two were held. Of these, sixteen, found to have used firearms, were arrested and sent to a maximum-security prison, charged with aggravated murder.

On September 29, Mayor Abarca denied having any involvement in the police attack. Nor did he admit to the “Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?”-style injunction to “teach them a lesson.” The next day, however, the mayor requested and received a thirty-day leave of absence, and immediately skipped town with his wife and his cousin, the police chief.

On October 4, searchers combing the countryside near Iguala discovered three mass graves containing the bodies of twenty-eight people (later revised to thirty-four). But on October 14 it was declared that DNA analysis proved none were the missing students. Who they *were* was a new mystery, soon compounded when more mass graves turned up, containing an undetermined number of bodies. Other families now came forward to demand investigation to see if *their* disappeared relatives were among those whose bones had been uncovered. (“Six mass graves,” wrote one appalled columnist, “and they still haven’t found the *right* mass grave.”)

The next day, October 5, a 250-person federal police contingent—the elite National Gendarmerie—removed all the Iguala police from office and took over their duties. October 6 saw shockwaves and protests rippling out from the vigil at Ayotzinapa that the parents had begun to keep. President Enrique Peña Nieto, whose initial response to the incident had been muted (on September 30 he’d said the state of Guerrero should assume responsibility), addressed the nation, promising to expand the search and bring the perpetrators to justice. Students who had escaped the initial police shooting held a press conference and described the attack on the buses. A guerrilla group from Guerrero—the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR), which dates to the mid-1990s and has been largely inactive in recent years—YouTubed its solidarity, promised to take action, and called on the public to enact “popular justice.”

On October 8, students from the school led their first large-scale demonstration, and solidarity protests were held the same day in Berlin, Buenos Aires, London, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Montreal, Barcelona, Madrid, Brussels, and Manchester, England. On October 11, masked protesters stormed and burned a state office building in Chilpancingo. On October 16, there were student strikes around the country, and Peña Nieto declared finding the students to be a priority of his government. Within days, the federal state dispatched special police forces to take control of thirteen other gangster-ridden municipalities in Guerrero. Thousands of security forces scoured the countryside, using horses, vans, tanks, helicopters, motorboats, and diving gear. At the state level, in Acapulco, thousands of students, teachers, and machete-wielding farmers called for the resignation of Governor Aguirre over his handling—or non-handling—of the case. That same day on a highway near Mexico City, federal forces captured Casarrubias, the top-ranking member of Guerreros Unidos.

On October 22, Mexico’s Attorney General Jesús Murillo Karam announced that, according to the gangster’s confession, the mayor and his wife had indeed ordered the interception of the buses. Later that day in Iguala, as thousands marched peacefully demanding the missing students be returned alive, dozens of masked protestors broke away and firebombed City Hall. In Mexico City over fifty thousand demonstrated, peacefully.

The next day, October 23, Governor Aguirre stepped down, pressured by his party and public opinion. He was not, however, accused of any culpability. On October 27, authorities arrested four other members of the Guerreros Unidos. They directed attention to the garbage dump, which was

cordoned off by the army and navy. Forensic teams arrived to investigate the scene.

On October 29, parents of the students had a five-hour meeting with Peña Nieto at Los Pinos, the presidential residence, and then held a press conference at a human rights center in the city. One father, declaring, “We are not sheep to be killed whenever they feel like it,” asserted he had come to demand the children be found “because I am a citizen of Mexico, and I have rights.”

On November 4, the mayoral couple was tracked down by federal police, hiding in a working-class neighborhood of Mexico City. Abarca admitted he had been collapsing under the strain. Pineda, haughty as ever, disdainfully ordered the police arresting her to “Take your hands off me” before adding, “How dare you!” Both were imprisoned. None of the couple’s responses to questioning were released.

Finally, on November 7, Attorney General Murillo, having met with the parents first, held a somber press conference at which he presented the findings to date. Drawing on the confessions of several who had participated in the mass murder, he laid out the story whose essential lines we have presented above. He also added a disturbing postscript to the atrocity.

After the fire had burned out, the executioners were told to cool and pack the remains—ashes and bone fragments (the latter first smashed to powder)—into large black plastic garbage bags and dump the contents in the nearby San Juan River. The first, and seemingly least experienced, flung two bags, *intact*, off a bridge into the current below. His colleagues explained they were supposed to *empty* the bags into the river, and this was done with all the remaining ones. But the error allowed Navy divers to salvage some remains. The parents, not trusting Mexican officials, demanded that attempts to glean some DNA information from these tiny bits of bone include, as independent agents, a team of forensic experts from Argentina, who were grimly experienced in tracking the remains of those disappeared by the dictatorship. Material was also sent to the world-class laboratories at the University of Innsbruck in Austria. For the moment, Murillo said, the students were still officially categorized as “missing,” and the case remained open.

In December the Austrians announced that DNA found on one of the bone fragments was that of Alexander Mora Venancio, one of the Forty-Three. The Argentinian forensic team accepted the analysis, but noted that as they had not been present when the remains had been discovered, they could not ratify the government’s assertion that the burning had taken place at the dump.

In January 2015, Attorney General Murillo Karam declared the case closed, arguing that no new information had been unearthed that would require revising the official narrative. Many of the parents insisted that, given the absence of any forensic evidence as to the fate of forty-two of the forty-three missing students, their sons might still be alive. They called for turning the case over to an international criminal tribunal.



The story of the Ayotzinapa students has shaken Mexico profoundly. Immense demonstrations have taken place all across the country. Students at universities and technical schools have been particularly vociferous, appalled at the fate of their fellow students, but artists, actors, writers, lawyers—one trade and profession after another—have also marched in solidarity. Catholic bishops have spoken out (like Pope Francis). Over the six agonizing weeks from massacre to unmasking, hope faded but anger grew, and with it the size and fury of protests against municipal, state, and federal authorities. Not only have individual politicians been discredited to a remarkable degree, but the leading political parties have also been bitterly denounced. The PRD, the major left opposition party, has been badly tarnished, as both Abarca and Aguirre ran for office on their ticket. Peña Nieto’s ruling PRI party has been attacked for its belated concern with the students’ fate, and more broadly for its inability to

unwillingness to crack down on criminality; huge citizen assemblies have called on the president to resign. Most of these protests have been peaceful, but some have flared into violence, as when the doors of the Presidential Palace in Mexico City were set ablaze, or when Acapulco International Airport was seized. This led critics to denounce the disorder, and to dismiss the Ayotzinapanes as themselves as radical troublemakers not worth all the uproar. But the overwhelmingly predominant responses have been shock, shame, sadness, and outrage.

This reaction is something of a mystery. Not because the massacre does not warrant such response but because it is only the latest in a lengthy sequence of horrors. Apart from the identity of the victims—poor rural youth determined to improve themselves and their communities by becoming teachers—there is not a single aspect of the killing spree, and the nexus of corruption and criminality that spawned it, that has not been commonplace in Mexico's recent history.

Mass murder (in one instance producing three hundred corpses); grisly torture (one victim's face was skinned and sewn onto a soccer ball); collusion between mayors, governors, and militarized drug traffickers; rampant kidnapping and extortion; police on the payroll of cartels possessed of vast drug profits available for bribery; the wholesale arrest of police departments; a criminal justice system that all but guarantees criminals impunity from prosecution; the inefficiency or disinterest of high political officials; and even the eruption of protests from civil society—all these have been routine in the last dozen years.

Forty-three bodies? Since 2000, more than one hundred thousand have been killed. Mass graves. Tens of thousands have been disappeared, many likely moldering in such pits. Horrific executions. Roughly two thousand of the hundred thousand suffered death by decapitation.

So, why now the nationwide explosion? In part, it was the militant determination of the parents not to let this latest atrocity get lost in the endless slipstream of murder and mayhem. In part it was precisely *because* of the long train of abuses that had preceded it—the patently metastasizing cancer of corruption and criminality—of which people had finally had enough. “We are angry because this is not an isolated event,” said one woman demonstrating on behalf of the Forty-Three. “Many of us are parents and we see very ugly things in this country that we want to fight.”

This is a book about that long train of abuses. It seeks to provide readers, especially those in the U.S., with a general context, without which this particular outrage is largely incomprehensible. Much of our story will focus on what is generally known as the Mexican Drug War, a phenomenon conventionally dated from 2006, when the Mexican military was sent into action against powerful drug cartels exercising effective control over vast stretches of Mexican territory. Most Americans know that something horrible has been going on below the Rio Grande during the past decade (2006-2015). They have seen the occasional stories detailing blood-drenched massacres, the capture of drug kingpins, the murder of journalists. They may have read U.S. State Department Travel Warnings alerting them that murder and kidnapping await the unwary (and the wary as well). But it has been difficult to get a grasp on the drug war's extent or nature.

It is our contention that just as the story of the Forty-Three needs contextualization, so does the drug war itself. We suggest that it, too, is inexplicable if one scrutinizes only the narrow time frame in which it is customarily confined. That decade has a lengthy and complicated backstory that needs to be situated in the preceding century (1914-2015) of which it was the sanguinary dénouement.

In addition, we argue that the very term “Mexican Drug War” is profoundly misleading, as it diverts attention from the American role in its creation. Americans understandably view the blood-drenched bulletins from below the Rio Grande as dispatches from a different world. They are reports from a distant battlefield, limning a *Mexican* Drug War—presumably a conflict of Mexico's making, hence Mexico's responsibility alone. But we believe the term to be a misnomer, as the complex phenomenon to which it refers were jointly constructed by Mexico and the United States over the last hundred

years.

Americans are probably aware that the vast bulk of illegal drugs consumed in the United States—cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine—arrive from Mexico. Some are also aware that the vast bulk of weaponry used by drug cartels in their battles with each other and with the Mexican state flows south from the U.S.A. But what is perhaps less appreciated is how much the present situation dates to America's long-ago coupling of a voracious demand for drugs with a prohibition on their use or purchase. Just as the prohibition of alcohol in 1919 summoned American organized crime into being, along with hyper-corruption of politicians and law enforcement, so its even earlier proscription of narcotics in 1914 (which, unlike the ban on alcohol, was never repealed) spawned a drug-trafficking industry in Mexico, the enormous profits from which were used to corrupt Mexican politicians and law enforcement.

Mexico was not a helpless, hapless victim. Powerful forces within the country profited hugely and happily from supplying gringos with what their government forbade them. But when the U.S. began bullying its neighbor into trying (and failing) to interdict the torrent of drugs moving across their joint border (something it had been unable to accomplish itself), it led, eventually, to the “Mexican Drug War,” which would cost tens of thousands of Mexican lives and spur an explosion of corruption and criminality.

These assessments underlie the organization of this book. We will first undertake an overflight of a century of U.S./Mexico relations, setting the commerce in drugs, and the attempts at its repression, in the context of the larger political, economic, and ideological transformations experienced by both countries. Then we will track in greater detail the last decade's drug war proper, when a tsunami of violence swamped Mexico. Finally we will return to the story of the Forty-Three, which by then, we hope, will have become more comprehensible, and conclude with some thoughts on how both the U.S. and Mexico might turn some new pages in their respective and joint histories. In particular, we will suggest that the fury aroused by the Forty-Three affair, and the subsequent determination of Mexico to pursue fundamental changes, might best be directed not only into indispensable remakes of its political, economic, and criminal justice systems, but also into ending the century-old criminalization regime itself, which we believe has in large part been responsible for the current situation.

—Carmen Boullosa and Mike Wallerstein
Brooklyn/Coyoacán
January, 2011

- 1 It seems odd that the buses didn't make a left on Eutimio Pinzón, and left again on Avenida General Álvaro Obregón, and then head south nine blocks to the highway, rather than driving north, into the congested and likely dangerous center. But perhaps there was some obstruction at the critical juncture. Such things are always clearer in hindsight, and at a calm distance from the tempestuous reality.
- 2 One of the many remaining mysteries is why, if the murders committed that night were done by gangsters intent on hiding their deeds, they would signal their involvement by dumping a mutilated corpse in a public place, a signature method of cartel assassins. As we will show, the narco modus operandi for dealing with dead victims was either to make a great public show of the murder—hanging bodies from highway overpasses, dumping them at town hall doorsteps, videotaping the killing itself—or to hide the bodies, usually in mass graves, or dissolving them in acid, or burning them down to ash and bone. It is odd that in this case they did both at the same time.

CHAPTER ONE

1910s–1930s

We begin north of the Rio Grande, the source of the insatiable demand for, and interdiction of, narcotics from Mexico. In the United States, the use and sale of various psychoactive drugs—notably opium, marijuana, and cocaine—had been perfectly legal in the nineteenth century and into the early years of the twentieth. Indeed, drug peddling had become big business. Pharmaceutical and patent medicine companies added opium derivatives (morphine, laudanum, heroin) to home remedies for assorted ailments, opiates being one of the few effective forms of pain control available. The typical opium user was a middle-aged, middle-class, white woman. Cocaine, too, was added to medicinal and recreational commodities ranging from cigarettes to soft drinks. Coca-Cola was tinctured with coca leaves until 1903.

Slowly during the 1890s, then with mounting determination during the 1900s and 1910s, a variety of players promoted the criminalization of narcotics, a movement that paralleled the simultaneous push to outlaw alcoholic beverages. These drug prohibitionists included: doctors newly aware of the additives' addictive capabilities (and who now had, in aspirin, an effective substitute); muckrakers who denounced corporations for using drugs to hook customers on their products; and anxious racists of various stripes, such as southern whites who claimed cocaine drove Negroes to rape white women and anti-Chinese activists who charged them with using opium to seduce white women. As David Musto notes, it was not fear of drugs per se that drove the prohibitionists, so much as fear of the social groups who used them.

First, some state governments were won over to prohibition. Then, in 1906, the Pure Food and Drug Act required manufacturers to list the ingredients in their narcotics-laden products, alarming many of the housewives who unwittingly had been spooning opiates to their children. In 1909 the Smoking Opium Exclusion Act successfully barred importation of the form in which most Chinese ingested the drug—putting opium dens out of business—while exempting medicinal versions used by white Americans. The 1909 initiative was prompted, also, by American businessmen's desire to break Europe's (and especially England's) grip on the lucrative China market, as it was thought (correctly) that banning opium would play well with the Chinese authorities who were then trying to stamp out the widespread use of a drug that, since the 1840s, had been pushed on them at gunpoint by the British.

These proscriptions had several unanticipated consequences. Scarcity drove up the price, which attracted criminal traffickers. It also induced former opium smokers to switch to more potent and more dangerous derivatives, like morphine and heroin. The prohibitionists responded by tightening restrictions. They also pushed for international criminalization—winning in the Hague Convention of 1912 commitments from several nations to restrict opium and cocaine. In the U.S. they won passage of the Harrison Act in 1914, which prohibited all non-medicinal use of opiates and cocaine, though not cannabis, which was (correctly) adjudged to be relatively harmless.

The United States had declared war on drugs.

The subsequent shortages, and skyrocketing prices, drew a new generation of gangsters to the trade (Lucky Luciano's first arrest, in 1916, was for peddling opium). With passage of the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act in 1919, the production, distribution, and sale of alcoholic beverages were banned, triggering the shift from licit to illicit purveyors that spawned modern organized crime in the U.S. Gangster entrepreneurialism was further accelerated by criminalization

the manufacture, importation, and possession of heroin in 1924—which promptly galvanized yet another underground market. Arnold Rothstein, New York’s master criminal, alerted by his protégé Luciano about the profit potentials—a kilo of heroin could be bought for \$2,000, then cut and resold for \$300,000—shifted out of rum-running in the mid-1920s, and turned instead to importing opium and heroin from Europe. Purchasing a well-reputed mercantile firm as cover for his wholesaling operations, Rothstein began distributing to a national market, dispatching the goods by rail.



The booming U.S. demand for narcotics also attracted attention in Mexico. While the climate in the United States was not suitable for poppy horticulture, Mexico was situated in a latitude zone that provided the perfect temperature for cactuses (at lower altitude) and poppies (at higher elevations). Conditions for opium cultivation were particularly ideal in the Golden Triangle, a region in the western Sierra Madre mountains (of *Treasure* fame) where the states of Sinaloa, Durango, and Chihuahua come together. (See map, page vi.) It was there that poppy production blossomed—introduced in the 1880s by Chinese migrants who had been forced out of the U.S. or had arrived by sea to Sinaloa, a state that runs for four hundred miles along Mexico’s Pacific coast. Most worked on the railroads and in the mines, but some rural Chinese families entered into production of opium and marijuana. Their numbers increased after the United States banned further immigration, with passage of the baldly titled Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and its subsequent iterations in 1892 and 1902. In the first decade of the twentieth century the number of Chinese living in Mexico quintupled (from 2,660 to 13,203), and more opted to engage in cultivation. During and after the Revolution, in the 1910s and 1920s, they were joined by some of the many Mexican farmers who had been impoverished by the war’s devastation.

Over these decades Chinese immigrants and their descendants fashioned a rough-hewn drug trafficking network. After harvesting the poppies and extracting the *goma* (gum, latex paste) from the poppy seedpods, they conveyed raw or cooked opium to Chinese dealers in the U.S. (chiefly Los Angeles) via a series of outposts in towns between Sinaloa and the cities on Mexico’s northwest border, notably Tijuana. More and more Mexican peasants, middle-class townsfolk, and some wealthy merchants jumped into the business. It was easy to enter—there were no significant start-up costs. Nor was there significant danger: there was room for everybody, hence no need to employ violence to stake out market share.

The U.S. border—360 miles to the north—was not only close to Sinaloan traders and producers (called *gomereros* after the *goma*) but also notoriously porous. It had been so for a long time, ever since the Mexican War (*La Invasión Norteamericana* [1846–1848]) had violently redrawn the line of demarcation, shifting vast holdings of gold, coal, iron, and copper, along with great tracts of fertile agricultural land, to the U.S. side of the ledger, including all or parts of California, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado. The newly inscribed frontier (enhanced by an additional strip purchased in 1853) became one of the longest borders on the planet, stretching two thousand miles. It ran from Tijuana, on the Pacific coast, through deserts and arid hills to Ciudad Juárez at roughly the halfway mark, and from there it jagged southeast, running along the Río Bravo (as Mexicans call the Rio Grande) down to the Gulf of Mexico.

Almost immediately the border was transgressed more or less at will. In the 1850s slaves smuggled themselves across to freedom: Mexico, having abolished slavery, awarded citizenship to runaway slaves who headed not toward the North Star (Canada) but the Southern Cross. In the 1860s Confederates smuggled cotton to Mexico for transshipment to Europe, and gun runners sent munitions to help Benito Juárez fight the French. Cattle rustlers ambled over from both north and south, stealing herds

and driving them across the border for rebranding and sale. A brisk commerce in tequila, pulque, mescal, and rum also sprang up, flowing north to the U.S. from Mexican distilleries, avoiding tax collectors and, later, prohibition agents.

There was also an easy flow of people back and forth. Border crossing was a breeze because there were no official restrictions or quotas on Mexican movement north; even after the U.S. imposed stringent quota laws in the 1920s, Latin Americans remained exempt. The U.S. Border Patrol, created in 1924, focused on Europeans or Asians seeking to circumvent the barriers erected on the Atlantic and Pacific frontiers. In the early 1900s, about sixty thousand Mexicans entered the U.S. each year at the behest of U.S. agricultural employers; the majority returned home in the winters. The number doubled in the 1910s, as the Revolution set off tidal flows of migrants.

Mexico's people and produce obtained easier passage after the Sonora Railroad—operating from 1882 between Mazatlán (Sinaloa) and Nogales (Sonora)—was integrated northward in 1898 into the Southern Pacific's U.S. rail grid, and extended southward to Guadalajara. The renamed Southern Pacific of Mexico transported millions of passengers and millions of tons of freight, both within Mexico and across the northern frontier.

Opium eased its way into these well-traveled routes. The three crossing points closest to the mountain seedbed of Sinaloa were Tijuana and Mexicali (both astride the border between Baja California and California) and Nogales, where Sonora interfaces with Arizona. Channels were also being created in the center of the country, at the major metropolis of Ciudad Juárez, situated in the state of Chihuahua just below New Mexico and Texas (at El Paso). And farther east, transit points grew up at three medium-size towns dotted along the river—Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and, finally, Matamoros on the Gulf of Mexico.



Not all drugs crossed the border. Some were destined for local consumption. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, psychoactive agents were commonly used in Mexico, for medical and recreational reasons. Opium smoking was chiefly a pastime of the Chinese minority; morphine, heroin, and cocaine appealed to bourgeois artists and intellectuals; and marijuana was primarily the province of the poor. But drug use was not a mass phenomenon. Ingestion levels were nowhere near those attained in Gringolandia.

In part this was because Mexico, unlike the U.S., had a long tradition, inherited from the Spanish, of keeping a regulatory eye on drug use. Constraints of varying degrees had long been imposed on the consumption of alcohol, of peyote and other psychoactive substances used in rituals (which were seen by the Inquisition as theologically suspect), and of herbs, notably potentially dangerous ones like belladonna, henbane, hemlock, digitalis, and jimsonweed.

Surprisingly—from a contemporary perspective—one of the drugs most frowned upon by officialdom was marijuana. Not an indigenous plant, the weed had been introduced by Spanish imperial authorities in the sixteenth century because hemp was highly prized as a nautical fiber, used for making ropes and sails. Gradually it became available from herboleros—indigenous pharmacists—and by Porfirian times (dictator Porfirio Díaz reigned from 1876 to 1911) it had become the drug of choice for the lower classes, particularly soldiers and prisoners. Marijuana had also gained the reputation of being able to trigger temporary insanity and murderous violence. There were indeed hundreds of well-documented cases, especially in jails and army barracks, of sky-high *machos* running amok, even when vastly outnumbered. But as Isaac Campos argues persuasively, this is better chalked up to context than to cannabis. The effect of marijuana, as with most psychoactive chemicals, depends on the setting in which it is consumed, which includes prevailing mindsets. It should not be surprising

that its use in highly stressful situations, where defending one's honor (and person) often demands an aggressive response to a perceived slight, could engender paranoia rather than mellowness, and promote a lashing out.

A patchwork of state, local, and federal laws grew up during the Porfiriato. In 1883, marijuana and opium were among the two dozen drugs that could be sold only by prescription, and only through pharmacies, not *herbolarias*. The regulation was not aimed primarily at recreational users, but was intended to diminish the number of accidental (or purposeful) poisonings. The edict was reaffirmed in the first Federal Sanitary Code (1891). And in 1896, even Culiacán, capital of drug-friendly Sinaloa, banned the sale or use of marijuana without a prescription. So did Mexico City, a decision that municipal authorities reaffirmed in 1908, though they outlawed only cultivation and commerce, not possession of pot, nor giving it as a gift. By the 1910s there was substantial but not overwhelming support in Mexico for restrictionist policies, though most drugs, if prescribed by doctors, remained available in pharmacies.

The Revolution strengthened prohibitionist forces. In 1917, the country was still reeling from a dizzying succession of events—the electoral defeat of the long ensconced Porfirio Díaz by Francisco Madero in 1911; Madero's overthrow and murder by Victoriano Huerta in 1913; the outbreak of war against Huerta by the combined forces of Venustiano Carranza, Álvaro Obregón, Emiliano Zapata, and Francisco “Pancho” Villa, their anti-Huerta campaign aided and abetted by the United States, which briefly occupied Veracruz; Huerta's overthrow in 1914; the seizure of power by liberal reformer Carranza in 1914, the recognition of his government by the United States in 1915, and his election as President in 1917. It was in the subsequent window of (very relative) tranquility and stability that Carranza and his immediate successors set in motion a change in Mexico's approach to the business of narcotics, one that dovetailed with simultaneous developments transpiring north of the Río Bravo.

In 1912, Francisco Madero's government had signed the Hague Convention (though Mexico would not ratify the treaty until 1925). In part this was done because the still-shaky regime felt the need to align itself with the international movement being promoted principally by the United States. But the truth Mexico had preceded the U.S. on the road to regulatory regimes and was way ahead of it in its opposition to marijuana.

The issue was put aside in the ensuing whirlwind of revolutionary combat, but once Carranza came to power, restrictionists took a further step. Determined to restore political order, Carranza convoked a Constitutional Convention, which opened in the city of Querétaro in December 1916. Battles between relatively moderate Carranza forces, and radical younger turks seeking social and economic as well as political change, were for the most part won by the radicals, with key provisions drastically curtailing the power of the Catholic Church, laying the basis for major land reform, establishing national rights to subsoil minerals, expanding lay education, and creating a powerful executive branch.

There was, however, little disagreement about drug policy. In January 1917, Brigadier General José María Rodríguez, personal physician of Carranza, argued passionately that Mexico's position in the “competition of nations” was imperiled because the Mexican “race” had become “infirm” and “degenerated” under Porfirian rule. Some delegates even charged the dictatorship had sought to stupefy and distract the populace through drink and drugs, gambling and prostitution. Steeply, revolutionary elites associated alcoholism, opium addiction, and marijuana consumption with lower class illiterates and (mistakenly) with indigenous Indians—“backward” social sectors. Drugs were perceived as obstacles to forging a new model citizenry, one that could build a modern, progressive and civilized Mexican nation.

Rodríguez proposed an amendment to the Constitution that would give Congress the power to prohibit the “selling of substances which poison the individual and degenerate the [Mexican] race.” He named alcohol, opium, morphine, ether, cocaine, and marijuana (the latter being “one of the mo

pernicious manias of our people”). He also urged writing into the revolutionary charter a provision for a federal department of public health, whose recommendations on issues of civic hygiene would have the force of law. This was done; the new Constitution was approved in 1917, and in 1918 the agency was established, with Rodríguez as its head. He now pushed for draconian measures and, during the last days of the Carranza regime, had the department promulgate “Decrees on the Cultivation and Commerce of Products that Degenerate the Race.” These banned the growing of opium and the extraction of its narcotic latex without special permission; banned completely the production and sale of marijuana, nationwide; required drug wholesalers to obtain special permission to import opiates, cocaine; and mandated that such importers sell those drugs only to licensed medical distributors, or doctors who had received specific permission to receive and prescribe them.

Mexico had declared war on drugs.

Implementation was forestalled by renewed revolutionary chaos, as Generals Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles, among others, took up arms against the Carranza regime. In May 1920, with rebel forces closing in, Carranza left the capital for Veracruz but never made it, having been murdered (or committed suicide) on the way. Obregón was now elected to succeed him, and Mexico entered a period of (again relative) tranquility. In 1923 Obregón peacefully passed the presidential torch to his comrade-in-arms Calles, who during his term in office (1924–1928) resuscitated the delayed assault on illicit substances.

Calles was determined to realize the transformative visions embodied in the Constitution but not yet wholly enacted. In preparation, he had undertaken a 1923 tour of Europe to study contemporary socialist practice. He consulted particularly with German Social Democrats, and also corresponded with Turkey’s Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who was just then embarking on an analogous program of political, economic, and cultural reforms to transform the former Ottoman Empire into a modern and secular nation-state. In particular, Calles set about ruthlessly enforcing constitutional curtailments of Catholic prerogatives—breaking the Church’s grip on the educational system, and prohibiting religious rituals outside of churches, which themselves became the property of the nation. This sparked a furious resistance by Catholic peasants that spiraled into the ferocious Cristero War (1926–1929) in which seventy thousand to ninety thousand died.

For all his anti-clericalism, Calles sought the moral betterment of the Mexican people. As had his Revolutionary predecessors, he saw combating drug use as one way to accomplish this. Alcoholism was his original *bête noire*. As governor of Sonora he had prohibited by decree the importation, manufacture, or sale of intoxicating beverages. Violators were to be punished with five years in prison, though he underscored his determination by summarily executing one poor drunkard. As president, he lit into narcotics.

In February 1925 the *New York Times* reported, in a story headlined “Calles Orders Drug War,” that the new president had announced he would “punish all drug handlers and users of drugs in Mexico.” He had, moreover, fired policemen who “were recently implicated in the drug traffic through protecting importers.” Follow-up stories hailed Calles’ announcement that he would “clean out traffickers from border towns, shut down retail outlets in Mexico City, and go after transshipment from Asia and Europe. (Opium and heroin arrived to Acapulco and other west coast ports on Japanese vessels, sometimes hidden inside fish, or were transported to east coast ports like Tampico and Veracruz from Germany, Belgium, and France.) The government also assaulted opium growers—destroying several hundred acres of Chinese-cultivated poppies in the states of Nayarit and Durango—and went after pot producers too.

“Mexico Bans Marihuana,” declared a December 1925 *New York Times* story recounting industrious efforts by public health department inspectors to arrest farmers and incinerate their crops. Marijuana leaves, the paper explained, retailing an emerging north-of-the-Río-Bravo version of Mexico

conventional wisdom, “produce murderous delirium” that often drives addicts insane, adding “Scientists say its effects are perhaps more terrible than those of any intoxicant or drug.” In 1933 Luis Astorga notes, drug consumption and trafficking were defined as federal crimes.



Calles also set in motion momentous changes in the nation’s political structure that would greatly impact once and future drug wars, albeit in contradictory ways. In 1928 he proposed ending *caudillismo*—the seemingly endless battle for preeminence between rival generals—by bringing all factions together inside one capacious political entity, the PNR (*Partido Nacional Revolucionario* or National Revolutionary Party). Established the following year, the PNR solved the vexing problem of presidential succession by allowing the outgoing president, in consultation with other party chieftains, to choose the incoming one. The procedure became known as *el dedazo*—“the tap of the finger”—with the announcement serving as a sort of secular Annunciation. The term of office was changed from four to six years (a period that became known as the *sexenio*). Reelection was strictly prohibited, thus barring any replay of Porfirian-style “elective” dictatorship.

This was no small achievement, given the fate of most other Latin American nations: there would be no dictators-for-life, no Somozas or Trujillos in Mexico’s future. Calles, to be sure, did not completely follow his own script. After his term expired, he managed to select and de facto dominate his three de jure successors, with each serving only two years; hence he became known as the behind-the-scenes *Jefe Máximo* (“Maximum Leader”). In 1934 he fingered Lázaro Cárdenas, and even chose his cabinet for him. But in 1936, Cárdenas finally put Calles’ principles into practice by having him pulled from his home at midnight and bundled off to exile in San Diego.

Cárdenas, a Depression Era president whose 1934–1940 term overlapped two of FDR’s, extended and deepened the Revolutionary legacy: nationalizing oil and railroads; redistributing forty-five million acres of hacienda land to peasants; reviving the system of *ejidos* (communal land, parcels which were possessed and worked by individuals, but not owned or sellable by them, forestalling the accumulation of giant *encomienda* tracts); expanding social services and secular schools; and supporting strikes that lifted workers’ wages. He also sought to organize core sectors of society into consolidated entities—like the CTM (Confederation of Mexican Workers), a vast collection of unions—with equivalent corporatist bodies for peasants, businessmen, professionals, the military, and others. These were then incorporated into the PNR, which in 1938 he renamed the PRM (*Partido de Revolución Mexicana* or Party of the Mexican Revolution). The political order had been transformed from an elite to a mass-based system. Within a year, the PRM claimed some 4.3 million members.

What the PRM was *not* was democratic. The new political system concentrated power overwhelmingly in the hands of the party-selected president, reducing the legislative and judicial branches to rubber stamps. Rivalries and disputes were to be settled inside the party, after which a united front was to be presented to the outside world. Internal factionalism was moderated by patronage. Federal and state officials dispensed contracts, jobs, political promotions, education opportunities, and social services only to loyal and accommodating party adherents. Leaders of trade unions and *campesino* (peasant farmer) organizations delivered votes and suppressed rank-and-file protests, in exchange for personal favors to leaders and concessions to their constituencies.

Challenges to this one-party rule were derailed by muscle and electoral fraud. In 1940 the radical Cárdenas, seeking stability after so much upheaval, chose a moderate successor, Manuel Ávila Camacho. A more radical faction decided to run an opposition candidate, who gathered considerable support. But the labor confederation and the army collaborated in manipulating ballot boxes; PRM gangs provoked street fighting in which dozens were killed and hundreds wounded; and the party

declared its official candidate the winner by a preposterous 99 percent margin. (In all this they were following a trail long since blazed by politicians in the United States, the quintessential example being New York City's Tammany Hall, which since the 1830s had been hiring gangsters to drive away opposition voters, using "repeaters" to "vote early and vote often," and stealing ballot boxes to purify them of unwelcome votes.)

The PRM elite did much the same in 1943 when first confronted with a truly independent rival party. In 1939, a group of conservatives led by Manuel Gómez Morín—economist, former director of the Bank of Mexico, and former rector of the National University of Mexico—had founded an oppositional political party, the PAN (*Partido Acción Nacional* or National Action Party). As businessmen and Catholics close to the hierarchy, they were opposed to Cardenismo's anticlericalism, land reform, and oil company expropriation, and to the ruling party's monopolization of political power (though the PAN's democratic credentials were tarnished by their sympathy for Franco's regime).

When the new party first ran candidates, in 1943, the PNR dispatched hooligans to break up the meetings and deployed tested methods of electoral fraud. When the PAN disputed the outcome, the PNR leaders had the official certifying body (which they controlled) award themselves all the contested seats. In 1946 the party bosses adopted a slightly more sophisticated strategy, allowing a handful of victorious opposition representatives to take their seats in the Chamber of Deputies, and one mayor to occupy a single city hall. But they maintained absolute control of the presidency, the senate, and every one of the thirty-two state governorships, and would for decades. Their conviction that they had established a lasting primacy was reflected in their final name change. In 1946 Ávila Camacho rechristened the PNR as the PRI—the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party). The Revolution had been institutionalized. The party had declared itself the agency of permanent revolution.

Yet the PRI was not quite the monolith it claimed to be; the pyramid of power was not perfect. At their command of the country's center was all but total, their grip on the periphery, while potent, was more compromised. Many of the circumferential governors were, as they had been under Porfirio Díaz, powerful local *caciques* (chiefs) who were allowed great leeway in ruling their fiefdoms, so long as they obeyed PRI dictates and channeled votes and resources up the chain of command. Many were former generals who had in effect been bought off by being dispatched to the provinces, allowing party politicians to steadily shrink the power of the officer class at the center, furthering demilitarization.



One of the perquisites of local power was the freedom, subject to presidential will, to engage in profit-making ventures, notably illicit ones. Drug trafficking was one such business that could be permitted to powerful members of the "Revolutionary family," and this opportunity was most thoroughly seized upon in the northern states nearest the U.S. frontier. Cultivation and commerce of narcotics thus became incorporated into the political system—despite official strictures against it. More precisely, *because* of those strictures: criminalization gave politicians the upper hand and opened up profitable opportunities. Local police and military authorities could exact tribute from traffickers in exchange for guaranteeing no interference from police or military forces. At the same time they regulated the business by forestalling would-be competitors from entering the trade—thus keeping a lid on intramural violence—while also banning operators from themselves engaging in political activities.

Colonel Esteban Cantú, arguably the first major Mexican racketeer, had been sent to the border town of Mexicali in 1911, at the outset of the Revolution, to protect the northern region of Baja California from possible U.S. incursions. In 1914 he declared himself governor and proceeded to preside over

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