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Elizabeth Henson, *Agrarian Revolt in the Sierra of Chihuahua, 1959-1964*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019, 272 pp. ISBN: 9780816538737.

Elizabeth Henson's book, *Agrarian Revolt in the Sierra of Chihuahua, 1959-1964*, addresses the development of Mexico's first socialist guerrilla movement, which emerged out of the long history of agrarian struggles in northern Mexico. The story is purportedly one of failure: in 1965 the Grupo Popular Guerrillero (GPG) attacked a military outpost in Madera, Chihuahua. Eight of the thirteen insurgents who forged the attack, including two of the group's most prominent leaders, were killed, abruptly ending the revolutionary project. Three different outcomes emerged in the aftermath. On the one hand, the government of Chihuahua doubled down on its repression of agrarian movements. On the other, long awaited distributions of land did occur (although Henson wonders whether this was indeed the result of guerrilla pressure or if it was going to happen regardless). The third outcome was the development of several new guerrilla movements fighting for change in Mexico in subsequent years, inspired by the GPG.

Henson's arguments about the GPG 1964-1965 uprisings are well situated within a long history of campesino activism and land struggles. The first chapter sets the scene for the development of armed insurgency in Mexico, focusing on the broader political spectrum that was coterminous with the Cuban Revolution. Although, Mexico's 1917 Constitution famously granted land rights to campesino communities, the impetus for land reform in Mexico went ignored for many years. Land distributions that took place under President Lázaro Cárdenas were rolled back in the 1940s and evictions and private concentration of land resumed. By the late 1950s, patience with the agrarian reform process was waning. When land distribution did take place, it was painstakingly slow, mired in a cumbersome bureaucratic process and taking an average of fourteen years to complete. By 1960, news of the Cuban Revolution's sweeping reforms against *latifundismo* and foreign landownership had reached Mexico. It was in that context that some of Mexico's land struggles began to transform, Henson argues. The changing tide of the New Left brought a renewed interest in Mexico's student movements, a wealth of new periodicals, and acute attention toward Cuba's trajectory.

The second chapter brings us to Chihuahua, Mexico's largest state, providing necessary historical context. It begins with the exploitation of Chihuahua's natural resources, the encroachment of large haciendas upon the land, and efforts by the U.S. to invade and successfully

annex the northern frontier of the state, which later became the border between the two. After the 1910 revolution, large landowners and U.S. investors still held sway over the land. The chapter describes the emergence of several protest movements that arose in the 1950s. It also provides a history of the Comités de Defensa Popular in the 1960s and '70s—armed committees that arose to protect citizens against ongoing state violence and frequent murder of campesino activists. The third chapter is perhaps the most dynamic one of the book. It introduces readers to the leaders of the GPG and the campesino and student movements in Chihuahua that led occupations of land and government headquarters in the city. Local and increasingly socialist oriented movements built on a foundation of agrarian struggles and the fight for *ejido* land rights in the region, even as repression increased. As impatience with the intransigence of the government and landowners grew, organizing land invasions and marches became a strategy for activists to promote direct participation among the local population. This chapter is rich with detail and an engaging narrative in which the process of making demands for land redistribution comes to life. The campesinos and students are not passive spectators manipulated by obstinate Mexican politicians, it is clear. Instead they are in command; they are agents and protagonists of revolutionary change. The chapter also delves into the student movement born in the highly politicized normal schools—historically a locus of sustained social activism in Mexico. Significantly—and much like the 43 *normalistas* in Ayotzinapa who the Mexican state kidnapped and forcibly disappeared in 2014, and for which this chapter provides crucial historical background—these students were the children of campesinos, and many had been raised within the context of agrarian conflict and battles for the land.

The fourth chapter, set in 1964, focuses on the emergence of the GPG and its explicitly socialist armed vanguard. Uprisings in 1964 led to increased government repression. Henson provides insight into what members of the GPG were thinking by listing some of the literature and books that they were reading, much of which centered on Fidel Castro and Cuba's revolution. Henson contends with the GPG's move to Mexico City where, unlike in the sierras of Chihuahua, they had to work clandestinely, but would presumably be able to recruit a broader range of people. The fifth chapter chronicles the failed September 23, 1965 attack on the army barracks in Madera that resulted in the death of over half of the insurgents. Henson grapples with the question of how the movement went from one that attempted to enforce Article 27 on land rights to one that sought to overthrow the regime. For Henson, the influence of the Cuban Revolution and the GPG's turn to vanguardism are crucial elements in that shift. The final chapter, about the aftermath of the September 23rd attack, argues that despite its failure, the GPG movement did resonate with locals. After the assault, local villagers hid and cared for the five insurgents who escaped. The GPG was not forgotten—in fact subsequent guerrilla socialist movements in Mexico named themselves after the date of the assault and after Arturo Gámiz, the GPG's famous leader who perished that day.

Throughout the book, Henson attributes part of the GPG's failure to their 1964 pivot away from local activism rooted in decades of armed insurrection and land occupations, and toward specifically socialist vanguardism, which she argues came by way of GPG leaders seeking to emulate the Cuban example. Henson attributes the development of the vanguard strategy to

the influx of material circulating in Mexico about the Cuban Revolution and the success of the guerrilla movement in toppling dictator Fulgencio Batista. Had GPG leaders not read or tried to emulate Che Guevara's *Guerra de Guerrillas*, nor believed that, as he argued, the insurrection could create the necessary conditions for making revolution, Henson suggests, things might have turned out differently for them. Yet, by the time the Cuban Revolution came around, Mexico boasted a rich socialist and agrarian legacy of its own to draw from and one wonders to what extent that legacy was already embedded in the development of GPG formation.

The book's narrative flows, and a concise summary of arguments at the beginning of each chapter provides thematic and analytical context. The book is well researched and grounded in both archival and oral history sources. The level of detail that Henson provides about the day-to-day developments of Chihuahua's agrarian movement gives the book comparative import. It also goes a long way to helping scholars appreciate the role of contingency in the development of revolutionary movements. Fortuitously for Fidel Castro, for example, his story did not end the day that his movement attacked the Moncada Barracks in 1953, despite its similarly ill-fated plan. That was not the case for the GPG leaders, who were killed during their assault on the Madera barracks.

There is, perhaps, more of a sense of disillusionment in this book than is warranted by the story it presents. In grappling with the demise of the GPG, Henson contends with the complex and broader history of guerrilla movements in Mexico and the criminal wave of state terror that plunged the country into a depression. Yet, agrarian struggle in Mexico did not end with the GPG in 1965. The state was unable to permanently crush armed agrarian movements, which continued to make inroads, gaining additional access to land and even the legalization of land occupations in the 1970s and beyond. Whether any of this can be traced back to Chihuahua—or whether these gains were made in spite of the GPG's example—would have been an interesting coda. Still, the book is an important and necessary addition to the literatures about both agrarian and guerrilla struggles, not only in Mexico, but across Latin America and beyond.

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