

Communications

To the Editor:

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Peter Guardino's paper on the 1840s peasant wars in present-day Guerrero (*HAHR* 75:2, May 1995) significantly advances our understanding of these events. The paper perpetuates one commonly held misconception, however. Guardino echoes other researchers of late colonial and nineteenth-century Mexico in stating that "By the late eighteenth century, population growth was squeezing peasant agrarian resources" (p. 188). No specific citations are offered, but presumably he has drawn this inference from the increased number of lawsuits and other records involving land disputes in the Chilapa region in the late colonial period. Some of these documents are offered in evidence by John Mason Hart (see citations in *HAHR* 75:4, Nov. 1995, p. 749) to support his argument that any "squeeze" on peasants was a result of the expansion of commercial agricultural estates into territories once held by native villages. Guardino challenges Hart on the issue of commercial agriculture and estate expansion, arguing that private holdings were small and posed a comparatively small threat to peasant communities (*ibid.*, p. 752). But both agree that in the decades leading up to the 1840s conflagrations some sort of imbalance had developed between population and the available agricultural resources.

It is unfortunate that Guardino adopts this position in that it partially undermines, or at least muddles, his most important contribution in understanding the passions unleashed in the 1840s. Guardino is correct to dismiss Hart's arguments on the importance of commercial estates, especially in villages in the immediate vicinity of Chilapa where the revolt was initially centered. As early as the eighteenth century private landowners had gained a tenuous foothold over a few small plots of irrigated land (few, if any, larger than 10 hectares), used to grow sugarcane, together with somewhat larger tracts of surrounding dry-farmed land (50 to 200 hectares). But

thousands of hectares of arable land remained in the possession of peasant villages. To cite a single example, Atzacoyaloya, an early participant in the 1840s conflagration, claimed a territory of about 10,000 hectares, nearly 4,000 hectares of which was suitable for rainfed maize cultivation. Only about 20 hectares of Atzacoyaloya's land could be irrigated. The largest expanse of irrigable land, about 10 hectares, bordered the east edge of the townsite. The next-largest, about 5 hectares, was at the site of the present-day hamlet of Maquiscoatlán. The remaining irrigable surface consisted of small, often minuscule plots scattered throughout Atzacoyaloya's territory. Only the tract Maquiscoatlán, together with a small parcel of surrounding rainfed land (about 80 hectares), fell into the hands of private landowners, probably in the eighteenth century when most estates in the area were founded. Atzacoyaloya retained control over no less than 3,800 hectares of arable land, including about 350 hectares of rich alluvial bottomland which alone could have supported the community's population. In the mid-eighteenth century, Atzacoyaloya was inhabited by only about 550 people. The ease with which this territory could support this number of people can be seen from the fact that it was inhabited by about 5,000 people in 1950, nine times the number present in the mid-eighteenth century.

Economically, irrigated land in the Chilapa area was comparatively unimportant to villagers, just as dry-farmed land was of little interest to Chilapa's mestizo elites. Aspiring estate owners sought the irrigated plots because they could be used to produce sugarcane, which, once processed into *panela*, could be exported to cotton-producing areas to the south and the proceeds used to finance cotton imports to supply Chilapa's lucrative textile industry. Chilapa's elites could export *panela* where peasants could not, at least not as profitably, because elites had preferential access to mule trains that passed through or were based in Chilapa. High transportation costs ruled out exporting other agricultural products, however. Furthermore, consumer demand for agricultural commodities in Chilapa, the only settlement in the region with anything like an urban economy, was not sufficient to draw bulk goods from outside its immediate rural hinterland, which includes more than one thousand hectares of fertile alluvial bottomland. Peasants in this immediate hinterland, in Nexapa, Atempa, Trigomila, Chautla, and other hamlets, do not seem to have participated in the 1840s revolts.

Peasants of Atzacoyaloya and other indigenous communities who did participate in the 1840s revolts used arable land primarily for subsistence maize production. Summer rainfall in this area is more than adequate to support maize, especially on plains and in gently sloping uplands. Prior to the founding of sugarcane fields and trapiches the potentially irrigable areas on lands controlled by Atzacoyaloya, Ayahualulco, Hueycantenango, etc. seem not to have been irrigated at all, presumably because the labor entailed in constructing and maintaining irrigation systems was more profitably applied to more extensive forms of dry-farming. That the historical record is replete with conflicts over irrigated land, including incidents ending in vio-

lence, should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the disputed areas were small and comparatively unimportant to peasants.

I have emphasized the case of Atzacoyaloya because I think its history is typical of the communities participating in the revolts of the 1840s. Both Hart and Guardino have illustrated the circumstances of peasants with regard to land using as examples communities in which land conflicts were particularly intractable. Hart centers much of his discussion on a creative interpretation of the plight of Ayahualulco, a community whose lands bordered those of Atzacoyaloya. Guardino singles out Nancintla and San Sebastián Buenavista, both cases in which aspiring landowners acted with notable audacity. But communities such as Atzacoyaloya, whose most important land conflict was probably fought and lost a full century earlier (without leaving much of a paper trail, unfortunately), participated in the 1840s revolt with the same zeal as these other communities. Land disputes were highly localized, in other words, and affected only some of the villages participating in the early stages of the uprising. While Guardino indicates that he is aware of all this, he nevertheless defends himself against Hart's attack by reaffirming that "land disputes were crucial issues in the rebellions" (*ibid.*, p. 752). He need not have been quite so deferential to Hart on this point.

What I find most striking about the 1840s peasant revolts, at least in the immediate environs of Chilapa, is the scale and fervor of the peasant actions to what were, in fact, relatively mild provocations. Conflicts over land clearly rankled a few villages, but only a few. New taxes were assessed throughout the region, as Guardino notes, but peasants in this area were well practiced at avoiding tax payments. The new taxes were probably a far graver concern to those sent to villages to collect them than to the peasants. Guardino's description of the local elite's efforts to alter the political status of villages and to intervene in villages' internal political organization is more compelling. Even here, however, the facts on the ground were probably less problematic than might be supposed. For example, in 1990-91 I witnessed villagers stymie efforts by the central government to convert the office of village *comisario* from a one- to a three-year term. After a year in office incumbent *comisarios* in nearly every village in the municipio of Chilapa simply resigned leaving the municipio *presidente* little choice but to recognize the villages' designated replacements. It is hard to imagine peasants being less able to thwart outside interference in the mid-nineteenth century when local elites and their bureaucratic lackeys were far less powerful.

Guardino argues convincingly that by 1840 elites in the Chilapa region were emboldened by the perception of support from the central government (such as it was), and were exploring possible means of exploiting rural resources and labor. His evaluation of these efforts is a very substantial contribution to the literature, correcting numerous errors of fact and erroneous interpretations published elsewhere. But the elite's exploratory probing of Chilapa's hinterland had not pushed

peasants to the edge of economic viability, as Guardino also suggests. Rather, peasants in the Chilapa region were economically secure and were in a strong position to defend themselves against outside interference. They demonstrated this by plunging the region into chaos, effectively calling the elites' bluff.

CHRIS KYLE, Columbia, Mo.