

“The Infinite Injustice Committed against Our Class Brothers”

IN SEPTEMBER 1964 the rural normal teacher Pablo Gómez wrote to Education Minister Jaime Torres Bodet protesting his transfer from Saucillo, Chihuahua, to Atequiza, Jalisco. Chihuahua's governor, Práxedes Giner, had long sought Gómez's removal, accusing him of taking students to campesino land invasions. Students took action of their own accord, protested Gómez. They, like youth around the globe, were conscious of the world's problems and sought practical solutions. Teachers may have had an influence, but that was only in “accordance with the social implications specified by Article 3.” What right, continued Gómez, did state politicians, “enemies of normal education, and of President Adolfo López Mateos's great free textbook program,” have to remove him? So hostile had these same authorities been to federal education policy that Saucillo's municipal president had suggested storming public schools to burn the government-issued textbooks.¹

As Gómez pointed out, those now objecting to the free textbooks were the same groups long hostile to public schoolteachers and demeaning of the institutions that trained them. Not only had Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution undermined the church's historic dominion over schooling, but in its expansive definition of the educator's role—to aid in land distribution, organize unions, and publicize agrarian rights—the revolutionary state had

birthed political agents. Notwithstanding later efforts to transform teachers' role to one more akin to social work, rural normales preserved the Cardenista tenets of socialist education. Justice for the countryside remained a constituting element of their institutional culture, one continuously infused by students' family histories of exploitation and by promises of revolutionary reform, not to mention normalistas' own coming of age amid a socioeconomic order that, in several regions of the country, eerily resembled Porfirian times. This presence of campesino consciousness made rural normales particularly radical educational sites.

By showcasing the nature of rural normalistas' participation in northern Mexico's agrarian struggles of the early 1960s, this chapter highlights how student protest marked Mexico's periphery before the widely recognized 1968 movement in the capital. Hidden in plain sight, normalista mobilizations in Chihuahua challenge the notion of student movements as a uniquely urban phenomenon. In the country's periphery, students from the rural normales of Salaiques and Saucillo participated in land takeovers alongside campesinos, dramatizing the country's increasing land concentration and the violence that undergirded it. In this struggle, teachers like Pablo Gómez and Arturo Gámiz acted as leaders, advisers, organic intellectuals, and links with organizations at the national level. They were the visible incarnation of the socially committed, politically militant teachers the revolutionary state had once held as models.

Emerging from the ranks of the Popular Socialist Party (Partido Popular Socialista, PPS) and the independent General Union of Mexican Workers and Campesinos (Unión General de Obreros y Campesinos de México, UGOCM), Mexico's agrarian struggle of the 1950s and early 1960s reinforced the progressive ideology on which rural normales were founded. Internationally, the 1959 triumph of the Cuban Revolution expanded the spectrum of possibilities and stoked their imagination. Normalista frameworks of justice increasingly pushed Cardenista notions beyond campesino empowerment to a state controlled by workers and campesinos. When the hardening repression and ever more elusive reforms produced a local guerrilla group in 1965, its actions crystallized the broad-based association between rural normales and the radical protest of their students.

CHIHUAHUA: *LATIFUNDISMO* AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Chihuahua has long been a source of wealth for foreign investors, Mexican business owners, and local caciques. During the early twentieth century, thanks to Porfirio Díaz's business-friendly policies, families like the Terrazas

and Creels built empires that rivaled those of U.S. magnates of the time.² Their monopoly over land, cattle, banking, manufacturing, and mining was so great that, unlike in other northern states, no dissident elite emerged to challenge them during the revolution. Instead, the middle class, peasants, and workers allied against them and forced reform over the years of fierce fighting.³ But Chihuahua's persistent oligarchs, to use Mark Wasserman's term, proved adept at navigating the new order. While the northern revolutionaries Francisco Villa and Álvaro Obregón expropriated much of the Terrazas-Creel land for redistribution during the 1920s and 1930s, the relatives of the large landowners repurchased it, often with the very money obtained as compensation for previous expropriations. Their postrevolutionary holdings represented but 20 percent of their previous possessions; however, it was some of the state's best land and nearly matched the total acreage redistributed by the government during the 1930s. Other magnates arose from the ruins of the Terrazas-Creel estates. Families like the Vallinas, Almeidas, Quevedos, and Borundas—pervasive names in campesino grievances—purchased many of their previous holdings.⁴ Chihuahua's mining, cattle, agriculture, and lumber sectors provided seemingly endless possibilities for wealth. Exemption decrees, which deemed certain businesses key to the national economy, aided the process by shielding the great cattle and agro-export industry from expropriation. As had been the case during the Porfiriato, political connections helped protect and grow investment. The new elite formed banking associations, cattlemen's organizations, and a chamber of commerce, interest groups that wielded immense power regionally and nationally. While no single family achieved the previous Terrazas-Creel power, by midcentury the Vallinas—in partnership with Terrazas descendants—came close.⁵

Bosques de Chihuahua is a good example of the process by which new elites built fortunes on the remnants of Porfirian-era enterprises. In 1946 Eloy Vallina, a prominent banker, and Carlos Trouyet, a powerful entrepreneur, acquired half a million hectares of land held by Northwestern Railway, a company founded in 1909 that, under foreign ownership, consolidated Chihuahua's rail and timber industries. Bosques de Chihuahua's success came in no small measure thanks to President Miguel Alemán, who would become a silent partner in the venture.⁶ Before leaving office, Alemán issued a presidential decree wherein the Mexican state bought the railway lines now under Bosques' control; this business deal helped provide Vallina and Trouyet with funds to expand the company's timber industry.⁷ More important, in 1952 President Alemán granted Bosques a fifty-year concession of half a million

acres on which the company would supply raw materials to three key paper and lumber businesses.⁸ For generations prior, small-scale ranchers had inhabited this land as well as the 260,000 hectares Bosques bought from North-western Railway and now proceeded to enclose, partition, and sell. Arguing that the company constituted a latifundio, residents petitioned the government for ownership rights. Thus began a years-long struggle against an enterprise whose investing partners, in addition to the former president, included some of Chihuahua's most powerful men: Antonio Guerrero, a former military commander; Teófilo Borunda, the state's governor from 1956 to 1962; Tomás Valle, a businessman and state senator; and members of the Terrazas and Almeida families.⁹

If, on the one hand, Bosques de Chihuahua exemplified the crony capitalism that in Mexico lay at the heart of huge fortunes during the latter part of the twentieth century, on the other, the Ibarra family, who bought portions of the land and forcibly removed its occupants, epitomized the violence that undergirded this process.¹⁰ Newspapers and federal agents reported a growing list of victims murdered by the Ibarra, whose terror methods also included rape. So common was their sexual violence against women that José Ibarra produced a noticeable crop of unacknowledged offspring.¹¹ The murders of prominent local activists at his hands would be an important catalyst of Chihuahua's popular unrest.

In 1949 organizations disenchanted with the government-controlled National Campesino Confederation formed the UGOCM and channeled that unrest into direct action. In the subsequent two decades, the UGOCM spearheaded three principal forms of struggle: local and federal elections; a defense of collective rights, especially as related to the ejido; and demands for the breakup of latifundios and distribution of land. The UGOCM was affiliated with the Popular Party (Partido Popular, PP), formed in 1948 by Vicente Lombardo Toledano, which grouped communists, reformists, and critics of the increasing reactionary tendencies of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) under President Alemán; members of the union's executive council also belonged to the party's national board. Prominent among them was Jacinto López, the UGOCM's secretary general, who in 1949 ran for governor of Sonora under the PP banner.¹² The party's and union's organizational structure provided networks that crisscrossed Mexico's northern states and frequently passed through Mexico City. The PP's focus on electoral strategy, however, would be a source of tension, as local leaders and rank-and-file members pushed for direct action. Some UGOCM members and teachers like Pablo Gómez and Arturo Gámiz, who ran for local office

under the party's banner, would eventually become radicalized and ultimately insist on armed struggle.

Rural normales and other educational centers serving Chihuahua's poor became important hubs of party support. In 1960 the PP became the PPS, which together with its affiliate, the Popular Socialist Youth, enjoyed substantial teacher and student support.¹³ Party literature and organizational strategy encouraged student involvement in campesino struggles.¹⁴ But the PPS also found fertile ground because the teachers and students saw their own family history reflected in campesino battles for land. In addition to the rural normalistas from Saucillo and Salaices, students in Chihuahua City who attended the State Normal School, the Arts and Trade School, the Ladies' Industrial School, and the various Normal Night Schools became important participants in the mounting agrarian battle.¹⁵ If students' poor background imbued them with a sensitivity to campesino grievances, boarding schools provided the space, and student associations the vehicle, for them to act on this sentiment. While Chihuahua's State Normal School lacked the institution-wide boarding-school component of the federal rural normales, it provided living quarters for low-income students who came from outside the capital. These dormitories were located in the same building as those for the Arts and Trade School and the Ladies' Industrial School.¹⁶ In 1962 students from these three schools as well as the rural normales and numerous junior high schools formed the Chihuahua Student Federation. A portent of what was to come, their inaugural meeting was attended by three thousand delegates.¹⁷

"BOSQUES DE CHIHUAHUA, ASSASSINS"

The November 29, 1959, murder of Francisco Luján Adame, a rural teacher from Madera, triggered the unrest that shook Chihuahua for the following half decade. Killed in his home by a man later identified as Encarnación García, Luján Adame had been a regional secretary of the UGOCM and long assisted Madera's campesinos who sought ejido expansions. Madera residents never accepted the knife-wielding assailant as the lone murderer; they pointed instead to José Ibarra as the crime's intellectual author. Luján Adame traveled frequently to Mexico City to carry out paperwork on behalf of campesinos and denounced Bosques de Chihuahua agents who constantly harassed rural dwellers into vacating their lands.¹⁸ His death drew the largest funeral procession in Madera's history, reported one state newspaper, as mourners emptied "the community in silent protest of the macabre act."¹⁹ In

the months that followed, demands for Bosques' expropriation merged with calls for justice over Luján Adame's murder.²⁰

Before the assassination of Luján Adame, the region's campesinos had already faced a series of murders, many at the hands of the Ibarra brothers. For example, Ibarra henchmen had killed Anselmo Enríquez Quintana, a campesino who refused to give up his land. For this murder José Ibarra was indicted but never arrested. On September 4, 1959, his nephew, Rubén Ibarra, killed another teacher, Luis Mendoza. Six months later, Rubén's father, Florentino Ibarra, shot and killed Carlos Ríos, a Pima indigenous activist. Despite receiving an eight-year prison sentence, Florentino spent only three days in jail. José Ibarra, the most notorious of the family, had a murder record that dated back to at least 1942.²¹ Despite this—or perhaps because of it—the state authorities let him command the military and state police, who terrorized the population by hanging campesinos from trees. Instead of a noose, Ibarra's men used a knot that would strangle but not kill their victims, referred to as *cordadas*. Federal intelligence agents reported such abuses, the support the Ibarras had from both state and federal forces, and their success in forcing many campesinos off their land.²²

“Bosques de Chihuahua, Assassins,” soon became a rallying cry as protests spread to the state capital.²³ There students, especially normalistas, held rallies in support of the sierra's campesinos. The youth articulated a clear connection to the agrarian struggle: they were the sons and daughters of campesinos, who were the land's “legitimate owners.”²⁴ Arturo Gámiz, then a student at the Chihuahua State Normal School, delivered a moving speech. Offering a damning analysis of the country's situation, he ended with an impassioned plea: “The youth cannot allow their teachers to be murdered. On the contrary, the youth, as part of the people, must actively fight against injustice. Even though we are young, we worry about the fatherland's problems. We students are poor; we are the children of campesinos and workers. That's why we are here, asking the people to raise their voice in protest, demanding justice.”²⁵ In asserting both their campesino origin and their status as youth “worr[ied] about the fatherland's problems,” Chihuahua's students insisted on the link between the fate of campesinos and that of the nation. Normalistas especially positioned themselves as natural advocates of the rural poor. Such a responsibility resonated profoundly as a rallying cry for Chihuahua's students during the first half of the 1960s and would push many of them to the sort of decisions their grandparents had made during the revolution.

At the one-year anniversary of Luján Adame's murder, when the UGOCM organized a nine-day march from Madera to Chihuahua City, students were

among the first to join campesino calls for land and justice. Designed to coincide with López Mateos's visit to the state capital, the UGOCM protest led delegates to meet with the president and demand he expropriate Bosques' land and address the impunity behind Luján Adame's murder.²⁶ The president was unsympathetic. He criticized the marchers for their "unnecessary agitation" and inability to recognize that Bosques de Chihuahua was an "industry that benefited the nation" and dismissed calls to prosecute José Ibarra when the material perpetrator had already been imprisoned.²⁷

"We have been subjected to all sorts of abuse," wrote Leonel Luján, son of the slain teacher, shortly afterward. In a public letter to Chihuahua governor Teófilo Borunda, Luján detailed the long history of abuse in Chihuahua's sierra, "not only assassinations . . . but the burning of our humble homes and eviction from land we possessed for more than fifty years."²⁸ Where President López Mateos saw agitation, normalistas saw the dignity of their families; where the president saw a prosperous company, normalistas saw an insult to the letter and spirit of agrarian legislation; and where the president saw a just criminal court system, normalistas saw another murdered activist. What kind of a future did such a system hold for poor youth?

Thus, the murder of Luján Adame, a rural teacher who had long denounced repression and fought for campesino rights, became a catalyst that drew normalistas into the center of a storm. For half a decade, together with campesinos and rural educators, they forged a movement bonded by a common origin and shared—almost sacred—constitutional rights: land and education. In the context of the 1960s, these twin principles increasingly provided the basis for a radical trajectory, one that reverberated with particular intensity at the rural normales, where the link between agrarian justice in the present and education's hope for the future constituted a founding principle.

ARTURO GÁMIZ AND PABLO GÓMEZ

Few figures personify the revolutionary essence of the committed rural teacher better than Arturo Gámiz and Pablo Gómez, even if they themselves were not schooled at rural normales. It was partly because of their charismatic leadership that hundreds of normalistas joined Chihuahua's agrarian struggle. Their legacy, like that of Genaro Vázquez and Lucio Cabañas in Guerrero, would become intimately linked to the narrative—both official and popular—of the rural normales. Gámiz's and Gómez's personal histories and political leadership gave them a strong presence among a cross section of Chihuahua's aggrieved population. Both came from a humble background

in northern Mexico, both studied for a time in Mexico City, both became involved in the PPS, and both returned to Chihuahua. There they delivered their lives to agrarian justice.

Gómez and Gámiz were not the sole leaders of Chihuahua's 1960s agrarian struggle. Just as significant were campesinos like Álvaro Ríos and Salvador Gaytán, with whom Gómez and Gámiz shared similar life experiences.²⁹ The two teachers planned actions in concert with Ríos and Gaytán, and these campesino leaders profoundly shaped their ideology. Their relationship is an example of the dialectical nature of political consciousness. As much as the government and the media portrayed the agrarian unrest as stemming from teachers and normalistas who agitated the campesinos, poor rural folks were just as responsible for developing educators' consciousness. The attention to Gómez's and Gámiz's leadership here stems from my focus on rural normalismo. Partly because of these two teachers, who waged a struggle that bridged classroom and field, Chihuahua's normalistas could imagine and follow a revolutionary path. Their biographies are thus worth exploring. Each life is a measure of the dynamics that produced movement leaders in the context of broader social processes—migration, urbanization, schooling—taking place in midcentury Mexico.

Born in Durango in 1940, Gámiz came from a humble background, and there were several rural teachers in his extended family, who also had a tradition of involvement in local struggles.³⁰ Gámiz spent his early youth in Mexico City, where his family moved in 1950. There he attended the National Polytechnic Institute (Instituto Politécnico Nacional, IPN) and was active in the youth section of the PP. In 1956 IPN students went on strike demanding greater participation in school governance; the resignation of the director, whom they charged with being corrupt and autocratic; and increased funding for scholarships and school infrastructure. The movement reverberated nationally as schools across Mexico—including the rural normales—joined their strike.³¹ As a student at the IPN, Gámiz participated in the mobilizations and distinguished himself as a skilled orator and sophisticated thinker.³² The government ultimately responded to this strike with repression. In a prelude to Chihuahua governor Giner's attack on the state's normales, the army occupied IPN dormitories on September 23, 1956, forcibly removing students in the early morning hours.³³ Targeting dormitories was an effective strategy since these living quarters were important spaces of political organizing.

Soon after, Gámiz moved to Chihuahua and worked as a teacher in the municipality of Guerrero. He remained there for two years and in 1959 applied to Chihuahua's State Normal School, where he studied for two additional years.³⁴

At the normal, Gámiz participated in student mobilizations, especially those in support of campesino struggles, including a November 1960 caravan from Madera to Chihuahua City. Gámiz's charisma, his political activism, and his passion for agrarian justice quickly made him an inspiration to other students, who followed his footsteps and joined campesino mobilizations. Tellingly, the agrarian leader Salvador Gaytán referred to him as "the young man who always brings a lot of students to the campesino marches."³⁵

In 1962 Gámiz moved to Mineral de Dolores, a community on Chihuahua's border with Sonora. There he joined Gaytán, whom the community had elected as their representative. In a town that had not had a teacher in twenty-eight years—caciques were using the school as a stable—Gámiz set up a makeshift classroom in the town plaza, where he taught sixty-five children. Once he and Gaytán recovered and rebuilt the schoolhouse, they named it the Escuela Primaria Prof. Francisco Luján Adame, after the Madera teacher slain in 1959.³⁶ Mineral de Dolores had once been a prosperous town, but the foreign-owned mines had halted activities twenty years earlier, "taking with them all the wealth, leaving nothing but ruins, bare mountains, and nostalgia," wrote Gámiz. But the region's economic depression, he continued, "is not only due to the end of mining; there is another important reason: the formation and entrenchment of a *cacicazgo*, an empire of assassins."³⁷ Gámiz's work in Dolores followed a script straight out of the 1930s: build a school, teach the children, assess the community's needs, make them aware of their rights, and organize them to attain these rights. But, thirty years later, the SEP (Ministry of Public Education) wanted instructors whose work stayed within the classroom walls. Lázaro Cárdenas's stewards of social justice had little place in Cold War Mexico.

Two years later, jailed, Gámiz recounted his experience to Salvador del Toro Rosales, an agent from the attorney general's office whom the federal government sent to investigate the state's increasing protest and violence: "I am an unemployed normalista teacher. They took my job away long ago," Gámiz told Toro Rosales.

How do I survive? Well, thanks to the help of campesinos. I teach their kids how to read and write, and in return they give me some food; and when they see I have no shoes, well, they buy me some; sometimes they give me the clothes they no longer wear. That's how I get by. . . . Living among rural folks, I learned of their fatigue and misery, and, as paradoxical as it may seem, authorities deny them the right to the soil they walk on, even though their parents and grandparents are the legitimate owners

of the roads, forests, and ranchos in the state of Chihuahua. . . . As soon as it became known that I helped campesinos, I was blacklisted and labeled a communist agitator.³⁸

Reproduced years later by Toro Rosales, Gámiz's words may say as much about the young teacher as they do about Toro Rosales's reflection of the situation he was sent to investigate. Either way, Toro Rosales was clearly moved by Gámiz. If he had this effect on those from the establishment, it is no wonder he galvanized the students and campesinos around him.

Fourteen years his senior, Pablo Gómez was another important protagonist in the state's mobilization. Born in 1926 "to an agrarista campesino family," as his daughter Alma put it, his early life was one of poverty. In a region where temperatures can drop below freezing during the winter months, with no heating at home and few warm clothes, Gómez would take refuge in local cantinas, where he would sleep curled up atop a billiard table "until the bar closed," said his daughter. Like Gámiz, Gómez prepared for a teaching career at Chihuahua's State Normal School, where he met his wife, Alma Caballero, who also studied there. But Gómez's dream was to become a doctor, a career he would pursue in the early 1950s at the National Autonomous University of Mexico in the country's capital. Three of his five children were born during this time. To support his family, Gómez taught elementary school by day and attended medical school by night. After obtaining his medical degree, he chose to practice medicine in Flores Magón, a town in the northwestern part of Chihuahua where he knew several teachers at the rural normal. Unable to sustain a medical practice because he consistently treated poor patients for free, he supported his family by teaching at the rural normal.³⁹ In Flores Magón and later in Saucillo, where the rural normal moved in 1962, Gómez was always active in local campesino struggles and became a member of the PPS and a UGOCM delegate.⁴⁰ "During that whole process of campesino mobilizations, he, his brother, and other leaders faced repression," recalled Alma, who witnessed the new wounds that continually appeared on her father's body as his involvement intensified. "He had a scar from an attack with a glass bottle; his nose was broken; he had a stab wound in his back. He was detained several times. It was an environment of both generalized and selective repression. . . . His last time being jailed, I remember he told my mother, 'I prefer to die than to live under this repression.'"⁴¹ Aside from the physical aggression Gómez suffered as state and federal forces dislodged him and other campesinos from land takeovers, Governor Giner, and eventually the SEP authorities, sought his transfer out of the state. Accusing

him of inciting Saucillo's normalistas to participate in land invasions, the SEP reassigned him to Atequiza, Jalisco, in 1964.⁴² Gómez quit rather than accept this transfer. He sought instead to move to Cuba with his family, but this plan was reportedly blocked by the upper echelons of the PPS.⁴³

Alma described her home environment as liberal. "Four of the five of us [siblings] were baptized but only because my father liked having *compadres*. But we never went to church. We did not have a religious upbringing." As the years wore on and Alma's father became more involved in local land struggles, her home environment went from liberal to radical. The triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 provided a framework of hope in a local context where striking injustice was punctuated by popular and dramatic acts of resistance. From a very young age, Alma remembered her father glued to their shortwave radio. "Every day, very early in the morning when I woke up, I'd hear my dad listening to Radio Habana. We'd hear speeches by Fidel and Che, all that." It was an atypical household, a situation Alma realized early on through the constant harassment she and her siblings suffered, especially when they moved from Flores Magón to Buenaventura, a town about forty-five miles away where Alma's father wanted to practice in the clinic of a surgeon he admired. "In spite of everything, the situation in Flores Magón was different because of the environment created by the normal. But in the Buenaventura valley, there was no counterweight; it was an incredibly reactionary town. We lived there for a year, and it was a very difficult time for us. My brother Pablo and I often had to take a taxi to school because on the streets they'd hound and throw stones at us for being communist." Alma searched for ways to fit in and thought church could be a venue: "I went to mass every Sunday, and on one Sunday, in his sermon, the priest began to explain that when, in an apple orchard, there is a rotten apple, if it's not removed in time, it will rot and contaminate the rest. Same with tomatoes, and I don't remember what other examples he used. Then he said: "That's what happens in society. Sometimes there are people who can contaminate and ruin the rest of society. And these people need to be eliminated. In the case of this community, it is Pablo Gómez." Alma felt as if the earth had parted beneath her. "I felt afraid, anxious, and angry, but I didn't want to worry my parents, so I didn't say anything." But news travels fast in small towns. Before Alma even got home, her parents knew. Her father was furious and prohibited her from ever going back to church. "I was eleven. . . . That's when my religious life ended."⁴⁴

In 1962, after a year of living in Buenaventura, the Gómez family again moved, this time to Delicias. Her father continued to teach at the rural

normal, which had relocated from Flores Magón to Saucillo. There Alma began her studies in 1963. “I don’t remember the moment nor the circumstances in which I decided to become a teacher. I think it was a very natural process. Since my childhood I had been close to the normal. My father was a teacher there. I would often stay in the dorms with the girls [*muchachas*]. . . . So I had a really close relationship with the normal. . . . I never even asked myself if I wanted to be a teacher; I just went straight to the normal.” Alma Gómez, like her father, would be an important activist in Saucillo and in the 1970s joined a guerrilla movement.⁴⁵

Gámiz’s and Gómez’s humble beginnings, travel to urbanized centers, social mobility through education, struggle for an elusive agrarian justice, and state persecution exemplify the broader social experience of many rural normalistas. That students from Salaiques and Saucillo became important protagonists in their struggles intertwined these teachers’ legacies with that of the rural normales. In the pantheon of unofficial heroes, Gómez and Gámiz stand alongside figures like Rubén Jaramillo, Valentín Campa, Demetrio Vallejo, Othón Salazar, Lucio Cabañas, Genaro Vázquez, and Ramón Danzós Palomino—popular figures who fought the PRI’s authoritarianism and paid a heavy price. Gómez and Gámiz are ignored by official history—except to illustrate that rural normales have a subversive tradition. From below, however, that tradition looks more like dignified resistance to a long history of injustice.

FAMILY HISTORIES, LEGACIES OF RESISTANCE, AND PATHS OF STRUGGLE

Chihuahua’s 1960s agrarian struggle, with its appeals to campesino rights, its direct action, and a leadership that invoked the Cuban Revolution, provided rural normalistas ample opportunities to act. Education officials might no longer have advocated for an activist teacher, but in places like Chihuahua, the UGOCM’s struggle did. Those who heeded such calls came to understand the struggle through ideology as much as through their family’s history and poverty. For example, José Luis Aguayo Álvarez, who studied at the rural normal of Salaiques and in 1965 became head of the school’s student association, recalled his early political awakening: “Our family was very poor. . . . Early on I perceived the social division, we were not all the same. And since my uncles were active in the struggle—they were agraristas—they’d emphasize to us, to their kids, that one had to be committed to the people.”⁴⁶ Such personal memories could grow deep roots at the rural normales, institutions whose

founding logic was to improve the campesino condition. As José Ángel Aguirre Romero, also from Salaises, stated, “We were educated to give ourselves wholeheartedly to the campesino causes. And in that time [the 1950s] there was a lot of caciquismo in the state; there were huge latifundios here. One latifundio, Bosques de Chihuahua, made up almost half the state. So land-petition groups began to emerge, and we couldn’t be detached from such causes.”⁴⁷ Aguirre, whose family had received land in 1923 as a result of the revolution, described in painstaking detail the hardship his family endured even with such reform:

The conditions were almost worse [than in the hacienda where they previously worked] because they got land but no protection. That land had been expropriated from another hacienda. . . . They did not even have a plow to farm and had to break the land with a pick and shovel and cultivate small plots of corn, beans, squash, whatever they could. But the yield was quite small; some had to go work in a nearby town at the hacienda of El Sauz, where a few got jobs. But the majority went to the nearby sierra to cut wood and collect it in little carts. Then they sold it in Chihuahua City. It would take four days to go, fill a little cart, come back, and sell it. They’d receive six pesos, six pesos they would use to buy some corn or beans; there was no hope of buying meat or anything like that.⁴⁸

Bosques de Chihuahua would later enclose the forested lands, which many of Chihuahua’s inhabitants used to supplement their household income. And like Aguayo, Aguirre would also become head of Salaises’s student federation, the Mexican Federation of Socialist Campesino Students (FECSM), an experience that likely reinforced and politicized the memories of his family history.

From a different social sector but with a similar story, Manuel Arias Delgado, who came from a Chihuahua mining family, vividly recalled the harsh conditions under which his father and his grandfather labored in a U.S.-owned mine. Black lung disease, mining accidents, and wages that hardly supported a family of nine children marked Arias’s early life. To help support his family, Arias worked various odd jobs, including as a gardener in a U.S. neighborhood in Chihuahua. “That neighborhood was straight out of a postcard: there was grass, pools, fine-bred dogs. . . . The *gringitos* looked like they were from a Gerber commercial. . . . My toy was a metal wheel that I would push around with a hanger. And they had bicycles they left lying on the grass. They had grass! Here we had rocks. There they had a pool; here we didn’t even have drinking water. And I thought, ‘Why such inequality?’ I

was the example of poverty in the middle of an insulting abundance.” In that abundance Arias found the explanation of his own poverty: “They have what I lack. And why do they have this money? Well, because they took it from my father and his *compañeros*. That’s it, an unequal distribution.” It is no surprise to hear Arias articulate this Marxist labor theory of value. Indeed, he characterized the rural normales as “centers of socialist ideological formation.” Students had a mobile revolutionary library: “That’s where we became acquainted with Marx, Engels, and Lenin. It was a mobile dynamic library. These were books whose pages were all loose because of so much use.”⁴⁹

Out of a student body with this background, figures like Gámiz and Gómez engaged in the state’s agrarian movement. And while such personal histories alone would not spur political struggle, the rural normales’ own radical culture, the 1960s political effervescence (especially among youth), and the inspiration of the 1959 Cuban Revolution created a propitious context for rural normalistas to act on their institutions’ long-proclaimed ideals. Doing so enhanced an already radical tradition. It also aggravated the authorities, who saw the alliance among teachers, *campesinos*, and students as proof that social unrest was the work of agitators rather than the result of unfulfilled or betrayed revolutionary promises. As normalistas invoked the Cuban example, they joined youth throughout Latin America who were hungry for alternative political projects and expanded the notion of the possible. U.S. aggression against the island served to confirm the righteous nature of the Cuban road.

Across the rural normales, organizations like the FECSM circulated images of bearded revolutionaries constructing a new society with agrarian and educational reforms at the center. The island’s revolution itself offered new material for political study circles. Silvina Rodríguez, a student from the rural normal of Saucillo, for example, recalled, “We’d have meetings on Fridays, and at those meetings Prof. Pablo Gómez would bring a map and explain to us how the Cuban Revolution was going, who had advanced in what moment and on what day. So Fridays we’d hear how events had unfolded for the week.”⁵⁰ Her classmate, Alma Gómez Caballero, likewise remembered, “On May 23, ‘Students’ Day,’ there were a series of activities, among them a parade with various floats. And there is a picture that must have been taken in 1961, where on one of those floats the girls are dressed with beards and in olive green clothing. That was the influence of the Cuban Revolution, and how it came all the way over here.”⁵¹ A few years later, the 1967 graduating class at this normal voted to call itself the “Castro Ruz Class,” a name they wanted printed on their diplomas.⁵²

The enthusiasm for the Cuban Revolution, moreover, provided additional opportunities for alliances between students from different schools. As was the case throughout Mexico, Chihuahua's students protested the Bay of Pigs invasion, and on April 24, 1961, Chihuahua's State Normal School and Cuba's Friendship Society organized a demonstration condemning the U.S. aggression. Hundreds gathered in the state capital. The event turned violent when a fight broke out between demonstrators and members of the Catholic Youth Association, who, according to the student protesters, threw tear gas bombs into the crowd. *El Heraldo*, a newspaper long disparaging of social protest, reported that the "pseudo students" in a "commie romp" had instigated the violence, unprovoked, by beating an innocent bystander who later died from his injuries. In a premeditated act, continued the piece, demonstrators then vandalized the newspaper's headquarters. In a tone characteristic of the official press's portrayal of rural normalistas, the newspaper asserted that the demonstration's organizers, "in cahoots with the teachers of the rural normales of Salaiques and Flores Magón [later Saucillo], nests of permanent agitation, brought irresponsible students to this city with instructions to deface *El Heraldo's* building."⁵³ Normalista participants insisted that the right-wing youth had provoked the violence. An agent provocateur, they maintained, threw a Molotov cocktail into the crowd. The reported death, according to one normalista, had not taken place but was made-up government propaganda.⁵⁴ The magazine *Política* later reported that the bishop, Monseigneur Espino Porras, had mobilized Sinarquistas (an ultranationalist Catholic organization founded in the late 1930s) and members of the right-wing National Action Party to attack the demonstrators.⁵⁵ Regardless of who triggered the violence, the skirmish illustrates how high passions ran when it came to Cuba. Just as it inspired the left, it created fear among the right. It also provided a convenient new phantom that the church used to relaunch its critique of secular education.⁵⁶

"All were brought from the rural normal of Salaiques," *El Heraldo* headlined its article on the six students arrested during the day's events.⁵⁷ That those apprehended were all from Salaiques was likely a coincidence. A group from this rural normal had parked their truck by the newspaper offices, and police nabbed them as they returned to their vehicle.⁵⁸ But *El Heraldo's* reference to the rural normales as "nests of permanent agitation" and allegations that their students were brought to the city—implying they were willing troublemakers—are telling examples of the long-standing vilification of these schools. This narrative demonized rural normalistas, but it did not demobilize them. On the contrary, the arrests galvanized Chihuahua's students,

who in the following weeks vigorously protested the students' detention and ultimately gained their release.⁵⁹

"Nothing has infused the oppressed of the Americas with the same hope and trust in the future as the Cuban Revolution," proclaimed Arturo Gámiz.⁶⁰ Rural normalistas still preserved socialist education as an ethos to articulate notions of justice, but to it they added another layer. Normalistas mounted increasingly radical critiques of the Mexican government, which had little tolerance for socialist appeals at home, its defense of Cuban self-determination notwithstanding. The Cuban Revolution had an influence in the rural normales, a Salaiques graduate would later write. "Leftists groups that went beyond the liberal Cardenista politics characteristic of the boarding schools began to proliferate."⁶¹ This was not an uncontested process. While persistent, the notion of the politicized teacher carried with it certain contradictions. There was an inherent tension between the prospects of upward mobility a teaching career afforded the poor and the charge to serve the people. For teachers in training, moreover, the political mobilizations themselves triggered a range of debates—many of them contentious—about goals and strategies. As Arias put it, "We had everything: from the honest radicals to the radical demagogues. . . . And from there the indifferent ones: 'I came to study, and when I graduate, I'll be a teacher, locked inside my little school. I'll have my family, and the world can turn as it may.' Between these two perspectives, there was a broad spectrum of different character profiles."⁶²

As with any politicized sector, rural normalistas were usually divided. In the context of 1960s Chihuahua, these divisions manifested themselves in two ways. First, some students thought that at the rural normal, their responsibility was to complete their teaching preparation and *then*, degree in hand, aid and participate alongside campesinos. To that end, they thought political participation should be confined to issues involving resources needed to complete their studies. A second source of contention was the form that political participation itself should take. Some advocated peaceful and legal mobilizations, while others sought more dramatic actions, ones capable of precipitating a revolutionary uprising.

Gámiz himself addressed the matter and rejected the notion that normalistas best served the cause by first obtaining their degree. "If the goal is to serve the people," he wrote, "it is necessary to participate in their struggle, and here a degree has no relevance. One does not serve the people as a professional, one serves them as a revolutionary, and no university provides a degree for this cause." To mount separate struggles, argued Gámiz, to think that it should be "students alongside students, campesinos alongside

campesinos, workers alongside workers, and men alongside men, is to raise a Great Wall of China between one another. That benefits only the oligarchy." Wanting a career was not in itself negative, Gámiz clarified; "collective interests could combine with family and personal ones. The danger, the real betrayal, is the pretext it gives to abandon the ranks of the proletariat, the group [whose taxes and labor] fund the professional schools."⁶³

Gámiz made such declarations as he reflected on the First Gathering of the Sierra, an event he, along with other teachers like Pablo Gómez and his brother Raúl, as well as the campesino leaders Álvaro Ríos and Salvador Gaytán, organized in an effort to broaden and define Chihuahua's agrarian movement. It was held on October 7–12, 1963, in Cebadilla de Dolores in the municipality of Madera, and the organizers invited campesinos, students, and workers to discuss "the youths' role in resolving the general problems of the people."⁶⁴ The attendees were housed by the area's campesinos or camped in the community's elementary school. The meeting's chosen location was itself significant. First, it signaled to the sierra's caciques that land-hungry campesinos were not alone in their struggle.⁶⁵ Indeed, with representatives from eighty-five different associations in attendance, organizers hoped to expand the movement beyond Chihuahua.⁶⁶ Second, for students from the state capital, this was a chance to venture beyond the urban areas that had predominated as protest sites. Indeed, the ten-hour walk to the Cebadilla ejido was in itself a test of will, a small taste of the physically demanding nature of radical action.

According to government informants, about seventy-five people journeyed to Cebadilla de Dolores, where they were received by sixty-four ejidatarios.⁶⁷ The delegates discussed an array of topics ranging from the forging of closer connections with countries of the socialist block, to a condemnation of U.S. imperialism, to the role they should play in Mexico's upcoming presidential elections. Shortly after the First Gathering of the Sierra, Gámiz issued his own theoretical piece discussing students' revolutionary potential. Published in the weekly magazine *Índice*, Gámiz's text alluded to a point of contention within the Salaires student delegation.⁶⁸ The students of this rural normal, he maintained, held the "curious and idealistic view that before making the revolution and taking power, they must teach the masses ethics." As would be expected, continued Gámiz, other students as well as the campesinos, themselves schooled by years of struggle, rejected this notion. If students wanted to be the vanguard, asserted Gámiz, they had to act deliberately and with abnegation, "not with absurd notions that the student movement was pure and untainted."⁶⁹

The discussions held at the First Gathering of the Sierra reflected wider debates over strategy. While figures like Gámiz, Gómez, and Gaytán recognized the need for electoral struggle—indeed, they were members of the PPS and had run for local office—they increasingly clashed with the national leadership. State leaders like Jacinto López and national ones like Vicente Lombardo Toledano demanded moderation and, in certain instances, opposed grassroots direct action, yet the rank and file grew impatient. In fact, this meeting may well have marked a point of divergence between the radicals and those they regarded as reformist.⁷⁰

“RURAL PROFESORCILLOS RILING UP THE HENHOUSE”

In the months after the First Gathering of the Sierra, Chihuahua witnessed a significant number of campesino land invasions. Coordinated and led by the UGOCM and with the heavy participation of rural normalistas, these actions were meant to dramatize Mexico’s land concentration and to pressure the agrarian authorities to resolve pending distribution petitions. Hundreds of campesino families occupied vacant land—sometimes simultaneously, sometimes in relay fashion—until the authorities removed them. While for the urban marches and demonstrations the press and government agents cited the participation of the student bodies from several professional schools, in the land invasions the authorities dwelled on the involvement or leadership of students from the rural normales. This dynamic solidified the reputation of rural normales as particularly radical. After all, rural teachers—the official narrative went—were agitating the otherwise quiescent population of the countryside. Based on this logic, rather than addressing campesino demands for land, the state sought to contain student-teacher involvement, a tactic that, to the more radically inclined, confirmed the need for armed struggle.

The 1964 land takeovers thus paved the road to armed struggle. Campesinos from the northwestern municipality of Janos marked the New Year by occupying the property of the cattle rancher Hilario Gabilondo. They remained there for twenty days until the military violently removed them.⁷¹ Denouncing the army’s unrestrained cruelty, in which soldiers beat women and children with their bayonets and rifle butts, UGOCM leaders stated that if “those responsible were not punished, the campesinos and the people would mete out justice by their own hand.”⁷² Deaf to such warnings, Governor Giner declared that future invasions would be “repressed with no [special] considerations and the full rigor of the law.”⁷³ Meant to instill fear and deter future land takeovers, such threats had little effect, and February

marked a particularly intense month of land invasions. Chihuahua appeared like a game of checkers, with normalistas and campesinos invading lands and the army removing them, while new invasions took place in other parts of the state. On February 19 alone, the state witnessed at least eight simultaneous land takeovers. In the municipalities of Saucillo, Delicias, Lázaro Cárdenas, and Meoqui, reported intelligence agents, students from the rural normales led or advised the invaders. "Young ladies from Saucillo dressed as men interspersed themselves among campesino ranks," read one such report.⁷⁴ Reacting to the ubiquity of rural normalistas in these actions, Benjamín Fuentes, assistant director of teacher-training education, personally visited Saucillo, urging the students to end their "agitating and disorienting actions."⁷⁵ Officials from the SEP tried again and again to dissuade Saucillo students from participating and advised educators to use "moral suasion and take advantage of the affection the students had for their teachers in order to orient and control them."⁷⁶ Some were harsher, instructing all rural normal directors to prevent students from joining political acts by threatening them with sanctions.⁷⁷ Teachers at these schools, many themselves sympathetic to the campesino struggle, countered by citing students' commonsense notions of justice, "an ideology that leads them to act in favor of the humble classes. . . . While they listen respectfully, they had an agreed-upon course of action to which they were intractably committed."⁷⁸ The decision on whether to expel those who chose to act on their commitment soon passed into the hands of Education Minister Torres Bodet.⁷⁹

As SEP officials sought to control normalistas through institutional reprimands, state authorities jailed campesino leaders. Neither strategy worked. On the contrary, the state's heavy hand gave them further reason to mobilize. In Saucillo, for example, rural normalistas congregated outside the municipal jail where the authorities had detained and charged several UGOCM leaders with property dispossession and criminal association. The students remained there until late in the night and the following day organized a demonstration in Saucillo's town plaza. Intelligence agents reported 1,500 people in attendance.⁸⁰

Protests soon extended to the state capital. On February 22, students from several normales and one junior high school gathered in Chihuahua City's central plaza demanding the freedom of jailed UGOCM leaders and the resolution of the state's agrarian problems. As the event unfolded, a group of between two hundred and three hundred students made their way to the agrarian offices, with about fifty of them forcing their way into the building. There they demanded that the administrator phone national headquarters.

The agent instead called security forces. When the students refused to vacate the agrarian offices, the SWAT team forced them out with tear gas. The authorities detained thirty-five students and hauled them off to the nearby government offices for processing. In a city center now guarded by municipal police, the secret service, and the SWAT team, students gathered in the city plaza demanding the release of their peers. By then, their numbers had swelled, perhaps the result of reinforcements from “outside normales,” noted one newspaper. After the students refused to heed General Manuel Mendoza’s orders to disperse, the police fired some thirty tear gas canisters, leading to a prolonged skirmish instead of the desired quiescence.⁸¹ And here the general was acting with restraint: “If it were a different time,” he later boasted to a federal agent, he would have beat up these “insolent and disrespectful youngsters. . . . There would be none of this nonsense that because they are students we can’t touch them.”⁸²

While the general decried the protection afforded by student status, students themselves invoked their campesino identity. As they were corralled and detained, they shouted, “We are sons and daughters of campesinos and won’t remain indifferent to the injustices in the countryside.”⁸³ The students, almost all under the age of eighteen, insisted they had no leaders and had taken action of mutual accord. The authorities later released thirty of the detained but charged the older participants with inciting the younger students. Among the five people accused of forced entry, attack on the general communication lines, injury, and armed assault was Carlos Herrera, a teacher from Ciudad Juárez and a former student of the rural normal of Salaires.⁸⁴ Herrera declared that “he defended the interest of the campesino class that, with no real advocates, had in desperation turned to the student youth.”⁸⁵ The student-campesino link thus resulted not only from family connections but from students’ social responsibility, which they emphasized to show how badly the revolution had failed the countryside.

With a maddening disregard for reality, Governor Giner declared that in Chihuahua there were no latifundios. The increasing unrest was the work of “rural *profesorillos* [no-good teachers] riling up the henhouse.” Accordingly, he moved to treat the symptom, not the disease: he requested that the SEP close Chihuahua’s rural normales “because they are veritable serpents’ nests, complete communist nests.” If their closure were approved, boasted Giner, he would “turn them into pig farms and oust all the lazy students; those who want to work can raise pigs.”⁸⁶ State authorities were especially disparaging of female normalistas. In an explicitly gendered critique of Saucillo students, one agent described how they “slept in the fields alongside campesinos with

no regard to the honor lady students should preserve.”⁸⁷ Mendoza, the same military general who lamented that he could not beat students in the ways of yesteryear, declared about female participants, “They are like those lowlife women from the streets. . . . What are those girls doing with campesinos out in the hamlets? . . . What are they doing far from home at night, at dawn?”⁸⁸ Not to be outdone, the governor mocked the female students when they protested his attempts to close their normal: “Why do they want boarding schools if they like to sleep with campesinos in the field[?]” he declared.⁸⁹ So pervasive were these attacks on female normalistas’ morals that the UGOCM felt compelled to protest—if paternalistically—against the numerous allegations. “Regarding the female students who have supported us,” read an UGOCM statement, “we see them not as *soldaderas* [women who fought in the revolution] but as our daughters, and as such we have offered them what is at our disposal: our sincerity and, above all else, our profound respect and admiration.”⁹⁰

Federal authorities, for their part, were increasingly alarmed by rural normalista participation. Schools like Saucillo and Salaices, one intelligence report stated, “are graduating teachers who, deforming their educational and social function, constitute real problems when they start teaching in their assigned communities. Their attitudes are ones of anarchy and cause confusion and disorientation, especially among campesino groups.”⁹¹ Two months after the SEP’s assistant director had visited the schools, a SEP commission returned, this time headed by the normales’ general director himself. The director scolded students and their instructors, stating that their actions were detrimental not only to the profession but to the nation. He had believed earlier claims about their political participation to be exaggerations but now proposed assigning Salaices and Saucillo graduates to positions outside Chihuahua. Within the state, he asserted, they had too many ideological links with “communist cells and extremist groups,” code words for campesinos demanding land restitution.⁹²

Everywhere in Chihuahua, it seemed, teachers and normalistas were at the center of campesino unrest. Their storming of the agrarian offices in the state’s capital represented the final straw after months of protest, declared Governor Giner. He vowed no more tolerance and promised to “energetically repress all acts that encouraged the violation of our laws.”⁹³ Before he could make good on such threats, the federal government stepped in. The state’s unrest had reached such levels that in late February 1964 the attorney general’s office sent two officers to Chihuahua. To take stock of the situation, the lead investigator, Salvador del Toro Rosales, met with state authorities as well as students. His memoirs reveal a dismay with Giner and his cabinet,

whom he characterized as ignorant and crass. For Gámiz—brought from jail to meet with Toro Rosales—he conveyed admiration. Less sympathetic to Gómez, whom he portrayed as manipulating campesinos, Toro Rosales recognized the unjust nature of the situation, though not the critical level it had reached.⁹⁴ In a press conference, he soon announced the liberation of the detained students, teachers, and campesinos and declared that the federal government would dispatch a team of agronomists to study the disputed lands. Careful not to legitimate popular protest, he emphasized that campesino petitions would be processed as a measure of justice, not as a response to their “agitation.”⁹⁵ For a certain group of teachers and campesinos, this was too little too late.

A DEEPENING CRISIS

The first signs of guerrilla activity came at the end of February 1964. With Gámiz in jail, a group close to him burned a bridge along Bosques de Chihuahua’s industrial road. Calling themselves the Popular Guerrilla Group (Grupo Popular Guerrillero, GPG), atop the rubble they left a message reading, “We burned this bridge to demand the freedom of campesinos and students and the resolution of the agrarian problem.”⁹⁶ A few days later, GPG members killed the cacique Florentino Ibarra to avenge the murder of the campesino leader Carlos Ríos, whom Ibarra had shot in cold blood because of Ríos’s refusal to abandon his land.⁹⁷ On April 12, in Dolores, the group detonated homemade bombs on the Ibarra’s property, destroying the family’s radio transmitter. This site, which state authorities used as a command center, would again come under guerrilla attack on July 15, 1964, when the GPG surprised the very group charged with tracking them down. There the guerrilla members captured the five state agents led by Rito Caldera Zamudio, a former Ibarra family henchman. After a prolonged discussion, the guerrillas decided to spare the state agents’ lives, taking only their arms and ammunition.⁹⁸ In response, Governor Giner commissioned the army to join in pursuing the guerrillas. He also advised José Ibarra, the brother of the slain Florentino, to leave the state for his own safety.⁹⁹

In the state capital, the political tension also intensified. In early April 1964, violence broke out in Chihuahua City at an election rally for Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. After the presidential candidate spoke before a crowd that, according to intelligence agents, numbered thirty thousand people, the normalista José Mariñelarena stormed the stage and began an impassioned speech enumerating student and campesino grievances. As security agents

moved to cut the microphone, many in the crowd chanted, “Let him speak.” Audience members, including campesinos sitting in the front row, fought to hear the student. They threw their folding chairs at security agents, forcing Mariñelarena’s release. The normalista then led the crowd to Díaz Ordaz’s hotel—located a block from the plaza. There the unrest continued as rocks, sticks, and wood pieces flew from all sides, one striking Díaz Ordaz himself. Not long after, as protesters and Díaz Ordaz supporters battled it out, someone set the stage ablaze. The adjacent Municipal Palace also caught fire. Eventually, a military dispatch arrived, emptied the plaza, and “took control of a large swath of the city.”¹⁰⁰

Students from Salaiques and Saucillo “planned the events that took place during Gustavo Díaz Ordaz’s campaign visit to the city of Chihuahua,” an intelligence agent later reported.¹⁰¹ Governor Giner, too, blamed the rural normales, though he charged the shiftless teachers with equal culpability.¹⁰² The day’s events initiated a hardening of the government’s position as Giner sent the army to occupy the Salaiques and Saucillo campuses, where, according to students, soldiers had orders to beat or jail anyone attempting to leave. The governor cordoned off an additional area, instructing the state’s public transit not to allow students to board. The situation, the students declared, evoked Porfirian times.¹⁰³

The government’s understanding of such unrest—as conveyed through intelligence sources—was simplistic at best. Reports dwell on what leaders, political organizations, or subversive ideology led teachers, students, and campesinos to protest. Some reports pointed to José Santos Valdés, the supervisor of Mexico’s northern rural normales, as the one pulling the strings. From his residence in Torreón, Coahuila, he reportedly controlled the directors of Saucillo and Salaiques and teachers like Pablo Gómez. Since Santos Valdés oversaw student stipends in the amount of 1.5 to 2 million pesos, he used this money, implied one agent, to support political activity. Rural normal directors and their teachers, the majority of whom sympathized with the PPS, according to intelligence agents, influenced the political ideology of the students, inciting or allowing them to participate in land invasions.¹⁰⁴ The composite picture is an upward spiral of blame: older students brainwashed younger ones; teachers brainwashed their normalista pupils; together they manipulated campesinos into protest. This all occurred under the aegis of an old socialist guard of normal teachers and directors, the most prominent of whom was Santos Valdés.

As tensions mounted, rumors circulated that the next president would close twenty of the country’s rural normales. As it turned out, these accounts

were not that far off the mark, but for now the SEP feared that closing the institutions would provoke too much resistance.¹⁰⁵ Governor Giner was less apprehensive and closed normales and dormitories under his jurisdiction. In the cities of Ojinaga, Parral, Juárez, Saucillo, and Chihuahua, the governor closed the Normal Night Schools, arguing they had served their purpose. In a state with an excess of teachers, reported an article announcing the closure, there was no reason to maintain these schools.¹⁰⁶ Curiously, the same front page of *El Heraldo* that explained the closure by citing an overabundance of educators included—two columns over—an article about the number of unfilled teaching positions the state faced when the federal government failed to send the teachers it promised.¹⁰⁷ Holding that dormitories constituted sites of promiscuity and homosexuality and inhibited learning, the governor also closed the dormitories of the State Normal School of Chihuahua and those of the Arts and Trade School and the Ladies' Industrial School.¹⁰⁸

Youth did not accept these measures without a fight: the State Normal School quickly declared a strike. Seeking to prevent the rural normales from joining, the local authorities postponed the start of classes, arguing that the buildings had to be repaired, a lie that students did not let pass uncontested. Once classes started, the assistant director of the rural normales again traveled to Saucillo and Salaices, urging students not to support the strike, declaring that the leaders' intent was to create "a climate of agitation that would harm their studies."¹⁰⁹ When the rural normal of Saucillo planned consecutive work stoppages and invited campesinos from the region to attend their demonstrations, the police inspector general ordered the interception of any vehicles carrying campesinos to Saucillo.¹¹⁰ The teachers' union joined its voice to the protest. They criticized Governor Giner for undermining the revolution's principles and pointed out that while the government closed institutions serving the poor, the number of private schools was rising.¹¹¹

The student protest did not succeed in preserving the Normal Night Schools, nor in saving the dormitories of the Chihuahua State Normal School, the Arts and Trade School, and the Ladies' Industrial School. Nonetheless, students ended their strike in December 1964 when the state government agreed to fund alternative student housing, subsidize rent, expand medical care, provide scholarships for the students of the closed evening normales so they could attend private schools, and refrain from retaliation against students, teachers, and families who supported the strike.¹¹²

By the year's end, the state of Chihuahua faced a critical situation. Blinded by their focus on teacher and student culpability, state authorities

had fueled the growing unrest. In the sierra, a teacher-campesino contingent had taken justice into their own hands; the state capital was the scene of constant demonstrations, some with violent outcomes; and the normales were either on strike or under military occupation. While the federal government seemed poised to implement some reform, the choice of presidential candidate augured the ominous times ahead.

THE MADERA ATTACKS

In April 1965 Miguel Quiñónez, a graduate from the rural normal of Salaices who now taught in the Sierra Tarahumara, sent a letter to Javier Flores, also a rural teacher and Salaices graduate. The missive invited Flores to a series of talks, scheduled for later that year and taking place in either Saucillo or Salaices. Flores was to exercise extreme caution in the matter and share the information only with *compañeros* in whom he had the utmost trust since “it regarded illegal methods of struggle.”¹¹³ In his two years as a teacher, Quiñónez had undertaken an economic survey of the region, documented community needs, organized a cooperative, and fought alongside the *ejidatarios* of Ariseáchic in defense of their land. The portion of his salary that he did not send to his parents he used to finance trips to Mexico City’s agrarian offices, where he and other community members sought federal intervention in the region’s pressing land problems.¹¹⁴ “Miguel’s drive was palpable,” recalled Flores, his fellow teacher. “Rumors reached us about the conflicts throughout the state, particularly in the Sierra. We knew of the problems besieging the normal of Saucillo. Campesinos continued to fight for land, and normalistas stood alongside them. Miguel had already expressed the need to take a position, to change the situations of the *ejidos*, especially the poorest ones. We had beautiful discussions, ones that illustrated and helped me understand the state of the world, the country, the region.”¹¹⁵

Quiñónez was born in Durango, the fifth of nine children in a campesino family. He had long been a good student, scoring at the top of the eight hundred applicants who took the Salaices entrance exam in 1957. Possessing great discipline and a calm temperament, he continued to stand out academically and socially at the normal, where he headed several student groups, including the school’s FECSM. “He was radical in his thoughts and actions,” wrote Santos Valdés, “and even though he was happy and cordial and displayed a sense of camaraderie, when it came to ideological issues or political theory, he was stubborn, tenacious, persistent. If it concerned what he believed was a just political view, he willingly sacrificed a long friendship.” Quiñónez had

participated in Chihuahua's numerous mobilizations and hoped the state's leftist groups could form a unified coalition, one strong enough to effect change.¹¹⁶ Instead, the latter part of 1964 witnessed a slowdown in the land mobilizations with which the year had begun. State repression was indeed having an effect. In January 1965 Quiñónez and three other rural normalistas addressed a manifesto to "students of the rural normales, their alumni and parents association, and to all worker, campesino, and student revolutionary organizations." Mexico, declared the text, was dominated by *latifundistas* and despite repeated petitions that often took twenty years to process, campesinos remained empty-handed. In light of this situation, the writers declared their commitment to revolutionary struggle and appealed to the students, whom they urged to join the workers and campesinos in a movement against the bourgeoisie. "It has been the youth, students," noted the manifesto, "who in one way or another have bravely initiated the great liberation movements in the world." The declaration addressed rural normalistas specifically, urging them to reflect on this assessment "and, whether you agree or not, pursue the complete liberation of our class, without giving up, much less betraying it."¹¹⁷

The text was an example of the type of radicalization taking hold within a small group of students, teachers, and campesinos who had participated in Chihuahua's land struggle. Alluding to the reformist view that Salaces delegates expressed during the sierra's First Gathering, the declaration condemned that position, characterizing it as "diametrically opposed to the principles and revolutionary traditions that rural normalistas had always been proud of." Such an attitude, continued the text, resulted from the influence of previously progressive SEP authorities—including Santos Valdés—who had sown fear among the student body, warning that continued agitation alongside campesinos would deliver "a death sentence to the rural normales."¹¹⁸

Previous ideological divides became tactical ones as the small guerrilla group sought to lay the groundwork for armed insurrection. The resolutions of the Second Gathering that took place on Durango's northern border with Chihuahua are a good example of this radicalization. Organizers chose this location partly as a show of solidarity with the six hundred families of that region who had been fighting for the redistribution of the latifundio of Torreón de Cañas.¹¹⁹ Intelligence agents reported seven hundred people there, "all campesinos along with some students from the rural normales of Chihuahua and Durango."¹²⁰ The organizers' own resolutions listed twelve different student, campesino, indigenous, normalista, and teacher organizations in attendance.¹²¹ If, two years earlier, the First Gathering's resolutions expressed a frustration with peaceful means, the Second Gathering's

Five Resolutions foregrounded the path of armed struggle. From a Marxist perspective, the text discussed imperialism, Third World liberation struggles, Mexican history, the failures of its 1910 revolution, and campesinos' revolutionary potential. In a clear allusion to Ernesto "Che" Guevara's writings on guerrilla warfare, this last resolution, entitled "The Only Path Forward," made clear that the conditions for revolution could be created, even if by only fifteen or twenty guerrillas. "The struggle will be very long, one counted not in years but in decades. That's why it's necessary to begin at once, while young, to gain the qualities that only come from years of action," outlined the document.¹²² The guerrilla group would indeed remain small. As became increasingly clear, the teacher, student, and campesino participants in Chihuahua's agrarian struggle were sympathetic to those in arms, but few were ready to make the revolutionary leap themselves.

Graduates of Saucillo and Salaices provided pivotal support networks that sustained the guerrillas in the Sierra Tarahumara, a striking vertical landscape with jutting canyons in a mountain range whose peaks climb to over nine thousand feet. In fact, a whole network of rural teachers coalesced in this sierra.¹²³ Javier Flores, who taught in the municipality of Guerrero after graduating from Salaices, remembers the specific task Quiñónez assigned him: "I was to go to all the communities near Heredia y Anexas, whether on horseback, by foot—however I could. I would speak with the ejidatarios, the campesinos, the region's indigenous people, asking them to shelter the guerrillas and provide them cover if they needed to quickly escape, found themselves isolated, or needed any other kind of help. Everyone offered food for one or two people, one or two horses, and, of course, hiding places in the sierra's caves."¹²⁴ José Ángel Aguirre Romero, another Salaices graduate who taught in the region, remembered that people he did not even know sought him out on the recommendation of Gómez or Gámiz. Aguirre helped with logistical matters and provided additional contacts. "I never got involved directly but [when they left], knowing that they never had any money, we'd reach into our pockets and take out twenty pesos; that was a lot in those days." Aguirre would further offer, "You don't have a place to stay? You can sleep here." Asked to participate in the attack on Madera, Aguirre rejected the invitation. He remembered telling Quiñónez, "Look at the conditions! You're asking me to come along, and I never even knew I was part of the plan. I've never even handled a weapon. If that's the state of everyone else, think about it, they will kill you all."¹²⁵ That was the last time Aguirre saw Quiñónez, who left angry, frustrated by his friend's refusal to join the planned attack on Madera.

Because of its dramatic nature, the September 23, 1965, guerrilla attack on Madera's military barracks has received a great degree of attention, often obscuring the long and widespread mobilizations from which it emerged.¹²⁶ It was indeed a daring, if suicidal, undertaking. Conceived by teachers and campesino leaders who had been key figures in Chihuahua's land struggle since 1959, the assault followed the logic of the guerrillas' previous clandestine actions, especially the successful July 1964 ambush in Mineral de Dolores. The planned Madera assault was to involve between thirty and forty participants, twenty of whom had received military training from a former army captain in Mexico City.¹²⁷ Madera's choice was both strategic and symbolic. The town lay at the heart of the region's long struggle against caciques, the guerrillas had the population's sympathy, and the region's mountainous terrain afforded good cover. The plan was straightforward: overpower the military barracks, expropriate the local bank's funds, and issue a radio proclamation publicizing their revolutionary principles. Their success would motivate groups throughout the region to take similar actions.¹²⁸

Confident they could overtake a military installation that, by their estimations, housed two dozen soldiers, the guerrillas expected losses but not the carnage they suffered. What is startling about their attack is not the plan itself but the refusal to call it off when key components fell apart: two of the three armed contingents did not make it to Madera by the agreed-upon date. One was lost in the sierra, and the other, which had the military materiel (obtained during the previous attack in the Mineral de Dolores), could not traverse the raging rivers left by days of heavy rain. The Madera barracks, moreover, housed not the two dozen soldiers the group had calculated but over a hundred, prompting Gómez and a few others to propose postponing the attack. But Gámiz remained adamant, and his view prevailed.¹²⁹

Predictably, the thirteen guerrilla members were no match for the soldiers, whose rain of bullets killed eight of the attackers, including Gámiz and Gómez. Five soldiers reportedly died. Five of the guerrilla attackers managed to escape.¹³⁰ That they were not captured by the heavy military detachment ordered to comb the sierra bespeaks the support participants had among the local population, one cultivated by members of the group but also resulting from the population's resentment against the authorities' long-standing harassment and brutal counterinsurgency campaign, which included hanging people from helicopters and dangling them along the jutting rocks.¹³¹

While the core of the GPG was eliminated, this hardly represented the end of guerrilla struggle in Chihuahua, much less in Mexico. An armed

clandestine organization calling itself the Arturo Gámiz Popular Guerrilla Group continued to operate in the Sierra Tarahumara. Indeed, Mexico's Cold War guerrillas were nourished by a tradition of rural insurrection that had emerged almost immediately after Cárdenas left office.¹³² In addition to the previous agrarista component, students, teachers, and graduates from Mexico's rural normales helped fuel the socialist ideals of the 1960s radical left.

"WE WERE ALL THERE"

At the time of the attack, Pablo Gómez's daughter, Alma, was fifteen years old and a third-year student at the rural normal of Saucillo. Alma's cousin brought her the news of her father's death. "In that moment I didn't feel anything—obviously confusion," she related, "but I didn't have a reaction." After talking to her cousin, Alma made her way back to the dorms, where she passed a group of "compañeras that had participated in the campesino marches and adored my father. They also protected and took care of me. . . . I must have had a tormented expression because they asked me, 'Alma, what happened?' 'They killed my father,' I answered. That's when I broke down in tears."¹³³

Of the eight participants who died in the attack, only Gómez, Alma's father, was over twenty-five. He was also the only one married with children—five of them. "So everyone is awed," pointed out his daughter, "that a man with kids made a decision like that. All the others were young and single. To make that kind of a decision is a very important act. . . . But I believe that a key factor in this difficult choice was his *compañera* [partner/wife], a woman who was a rebel, a leftist, intelligent, daring. He knew he was not simply abandoning us to a difficult situation. It is obviously not easy to bring up five kids, but he wasn't leaving us in total misery. He knew that my mother would see us through. And she did."¹³⁴

Alma's point is more than a personal vindication of her mother. Her statement concerns the broader mobilization that produced the now-mythical Madera attacks. Women's participation in those mobilizations—which intelligence agents had noted with alarm, state authorities had disparaged with misogyny, and UGOCM leaders had minimized with paternalism—was central. "We were all there," stated Alma. "Yes, while we didn't go [to Madera], the assault was a process in which campesina women, students from the normales, we all participated. It was not just a man's fight."¹³⁵ Indeed, had it not been for guerrilla members' views that women needed to be

protected rather than treated as fighters in their own right, some normalistas from Saucillo might have joined the attack itself.¹³⁶

The teacher-campesino contingent that attacked Madera did not propel the revolution forward, but it did puncture the narrative that armed groups did not exist in Mexico. Threatened by the broader struggle that produced them, the authorities would not forgive such a bold transgression. Governor Giner issued explicit orders preventing family members from retrieving their loved ones' bodies. Instead, after the mangled, bullet-ridden corpses had been paraded around Madera, the governor had them thrown in a mass grave. In a play on the word *tierra*, which in Spanish means both "land" and "dirt," Giner declared, "They wanted tierra, give it to them until they've had their fill."¹³⁷ While publicly dismissing the guerrilla attack as the work of a small group of agitators, the federal and state authorities responded with a massive show of force. Governor Giner characterized the action as insignificant, "a crazy adventure at the orders of Pablo Gómez." He was, after all, continued the governor, "a poisoner of the minds of inexperienced youth."¹³⁸

Just two weeks after the attacks, government agents reported the arrival in Chihuahua of rural normalistas from various parts of country.¹³⁹ For normalistas who knew the participants and had struggled alongside them in marches, demonstrations, and land takeovers, and for the teachers who provided the underground infrastructure that sustained the small cadre, Madera was to be celebrated. Within days of the attacks, normalistas issued pamphlets, visited the graves, and mobilized local support. One manifesto issued by the rural normales of Chihuahua praised the rebels who had placed themselves "at the service of the humble and oppressed class and whose bodies had been destroyed, riddled, and thrown in a common grave like animals." As state and federal authorities sought to contain news of the attack, normalistas publicized the event, deposited wreaths at the guerrillas' mass grave, and issued declarations urging "the continuation of the revolutionary movement begun in Madera."¹⁴⁰

The local population's reaction was more measured, with many residents hesitant to celebrate the event. One demonstration planned by the FECSM had to be canceled because teachers—graduates of the state's normal school—opposed it, fearing it could turn the people of Chihuahua against them.¹⁴¹ At a town council meeting in Madera, participants expressed varying views on the attack. Taking note of such divisions, the municipal president planned to issue a statement reading in part, "The inhabitants of Madera are lovers of peace and work and had nothing to do with guerrilla movements nor with the planned visit to the grave of those who fell on September 23rd."

Nonetheless, noted the government spy reporting on this meeting, the majority sympathized with the slain guerrillas, “a consequence of the grave abuses and arbitrary harassment the military dispatch committed against the inhabitants of the sierra’s hamlets and in the town of Madera itself.”¹⁴² Other reports also noted this abuse, describing how, in its investigation, the army mistreated, humiliated, and taunted the local population. In fact, because of the vulgar manner in which the military inspected trains, conductors refused to lend their services in Madera. Aware of such abuses, the military general in charge considered them “lamentable but necessary” in the efforts to locate the escaped guerrillas.¹⁴³

A year later, state authorities remained intolerant of public commemorations of Madera, detaining normalistas from Saucillo for handing out flyers.¹⁴⁴ Aguirre, the Salaces graduate who had declined Quiñónez’s invitation to participate in the attack, remembers the enduring climate of fear. Even though he disagreed with the guerrilla actions, he wanted to pay homage to the fallen participants. Traveling throughout Chihuahua as the teachers’ union representative, he recalled the anxiety he encountered. “Everywhere I’d go, I’d find a great deal of fear. Anything having to do with organizing had to be done clandestinely. Flyers were made clandestinely and handed out quietly. The fear lasted a long time, especially in Madera. The first time I went there, I held a meeting with the teachers of the whole region. There were about 150 teachers. . . . As soon as I gave my presentation, I honored the fallen compañeros. I remember that as we were leaving the meeting, the teachers tried desperately to hide me. ‘They’re going to kill you.’ They did not kill me; nothing happened. But that’s how much panic there was.”¹⁴⁵

THAT RURAL NORMALISTAS DREW such inspiration from the Madera attacks is one of the many manifestations of the radical student culture brewing within their walls. But it was also part of a more general student tendency that marked the global 1960s, a decade on which youth protest left a lasting imprint. What normalista actions show is how this student protest took shape outside Mexico City. At rural normales, where the campesino world was ever present through familial ties, agricultural pedagogy, and teacher commitment and was a constituting element of the FECSM’s ideology, agrarian movements had a powerful resonance. Indeed, the revolution’s campesino struggle had produced these institutions, and it was a struggle many normalistas sought to further. To the campesino consciousness that permeated the schools, the 1960s added an international repertoire of struggle inspired

by the Cuban Revolution, the worldwide student movements, and the decolonization struggles. In this context, rural normalistas would increasingly posit their vanguard role. As one 1966 FECSM proclamation put it, “It is up to us, the youth, especially the campesino youth educated in the glorious rural normales, to bring about the fourth stage of our history: socialism, to achieve a nation that has fewer poor people and fewer rich people. This is how we, the students of the rural normales, think—we who come from the countryside and observe the infinite injustices committed against our class brothers and our very families.”¹⁴⁶

As the decade wore on, the country’s rural normales would come to house powerful elements of old- and new-left politics. The economic rights that Cardenismo had extended to the poor during the 1930s increasingly mingled with youths’ awareness of themselves as political actors and the idea that a revolution could be made through deliberate and willful action in which students played a vanguard role. This combination—along with the hardening of the federal government—continued to pave the way for radical struggle. Far from an anomaly, the Madera attack inaugurated two decades of guerrilla movements that in other parts of the country would likewise be linked to rural normales.