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*The broken years:
The case of the so-called “dirty war” in
Mexico*

Fritz Glockner / Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes

Translated by Elizabeth Polli

The history of the different, corrupt illegal actions committed by the dictatorial governments of the majority of Latin American countries has been widely disseminated, represented, studied, and analyzed. These historical processes have been referred to as “Dirty Wars”, and with their mention it is common to hear about the horror, which took place in Argentina, Guatemala, Chile, El Salvador, Uruguay or Brazil, among other countries. Nevertheless, in the case of Mexico, few people or perhaps no one could imagine that the strategy that is frequently referred to as the “Dirty War” was carried out in equal fashion by the Mexican State.

It might seem implausible to imagine that the Mexican government, with its civilian leaders, elected by an apparent democratic system, could have carried out corrupt illegal actions against those opposing the political system, or against their critics, or against those citizens who spoke up to protest injustice. How can one imagine that in Mexico the practice of forced disappearance could have been implemented? Could the so-called death flights possibly have existed in Mexican territory?

What is curious about this topic, is that Mexico is precisely the first Latin American country that put into place the strategies learned at the various North American counter-insurgency schools, as was the case of “The School of the Americas”, situated in the thin strip of land in the Panama Canal. The Mexican governments used their military and their secret police to develop in earnest the teachings of repression instilled at those training centers.

It is thus that we see the first disappearance of a politician in Latin America in the figure of Professor Epifanio Avilés Rojas, on the 19th of May, 1969, in the State of Guerrero, Mexico, a circumstance which remains unsolved to this day, one which took place several years before the practice of forced disappearance was exercised in Argentina or Chile.

While the first “Death Flights” are carried out in Mexico around 1974, in the case of Argentina they began in 1976. Therefore, the famous experience of “offering a feast to the sharks” had its debut in Mexican territory.

In the case of torture, it is the Mexican military and police force that implement the use of mineral water during interrogation sessions. Not only were these tactics simply evil, why not just say it was also ingenious to apply chili powder during those sessions, a creative way to enhance what they had learned in the halls of “The School of the Americas.”

How is it possible that the practice of torture, forced disappearance and assassination has remained in the dark for so many years in Mexico?

Notwithstanding, what we understand today as the period of the “Dirty Wars”, those years of repression and terror experienced under the different Latin American dictatorships, would have to be clarified academically in the case of Mexico, where the term “Low Intensity War” better refers to the strategy of confronting and eliminating the opposition.

This very term was used during the time of the Reagan presidency, particularly from 1982 on. If we scrutinize, however, the concepts covered in the counter-insurgency instruction manual itself, dated 1967 – the one the South American students in the aforementioned “School of the Americas” studied, in which the different actions to follow stand out and are described, such as to contain, to annihilate, to subdue, or to eliminate the different opposition groups through various counter-insurgency actions, all of which were carried out to the “t” by the Mexican military and police under the direction of civilian governments – one could suggest with all the evidence that what happened in Mexico belongs to a strategy called “Low Intensity War” or Low Intensity Conflict” (LIW).

Another element that enables us to maintain that the LIW was applied in Mexico has to do with the declaration offered by ex-president Luís Echeverría Álvarez, in power from 1970 – 1976, who in an interview with the author of this article, in September of 1977 said: “...the family of Senator Figueroa didn’t want me to send in the army to free him, but I made the decision on my own and sent in the military, behind the back of Lucio Cabañas, so they would kick the shit out of him...” This incident happened in 1974, when the peasant and Professor in Guerrero took up arms against Lucio Cabañas, decided to kidnap Senator Rubén Figueroa Figueroa and demand 50 million pesos (four million dollars at that time) for his release, as well as that of several other political prisoners. The military operation resulted in the deployment of nearly twenty five thousand troops from the National Army to the state of Guerrero, Lucio Cabaña’s political territory, nearly 50% of the troops that saw action that year. This brings us to propose the following: if the head of the Mexican Armed Forces is the President of the Republic, and he gives the order to act against a civilian who has taken up arms, what do we call that if not war.

On the other hand, at the same time that the “Low Intensity War” was instigated from the top down, it also generated and applied a strategy of communication to successfully snuff out the social demands called for by the peasant leaders, by the independent unions or student unions, or even by the guerrilla leaders who could plant seeds in the conscience of the common people, in the learned sectors, or in the middle class in Mexico. Such a tactic was carried out through the control of the mass media, and in the cases or situations in which the information got out to the public, it was treated as pertaining to the world of common delinquency, relegated to the police

report section in the newspapers, information which alluded to those fighting for social justice as robbers, snitches, kidnapers, horse thieves, drug addicts, professional agitators, turncoats, and allies of the most obscure foreign interests threatening Mexican religion, stability and traditions.

One more favorable factor which aided the Mexican state in avoiding the release of information and news regarding governmental repression against the common people has to do with the fact that since 1939, Mexico had become a safe haven for the politically oppressed from other areas of the world. It was then that the first political exiles from the Spanish Civil War arrived to Aztec territory, during the six-year presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, who governed from 1934 – 1940. Later, under the Estrada Doctrine (a foreign policy doctrine) of “no intervention”, the Mexican government maintained distance and was respectful toward the facts and situations occurring in different countries around the world. The same held true regarding internal affairs particular to those other countries. Mexico stands out by 1961 as the only Latin American country that has not aligned itself with the North American determination to break political ties with the emerging Social Republic of Cuba, and at the end of the 1960s and all throughout the 1970s it becomes the country that provides political asylum to those persecuted due to left leaning ideologies and those threatened by death by the different dictatorships in Central and South America. Meanwhile, in the heart of Mexico citizens are dying and are being tortured; it doesn't seem erroneous to ask why Mexicans themselves could never count on a Mexican embassy that would provide them with a safe haven.

There is another key element as to why the idea that the historical inexistence of the “Low Intensity War” in Mexico was isolated information, and this has to do with the complicity and the unwritten pact between the Mexican and Cuban governments. This pact did not exist solely within the official confines of the relationship between the two countries –the socialist government in Cuba always demonstrated that the relationship between Mexico and Cuba could not deteriorate in the least, negating in this way any type of official recognition of the social, political and economic contradictions being expressed in Mexico. One would also have to point out the friendship cultivated for years between el Comandante Fidel Castro and Captain Fernando Gutiérrez Barrios, who was considered the brain behind all of the counter-insurgency operations and the “Low Intensity War” waged in Mexico from 1950 – 1985. For this reason, the uprisings of the guerrilla movements in Mexico, for example, never counted on the endorsement,

which the Cuban government had bestowed on Latin America and even on other countries around the world since the 1960s.

The repressive mission of the Mexican government is not limited strictly to the period considered, the aforementioned “Low Intensity War”, which could be said to extend from 1965 (the year in which the first outbreak of guerrilla action of an ideological nature took place in the city of Madera, in the state of Chihuahua), to 1978 (when political reforms are advocated and the participation and expression of the left as a political power is recognized). Even going back to the 1940s and 50s, though, repression was felt during the demonstrations held by the different labor unions, such as the teachers union, who protested against working conditions and governmental control of their union; or when the government acted against the demands of railroad workers who wanted the right to elect their own union leaders; or the peasant movement led by Rubén Jaramillo, whose end came on May 23, 1962 when he was assassinated, in the company of his pregnant wife and three of his four children at the ruins of Xochicalxo in the state of Morelos, at the hands national army troops, accompanied by federal and state police officers.

Nonetheless, there are two dates that have left a major mark as public demonstrations of the implementation of the so-called “Low Intensity War”, and they refer to two specific events. The first took place on Wednesday, October 2, 1968, when at a gathering in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, in Mexico City, a student demonstration was underway. They were demanding a public dialog with the government in order to resolve the different aspects of the charges they had filed after having witnessed different types of confrontations, tortures and the detention of young men and women, which had in turn caused 41 strikes to break out at various university campuses around the country. The government’s response of then president Gustavo Díaz Ordaz was an ambush; he placed snipers on the tops of the buildings where the demonstration was taking place, and these snipers shot against the army at the very moment they (the army) made their presence known in the plaza, to create the illusion that the students had been the ones who had attacked the military forces, thus justifying a merciless massacre, which was coincidentally witnessed by a large number of international journalists, who were at the protest. They were in Mexico to participate in the inauguration of the XIX Olympic Games, which started just ten days after the massacre.

In spite of the fact that the news of the massacre spread to all the corners of the world on Thursday, October 3, 1968, the events were obscured in Mexico, and the media was threatened to keep all news out of the press. As far as the international community is concerned, even though they had knowledge of the massacre, there were no sanctions, no diplomatic protests, not even an act of solidarity in favor of the students who were assassinated and the hundreds of detainees and those tortured, for whom the Olympics represented tremendous disillusionment.

The second event of public repression in the state of Mexico was carried out on June 10, 1971, when a group of young paramilitaries trained, financed and under the auspices of the federal government, comprised of some one thousand troops known as “Los Halcones”, went into action to assault and assassinate students gathered to march in favor of the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, outside the Escuela Nacional de Maestros in Mexico City. The repressive actions of the paramilitary group were carried out with the consent of the soldiers and police present at the gathering, who at no time acted to stop the attack. The terror and persecution extended to the hospitals where those injured were taken, when “Los Halcones” showed up to beat upon, assassinate and kidnap the students in plain view of the medical staff of the Rubén Leñero Clinic.

In this latter case, President Echeverría denied the existence of the paramilitary group, and as always he promised to get to the bottom of the situation to punish the guilty. Echeverría, at that moment friend of Salvador Allende, however, not only neglected to carry out any investigation, but to add injury to insult he rewarded the executors of that repressive undertaking.

The figures associated with the so called “Low Intensity War” in Mexico enable us to calculate that from 1969 to 1978, between four and five thousand persons were disappeared or assassinated, a number that evidently falls below the twenty five thousand in Guatemala, or the thirty thousand in Argentina; without a doubt, though, it’s useless to even mention a comparison of numbers regarding the disgrace of hundreds of families who saw their dreams truncated and turned into nightmares.

During that same period we know that in the nation at large a total of 37 different armed revolutionary groups were in action. In all of these cases this came after a long process of endeavoring to act in a legal fashion, but faced with the official obstinacy, the police persecution,

and the voice of violence, these groups opted for armed self-defense movements, establishing different programs to attempt to modify the social, economic and political structures in Mexico.

Curiously it is in 1994, with the rise of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), that light is shed on the fact that the situation of the majority of the Mexican population is deteriorating; in addition a focus is targeted at rescuing part of the concealed history of Mexico of the XX century.

During Vicente Fox's rule, in 2003, the position of a special public prosecutor was created to investigate the probable crimes of the past at the hands of the authorities, but the complicity between the traditional political party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which ruled Mexico for 71 years, and the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), which carried Fox to the presidency in the year 2000, closed all avenues for bringing to justice those responsible for the "Low Intensity War", thus providing impunity for state terrorism.

While in the various Latin American countries processes of reconciliation have been engaged, and justice administered to heal the old wounds occasioned by the so-called "Dirty Wars", the case of Mexico lags behind to this day. In spite of the violation of human rights it is a history whose voice is still silent, generating in this way a condition of broken years.

Notes

[1] The particularities of syntax and punctuation in the original have been maintained in this translation, to the best of my ability, to accurately reflect Glockner's style.

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