"We Live to Struggle, We Struggle to Triumph": The Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms and Radical Nationalism in Guatemala

A dissertation presented to
the faculty of
the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2014

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This dissertation titled
"We Live to Struggle, We Struggle to Triumph": The Revolutionary Organization of the
People in Arms and Radical Nationalism in Guatemala

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Abstract
BIBLER, JARED S., Ph.D., August 2014, History

"We Live to Struggle, We Struggle to Triumph": The Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms and Radical Nationalism in Guatemala

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This dissertation is an intellectual and political history of The Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms (ORPA), a political-military movement that operated in Guatemala from 1971 to 1996 during the country’s civil war. The movement’s creative ideological approach, which included an interpretation of Marxism that emphasized social and cultural issues and the role of human actors, resulted in a peculiar brand of radical nationalism that differed from contemporary revolutionary movements in Guatemala and Latin America more broadly. This is not a broad history of ORPA and its military operations, but focuses on the organization’s ideology and analysis of Guatemala’s problems, including its perspectives on the long-debated “indigenous question” and the role of the country’s indigenous majority in the revolutionary struggle. In an attempt to establish a firm ideological foundation for its members, during the 1970s, the movement’s leadership produced various theoretical documents for internal use that delineated the movement’s ideas, including two, lengthy documents detailing the role of racism and discrimination in the country’s oppressive and exclusionary social, political and economic structures. The leadership argued that since the indigenous majority suffered both racial discrimination and economic exploitation, the revolutionary struggle had to simultaneously address race and ethnic issues, as well as class issues. Heterodox Marxist writers and decolonization theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi and
Amilcar Cabral heavily influenced ORPA’s ideas on race, colonialism and even the role of the Guatemalan bourgeoisie and intellectuals in the revolution. The study represents an important case study in Latin American radical thought of an organization’s ability to escape the limited scope of contemporary Marxist-Leninist currents in order to establish a radical, inclusive and creative revolutionary nationalist ideology. Furthermore, the story of contemporary social and revolutionary movements is relevant and timely as Guatemala, and the region more broadly, continues to struggle with many of the same issues that inspired such movements in recent history.
Dedication

To Maria and Euan
Acknowledgments

Many people need to be acknowledged for contributing to the completion of this dissertation. My advisor Dr. Patrick Barr-Melej provided valuable suggestions, criticisms and insights throughout the process. The other members of my committee, Drs. Mariana Dantas, Kevin Mattson and Thomas Walker offered great feedback and suggestions not only for this current edition, but turning it into a manuscript. Many other faculty members, colleagues and friends in the discipline have also helped me make sense of the topic, even if that meant simply asking sincere questions about my research and engaging in critical and thoughtful discussions.

The History Department and Contemporary History Institute at Ohio University provided funding for a research trip to Guatemala in 2008 and a Student Enhancement Award from OU’s Office of the Vice President for Research funded a trip in 2010. The Baker Peace Fellowship provided a year of funding so I could dedicate my time entirely to the dissertation. The wonderful administrative staffs of the History Department and Contemporary History Institute helped me navigate the process of using the money.

The Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica (CIRMA) in Antigua Guatemala provided wonderful institutional support. The archive staff and director were consistently patient and helpful in my search for documents during three separate research trips.

Many Guatemalans both inside and outside of the country have assisted this dissertation. While many wish to remain anonymous, their assistance is greatly appreciated. It ranged from introducing me to former members, providing access to organizational documents, sharing personal stories about experiences in the movement
and generally helping me to better understand the movement. The many conversations that occurred both on and off the record about ORPA and recent Guatemala history helped situate the organization’s story in broader historical context. I am indebted to Dr. Raul Molina who introduced me to Rodrigo Asturias back in 2003, a meeting that sparked my initial interest in this topic. Since then Raul has introduced me to many former members and leaders of the movement, and from there my network of contacts expanded over the years. While the list is too long to include here, many provided oral histories and appear in the bibliography. Along with providing important insights about the organization, Zully Schaub de Asturias, María del Rosario Valenzuela Sotomayor and Sandino Asturias gave me access to key organizational documents that they each possessed.

Many family members and friends offered support during the process. My in-laws Nafisa and Mohomed Bootwala spent many hours with our son, Euan, and even though they consider it quality time with their grandson, it was greatly appreciated. Cheryl (King) Walter went far beyond her duty as a friend by both watching Euan at times and providing comments on chapters. Most importantly, my wife Maria was patient and supportive throughout the process even allowing our dining room table to disappear under piles of documents and books for quite some time. I am indebted to all those mentioned above and many others that are not.
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Introduction

On September 18, 1979, a group of armed men and women descended from the protective cover of the surrounding hills and mountains to the coffee plantation at Mujulia, near the city of Quetzaltenango in western Guatemala. The guerrillas called the workers to a meeting during which they shared a political message and distributed a pamphlet titled “The Necessary and Inevitable War,” then retreated to the security of the densely forested highlands. To any observer of modern Central American history, a band of guerrillas visiting a rural community does not seem all that unusual. However, in this particular case, the occupation of Mujulia was the first public action of the Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms (ORPA). For nearly eight years, this movement had been preparing both intellectually and militarily to carry out a war against the successive military regimes that constituted the Guatemalan state.

The significance of ORPA is found in the organization’s ideas. The movement’s creative ideological approach, which included an interpretation of Marxism that emphasized social and cultural issues and the role of human actors, resulted in a peculiar brand of radical nationalism that differed from contemporary revolutionary movements in Guatemala and Latin America more broadly. This is an intellectual and political history of the movement focused on its ideology and analysis of Guatemala’s problems, including its perspectives on the long-debated “indigenous question” and the role of Guatemala’s indigenous majority in the revolutionary struggle. This study does not pretend to offer a broad and general history of the movement, nor a detailed account of its military actions or other day-to-day operations. Instead it focuses on the organization’s
ideas and the ways in which it proposed to change the country’s political, social and economic relations.

From the early 1960s to the mid-1990s, thousands of Guatemalans came to the realization that armed struggle was the only option to effectuate radical socioeconomic and political change, and they were willing to risk death in order to pursue it. These militants filled the ranks of the various political-military organizations that operated during this era, and tens of thousands more supported the organizations in some capacity or another, whether working in popular organizing or providing logistics to the guerrilla armies. Many members and supporters were killed by state forces and did not witness the signing of Peace Accords in 1996, which ended the 36-years of civil violence. Thousands of innocent bystanders met the same fate, as many aspects of civil society were targeted by the various incarnations of state-sponsored repression. An estimated 200,000 people were killed or disappeared during the longest and most brutal internal conflict to occur in the Western Hemisphere during the Cold War. Widespread state repression and the horrendous methods and tactics employed, including 600 massacres, have been well detailed in the many studies on the conflict. In 1999, Guatemala’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CEH) concluded that state sponsored forces committed 93 percent of the human rights abuses, while only three percent were attributable to the

guerrilla organizations.² The most extreme levels of violence were directed at the indigenous population, prompting some observers to accuse the Guatemalan government of genocide.³

The extreme levels of state-directed violence, heinous crimes against humanity and the ongoing culture of impunity have been the focus of many studies of Guatemala’s Civil War. While these aspects of the war are important for any historical interpretation, this study is focused on ORPA’s ideology, the ideas that inspired people from various walks of life to join the insurgency despite all the implications and dangers that came with that decision. The organization was a leading and powerful political-military movement that operated from 1971 to 1996, attracting broad support that ranged from middle-class urbanites, such as doctors and professors at the national university, to landless, rural peasants struggling for subsistence. This study generates a greater understanding of Guatemala’s recent history by offering an in-depth analysis of the organization’s ideas, and offers a case study of how a radical movement rejected ideological imperatives in search of solutions to a specific national reality, which included incorporating issues of race and ethnicity in its revolutionary thought and action with the intent of establishing a more inclusive society.

ORPA’s operations coincided with three other political-military movements in Guatemala: the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP), the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR) and the Guatemalan Workers’ Party (PGT). Relative to the many studies focused on aspects

² CEH, Memoria del Silencio, 1999.
³ For one such instance see Greg Grandin, The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 3; The CEH and REMHI human rights reports found that the Guatemalan State committed acts of genocide.
of Guatemala’s Civil War, research focused on the specific ideas driving these different insurgencies remains limited, and much that does exist offers very broad generalizations of the disparate movements. Some scholars have broadly characterized them as Marxist rebels or simply grouped them together as one movement implying a unified ideological approach. To be certain, such generalizations do have historical roots. The Marxist label is not necessarily false, considering each movement did incorporate aspects of Marxist thought, but such a characterization overlooks the many nuances that existed, even within the varied interpretations of Marxism more broadly. ORPA, for instance, certainly employed Marxist analysis, but it represented just one aspect of the organization’s radical nationalism.

The fact that the four movements established an operational alliance during the conflict has also resulted in broad generalizations of a unified ideological approach. In 1982, in an attempt to coordinate some efforts the movements formed an umbrella organization, the Guatemala National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). Subsequently, in 1996 it was representatives of the Guatemalan government and leaders of URNG that negotiated an end to the 36-year Civil War. At that time, the four organizations ceased to exist folding into the URNG, as that organization became a legitimate political party. To many outside observers, as well as many from the younger generation of Guatemalans, the emergence of the URNG in 1982 and its existence as a legal political party after 1996

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has overshadowed the differences that existed among the guerrilla organizations, both in
historical trajectory and ideological line.

While the banner of the URNG enabled the organizations to coordinate efforts
against what all four viewed as an unjust government, each organization retained nearly
complete ideological and operational autonomy. The URNG’s General Command
consisted of the principal leader of each member organization, and issued various
political statements after its formation, but it was not until 1991 that a united guerrilla
front was formed to promote operational unity, and even then it mainly consisted of
members of ORPA and the EGP, with FAR militants arriving only temporarily for joint
operations. As the war dragged on during the 1990s, there was greater interest among the
leadership in establishing a unified political front, not only for peace negotiations but also
for the prospective political future. Even still, the URNG’s negotiating team was the
General Command ensuring that each member organization had a representative sign
most of the Accords. Today, in an effort to maintain political harmony, the current
secretary general of the URNG (a former ORPA leader) and other political activists of the
party attempt to mitigate political and ideological differences that existed during the war.
Projecting the present onto the past is a logical move in the party’s attempt to establish a
unified political front and gain legitimacy among the electorate. However, it does

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6 Rodrigo Asturias was unable to sign the final Accords in December of 1996 due to the high profile
kidnapping of Olga de Novella, a member of a prominent Guatemalan family, in August 1996 by two
ORPA militants. Novella was released unharmed on October 20, but much controversy surrounded this
event. The kidnapping jeopardized the peace process and damaged the credibility of Asturias forcing him to
retreat from the negotiating table. Jorge Rosal, a member of ORPA and a leader of the URNG international
network signed instead. For further information of the Olga De Novella kidnapping and the subsequent
investigation into the disappearance, torture and death of one of the militants responsible for it known as
the “Mincho Affair” see REMHI, Guatemala: Never Again!, 284-285; Susanne Jonas, Of Centaurs and
overlook the ideological differences and rich theoretical debates that were central to the formation of disparate groups in the 1970s. Treating the movements as a monolith, even while operating under the umbrella of the URNG, takes away from the specific historical trajectories, ideological debates and goals that existed among the largely autonomous organizations.

A document issued by the URNG leadership as peace was being negotiated speaks to the divisions and autonomy of the respective organizations. The leadership made a concerted effort to overcome these differences in order to establish a unified political movement. In a 1996 document, URNG leaders lamented how wartime divisions among its four factions weakened the organization, and they issued a call for political unity to all URNG members, regardless of prior allegiances.\(^7\) In March 1997, ORPA’s founder and ideologue, Rodrigo Asturias, issued a similar appeal urging members of the organization to support the URNG as it moved forward in the legal political sphere.\(^8\)

This dissertation highlights the ideological autonomy and differences that existed among the movements through an analysis of ORPA’s radical nationalism, including the theoretical debates that resulted in the emergence of the organization. The organization’s ideas remain understudied, despite the important role the organization, its leaders and members have played in recent Guatemalan history. Rodrigo Asturias, as well as other former leaders and members of the movement, have been prominent figures in electoral politics and social organizations, including the current Secretary General of the URNG,

\(^7\) URNG, *Guatemala, La Democracia Plena: Meta Revolucionario en el Fin del Milenio, Orientaciones del Momento Actual* (Guatemala: Ediciones URNG, 1996).
\(^8\) ORPA, *Organización del Pueblo en Armas* (Guatemala: Unknown, 1997).
Hector Nuila. More broadly, the guerrilla movements played a substantial role in Guatemala’s recent history.

ORPA, the second largest political-military organization operating in Guatemala at that time, was founded in 1971, but did not emerge publicly until 1979. Those eight years were spent constructing a strong foundation, both organizationally and ideologically, from which the movement could launch its struggle. Since this study is focused on the movement’s ideology, here it suffices to offer a brief glimpse of the organizational structure. While an ORPA document from 1989 lists nine founding members, Asturias is widely recognized as the principal founder and ideologue of the movement and served as the commander-in-chief for its entire existence.\footnote{Every former member interviewed for this study, both on and off the record, recognized Asturias as the primary ideologue of the movement, but some did suggest that a more collaborative effort occurred among leaders and members in the production of some documents. The ORPA document is an interview with Rodrigo Asturias on the tenth anniversary of operations published by the organization titled 10 Años en Marcha: Entrevista con Gaspar Ilom, Comandante en Jefe de la ORPA, Integrante de la Comandancia General de la URNG (Guatemala: ORPA, 9/18/1989) and lists Roberto García Benavente (nom de guerre – Marcos or Diego Tzoc), Salvador Aceituno (Luis Ixmatá), Eduardo Aguilera (Antonio), Fabián Rosalio de León Escobar (Chano), Mariano Bonilla (Esteban), Cirilo Goves Pérez (Javier Tambriz), Rufino Orozco (Manuel) and Salomón Dary (Abimael) as the other eight founding members along with Asturias (Gaspar Ilom). However, Jorge Murga Armas cites a 1982 interview conducted by Marta Harnecker, La Historia de ORPA y Otros Temas, in which Asturias states that the “true founders of ORPA” were himself, Roberto García Benavente and Salvador Aceituno.}

Organizationally, ORPA rejected the \textit{foco} strategy that had been widely adopted throughout Latin America in the 1960s due to its alleged success in the Cuban Revolution. \textit{Foquismo} argued that a guerrilla movement could achieve victory with or without the help of a mass political base or party by embedding itself in the countryside and actively making the revolution through military operations, which would eventually lead to popular support and growth. Che Guevara and his supporters trumpeted the strategy maintaining that the Cuban experience began with a small and poorly armed
guerrilla group that eventually took power and inspired many to adopt the approach including the Guatemalan guerrillas of the 1960s. By the early 1970s, various movements throughout the region had failed attempting the *foco* strategy, including Guevara’s own attempt in Bolivia, which ended with his capture and execution in 1967.

ORPA set out to establish a broad political-military organization in order to carry out a popular revolutionary war. Guerrilla warfare remained central to this strategy but the plan was for it to be “complemented” by the “political struggles of the masses in every corner of the country.” The organization consisted of regular forces in multiple rural fronts and an urban front, and irregular forces known as the Resistencia. Members of the Resistencia were full time militants that did not live a full time military life in a guerrilla camp. The irregular forces lived among the population that “protect[ed] and sustain[ed] them,” but were still organized into squads that would come together to carry out sabotage, propaganda and military actions. Similar irregular forces existed in the capital city – militants that maintained legal lives but were prepared to participate in a variety of organizational activities. ORPA fully appreciated the need for popular support to effectively carry out the struggle, but due to the “existing context of terror” the

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11 ORPA was not the only movement to reject the *foco* strategy. Many movements had been defeated in *foco* attempts, including the intellectual author of the strategy Che Guevara in Bolivia in 1967, resulting in organizational shifts to strategies to broad-based popular organizations prepared for prolonged warfare. This shift in organizing strategy is discussed a bit more in Chapters 1 and 2.


13 ORPA established three rural fronts and an urban front before its first public action in 1979, see Marta Harnecker, *Pueblos en Armas* (Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, 1985), 217 and Dirk Krujit and Rudie Van Meurs, *El Guerrillero y el General* (Guatemala: FLACSO, 2000), 36. At its peak the organization operated five rural fronts, but by the late 1980s it only had two rural fronts, one of which became the URNG Unified Front in 1991.
leadership did not want communities and popular organizations to participate openly in the movement. Instead the movement opted for clandestine political work with the masses in order to “protect” the leaders and members of the communities and popular organizations that in turn supported and protected them. The communities “constituted the nucleus of resistance” of the organization.14

Similar to most Latin American revolutionary movements at that time, ORPA employed Marxism as an analytical framework, but Marxist analysis constituted just one facet of the movement’s ideology and its interpretation went beyond the rigid historical materialism of many contemporary movements. Similar to early-twentieth-century Marxist intellectuals like Antonio Gramsci and the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui, ORPA emphasized the role of ideas and human subjectivity in revolutionary struggle. Furthermore, the organization’s political and theoretical lines were heavily influence by African decolonization theorists and independence leaders such as Frantz Fanon, Alberto Memmi and Amilcar Cabral, especially their analyses and perspectives on colonialism, racism and the role of the petty bourgeois intellectual in the revolutionary struggle. In fact, various intellectual influences coalesced into a revolutionary nationalist ideology geared toward problems inherent in Guatemala, a pragmatic approach to national problems, especially, social and political inequality, and its many manifestations.

ORPA’s leadership expressed deep concern over the racism that permeated Guatemalan society. Early documents argued that racism had to be confronted directly by the guerrilla organizations, not ignored. ORPA heavily criticized the Guatemalan Left,

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including the Marxist Left, for its lack of concern for the indigenous population.\textsuperscript{15} The organization argued that racism was both a product and instrument of the social structure and a fundamental aspect of the ruling ideology in Guatemala, not simply part of the superstructure, defined as aspects of social and political relations that while built on the economic base, are secondary to that base.\textsuperscript{16} ORPA leaders argued that the barriers and divisions created by racism were greater than the unity that comes through class solidarity, as racism impeded class unity and horizontal cohesion by creating a vertical hierarchy.\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{Historiography}

To date, the only historical treatment of ORPA was published by the organization in 1979. Although the organization’s “autobiography” contains crucial information, such as the founders’ thoughts on the ideological and strategic debates from which the movement emerged, it is not without biases.\textsuperscript{18} Much of the secondary literature that does discuss the Guatemalan guerrilla organizations does so in broad strokes as tangential to the primary focus. Very few have attempted to analyze the ideologies driving the movements or the perspectives on the indigenous question. However, while there is not an in-depth history of the ORPA’s ideology and creative approach to revolution, many scholars have referred to peculiarities of the movement, even while not delineating the nuances. Many point to both ORPA and the EGP as representing shifts in operational strategy, political organizing and approach to the indigenous population. This trend is

\textsuperscript{15} ORPA’s analysis generally refers to the Marxist Left, and traditional Marxist Left, which certainly implied the PGT, which was Guatemala’s Communist Party, and the FAR, the armed Left of the 1960s.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 12.
\textsuperscript{18} ORPA, \textit{La Historia de nuestra Organizacion} (Guatemala: Ediciones ORPA, 1979).
apparent even in studies that were published during the Civil War, whose authors’ would have had a limited access to ideological documents of the guerrilla movements due to illegality and secrecy of clandestine movements.

James Dunkerley’s extensive history of modern Central America points out that “flexibility” in ORPA’s political style resulted in a broader constituency, including support from middle-class intellectuals, something that the other movement’s lacked. He suggests the possibility that the organization’s “more expansive platform” and “political pragmatism” could have been lessons learned from Nicaragua’s FSLN, which had taken power just before ORPA began military operations. He also indicates that the movement embraced indigenous issues, similar to the EGP, and that it had a “significant number” of indigenous members and supporters; however, it was not “an Indian army as such,” but instead was focused on national liberation.\(^\text{19}\) Susanne Jonas made similar observations of the organization’s emphasis on indigenous issues, as well as support from the indigenous population and middle-class intellectuals.\(^\text{20}\) John Booth and Thomas Walker also referred to ORPA and the EGP as “indigenous-based guerrilla organizations” with ORPA’s membership “predominantly” indigenous.\(^\text{21}\) These scholars’ observations do highlight a strategic and organizational shift between the 1960s and 1970s guerrilla; however, there is little, if any detail of that shift beyond these general observations. The details of ORPA’s political pragmatism, flexibility, or approach to the indigenous question, or why

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the movement enjoyed indigenous and middle-class support remains unclear. Moreover, George Black, broadly discusses some of the ideological debates occurring between the different organizations, including ORPA’s early criticisms of the racist positions taken by the other revolutionary groups, but stops short of detailing ORPA’s perspectives on race, or its analysis on the indigenous population more broadly.\(^{22}\) Even though lacking thorough analysis, the early observations of these scholars are generally accurate. Dunkerley’s suggestion that ORPA’s pragmatism might be lessons from the FSLN highlights the difficulties of understanding a contemporary clandestine organization without access to internal documents. While a very plausible theory when considering the pragmatic approach of elements of the FSLN, and Dunkerley only suggests this as a theory, ORPA’s internal documents had emphasized such an approach to the struggle and an attempt to create a broad base from the early-1970s before the Sandinista victory.

Lack of access to documents also limited the perspective of anthropologist Carol A. Smith in her 1992 article, “Marxists on Class and Culture in Guatemala.”\(^{23}\) The article is insightful in that it outlines various Marxist positions on the indigenous question in Guatemala between 1960 and 1990, including the positions of the guerrilla organizations. Smith argues that other Third World Marxist intellectuals changed the “basic Marxist mechanism of social transformation (class struggle) into something broader and more culturally based.”\(^ {24}\) However, she maintains that Guatemalan Marxists lagged behind

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\(^{24}\) Smith, 200.
other Third World revolutionaries in that they never developed a progressive, non-orthodox position on class and culture, but retained the primacy of class struggle.

While Smith’s observations are correct in many instances, her analyses of Guatemala’s guerrilla organizations were based on limited sources, which led to premature conclusions. This was especially the case in her treatment of ORPA’s views on the indigenous question, which was based on a five-page article printed in a Costa Rican journal.\(^{25}\) This brief article was an excerpt from “Racismo I,” an extensive 120-page internal document on the indigenous question.\(^{26}\) The full document, which is discussed at length in Chapter 3, was not available to Smith in 1992, nor were hundreds of other internal and external ORPA publications that highlight ORPA’s progressive approach to the indigenous question. Such documents illuminate a clear rejection of the dogmas that existed among the Marxist Left, and promote a more profound analysis of the indigenous question that went beyond class struggle.

Dirk Kruijt published *Guerrillas: War and Peace in Central America*, a study of the Central American guerrilla movements and the transition from armed struggle to electoral politics. His research provides great foundational details notwithstanding the massive scope of the study: three different national experiences (Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua), each with multiple guerrilla movements. Nonetheless most of the specific details of ORPA (and the other movements), whether ideological or organizational, come from interviews Kruijt conducted with Rodrigo Asturias and other leaders and members. Kruijt also coedited, together with Rudie van Meurs, a book of

\(^{26}\) ORPA, *Racismo I*. 
retrospective interviews with Rodrigo Asturias conducted after the war.\textsuperscript{27} Both books offer valuable insight into Asturias’ ideological and political formation and insider perspectives and details of the organization but do not provide the full scope of a document based intellectual history, which analyzes ORPA’s ideas and approaches as presented contemporarily in organizational documents.

Mario Payeras was arguably Guatemala’s most prolific revolutionary author, publishing a few books while in the guerrilla. However, Payeras was a founding member of the EGP and that organization was the primary focus of this work.\textsuperscript{28} As one of the ideologues of the movement, he is recognized as having written the EGP’s statement on the indigenous population, published in 1982, which will be examined in Chapter 3.\textsuperscript{29} Another founder of the EGP, Julio Cesar Macias, published an autobiography after the war that briefly discuses Asturias’s realization in the early 1960s about the role of the indigenous population in the struggle. However, Macías does not contextualize the significance of such ideas in the early 1960s, nor does he analyze how Asturias continued to develop this line of thought in the coming years.\textsuperscript{30}


\textsuperscript{29} EGP, “Los Pueblos Indígenas y la Revolución Guatemalteca” in \textit{Compañero No. 5} (Guatemala: 1982). Due to internal ideological and strategic debates in the EGP, including emerging differences on the indigenous question, Mario Payeras would eventually leave the organization in 1984 and found a new movement, Octubre Revolucionario. He would continue publishing essays and books, however, the debates that led to this divide in the EGP leadership are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

\textsuperscript{30} Julio César Macias, \textit{La Guerrilla Fue Mi Camino: Epitafio para César Montes} (Guatemala: Editorial Piedra Santa Arandi, 1999).
Two former leaders of ORPA have written books documenting their experiences in the movement. In 2004, Santiago Santa Cruz Mendoza with the nom de guerre “Comandante Santiago,” published *Insurgents: Guatemala, The Sudden Peace*, and, in 2010, Pedro Pablo Palma Lau, or “Comandante Pancho,” published *Sierra Madre: Passages and Profiles from the Revolutionary War.* Both men served as military commanders in the organization, the second highest attainable rank in ORPA’s hierarchy after the position of commander-in-chief held by Asturias. Cruz Mendoza’s book reads as a narrative of his experiences in the organization, whereas Palma Lau’s book is part prose and part poetic collection of reminiscences, rather than a narrative of his experiences with chapters that share his thoughts on events, locations and individuals, among others things. Similar to the Asturias interviews mentioned above, both books provide interesting details and insights from the authors’ perspectives within the organization. However, these personal accounts lack the rigor of a document-based history of the movement’s ideas and the contextualization of those ideas into the broader revolutionary history.

Jennifer Harbury, arguably the organization’s closest outside observer, published two books that discuss aspects of the movement. An Ivy League-educated lawyer, Harbury became aware of the government’s human rights violations while working with Guatemalan refugees in the US. This work led her to Guatemala and after spending a period in an ORPA guerrilla camp she married Efrain Bámaca Velásquez or “Everardo,”

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31 Santiago Santa Cruz Mendoza, *Insurgentes: Guatemala, la paz arrancada* (Santiago, Chile: Lom Ediciones, 2004); Pedro Pablo Palma Lau, *Sierra Madre: pasajes y perfiles de la guerra revolucionaria* (Guatemala City; F & G Editores, 2010).

an indigenous military commander in the organization. Her first book, *Bridge of Courage*, is a collection of interviews that she conducted with various members of ORPA, sharing their experiences as to why they joined the movement and life in the guerrilla, with her own experiences inserted throughout. The book attempts to humanize the struggle, demonstrating both the difficulties and aspirations of members of the guerrilla, as well as the inhumanity of the Guatemalan state and military. Her second book, *Searching for Everardo*, documents her battle against the United States and Guatemalan governments to reveal the facts of her husband’s torture and death, and to hold the perpetrators responsible. This battle continues today in the Guatemalan court system as Harbury seeks justice for Everardo and the many others that did not survive the state repression. As a fierce human-rights advocate, it is no secret that her books were written to raise awareness of these issues. In a more recent interview, Harbury described ORPA as a broad based civil rights movement “with the indigenous people themselves organizing and trying to get their lands back…that linked up with people who in the capital, ladinos, that were also trying to push for human rights and civil rights.”33 Harbury drew parallels to the broad based civil rights movement that occurred in the United States when discussing ORPA. This astute observation carries some weight as

33 Jennifer Harbury. Interview by author. Digital Recording. Guatemala City, July 24, 2010. Ladino is the term commonly used in Guatemalan to refer to people of non-indigenous descent and is used accordingly throughout this dissertation. Greg Grandin explains that while the term ladino has had different connotations both historically and regionally, by independence the term was used to refer “to all non-Indians, including Mestizos, Creoles, and Spaniards,” which he explains is distinct from the term Mestizo used in neighboring countries that took on “much more self-consciously hybrid (indigenous and Spanish) connotations; in Guatemala, in contrast, the use of Ladino has historically suggested a Hispanicized or European cultural identity,” see Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000), 238-239; Betsy Konefal offers further discussion into the evolution of this term in Guatemala, see *For Every Indio Who Falls: A History of Maya Activism in Guatemala, 1960-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010), 13-16.
former indigenous members interviewed outlined the skewed system of land tenure and
former ladino members almost all discussed basic ideas of social justice and civil rights
as the reasons they joined the movement.

A few other books have been published in Spanish over the past decade that detail
aspects of ORPA’s history and approach critical examinations of the organization’s
ideology. Jorge Murga Armas offers perhaps the most thorough examination of the
movement in his ethnography of the community of Santiago de Atitlan, one of ORPA’s
areas of operations. Murga Armas traces the shift in organizational styles and analyzes
the intersection of Catholic activism and revolutionary involvement. Murga Armas has
also produced a brief, yet insightful essay on a few of the debates on racism that occurred
in Guatemala during the late-1960s and early-1970s, including some positions of Rodrigo
Asturias.34 While Murga Armas delves into some of the organizational and ideological
debates that occurred the story of catechists in Santiago de Atitlan precludes an in-depth
study of ORPA’s ideology.

ORPA gained broad-based support in its nationalist struggle offering an
ideological framework different from those of its contemporaries. In fact, early internal
documents did not shy away from criticizing the positions and actions of the other
organizations operating in Guatemala. This study offers a broad portrait of the movement,
focused on its creative approach to ideology. A study of ORPA’s ideology is especially
relevant as Guatemala today struggles with many of the same issues that ignited the civil

34 Jorge Murga Armas, Iglesia Católica, Movimiento Indígena y Lucha Revolucionaria (Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala) (Guatemala: Impresiones Palacios, 2006); “Debate sobre el racismo en Guatemala: 1970-
1973” in La tierra y los hombres en la sociedad agraria colonial de Severo Martínez Peláez (Guatemala: Iximulew, 2008). Also see María del Rosario Valenzuela Sotomayor, Por qué las armas? Desde los Mayas hasta la insurgencia en Guatemala (Mexico: Ocean Sur, 2009).
war nearly 50 years ago, including widespread social inequality, lack of basic human rights, and political corruption. Regionally, the history of contemporary social and revolutionary movements and the ideas that gained widespread, popular support is relevant and timely on many levels, especially considering the geopolitical shift occurring in Latin America toward leftist, center-Left and neo-populist governments. A reexamination of the goals and aspirations of the now defunct political-military organizations can offer insight into historical roots of the current goals and aspirations of the political left.

Sources and Organization

This history of ORPA is primarily based on a broad-range of internal and external documents produced by the organization. Ideological differences caused the founders of ORPA to split from another guerrilla movement in 1971. Subsequently, the organization recruited, organized and developed clandestinely for eight years before carrying out their first military operation in 1979. Though the movement did not distribute any publications during this period, the organization’s commitment to the ideological development of its members resulted in some lengthy internal documents on a range of theoretical issues, all of which were to be used for organizational purposes. Since the documents were intended for internal use, they represent the best source of the leadership’s analytical perspectives at that time, as analysis is not contingent on historical memory or outside interpretations, as both can be selective. The documents are most valuable as historical texts in that they provide a contemporary source of ORPA’s radical nationalist ideology and revolutionary approach. The documents provide insight into the organization’s ideological line,
political strategies, intellectual influences, the leaderships’ interpretation of Guatemalan history, the ideas that made the movement unique, as well as the movement’s criticisms of contemporary movements.

In September 1979, the organization began to operate publicly, and from that point, distributed pamphlets, press communications and other types of publications. These documents prove useful for a history of ORPA as they provide the public face of the organization. They contain the ideas, analysis and interpretations that ORPA’s leadership wanted to disseminate to the Guatemalan population, and at times the international community more broadly. Something that became apparent during the research was the overall consistency between the organization’s political line as deduced from internal documents and the analysis it promoted in its external publications.

While this study relies heavily on documents, oral history interviews are also used to look broadly at what inspired Guatemalans to join the organization and to understand how the movement’s ideas were understood and applied to daily life by members. Interviews were carried out with former members from a variety of backgrounds and social categories, from middle-class urbanites to struggling rural peasants, both men and women, indigenous and non-indigenous. While those interviewed represent just a fraction of the movement’s membership, and notwithstanding the fact that oral histories are subject to selective memory and personal biases, the interviews provide insight into the experiences of those who embraced the movement’s ideas on some level and committed to radical change.
Chapter One offers an overview of the intellectual traditions and organizational atmosphere both inside Guatemala and regionally that provide the backdrop for ORPA’s emergence in the early 1970s. It examines the development of radical thought in Latin America, specifically variants of Marxism, as well as some different approaches to race and ethnicity, especially those relevant to the organization’s emergence. The chapter also details the popular struggle in Guatemala from the Guatemalan Revolution of 1944 to the guerrilla movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, providing the historical context for ORPA’s emergence and Rodrigo Asturias’s intellectual and political trajectory.

The second chapter delineates the emergence of ORPA in the early 1970s, and details key aspects of the movement’s ideology. Drawing on internal, theoretical documents, primarily produced during the gestational period in the 1970s, the chapter highlights ORPA’s creative and flexible approach to revolution that emphasized the importance of ideas and the role of subjective human actors in the revolutionary struggle. The first part of the chapter is organized chronologically as it outlines the process in which Asturias and other founding members were critical of the FAR and the PGT and decided to start a separate movement that advocated a new approach to Guatemala’s problems. The second half of the chapter is organized thematically as it analyzes various aspects of the movement’s ideology as presented throughout its internal publications. The themes analyzed are ORPA’s approach to member and organizational development, the Guatemalan reality, the role of the petit-bourgeois intellectual, the militarization of the oligarchy and the role of women in the revolution.
Chapter Three is dedicated to a central aspect of ORPA’s ideology: its perspectives on race and ethnicity. While not the only aspect of ORPA’s ideology that set the organization apart from contemporary movements in Guatemala, its analysis on race and ethnic issues stood in stark contrast to previous approaches. ORPA maintained that racism was a central aspect of the country’s dominant ideology sustaining the exclusionary and oppressive social, economic and political structures and needed to be confronted accordingly. The chapter starts by looking specifically at the analysis of contemporary movements as presented in their respective documents before outlining ORPA’s ideas as contained in three, lengthy internal documents: “Racismo I,” “Racismo II: La Verdadera Magnitud del Racismo” and “What is the Use of Knowing History?."

Chapter Four analyzes the organization’s external discourse as presented in the publications the movement distributed throughout Guatemala during the war. The chapter is organized categorically into the most recurrent themes found in the movement’s public literature. Some of the analytical categories mirror those examined in consideration of internal documents in Chapters Two and Three such as the militarization of the oligarchy, women’s issues and indigenous issues. However, since the external documents were geared toward raising awareness and support instead of ideological and organizational development some of the most recurrent themes are entirely new categories such as state repression, the plight of the peasantry, the Revolution of 1944, the democratic farce and government corruption and imperialism. While all these areas of analysis appear in internal documents as aspects of ORPA’s interpretation of the Guatemalan reality, their prevalence in external publications merited separate analysis. The chapter also considers
the different audiences, the continuity of the movement’s message both before and after joining the URNG, as well as the theoretical consistency between documents intended for internal use and those to be disseminated.

The final chapter incorporates oral history interviews of former members and leaders of ORPA in examining why people joined the movement and how the ideas were understood and internalized by members and applied in daily interactions. It demonstrates that while members came from varying backgrounds and life experiences they were unified in their desire to struggle for greater socioeconomic justice and racial equality. This chapter is organized thematically using variations of the same analytical categories employed in Chapters Two, Three and Four such as member and organizational development, the Guatemalan reality, issues of race, and gender issues, among others. Chapter Five is followed by a brief epilogue that examines some of the historical conclusions of the Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) established during the peace process.
Figure 1.1: Map of Guatemala, The University of Texas at Austin, Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection. http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/americas/guatemala_rel00.jpg
Chapter 1: Marxism and Race in Historical Perspective

To better understand the Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms (ORPA) and its ideology, it is first necessary to analyze the broader historical context of Latin America, and more specifically Guatemala, leading up to the emergence of the movement, as well as trace some key ideological trends. The organization did not materialize in a vacuum; social, economic and political events occurring in and outside of Guatemala influenced the ideological development of the movement’s founders. The second half of the twentieth century was an especially volatile time in Guatemala. Between 1944 and 1996, the country experienced a 10-year democratic revolution, a C.I.A.-orchestrated coup, numerous military dictatorships, a 36-year civil war and the emergence of no fewer than seven, radical political-military organizations. ORPA’s founding in 1971 was rooted in a long history of repression and resistance. This chapter analyzes the historical context of ORPA’s emergence. First, it looks at the acceptance and spread of Marxist thought, an ideology that influenced ORPA as well as most radical movements in Latin America. Second, it delineates the development of the armed insurgency in Guatemala, the predecessor of ORPA, considering the specific events leading to the emergence of the movement. Finally, the chapter examines certain aspects of race and ethnic issues, which became themes central to ORPA’s ideology and set the movement apart from its contemporaries.

Marxism in Latin America

In the mid-nineteenth century, the German philosopher Karl Marx began to analyze the socioeconomic and political relations that resulted from modern capitalism
and industrialization. Marx maintained that the ills of industrialization and advanced capitalism would exacerbate class antagonisms to such a degree that the workers would unite in a revolution to restructure society into a classless state; communism represented this classless state.\(^{35}\) Marx argued that capitalism needed to run its course to create the necessary and objective economic conditions for the proletariat revolution that would lead to communism. Even though politics was considered secondary to the economic base, he believed that liberal democracy was the political expression of capitalism; only liberal democracy would provide the necessary conditions for capitalism to grow and expand until the inherent contradictions resulted in its own demise. For Marx, it was not a matter of if the revolution would happen, but when, as he believed it was an inevitable process. Since the publication of Marx’s work, radical movements throughout the world have adopted his ideas, or interpretations of his ideas, as their own ideological framework, many emphasizing the economic determinism found in his work.

Marx’s economic determinism raised significant questions for Latin Americans. The socioeconomic structure of Latin America differed greatly from the European one analyzed by Marx, as many parts of the region were still pre-capitalist, nearly void of industrialization. In fact, for many countries, the most industrialized aspect of the economy was the extraction of raw materials in the forms of mining and agriculture. The industrialization that Marx witnessed and analyzed, complete with manufacturing and an urban proletariat, was virtually non-existent throughout most of the region during the nineteenth century. By the beginning of the twentieth century, organized labor had

emerged in the major urban centers of Latin America; however, most Latin American workers remained in agriculture and mining. The region’s large-scale mining operations paralleled the urban centers in representing nascent industrial capitalism and both mine and agricultural workers suffered high levels of exploitation, but a great portion of the region’s population remained in feudalistic socioeconomic relations. If Marx believed that the capitalist system needed to run its course before a revolution could occur, then his adherents in Latin America would find themselves waiting a long time before seeing the necessary revolutionary conditions.

The political side of Marx’s analysis was also complicated. In the mid-nineteenth century, various politicians throughout Latin America championed the ideals of liberal democracy, but by the turn of the century, the tenets of positivism had replaced such ideas. Throughout the region, the political elite had embraced illiberal political institutions in an effort to free economic growth from the restraints of civil and human rights. The elite maintained that rights associated with liberal political institutions retarded economic development and modernization and therefore took steps to divorce political and economic liberalism. In Guatemala, for instance, a “liberal” resurgence in the 1870s included a dictatorial government that promoted and enforced vagrancy laws and debt peonage, very illiberal policies by any measurement, in order to drive economic development.36 At the dawn of the twentieth-century, most Latin American countries had authoritarian governments that limited the establishment of an independent, national bourgeoisie powerful enough to challenge the feudalistic economic relations and usher in real capitalist development.

One deficiency of Marxist thought became especially apparent in the Latin American context. Latin America is ethnically diverse, with many countries having a majority indigenous population. Ethnic divisions and prejudices abound, and for many indigenous people, class exploitation and marginalization have been compounded and further complicated by racial discrimination. Marx’s focus on class struggle neglected such central aspects of diverse Latin American societies. Advocates of an orthodox Marxist analysis considered race and ethnic issues to be part of the superstructure, understood as aspects of social and political relations that while built on the economic base, are secondary to that base. Therefore, phenomena such as race and ethnicity, as well as all other cultural and ideological aspects of society, were outside the scope of the revolutionary struggle. According to this line of thought, problems arising from such issues would dissipate with the resolution of class conflict.

In the early twentieth century, V. I. Lenin made additions to Marxist thought that made the ideology more relevant to the Latin American reality. The Russian experience demonstrated that industrialization was not a prerequisite for revolution. Lenin posited that a small group of revolutionaries, or vanguard, could take the initiative and cultivate the revolutionary consciousness of a rural, agricultural based society, and create the conditions for revolt. Lenin’s thought was well received in Latin America considering the under-industrialized state of most countries, including Guatemala. Just as advanced industrialization was not a prerequisite, the Russian example also highlighted that liberal democracy was not a necessary political stage. A revolution led by a vanguard could circumvent both.
Lenin conceptualized imperialism as the “monopoly stage of capitalism” through which finance capitalists attempt to consolidate control over an ever-increasing percentage of the world’s wealth. According to Lenin, this was the “highest stage of the development of capitalism.” He considered the world divided into two camps, the developed nations and the peripheral suppliers, macro representations of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, respectively. Lenin’s analysis of imperialism reverberated in Latin America due to the region’s dependent historical relationship with the United States and other industrialized nations. This very relationship frequently impeded capitalist and democratic development in the subordinate, peripheral nations and colonies.

The Russian experience and Lenin’s ideological additions to Marxist thought had far-reaching effects in Latin America. First, his analysis countered the deterministic, historical materialist interpretation of Marx that had become widely accepted as the interpretation. Many began to believe that it was no longer necessary to wait until capitalism had run its course; rather, a group of leaders, acting as the vanguard, could help create the necessary conditions for revolt. Second, Lenin’s theory of imperialism echoed loudly throughout the region. During the positivist era, the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the region experienced a significant rise in foreign capital investment while governments increasingly limited civil liberties. Finance capitalists became very powerful figures in not only the economic sector but also other aspects of

society and politics. Many Latin Americans began to realize their position as peripheral suppliers, sustaining and fortifying the economies of the developed world.

Lenin and the Russian experience inspired a brief revolutionary period among Latin American communists with some calls for immediate revolution by circumventing the liberal democratic, capitalist stage. However, this was an ephemeral moment, with its primary expression in a failed uprising in rural El Salvador in 1932. There, the recently formed Communist Party, led by Augustín Farabundo Martí, organized a mass uprising against the military dictatorship and the socioeconomic relations that it sustained. An estimated 40,000 militants participated in the uprising and for a few days occupied some villages and established short-lived “local soviets.” However, the military’s quick and brutal reprisal, know as La Matanza (The Slaughter), destroyed villages and executed some 20,000 men, women and children, including most of the Communist leadership. This failed uprising, considered ill advised and premature by critics, including regional communist leaders, coupled with Joseph Stalin’s emergence as the Soviet ideologue, resulted in a return to a more orthodox, historical materialist interpretation of Marxist thought.

Stalin managed to imbed economic determinism deep into the region’s Marxist thought. According to Michael Lowy, “Stalin’s theory of revolution by stages,” or stagism, was hegemonic in Latin America by the mid-1930s. Ironically, the Soviet Union, product of a heterodox Marxist revolution, advocated orthodoxy. Stalin’s stagism maintained that Latin America was semi-feudal and economically underdeveloped, and

41 Lowy, Marxism in Latin America,” xiii, xxiii-xxv.
therefore not ready for a Marxist revolution, as the objective conditions did not yet exist. Stagism promoted a popular front, composed of the proletariat, peasantry, petty bourgeoisie and national bourgeoisie that would lead the country through the capitalist, national-democratic stage, also referred to as the anti-imperialist or anti-feudal stage. The region would only be ready for socialism once the national-democratic stage had run its course.42

One Latin American intellectual who not only escaped the analytical restraints of stagism but also “resisted the Stalinization of Latin American Marxist Parties” was Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui.43 Arguably the most important Latin American Marxist intellectual of the early twentieth century, his interpretation of Marx emphasized the role of human actors as well as the importance of local conditions. Mariátegui looked beyond dialectical materialism and argued that ideology and culture were key forces driving historical movement. He also underscored the revolutionary potential of the rural, peasant masses. Mariátegui understood the importance of objective conditions, but also emphasized subjective actions in his historical analysis and the creation of a Marxist thought geared toward specific local realities.44

Mariátegui’s support for the Peruvian working class forced him into exile in Europe in the early 1920s, a period which put him into close contact with not only European socialists, but also with the writings of the Italian Marxist intellectual Antonio

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42 Lowy, *Marxism in Latin America*,” xxix.
Gramsci, long before they became popular in Latin America. While in Italy, he attended the Socialist Congress of Livorno in 1921, where an increasingly revolutionary group, which included Gramsci, splintered and formed the Italian Communist Party. Mariátegui considered Gramsci to be one of the most important intellectuals in the Italian Communist Party. His exile experience was critical in his intellectual development, as it was there that his “socialism evolved into a more clearly thought-out revolutionary Marxism,” and he returned to Peru “a convinced and declared Marxist.” Similar to Gramsci, Mariátegui argued that too many Marxists were actually misinterpreting Marx as they focused on economic determinism with a “mechanistic mentality,” failing to understand the human elements and creative opportunities contained in the framework. He agreed with Gramsci’s position that Marxism was a philosophy of praxis, a combination of theory and practice, situating human actors in a central role in any revolutionary movement. In defending a creative approach to Marxist theory, Mariátegui wrote, “Marxism, where it has shown itself to be revolutionary – that is, where it has been Marxist – has never obeyed a passive and rigid determinism.” Furthermore, he maintained that Marx “always understood the spiritual and intellectual capacity of the proletariat to create a new order through class struggle as a necessary condition.” Mariátegui argued that the “voluntarist character of socialism is, in truth, no

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45 Becker, Mariátegui, 30, 78.  
46 Diego Meseguer Illán, José Carlos Mariátegui y su pensamiento revolucionario (Lima, Peru; IEP Ediciones, 1974), 102-107.  
47 Becker, Mariátegui, 39.  
48 Harry E. Vanden, National Marxism in Latin America: Jose Carlos Mariategui’s Thought and Politics (Boulder, Colorado; Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1986), 120.  
49 Vanden and Becker, Mariátegui: An Anthology, 294.  
less evident – even if less understood by its critics – than its determinist foundation,” and that in the development of the proletarian movement “every word, every Marxist act resounds with faith, will, heroic and creative conviction, whose impulse it would be absurd to seek in a mediocre and passive determinist sentiment.”

Mariátegui not only advocated a voluntaristic and creative approach to Marxism, but also argued that this was precisely the real richness of the analytical framework offered by Marx. During his exile in Europe, he became dedicated to the idea of a “world proletarian revolution,” and intended to return to Peru in order to advocate such a revolution.

In the 1920s, Mariátegui advocated a Marxist analysis that could effectively address the realities of both his native Peru and Latin America more broadly - a creative application of Marxism to a specific national reality that became known as “national Marxism.” However, for the most part, his contemporaries remained true to the economic determinism that was espoused and disseminated by Moscow. Mariátegui’s creative and flexible approach to Marxism would eventually become influential posthumously in mid-twentieth-century Cuba and then among subsequent organizations, including ORPA.

Despite some dissention, Stalin’s interpretation was the most widely accepted throughout Latin America. From the emergence of the Stalinist Communist International in the 1920s until the 1950s, Communist parties and other radical intellectuals created popular fronts by aligning themselves with the bourgeois and reformist bourgeois political parties. During that period, most regional Communist parties also adopted the

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52 Vanden, National Marxism, 120.
official stance that armed rebellion was not true Marxism, but adventurism. The Comintern was a key mechanism for promoting Stalin’s interpretation throughout the region demonstrating from the start that “it was less interested in becoming better informed about the Latin American situation than in imposing its views in the most rigid way possible, disregarding the real context, the real social and political situation.”53 The systematic application of patterns of socioeconomic development specific to Europe impeded the debate and development of authentic Latin American Marxist analyses. Instead of analyzing the Latin American reality, many radical intellectuals attempted to force that reality into a “one size fits all” Marxist paradigm promoted by Stalin and the Soviets.

A belief in Stalin’s interpretation was precisely why the Guatemalan Communists and other Marxist intellectuals supported the 1940s democratic revolution and worked within the system to achieve radical socioeconomic change. On October 20, 1944, progressive military officers and prominent civilians led a popular uprising against the long-time dictator Jorge Ubico. The uprising ended years of authoritarian rule and led to a ten-year democratic opening known as the Guatemalan Revolution. Two consecutive presidents took steps to transform the country socially, politically and economically. Juan José Arévalo, elected the first president of the Guatemalan Revolution in December of 1944 with over 85% of the vote, believed that “democracy was a crucial component in

human progress,” and included the government taking responsibility for the citizenry.\textsuperscript{54} A new constitution emphasized and protected individual rights along with other progressive social guarantees.\textsuperscript{55} The 1947 Labor Code was arguably the most important legislation passed during Arévalo’s presidency. Even though the Code was relatively moderate when compared to labor codes of developed countries, it did establish “basic standards of health and safety in the workplace,” provided protection from “unfair dismissals,” created a standardized workweek and “regulated the employment of women and adolescents.” It also legalized labor unions and strikes, though it set limitations on both.\textsuperscript{56}

Jacobo Arbenz, one of the military leaders of the 1944 October Revolution, succeeded Arévalo in 1950, receiving approximately 64% of the vote.\textsuperscript{57} Arbenz firmly believed that the Revolution still had much to accomplish and intended to push for even more radical change. Arbenz postulated that Guatemala was entirely dependent on other nations in a semi-colonial fashion and promised to free his country from the foreign monopolies restraining growth and development. He considered agrarian reform the key to creating a more equitable society. When Arbenz took office in 1951, over 70 percent of agricultural land was owned by 2 percent of the population. Furthermore, 50 percent of small landowners were “crowded onto parcels too small to sustain a family.”\textsuperscript{58} He intended to “transform Guatemala from a backward country with a semi-feudal economy into a modern capitalist country” by constructing a plan of “self-sustained economic

\textsuperscript{55} Kinzer and Schlesinger, \textit{Bitter Fruit}, 33-34.
\textsuperscript{57} Gleijeses, \textit{Shattered Hope}, 83.
\textsuperscript{58} Gleijeses, \textit{Shattered Hope}, 36-37.
development based on agrarian reform and public works.” Determined to effectuate the “greatest possible increase in the living standards of the large masses of the people,” he enacted major land reform and refused to grant foreign companies the “special concessions” they had previously enjoyed. However, such radical change came into conflict with the economic interests of both U.S. companies and the Guatemalan elite. The influence of the Guatemalan Communist Party leadership on Arbenz and his policies also began to concern the United States government.

Arbenz’s development program ended abruptly on June 27, 1954, when he resigned the presidency as the country was under attack by a small group of Guatemalans that had been trained and supported by the C.I.A. with the blessing of the US president and secretary of state, among other officials. The invasion was welcomed and supported by domestic opposition dissatisfied with the revolution. While the small force could have easily been put down by the Guatemalan military just as many other coups had been during the 10 year revolution, it was US backing that caused Arbenz to resign with the hopes of continuing the advances of the revolution under new leadership. Arbenz subsequently went into exile, never returning to his native country. Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas became the new president with explicit U.S. support and was heralded the “liberator of Guatemala” by the reactionary opposition both in Guatemala and abroad. The new dictator wasted little time returning Guatemala to what Arbenz and his

59 Immerman, CIA in Guatemala, 62-63; Gleijeses, Shattered Hope, 149.
60 The 1954 coup that was carried out by Guatemalans, but directly supported by the CIA has been well documented; see Gleijeses, Shattered Hope; Kinzer and Schlesinger, Bitter Fruit; Dunkerley, Power in the Isthmus; Immerman, CIA in Guatemala. Gleijeses explains that Arbenz resigned in order to try and preserve gains of the revolution. He trusted that a “loyal officer” Chief of the Armed Forces Colonel Carlos Enrique Diaz would assume the presidency and protect at least some of the “achievements” of the revolution, See Gleijeses, Shattered Hope, 347-360.
supporters considered a semi-feudal, social and economic structure. The counter-revolution successfully reversed the reforms from the previous 10 years and suppressed the popular movement more broadly. An estimated 17,000 political prisoners were arrested in the first weeks and repression directed at organized labor caused union membership to drop from 100,000 to 27,000 in the first year alone. One account maintains that “as many as 8,000 peasants were murdered in the first two months” of the regime. Castillo Armas sought a stable environment and protection for foreign investment, at the expense of the Guatemalan people.

As the advances of the Guatemalan Revolution were dismantled by reactionary elements, another revolution was underway that would have drastic, far-reaching effects for Latin America. On January 1, 1959, Cuban revolutionaries ousted long time dictator Fulgencio Batista. The successes of the revolution and its ideologues, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, ushered in a new era of Latin American radical ideology as the two gun-toting intellectuals made their own additions to Marxist thought. To many Latin American leftists, the Cuban experience appeared to offer a road map for revolution. It challenged the orthodox Marxist determinism that had been accepted by many Latin American radicals and also included a strong nationalist component. Castro and Guevara circumvented the Comintern’s stagism and took the figurative revolutionary torch from Lenin, maintaining that it was not necessary to wait for specific conditions to develop before revolution could emerge; rather the conditions could be created, and should be, immediately. The ideas and actions of Castro and Guevara, accompanied by vociferous

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61 Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*, 149.
cries for revolution, inspired many to take up arms. Their ideas were monumental in that they advocated a new interpretive framework for Marxism, and revolutionary thought more broadly, that made it relevant to the Latin American reality. Both maintained that only armed struggle could truly destroy North American imperialism and the bourgeois political structure that enabled it.

The Cuban Revolution inspired Latin American activists and intellectuals to escape a period of ideological stagnation, essentially nullifying the imperative of Stalin’s revolution by stages. Castro and Guevara did not take their cues from Moscow or the Cuban Communist Party, but were instead influenced by creative Marxist intellectuals like Mariátegui. Both Castro and Guevara embraced a voluntaristic, national Marxist thought, emphasizing the revolutionary potential of the Cuban peasantry.

The Cuban nationalist José Martí also influenced Castro and the Cuban Revolution, if not Guevara. In the late-nineteenth century, Martí was a leading advocate of an independent Cuba, whether from Spain’s formal colonial rule or from any possible subsequent neocolonial relationship with the United States. Martí expressed concern about the interests of the United States in Latin America, and opposed its participation in Cuba’s independence war against Spain stating that “once the United States is in Cuba, who will get it out?” Writing from a non-Marxist, nationalist perspective, Martí maintained that United States economic relations with the region resulted in dominion and dependency and, moreover, that common interests could never exist between the

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colonial or neocolonial power and the colonized. The nationalist fervor of Martí’s ideas inspired the Cubans in their anti-imperial struggle against U.S. interests. Castro and Guevara understood the importance of creating a radical thought capable of responding to Cuba’s historical experience. In essence, they resurrected Mariátegui’s criticisms of economic determinism from the 1920s and branded Cuba’s own version of Marxism rooted in a nationalism inspired by Martí.

The Cuban Revolution represented an ideological break by creating a schism between orthodox historical materialists and the nascent Castroist or Guevarist trends. Both Castro and Guevara believed that the subjective factors, driven by ideology and revolutionary emotions, had a greater impact on the outcome of the revolution than the objective economic conditions. The rebel leaders promoted the idea that industrialization was not a prerequisite for revolution, but that a well-organized guerrilla army, albeit small and poorly armed, acting as a vanguard could create the necessary conditions for revolt, and subsequently defeat a much larger army by embedding themselves in the countryside and slowly gaining peasant support through military victories and educational initiatives. Research has since demonstrated that the urban underground faction of Castro’s movement, as well as a broad support network, were much larger and more central to victory than the leadership admitted. However, the official history,

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established by the leaders, focused on the small, poorly armed guerrilla army. This modified version of Lenin’s vanguard theory became known as Guevara’s *foco* theory.  

Castro and Guevara both maintained that the revolution should be pursued immediately. Instead of waiting for specific objective conditions to exist, revolutionary conditions *could* and *should* be created. It was not enough to simply theorize about the revolution as the Communist parties had been doing; the vanguard must help create the conditions for revolution. While official Communist parties continued to tow the Soviet line, a younger generation of militant radicals attempted to follow in the footsteps of Castro and Guevara and create the revolution. The most fundamental aspect of this line’s Marxist analysis was its emphasis on “revolutionary voluntarism, both political and ethical, in opposition to all passive and fatalistic determinism.” The revolutionary must make the revolution.

Throughout Latin America a new generation of radicals began to distance themselves from the seemingly stale and conservative options of the official Communist parties, as well as the Soviet Union. Generally, this was a rejection of the old guard that many young activists considered too conservative and reactionary, wasting time on political alliances with a practically non-existent national bourgeoisie, and waiting for the revolution to develop in stages as Stalin had professed. Recent research on this period of activism demonstrates the development of a New Left in Latin America, similar to the

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well studied and documented New Left in the United States. Whereas in Latin America most scholarship has focused on the armed Left, recent studies have documented the development and important role of the non-armed Left throughout the region that attempted to keep the struggle within the legality of each respective system. In fact, many members of ORPA began their revolutionary careers in legal political activism as university students, only to move to the armed Left after heightened government repression closed off peaceful roads to change.

The leaders of the Cuban Revolution understood Marxism as a philosophy of praxis, maintaining that theory and practice must inform and strengthen one another. Guevara’s foco theory became central to this idea of revolutionary praxis, as the guerilla army would combine both ideology and action in order to lead the peasant and proletariat masses to socialist revolution. Even after the victory, Castro understood that socialist ideology would not emerge from structural change, but instead, needed to be “molded out of class struggle and political education.” Both Castro and Guevara agreed with Mariátegui’s perspectives on the revolutionary potential of the peasantry; however, they maintained that the peasantry would not rebel on its own, but needed the leadership and conscious raising efforts of the vanguard, consisting of working class and intellectuals, to become fully revolutionary.

73 Guevara, Guerrilla Warfare, 7.
75 Liss, Fidel, 36.
Castro and Guevara echoed Lenin, Mariátegui and even Martí’s analyses of imperialism, identifying U.S. imperialism as one of the greatest barriers to Latin American development. While Martí’s view of capitalism and its relationship to imperialism differed from that of Lenin and Mariátegui, their analyses agreed that U.S. interests in the region stifled local interests. Castro considered imperialism a “doctrine of plunder,” that in its search for cheaper labor and resources caused declining economic and social conditions and could only be repelled through revolution, when the “native working-class interests take control over institutions formerly run by the upper and middle class[es] and foreigners.” Guevara advocated an international unified front against imperialism, since imperialism itself, as the most advanced stage of capitalism, was a world system. The task of the developing nations in this unified front was to take away imperialism’s supply bases and markets. The theme of U.S. imperialism developed by the Martí and Mariátegui, and subsequently by Castro and Guevara, became a key component of Latin American Marxist thought.

The Cuban Revolution marked an important watershed in Latin American radical thought. In fact, Castro and Guevara’s new additions to Marxist thought in turn inspired numerous organizations to take up arms and make the revolution. Nearly every Latin American revolutionary movement thereafter, including ORPA, was influenced in some way by the event. However, after advocating a flexible interpretation of Marx that could effectively deal with Cuba’s reality, Castro and Guevara promoted their ideas and experience as a new paradigm for Latin American insurrection – a major irony of the

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76 Liss, *Fidel*, 84-85.
Cuban experience. While Cuba’s historical experience is certainly closer to Guatemala’s than Germany’s, this new revolutionary “model” posed many of the same limitations that Stalinism had. During the 1960s, many armed movements attempted to imitate the Cuban experience. However, the attempt to recreate Cuba’s experience with little consideration for national differences resulted in many failures. This was certainly the case in Guatemala, where what began as a nationalist armed rebellion opting to implement Guevara’s foco theory ended tragically in 1968 when the military’s scorched-earth campaign left 10,000 dead.

The Guatemalan Insurgency

The nationalist fervor of the Cuban Revolution inspired a group of Guatemalan military officers to rebel on November 13, 1960. These officers were angered by the role of the U.S. in their country, which most recently included the installation of a CIA training camp preparing Cuban exiles for the Bay of Pigs invasion. One rebelling officer maintained that it was a “shameful violation of our national sovereignty” allowed by the puppet government. According to historian Adolfo Gilly, some 800 peasants arrived at the rebel barracks requesting arms “with which to fight the government,” indicative of broad discontent with the counter-revolution. Gilly maintains that popular support offered the possibility that the military conspiracy could evolve into a popular uprising; however, the rebelling officers had a very limited program, which was void of any long-term plan if the government did not immediately fall. The lack of a clear agenda impeded

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the officers from channeling the popular support into a larger rebellion. The peasants did not receive arms from the rebelling officers, and loyal government forces quickly put down the uprising. However, the rebellion did expose discontent among the population. A group of rebel officers, adhering to Guevara’s theories on guerrilla warfare, regrouped and launched an armed struggle that would continue, in various incarnations, until 1996.

Rodrigo Asturias, the principal founder of ORPA, became politically active during this dynamic period. While he was not the only founding member of ORPA, former leaders and members commonly recognize him as the primary founder and ideologue of the organization. An understanding of his political trajectory provides insight into the ideological underpinnings and approach of the movement.

A key aspect of Asturias’ formative years was his relationship with his father, Nobel Prize-winning author, Miguel Angel Asturias. It is important to note that in the 1920s, the elder Asturias offered one of the most commonly referenced and clearest expressions of the Guatemalan indigenismo movement. His graduate thesis became representative of a movement of Guatemalan scholars and writers during the era that studied the role of the indigenous population in modern society, typically applying quasi-scientific sociological approaches in paternalist and even racist terms. However, by the early 1960s, his father had long-since abandoned indigenismo attitudes and had embraced new perspectives on the indigenous question publishing literary commentaries on the socioeconomic and ethnic disparities that existed in Guatemala, such as El Señor Presidente (1946), Men of Maize (1949), and the books Strong Wind (1950), The Green

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81 Similar expressions of indigenismo appeared throughout Latin America at this time, specifically in the nations with large indigenous populations such as Peru, Bolivia, Colombia.
Pope (1954) and The Eyes of the Interred (1960) known collectively as the banana trilogy. As a prominent intellectual, he served as an ambassador of the Arbenz government, a position that he renounced when Arbenz was overthrown.

Working as his father’s assistant, Rodrigo Asturias was exposed to Guatemala’s political and social reality at an early age. He maintained that whereas his “father wrote about the reality of the country…what [he] tried to do was change it.” Even though his father disapproved of violent struggle, his influence was apparent when Asturias adopted Gaspar Ilóm, a character from one of his father’s novels, as his nom de guerre.

Asturias’s intellectually progressive upbringing framed his reaction to the U.S. intervention in 1954 and the volatile period that followed. He was just 13 when the C.I.A. orchestrated the overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz and established a “counter-revolutionary, anti-popular regime,” so at a young age he witnessed “fascism” after “having glimpsed a little of what democracy was.” He maintained that by the age of 15 he made the conscious decision to “dedicate his life to the cause of the people,” and even though he was still unsure how he was going to do that, he spent the late-1950s preparing intellectually for that task. While living in Argentina, he earned a law degree from the Universidad Nacional de La Plata. His worldview was shaped by his interest in social and revolutionary thought coupled with first-hand observations of the Latin American reality as he traveled throughout the region. For instance, he traveled to Bolivia to observe the

83 Kruijt and Van Meurs, Guerrillero, 121.
84 For Rodrigo’s reflections on his father’s writings see Kruijt and Van Meurs, Guerrillero, 107-115.
85 Kruijt and Van Meurs, Guerrillero, 107-115.
agrarian reform and nationalization of mines that had been carried out by the Bolivian Revolution of 1952.\textsuperscript{86} Even though he studied different radical doctrines and ideologies, he sought a path particular to the conditions in Guatemala:

From this point – and this was advice from my father – I did not adopt a doctrine as dogma. After giving up the dogmatic formation that I was carrying out, he recommended: “If you are going to change, don’t just change churches, but look at the world differently.” Since then, this has obsessed me and guided me on how to search and how to elaborate a path specific to Guatemala’s conditions.\textsuperscript{87}

By the time he returned to Guatemala at the age of 20, it had become clear that peaceful avenues of change had been closed off, and he accepted armed struggle as the means to effectuate change, a path his father disagreed with.\textsuperscript{88} He recalled “I started to commit myself to the path of armed struggle, always together with and closely connected to the path of the popular organization, the political struggle, and the theoretical elaboration.”\textsuperscript{89} The military rebellion in November 1960 demonstrated that others were also committed to armed struggle. As a young activist, Asturias supported and even collaborated with the leaders of the defeated military uprising when they regrouped and formed the Revolutionary Movement – November 13 (MR-13) – in February 1962.\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{86} Kruijt and Van Meurs, \textit{Guerrillero}, 115-116
\textsuperscript{87} Kruijt and Van Meurs, \textit{Guerrillero}, 116.
\textsuperscript{88} Kruijt and Van Meurs, \textit{Guerrillero}, 116-118.
\textsuperscript{89} Kruijt and Van Meurs, \textit{Guerrillero}, 117.
\textsuperscript{90} In an interview, Rodrigo counts himself among a few civilian activists and leftist leaders that actively participated in the preparatory stages of the 1960 military uprising discussed above. But in the end, the military leaders opted to make it strictly a military operation, see Kruijt and Van Meurs, \textit{Guerrillero}, 118-119. Yvon Le Bot simply states that Asturias was a student activist in the demonstrations that accompanied the uprising, see Yvon Le Bot, \textit{La guerra en tierras mayas: Comunidad, violencia, y modernidad en Guatemala (1970-1992)} (Mexico, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1995), 114. Other sources treat it as a military operation from the outset, see Richard Gott, \textit{Guerrilla Movements} and Adolfo Gilly, \textit{Guerrilla Movement in Guatemala}. Regardless of whether he collaborated or not in the initial uprising, he was actively supporting and collaborating with the rebellion when the MR-13 was formed in 1962, see Kruijt and Van Meurs, \textit{Guerrillero}, 119; Le Bot, \textit{guerra en tierras mayas}, 114.
Asturias joined the armed struggle shortly thereafter, although not the MR-13 but a newly formed group led by an Arbenz loyalist, Colonel Paz Tejada. The Guatemalan Worker’s Party (PGT) together with the Party of Revolutionary Unity (PUR) created a small guerrilla group in March of 1962 called the Movimiento 20 de Octubre, in commemoration of the Revolution of 1944. Asturias maintained that he was a member of the PUR, and not the communist PGT. The guerrilla group was mainly composed of young student activists, but some peasants and union leaders also participated. Despite the military experience of Paz Tejada, the group lacked a concrete program and only numbered about twenty-three members with limited training. The group was decimated during a premature confrontation with the military near the town of Concúa, Baja Verapaz, only weeks after its inception. Though many of the members were killed, Asturias, among a handful of others, was captured and imprisoned. Even though his first experience as a guerrilla was a short-lived disaster, the ideas that inspired him to join and the lessons he learned were important for his future social and political development, and that of ORPA.

The Movimiento 20 de Octubre has received minimal scholarly attention due to its brief existence and limited impact. The PGT’s involvement has led many to simply view it as an early communist attempt at armed struggle; however, a public statement issued by Paz Tejada indicated an organization driven more by nationalism than

community. Harshly criticizing the government, Paz Tejada maintained that their struggle was a national one aimed at combating poverty, government corruption, oppression and the infringement of national sovereignty permitted by the government.\footnote{Gott, \textit{Guerrilla Movements}, 54-55.}

The short-lived movement seemed committed to the goals of the 1944 Guatemalan Revolution, and similar to the leaders of MR-13, Paz Tejada believed that peaceful roads to change had been denied.

While incarcerated, Asturias began to reassess the organizational and ideological shortcomings of his first guerrilla excursion, as well as that of the 1960s guerrilla more broadly. This period of analysis was not only crucial to his theoretical development and ideological shift, but also paramount to the emergence of ORPA, as he was the principal ideologue. One of his earliest realizations was the significance of the indigenous people in the revolutionary struggle:

In 1961, I got to work with the indigenous population, breaking the myths and taboos that existed in the 1960s in which the indigenous was rejected, even by the left, the traditional left. It is the matter of a great polemic of the 1960s, concerning the participation of the indígena or not. What role did this indigenous population have in the revolution? In the Salamá jail, half the population is indígena. And I begin thinking about what the participation of the indigenous population in the struggle. So in the school that I assembled in jail, I discover a great potential. It also revealed all these conditions. Afterward, in exile, I continue working on this. I wrote an article, an essay titled “Structure and Crisis of Guatemalan Society” in which I start to suggest that the indígena is one of the fundamental aspects...Already in 1971 we were able to realize a plan for indigenous participation. It was the antecedents of indigenous participation that we were working on and discovering. Here was a much greater indicator, the indicator of the exclusion and discrimination. We had to give a strong fight against the reflections of discrimination and racism that were expressed, including among the left.\footnote{Kruijt and Van Meurs, \textit{Guerrillero}, 127-128.}
Life in Guatemala, as well as his father’s work, had previously exposed him to aspects of indigenous culture and society; however, the first time he really interacted with the indigenous population on a daily basis was during his 15-month incarceration in Salamá. He witnessed daily injustices against the indigenous prisoners and even provided legal assistance to many.  

As he gained a deeper understanding of their plight, he realized that a struggle against “images of discrimination and exclusion that existed in the country” needed to be a central facet of the revolution. He also realized that such images existed not only in mainstream society but also among the Left, which was an important and necessary realization for members of the Guatemalan Left to make considering the ethnic diversity of the population. One MR-13 leader who visited him in jail attested to his new emphasis on the role of the indigenous population in the struggle. Racial and ethnic issues would eventually become a rallying cry for ORPA. At that time, however, Asturias was forced into exile and would have to wait nearly a decade before he could implement his ideas in practical application. While in exile throughout the remainder of the 1960s, Asturias continued to critically analyze the Guatemalan reality, preparing for an eventual return to his native land and the armed struggle. During this same period, major defeats and splits occurred within Guatemala’s armed left altering the country’s revolutionary landscape.

In late 1962, the MR-13 split due to ideological differences, resulting in the MR-13 and the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR). The MR-13 adopted Trotskyism, the ideas of

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98 Kruijt and Van Meurs, Guerrillero, 127-128.
99 Macías, La Guerrilla, 254.
Marxist theorist Leon Trotsky, who advocated the incorporation of the peasantry into the revolution, an immediate transition to socialism and the idea of permanent revolution, among other things.\textsuperscript{100} The MR-13 proposed an agrarian based struggle with the establishment of zones of peasant self-defense, along with an immediate transition to socialism and opposition to any alliance with bourgeois political parties. The FAR defended a working political alliance with the Communist PGT, and established an agreement with that organization. The FAR, led by one of the original leaders of the MR-13 movement, Luis Turcios Lima, incorporated Che’s \textit{foco} theory emphasizing the guerrillas as the core of a larger revolutionary organization.\textsuperscript{101} The assassination of Turcios Lima in 1966 and a subsequent power shift within the movement, delayed Asturias’ plan to return to Guatemala and work with the FAR.\textsuperscript{102} Despite continued operational differences of opinion, the FAR and the MR-13 reunited in 1967, only to suffer virtual annihilation at the hands of the military the following year.\textsuperscript{103} Not all FAR members agreed to the alliance with the Trotskyist MR-13. One group of dissenters expressed their position in a statement that would become a foundational document of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP), an organization that emerged in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{104} Also, in 1967 Che Guevara died attempting to implement his \textit{foco} theory in Bolivia. Although Guevara’s revolutionary legacy would live on, his \textit{foco} theory of revolution came under

\textsuperscript{100} Robert J. Alexander, \textit{Trotskyism in Latin America} (Stanford, California; Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, 1973), 4-5.
\textsuperscript{102} Macias, \textit{La Guerrilla}, 254.
\textsuperscript{103} For a more in-depth discussion of this period see Gott, \textit{Guerrilla Movements}.
scrutiny. The failures and deficiencies of the 1960s Guatemalan experience and Che’s Bolivian excursion were not lost on Asturias.

In 1969, Asturias offered his analysis of Guatemala’s social, political and economic structures in the article “Structure and Crisis of Guatemalan Society” published in the Mexican journal *Cuadernos Americanos*. Asturias argued that the indigenous population “characterized Guatemalan society,” a fact that most observers ignored. He posited that colonial relations persisted in the country’s social and economic structures as a minority population systematically exploited over two-thirds of the population, a majority that also suffered “racist discrimination” and “subhuman” categorization at the hands of the ladino population (ladino is the Guatemalan term signifying people of non-indigenous or mixed descent). Asturias expressed frustration with theories that reduced the “indigenous problem” to cultural differences. He argued that theories that consider culture to be the determining factor of the existence of the indigenous are “corrupted from the beginning” as they “completely avoid and conceal the situation of the indigenous people caused by the exploitation and colonization by the ladino.” He considered acculturation and social integration, which has emerged from such culturalist theories, an impossible goal, even a “fiction of the indigenista” movement, maintaining that it would do nothing to address the discriminated and exploited condition of the indigenous population. Moreover, he believed social integration to be a major “sociological absurdity” as one cannot “form, nor integrate a society based on an oppressive minority with an oppressed nationality.” Nor did he believe that a people

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106 Asturias, *Estructura y Crisis*, 46.
would stop resistance to join a minority group that has exploited and discriminated against them for centuries.\textsuperscript{107} This 1969 article provided an early glimpse of some key ideas that Asturias would continue to develop in the following years. His emphasis on the colonial structure of society and the indigenous population became important facets of ORPA’s ideology.

\textit{Marxism and Race}

Marxism’s focus on political economy and class struggle neglected factors such as race and ethnicity, phenomena central to Latin American societies. Advocates of an orthodox Marxist interpretation argued that ethnic problems were secondary to the class struggle and that the resolution of the class struggle would solve society’s other problems. Various Marxist theorists, including Lenin, Stalin and Mariátegui, addressed questions of race and ethnicity, in one way or another, adding to the debates among Marxists. However, despite attempts to engage such themes, their conclusions were grounded in economic determinism, reiterating the primacy of class struggle.

The terms “race” and “ethnicity” have convoluted historical legacies. The meanings that have been attached to either term have been historically contingent and continue to evolve. Basic definitions are that race signifies perceived phenotypical difference and ethnicity signifies cultural difference; however, such simplification requires qualifications.\textsuperscript{108} With the dismantling of scientific racism in the mid-twentieth century, it has become widely accepted in academic circles that race is a social construct -

\textsuperscript{107} Asturias, \textit{Estructura y Crísis}, 47, emphasis in the original text.
\textsuperscript{108} The following discussion relies heavily on Peter Wade, \textit{Race and Ethnicity in Latin America} (London: Pluto Press, 1997).
- that “the idea of race, is just that – an idea.”\textsuperscript{109} While scholars may hold such an understanding, in daily life, most people operate, and even identify, as if races do in fact exist. Therefore, in the myriad social, economic and political interactions that constitute reality, races exist as “powerful and tenacious” social categories making it more important to consider the real implications of racial differentiation, than some abstract understanding of race as a social construct.\textsuperscript{110} Ethnicity refers to cultural differentiation that tends to use a “language of place” or origin rather than phenotypical signifiers.\textsuperscript{111} The terms “race” and “ethnicity” have sometimes been used interchangeably. The concepts do overlap, as both “involve a discourse about origins and transmission of essences across generations.”\textsuperscript{112} Some of the documents analyzed below use the terms interchangeably, or employ broader terms to collectively refer to both concepts. For instance, many early twentieth-century Marxist theorists referred to issues of race and ethnicity collectively as the “national question,” the “indigenous question” and even the “indigenous problem.”

Lenin, and later Stalin, broached the topics of race and ethnicity as the “national question.” In 1916, Lenin argued that the right to self-determination of oppressed nations was a central part of the socialist revolution’s struggle against imperialism. According to Lenin, colonies and dependent nations caught in the grips of advanced capitalist nations had the right to secession, and furthermore, that workers of the imperial nations had to actively support the movements of national liberation of the oppressed nations. This did

\textsuperscript{110} Wade, \textit{Race and Ethnicity}, 14.  
\textsuperscript{111} Wade, \textit{Race and Ethnicity}, 18.  
\textsuperscript{112} Wade, \textit{Race and Ethnicity}, 21.
not occur solely on a supranational level, but within nations as well.\textsuperscript{113} Stalin echoed Lenin’s thought on the national question, pointing to the imperative of supporting movements of national liberation. According to both, the colonial and dependent nations were the foundation for the highest stage of capitalism: imperialism. Therefore, it was crucial that the proletariat in the oppressor nation join national liberation movements in the colonial and dependent nations in order to defeat the common enemy. This pitted workers in developed nations against their own imperial government, but according to the Soviet ideologues, victory of either was contingent on the creation of an international revolutionary front between the two.\textsuperscript{114}

Lenin and Stalin’s ideas on self-determination and the role of race and ethnicity in the revolutionary struggle soon arrived in the Americas. By the late 1920s, the Stalinist Comintern advocated self-determination for blacks in the southern United States. An intense debate on race at the Sixth Congress of the Comintern in 1928 concluded that a central task of the Communist Party was “in the struggle for a complete and real equality of the negroes, for the abolition of all kinds of racial, social and political inequalities.” The delegates at the congress advocated “the right of all nations, regardless of race, to complete self-determination.”\textsuperscript{115} As a subject nation, blacks in the South had the right to secession. The following year, the debate on race continued at meetings with Latin American delegates held in Uruguay and Argentina where the Comintern began to

advocate the creation of an Indian Republic consisting of Aymara and Quechua speaking people in Peru’s Andean highlands, a position that became a point of contention between the Moscow-directed Comintern and Mariátegui.

The positions of both Lenin and Stalin on the national question were still fundamentally rooted in class analysis and a critique of imperialism. Even though the terms “race” and “nation” were used to differentiate between groups of people, and the idea of racial equality was employed, at no point was there an attempt to address race relations within the existing national situations. Lenin, and later Stalin, simply wanted to channel the struggle of the national liberation movements emerging in the colonies into the larger world revolution. This was not much of a leap, considering that both the proletariat in the developed nations and the colonies were fighting against the common enemy of imperialism.116 Liberation of colonies would hasten the fall of imperialism and ultimately capitalism. However, the self-determination advocated by Lenin and Stalin had strict limitations. Stalin wrote that “the question of the rights of nations is not an isolated, self-sufficient question; it is a part of the general problem of the proletarian revolution, subordinate to the whole, and must be considered from the point of view of the whole.”117 Therefore, self-determination existed only as long as it forwarded the proletarian revolution. If any democratic demand, including self-determination, contradicted the greater struggle, “it must be rejected.”118

Lenin and Stalin both argued that international solidarity between the workers in the oppressor and oppressed nations in the struggle against imperialism would ultimately

result in a “voluntary” union of nations in a “single, socialist world economic system.”

It is important to note that a major obstacle to establishing such an international alliance was the inherent imperial (and even racist) attitudes of many workers in the oppressor nations, a problem that also complicated Comintern policies in the U.S. and Latin America. The national problem for the Soviet ideologues was one of colonial and dependent economic relations. The “races” or “nations” simply needed to liberate themselves from imperialism to solve the national problem. However, focusing solely on class struggle impeded international solidarity across racial and ethnic lines.

Mariátegui strongly disagreed with the Comintern’s advocacy of an Indian Republic in Peru. Even though he was heterodox in advocating a national Marxism, and has been widely recognized for addressing Peru’s indigenous question, his analysis remained grounded in class terms. In fact, it is in his analysis of the indigenous question where his Marxist interpretation is perhaps most orthodox. Mariátegui submitted two position papers for discussion at the conferences for Comintern delegates from Latin America held in 1929. One was titled “On the Indigenous Problem” and the other “The Problem of Race in Latin America.” These papers, similar to his other writings from the period, considered any perceived race and indigenous issues as problems of economic relations. Mariátegui argued that those who focus on the racial aspects of the indigenous problem, overlook that the issue is “fundamentally dominated by politics, and therefore by economics.” He maintained that his Marxist orientation caused him to stop viewing the indigenous question “abstractly as an ethnic or moral problem,” and to identify it

119 Stalin, “The National Question,” 188.
“concretely as a social, economic, and political problem.”

He posited, “only a class-based revolutionary movement of the exploited indigenous masses will allow for a real liberation of the race from exploitation.”

Mariátegui was the first Latin American Marxist to make connections between the indigenous question and the agrarian issue, arguing that the problems of the indigenous people stemmed from the highly inequitable structure of land tenure. He argued that the problem could not be solved by legislation protecting Indian rights or educational initiatives, because the landed elite wield the true power and will “invalidate” any attempts to regulate their domain. The landed oligarchy had exploited the indigenous people for centuries in a feudalistic relationship, firmly establishing its power within society and resulting in an indigenous problem that was predominately socioeconomic; only profound structural changes to the system of land tenure could resolve it. While Mariátegui’s analysis did not deny ethnic and racial discrimination, he maintained that policies and laws addressing such discrimination would only provide superficial solutions. One needed to focus on the long history of socioeconomic exploitation and marginalization in order to get to the heart of the problem.

Mariátegui believed that indigenous people, as descendants of the Inca, had historically embraced forms of communal living. This “primitive agrarian communism, which persists both in concrete structures and a deep collectivist spirit,” formed a strong,

123 Lowy, Marxism, 34.
124 Mariategui, Seven Interpretive Essays, 22-23.
and even natural, foundation for Communism. However, he made it clear that the transition to socialism would occur under the “hegemony of the proletariat.” Furthermore, due to cultural considerations, radical Indians, who had joined the workers’ vanguard, would be called upon to realize the “progressive ideological education” of the indigenous people. It was from this perspective that Mariátegui criticized the Comintern’s idea of establishing an Indian Republic. He believed that the creation of an Indian Republic would not lead to economic improvement, but further marginalize an already impoverished and exploited group. Instead of eliminating classes it would lead to “an Indian bourgeois state with all of the internal and external contradictions of other bourgeois states.” Nor would this do anything for the so-called race problem. He argued that race was a bourgeois construct that served to distract from the class struggle, maintaining that “the race question serves, among other things, to disguise or evade the continent’s real problems…economically, socially, and politically, the race question, like the land question, is fundamentally that of liquidating feudalism.” Mariátegui treated the indigenous question as a class issue, and not a problem of race. His analysis did not sufficiently engage issues of race and the legacy of racism. In fact, due to his emphasis on class, one would reach the same conclusion by substituting “peasantry” for “indigenous people” in much of his analysis.

The Cuban revolutionaries inspired by Mariátegui’s ideas of creating a national Marxism also failed to adequately address issues of race and ethnicity as the revolution

127 Becker, “Mariategui, the Comintern,” 466.
focused on class struggle, considering it the main cause of any existing race issues. Cuba had a large Afro-Cuban population that had been historically marginalized through exploitative economic relations and a culture of racism, two processes that were mutually reinforcing. Race relations in Cuba were especially complicated due to the nation’s unique historical experience with African slaves arriving as late as the 1860s, and being the last Spanish colony to abolish the institution of slavery in 1886.\textsuperscript{129}

According to Alejandro de la Fuente, issues of race barely figured in the political agenda of the Cuban revolutionaries but the movement’s “unprecedented commitment of the revolutionary government to benefit the humblest sectors of Cuban society would benefit blacks, for they comprised a significant portion of the \textit{clases populares}.”\textsuperscript{130} Still, Castro considered racism “a product of class conflict and part of the superstructure of the capitalist system,” maintaining that it would disappear with the advent of socialism.\textsuperscript{131} However, understanding that racial discrimination existed in reality, he maintained that racism was something that the world revolutionary movement would have to confront and eliminate.\textsuperscript{132} This has been attempted in Cuba with policies of integration through “pursuing proletarian internationalism and universal culture that transcends ethnic, racial, cultural, and national frontiers.”\textsuperscript{133} Accordingly, Castro has also tried to mitigate ethnic or cultural differences through integration.

\textsuperscript{129} Alejandro de la Fuente, \textit{A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba} (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 3.
\textsuperscript{130} de la Fuente, \textit{Nation for All}, 17-18.
\textsuperscript{131} Liss, \textit{Fidel}, 159.
\textsuperscript{132} Liss, \textit{Fidel}, 158.
\textsuperscript{133} Liss, \textit{Fidel}, 159.
While Afro-Cubans have accused the Revolution of minimizing their cultural distinctiveness, one observer maintained that it is “more precise to say that revolutionary objectives have taken precedence over the preservation of ethnic ties.”\textsuperscript{134} However, this minimization of cultural differences might also stem from a fear that black culturalist movements could potentially lead to separatist movements, which could have adverse effects on a socialist revolution. Such fears emerged among sectors of the Guatemalan Left in the 1970s and 1980s. Regardless of the underlying reasons for this approach, the Cuban revolutionaries emphasized incorporation of the Afro-Cuban population into a class-based revolutionary movement, maintaining that racial and ethnic integration was the best solution until the construct of race dissipates with the advancement of the socialist revolution.

As early as 1960, just one year into the Revolution, Cuban leaders made claims that racial discrimination no longer existed in Cuba, referring to it in the past tense. In 1966, Castro maintained, “Discrimination disappeared when class privileges disappeared, and it has not cost the Revolution much effort to resolve that problem.”\textsuperscript{135} Since the Revolution viewed racial inequality as a “by-product of class-privilege,” it began heralding the end of racial discrimination in Cuba once class contradictions were resolved.\textsuperscript{136}

Nearly every revolutionary movement that emerged in the wake of the Cuban victory embraced similar ideas concerning race and ethnicity. Not all movements operated in such diverse countries, but those that did gave very minimal attention to race

\textsuperscript{134} Liss, Fidel, 159-160.  
\textsuperscript{135} De la Fuente, Nation for All, 4, 18.  
\textsuperscript{136} De la Fuente, Nation for All, 18.
and ethnicity or downplayed its significance in the respective national experience. This was especially the case during the 1960s as movements tried to mimic the Cuban experience, implementing Guevara’s *foco* theory and hopeful of a similar outcome. This was problematic in ethnically diverse countries of Latin America, including Guatemala, with estimated 60-percent Maya population, since large portions of the population suffered both economic exploitation and racial discrimination. It was not until the late-1960s that some Guatemalan leftists began to question this Cuban-inspired strategic and ideological approach to varying degrees. In fact, the necessity of addressing issues of race and ethnicity was a major factor in the emergence of ORPA, as it had been an early realization of Asturias.

A concern with the indigenous question was not without local and regional precedents. In the 1920s, intellectuals and scholars concerned with modernization began to critically evaluate the indigenous question. In countries with large indigenous populations, such as Guatemala and Peru, reform minded, non-indigenous scholars pondered the place and role of the indigenous population in modern society. According to Betsy Konefal, this intellectual trend, known as *indigenismo*, “brought about a valorization of indigenous culture...if in the patronizing terms of the times.”

Developing alongside this new interest in the indigenous past “were concerns about the problems inherent in integrating the present-day indígena into Western Civilization.”

In 1923, decades before winning the Nobel Prize for literature, Miguel Angel Asturias’s graduate thesis, *Guatemalan Sociology: the Social Problem of the Indian*

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137 Betsy Konefal, *For Every Indio*, 17-18.
became a dominant expression of the Guatemalan *indigenista* movement. Despite being representative of a broader movement of thought not confined solely to Guatemala, his writings have received the most “notoriety” from this period.\(^{139}\) Even while advocating a greater understanding of the indigenous population, Asturias’s thesis espoused the paternalistic, assimilationist and racist attitudes of the *indigenista* movement. It is clear throughout that Asturias believed that the indigenous population posed the greatest obstacle to a modern Guatemalan nation, which he envisioned as a “racially, culturally, linguistically and economically homogenous nation.”\(^{140}\) He maintained that ladinos needed to rescue the indigenous population from their own cultural and genetic inferiority. While he proposed education as a means of cultural enlightenment, he maintained that education was not enough to overcome the indigenous problem since the “most significant aspect of the problem” was that the Indians “profound defects stem from a racial background that is insufficient.”\(^{141}\) He proposed the need to “transfuse new blood” into the veins of the indigenous people to raise their genetic stock through immigration and crossbreeding.\(^{142}\) Asturias’s position was representative of the *indigenista* movement of the 1920s, a movement that inspired many scholars, both North American and Guatemalan alike, to learn more about Guatemala’s indigenous population.\(^{143}\) The movement also influenced government policies and approaches grounded in ideas of biological determinism and racial inferiority. Ideas of racial

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\(^{139}\) Konefal, *For Every Indio*, 18.

\(^{140}\) Miguel Angel Asturias, *Sociologa Guatemalteca: Guatemalan Sociology* (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona State University, 1977), 64.

\(^{141}\) M.A. Asturias, *Guatemalan Sociology*, 101.

\(^{142}\) M.A. Asturias, *Guatemalan Sociology*, 105.

\(^{143}\) Konefal, *For Every Indio*, 18-19.
differentiation and inferiority became widespread in Guatemalan social thought, including among the left, for decades to come.

Chapter 3 returns to our discussion of race and ethnic issues in Guatemala during the 1960s, a decade when radicals and scholars began to seek out and debate new explanations and approaches to the indigenous question. Such issues were central to the emergence of ORPA, and the movement’s revolutionary agenda. In the early 1970s, the movement’s leadership circulated “Racismo I” and “Racismo II,” both internal documents that analyzed topics such as racism and ethnicity, the role of the indigenous people in the revolutionary struggle and the attitudes and views of the contemporary Guatemalan Left regarding race. The movement was very critical of the dominant views on the left concerning the indigenous population, ideological differences that ended in the break with the FAR in the early 1970s.

ORPA’s creative ideological approach to the revolutionary struggle, including its analytical perspectives on issues of race and ethnicity, set the movement apart from its contemporaries. Asturias and the other leaders attempted to outline a program and chart a path geared toward the specificities of Guatemala’s social, economic and political realities, something that is apparent in the movement’s internal documents, external discourse and testimonies of former members. The subsequent chapters delineate the history of this movement and its ideas in order to include its unique approach and perspectives in the broader context of the Latin American revolution.

Chapter 2: The Birth of a Movement

In 1971, after spending nearly a decade in exile, Rodrigo Asturias returned to Guatemala to join the Organización Regional de Occidente (Regional Organization of the West), a group associated with the reorganized FAR. The Occidente was working in the western departments of San Marcos and Quetzaltenango, an area with a large indigenous majority. Upon arrival, Asturias discovered a movement operating more like a gang, and not the revolutionary organization it purported to be. Openly critical of the movement’s activities, Asturias and a small group of like-minded members determined to take control from the FAR’s appointed leaders. According to Asturias’s analysis of the situation, as presented in internal ORPA documents, the FAR leadership had become ideologically bankrupt and disconnected from the Guatemalan reality, including the lack of any perspective on the indigenous population. According to the analysis, the movement lacked a “general political direction,” as well as “any material on which political work could be based,” alleging that even though the FAR emerged in 1963, as of 1971 “there was no political material.” FAR leaders “did not understand the peasantry,” and even “blamed them for their own hopelessness.” Furthermore, there was no sense of revolutionary perspective or duty among the members since the FAR did not encourage ideological development. The situation had deteriorated to such a degree that FAR members were instilling fear in the population through terror and extrajudicial killings.1

Asturias set out to implement the ideas that he had been formulating since his brief guerrilla experience nearly a decade earlier, intent to change the movement both structurally and ideologically. This chapter examines this shift in ideological approach by

looking at internal theoretical documents produced by ORPA that advocated a creative ideology and voluntarism in the revolution. The leadership believed in the importance of ideas and subjectivity in social relations and wanted to establish a flexible approach to revolution that emphasized the role of the human actors driven by emotion and revolutionary spirit. Under Asturias, the organization became ideologically active, producing a number of internal documents that analyzed the Guatemalan reality and argued for a new revolutionary direction. Instead of alienating the population, the Asturias – led Occidente began to dedicate its time and energy to gaining the trust and support of the people of the Western highlands.

According to internal ORPA documents, when Asturias initially gained control of the Occidente, the FAR leadership incorporated him into the ideological commission of the organization. This relationship did not last long, as Asturias became increasingly more critical of the FAR’s approach to the revolutionary struggle, its alliance with the PGT and retreat into the capital city. Asturias had only been back in Guatemala for a few months when he began circulating the position papers “Principles and Objectives” and “The Policy of Executions” in an attempt to alter the strategy of the Occidente and convert the organization into a truly revolutionary force. An analysis of these internal documents, which were initially produced in May and November of 1971 respectively, offers key insights into the disarray of the movement and the initial problems encountered by Asturias, as well as provides an early expression of his plan for moving forward.

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2 ORPA, *Historia*, 29-34.
3 ORPA, *Historia*, 55.
Asturias produced and circulated “Principles and Objectives” as an attempt to provide ideological cohesion and direction for the Occidente, and according to an introduction written for a 1979 reprint, the problem was not limited to the Occidente, but the “lack of political and revolutionary conceptions was a painful characteristic” of the Guatemalan armed Left more broadly. The document represented the first attempt to “implement political courses and discussions” for the “political formation” and ideological development of the combatants, as well as the peasantry. Despite being a brief 13 pages, “Principles and Objectives” introduced various ideas and themes that would be further expanded and developed theoretically by Asturias and the organization’s leadership in subsequent years. As the first written articulation of ORPA’s ideology, “Principles and Objectives” represented a key foundational document of the movement.

“Principles and Objectives” criticized the government and military for protecting the interests of a small oligarchy, while the majority of the population suffered injustices, misery, hunger and the lack of freedoms, among other things. Even though Guatemala had an abundance of resources, the population suffered from lack of food and land since the oligarchy geared the agricultural industry toward exports. The analysis linked this economic situation to foreign interests, namely U.S. imperialism, maintaining that the Guatemalan oligarchy was entirely willing to put the country’s resources in foreign hands. Furthermore, the military, government and clandestine security forces were all too

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4 ORPA, Principios y Objetivos y Política de Ajusticiamientos (Guatemala: Reediciones ORPA, 1979), 3.
5 ORPA, Principios y objetivos, 5-7.
willing to repress the population in order to protect foreign interests.\textsuperscript{6} The document argued that the country’s economic relations remained rooted in the colonial system since it began from the “conquest” that a minority forcefully established themselves as owners of both “the land and of the men that worked the land.” It was also during the colonial era that the government and military that has protected the landed interests “was born.”\textsuperscript{7} The collusion between the government and military (frequently one in the same), the oligarchy, North American imperialism and the legacies of that colonial relationship were themes that the organization further developed and critiqued in subsequent documents.

This seminal document focused considerable attention on the indigenous peoples, foreshadowing the centrality that this population would play in ORPA’s thought and actions. The document maintained that the indigenous people were the “true owners of the country, our ancestors,” but that theories of race had divided Guatemalan society, causing the non-indigenous population to “despise,” “humiliate” and marginalize the direct descendants of their Mayan ancestors.\textsuperscript{8} Accordingly, true equality and justice could only be achieved when the “disdain and humiliation against our [indigenous] race disappears.”\textsuperscript{9} The movement’s ideas on race and the indigenous question received in-depth treatment in the lengthy documents “Racismo I” and “Racismo II,” which were circulated a few years later, and will be analyzed in the subsequent chapter.

“Principles and Objectives” resolved that armed struggle had become the only option capable of effectuating change in Guatemala since the government had blocked

\textsuperscript{6} ORPA, *Principios y objetivos*, 6, 8, 10.
\textsuperscript{7} ORPA, *Principios y objetivos*, 5.
\textsuperscript{8} ORPA, *Principios y objetivos*, 5-6.
\textsuperscript{9} ORPA, *Principios y objetivos*, 9.
any legal forms of opposition.10 The movement did not consider armed struggle to be a new phenomenon, but situated the current struggle in a long history of indigenous resistance in which the Maya had resisted colonization, the colonial structure and post-independence, neocolonial efforts.11 The new struggle was simply another chapter in the long tradition of resistance. The voice given to indigenous issues by the Asturias’ led Occidente deviated from the FAR’s orthodox, Marxist approach grounded in economic determinism. While this first document provided an early glimpse of ideas that would be central to ORPA’s ideology, it also foreshadowed the problems that would arise between Asturias and the central leadership of the FAR. The document concluded with a call to action for all those tired of “putting up with the humiliation, torture and death” to join the struggle to overthrow the “government, the exploiters and to drive out foreign domination.”12

“Principles and Objectives” presented some of the key ideas of the Asturias – led Occidente, underscoring a theoretical shift that began to strain the relationship between Asturias and other FAR leaders. The group’s second document, “The Policy of Executions,” further accentuated the rift developing between Asturias and the FAR’s central leadership. The document presented a damning indictment of how the Occidente was operating in the region, and by extension an implicit indictment of the FAR for allowing this wing of the movement to operate in such a way. The document criticized the use of terror and execution in the Western highlands, articulating many reasons why executions harm the development of the movement and the revolutionary struggle more

10 ORPA, Principios y objetivos, 12.
11 ORPA, Principios y objetivos, 12.
12 ORPA, Principios y objetivos, 13.
broadly. Executions “unleashed a blind violence” among some sectors of the population resulting in deadly confrontations among families or villages that had nothing to do with any revolutionary objectives.\textsuperscript{13} Such a distorted conceptualization and misguided application of revolutionary violence was counterproductive, considering that each civilian executed resulted in 10 to 20 new enemies, as their family members would then oppose the organization. The end result was an even greater cycle of violence.\textsuperscript{14}

The main focus of the document was the broader implications of the politics of executions, especially the lack of correct revolutionary concepts and objectives. This lack of revolutionary perspective enabled the culture of terror and executions to grow. According to the analysis, the group needed to do “something” to justify its existence, and the easiest solution was to attack the alleged enemy at hand. Misplaced violence as the movement’s raison d’etre negated any revolutionary pretense as the movement became “immersed” in a “sinister world of vengeance, hatred and misunderstandings, lacking…all political direction and content.”\textsuperscript{15} The document maintained that for “armed actions to be revolutionary they must be aimed at destroying the fundamental bases of the system - the centers of political and military power.”\textsuperscript{16} Executions directed at foremen or administrators due to workplace abuse, poor treatment or low wages focused the struggle on a person, not the system, without considering the fact that the targeted person was also

\textsuperscript{13} ORPA, Política de Ajusticiamientos (Guatemala: Reediciones ORPA, 1979), 23.
\textsuperscript{14} ORPA, Política de Ajusticiamientos, 23-24. In an interview after the war, Asturias maintained that the policy of executions was such that “small mobile patrols drove through the villages, determining who would be the following month’s victims – these names were written down. I have a document that shows that in one month – in one month – thirty-five persons were shot,” see Kruijt, Guerrillas, 63.
\textsuperscript{15} ORPA, Política de Ajusticiamientos, 17-18.
\textsuperscript{16} ORPA, Política de Ajusticiamientos, 21-22.
a product of the system. The policy of executions impeded the FAR from establishing a political relationship with the people, much less mobilizing them for war. Since the objectives were not political, no political consciousness was born in the population, and the movement entered an “abyss of putrefaction” and “disintegration.” These were the initial observations of Asturias when he arrived in the western highlands to join the Occidente. With support from some sympathetic members, both in the rural Occidente movement as well as in an affiliated urban cell in the Quetzaltenango, he set out to end the policy of executions, and provide the movement with a new revolutionary perspective.

The two 1971 documents elucidated various concerns that Asturias had about the FAR’s ideological and strategic approach to the struggle, but perhaps the harshest criticisms concerned issues of race and ethnicity. In 1971, the FAR decided to put its armed struggle on hold and shift their focus to political organizing among the urban working class, specifically in the capital city. This resulted in a closer working relationship with the communist PGT, a move which Asturias considered a complete neglect of the indigenous question. The Occidente dissidents maintained that the FAR’s retreat into the city was only the most recent example of the movement distancing itself from the indigenous population. In 1968, the FAR had moved their base of operations further and further north from the heavily indigenous departments of Alta and Baja Verapaz into the sparsely populated, predominantly ladino department of El Petén.

17 ORPA, Política de Ajusticiamientos, 19.
18 ORPA, Política de Ajusticiamientos, 26.
20 Manuel (pseudonym). Interview by author. Digital recording. Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, August 5, 2010; Also see ORPA, Historia and Kruijt and Van Meurs, Guerrillero.
According to the analysis, this conscious “separation” from the indigenous zones and unwillingness to accept that population as revolutionary actors not only demonstrated problems with the leadership’s “interpretation of the Guatemalan reality,” and its “inability to understand” the Mayan population, but the move also illustrated that the leadership held the same racist views that permeated Guatemalan society. As an ORPA document explained:

The distancing from the [indigenous] zones…had to do with this problem of conception and interpretation of the Guatemalan reality…it had to do with one of the central problems of Guatemalan society. The positions that [the FAR] had were the traditional racist positions, although at the last minute they varnished them with some conceptions that had been used within the traditional left against racism…In reality, [the FAR] has never had any of its own theoretical elaboration on this issue. What exists in [the FAR] is an amalgam of reformism and racism.

For Asturias and the Occidente, the FAR’s refusal to develop a theoretical and strategic approach to the indigenous majority exposed a profound misinterpretation of the country’s social situation that arose from the leadership’s acceptance of the racist attitudes that permeated much of Guatemalan left. Furthermore, the FAR’s renewed alliance with the PGT appeared to be an endorsement of the PGT’s position on the indigenous question which to many observers “bordered on racism.” The PGT leadership postulated that even though the Maya had some of the worst standards of living in the country, their “cultural backwardness,” “downtrodden state” and “relative isolation from the economic and political life of the country economic and political

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21 ORPA, Historia, 86-88.
22 ORPA, Historia, 86.
centers” has resulted in a politically inactive population.\textsuperscript{24} The PGT maintained that accordingly, the indigenous population would not constitute a major force in the revolution, but be on the periphery of a ladino led, proletarian struggle.

Not every member of the Occidente agreed with Asturias’s ideas and leadership. Various militants defected, with some even launching competing movements in order to challenge Asturias. The central leadership of the FAR was also reportedly upset with Asturias’ criticisms, and did not intend to tolerate dissention within its ranks. Nor did the leadership have any interest in discussing the historical consciousness of the indigenous population.\textsuperscript{25} Internal documents and communications attacked Asturias and the Occidente, and members of FAR’s central leadership visited the burgeoning movement attempting to demoralize and demobilize the group from within. This was not only done through slanderous accusations, but they also tried to destabilize Asturias and the organization through the support and use of the splinter rival movements that had emerged in the area.\textsuperscript{26} According to César Montes, a leader of the 1960s guerrilla and founding member of the EGP, the FAR leadership scheduled a meeting with Asturias to judge his insubordination and execute him.\textsuperscript{27} It is difficult to know for certain the intentions of the FAR central leadership, but needless to say, Asturias avoided the meeting, knowing that it meant a complete break with the FAR.\textsuperscript{28} According to ORPA documents, this rupture was a long time coming. By late 1971, it was clear that the FAR was not interested in incorporating Asturias’s ideas into the movement; and the

\textsuperscript{25} ORPA, \textit{Historia}, 56.
\textsuperscript{26} ORPA, \textit{Historia}, 46-47, 64-67.
\textsuperscript{27} Macías, \textit{La Guerrilla}, 255.
\textsuperscript{28} ORPA, \textit{Historia}, 68.
Occidente’s defense of armed struggle, and push for a new ideological line, contradicted the FAR’s retreat into the city and renewed association with the PGT.  

In mid-1972, Asturias declared the Occidente independent of the FAR, initially changing its name to the “Revolutionary Organization,” often just referred to as the “Organization,” and later adding “of the People in Arms.” To be sure, ORPA documents emphasized that this was not a faction or splinter group of the FAR, but rather a completely new movement with a different theoretical line and strategic approach. By the time ORPA broke with the FAR, the organization had established its first base in the Cuchumatanes mountain range on Volcán Tajumulco, the highest peak in the country. This region of operation was paramount to the idea that the indigenous population needed to be at the center of the revolutionary struggle. The primary zone of operation ran along a corridor of mountains and volcanoes that stretched from Volcán Tacaná on the Mexican border to Lake Atitlán. Asturias considered this densely populated, highland area “the heart of indigenous society” and the “spinal column” of the country. This strategic position enabled the movement to have a “direct” impact on the indigenous subsistence farmers of the highlands and the laborers of the Pacific foothills, as well as contact with the population on the southern Pacific coast. The southern coast was home to the sugar

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29 ORPA, Historia, 57-62.  
30 ORPA, Historia, 68; Macías, La Guerrilla, 255; Black, Garrison Guatemala, 74; Marta Harnecker, Pueblos en Armas (Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua; 1985), 217.  
31 ORPA, Historia, 73-75.  
32 Kruijt and Van Meurs, Guerrillero, 37; Even though the organization did not officially adopt its full name until the late 1970s, from this point forward, this dissertation will use the acronym ORPA for clarity and convenience.  
33 Le Bot, Guerra en Tierras Mayas, 114; Harnecker, Pueblos en Armas, 218.  
agro-industry, resulting in a population that consisted of both locals and seasonal migrant laborers that worked the harvests.

The region selected by ORPA differed greatly from the areas chosen by previous guerrilla organizations. In the 1960s, the guerrillas chose to operate in sparsely populated areas in the Sierra de las Minas where they could first establish themselves militarily before organizing the population in accordance with Che’s foco theory. That area, predominately populated by ladinos, people of non-indigenous descent, allowed the guerrillas to ignore the indigenous question. Conversely, ORPA chose to mature and develop as an organization in the heart of indigenous society, and it was clear from the first document, “Principles and Objectives,” that indigenous issues were going to be central to the movement’s struggle. Asturias believed that the region provided the necessary social conditions to specifically address indigenous issues and enable the organization to grow. The indigenous population in the region was subject to both economic exploitation and ethnic discrimination. From the continuous usurpation of their lands to the forced seasonal migrations to work on plantations, the indigenous population was not oblivious to their socioeconomic situation.35 Furthermore, many people throughout the region would have remembered the ephemeral gains of the Guatemalan Revolution and Arbenz’s agrarian reform, gains that were rescinded by successive counter-revolutionary governments. The social conditions were ripe for a movement with a new theoretical and strategic approach to enter and begin organizing the population, and ORPA did so for over eight years before emerging publicly in 1979. The long gestational period also enabled non-indigenous ORPA members, such as Asturias, to gain a profound

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35 Black, Garrison Guatemala, 80; Harnecker, Pueblos en Armas, 218.
understanding and appreciation of the cultural elements and history of indigenous society.\footnote{Prieto, \textit{Guerrillas Contemporaneas}, 182.}

It appeared that Asturias, possibly more so than other leaders, understood the operational deficiencies of the 1960s and made the necessary adjustments in preparation for a prolonged war. The organization patiently built up an infrastructure, and emphasized “greater flexibility” in its political approach and program.\footnote{Dunkerley, \textit{Power in the Isthmus}, 483.} According to Asturias, even ORPA’s insignia, “We Live to Fight, We Fight to Triumph” was less fatalistic than mantras of previous movements.\footnote{“Vivimos para luchar, luchamos para triunfar” appeared on most ORPA documents. Asturias is referring to war cries such as “Country or Death!,” see Kruijt and Van Meurs, \textit{Guerrillero}, 123.}

During the eight years of clandestine preparation, members of the movement visited homes and villages offering their analysis of the socioeconomic, ethnic and political situations, along with a plan of action. Gauging by the organization’s growth, the recruitment and propaganda campaigns were effective. Furthermore, the fact that they were able to operate throughout the region for nearly eight years without being exposed to the government was a testament of at least tacit support of much of the population. According to Asturias, they made a conscious effort to recruit heads of families, which would naturally lead to more recruits.\footnote{Kruijt and Van Meurs, \textit{Guerrillero}, 35.}

ORPA’s predominately indigenous membership allowed the movement to conduct meetings in the native languages of the local populations.\footnote{According to one sources, the U.S. Embassy admitted that 8 out of 10 guerrillas were Indian, see Black, \textit{Garrison Guatemala}, 74, 104; ORPA claimed to have over 90% indigenous membership. Although the exact percentage cannot be verified, most sources agree that the majority of ORPA’s combatants were indigenous.} Apart from resulting
in greater mutual understanding, this would have also mitigated the mistrust of ladinos that many indigenous communities had developed due to historical relationships and the structure of Guatemalan society. The favorable conditions enabled ORPA to organize three guerrilla fronts in the Western highlands before the group’s first military action. Organizational successes soon extended beyond their initial support base in the Western highlands. After establishing the guerrilla army as the movement’s foundation, ORPA went on to form an urban front and an international solidarity network. Asturias maintained that they did not only intend to establish a guerrilla army, but a revolutionary organization with a harmonious relationship between the rural guerrilla front, the urban front and the international solidarity network with broad support from urban professionals, students, industrial workers and intellectuals. ORPA’s efforts to organize in the capital city were met with success, reportedly, achieving greater support among urban middle-class intellectuals than the EGP and the FAR. This was evident in ORPA’s ability to recruit both students and faculty at San Carlos University (USAC), the national university. In the radical spirit that swept much of the world beginning in the 1960s, the USAC developed a culture of social awareness and activism much like other universities throughout the western world. In Guatemala, as many members of the USAC community gained a greater understanding of the challenges facing the indigenous population they believed that civil rights had to be part of any revolutionary agenda. To

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indigenous, see Harnecker, *Pueblos en Armas*, 219. Various former members interviewed by the author mentioned that the majority of members in the guerrilla camps were indigenous from various ethnic groups.


many, the flexible, non-dogmatic nature of ORPA’s ideology, with a strong emphasis on indigenous issues made ORPA the most conducive vehicle for social change.\textsuperscript{44}

The development and size of ORPA’s urban front is not well documented, with the scope of the network only evident after the Guatemalan military’s urban offensive of 1981. The movement was also successful establishing support cells in various countries to inform and educate the international community about Guatemala’s oppressive and discriminatory reality.\textsuperscript{45} ORPA’s projection into the city and beyond the nation’s borders strengthened the movement but the rural guerrillas remained the centerpiece of the organization. Furthermore, despite the demographic disparities that existed between the urban and rural societies, the role of the indigenous population remained the driving force behind the organization and had to be a central concern of non-indigenous recruits.\textsuperscript{46} All of the movement’s recruits, including middle-class urbanites that might eventually have urban responsibilities, spent time as part of a rural guerrilla unit. This served for not only military training purposes, but it also forced ladino urbanites, with little or no prior contact with indigenous society, to immerse themselves in rural society and work side by side with the Maya population.\textsuperscript{47}

In 1979, with three rural fronts, one urban front, a considerable amount of peasant support throughout the Western highlands and an international support network, the leadership considered the movement sufficiently prepared to carry out its first public


\textsuperscript{45} Galeano, \textit{Guatemala}, 186.

\textsuperscript{46} Galeano, \textit{Guatemala}, 185.

\textsuperscript{47} Off the record conversation with two former members of the organization.
action, and on September 18, 1979, ORPA carried out its first military action at the Mujulia coffee plantation on the outskirts of Quetzaltenango.\textsuperscript{48}

The country’s political situation had become quite volatile by the time ORPA emerged publicly in 1979. The Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) had established a guerrilla nucleus in the predominantly indigenous Department of El Quiche in 1972, and began armed operations in 1975. Its founders were former members of the Frente Guerrillero Edgar Ibarra (FGEI) part of the FAR of the 1960s. Like Asturias, they became critical of both the FAR and PGT tactics and ideological views.\textsuperscript{49} They came to the same realization as Asturias in that the indigenous majority needed to be a part of the revolutionary movement. However, the EGP’s program of how to accomplish this and its analysis of issues of race and ethnicity differed from ORPA’s. These differences will be discussed in the following chapter. The EGP more so than any of its contemporaries, employed the ideas of liberation theology in its recruitment efforts.\textsuperscript{50}

The FAR also returned to guerrilla activity by the end of the 1970s. Previously the movement had abandoned the armed struggle, retreating to the capital city to work with the PGT in organizing an urban labor movement in the hopes of creating a “working-class party.”\textsuperscript{51} In early 1979, the FAR returned to rural areas with a strategy based on the “radicalization of popular sectors” through mass organizing.\textsuperscript{52} The movement had begun to reconsider the possible revolutionary potential of the non-industrial, rural population, but the movement continued to embrace an orthodox Marxist-Leninist ideology focused

\textsuperscript{48} Galeano, Guatemala, 186; ORPA, Siembra: Sowing Time (Guatemala: ORPA, 9/1982), 1.
\textsuperscript{49} Jonas, Battle for Guatemala, 137.
\textsuperscript{50} Black, Garrison Guatemala, 80; Le Bot, Guerra en Tierras Mayas.
\textsuperscript{51} Black, Garrison Guatemala, 106.
\textsuperscript{52} Jonas, Battle for Guatemala, 136.
on class analysis and continued to ignore the ethnic question. Furthermore, the movement selected the sparsely populated northern department of Petén as its region of operations limiting the possibility of mass organizing. This approach was reminiscent of the *foquista* strategy of the FAR of the 1960s. The PGT made different attempts at armed struggle throughout the decade, but without success. Similar to the FAR, the PGT adhered to an orthodox class analysis and concentrated its efforts in the labor movement, neglecting the indigenous question. In the early 1980s, however, both the PGT and the EGP printed documents that discussed the indigenous question (the FAR would issue a statement later in the decade), as we shall see in Chapter 3’s discussion of ORPA’s perspectives on race and ethnicity.

Initially, ORPA consisted of fewer members than were involved in Asturias’s disastrous guerrilla experience in 1962 with the Movimiento 20 de Octubre. Yet, the organization possessed a concrete agenda for what it hoped to accomplish and the determined patience to carry it out. The movement attempted to escape the constraints of the dogmas and orthodoxies that inhibited contemporary organizations and find ideologically creative solutions to social, political and economic problems. Much is unknown about the movement’s long preparatory period, with most information existing only in the historical memory of those that participated in the early years. Since the goal was to remain hidden the organization did not distribute mass publications, nor make statements to the press. Since ORPA was committed to the ideological development of its members, the organization produced various theoretical documents for internal use –

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historical texts that are useful for analyzing ORPA’s approach to organizing and its ideological foundations. It is important to point out that while the leadership (notably Asturias) had the ultimate say in the content of these early internal documents, the movement’s approach seems to be more complex and involved than a top down diffusion of ideology. Many of the texts state that they were collectively elaborated among members and leaders. Furthermore, in interviews, former members who had joined the organization in the early to mid-1970s mentioned open discussions among leaders and members alike that were recorded and served as the framework for many of the early documents. The internal documents provide insight into the ideological foundations of the organization, and since they were intended for internal use, they arguably offer the most objective view available of the organization’s ideas. An analysis of this early literature illustrates the organization’s political line, its ideological influences and the positions that set it apart from contemporary groups.

Even though the relevant documents express aspects of the movement’s ideology, some focus more on the logistics and difficulties in establishing a revolutionary organization, while others provide more profound theoretical analysis. Some of the movement’s internal documents were produced in two formats: one entirely text-based, and a second version which included illustrations, directed at those militants with limited formal education. While employing illustrations was a very common practice with regard to external publications, it is not clear just how many internal documents were produced in this format, as most referred to in this study are solely text-based.\textsuperscript{56} The following

\textsuperscript{56} Only two illustrated, internal documents were found during this study, versions of \textit{Estilo de Trabajo} and \textit{Para que Sirve la Historia}, both with unknown dates of publication. The documents present much of the
analysis focuses on some broad themes that are recurrent throughout the literature: member and organizational development, the Guatemalan reality, the role of the intellectual, the militarization of the oligarchy and the role of women in the revolution. (The subsequent chapter examines the organization’s perspectives on issues of race and ethnicity and the role of the indigenous people in the revolutionary struggle.) While an attempt to categorize the movement’s ideology into such broad themes is useful for analytical purposes, it must be noted that ORPA did not necessarily present ideas in such a rigid, compartmentalized fashion, but as a comprehensive and fluid political thought, with most documents addressing or referring to many, if not all, of the themes.

An analysis of ORPA’s ideas and approach to revolution makes one thing incredibly evident: the organization’s focus on establishing a creative ideology and flexible approach to revolution that emphasized the role of the human actors driven by emotion and revolutionary spirit to make the revolution. From the movement’s approach to political formation to its ideas on race, it is clear that the leadership appreciated the function of ideas and subjectivity in social relations and historical movement more broadly. From early on, Asturias argued that a dogmatic adherence to economic determinism would neglect these important aspects of society, and therefore fail to take advantage of the existing social conditions to actively pursue revolutionary change. ORPA’s creative ideology and voluntaristic approach to revolution is evident throughout its internal documents.

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same material found in the text versions in a more simplistic manner, however, whereas the text version of *Para que Sirve la Historia* ends with the 1954 counter revolution, the illustrated version outlines events up until the mid-1980s, including the URNG alliance. Maria Tuyuc discussed an illustrated version of *Principios y Objetivos*, in an interview conducted by the author on August 20, 2010 in Guatemala City.
Membership and Organizational Development

ORPA’s primary logistical concern was to establish a well trained, functional, and, of course, effective political-military organization. This task required an organizational framework that addressed issues ranging from the education of new recruits to disciplinary action. Internal documents that outline the movement’s organizational approach are also indicative of the many challenges that the clandestine movement faced, even before it began its military campaign. Some principle recurring themes that merit analysis are education, discipline and morale, as well as the moral strength and determination necessary to not only confront challenges, but also foster commitment to the struggle. Such themes are interrelated and overlap in the movement’s documents.

Education was a high priority, and documents often stressed the importance of the political development of its members, maintaining that a profound theoretical understanding of the Guatemalan reality and the reasons for the revolutionary struggle were central components of this political development. According to one early internal document, “each one of our militants must be clear as to what we think, what we want and how to achieve it.” Accordingly, one of the first changes that Asturias made to the Occidente in 1971 was to initiate an “intense program of political activities” which included “talks, courses, lectures and discussions” in order to arm the members politically before initiating the military campaign. ORPA’s leadership ascribed many functional

57 ORPA, Sobre Organización (Guatemala: Ediciones ORPA, 1972), 9.
58 ORPA, Historia, 29-30.
aspects of the organization to members having a sound theoretical understanding of the movement’s ideology, as well as the analytical skills to apply it.

As representatives of the movement it was imperative that members embraced the organization’s approach and ideas as their own, and put them into practice in their daily lives.\(^{59}\) It is important to note that even though discussion and debate were considered intellectually stimulating and therefore encouraged, parameters existed, and once an ideological line was established, the organization required acceptance of it and adherence to it. The movement attributed this aspect to discipline, maintaining that when a militant was in a situation in which they needed to defend an idea or position of the movement they needed to be disciplined enough “to take the [ideological] line and orientation that the organization has set forth, and should not express a personal interpretation or line.”\(^{60}\)

The leadership believed that a politically educated membership was the key to achieving this discipline, maintaining that the “level of discipline was closely related to the level of ideological and political development.”\(^{61}\)

Similar to the philosophy of praxis emphasized by Gramsci and Mariátegui, ORPA believed that political formation more broadly “included the conjunction of theory and practice,” with each one reinforcing the other.\(^{62}\) One document explained this in the following terms:

In order to develop a good theory from the revolutionary perspective, one needs to have a constant political practice, that is, a systematic contact with reality and the problems that must be confronted. This is what allows one to acquire experience,


\(^{60}\) ORPA, *Estilo de Trabajo* (Guatemala: ORPA, unknown date), 33; However, former members frequently referred to this document being from the mid-1970s.

\(^{61}\) ORPA, *Estilo de Trabajo*, 35.

\(^{62}\) ORPA, *Estilo de Trabajo*, 35.
and experience joined with theoretical formation is what allows elaboration. Only in this way can one’s elaboration and theory have true value and be something more than repetition of texts. This must be one of our aspirations and concerns: how to link study with practice, how to link theory with action, how to combine all of this.\(^{63}\)

The organization emphasized that the political formation of the members occurred through praxis, not simply through study, and for that reason the movement emphasized theoretical development and practical application. The organization criticized “café theorists” who spent time discussing revolutionary theories, but were “incapable of applying them to the concrete reality,” positing that such figures had a “political culture, but in reality they did not have a political formation.”\(^{64}\)

ORPA’s leadership approached ideological development as a process of accumulation, with the first step being the establishment of a firm theoretical foundation, as it was important to build from a strong base. Such a foundation facilitated the accumulation of greater knowledge and a more profound understanding.\(^{65}\) While this was essential at every level of organization, it was especially important for those in leadership positions to have a solid theoretical foundation considering they would be overseeing the political and ideological development of new recruits. As “builders” of the movement, leaders at all organizational levels first needed to understand the principal “concepts” as well as the process of accumulation of knowledge in order to promote the development and formation of rank and file members.\(^{66}\) ORPA believed that if it neglected the political formation of leaders it exposed the organization to “not only tactical risks, but strategic

\[^{63}\] ORPA, *Estilo de Trabajo*, 64.
\[^{64}\] ORPA, *Estilo de Trabajo*, 35.
[risks] as well” as leaders would lack the skills to effectively prepare members for the various facets of the struggle.67

A primary responsibility of leaders was to create an atmosphere conducive to ideological development, an atmosphere of sharing, discussion, debate, and even regular one-on-one meetings with members. The leader “is not a professor that teaches, but someone that shares, discusses and clarifies…not a scholar that expounds on a series of approaches and positions of the Organization…but instead someone who shares their life, their experience and the political experience of the Organization…[and] their combative spirit and strength” in confronting daily challenges with those under their responsibility.68

Documents promoted the establishment of some sort of a learning community that, while remaining within the parameters of the movement’s ideological framework, would promote a more involved educational experience and intellectual exchange.

Individual “peculiarities” of each member required leaders to be flexible in their approaches in order to “define, plan and implement a distinct process” of development for each militant under their command.69 While the central leadership of ORPA intended to establish a uniform organization that espoused a homogenous ideology, it understood that people were inherently different, and therefore promoted a flexible approach to the formative experience of each member. While the means may have varied from case to case, internal documents laid out specific study plans to promote the same end result of a common ideological understanding.

67 ORPA, El Cuadro, 5-6.
68 ORPA, El Cuadro, 20.
69 ORPA, El Cuadro, 10.
An aptly titled 1988 document, “Guide for the Development of Discussions for Study: 5 Basic Themes for the Formation of All Militants,” consisted of brief summations of five key internal, theoretical documents from the 1970s, including “Principles and Objectives” and “Racismo I,” as well as guidelines for leaders indicating how to most effectively use the study plan for ideological formation. Each document summary included questions for the militants to consider; this was to encourage that everyone took an “active part in the meeting.” The leaders tasked with leading the discussions were advised to “carefully study each theme” before leading the discussion, referring to the original documents if possible, and plan for adequate time for each topic, as well as ensure the participation of those present, trying to get everyone to “express their opinions.” At the end of each theme, each member was expected to reiterate the “opinions of the Organization” to ensure understanding.  

Apart from studying the theoretical documents of the movement, the leadership believed that a clear understanding of the movement’s historical experience was also an important aspect of political formation, and members were expected to study a 246-page, 1979 internal document titled “Our History.” The purpose was to not only understand the “process, or a historical moment,” but to understand what this all meant politically. Another document stated that “Our History” must be presented as an “ideological resource,” as a unique “historical interpretation” that enabled members to understand the movement and all that it represented. Despite the emphasis placed on this document, it

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70 ORPA, Guía para el Desarrollo de las Platicas de Estudio: 5 Temas Básicos para la Formación de todo Militante (Guatemala: ORPA, 1988), 47-48.
71 ORPA, Historia, 9-10.
72 ORPA, El Cuadro, 21.
was largely unavailable to militants that joined ORPA after the formation of the URNG in 1982 due to the many harsh criticisms leveled against the FAR and the PGT, as both movements were also in the URNG coalition. In an apparent attempt to ease tensions between these organizations, ORPA leadership allegedly issued a recall of the document in the early-1980s, a request that many members respected.  

A 1982 document, “Curriculum for Militancy,” presents an even more detailed and rigorous program of study to be implemented by leaders, including guidelines for individualized and group study and discussion, a list of ORPA documents to be studied and a manner to evaluate progress and a list of non-ORPA publications to examine. According to the introduction, such a program was important considering the “heterogeneous levels of understanding of the members” and limited number of materials. However, the document maintained that if the program is implemented correctly it would enable all members to achieve common understanding, and “recognize the principal political and economic problems [of Guatemala], know the enemy that [they] confront, as well as the way and methods to overcome [the enemy].” ORPA considered individualized study to be essential for members to proceed at “their own pace” and to develop their “own ideas.” Yet, this was not always possible considering the disparate reading levels; therefore, group study facilitated the participation of those that lacked the reading skills necessary for individualized study. According to the organization, group study sessions also provided a “rich” formative experience due to the participation of all present including their “opinions, analysis and experiences.” One

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73 Interview with former members that wished to remain anonymous. Conducted by the author. Guatemala City, Guatemala, July 2010.  
74 ORPA, *Planes de Militancia de Estudio* (Guatemala: ORPA, Unknown), 1.
aspect of the study plan even included members giving presentations to the group in a “clear, straightforward and very dynamic manner” on themes that they had “mastered” enabling “easy understanding and assimilation” of the themes.\textsuperscript{75}

The “Curriculum for Militancy” outlined a three-phase study plan of the movement’s theoretical documents. The “Curriculum” even presented a slightly adjusted study program for the popular sector, those supporters in regions of operations that were not official members of the organization. The non-ORPA publications listed at the end of the document were not mandatory reads, but suggested due to their “good content” and the fact that they are “enjoyable,” “fast” reads. The list ranged from books on World War II to books about popular revolutionary movements and leaders in Vietnam, Cuba, Nicaragua and Guatemala. It included the biography of Turcios Lima and “Days of the Jungle,” both written by EGP founders.\textsuperscript{76}

Considering the active role that leaders were expected to play in the theoretical formation of militants, it is no surprise that ORPA emphasized the training and promotion of qualified leaders as “one of its fundamental concerns.” The movement understood that “an organization’s level of development [was] directly related to the quantity and quality of its leaders,” emphasizing that quality should never be sacrificed for quantity.\textsuperscript{77} The organization was even prepared to retard growth and development until more quality leaders could be promoted so as not to weaken the movement.\textsuperscript{78} In order to avoid such a situation, a central role of existing leaders was to recognize, then cultivate and forge new

\textsuperscript{75} ORPA, \textit{Planes de Militancia}, 3.
\textsuperscript{76} ORPA, \textit{Planes de Militancia}, 8.
\textsuperscript{77} ORPA, \textit{El Cuadro}, 3-4.
\textsuperscript{78} ORPA, \textit{El Cuadro}, 5.
leaders. In fact, ORPA maintained that a “fundamental role” of the organization was “to be a training factory” of leaders and believed that this process must start on the first day that the militant joined the movement. Apart from promoting political and social development through example and plans of study, leaders were also expected to delegate increasingly greater responsibilities and demands to those under their command, which would encourage formation and development, and underscore the conjunction of theory and practice.

Internal documents emphasized discipline, and especially self-discipline, as essential to effective operations. In most situations, militants were expected to carry out their duties without constant supervision. Furthermore, due to compartmentalization, a “cornerstone” of any clandestine organization, each member represented an integral piece of a puzzle. It was imperative that members had the necessary discipline to fulfill their role as assigned. Disciplined operatives not only enabled the entire organization to run smoothly, but also best protected the security of the organization and its members. ORPA maintained that only the discipline of “constant militancy, constant suspicion and clandestinity” in all situations could guarantee success in revolutionary work and best promote the security, and ultimately the “preservation,” of the organization.

ORPA’s early internal documents frequently referred to “dispersion,” a concept defined as any activity that managed to “divert or obstruct the fundamental activity,

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79 ORPA, El Cuadro, 6-7.
80 ORPA, Estilo de Trabajo, 28-42; ORPA, Material de Seguridad (Guatemala: ORPA, Reprint 1984), 34.
81 ORPA, Material de Seguridad, 1, 38.
thoughts and concerns of the revolutionary militant.” While admitting that dispersion existed throughout the organization, documents indicated that it was most problematic in the urban areas, where members typically led legal lives as well. ORPA considered most activities to stem from alienating social structures that existed in the system such as daily employment or career aspirations. The organization called for an “inversion of values” in which legal employment, while necessary for sustenance, only represented “an ingredient to guarantee our struggle and constant participation.” Legal employment was only a means to an end and not an end in itself.

An important aspect of ORPA’s approach to member development was its emphasis on human emotions and subjectivity in the revolutionary struggle. Documents argued that without high morale, firm determination and a dynamic spirit members would be unable to endure the challenges of guerrilla life and effectively carry out revolutionary duties; and furthermore, if members were unable to properly carry out assignments and make the revolution, ideological development was useless. As one document explained:

An organization can have a correct political line and make correct proposals concerning the national problematic. But if [the organization] does not have a great impulse, if its militants and leaders are not capable of developing dynamism within the People, and do not carry out plans and tasks with an enterprising spirit, the political line serves for little.

The leadership believed that theoretical development and revolutionary determination existed in a reciprocal relationship, each reinforcing the other. Ideological development was key to strengthening the “conviction” of the militant and the “absolute and unlimited

83 ORPA, “La Dispersion,” 62.
84 ORPA, Estilo de Trabajo, 13.
certainty in the justice, necessity and historical importance of [the] cause,” which would boost morale and inspire members to put their “ideological aspirations” into action.\textsuperscript{85} Documents that discussed the importance of morale and determination were typically in direct response to the many difficulties of adjusting to guerrilla life in the mountains, which was especially challenging to urban recruits that had very different life experiences than their rural counterparts. All members of the organization, regardless of the role that they would play within the organization, were required to spend time in the mountains. Documents offered encouragement to members, with hopes of igniting the determination and revolutionary spirit necessary for guerrilla life.

Documents also highlighted the importance of moral conviction, arguing that the moral strength of “a revolutionary organization poses a qualitative difference in the face of the enemy, and [moral strength] situates the organization in a completely different and superior condition.”\textsuperscript{86} The analysis continued that this moral strength had been forged through the many difficult challenges the organization had faced, and it must be central to the work ethic and determination of all members. In order to ensure this moral strength to “face any difficult, hard and dangerous situation” that guerrilla life could present, militants, and the organization more broadly, needed to “consciously” prepare “ideologically, politically and psychologically.” The document continued:

Often the enemy defines this moral strength as ‘fanaticism.’ And in this we see [the enemy’s] inability to understand what exactly is the moral [strength] of a revolutionary, of a man convinced of his ideas and the nobility of the cause for

\textsuperscript{85} ORPA, “Enfretar y Vencer las Dificultades” reprinted in \textit{La Poesía Universal: Tomo I} (Guatemala; ORPA, 1983), 3.
\textsuperscript{86} ORPA, \textit{Estilo de Trabajo}, 15.
which he fights. The enemy cannot comprehend this man that doesn't break under torture, death, sacrifice or facing the toughest conditions.\(^8\)

Many internal documents discussed the importance of moral strength, determination and revolutionary commitment, and urged members to develop these attributes. Furthermore, leaders emphasized theoretical development and practical application as key to fostering such revolutionary commitment and determination. A reciprocal relationship existed between ideological development, revolutionary determination and practice, each one able to promote and reinforce the others.

The number of documents that focused on aspects of member and organizational development highlights the importance of this in ORPA’s revolutionary project. The movement’s analytical perspectives and approach to member development, emphasizing theoretical understanding and political formation, moral strength and revolutionary commitment, all underscored the organization’s concern with the ideological realm and emphasis on subjectivity. The organization’s approach stressed the role of the people as conscious actors making the revolution, promoting an understanding and interpretation of Guatemala’s historical experience that would in turn inspire the determination to act. In effect, cultivating a revolutionary consciousness among the population. The organization was determined to produce well-disciplined militants with profound theoretical understanding of the movement’s ideological line and an in-depth knowledge of Guatemalan reality.

\(^{8}\) ORPA, *Estilo de Trabajo*, 16-17.
The Guatemalan Reality

ORPA’s internal literature stressed the necessity of making the struggle Guatemalan. Instead of applying a preconceived ideology to Guatemala’s situation, the organization maintained that its ideology and approach needed to emerge from the specificities of the country’s historical experience. This deviation from previous movements was an essential aspect of the organization’s ideological approach, and, in fact, had been one of the first realizations Asturias had when reassessing his experiences of the 1960s.

ORPA argued for an anti-dogmatic position not only in ideology, but also in military and political matters. The organization argued that dogmatism hindered the development of a Guatemalan revolution, advocating instead creative thought capable of addressing problems inherent in Guatemala. ORPA maintained that ideas needed to be in a continuous state of “development” and “enrichment” so as not to become stagnant; in this sense, the movement did not believe in “eternal truths, but in principles that can be applied to develop [the struggle] based in reality.”88 The movement maintained that dogmatisms were essentially static ideologies incapable of dealing with the national reality. One document explained:

Experience clearly demonstrates that the triumphant revolutionary wars have been able to be so because they have been tremendously creative, have adapted to the conditions of their country and have articulated their methods of struggle and possibilities to their historical moment…because they maintained, cultivated and deepened a creative spirit.89

88 ORPA, Estilo de trabajo, 10-12.
89 ORPA, Estilo de trabajo, 12-13.
The movement was aptly aware of the historical experiences of the other revolutionary movements of the twentieth century and that the successful ones were heterodox in some way. Both the Russian and Cuban Revolutions, while adhering to some interpretation of Marxism, did not gain power by dogmatically applying the analysis Karl Marx elaborated in the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, leaders of both revolutions made their own theoretical contributions and additions to Marxist thought in efforts to apply the ideology to each respective national reality. Despite the ironies and contradictions that emerged as leaders of each revolution attempted to export their experience as a new model for revolution, and regardless of how static the revolutionary ideologies might have become, the initial triumph of each stemmed from a creative approach. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the Vietnamese experience, as well as the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, although the latter took state power after Asturias and the ORPA leadership began promoting a creative ideological approach. This reality was not lost on Asturias and the other leaders of the movement.

Like most contemporary movements, ORPA employed aspects of Marxist and Leninist analysis in the movement’s worldview. However, the organization maintained that a blind application of these foreign ideologies caused many would-be revolutionaries to misinterpret or simply overlook the existing objective conditions. This was precisely what occurred with the FAR in the late-1960s as they were unable to appreciate and take advantage of the revolutionary conditions that existed. According to ORPA’s analysis, the FAR leadership “denied the revolutionary possibilities of the peasantry and put all emphasis on factory workers” due to their “incapacity to interpret and understand the
Guatemalan reality.” Asturias believed that the “optimal” objective conditions have existed in Guatemala, but they were being misinterpreted. The FAR’s attempt to dogmatically apply Marxian class analysis to Guatemala’s specific situation also rejected the subjective voluntarism necessary to take advantage of extant objective conditions. ORPA argued that only a creative and flexible ideology, whether influenced by Marxism or some other philosophy, could fully take advantage of the existing conditions.

ORPA’s advocacy of a creative use of Marxism and the development of a flexible ideology geared toward Guatemala’s specific situation resembled the thought of two early-twentieth-century Marxist theorists. Antonio Gramsci and his Peruvian contemporary, Jose Carlos Mariátegui, advocated for creative Marxist thought capable of addressing varied realities. Though Gramsci and Mariátegui had ideological differences, the area in which their ideas intersected is most relevant to this analysis. Both rejected deterministic Marxism, while promoting a subjective and voluntaristic application, advocating an ideology geared toward a concrete reality. Both emphasized the role of human consciousness and ideology in driving the revolutionary struggle, and while objective economic conditions were important, subjective human actions were absolutely necessary for revolutionary change.90 Though Gramsci is not specifically mentioned in the documents under consideration here, Mariátegui is quoted in at least one internal document.91 It is plausible that Asturias and other ORPA leaders were familiar with the intellectual contributions of both and influenced by their ideas of national Marxism as the

91 See ORPA, Racismo I, 94-96 for a discussion of Mariátegui.
similarities in theoretical approach and ideological parallels give credence to this argument.

ORPA’s determination to make the struggle Guatemalan was a constant theme throughout the organization’s literature. The leadership insisted that history had shown that in order to be successful it had to be geared toward Guatemala’s own national reality and historical experience. While aware that parallels existed and much could be learned from other revolutionary experiences in places such as Cuba and Vietnam, the movement’s ideological framework and agenda needed to be grounded in the concrete realities that existed in the country and respond to the specific needs.

In order to focus the struggle on the Guatemalan reality, the organization emphasized the importance of having a clear understanding of that reality, which was both grounded in, and emerging from, the country’s specific historical experience. In fact, ORPA’s leadership believed that the manner in which the reality was “understood, synthesized and interpreted” was “as important as the reality itself.” So as to promote an understanding and interpretation of the historic challenges being confronted by the revolutionary struggle, the organization produced a lengthy, internal document that outlined the country’s history titled “What is the use of knowing History?” Considering Guatemala’s history and the organization’s emphasis on race and indigenous issues, it is no surprise that a large portion of the document was dedicated to the historical experience of the indigenous population, however, the document also considered class struggle and

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92 ORPA, *La Historia*, 103.
economic exploitation in various historical moments, including the colonial experience, the Liberal Revolution of 1871, and the Revolution of 1944, among others.93

Before getting into the specificities of Guatemalan history, the document responded to the question posed in the title explaining why studying history is important to our understanding of the present situation:

We cannot understand what is occurring today, if we ignore what happened yesterday. It is impossible for us to understand the types of exploitation in Guatemala, and the diverse ways it has been disguised if we do not study history. It is equally impossible for us to have an accurate vision for the future and to think in future perspectives if we have not understood the past and we have not interpreted it correctly; because the history of a society is formed through a process, in which many interests in a constant class struggle give it shape. Societies have not always been as they are now…but have been the result of a struggle of classes, of interests. This is where the study of history becomes a light that illuminates the present reality.94

ORPA produced this document to counteract the “false and incorrect” official history that Guatemalans learn from a young age “narrated in a manner favorable to maintaining and perpetuating the system.” In contrast, “to know the true history of the people, eliminates one of the weapons that the enemy has utilized to destroy the people,” which has been to deny the past. The document presented the “other history,” the “history of the people,” one that would “serve the interests of the people.”95 Not only did a true knowledge of the country’s past take away a weapon of “oppression, but it became a “priceless weapon in

93 The document traces a long history of economic exploitation and racial discrimination suffered by large sections of the population. While both are central aspects of ORPA’s interpretation of Guatemala’s historical experience and are frequently intertwined in the national experience, this section will focus more on the analysis of class struggle, and the subsequent chapter considers those aspects focused specifically on race and ethnicity.
94 ORPA, Para Qué Sirve la Historia, reissue (Guatemala: Ediciones ORPA, 1983), 4-5.
95 ORPA, Para Qué Sirve la Historia, 3.
hands of the revolutionary” central to the movement’s “ideological and political struggle against the system.”

Independence and the Liberal Revolution of 1871 were two key historical moments analyzed in the document. The document challenged the idea of a popular independence movement and a liberal revolution, arguing instead that both events served to consolidate the interests of the oligarchy at the expense of popular needs and aspirations. Independence represented a change in name only, as exploitation continued unabated, and in many instances worsened:

We can say that independence is an historical event realized by a class descended from the conquistadores that had strengthened itself during the colonial period and had developed its own national interests that began to contradict those of the Spanish crown. [So they] took advantage of a favorable conjuncture to separate itself [from Spain] and guarantee its owns interests at the national level. There was no popular participation.

Through “propaganda and the invention of myths” this ruling class was able to convince the people that they were at the center of an independence movement. Not only did independence not bring improvement for the people, the situation “rapidly worsened, due to the fact that the oligarchy felt stronger and freer, which caused them to further develop their interests.” In order to underscore this class-based interpretation of Independence, the document pointed to the fact that it was the “most progressive” elements of the oligarchy, those that took the label “liberals,” that “issued the first forced labor law for the [indigenous population], a law that obligated them to work in the plantations.”

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96 Ibid, 7, 17-18.
97 ORPA, Para Qué Sirve la Historia, 110.
98 ORPA, Para Qué Sirve la Historia, 110.
ORPA presented similar conclusions of the “Liberal Revolution of 1871,” maintaining it was not a revolution but simply another consolidation of oligarchic power. The document admitted that compared to the independence era “more people participated, there were more tensions, [and] in fact, there was a war caused by the contradictions between conservative and liberal sectors defending their respective interests; but there was no revolution.” The “liberal” leaders attacked the power of conservatives, both in the oligarchy and the Catholic Church, and went after their respective landholdings, but in reality “the amount of native communal land expropriated” exceeded that taken from the Church and the conservative oligarchy.\(^9\) According to the analysis, the events of 1871 only “signified the displacement of a sector of the dominant class by another sector of that same class;” the desire to “maintain the exploitative system” remained unchanged. Furthermore, the document pointed to the victory of the liberal oligarchy in 1871 as key to opening “the doors to North American imperialism,” which was already trying to gain a foothold in Guatemala.\(^10\) While similar arguments concerning the lack of any real change from Independence and late-nineteenth-century “liberal” revolutions are common today, this document was being used for political formation and ideological development in rural Guatemala in the 1970s. It was attempting to dispel the official history propagated by the state and provide a new interpretation and perspective, to provide an “analysis and vision…in function of popular interests.”\(^11\)

The document continued by tracing the “penetration of North American imperialism” into Guatemala’s economy until being checked, even if temporarily, by the

\(^10\) ORPA, *Para Qué Sirve la Historia*, 128-129.
Guatemalan Revolution of 1944. This event initiated a 10-year period of democratic governance, a new constitution, and Jacobo Arbenz’s attempted agrarian reform, and culminated in a C.I.A. intervention in 1954. ORPA maintained that while 1944 – 1954 “was a very important period” in Guatemala’s history, certainly more progressive than previous eras, it should not be considered revolutionary. The traditional landed oligarchy did lose some of its power during this period with the establishment of a more liberal “anti-dictatorial” and anti-imperialist government, but the social “restructuring” that occurred cannot be considered a revolution.102

Notwithstanding its limitations, it was the first time in the country’s history that “governments were not in power solely to defend oligarchic interests, but were truly concerned for the people.” Furthermore, workers and peasants experienced a political opening for popular organizing “without being repressed,” and many peasants became “owners of their land,” and Guatemala escaped the grips of imperialism.103 However, ORPA argued that there was no revolutionary restructuring of classes, which enabled the historically dominant class to supplant the democratic governments and return to power after ten years. The analysis explained:

This period did not destroy the dominant class. It was pushed aside, but it conserved its economic power, part of its political power and all of the ideological influence it had. This movement and these governments were very timid in the measures they took, and almost never dared to confront the oligarchy. They did not displace the oligarchy and occupy its place in the social structure; but leaving it to one side in a fluctuating state, it returned after ten years to reoccupy its place.104

102 ORPA, Para Qué Sirve la Historia, 156-157.
103 ORPA, Para Qué Sirve la Historia, 168.
104 ORPA, Para Qué Sirve la Historia, 161.
The Guatemala Revolution of 1944-1954 did not sufficiently weaken the political, economic and ideological power of the traditional oligarchy to stop the reassertion of power. This group opposed the progressive aims of the democratic governments, and employed ideological warfare to help encourage a United States intervention. ORPA maintained that the governments were too accommodating to the oligarchy, and this resulted in the end of the democratic opening.

_The Role of the Intellectual_

ORPA’s internal documents frequently assessed the role of intellectuals in the revolutionary struggle. As discussed above, the movement criticized theorists and intellectuals for misinterpreting the Guatemalan reality or advocating dogmas. ORPA believed that intellectuals had not been fulfilling their role in Guatemala and the movement was committed to incorporating them into the struggle. ORPA employed a broad definition of intellectuals that included researchers, teachers, scientists, university students, technicians and even revolutionary theorists.¹⁰⁵ Discussions of intellectuals primarily referred to petty bourgeois urbanites either already in the professional workforce or enrolled in the university preparing to enter the professional workforce. In some instances, the documents specifically addressed either intellectuals or the petty bourgeoisie; however, these analyses contained so many parallels that the categorizations were essentially interchangeable, if not references to the same group of people. As ORPA increased its recruitment efforts among faculty and students at the national university and

organized an urban front, the movement was determined to provide a revolutionary perspective and role to the petty bourgeois intellectual.

ORPA’s analysis of petty bourgeois intellectuals and its approach to their incorporation into the struggle represented a tactical and ideological deviation from previous strategies. Instead of advocating an alliance or a popular front with the bourgeois class, ORPA maintained that the participation of the petty bourgeois intellectual was “conditional” in that they were required to denounce their class position. The movement adopted a position expounded by the African decolonization theorist Amilcar Cabral in a speech at the Tricontinental, which maintained that in order for the petty bourgeoisie to truly integrate itself into the popular liberation struggle it had to “undergo a transformation, a true class suicide.” Following from Cabral’s statement, ORPA argued it is not for the revolutionary movement to adopt the positions of the petty bourgeoisie, especially since history has made it clear “that these positions are reformist, limited and do not correspond to the true interests of the popular classes.” Much to the contrary, the bourgeoisie needed to “adopt the revolutionary positions of the popular classes.” Such was the “condition” for their participation in the struggle, and, according to the movement, it was “a very important standard.” In order to be actors in the popular struggle, the bourgeoisie needed to reject class assumptions and positions, radicalize, and embrace the aspirations of the popular classes.

ORPA criticized the disconnect that existed between the bourgeois intellectual and the Guatemalan people, lamenting that while intellectuals should be an asset to the

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people’s struggle due to greater levels of “preparation and comprehension,” they had all too frequently “abandoned” the people and isolated themselves in both practice and theory. In Guatemala, the bourgeois intellectual was persecuted and terrorized by the “aggressive right,” and failing to “assume [the] responsibilities that would correspond to him” on the side of the people, the intellectual finds himself in the “middle of a fierce battle” and converting into a victim rather than a participant.” However, the movement assured that repression directed at intellectuals was “for talking, not for doing” for being “spectators, not actors in the social changes” occurring around them.

ORPA argued that Guatemala’s leftist intellectuals had a “bad habit” of promulgating “grand initiatives from vague ideas concerning that which should be done, that which should be published or the [political] line that should be followed,” but “on the other hand, do not accept any real and concrete commitment for its realization.” They did not take any necessary steps to accomplish the “grand initiatives,” and much less so if it required a “small sacrifice or a medium effort.” According to ORPA’s analysis, intellectuals frequently wanted to fulfill a role of social and political thinkers, but were unwilling to even make the sacrifices necessary to effectuate and implement any of their own ideas. The movement considered this a major contradiction of the Guatemalan intellectual. Another contradiction highlighted by the organization was the fact intellectuals were quick to denounce armed struggle, but willing to accept fraudulent elections. Many accepted the “reactionary political game” and imagined or “invent[ed]”

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possibilities of change if a certain candidate were to win. ORPA maintained that within the corrupt and militarized political atmosphere elections were futile and only achieved superficial change, not fundamental socioeconomic and political changes that the organization advocated.

The movement did not place all blame on the bourgeois intellectuals, but maintained that the revolutionary movement, including ORPA, had not provided the correct perspective and purpose to this group. Not only has the armed movement in Guatemala failed to give a “defined perspective” to the role of the intellectual, “neither in theory nor in practice,” to help them overcome their “limitations…and contradictions;” but the “inexcusable myopia or sectarianism” of the movement had all too often impeded “sensible” bourgeois intellectuals that wanted to contribute from finding their place in the struggle. Documents argued that if intellectuals were given a correct perspective for the realization of their revolutionary potential they could radicalize and provide many strong members to the struggle.

Cabral was not the only African decolonization theorist who influenced ORPA’s ideology. Frantz Fanon’s ideas heavily influenced the organization’s world-view, including the movement’s position on the role of intellectuals in the revolution. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon argued that in colonial situations, intellectuals were often seduced by the system, and even defended the political structures. Colonial powers implanted into the minds of intellectuals that the “essential qualities of the West” were

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eternal, causing them to reject, and even denounce, their native roots as backward. Their intellectualism and theoretical scope had been colonized, compromised by the dominant ideology. Fanon argued that during liberation struggles true native intellectuals would recognize the evanescence of colonial doctrines and reconnect with the people. He analyzed the many contradictions of the colonized intellectual and delineated their responsibilities once they committed themselves in the popular struggle.

ORPA’s leadership maintained that Fanon’s theories and analysis of the colonized intellectual resonated loudly in the Guatemalan reality. According to the organization, Guatemala remained in a colonial relationship, although an internal one, in which an exploitative and repressive elite minority dominated the country’s socioeconomic and political structures. The ruling elite had managed to seduce the bourgeois intellectual into becoming complacent in the system and reject popular aspirations. The organization urged intellectuals to read (or in some cases reread) Fanon “with new eyes.” to find the “many mirrors, clear explanations, and, above all, points of departure” contained within. ORPA argued that Fanon’s work could help the colonized intellectual better understand their own contradictory reality and provide a road map for overcoming many contradictions and deficiencies in order to join the popular struggle. The influence of Fanon’s ideas were not limited to the intellectual, as former members mentioned The Wretched of the Earth as a prominent non-ORPA text being read by rank-and-file militants of the organization.

113 Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 46-47.
115 In both formal interviews and informal conversations with the author, when asked what non-ORPA materials members read, Fanon was one of the more frequently mentioned.
ORPA intended to build a popular organization that incorporated both the armed struggle and a political struggle, and it understood that the participation of bourgeois intellectuals could be a valuable part of such an organization. The movement posited that access to education and professional formation was a privilege that obligated the recipient, “in a good sense,” to give back to the nation and “return to the people all the efforts that they had [collectively] made to provide [the opportunities for this] formation” (an important obligation in Guatemala as the majority of the population lacked access to any level of education and remained illiterate). The organization clarified that it did not mean to suggest that more education and formation signified greater revolutionary consciousness, but maintained that it “prepares and provides greater possibilities to contribute in a variety of areas…in the development and triumph of the popular war.”

The intellectual needed to be entirely dedicated to the struggle, prepared to move from theory to practice, with the willingness and tenacity to serve wherever needed, even as a combatant on the front lines. Moreover, if the intellectual was assigned political duties, he or she needed to perform those duties with the militant mentality of a combatant. The concept of dispersion, analyzed above, was a challenge and limitation of urban intellectuals, and impeded many intellectuals from truly giving themselves to the revolution and fulfilling a specific role.

ORPA argued that victory was only attainable through a combination of political and military action. This position differed greatly from that of Che’s foco theory that

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118 ORPA, “La Dispersión,” 59.
argued that a guerrilla movement, if executed correctly, could achieve victory, with or without the help of a political front. In fact, while fighting in Cuba, he continuously denigrated the work of members of the political wing, touting the primacy of the armed struggle. ORPA believed that petty bourgeois intellectuals could aid in both the political and military sides of the struggle, and the organization’s efforts to provide this group with revolutionary perspective met with success, as ORPA reportedly achieved greater support among urban intellectuals than the other political military organizations. Even though the rural guerrillas remained the foundation of the organization, ORPA’s projection into the city enabled the establishment of an urban military front, and a broad political wing that would eventually extend into the international arena.

*The Militarization of Oligarchic Power*

This area of analysis, a variant of Marxism-Leninism, revolved around the collusion between the country’s dominant class and military in an attempt to maintain their privileged position at the top of the social hierarchy through control of the masses by any means necessary, including violent repression. ORPA’s analysis delineated the emergence and development of this symbiotic relationship after the U.S. intervention of 1954 and the ways in which the relationship served to repress popular aspirations while protecting the privileges of the elite, including the military elite. According to the movement, over the years the military increasingly acquired key posts in successive

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governments resulting in the centralization of power, thus enabling that institution to exercise this power almost unconditionally. The country’s oligarchy was not simply a bystander as the military usurped effective political power; it recognized the benefits that such a relationship could provide and directly supported its development and actively participated in the system, willing to discard any pretensions of democratic liberalism to maintain the status quo. ORPA called this process the militarization of oligarchic power, maintained that, together with U.S. support, it corresponded to a “broader phenomenon inscribed within a more general strategy of imperialism” throughout Latin America, especially in the countries that were experiencing armed insurgencies.122

ORPA’s lengthiest internal document from the organization’s formative years focused on this process. This 442-page document, printed in November 1978, titled “La Coyuntura,” which translates to “the juncture” or “the conjunction” in English - referring to the particular circumstances in Guatemala at that historical moment - offered a profound analysis of the country’s social, political and economic structures.123 Some former members jokingly referred to this document as “the Bible” in reference primarily to the length of the document, but also considering its central point of ideological reference for members of the organization.124 An abridged version of the document was published in 1980 for wider distribution further demonstrating the important role of the analysis in the organization’s world-view.125 The document was divided into three major analytical sections: political, economic and social. While the analysis incorporated

122 ORPA, La Coyuntura (Guatemala: Ediciones ORPA, 1978), 3.
123 ORPA, La Coyuntura (Guatemala: Ediciones ORPA, 1978).
124 Former members of ORPA who wish to remain anonymous in conversation with the author in Guatemala City, July 2008.
125 ORPA, La Coyuntura (sintesis) (Guatemala: Ediciones ORPA, 1980)
Marxist concepts of class struggle and the dominant class’s ever-increasing control over aspects national life, ORPA firmly grounded this phenomenon in Guatemala’s particular historical experience.

In the opening pages of the document, ORPA attempted to differentiate its analysis from other studies on the militarization of Latin America more broadly, maintaining that this is not a traditional military dictatorship, but rather a new phenomenon, and therefore requires a new analysis and approach. The text defined militarization as the process in which the military played an increasingly “more prominent role within the government apparatus and within the country’s political structure” until becoming the “principal and central axis of the political structure,” the real power within the country. According to the analysis, whereas traditional military dictatorship might weaken oligarchic power in the military’s attempt to keep all non-military classes in check, the militarization of oligarchic power in Guatemala was actually “aimed at preserving and strengthening the economic power of the oligarchy.” The military had not “displaced” the oligarchy by usurping its power; instead, the military “serve[d] as the absolute depository of power,” and had entered as an “emergency measure to save” and protect the power of the oligarchy and the structure of Guatemala’s socioeconomic system and power structure.126 ORPA’s analysis emphasized that this process was not “arbitrary and casual,” but had very “clear and defined” political causes, with the principal and most immediate being the growth of popular discontent and the armed insurgency.127

ORPA maintained that the antecedents of the militarization of oligarchic power lay in the 1954 intervention that ousted President Arbenz and the counter-revolution that followed. However, it was not until 1962, during the presidency of civilian Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes, that the military “established and institutionalized [this] new form of government.” In the spring of that year, the Ydígoras government faced a crisis stemming from widespread “popular discontent” with demonstrations almost reaching “insurrection” levels.\(^\text{128}\) It was during this period that many urban, middle-class youth, including Rodrigo Asturias, became active in the social and political opposition movement. It was also at this time when the proponents of the failed, progressive and nationalistic military uprising of 1960 had regrouped in order to start an armed insurgency exacerbating the already fragile situation.

The military initially allowed Ydígoras to remain in power, but became much more involved in his government. When the situation deteriorated even further in the spring of 1963, the military, with the support of the Guatemalan elite and foreign powers, stepped in so as to “avoid [a] situation of confusion and chaos” that could result in the fall of the government and open the door to a popular victory. According to ORPA’s analysis, the military, the oligarchy and imperial powers believed that the “strategy” of the militarization of oligarchic power represented “the best alternative to fill that political vacuum and achieve cohesion within their interests,” as well as allowed for the implementation of a “long-term strategy of repression, that would be the counterinsurgency strategy.”\(^\text{129}\)

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\(^{129}\) ORPA, *La Coyuntura*, 14-16.
ORPA’s analysis argued that starting mid-century, through a process of “corruption and incorporation,” many military leaders had joined the oligarchy as landowners and owners of other productive forces, a process that had continued as members of the military hierarchy continued to take personal control of government lands. Military leaders not only embraced a “caste consciousness” as members of that institution, but also forged “a class consciousness, linking the military to the economic interests of the exploiters and of the oligarchy.” No longer was the military solely linked to the ruling elite in its capacity as a repressive force, a protector of the status quo, but now through “very concrete economic interests.” The economic interests of a new military elite now coincided with the interests of Guatemala’s traditional wealth.

ORPA maintained that the formation of the Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial and Financial Associations (CACIF) in the late 1950s was an important precursor to the militarization of oligarchic power. The purpose of CACIF was to bring together these various, private associations “without any distinction or differentiation for the diverse economic activities,” and it rapidly became the “most dynamic and strongest coordinating agency for the oligarchy” in all Central America. ORPA argued that the emergence of CACIF was key in the counterinsurgency strategy by strengthening the country’s elite class through the creation of a united front in order to support it.

ORPA emphasized the complicity of both the oligarchy and the military in this political system. Even though the military had direct control in governance and

130 Ibid, 17-18.
perpetrated the violent needs of the arrangement, it was the elite that requested this. ORPA maintained that in support of the 1963 coup, CACIF communicated to the Minister of Defense that the association “was willing to support all actions that the military would put into practice in order to safeguard the country from the intentions of international communism that would violate democracy and free enterprise,” and it called for a popular rally in front of the presidential palace “in support of the national army” since it had protected the “security of the principles of free enterprise and respect for private property.”

ORPA posited that during military dictatorships, the militarized oligarchy, embodied in CACIF, was a key actor in political decisions and maneuvers as indicated in various legal changes in the 1960s that protected the interests of the oligarchy. Furthermore, military repression directed at organized labor as part of the counterinsurgency strategy directly supported the interests of CACIF.

ORPA maintained that despite superficial changes in military governments this collusion prevailed until the 1978 printing of *La Coyuntura*, and the movement’s subsequent publications analyzed its perseverance into the 1980s, even after the return to civilian rule in 1986. In line with the promotion of a flexible and creative ideology, this analysis paralleled aspects of Marxism-Leninism, but was firmly grounded in Guatemala’s historical experience and national reality.

*Women in the Revolution*

While the following chapter focuses on ORPA’s analysis of the indigenous question, that population was not the only historically marginalized group that the

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movement analyzed and attempted to incorporate into the struggle. In the mid-1970s, the leadership produced and circulated an internal document that analyzed the status of women in Guatemalan society and attempted to provide some perspective of what their role might be within the revolutionary struggle. The 40-page document, simply titled “Women,” admitted to not being as “profound and detailed” an analysis as such a topic required, but rather tried to focus on some key themes and serve as a jumping off point for further study. Many former female members of ORPA considered it significant that the organization would produce a document entirely focused on the situation of women and their potential role within the revolutionary struggle. While some of the same women agreed that the analysis was incomplete, views that will be examined in Chapter 5, they generally thought it was a step in the right direction, starting a dialogue on the situation of Guatemalan women.

The organization maintained that women, representing approximately half of the population, must play a fundamental role within the revolutionary movement, as well as within society more broadly. However, as opposed to the feminist movement that solely focused on women’s issues, ORPA argued that their situation could not be approached “isolated from the social problematic, nor independent of the revolutionary struggle,” but instead must be “tied” to all other “social problems.” Only by establishing an inclusive and correct position in this matter could the revolutionary movement “incorporate a great potential that until now has been wasted and underappreciated in an irrationally

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134 ORPA, *La Mujer* (Ediciones ORPA, Unknown Date), 33.
traditional and patriarchal society like Guatemala.” The document approached the topic by analyzing the experiences of both peasant and urban women, taking into account class position within the groups. It then discussed the role of ideological factors in Guatemalan society in regards to women. Finally, the document offered preliminary suggestions for liberation, as well as noting how the organization should be applying these liberating ideas in daily practice.

While a document specifically analyzing the status of women in Guatemalan society and their role within the revolutionary struggle seems significant, the fact that it is only 40-pages compared to the hundreds of pages written on the indigenous population and the role of racism in Guatemalan society raises some questions about ORPA’s theoretical approach to historically marginalized sections of the population. Some members indicated that Asturias encouraged the female members to further develop this area of analysis, presumably because they were women and more attuned to their own needs. Meanwhile, he did not hesitate to offer lengthy analysis on the indigenous question and matters of race. It is difficult to know exactly why this area of analysis remained underdeveloped, but it highlights that the movement paid greater theoretical attention to some aspects of society than others, even in this case of a historically marginalized group that represented approximately half of the population.

Conclusion

From his exile in Mexico to his return to Guatemala to join the revolutionary movement, Asturias was committed to establishing a movement geared toward Guatemala’s socioeconomic and political needs. Together with a small, but like-minded,

\[136\] ORPA, *La Mujer*, 2.
group of individuals, he broke-away from the FAR, initiating a long, preparatory stage focused not only on military preparations, but also on emphasizing the ideological development of the members so as to establish a knowledgeable, committed and determined group of militants capable of making the revolution. Far from relying on economic developments beyond human control, the movement firmly believed in the power of ideas and emotions to drive human actions and result in radical changes. The movement established a plan of political formation that would inspire the necessary dedication to the construction of a different future. In addition, the movement’s attempt to establish a creative and flexible ideology directed toward Guatemala’s specific needs was apparent in its approach to the various themes addressed throughout this chapter, from Asturias’s criticisms of the FAR and PGT, to the role of the petty bourgeois intellectuals in the revolution. The movement’s interpretation of Guatemala’s historical experience enabled that struggle to be geared toward the nation’s specific present reality. ORPA’s perspectives on issues of race and ethnicity also represented a break from previous radical ideologies and the following chapter is dedicated specifically to this area of analysis situating it in historical perspective.
Chapter 3: A Revolutionary Approach to the Indigenous Question

One of ORPA’s most significant contributions to radical thought in Latin America was its analysis on issues of race and ethnicity. While the movement’s creative ideological approach deviated from many contemporary movements, its analytical perspectives on the indigenous question, racism in Guatemala and the role of the indigenous people in the revolutionary struggle stood in contrast to previous conceptions of revolutionary organizations and leftist intellectuals. In the 1970s, when contemporary movements were focused on class struggle, the organization situated race and ethnicity at the center of its revolutionary thought. According to ORPA’s analysis, economic determinism failed to give sufficient attention to the role of ideas in economic relations, and social relations more broadly. Documents argued that class issues could not be isolated from the superstructure as they were in constant interaction. Guatemalan society could not be understood in its entirety without considering all aspects of that society including the dominant ideology of racism. The organization maintained that the indigenous population was a fundamental aspect of Guatemalan society and needed to play an integral role in the revolutionary struggle. This position was already apparent in Asturias’s 1969 article on Guatemalan society that he published while exiled in Mexico.

In the early 1970s, ORPA published two lengthy analyses of the history of racism in Guatemala and how it had served as a system of control, alienated the masses and impeded the progress of the revolutionary struggle, among other things.1 One of

1 ORPA, Racismo I and La verdadera magnitud del racismo: Racismo II. Early members of ORPA date initial versions of the documents to 1972 and 1973 respectively. However, the versions cited throughout are Racismo I (Guatemala; Ediciones ORPA 1976, reprinted 1989) and La verdadera magnitud del racismo: Racismo II (Guatemala: ORPA, 1978).
movement’s most significant criticisms of its contemporaries such as the FAR, PGT and, to a lesser extent, the EGP was their unwillingness to fully address issues of race and ethnicity. In fact, the organization’s analysis went so far as to criticize the traditional and Marxist left, including the FAR and the PGT, of harboring racist views and attitudes.\(^2\) As explained in the previous chapter, ORPA’s decision to develop and mature as an organization in the indigenous highlands, and emphasize the indigenous role in the struggle instead of retreating to the city to focus on the urban working class resulted in the final break with the FAR.

Analyzing the indigenous problem was not a novel concept among radical thinkers; in fact, as the 1960s and 1970s unfolded various ideas and positions emerged from both armed insurgents and scholars working in academia concerning race and ethnicity and the relationship of the indigenous population to the revolutionary struggle. By the early 1980s, both the EGP and the PGT had issued statements on the indigenous question and the revolution. Contrary to many such statements, ORPA’s perspectives escaped the constraints of class analysis.

The Guatemalan guerrillas of the 1960s elected to operate in primarily non-indigenous departments in the eastern part of the country. The PGT leadership (the political wing of the FAR guerrillas) did not view the indigenous population as potential revolutionary actors, and offered a “remarkably clear and orthodox” position on the matter in a 1964 document:\(^3\)

\begin{quote}
Indian peasants in some rural areas of Guatemala…have the worst standard of living in the country; but their cultural backwardness, the downtrodden state in
\end{quote}

\(^2\) ORPA, *Racismo I* (Guatemala: Ediciones ORPA, 1976); *Historia*, 85-86.
\(^3\) Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus*, 508.
which they have been living since the times of Spanish colonial rule, their relative isolation from the economic and political life of the country...have resulted in a situation in which these people are, by and large, not politically active...Nor...will they be the main support of the democratic national liberation revolution maturing in the country...The main forces of the revolution, and the most active, are concentrated in the south and eastern areas of the country and in those areas of the highlands where political and economic development are at a higher level.\(^4\)

The PGT believed that the indigenous population would not be central to the revolution due to their own political inactivity that stemmed from political and economic isolation, “cultural backwardness” and “downtrodden state.” Instead, the PGT looked to the proletariat to be the central actors in the revolution, which was not only a group that they considered to be more politically and economically active, but also more culturally progressive, i.e. ladino. In the 1960s, some members of the FAR’s military wing began to question the PGT’s position on the indigenous population, viewing the indigenous masses as an economically active peasantry with great revolutionary potential. More specifically, members of the Frente Guerrillero Edgar Ibarra (FGEI), led by Luis Turcios Lima began to dissent from the PGT’s official line in the mid-1960s.

Turcios Lima was one of the army officers who led the nationalist military uprising in 1960, subsequently becoming one of Guatemala’s earliest guerrilla leaders and a founder of the FAR and FGEI. In the mid-1960s, debates of both theoretical and strategic nature emerged between Turcios Lima and other factions of the FAR, including the PGT leadership. Ricardo Ramirez, member of the FGEI and future founding member of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) in the 1970s, wrote about the debates that ensued in his 1967 biography of Turcios Lima. The FGEI, under Turcios Lima, began to

consider the participation of the indigenous people as “decisive in the outcome of the war,” positing that the “triumph of the revolution [was] impossible without the support of these masses at all levels.” Accordingly, the FGEI was concerned that the PGT, as the purported revolutionary vanguard, did not have a plan to incorporate the indigenous people, a population that represented the “absolute majority of the poor peasantry.” They were critical of the bourgeois and discriminatory views adopted by the PGT leadership that upheld, in some variation, that the backwardness and inertia of the indigenous people impeded them from being active participants in the revolution. However, the FGEI’s early analysis remained rooted in class struggle, albeit a class struggle that incorporated all Guatemalans, indigenous and ladino alike.

The emphasis on class was evident when Ramirez wrote: “No process can create a more complete, homogenous and just national unity than the revolutionary war guided by the proletariat ideology.” While respecting the cultural differences, the FGEI wanted to incorporate the indigenous masses into the revolutionary struggle as members of the proletariat. Even though Turcios Lima’s ideas deviated from the PGT’s, perhaps the most lasting legacy of his analysis on the indigenous question was simply the goal of bringing that population into the struggle; that is what other members of the FGEI emphasized when they formed the EGP in 1972. According to the EGP’s 1982 document on the indigenous question, the movement traced its foundation to the FGEI documents of the 1960s, which provided a “general line and basic orientation - which held that

7 Ricardo Ramirez, “Turcios Lima,” 94.
(Guatemala’s) Indian north-west should be the fundamental base area for the revolutionary forces.” From its roots, the EGP adopted a “strategic concern with the integration of the Guatemalan Indian peoples into the popular revolutionary war.”

In the late-1960s and early-1970s, while the armed guerrilla movement was in disarray, a polemic ensued among leftist intellectuals concerning perspectives on issues of race and ethnicity. University professors Severo Martinez Pelaez, Carlos Guzmán Bockler and Jean-Loup Herbert were at the center of this debate. In 1970, the sociologists Guzmán Bockler and Herbert coauthored Guatemala: Una Interpretación Histórico-Social (A Social Historical Interpretation), a book of essays analyzing the indigenous question, and later that same year, historian Martínez Peláez published La Patria del Criollo: An Interpretation of Colonial Guatemala, a monograph analyzing the history of economic relations in Guatemala. Both books appeared during a lull in Guatemala’s internal conflict. In 1968, the military had carried out a scorched earth campaign against the FAR in the department of Zacapa, virtually annihilating the armed insurgency until radicals regrouped and formed new movements in the 1970s.

Guatemala: A Social Historical Interpretation

Guzmán Bockler and Herbert’s analysis of Guatemalan society focused on the centrality of the antagonistic relationship that has existed between the dominant group and the dominated group since the onset of colonization four and a half centuries earlier. According to the authors, the correlation or relation that existed during the colonial period “between being Spanish and belonging to the dominant, exploitative group” and

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being indigenous “suffering the domination and the exploitation,” was essentially the same correlation that exists today between the ladino and indigenous populations. The “antagonism [that exists] between these two groups constitutes the primary determinant in Guatemala’s social structure: it [has been] the center of the dialectic for four and a half centuries.” The authors maintained that even though the “rhythm and the intensity” of this antagonism has varied, whether its violent or latent, it continued to “shape the conflictive formation of the collective national conscious.”

The authors posited that this contradictory and antagonistic relation was at the center of the Guatemalan reality, and throughout the book analyzed the racial and economic components of that relationship.

The authors argued that the onset of colonization initiated centuries of “impoverishment, underdevelopment, deculturation, and social disintegration,” calling this the “proletarianization of the Maya,” and they offered two analytical trends to understand this process. The first posited that this process eradicated indigenous culture, making contemporary Maya void of any cultural heritage. Ladino culture, as the only extant social identity in Guatemala, represented the national future. The second analytical line maintained that the Maya have resisted cultural and political domination, defended their identity, and retained their rebellious spirit, all despite the attempts of the ladino population (serving as the pawns of continual imperial powers that control the country) to deny and repress indigenous culture. The authors embraced the latter position, arguing

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that indigenous cultural identity survived the repression, remained strong in Guatemala, and that the contemporary Maya were prepared to take back their resources and nation.\textsuperscript{10}

The authors maintained that the very concept of “ladino” is illusory, only existing in a dialectical relationship to the Indian. During the colonial period, the ladino emerged and claimed legitimate rights over the country’s resources. According to the authors, if the indigenous population was able to regain what was theirs, the colonial relationship would finally be destroyed. Furthermore, the dialectical relationship of the ladino and Indian would be resolved, and there would be no more ladino or Indian, just revolutionary comrades, but until that juncture the ladino-Indian relationship was the central contradiction in Guatemalan society.\textsuperscript{11}

The authors criticized the Marxist Left for attempting to apply Eurocentric Marxism to Guatemala’s reality as such a paradigm ignored the indigenous population, a central aspect of Guatemalan society. In fact, they postulated that the guerrilla of the 1960s was decimated due to its neglect of issues of race and ethnicity. The authors further argued that the indigenous population was subjected to both internal and external colonialism. Internally, the ladino population sustained the colonial socioeconomic and political relationships by filling the power vacuum left by the Spaniards after independence. Externally, Guatemala suffered from an imperialistic or neocolonial relationship with the United States. When the U.S. intervened in 1954, the petty bourgeoisie did not protest because they lacked a national consciousness, and have since remained on the subordinate side of a colonial relationship. The authors argued that the

\textsuperscript{10} Guzmán Bockler and Herbert, \textit{Guatemala}, 69-70.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 113-114.
Guatemalan revolution needed to confront both internal and external colonialism. Ultimately, the destruction of the colonial power structure would enable the dialectical relationship between the ladino and Indian to be resolved.\textsuperscript{12}

Guzmán Bockler and Herbert were some of the first leftists to analyze internal colonialism and racism in Guatemala, two ideas that ORPA addressed a couple years later. The authors pointed to the way in which ideologies of race, and the creation of a superior - inferior dichotomy, complicate the class struggle. Even though their study addressed aspects of race and ethnicity, it remained grounded in class relations. The ladino-Indian relationship, the central contradiction in their analysis of Guatemalan society, when stripped to the base, was a class relation. After independence, the ladino population took over the dominant role of the colonizer, while the Indian remained in the subordinate, exploited position. As one observer has pointed out, the authors did break from previous views in that they portrayed the Maya as “potentially active and resistant.” This idea challenged the position the 1960s guerrilla, apart from the FGEI. However, the underlying argument of Guzmán Bockler and Herbert supported the belief that “classes were the only relevant social divisions in Guatemala.”\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{La Patria del Criollo: An Interpretation of Colonial Guatemala}

Severo Martínez Peláez responded to the ideas of Guzmán Bockler and Herbert with a more explicitly orthodox Marxist interpretation of Guatemalan society in his book \textit{La Patria del Criollo} (1970). The title, which translates to “The Creole Homeland,” referred to an overarching theme of the study. Martínez maintained that the native

\textsuperscript{12} Guzmán Bockler and Herbert, \textit{Guatemala}, 173-180.
\textsuperscript{13} Smith, “Marxists on Class and Culture,” 192.
population, along with the land and resources, had been an inheritance of the conquest for the Spanish conquerors. With independence, the creole population, those of Spanish descent born in the New World, gained control of that inheritance, establishing dominance over the land, resources and natives. In other words, the creoles took control of the economic base, and according to the historical materialist view, the entire homeland (or at least everything that mattered). Martínez’s main thesis followed that “Guatemala remains a colonial society because conditions that arose centuries ago when imperial Spain held sway have endured” under the creole population long after independence in 1821. However, Martínez’s conclusion was derived from the colonial economic relations, unconcerned with issues of race and culture; in fact, he argued that the modern Guatemalan Indian was a creation of these colonial economic relations.

Martínez argued that colonization destroyed indigenous culture, and, in the process, converted the native population into servants of the colony. He therefore considered the Indian a colonial vestige, and saw that any perceived cultural heritage had been created by the colonial relationship. He outlined how the existing native culture was forged during the colonial era through processes of imposition, resistance and concession. According to Martínez, the Indian only existed in relation the colony, explaining “historically, Indians are a product of the colonial regime, a result of oppression and exploitation. Their survival after the colonial era ended points to nothing

15 Murga, “Debate sobre el racismo,” 59-60.
other than the survival of a colonial servile class.”17 Following from this premise, Martínez argued that since the modern Indian is a product of colonialism, then modern indigenous culture was also a colonial creation, and any perceived cultural differences would cease to exist with the resolution of colonial economic relations. Martínez explained:

If we accept that Indians are a colonial product – as historical analysis clearly shows – then Indian culture is, by definition, also a colonial product; we must therefore seek to explain Indian culture by studying native situations and functions within the colonial regime. If we proceed from this assumption – which we accept as valid in the absence of concrete evidence to refute it - then Indian culture is an expression of the survival of oppression and servitude, right up to the present. If we diminish that oppression, better still if we eradicate it completely, the cultural complex imposed during colonial times will disappear.18

According to Martínez, people that emphasized race and ethnicity in their approach to the indigenous question only distracted from the real issues facing Guatemala’s indigenous population: economic relations. He explained the “Indian problem” in strictly economic terms, denying any relevance to race or ethnicity:

The source of the “Indian problem” does not lie in the “nature of the Indian.” This racist view of the matter is what Spaniards and criollos connived in creating centuries ago. The fact that such a mindset survives, albeit in veiled form, raises questions about criollo and colonial interests that prevail today...Let us be deluded no longer: the roots of the “Indian Problem” are to be found in Indian oppression. This oppression, as we have explained, dates back to the way the colony was set up. Oppression, in fact, made Indians, just as the “Indian problem” arose as a result of the creation of the Indian class. The crux of the matter is that the only solution to the “Indian problem” lies in eliminating the elements of oppression that maintain and sustain colonial servitude.19

Martínez admitted that discrimination existed, but maintained that it was due to social condition and not race or culture. According to his argument, the discrimination

17 Martínez Peláez, La Patria del Criollo, 273.
18 Martínez Peláez, La Patria del Criollo, 291.
19 Martínez Peláez, La Patria del Criollo, 271-272.
that existed was part of the superstructure in that it operated as a function of the class struggle. However, liberating the Indian from the condition of serf would also liberate them from the accompanying social discrimination. It would also create conditions for class solidarity, as the indigenous population would become part of the country’s proletariat, sharing the same class position as the ladino proletariat.  

Martínez attempted to apply an orthodox Marxist analysis to the Guatemalan situation. In his analysis, the indigenous population had been stripped of any real cultural heritage. Therefore, he saw little reason to address issues of race and ethnicity, as any perceived race or culture is part of the superstructure and will disappear, as class contradictions are resolved. Even though his study employed the alternative analytical trend presented by Guzmán Bockler and Herbert, specifically that the colonial process destroyed indigenous cultural heritage, both studies reached the same conclusions pertaining to the primacy of the class struggle in the Guatemalan revolution. However, Guzmán Bockler and Herbert did discuss racism, and both studies discussed a system of internal colonization, these areas of analysis needed further development as theoretical concepts.

This was the intellectual atmosphere surrounding issues of race and ethnicity in the early 1970s when the new wave of guerrilla movements began to coalesce. Rodrigo Asturias laid the foundations for ORPA upon his return from exile in 1971, and former members of the FGEI returned to Guatemala to found the EGP in 1972. The leaders of both newly forming organizations made the conscious decision to develop and begin operations in the indigenous highlands. Though not joining the very public debate of the

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aforementioned university professors, Asturias was familiar with their studies and positions, and set out to develop a new analysis and approach to the indigenous question in the early 1970s. By the early 1980s, both the PGT and the EGP had also issued statements on the indigenous question.

*The PGT: “The Indigenous Question”*

In 1982, the journal *Polémica* published a PGT document titled “The Indigenous Question,” a brief article outlining the group’s position on the relationship between race and ethnicity and the revolutionary struggle. The PGT took a firm class position in arguing that the indigenous people can only be incorporated into the revolutionary struggle due to their status as oppressed masses and exploited workers. While the document acknowledged the reality of cultural differences and the existence of discrimination, the PGT maintained the centrality of the class struggle throughout their analysis.

The PGT argued that Guatemala contained only one system of economic relations and that the indigenous and ladino populations were both subject to it. Depending on one’s relationship to the means of production, their position within the system would either be to exploit or to be exploited. Since class differentiation existed among the indigenous population just as it existed among the ladino population, in Guatemala the position of any given indigenous person or ladino was either to exploit indigenous people

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21 Polémica, No 3. (San José, Costa Rica: ICADIS, 1982), 63-64; Polémica was a journal dedicated to the analysis of social, political and economic issues in Central America which was published in San Jose, Costa Rica.
and ladinos or be exploited by one of them.\textsuperscript{22} The organization admitted that within the current system high levels of indigenous people are “victims,” both “exploited and discriminated” against. However, it maintained that this fact was no reason to ignore the class differentiation that the system produced, even among the indigenous population, nor should this “supplant the class struggle for a supposed antagonistic ethnic contradiction that exists between the indigenous population and ladinos.”\textsuperscript{23} According to the PGT, class relations were the primary determinant in all social relations, and therefore needed to be the central focus of any revolutionary movement.

The analysis continued that working class indigenous people were exploited by rich indigenous people and ladinos alike, sharing the same class position of the working class ladinos. They were not exploited due to ethnic origin, culture or race, but “because they [were] dispossessed and live in a society in which true class antagonisms exist.”\textsuperscript{24} According to the analysis, exploitative class relations were real phenomena that can be associated with others, such as culture or ethnic origin, but were not determined by them. Nonetheless, the organization believed that it was an important revolutionary task to combat discrimination, and opined that discrimination had been on the decline. They maintained that it was the class-based revolutionary struggle that would unite all workers in a single cause.

The PGT admitted that discrimination remained an important tool of the dominant class, something that they have developed ideologically and have tried to instill deep

\textsuperscript{23} PGT, “La Cuestión Indígena,” 63.
\textsuperscript{24} PGT, “La Cuestión Indígena,” 64.
within popular consciousness. The organization tied the discussion of discrimination to class relations maintaining that those who did not exploit have no reason to discriminate, the working class ladinos that discriminated against their class equals did so because part of their consciousness had been manipulated by the exploiting, dominant class. The PGT maintained that the class-consciousness of the Indian and ladino proletariat and semiproletariat was breaking down the ideological barriers that have been constructed by the dominant class. Social and political interactions were more intense each day as the economic conditions bring them closer together.25

The movement’s position maintained some of the orthodoxy of their mid-1960s position coupled with similarities to Martínez’s analysis. The revolutionary potential of the indigenous masses stemmed from their position as members of the proletariat. Similar to Martínez, they argued that much of the discrimination that existed was due to class antagonisms and not racial and ethnic differences, and furthermore, that any discrimination that was grounded in racial and ethnic ideas would disappear with the advancement of class-based revolutionary struggle.

*The EGP: “The Indian Peoples and the Guatemalan Revolution”*

In late-1981, the EGP published a document entitled “The Indian Peoples and the Guatemalan Revolution,” which maintained that the revolutionary movement had yet to address the indigenous question in a “systematic” and “homogenous” way.26 The movement offered such “notes” as a “preliminary outline of [their] view of the problem

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25 PGT, “La Cuestión Indígena,” 64.
26 EGP, “Indian Peoples,” 1-8.
and an invitation to begin a discussion on the subject.” This document stemmed from the EGP’s ten years of “revolutionary experience” working among the indigenous population. (It dated the movement’s experience and analysis of the indigenous question to the 1960s while the founding members were still affiliated with the 1960s FAR and the Turcios Lima led FGEI.) The EGP leadership recognized some key documents produced by the FGEI in the mid-1960s as foundational documents, including the biography of Turcios Lima, which was written by Ricardo Ramirez, founding member and commander of the EGP in 1967, shortly after Luis Turcios Lima died in a car accident. It was evident that Turcios Lima’s analysis influenced the strategic importance the EGP placed on the indigenous population.

The EGP’s analysis primarily revolved around two related contradictions that they had observed in Guatemalan society: the class contradiction and the ethnic-national contradiction. According to the analysis, the two contradictions were intertwined, as both “arose historically as essential parts of the same system of domination-exploitation.” The EGP defined the ethnic-national contradiction as “the domination of the Indian peoples and their ethnic-cultural identity by the dependent agroexport capitalist system which the ruling class has historically created in our country, and the need to eliminate the economic-class and political base on which this domination rests.” The ethnic-cultural domination emerged historically as a means to facilitate economic domination. The Spanish colonial powers determined that Guatemala’s wealth was in agricultural production, and colonists opted “to preserve basic Indian economic and social

27 EGP, “Indian Peoples,” 1.
28 EGP, “Indian Peoples,” 1.
organizations so as to facilitate exploitation of the rural labor force.” Burdening the indigenous population with the main task of producing social wealth made “the ethnic-cultural status of Indian in Guatemala equivalent to economic status of exploited.” Furthermore, colonial domination, whether military, political, economic or ideological aided in establishing the myth of Spanish superiority and Indian inferiority, thus perpetuating existing economic relations. Therefore, “Cultural oppression – and discrimination as one of its practical manifestations - has, in historical terms, an economic origin and a given class content.”\(^{30}\) The EGP’s analysis made it clear that the ethnic-national contradiction was so intimately tied to class contradictions that the first could only be resolved with the latter, placing the emphasis on class struggle.

The EGP agreed that cultural oppression and discrimination existed in Guatemala as part of a system of dominance. This system of cultural dominance was an outgrowth of economic domination and needed to be approached as such. For this reason, the movement stressed the need to “channel ethnic-national identity toward class-based political solutions, since the dominant class system, historically instituted, readjusted and reproduced, [was] the root of both contradictions.” The EGP’s emphasis on class relations was further strengthened by maintaining that the “Indians as such are not part of the motive forces of the revolution…But as peasants, as semi-proletarians, as agricultural and industrial workers they comprise the majority of workers and peasants, the motive forces of the Revolution.” The movement even warned of the risks of focusing too much on indigenous issues, arguing that such a focus could “distort” the revolutionary process and turn it “into a four centuries late liberation struggle which today can have no

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\(^{30}\) EGP, “Indian Peoples,” 2-4.
revolutionary content.” In fact, the movement maintained that the “main danger [was] that national-ethnic factors [would] burst forth, in detriment of class factors.”

Aspects of the EGP’s position appeared to go beyond class based analysis. Despite introducing the ethnic-national contradiction and other perspectives on ethnic issues, the final conclusions propped up economic relations as the only determining factor in the revolutionary struggle. At the core, the argument that the indigenous people were only a part of the motive forces of the revolution as members of the proletariat and semi-proletariat was similar to the PGT’s position in the 1960s—the position that Turcios Lima and the FGEI dissented from. Although the EGP was founded on Turcios Lima’s idea that the active participation of the indigenous population was necessary for any revolutionary success, their incorporation was based on class position only.

**ORPA’s Perspectives on the Indigenous Question**

ORPA’s perspectives on the indigenous question went beyond the class analysis espoused by the movements and scholars discussed above. The organization maintained that the indigenous population and its cultural heritage were essential to the Guatemalan revolution, were the driving force behind the organization and had to be primary concerns of all non-indigenous members. The fact that the movement elected to develop and operate in the predominantly indigenous, Western highlands highlighted this resolve. The organization’s line of thought certainly contained some ideas, concepts and even analytical parallels to some of the other analyses discussed. However, its analysis offered a new approach to the indigenous question. It was a central aspect of the movement’s

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31 EGP, “Indian Peoples,” 4.
32 Eduardo Galeano, Guatemala, 185.
identity, and in the early 1970s, ORPA leadership began to circulate two lengthy internal documents on the indigenous question.

A fundamental theme throughout ORPA’s analysis was the historic significance of racism in Guatemala’s social relations, seen as one of the most effective instruments of control that had existed since the colonial period. In fact, the organization maintained that its effects were so pervasive that “one cannot understand Guatemalan society, without studying racism.”\(^3\)\(^3\) Racism was a fundamental aspect of the ruling class’ ideology, and for over four centuries, it had influenced and dominated various aspects of Guatemala’s social and economic structures, perpetuating a system that protected the elite minority.\(^3\)\(^4\)

Although it started as a tool of the colonial elite, this dominant ideology spread to all sections of the non-indigenous population, even the working class, whom while suffering economic exploitation often embraced the idea of racial superiority resulting in a situation in which working-class ladinos identified with the very group that exploited them economically.\(^3\)\(^5\)

The organization explained that “this element [racism] that was initially an instrument of exploitation, is later converted into an instrument of division, and the system uses it to divide the exploited people.”\(^3\)\(^6\) The oligarchy essentially found allies to “serve their own class interests” when working-class ladinos embraced and practiced racism, as this “strengthen[ed] the entire exploitative system.” This divisive ideology created massive schisms among the popular classes as the vertical hierarchy that racism

\(^4\) ORPA, *Racismo I*, 3.
created impeded a horizontal cohesion.\textsuperscript{37} All too often, non-indigenous workers, while exploited economically, refused to struggle alongside the indigenous people whom were considered subhuman by the dominant, racist ideology. Even members of the indigenous population accepted the ideology of the dominant class, and this occurred in varying degrees.

To ORPA, racism elicited a variety of responses from the indigenous population. Some ignored its existence, while others denied their cultural heritage in an attempt to identify more closely with the ladino population, and still others tried to confront the problem in the legal arena.\textsuperscript{38} However, ORPA posited that denying the existence of racism was simply another way of identifying with the dominant class and reinforcing its racist ideology.\textsuperscript{39} The organization believed that attempts to identify with the dominant class were inadequate, unable to produce the necessary changes.

We encounter those that believe or feel that their path to liberation or compensation is to take a definitive step: deny their origin. They try desperately to erase all vestiges and possible links with their past, in a superficial and traumatic oblivion; in this way, they identify with the colonizer, and transform into a very particular type of discriminator. Their complete identification finds ecstasy in practicing discrimination, which is the first characteristic adopted from the model they are pursuing. The most significant is their desire to deny and ignore the racial situation, they transform into splendid allies for the dissimulation and artifice of the general situation.\textsuperscript{40}

Attempts to confront the problem within the country’s legal and political institutions impeded real revolutionary change since instead of trying to alter the system, they are working within it. Ultimately, both the denial of racism and attempted reform validated

\textsuperscript{37} ORPA, \textit{Racismo I}, 12.
\textsuperscript{38} ORPA, \textit{Racismo I}, 23-33.
\textsuperscript{40} ORPA, \textit{Racismo I}, 27-28.
the existing system. The organization argued that only a radical transformation and fundamental restructuring of Guatemalan society could liberate the indigenous people from their plight.\footnote{Ibid, 21-22, 30-33.}

ORPA’s analysis of the role of racism in Guatemala represented another prime example of the movement’s broader emphasis on the importance of ideas in historical movement. While the previous chapter highlighted this emphasis in various aspects of the organization’s approach to the struggle, ORPA really underscored the importance of the ideological in its documents on racism. The movement argued that “the ideological is not an abstract category, but has very concrete effects” in society and that racism produced the clearest example in Guatemala of just how powerful ideas could be, spreading and influencing all aspects of society:

We said before that the issue of racism must not be excluded from analysis as being a superstructural effect, now we say that the analysis of ideological aspects for any society, and racism in ours, is an urgent necessity if you want to do something serious and profound. The accuracy and functionality that any analysis of a society can have is intimately tied to the consideration given to ideological aspects…good analysis…must encompass the totality of the problem…[and therefore] it is fundamental and indispensable for a revolutionary organization to integrate ideological aspects in its analysis.\footnote{ORPA, Racismo II, 5-6.}

ORPA was critical of contemporary movements that dismissed the ideological as part of the superstructure, arguing that it had no major effects on society. In the application of Marxist thought, movements erroneously focused on the base (the economic) while neglecting the superstructure (the ideological). ORPA considered this a “mechanical interpretation of Marxist analysis” which “removes all the richness of
Marxism because [the analysis] is confined to just one of the various aspects that Marxism considers.”

One of the traditional positions in the analysis of our society is that the base produces and determines the superstructure, and that is it. They forget that the superstructure is in turn connected with the base, and this same superstructure, in its development, produces elements that consolidate the base.

ORPA maintained that a dialectical process existed between the base and the superstructure, between the economic and the ideological. Whereas an orthodox Marxist interpretation argued that the base produced and determined all other aspects of society, the organization posited that the interactions between the superstructure and the base were paramount to understanding society. Furthermore, any analysis that failed to consider the ideological would result in incomplete conclusions and therefore, a skewed view of society. The organization made it clear that this emphasis on the ideologically, was not an attempt to diminish the role of economic factors, but was to urge the consideration of all aspects of society:

We do not ignore the economic structure as a determinant, and all the class relations that this supposes. But understanding this, while fundamental in its consideration and knowledge, is insufficient to explain the same formation of society to establish a series of mechanisms that are key in the operation of society, as well as comprehending the perpetuation of the system in its totality.

ORPA maintained that this was not a new approach, but that other Marxist theorists, including Marx himself, had previously pointed out the need to address superstructural aspects in social analysis. The movement argued that while Marx’s “monumental work,” Das Kapital, mainly focuses on the capitalist mode of production,

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43 ORPA, Racismo II, 2.
44 ORPA, Racismo II, 3.
45 ORPA, Racismo I, 72-73.
“many aspects of the superstructural order implicitly appear” in that study and that he proposed to study and expand on these in subsequent writings” as seen in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. The document quoted a letter written by Frederick Engels, Marx’s intellectual collaborator in developing his socioeconomic framework, in which Engels wrote that political, philosophical and religious development among other things “rests on economic development...[but that] they all react upon one another and upon the economic base.” Engels continued that it was “not the case that the economic situation is the *cause, alone active*, and everything else only a passive effect” but that there was a “reciprocal interaction.” The movement even pointed to their contemporary French intellectual, Louis Althusser as a more recent example of an intellectual concerned with ideological factors.46 Among Latin American examples, ORPA argued that earlier in the century, the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui had emphasized the importance of ideas, as well as a creative ideological approach, in social analysis. “Racismo I” quoted Mariátegui’s message to workers in Lima, Peru:

> Marxism, of which all speak but few know, and even less comprehend, is fundamentally a dialectic method. Put in other terms, *it is a method that is completely based in reality, on the facts*. It is not, as some erroneously suppose, a body of principles valid for all times and all social systems. Marx extracted his method from history’s own crucible. *Marxism, in every country, in every people, manifests itself in certain conditions, in a certain medium, without neglecting any of its particularities.*47

ORPA lamented that the subsequent generation of intellectuals did not continue to develop Mariátegui’s creative approach and analyze the social problematic in its entirety. ORPA also lamented that despite various Marxist intellectuals suggesting the need for a

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47 ORPA, *Racismo I*, 95, underlines are in the ORPA document; Quote cited from Mariátegui, Mensaje al II Congreso Obrero de Lima, Perú, Amautu No. 5.
greater appreciation for the role of the superstructure, few have given serious consideration to race and racism in their analyses. Apart from “some great authors of the third world,” most theorists, including Marx and Engels, have ignored the existence of racism. ORPA somewhat excused Marx, Engels and other early European theorists, maintaining that the present role of racism in society “was alien to their perception at that time.” The organization believed that a greater concern underlies this omission among more recent western intellectuals considering its pervasive nature in modern international relations. ORPA argued that the “racist content of the western visions is one of the bases and instruments for the expansion of [western] interests and the colonization of much of humanity,” a process which included the “destruction and annihilation of two-thirds of humanity” to achieve the overarching economic objectives.48

The analysis continued that despite the existence of racism in western societies, it was not much of a concern of many western intellectuals as they did not suffer its effects, and were also part of a society that benefited in some way from its “export” in imperial efforts. Even though the “vigorous struggle” of African-American intellectuals and organizations was raising greater awareness of race problems in the United States, ORPA was concerned with the general lack of interest among western intellectuals with analyzing racism, since it constituted one of the “characteristic and permanent elements of all colonizing positions.”49 What concerned the movement even more was the “absence” of this problematic among the colonized. In the case of Guatemala, many on the left not only avoided the issue, but also actively resisted and even stubbornly opposed

including it in socioeconomic analysis.\textsuperscript{50} ORPA believed it was imperative to understand the operation, function and far-reaching effects of racism in order to understand Guatemalan society.

ORPA argued that, as a key element of the superstructure, racism aided in the consolidation of the economic base. The organization posited that the structure of Guatemalan society “cannot be explained nor understood in all its dimensions if one does not consider racism in the formation of that structure.”\textsuperscript{51} The movement argued that the indigenous majority experienced the most severe levels of social marginalization as they suffered both racial discrimination and economic exploitation. According to the analysis, racism had the “dual capacity of [being both] a product and instrument of the system” and that the diffusion of the dominant racist ideology exacerbated the plight of the indigenous people.\textsuperscript{52} Racial discrimination coupled with economic exploitation created a vicious cycle with each reinforcing the other, resulting in an indigenous population that was doubly alienated socially, politically and economically, due to class condition and race.

ORPA analyzed discrimination as the practical manifestation of racism in daily life, and argued that it had an important function in the system:

The practice and philosophy of discrimination are destined to break and deny the human condition. They are designed based on racial differentiation in order to be accepted as common fact. It is one of the most terrible and disgraceful pressures that a people or individual must bear. One’s origin, race, skin color, language, in short their entire being, is irretrievably condemned. It marks them as someone destined for servitude, reminding them of this every instant. The humiliation and disdain, present in all places, expressed in the most minor details, tries to

\textsuperscript{50} ORPA, \textit{Racismo I}, 88-89.
\textsuperscript{51} ORPA, \textit{Racismo II}, 6.
\textsuperscript{52} ORPA, \textit{Racismo I}, 9-11.
annihilate the man in order to convert him into a silent ghost [for economic exploitation].\textsuperscript{53} Historically, racism had been a productive tool in the implementation, function and survival of the system for the benefit of the oligarchy.\textsuperscript{54} Due to the power of ideas in social interactions and relationships, and its discriminatory manifestations, victims would commonly accept it. ORPA pointed out the fact that the indigenous people had overcome the humiliation of racism and rebelled against the system at various moments, including the present, a testament to the fact that while they might be downtrodden, they had not been broken.\textsuperscript{55}

ORPA maintained that Guatemala, like many other Latin American countries, had never experienced a decolonization process. Externally, there had only been “successive changes in the metropolitan dependency,” while internally, there was simply a “readjustment of power,” and the colonial “structures and function” continued under a new guise. While the Spanish colonial period ended in the 1820s, independence only amounted to “breaking political ties with a declining empire,” the indigenous population was still subjected to an internal colonial system, entirely under the control of non-indigenous elite.\textsuperscript{56} A few years before ORPA published this analyses, Guzmán Bockler and Herbert, as well as Martinez, had put forth theories of internal colonialism. Yet, these scholars argued that class relations were at the root, and that resolving the class contradictions would liberate the colonized. ORPA’s analysis went beyond this class-

\textsuperscript{53} ORPA, \textit{Racismo I}, 35-36.
\textsuperscript{54} ORPA, \textit{Racismo I}, 36.
\textsuperscript{55} ORPA, \textit{Racismo I}, 39.
\textsuperscript{56} ORPA, \textit{Racismo I}, 72.
based view of colonial relations, as the organization argued that racism provided a key ideological fortification for the system.

African decolonization theorists Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon heavily influenced this aspect of the organization’s thought. Some former members mentioned Memmi’s *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957) and Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and *Black Skin White Masks* (1952) as books that were read and discussed among the militants, and some who were close to Asturias mentioned the influence they had on his ideological development. It is clear that Memmi and Fanon influenced other aspects of the organization’s ideology, including the general emphasis on ideology, as well as the role of the intellectual in the struggle. ORPA’s colonial analysis, including racism as an integral part of the colonial system and the adoption of decolonization theories, were some of the clearest theoretical intersections. Both theorists detailed and analyzed the many contradictions that existed in colonial societies, contradictions that Asturias believed were also evident in Guatemalan society.

Memmi’s analysis emerged from his experience under French colonial rule in Tunisia. Even though he was one of the colonized he was a member of the Jewish population, which he maintained, “identified as much with the colonizers as with the

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57 A few ORPA documents specifically reference African decolonization theorists, but in most cases the influence of Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi and Amilcar Cabral is primarily evident in ideological parallels. Former members interviewed for this dissertation also recalled the influence of such intellectuals. Zully Schaub remembers reading Fanon as part of her political formation, Zully Schaub de Asturias, Interview by author. Digital recording. Guatemala City, Guatemala, September 1, 2010; Lydia Santos talked about reading Fanon’s writing on Algeria studying the colonial situation and racism, Lydia Santos. Interview by author. Digital recording. Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, August 11, 2010; Manuel stated that they drew theoretical knowledge from the anti-colonial struggles of Africa, listing by name Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks*, as well as decolonization theorist Amilcar Cabral as fundamental to this aspect, both referenced by ORPA, Manuel (pseudonym). Interview by author. Digital recording. Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, August 5, 2010.
colonized.” His unique position provided him insight and perspective into both worlds. Even though the Jewish population was “one small notch above” the Muslim population in the colonial hierarchy, he denounced colonialism, and his status and its “laughable” privileges to join the anti-colonial struggle.\(^58\)

Memmi understood that economic aspects and the accompanying privileges were at the heart of the colonial system; arguing that economic determinism could not fully explain the colonial relationship as greater complexities were at play including the ideological. He maintained:

> Colonial privilege is not solely economic. To observe the life of the colonizer and the colonized is to discover rapidly that the daily humiliation of the colonized, his objective subjugation, are not merely economic. Even the poorest colonizer thought himself to be – and actually was – superior to the colonized. This was too part of colonial privilege.\(^59\)

The privileges of the colonizer extended beyond the economic sphere into an ideology of superiority, which also constituted colonial privilege. Furthermore, colonial social relations were the products of human behavior and did not solely revolve around profit motive, but also by experience, feeling and suffering, from both sides of the colonial relationship.\(^60\) Therefore various phenomena affected, informed and reproduced the colonial relationship.

Memmi posited that colonization needed to be overthrown with a revolution, as any attempts to reform the system were insufficient in that they would leave the contradictions of colonialism in tact. The colonizer attempts to maintain the advantages of colonialism while mitigating the “ugly consequences,” which would do nothing to

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59 Memmi, *Colonizer*, xii.
60 Memmi, *Colonizer*, xiii.
resolve the inherent contradictions of that system. Memmi argued that the “mere existence of the colonizer creates oppression, and only the complete liquidation of colonization permits the colonized to be freed.” Therefore, the “refusal of the colonized cannot be anything but absolute, that is, not only revolt, but a revolution.” In Memmi’s analysis, this was not only an economic restructuring but also an ideological shift as the formerly colonized could only truly be free when they stopped using the negative categories and characterizations that had been appropriated by the colonizers as part of the dominant system.  

Fanon made similar observations of the colonial experience while working for the French colonial government in Algeria, a system that he defected from in order to join the anti-colonial struggle. Fanon, like Memmi, understood the power of the ideological in social relations and the need to study the interactions between the base and superstructure. He also maintained that the colonial relationship could not be understood by economic analysis alone and that racism played an important role in supporting the colonial structure:

The originality of the colonial context is that economic reality, inequality, and the immense difference of ways of life never come to mask the human realities. When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species. In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. This is why Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem.

Fanon outlined colonial attempts to establish both racial and cultural superiority over the native population in an effort of dehumanization and self-denial, and of course,

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61 Memmi, *Colonizer*, 147-152.
62 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 40.
acceptance of the dominant culture.\textsuperscript{63} Therefore, the decolonization struggle required more than simply taking over the economic base and political apparatus; it required destroying the colonizer’s ideology that aided in social control through the establishment of cultural and moral norms.

Fanon advocated the need to root out colonial ideas and attitudes from all areas of society, or they would pose a danger to the newly liberated nation, as elite would attempt to recreate the aspects of the colonial system. He explained:

But it so happens sometimes that decolonization occurs in areas which have not been sufficiently shaken by the struggle for liberation, and there may be found those same know-all, smart, wily intellectuals. We find intact in them the manner and forms of thought picked up during their association with the colonialist bourgeoisie. Spoilt children of yesterday’s colonialism and of today’s national governments, they organize the loot of whatever national resources exist.\textsuperscript{64}

Fanon believed that only a violent revolution could effectively end colonialism and fundamentally alter social relations. The colonizers have underscored the power of violent force in the establishment and survival of the colonial system, which he considers a twist of irony:

He [the native] of who they have never stopped saying that the only language he understands is that of force, decides to give utterance by force. In fact, as always, the settler has shown him the way he should take if he is to become free. The argument the native chooses has been furnished by the settler, and by an ironic turning of the tables it is the native who now affirms that the colonialist understands nothing but force. The colonial regime owes its legitimacy to force and at no times tries to hide this aspect of things.\textsuperscript{65}

According to Fanon, violence was necessary to destroy the colonial apparatus, as colonialism was “violence in its natural state” and would only “yield when confronted

\textsuperscript{63} Fanon, \textit{Wretched of the Earth}, 38-44.
\textsuperscript{64} Fanon, \textit{Wretched of the Earth}, 48.
\textsuperscript{65} Fanon, \textit{Wretched of the Earth}, 84 (italics in the original text).
with greater violence.”  

The violent struggle also served as a unifying force among the colonized to counteract the divisiveness of the colonial era, and at the individual level, it was a “cleansing force…it frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect.”  

The ideas of Fanon and Memmi, as well as other decolonization theorists influenced ORPA’s approach to Guatemala’s internal colonialism, as well as the role of racism in the structure, and the need for violence to overcome it.

ORPA believed that Guatemala’s internal colonialism contained many of the same problems and contradictions that Memmi and Fanon had observed. The colonial relationship extended beyond class relations and economic privileges as the dominant racist ideology, and the social ills that flowed from it, such as discrimination and negation of identity, played a central role in social relations helping to sustain the economic exploitation. Similarly, the movement agreed that only a revolution could effectively destroy the colonial system and the racist ideology that helped sustain it, as trying to peacefully reform the existing system was futile, and actually reinforced it. ORPA was adamant about the necessity of a revolutionary approach and the important and liberating role of the colonized in that revolutionary process. To quote “Racismo I” at length:

There is no doubt that this essential and initial process of restitution and insurgency among the discriminated would be incomplete and would have insignificant derivatives if it is not firmly accompanied by another aspect, that of the revolutionary vision, both in the confrontation with the current system and the objective of a new society. The colonized rises up and struggles for his identity, or manages to do it based on that [revolutionary vision]. In practice, this is simultaneously converted into an end and a means. It is not a graceful concession that [the colonized] receives from the discriminators; it is their presence and

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66 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 61.
67 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 93-94.
determined participation in a common task that mandates it. Therefore, the path [of the colonized] is not in the narrow vision of improving their community within the system. [It] would be isolated and unproductive to reapply their knowledge within the perspectives and possibilities that are offered by the current society. The position of the colonized is righteous for himself and his people to the extent that he participates in the radical transformation of society…In questioning the country’s prevailing order since the conquest, it must be clear [to the colonized] that the true meaning of the rescue and vindication of what is ours, in all its manifestations and profundity, has its reason and origin in the definitive confrontation. His unique and authentic possibility is the same revolutionary and transformative essence. To think otherwise is not only denying all potential, but indicative of their own insecurity and immaturity.68

Similar to Memmi and Fanon, ORPA maintained that a revolution was necessary to destroy the colonial apparatus and the powerful ideologies that supported it, ideas of differentiation that categorize some as superior and others as inferior. Racism performed this function in Guatemala and therefore, had to be addressed in the country’s decolonization process. Furthermore, the organization believed in the transformative powers of a revolutionary process, both at the individual level and the national level. The organization maintained that the new society would be forged through the colonized people actively overthrowing the colonial system and everything it represented. Only such a process could profoundly alter Guatemalan’s social relations.

The internal document “What is the Use of Knowing History?” presented an interpretive analysis of this continued colonial relationship. While the two studies on racism did well to contextualize the ideas in Guatemalan society, this document, through an examination of the country’s history from pre-colonial times to the 1954 intervention, provided further historical context and perspective to some of the ideas therein, including the racism, and the accompanying discrimination and denial of identity that abounded in

Guatemala’s social relations. One goal of the document was to counteract the “official history” that had tried to hide the history of the native population in order to “break us as a people, destroying our identity.”

We can say that the destruction of our identity leads to ignorance of our values as a people; it leads to the belief that it is impossible to rise up, to recover; it leads to the destruction of ourselves as individuals and as a people. [Those in power] try to make us believe that we are beings without roots, without history, without values.69

On the contrary, the analysis maintained that having a greater understanding of history, including “knowing when the subjugation and domination by the oppressors began,” can strengthen the people’s struggle, as history could serve as a “weapon of liberation” just as its manipulation served as an “instrument of oppression.”70

The early chapters of the document presented an interpretive history of the Maya population, highlighting cultural values and advancements including astronomy, mathematics and architecture, among other aspects, followed by the history of the conquest, the colonial period and the modern era from independence through the Revolution of 1944-1954. The document challenged the racist histories that promoted a superiority-inferiority dichotomy by celebrating the attributes of western society and culture while denigrating native culture. The organization maintained that “all peoples are equal” with the same “potential,” and all could “achieve the same levels in the social sense;” and even though historically some had been able to exert control and dominance over others, this did not signify that a people or a culture were inherently superior. Instead, differences in material conditions at historical junctures enabled some peoples to

69 ORPA, Para Que Sirve la Historia, 13.
70 ORPA, Para Que Sirve la Historia, 13, 16.
take advantage of the labor and resources of other peoples. However, dominance in the modern world had created and reinforced racist theories that “establish differences between peoples and cultures,” not to study and appreciate cultural diversity, “but to establish degrees of superiority or inferiority between peoples,” which the organization maintained was “false.”

After delineating various aspects of Maya culture to highlight the important roots of Guatemala’s indigenous population, the document examined the Spanish conquest, presenting it as “the destruction of a culture, a people and social organization through terror” with the primary objective of occupying the land and its resources, and forcing the previous owners to work on it. In essence, the Spanish tried to destroy the people and culture in order to “appropriate the land, obligate the people to work it and take advantage of that labor,” the first step toward establishing a “new system of exploitation in Guatemala.” This exploitative system was established and institutionalized through a concerted effort by the Spanish Crown, the landed oligarchy and the Catholic Church during the colonial period, an era that only produced “death, desolation, suffering; exploitation and racist discrimination.” The analysis continued:

[The colonial period] left us subjected to the exploitative class that emerged at that time. The colonial legacy that we are left with is a ruling class that developed over time and continues the same, with some variations and additions. We are left with a society and system marked by racism, as a principal ingredient to maintain the exploitation and oppression. This is why the regime has been able to last so long.

71 ORPA, Para Que Sirve la Historia, 24-26.
72 ORPA, Para Que Sirve la Historia, 74.
73 Ibid, 93-94.
The document explained that since the first Spaniards arrived, they worked to establish a social hierarchy based on official racial differentiation and categorization, dividing the people by classifying some as superior to others. According to ORPA, the colonial relationship has persisted to the present, albeit with some “variations and additions.” The colonial elite carried out independence, without popular participation, in order to “preserve themselves and preserve their interests,” not to make any real changes to social and economic relations. For the most part, the colonial status quo, both the economic exploitation and racist ideology that propped it up, continued unabated. Instead of any qualitative transformation, the indigenous majority continued to suffer the exploitative and discriminatory system established by the Spanish, the only difference being a change in name.

The document traced this colonial legacy of continued economic exploitation and racial discrimination through some key events in the independence era and concluded with the short-lived democratic opening that occurred from 1944 to 1954. While many refer to this period as the Guatemalan Revolution, ORPA maintained that it “must be understood…as a process of limited reform” and that those reforms failed to destroy the power of the dominant class. Even though it was “pushed aside” for a period, “it conserved its economic power, part of its political power and all of the ideological influence it had.” So while the traditional elite forfeited some of their historic political power to the successive democratically elected presidents, the two central aspects of the colonial relations prevailed, the economic control and the dominant ideology of racism.

74 Ibid, 97.
75 ORPA, Para Que Sirve la Historia, 106-111.
76 ORPA, Para Que Sirve la Historia, 161.
that supported it. While this specific document ended its historical analysis in 1954, the organization maintained that these colonial relations continued to the present.

Similar to the analyses of Memmi and Fanon, ORPA maintained that only a revolution could bring an end to colonization and sufficiently alter social relations in Guatemala. Furthermore, the movement agreed that violence was not only a viable option, but was in fact necessary to overthrow the colonial system and its racist ideologies as the system itself was fundamentally violent. ORPA outlined the differences between the oppressive violence of the system and revolutionary violence necessary to overthrow it. The oppressive violence included the “torture, mass killings [and] the disappearances” that “form only part of a long chain of acts that have a perfect structuring and only one meaning: the perpetuation of the system.” While these represented the most extreme levels of that violence, other forms of abuse, mistreatment, hazing and threat of violence also played a central role in sustaining the system, and were even more commonplace within Guatemalan society, which made them more difficult to measure. ORPA argued that this oppressive violence was a protection of Guatemala’s socioeconomic and political relations, and would “be present as long as revolutionary change is not achieved,” and would in fact increase as the privileges of the dominant class were threatened.77

ORPA had a very different view of revolutionary violence and its important and necessary role in combating and destroying the current system. The movement in no way celebrated violence, and labeled it “unpleasant.” However, it believed it was an “imperious necessity” to confront the system. Revolutionary violence needed to be

77 ORPA, Racismo I, 105, 109.
“exercised rationally and responsibly, with a perfect and clear political objective in its immediate application, but above all in its strategic conception…applied and utilized in a very strict manner, selective and indispensable, that form part of a general framework of the war and not of isolated and desperate outbreaks and manifestations.”78 According to the movement, violence was necessary to establish the necessary revolutionary changes.

Our thought and position are in agreement with those that think that the only way possible to achieve revolutionary transformation is through violence. We consider it a general truth, valid in the specificities of our country. Reality demonstrates that there is no possibility of liberation from the world of the oppressor, nor of real social transformation, if it is not through the use of violence. The reasoning is very clear and determined; there is no other way to break the iron circle, if one seriously thinks about it. Either use violence or be resigned to suffer this system forever. It will not change nor surrender freely that which for centuries it has defended and usurped by blood and fire, but it will do so by force, facing it and overcoming it in this way.79

Just as Memmi and Fanon had recognized in their respective studies on colonialism in Africa, ORPA understood that the dominant class would not willingly give up their privileges. Over centuries, the elite had demonstrated clear intent to retain control at all costs, instituting oppressive violence in order to protect the system. The elite had carefully constructed an economic, political and social system supported by a dominant ideology that helped perpetuate the arrangement. According to ORPA, history had shown that those at top of the arrangement were not going to graciously step down due to popular outcries of injustice, or even the existence of insurgencies, but would fight to the bitter end employing even greater levels of violence when necessary to maintain the beneficial system.

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78 ORPA, Racismo I, 111-112.
79 ORPA, Racismo I, 110.
Conclusion

ORPA believed that Guatemalan society could not be understood in its entirety without the consideration of all aspects of that society. The movement challenged orthodox interpretations of Marx that focused solely on economic relations, without giving proper attention to the role of ideas in those economic relations, and social relations more broadly. Racism played an integral part in those social relations. ORPA leadership maintained that a dialectical relationship existed between the economic base and the superstructure and that it was impossible to fully understand one without analyzing the other. While this basic position was central to the movement’s approach to the struggle, it was the documents on racism that most developed this analysis.

Broadly, the movement argued that class issues could not be isolated from issues of race and ethnicity, as they were in constant interaction, informing, creating, recreating and sustaining one another. ORPA advocated the destruction of that dominant ideology of racism and the colonial society that it helped sustain in order to create a multicultural society, with equal participation of the indigenous population.
Chapter 4: Public Discourse

In September 1979, when ORPA began its military operations, the movement publicly distributed written propaganda for the first time. Up until that point, documents produced by the movement had only been used internally for the ideological development of both long-time members and new recruits. The initiation of armed struggle necessitated new types of literature in order to convey the organization’s ideas and aims to the general public, and for that purpose, ORPA produced a variety of publications, ranging from monthly bulletins detailing the movement’s military activities to booklets providing a more in-depth socioeconomic analysis of the country. This chapter details the movement’s public discourse, analyzing some of the central themes of that discourse and how it reflected and promoted the ideology of the movement. Of course, the main goal of distributing publications was to gain support among the population, whether in the form of new recruits or less-official, perhaps even tacit, solidarity with the movement. External publications provided the vehicle to do this by promoting a particular interpretation of the Guatemalan reality through the movement’s specific ideological lens. The organization was determined to provide a new epistemology to the public through its critiques and analyses in order to establish a common understanding of the deficiencies of Guatemala’s political and socioeconomic relations, thus helping recruit a broad support base and forward the revolutionary cause in order to change those relations.

ORPA’s public discourse offered analyses of a wide array of events that occurred both within Guatemala and beyond its borders. The most recurrent topics discussed and analyzed in the publications were state repression, the Revolution of 1944, the democratic
farce and government corruption, the plight of peasantry, imperialism, the militarization of the oligarchy, indigenous issues and women’s issues. In an effort to appeal to a maximum number of people, the movement sought to present issues that were directly related to the average Guatemalan, issues that affected the laboring and middle classes alike. While useful for analytical and organizational purposes, the broad categories were not mutually exclusive in the organization’s discourse. Overlap certainly existed in discussions of indigenous issues and the peasantry, and both themes certainly included state repression. Meanwhile, analysis of the Guatemalan Revolution frequently either started or ended with discussing the democratic farce. External publications typically addressed multiple of the aforementioned themes in a synthetic critique of the movement’s interpretation of Guatemalan reality.

ORPA’s external documents further highlighted the organization’s emphasis on ideology as many themes were meant to arouse human emotion by appealing to a broad sense of injustice. Furthermore, a central aspect of the existing race and gender relations were the social ideologies that created, supported and perpetuated those relations in Guatemalan society. The movement was committed to understanding the dominant ideology in order to effectively confront it. As we have seen, ORPA desired to establish not only well-informed members, but also produce militants driven by moral strength and determination, willing to make great sacrifices in order to pursue the revolution.

One limitation of an analysis of ORPA’s discourse is that it is difficult to know the reach and reception of the movement’s publications, much less exactly how the audience understood the ideas contained and promoted therein. The audience was never
polled, and even if they had been, state repression would have precluded sincere participation. An ethnographic study focused on the reception and understanding of the movement’s ideas could provide some insight, yet this would undoubtedly be limited to a small section of the population. The amount of time that has lapsed since the original distribution of the documents could also be problematic in an ethnographic study when considering people may project more recent political conclusions back on the past.

The movement’s external publications varied in presentation due to the disparate educational levels in the country. For example, many documents were heavily illustrated in order to reach the largely uneducated, illiterate, rural population, while other documents were strictly text and geared toward educated middle-class urbanites. The language employed also typically reflected the target audience, with some documents written in a simplistic Spanish with a basic vocabulary, while others used more complex terms and ideas. In addition, some documents were published in foreign languages (including English and Arabic) for distribution to the international community.

The particular events being discussed varied from document to document and year to year, but ORPA’s socioeconomic and political analysis remained consistent throughout the war. The consistency of the movement’s analysis is especially significant when considering its cooperation with orthodox Marxist movements in the URNG. In 1981, due to a few factors, not the least of which was the military’s growing urban and rural offensives, ORPA began to coordinate some tactical efforts with the EGP in an “attempt to control the nucleus of the highlands,” essentially the heart of the country, the
area where the departments of Quiché, Sololá and Chimaltenango meet.¹ This new willingness to look past some tactical and ideological differences in order to work together was solidified into an official coalition in January 1982 when ORPA, the EGP, the FAR and PGT formed the URNG. Even though the URNG represented a unified front, each organization retained autonomy in their respective regions of operation and continued to disseminate their own literature. ORPA’s external publications reflect this ideological autonomy.

ORPA publicly distributed its literature from September 1979 to December 1996, with the first couple of years being prior to the formation of the URNG. The organization’s analytical framework remained consistent throughout the war, despite its membership in the URNG.² The autonomy of the four member organizations was further highlighted at the end of the war in 1996, when, transitioning into a legal political party, the URNG published a document calling for political unity in the post-war period regardless of prior allegiances to one of the member organizations.³ In early 1997, Rodrigo Asturias issued a similar appeal in a message directed toward members of the recently dissolved ORPA, encouraging active support for the URNG’s peacetime political agenda.⁴ While both calls for unity after the war exposed tensions and divisions between the organizations and members of those organizations that comprised the URNG, they also highlighted the level of autonomy of each organization. Even after

¹ Le Bot, guerra en tierras mayas, 198.
² See Jared Bibler, “The Ideological Underpinnings of the Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms” (2007, Unpublished MA thesis, Ohio University) for a content analysis of ORPA’s external publications, specifically comparing the movement’s discourse before and after becoming part of the URNG.
³ URNG, Guatemala, la democracia plena: meta revolucionaria en el fin del milenio, orientacion sobre el momento actual (Guatemala: Ediciones URNG, 1996).
⁴ URNG, Organizacion del Pueblo en Armas (Guatemala: Ediciones URNG, 1997).
joining the strategic alliance, ORPA retained the ideological flexibility and creativity that had originally set it apart from its contemporaries.

It is also significant that the movement’s public discourse was consistent with the ideas formulated and presented in the various internal documents analyzed in the previous chapters, representing a level of sincerity between the movement’s ideological underpinnings and the public image it presented. ORPA was not a hardline Marxist organization attempting to present a nationalist façade, but a movement that sought a flexible analytical framework, borrowing some Marxist perspectives and not restricted by dogmatism.

One former member explained that ORPA had a propaganda team that oversaw the publication process of external documents. In the early stages of the war, Asturias, as commander in chief, directly supervised the production of the documents, providing the themes and analysis to be presented and frequently choosing the specific text to be used. The team would then prepare a draft document that Asturias would thoroughly proofread and make any necessary revisions in the text and presentation. However, over time, the responsibility to produce and the authorization to print the documents was delegated to the propaganda team. A sizeable number of people on the propaganda team were Catholic clergy, both priests and nuns. The documents were prepared and printed on mimeograph machines, which enabled mass printings and the process was typically done in Catholic convents or parishes, which provided a protective cover. Even though ORPA did not embrace Liberation Theology, Catholic clergy and the printing operations they controlled provided significant support to the movement. After printing, the documents were
strategically delivered to those responsible for mass distribution in the various organizational fronts, including the urban and rural fronts, as well as the international network.5

In the rural areas of operation, ORPA distributed its literature through an action referred to as “armed propaganda.” The guerrillas would enter and secure a plantation or village, disarming any police or security guards. Subsequently, they called the villagers and workers to a meeting in which they shared a revolutionary message and distributed materials such as pamphlets and flyers. Such were the style and logistics of ORPA’s first operation on September 18, 1979, at the Mujulia coffee plantation close to Quetzaltenango, and this process was recreated many times during the civil war.

It was at Mujulia in September 1979 that ORPA distributed its first public document, a 20-page booklet titled “The Necessary and Inevitable War.” The document employed simplistic language accompanied by many illustrations in order to relay the movement’s message to the rural population. The main goal of this initial external publication was to both announce the emergence of the group and introduce it goals to the population. Under three main subsections, “This Is Who We Are,” “This Is What We Think” and “This Is What We Fight For,” the movement broadly explained its ideas and why it was committed to armed struggle. In this introductory publication, ORPA broached many of the general themes that reappeared in its discourse during the war, including state repression, peasant and indigenous issues and imperialism.6

5 The information regarding the propaganda team and the production of the external publications comes from email correspondence with a former member/leader of ORPA who wishes to remain anonymous.
6 ORPA, La Guerra Necesaria e Inevitable (Guatemala: Ediciones ORPA, 9/1979).
The document criticized the collusion of the wealthy, the government and the military, declaring that the only thing that this alliance “gives the people is repression, exploitation and misery.”\(^7\) It declared that a small wealthy, oligarchic class not only controlled the land and other productive resources, but also exercised great control over the government and military, which facilitated the exploitation of the poor and usurpation of their land. After losing land and resources, peasants were forced to look for work on plantations with an increasing workload and diminishing wages. Furthermore, when the work was completed, the owners of the plantations cheated them on weights and measurements.\(^8\) The document then condemned the state-sanctioned repression and violence that propped up the exploitative system:

The military and police are found in all parts because the government does not want to resolve the [country’s] problems. They kill those that defend the rights of the people and try to scare the population with assassinations and kidnappings. The groups that kidnap, torture and kill are part of the army. They remove the uniform and give themselves names of groups that do not exist in order to confuse the people.\(^9\)

The target audience would have been familiar with such state repression, whether having witnessed it personally or simply hearing stories about it. The text also referenced death squads that were operating in Guatemala at the time. Such forces consisted of plain clothed military and police personnel, another familiarity to most, even if only by word of mouth.

The document presented some of the difficulties faced by the indigenous population. While suffering the same economic reality as ladino peasants, such as loss of

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\(^7\) Ibid, 1.
\(^8\) ORPA, *La Guerra Necesaria*, 9.
\(^9\) Ibid, 13.
land and subsequent plantation work, the analysis pointed out that this was nothing new for the indigenous population, as it had been dealing with this for centuries. The text reads:

The [indigenous population] has been abused, despised and humiliated for a long time. The [wealthy] have always stolen their land and obligated them to work through force. They have destroyed the great works of their ancestors, and scorned their languages and customs; and the same is still happening today. The wealthy have separated the working people. They humiliate and abuse the natives. The rich maintain the disunity among the poor to facilitate exploitation.  

Even though this brief analysis did not mention racism by name, it introduced a few of the organization’s main ideas concerning the indigenous population that had been elaborated in internal documents. The simplified analysis highlighted the historic and present discrimination and denial of culture suffered by the natives, as well as the attempts to divide the working class along ethnic lines, thus implying the role of a dominant racist ideology.

An illustration positioned directly above the aforementioned statement on the indigenous population depicted the state-directed violence of the Panzós massacre that had occurred on May 29, 1978. A land dispute developed when an oligarchic family with ties to private capital and the US government began to push titleless, indigenous peasants off land they had been cultivating for decades. This dispute culminated in violence when the military called the peasants to Panzós “to resolve the issue only to be shot down upon their arrival in the town square by troops already in firing positions.” At least 34 peasants died in the massacre, and while the majority were men between the ages of 19 and 30, women and children were also among the dead. Others succumbed to wounds sustained

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10 Ibid, 11.
that day. The government initially claimed that the peasants had died in a clash with guerrillas but shortly thereafter it emerged that the victims were buried in a single mass grave “alleged to have been dug by tractors two days earlier.”

This also pointed to state forces, as the guerrillas did not have tractors. Even though the text of the ORPA document did not contextualize the Panzós massacre, the organization employed this illustration to conjure up memories of the massacre, and denote state repression directed toward the indigenous population.

Figure 4.1: Illustration from ORPA, *La Guerra Necesaria e Inevitable* (Guatemala: Ediciones ORPA, 9/1979), 11.

ORPA’s first public document also broached the theme of imperialism by discussing the power and influence of foreigners in Guatemala. According to the analysis, this consisted of a “group of people from other countries who are owners of the factories

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and big businesses” who “control” the banks and many of the country’s mineral resources. The organization accused the United States and Israel of helping to protect these foreign interests by supporting the Guatemalan military with “counsel, money, weapons and soldiers.” This portion of the document was accompanied by an illustration depicting primary resources leaving the country while military equipment entered, specifically implicating the United States and Israel in this imperial relationship.

This initial document also contained one of the ORPA’s few references to religion. It is important to note that the organization did not employ ideas specific to Catholic Liberation Theology, a widespread ideology in Latin America at the time. This is especially noteworthy considering that this ideology was a catalyst in the radicalization of many former ORPA members who attended Catholic schools or participated in religiously affiliated social justice groups. Also Catholic nuns and clergy oversaw the production of many external documents, and various movements throughout the region, including the EGP in Guatemala, utilized the Catholic networks and employed liberation theology to recruit new members. While former members have discussed Asturias as a spiritual individual, the movement did not utilize religious arguments to appeal to the spiritual sensibilities of the population.

12 ORPA, La Guerra Necesaria, 7.
One former member posited that embracing liberation theology would have amounted to adopting or promoting a specific religion, and Asturias believed that religion could be very sectarian. Instead, leaders wanted to ensure respect for people from both religious and non-religious backgrounds and maintained that a broad respect for humanity needed to be placed above religion.\(^\text{14}\) The organization’s first document presented this open approach to religion, and expressed concern that religious sectarianism could impede class unity:

> The revolution is not against religion. It respects all religions. The customs that our [indigenous] ancestors have passed on are also a religion. We all have the right to practice the religion that we have. All the poor must be united for the struggle, not separated by religion.\(^\text{15}\)

The movement maintained that religion must not act as a divisive force, but that the disparate belief systems and practices that existed in Guatemala were welcome in the struggle. The common social situation should unify the population. The brief section of the document was accompanied by an illustration (Figure 4.2) that shows people flooding out of Catholic and Protestant churches, as well as Maya religious sites, to join the armed struggle.

\(^\text{14}\) Former member that wishes to remain anonymous. Interview by author. Guatemala City, June 2010.

\(^\text{15}\) ORPA, *La Guerra Necesaria*, 15.
Other former members, often radicalized in religious-based activist groups or schools, discussed an organizational respect for religious beliefs and practices, and a mutual respect among members. Two former members recalled that while receiving

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16 Not all interviewed were asked about religion within the movement, but some discussed this theme. Sylvia said that religion was neither promoted nor prohibited by leaders. Sylvia (nom de guerre). Interviewed by author. Digital recording. Guatemala City, August 31, 2010; Nery mentioned how the movement promoted respect for all religions. Nery. Interview by author. Digital recording. 29 de Diciembre, Guatemala, July 28, 2010; Manuel maintained that the movement respected all forms of
tactical training in Cuba, the spirituality of some ORPA militants rebuffed the atheism of some Cuban instructors, causing them to stop criticizing religion.\textsuperscript{17}

Asturias’s view of dogma, and the importance that he placed on ideas and culture might also help explain the movement’s treatment of religion. Asturias’s concern with the limitations of dogma to address reality is a plausible explanation as to why ORPA did not adopt liberation theology in its discourse.\textsuperscript{18} ORPA understood and appreciated the power of ideas, including their ability to unify and divide people. It seems logical that the organization would not have wanted to adopt any one religious ideology that would risk alienating those who embraced another. In actuality, the organization’s emphasis on moral strength, determination and a revolutionary spirit would have allowed an easy transition from any religious or spiritual belief that promoted social justice and humanism.

Apart from the criticism and analysis included in the document, the organization offered a self-description under the subheading “This Is Who We Are.” The movement claimed to have been “born in the rural areas” and have developed in the “difficult guerrilla life in the mountains.” The document maintained that it was a “responsible and serious” organization with years of experience in clandestine preparations “determined to begin the war fighting against those that exploit and despise” the people. Accordingly, the organization maintained that it “will occupy all its time, make any effort and tolerate

\textsuperscript{17} Nery. Interview by author. Digital recording. 29 de Diciembre, Guatemala, July 28, 2010; Lydia Santos. Interview by author. Digital recording. Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, August 11, 2010.

\textsuperscript{18} Kruijt and Van Meurs, \textit{Guerrillero}, 116.
all sacrifices” to effectively carry out the revolutionary struggle. In a concluding subsection, “This Is What We Fight For,” ORPA recapitulated the many reasons for the struggle discussed throughout the document, such as combating state repression and imperialism, as well as more immediate motivations of hunger and poverty:

We fight to end the hunger and social problems of the people…and to make sure that our children have a good education and a good life. We fight to take the plantations and factories from the rich. So they can no longer continue to exploit the peasants and workers, and production will serve the people. We also fight so that the mines and oil are in the service of the people…We fight to establish respect and unity…to end the humiliation and contempt of the indigenous people…we will appreciate the languages and customs of our native population. We fight to have a revolutionary country with a people’s government that ends all the injustices and solves the problems and needs of the children, youth, women and workers. We fight to end the exploitation of the poor…We fight…so the abuses will end…the torture and assassinations will end and our people will be able to live peacefully and securely.

While not the entire list of the reasons for the struggle, the statement highlighted some key social, economic and political changes the movement advocated. ORPA presented its radical socioeconomic goals in its first document, laid out its raison d’etre. Even if the larger issues of collusion between the elite and military or imperialism were lost on the peasant population, social problems such as hunger, illiteracy and poverty were well understood.

This initial document distributed in the movement’s inaugural, armed propaganda action was representative of much of the movement’s subsequent literature. The themes presented in this document would be further developed and presented to different audiences during the movement’s public actions from 1979 to 1996. The consistency of the movement’s analysis throughout the conflict allows for a more in-depth categorical

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discussion of the themes of state repression, the plight of the peasantry, the Revolution of 1944, the democratic farce and government corruption, the militarization of the oligarchy, imperialism, indigenous issues and women’s issues and how these themes were presented in the movement’s external documents. The militarization of the oligarchy, women’s issues and indigenous issues were examined as aspects of the ORPA’s ideology in Chapters Two and Three. The other categories employed in this chapter, while constituting part of ORPA’s interpretation of Guatemalan society, were more specific to external documents aimed at fomenting support for the organization.

*State Repression*

ORPA publications regularly condemned state repression, labeling the military and other state security forces as enemies of the people while presenting the organization as the people’s army. This was an easy narrative to construct as the government’s human rights record helped corroborate ORPA’s accusations. The Guatemalan military and other state-sanctioned security forces carried out an extreme and systematic violent repression, resulting in hundreds of massacres that destroyed entire villages. The massacres were usually accompanied by other crimes against humanity, such as kidnappings and torture. The Panzós massacre was just one such case in a brutally repressive military campaign effectuated against the general population under the guise of counterinsurgency. After the war, two separate commissions, the Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) and the Recovery of Historical Memory Project (REMHI), thoroughly documented the human rights abuses that had occurred during the conflict. Both panels determined that the
military and other state-sponsored security forces were responsible for over 90 percent of the human rights abuses.\textsuperscript{21}

The CEH, the commission officially sanctioned by the 1996 Peace Accords, determined that over 650 massacres occurred during the war and attributed 93 percent of the human rights violations to the state forces and only three percent to the guerrilla. Of the human rights violations attributed to the guerrilla forces, only a very small fraction has been associated with ORPA. The report acknowledges that ORPA carried out extrajudicial assassinations, but that the number was nominal and the victims were not arbitrarily selected, with the majority consisting of military commissioners and army accomplices. Of the 32 massacres that the CEH report attributed to the guerrilla forces, none were positively linked to ORPA. In fact, when the government blamed the organization for a 1988 massacre of 22 peasant men in the village of Aguacate, third-party researchers investigated the case and exposed many inconsistencies in the official story, effectively exonerating the movement.\textsuperscript{22} ORPA’s human rights record, especially relative to the government’s, provided the movement with a moral high ground from which to denounce the government, proving an effective recruitment tool in rural areas. Daily, the population witnessed and experienced state violence first-hand, a reality that enabled ORPA to present itself as the people’s army and the necessary alternative to state repression.

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\textsuperscript{21} CEH, \textit{Memoria del Silencio}; REMHI, \textit{Guatemala: Never Again!}.
A February 1980 issue of *Siembra*, one of the organization’s monthly publications, promoted joining the struggle as way to combat the repressive reality. The issue condemned the “criminal” government and their brutal repression against the “people,” arguing that the high levels of repression reflected the “weakness of a government that does not understand, nor can solve [national] problems in any other way.” The attack on the Spanish Embassy one month earlier, which resulted in the “massacre” of 37 peasants who had taken refuge inside, represented the most recent example of the “weakness and brutality” of the government and its allies.

ORPA recognized the ability to take advantage of the military’s human rights record by appealing to the broad sense of injustice felt by many and redirecting the population’s anger into activism. After denouncing the repression, the *Siembra* issue shifted its focus to recruitment. The publication promoted various levels of participation in the war, ranging from direct participation in the armed struggle to key auxiliary roles such as helping to feed and clothe the “people’s army,” or even digging trenches to impede military movements. The document also discussed the importance of informing on the military’s movements, as well as ways to stop military recruitment and conscription. To combat the guerrillas, the military had stepped up recruitment and conscription efforts, especially in rural areas, pitting peasants against peasants. ORPA

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23 *Siembra* was a heavily illustrated, monthly publication written in simplistic language in order to convey the movement’s message to the rural population, a goal that was conveyed in the series subtitle, “Talking with the Peasant.” *Siembra* which means sowing, as in sowing or planting seeds, carried the double-meaning of referring to a task that peasants performed, and also meant to signify sowing seeds of consciousness among the population.

called on the people to refuse to fill the ranks of the repressive military and instead join the people’s revolutionary army. An illustration of peasants conversing included captions such as “the people have their own army” and “this is our war, the war of the people.”\textsuperscript{25} ORPA tried to identify with the people so they would identify with the organization and its struggle.

The organization presented the theme of state repression in many documents, making use of both text and illustrations. The illustration below (Figure 4.3) was found in the April 1981 issue of Siembra. The accompanying text denounced the massacre that the “criminal” army carried out in the village Chuabajito in which they killed 25 people, including a schoolgirl. The text admonished the reader that “we have to defend ourselves attacking these murderers.”\textsuperscript{26}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure4.3.png}
\caption{Illustration from ORPA, Siembra No. 9 (Guatemala: Ediciones ORPA, 4/1981), 3.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{25} ORPA, Siembra (2/1980), 7.
\textsuperscript{26} ORPA, Siembra No. 9 (Guatemala: Ediciones ORPA, 4/1981), 3.
ORPA also approached the issue of state repression from a slightly different angle by directing its discourse to peasants who had already been recruited or were susceptible to being recruited, often forcefully, by the military. In one 1981 pamphlet entitled “For You Soldier,” the organization simply asked the soldier “What is the government making of you?”. It answered the rhetorical question by advising the soldier “your criminal and lying [military] bosses are converting you into an enemy of your people.” The pamphlet continued:

Your weapons defend the rich. The weapons of the guerrilla defend your people. The army destroys and kills. The guerrilla is the hope of your people. [The army] converts you into a murderer of your brothers. The guerrilla fights on the side of your people.

The organization consciously employed the wording “your people” instead of “the people” in an effort to remind the soldier of his roots and emphasize that the soldier was being forced to repress, torture, and kill his people, his “brothers,” and not some alleged enemy. The pamphlet concluded by reminding the soldier that he did not choose that life, but was forcefully conscripted into the military. It then reminded him that he still has a choice in the matter; he was born “among the poor” and still has the opportunity to take his position on the side of the people.²⁷

A similar message appeared in an April 1981 issue of Siembra that maintained that the “murderous military” wanted to fill their ranks with men from the villages in order to have us “kill our own people.” The document reminded the population that they have their own military in ORPA and admonished “all men and women” to join the struggle on the side of the people’s guerrilla army, accentuating the point with large, bold

²⁷ ORPA, Para Ti Soldado (Guatemala: ORPA, 1981), 2-5.
print: “We will not go with the murderous army, we will not fight against our people, we will fight with our people.”

ORPA frequently employed the narrative of state repression in its external publications, attempting to appeal to the widespread grievances, outrage and mistrust among the population in its efforts to broaden its support base. The movement denounced the state-sponsored repression as a testimony of the army’s incompetence to effectively confront the revolutionary forces, elite intransigence and the government’s inability and even disinterest regarding the country’s myriad social problems. The movement considered the heightened level of repression in the early 1980s a sign of desperation, a last-ditch attempt to retain power at all costs, which foreshadowed inevitable defeat. The repression provided a tangible example of why the military and government should be considered the enemy of the people, and why ORPA was the people’s army.

**Plight of the Peasantry**

Another broad theme regularly addressed in ORPA’s external publications was the plight of the peasantry. Similar to the immediacy of state repression, the challenges that the peasantry faced represented the common experience of most rural Guatemalans. While the peasantry suffered some of the highest levels of state repression, this was just one aspect of their experience. In the movement’s literature, the term “peasant” referred to any rural agricultural laborer, whether indigenous or ladino. In an effort to promote unity, ORPA’s discourse often focused on the peasantry as a whole and the commonalities that existed due to class condition. However, this did not signify deemphasizing the racial divisions that permeated the peasantry and Guatemalan society.

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28 ORPA, *Siembra* No. 9, 7.
more broadly; in fact, the movement wanted to promote a greater understanding of the role of racism among the peasantry so as to combat and overcome it.

The organization explained to the peasant audience how the dominant class benefited from racial divisions and therefore made a concerted effort to promote such divisions. A 1982 document directed at the peasantry explained “The elite have divided the workers in order to more easily exploit them. They have tried to make the [indigenous people] believe that they are inferior beings, humbling them.”

The organization lamented how racial divisions resulted in a cleavage within the peasantry, allowing prejudices to impede revolutionary unity. ORPA therefore sought to demonstrate that indigenous and ladino peasants had more similarities than differences, and that a symbiotic relationship was both possible and necessary in altering Guatemala’s socioeconomic and political structures.

The plight of the peasantry encompassed what ORPA considered the many injustices against the Guatemalan people, especially considering the majority of Guatemalans worked in agriculture. A section of a 1982 document suggested various aspects of the plight of the peasantry as presented by ORPA:

The people of Guatemala endure great suffering. Daily, [the people] endure hunger, live in ranches without electricity or water, work from sunrise to sunset in humiliation and disdain, walk long distances with heavy loads due to lack of public transport and on top of this suffer [state] repression. For many years, the peasants have cleared the brush and worked the land to make it fertile. When the land gives good harvests, the large farmers and military run the peasants off the land to make it theirs. Furthermore, large farmers throw tenant farmers off the plantation so as not to pay them year round, leaving them without land, without work, without house and without food.

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29 ORPA, Nueva Agricultura (Guatemala: Ediciones ORPA, 1982), 12.
30 ORPA, Nueva Agricultura, 6-7.
According to the analysis, lacking land of their own, the peasants were “forced to seek seasonal work on plantations,” creating a cycle of temporary employment and unemployment. The document continued by emphasizing the socioeconomic realities of most peasants, highlighting the unfavorable terms of seasonal employment and poor working conditions. It also identified poor living conditions in which the peasants “live crowded together in large galleys without running water and electricity, the whole family working, with very little food.” The analysis broached such themes as lack of education and access to health care before concluding that the organization struggled so that the people can have “everything necessary to live a healthy and dignified life.”

The system of land tenure was a central concern of ORPA’s treatment of peasant issues. According to the organization, the people have spent many years working the land, only to be marginalized from it by large landowners with the support of the military and government. As detailed above, the mass of landless, unemployed peasants, lacking any real prospect of subsistence agriculture, end up working for large landowners in seasonal work, suffer deplorable working and living conditions, are victims of low wages and high prices at the company stores and often are “robbed” when owners cheat them on weights and measurements of their agricultural work and “delay payments.” Many workers would return home at the end of the season with nothing to show for their work. The perpetual cycle of debt and poverty affected many peasants and the movement regularly presented such analysis to attract those caught in the grips of that cycle to join the revolutionary struggle in order to end it. ORPA’s analysis argued that much of the

socioeconomic inequality of the peasantry was the result of the skewed system of land tenure and was perpetuated through the collusion of the Guatemalan oligarchy, military and government with support of foreign imperial powers.

Illustrations provided a way for the organization to reach the broadly illiterate peasantry. Drawings of peasants suffering daily hardships often filled the pages of the *Siembra* series. Illustrations also offered a subtle way to encourage peasant solidarity across racial lines, as some of the peasants appeared in traditional indigenous dress while others wore western clothes. This reminded the intended audience that the peasantry consisted of both ladino and indigenous people and that they all confronted similar obstacles.

Figure 4.4 below is of an indigenous family, indicated by the dress of its matriarch. The poverty of the family is underscored in both the illustration of the makeshift shelter lacking walls, and the caption that reads, "What are we going to do now, without a house, work, or money." The second illustration (Figure 4.5) uses accompanying descriptions of humiliation, exploitation, misery, hunger and inequality to emphasize the challenges the peasantry face. While all the people represented in the illustration appear to be in western clothes, the caption at the top left reads, “Savage Indian! You don’t now how to work,” once again highlighting the ethnic diversity of the peasant class. The racially charged words of the manager deploy indigenous stereotypes that underscore backwardness, ignorance and laziness. The caption at the top right simply reads “Faster.”

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The illustration below (Figure 4.6) drove home the movement’s message of peasant struggle by using descriptions of hunger, exploitation, unemployment and death,
with peasants appearing in both indigenous and western clothes to underscore a common experience. The captions in the middle of the illustration read, “One cannot live on this salary” and “There is no money, there is no work,” the first emphasizing poor wages if one is fortunate enough to have a job, and the second unemployment. The top right of the illustration over the subheading “Hunger” depicted a woman at the market assessing the money in her hand and informing her unclothed child that the money she has was “not enough” for food. In all of the movement’s illustrations, not limited to those included here, the plight of the peasantry was regularly presented with depictions of naked and hungry children, underpaid or unemployed adults, poor living conditions, and a high death rate – all relatable aspects of the peasant’s experience.
Figure 4.6: Illustrations from ORPA, *Nueva Agricultura* (Guatemala: Ediciones ORPA, 1982), 15.
ORPA expressed empathy with the peasantry, as publications regularly denounced the difficulties faced by the rural workers and consistently reaffirmed that the organization had developed in rural areas among the peasantry and that many members were peasants. Furthermore, much like the movement’s emphasis on ladino members identifying with the indigenous population, it was imperative that members who did not hail from the peasantry understood its plight and identified with its situation, declaring that the organization was open to all who “feel the pain of our people.” Ultimately, ORPA considered the plight of the peasantry to be intimately related to the other broad themes that appeared throughout the movement’s discourse, including state repression, the Guatemalan Revolution, the militarization of the oligarchy and indigenous issues.

*The Guatemalan Revolution*

ORPA frequently referenced and analyzed the Guatemalan Revolution, a decade-long democratic revolution (1944-1954) that yielded social, political and economic gains that were quickly rescinded by the counter-revolutionary government that followed. During the period, Presidents Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz oversaw the creation of a new constitution, the end of vagrancy laws, a new labor code, the peaceful transition between successive democratic governments and agrarian reform. While critical of the socioeconomic limitations of the Democratic Revolution, ORPA’s external publications frequently referred to aspects of this period, including democratic governance, agrarian reform, the U.S.-backed invasion and the subsequent counter-revolution led by Colonel Castillo Armas. ORPA knew that many of the people living in its areas of operation had been positively impacted by the revolution, and therefore it framed the movement’s

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34 ORPA, *Siembra* No. 9, 12.
struggle as an attempt to recover gains from that period, but with a more radical socioeconomic transformation.

ORPA understood the symbolism and importance of land, especially to the peasantry, in a predominately agricultural based society, and it frequently discussed agrarian issues in its external publications. The organization maintained that the country’s skewed land tenure system was a key structural deficiency that impeded social and economic development. President Arbenz had attempted to address this problem with an Agrarian Reform Act in 1952, a move that signaled the beginning of the end of the Guatemalan Revolution by influencing the U.S. decision to intervene. The counter-revolution that followed the overthrow of Arbenz abruptly dismantled the agrarian initiative and reversed any gains.

In a 1981 document on the country’s class structure, ORPA presented the fact that most of the cultivable land in Guatemala was concentrated in few hands, lamenting that 2.1% of the country’s agricultural properties constituted 62.5% of the arable land. According to the movement, this created a major social problem in an “underdeveloped” and “economically dependent” country, especially considering that 73% of the population depended on agriculture for their livelihood and sustenance. While large landowners controlled the most productive lands, peasants who were fortunate enough to have access to some land were marginalized onto the most “unproductive” plots. This resulted in a situation in which a majority of the population “cannot live from what their small property produces,” becoming obligated to sell their labor and thus becoming an agrarian
“semi-proletariat” and “proletariat.” ORPA’s analysis of land tenure was intimately related to the plight of the peasantry.

Another central aspect of the Guatemalan Revolution that ORPA discussed in its literature was the democratic opening that had occurred. In 1951, a peaceful transition of power occurred between two democratically elected presidents for the first time in the country’s history, a monumental event and process that ORPA reminisced about. A March 1982 document in the movement’s Erupción series offered an overview and analysis of the history of democratic governance in Guatemala. “Erupción,” which translates to “eruption” in English, was another monthly series published by the organization, and while covering the same topics as the Siembra series, it was directed at a literate population containing fewer illustrations and relying more heavily on text to convey its message. The title of the series referred to the eruption of the people into the revolutionary struggle, an idea that was also enshrined in the movement’s insignia of an erupting volcano (Figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7: The heading of most editions of Erupcion.

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The heading above, similar to the title pages of nearly all external documents, also contains the movement’s mantra “We live to struggle, we struggle to triumph.” This specific issue, titled “The Electoral Dance,” was published and distributed between the March 1982 elections and the military coup two weeks later that effectively nullified the results of the election. Both the Guatemalan Right and the Left considered these elections fraudulent. (As we shall see, the fraudulent electoral process and the absence of democracy were topics regularly criticized by the organization.) Overall, the movement discussed and analyzed the gains of the Arévalo and Arbenz presidencies and identified the benefits of authentic democratic governance.

ORPA posited that while this ten-year democratic period was an attempt at capitalist reform with a “nationalist and modernist sentiment” and did not have the far-reaching effects of a revolution, it still represented a move in the right direction for the people of Guatemala. It explained:

Even though it was something very different than an authentic revolution, it represented a lot for a people that had only known dictatorships and repression. For the first time in the country’s history, the Guatemalan people celebrated normal presidential elections, that is to say, classifiable within what is normally understood free and democratic elections. Repression ceased, and a legal and political space opened up for freedoms of expression, organization and mobilization. The agrarian reform outlined a path toward the desired capitalist modernization of the productive structures, but it [was unable to develop]. The traditional oligarchy, big business and the U.S. government, at the highest levels, decided to put an end to the [Guatemalan Revolution].

Even though ORPA stated that the programs and policies of Arévalo and Arbenz lacked the depth and scope of an “authentic revolution,” the organization appreciated the

36 ORPA, Erupcion International: La Danza Electoral (Guatemala: ORPA, 1982), 4.
advancements in the country’s social, political and economic structures, as well as the potential in cultivating further change through popular democratic participation.

Apart from addressing the democratic opening and the 1952 Agrarian Reform, the issue of Erupción discussed other specific developments and advances of the democratic revolution, such as a new law forcing landowners to rent idle lands to peasants, the Labor Code of 1947 and increased social spending. According to ORPA, the Arévalo government allocated one-third of the national budget to social spending in the form of building schools, housing and hospitals, as well as a social security system for workers. While all steps in the right direction, ORPA maintained that the reforms were “excessively timid and moderate” and failed to “alter the country’s social and productive structures.” However, the document also pointed out that despite the “excessively timid and moderate reforms,” Arévalo announced in his farewell address that his government had to withstand 32 coup d’état attempts, an indication of the intransigence of the Guatemalan elite and foreign economic interests, which had limited change from the outset.37

The document proceeded to delineate the steps taken by Arbenz in an attempt to alter the country’s socioeconomic and political structures. He tried to challenge the dominance of the landed oligarchy and US-controlled monopolies that existed in the country by promoting capitalist modernization and the creation of a competing infrastructure. Through reform, Arbenz “hoped to promote capitalist modernization,” however, “was harassed by the two sectors Arévalo had left intact: American monopolies

37 ORPA, Erupcion International, 6.
and the landed oligarchy.” The document briefly analyzed the economic, political, ideological, and military offensives carried out against the Arbenz reforms, which resulted in the end of Guatemala’s democratic-reformist experiment. The movement generally referred to the Revolution as the only period of genuine democracy in Guatemala’s history. The lack of true democratic governance was a common topic throughout ORPA’s literature, as the movement criticized the governments that had existed since the coup of 1954 and denounced their inadequacies.

*The Democratic Farce*

Government corruption and electoral fraud were frequent themes in ORPA’s external documents. The movement denounced the military’s control over the political structures and its erroneous use of the term “democracy.” In “The Electoral Dance,” the 1982 issue of *Erupción* discussed above, ORPA posited that the term “election,” should indicate “democracy, pluralism, possibility of ‘choice,’ an expression of popular will, expectations of change and an honest struggle for power.” However, in Guatemala’s political system the complete opposite frequently occurred. In a subsection titled “Elections without Democracy and without People (1954-1982)” the analysis delineated the elections that have occurred in Guatemala since the overthrow of Arbenz, making the case that they represented many things, such as fraud and corruption, rather than the will of the people:

Since the moment the counterrevolution violently took over political power, ending the bourgeois legality of the parliamentary regime, elections in Guatemala have stopped being an expression of popular will. Strictly speaking, they have stopped being elections…and this situation remains identical in

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1982…continuously since 1954, the anticommunist and counterinsurgent character of the state and of the different governments that have been in power, whether coup or “constitutional” – matters little.\textsuperscript{40}

The document provided an interpretation of the post-1954 period grounded in the movement’s “militarization of the oligarchic power” analytical framework (a recurrent theme discussed at length in the following section). When considering the democratic farce, ORPA maintained that no authentic elections have taken place in Guatemala for nearly four decades. Despite superficial change, the country’s corrupt electoral processes remained intimately tied to the traditional oligarchy and foreign interests; the current power structure needed to be altered at the foundation in order to achieve fundamental changes.\textsuperscript{41}

On March 23, 1982, shortly after the movement published “The Electoral Dance,” a military coup occurred that nullified the election results. ORPA published a lengthy document in May 1982 that analyzed the coup, criticizing it as nothing more than superficial change, a feeble attempt by the military to improve its image both domestically and internationally. The military, in the coup’s aftermath, issued statements claiming to be acting in the best interests of the people, as it was determined to respond to the “popular outcry” of electoral fraud and “redirect Guatemala’s path toward the route of true democracy”.\textsuperscript{42}

The irony, and even contradictions, of the military’s claims was not lost on ORPA, as the document highlighted the role that the military had played in the country’s power structure for “centuries.” The organization maintained that the coup leader’s

\textsuperscript{40} ORPA, \textit{Erupticon International}, 12.
\textsuperscript{41} ORPA, \textit{Eruption International}.
\textsuperscript{42} ORPA, \textit{El Golpe de Estado} (Guatemala: ORPA, 3/30/1982), 37.
claims “vehemently clash” with the lived experiences of the people. It asked how the military could present itself as the “guarantor of popular aspirations” or the coup as “attending to popular outcry” when for centuries it had been the “principal guarantor of the historical violation of [popular] aspirations” everyday suffocating the cry of the “thousands killed in cold blood.”\(^4\) The movement argued that the real objectives of the military takeover were to repair fissures by reunifying the various factions of the ruling elite, both in and outside of the military, to “improve the international image to facilitate [U.S.] intervention” and to try to regain the support for counterinsurgency that had been waning in the previous years, among others.\(^4\)

Another military coup occurred just eighteen months later, in August 1983, which ORPA viewed as similar in scope to the 1982 coup. Contradictions and divisions appeared within the sectors of power, both the military and the oligarchy, due in large part to the military’s inability to “annihilate or neutralize the revolutionary movement,” culminating in the need to replace one dictator with another.\(^4\) According to ORPA, the same high levels of repression and corruption that led to the coups continued in the aftermath of each, underscoring the lack of any real change.\(^4\)

The military’s much-heralded political and democratic opening of 1985 also came under heavy fire from ORPA.\(^4\) As in the case of the coups of 1982 and 1983, ORPA

\(^4\) ORPA, Golpe de Estado, 39.
\(^4\) ORPA, Golpe de Estado, 40-41.
\(^4\) ORPA, Erupción (Guatemala: ORPA, 4/1983); Erupción (Guatemala: ORPA, 4/1984).
\(^4\) In 1985, facing continued international pressure including from the US, the Guatemalan military and oligarchy agreed to return to civilian rule through democratic elections. James Dunkerley points out that key domestic factors weighed into this decision as well including “widespread desire for an end to violence and a discontent with the military rule even amongst powerful sections of the bourgeoisie” see Power in the Isthmus, 427.
considered the democratic opening simply another attempt to improve the government’s domestic and international image – an attempt to divert attention from the corrupt and repressive forces while leaving the established power structure intact. According to the organization, the military was not relinquishing any power; in fact, once again ORPA viewed it as a complete contradiction that the military was overseeing the democratic opening given that they had been responsible for the destruction of Guatemala’s democratic institutions.

ORPA saw no substantial change with the 1985 election of civilian president Vinicio Cerezo of the Christian Democratic Party, maintaining it was evident that the military retained undeniable power, only now it enjoyed a civilian façade. In interviews printed in ORPA publications, Rodrigo Asturias argued that the democratic opening was simply a new counterinsurgency strategy promoted by members of the oligarchy and the Reagan Administration. Within this “conditional and negotiated” opening, President Cerezo was unable to challenge the autonomy of the military and curtail the popular repression. In essence, the “democratization” process began and ended with the elections, and the impotence of the executive branch was obvious as Cerezo’s term came to an end. Asturias maintained that the administration cannot be regarded as a political success because it began with “promises of democratization and popular politics and ends being a government absolutely dependent on and controlled by the military high command,” surviving only “on the basis of negotiations and concessions” and essentially

49 ORPA, Elecciones y Gobierno Contrainsurgente de Nuevo Tipo (Guatemala: ORPA, 1/5/1986); ORPA, La Nueva Camarilla Militar (Guatemala: ORPA, 1986), 17-18.
“burying its perspectives and possibilities as a real political project by becoming a
despicable instrument of the army” in its counterinsurgency plan.\textsuperscript{50}

In real terms, state repression decreased in the mid to late-1980s. That is not to
say that it ended, as state-directed violence continued to suppress popular politics and
organizing. ORPA offered this as evidence of the lack of genuine power wielded by
civilian presidents, a lack of democratic space and continuing high levels of political
corruption. The organization also viewed repression as a logical aspect of a much larger
process that had been occurring in Guatemala for decades, which it called the
militarization of oligarchic power.

\textit{The Militarization of Oligarchic Power}

This area of analysis outlined the military’s ever-expanding role in key political
decisions and the oligarchy’s willingness to share political control with that institution in
order to protect their socioeconomic dominance. In 1978, ORPA’s leadership produced a
lengthy, 442-page internal document that delineated the development of this symbiotic
relationship from the 1954 United States’ intervention to the late-1970s, with the military
coup of 1963 as a key moment in which the traditional elite accepted military repression
as the best option to protect their interests. In 1980, ORPA published “La Coyuntura
(Sintesis),” a 107-page summation or synthesis of the 1978 internal document. This
abbreviated version presented this important aspect of the ORPA’s ideology to a public
audience.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{50} ORPA, \textit{10 Años en Marcha}, 16-17.
\textsuperscript{51} ORPA, \textit{La Coyuntura (Sintesis)} (1980). As previously indicated, La Coyuntura translates to “the
juncture” or “the conjunction,” referring to the particular circumstances in Guatemala at that historical
moment. The 442-page 1978 document was condensed into a 107-page summation in 1980.
Broadly, ORPA argued that Guatemala was not experiencing a traditional military dictatorship, but rather a new phenomenon that required intensive analysis. According to the organization, a military dictatorship would attempt to weaken the power of the traditional elite in order to maintain authority over all non-military classes, yet the militarization of oligarchic power in Guatemala was actually “aimed at preserving and strengthening the economic power of the oligarchy.” As the elite grew more concerned with popular discontent and the armed insurgencies in the 1960s, they decided that giving the military a more prominent role in the country’s political apparatus would benefit both groups. Instead of displacing the oligarchy, the military “serves as the absolute depository of power,” protecting the oligarchy against popular aspirations and upholding Guatemala’s socioeconomic relations through force when necessary.52 Over time, the upper echelons of the military began to develop their own economic interests, emerging as a new subsection of the Guatemalan elite, and therefore its actions also served to protect its own position within the country’s social, economic and political structures. Chapter Two examined this aspect of the ORPA’s analysis in more depth.

This analytical framework was central to ORPA’s worldview and regularly appeared in both the text and illustrations of the movement’s public documents. Documents contextualized the analysis in concrete terms, denouncing the military coups and power shifts of the early 1980s. The organization maintained that the coup that brought General Efrain Ríos Montt to power and the one that removed him 18 months later were clear examples of the militarization of oligarchic power. According to ORPA’s analysis, corruption and state repression had risen to unprecedented levels during the

52 ORPA, *La Coyuntura (Síntesis)* (1980), 5-6.
military regime of Romeo Lucas García (1978-1982), resulting in isolation from the international community and less access to foreign capital. The Lucas García government’s inability to effectively deal with domestic issues also caused low moral within the military, a situation that became even more volatile as the insurgency grew and dealt heavy blows to the state forces.\textsuperscript{53} Both the military and the oligarchy agreed that a change needed to occur, albeit a superficial change, and General Efrain Rios Montt, a devout, even fanatical born-again Christian, emerged as the new military dictator of Guatemala. The oligarchy hoped that he would serve as a moderate façade for the government as they did not intend to make any fundamental alterations to the system. Despite a few dismissals, the key positions within the military and governing structure remained unchanged, and the militarization of the oligarchic power continued. However, the coup did serve its purpose of offering an illusion of change.\textsuperscript{54}

The Ríos Montt regime was unable to contain the guerrilla organizations, and corruption and human rights abuses worsened. ORPA argued that the only solution to this current situation (the military and oligarchy’s governing alliance) would be the installation of a revolutionary government. However, as recent history had demonstrated, ORPA understood that during highly volatile periods, when the power apparatus was at its most vulnerable, the oligarchy, together with factions of the military, would move to install a new military dictator. Within a year of Ríos Montt’s rise to power, ORPA predicted that the dynamic situation would provoke another shift in power, warning that “it is foreseeable that the dictatorship will crumble, that other sectors and forces look for

\textsuperscript{53} ORPA, \textit{El Golpe de Estado}.
\textsuperscript{54} ORPA, \textit{El Golpe de Estado}.
support for a change in the upper echelons of power, and there is no reason to discard the possibility of a new coup to replace Ríos Montt.\textsuperscript{55} The bad press and international isolation facing the Ríos Montt regime concerned the oligarchy, and four months after the distribution of this ORPA publication, he was removed from power by yet another military coup. The oligarchy’s intricate relationship with the military resulted in another change in dictator with the continued arrangement that the military would retain key posts in the government and the oligarchy would support it, both benefitting from the symbiotic relationship.

ORPA presented this analysis in illustrations as well in an effort to reach the largely illiterate rural population. The dominant class was especially concerned with economic gains and their position at the top of the social hierarchy. It was willing to go to great lengths to protect both. The movement tried to emphasize this by employing illustrations that criticized the alliance between the military and the oligarchy, denounced the oligarchy’s willingness to turn to violence and underlined how both negatively affected the peasantry.\textsuperscript{56}

The illustrations below portrayed the oligarchy’s domineering role in the socioeconomic and political system, as well as its intimate relationship with the military. The first illustration (Figure 4.8) represented the tight grasp that the oligarchy had on all aspects of the economy and society, as the hand on the left is gripping “coffee,” “mines,” “livestock” and “petroleum” and the hand on the right is gripping indigenous people, representing the laboring class. While the illustration conveyed a clear message,

\textsuperscript{56} ORPA, \textit{La Guerra Necesaria}. ORPA, \textit{Por qué tanta Represión} (Guatemala: ORPA, 1981).
accompanying text emphasized that message explaining that “Guatemala is exploited and dominated by a small group of elites” that were the “owners of the [country’s] wealth, manage the government, control the army and want to deceive the people with words and promises.”

The second group of illustrations (Figure 4.9) comes from a brief pamphlet titled “Why So Much Repression?” The drawing on the left alluded to the exasperation and fear of members of the ruling class, both in the military and the oligarchy. While two of the men depicted appear in military officer uniforms, the other represents a member of the oligarchy. While pacing in a circle, one of the military officers lamented, “We are lost,” while the member of the oligarchy asks, “What are we going to do?” The other military officer is portrayed clenching his fists, bemoaning, “They will take away our riches.” Even though that might seem like a concern specific to the traditional elite, ORPA’s analysis on the militarization of the oligarchic power also highlighted how, over time, many military leaders were able to take advantage of their positions in the power structure and emerge as a new rich alongside the traditional oligarchy. The drawing on the right of Figure 4.9 depicted two military officers and one member of the oligarchy barking orders at soldiers, emphasizing the willingness to go to extremes in order to protect their interests. One military officer was depicted as saying “kidnap, torture, kill,” while the other was ordering “repress the people until they quit their struggle.” These illustrations tried to underscore the collusion of the oligarchy and military in the repressive state structures.

57 ORPA, *La Guerra Necesaria.*
ORPA’s discourse regularly analyzed and condemned the militarization of oligarchic power and the symbiotic relationship that existed between the two groups. As indicated above, the movement maintained that this relationship was supported by imperial powers that, similar to the Guatemalan elite, and eventually aspects of the
military, sought to protect their interests within the country. Some level of stability, albeit sustained through state-directed repression and violence, was a more favorable alternative for economic interests than the chaos and confusion that could lead to popular victory. According to ORPA, imperialism was a key component of this power apparatus.

Imperialism

ORPA’s external documents maintained that while the Arévalo and Arbenz presidencies briefly interrupted imperialism in Guatemala, after the C.I.A. intervention of 1954, foreign interests, especially U.S. interests, were able to imbed themselves even deeper into the country’s economic infrastructure than before the revolution through conditional loans and concessions. ORPA maintained that the U.S. exercised great influence over Guatemala’s governing structure through both military and economic aid, and explained the conditional loans, and imperialism more broadly as follows:

In essence, all these loans implicitly guaranty their [economic] interests, the commitment to strengthen the repressive apparatus, which is intended to ensure the survival of the system indefinitely. Imperialism is present in Guatemala ideologically, militarily and economically. [The agents of imperialism] implemented the counterinsurgency and therefore are also responsible for the repression.58

ORPA believed that foreign interests, primarily those of the US, have resulted in neocolonial relationships. Financial assistance, including military aid, had been used in an effort to protect and perpetuate such an arrangement, which the organization maintained made the foreign powers equally responsible for the ongoing repression. Similar to the other areas of ORPA’s discourse, the organization presented this theme in

58 ORPA, Conozca Algo Mas, 4.
both text-based documents, and those that relied on illustrations to convey the message to the illiterate masses.

A 1986 document, “Elections and Counter-insurgency Government of a New Type,” delineated the United States’ relationship with Guatemala from the intervention in 1954 to the time of publication, arguing that the American government provided both military and economic assistance in active support of the Guatemalan government’s counter-insurgency program. The document stated that the U.S. government had been an integral part in both large and small decisions of the Guatemalan state, maintaining that, “during this entire period, it is difficult to find a contradiction or rift between the different Guatemalan regimes and the North American administrations.”59

ORPA’s discourse posited that the Reagan Administration bolstered U.S. imperialism in Guatemala by strengthening ties with the military dictators and defending them in the international community. In an interview published and distributed by ORPA in 1983, Asturias denounced the manipulation of facts by the Reagan Administration, arguing that the U.S. government, in an attempt to create a black and white picture, erroneously categorized the Guatemalan revolution as another front of the Cold War. According to Asturias:

The Reagan administration has manipulated the information, trying to present the Central American struggles as a confrontation between the world powers, between the East and West, not wanting to understand that our struggles are completely national and motivated by the most basic and tremendous conditions of injustice that our people suffer. Reagan has also tried to present the Central American conflict as a security problem for the United States. He is trying to justify the growing intervention with this incorrect and ridiculous assessment.60

59 ORPA, Elecciones y Gobierno Contra insurgente, 4.
Another Asturias interview published by ORPA in 1984 focused entirely on the U.S. involvement in Guatemala’s internal affairs. Asturias argued that the U.S. not only supported the Guatemalan government, but also worked internationally to isolate the revolutionary movement. He alleged that United States’ participation and support had put “pressure against all the progressive and democratic forces of the world to stop any assistance to the region and in particular” Guatemala. In this document, as in many others, Asturias once again denounced the claim that Guatemala is a front in the Cold War.61

Illustrations were also used to denounce this imperial relationship. Figure 4.10 below showed a laborer carrying a large, and, as indicated by the hunched over stature of the worker, burdensome sack on his back labeled “mines, coffee, petroleum, sugar, meat.” In not-so-subtle terms, the illustration indicated that the goods represented by the sack are en route to the United States. Yet, the brief text that accompanied the illustration does not limit imperialism to the United States, but instead pointed to a more expanded view of modern imperialism in discussing “foreign power” more broadly.

The following text accompanied the illustration:

Foreign power is a group of people from other countries that are owners of the factories and big businesses. They take Guatemala’s oil, minerals, coffee, cotton, sugar, cardamom and wood. They also control the banks and many plantations. Foreign power defends the government and strengthens the army with weapons, military advisors and soldiers so the situation does not change, and they can continue robbing Guatemala.\footnote{ORPA, \emph{Nueva Agricultura}, 4.}

This explanation of “foreign power” offered the more expanded view of imperialism as driven by individual and corporate foreign economic interests and not solely limited to foreign governments (neo-imperialism instead of classical imperialism). Military aid served to protect and perpetuate the neo-imperial relationship.\footnote{ORPA, \emph{Nueva Agricultura}, 4.}

ORPA’s analysis of imperialism typically focused on the United States’ involvement in Guatemala, but publications also exposed Israel and Argentina as agents...
of U.S. imperialism and key supporters in Guatemala’s counter-insurgency program. After the Carter Administration cut-off military aid due to excessive human rights abuses, Israel and Argentina became surrogate suppliers and advisers of the Guatemalan military; in fact, one ORPA publication was entirely dedicated to Israel’s military involvement in Guatemala, referring to that country as the United States’ “loyal instrument and main ally in the war against the Guatemalan people.” The analysis maintained that during the period that the U.S. cut off aid, Israel became the “only provider of military equipment.” This only represented one aspect of its support, as Israel also provided “guidance in the politics of terror, intelligence and psychological warfare.” ORPA went so far as to maintain that the repressive measures of the counter-insurgency had parallels to Israel’s aggression against the Palestinian people. The military assistance and support of United States, as well as Israel and Argentina, was also depicted in illustrations (Figure 4.11).

Figure 4.11: Illustration from La Nueva Agricultura (Guatemala: Ediciones ORPA, 1982), 4.

ORPA’s discourse on imperialism was grounded in Guatemala’s historic relations with the United States. It was no secret that the U.S. played a central role in the 1954 intervention that brought the Guatemalan Revolution to a halt, and even though the revolution had attempted to limit the power of American companies in Guatemala’s economy, companies exercised considerable control over the country’s productive resources and economic activity after the revolution, just as they had before 1944. U.S.-based corporations worked closely with the Guatemalan oligarchy to establish a symbiotic relationship at the expense of the masses, and it was widely known that the U.S. government provided military assistance and even convinced allies such as Israel and Argentina to do the same.65

The Guatemalan population, both urban and rural, was aware that the U.S. played an active role in the country’s economic and political affairs, including the counterinsurgency. In reality, the mere existence of that relationship was more important than the scope and depth of that role. That is not to say that the role was not extensive in real terms, as there were substantial economic and military links. In ORPA’s effort to arouse anti-imperialist sentiment and recruit support and members, the lived experience and understanding of the population was of greater importance than the specific details of U.S. military and economic aid.

65 The role of US companies in Guatemala has been well documented by numerous studies. For the era surrounding the Guatemalan Revolution of 1944 see Gleijeses, Shattered Hope and Kinzer and Schlesinger, Bitter Fruit. For post-1954 details see Dunkerley, Power in the Isthmus and Lafèber, Inevitable Revolutions. Lafèber thoroughly documents US military aid and training to the different Central American countries, as well as its allies providing aid and training at different times. For instance, when Congress stopped Reagan from providing military aid to Guatemala, “two close U.S. allies, Israel and Taiwan” sent the Rios Montt government the needed military supplies and the CIA “secretly helped” the military, see Inevitable Revolutions, 322. Dunkerley demonstrates how Israeli military aid and training not only served as a “surrogate” when U.S. aid was restricted, but also an alternative that gave the Guatemalan government more independence from Washington, see Power in the Isthmus, 489-490.
Racism and Indigenous Issues

As analyzed in preceding chapters, indigenous issues represented a major driving force of the organization, something that was reflected in the movement’s external discourse as well. While ORPA never publicly distributed its most extensive analyses on racism in Guatemala, *Racismo I* and *Racismo II*, a brief, seven-page summation of some core perspectives was published in 1982 by third-party agencies outside of Guatemala, first by a Costa Rican journal and subsequently by a Montreal news agency dedicated to Latin America. Furthermore, various documents distributed within Guatemala during the war discussed and analyzed racism and other indigenous issues, celebrated the indigenous heritage of Guatemala and promoted a national future of a multicultural society, complete with greater respect for the indigenous majority and everything that that would encompass, including greater political participation, access to resources and an end to racial discrimination.

The excerpt from *Racismo I*, clearly intended for an international audience, summarized central aspects of the movement’s analysis on the profound role of racism in the country’s social, political and economic relations. Since the aforementioned internal documents from which the article was extracted are analyzed at length in the previous chapter, here it suffices to only discuss a few of the key points that ORPA emphasizes in the external document. The organization maintained that racism permeated life in Guatemala, “present from the most serious political manifestations and decisions to the most routine aspects of daily life.” It was a “poison and corrosive element within the social consciousness.” Racism contaminated social relations, which in turn reinforced and
perpetuated the existing system of political, social and economic relations. Similar to the internal documents, the summation not only analyzed the ways in which racism was employed as a tool of exploitation and oppression, but it also discussed the different ways that its denial of human qualities adversely affected the discriminated, as well as how it also affected those that practice it.\(^6\)

The brief article presented some of the main expressions of racism in Guatemala, such as “aggression against” the indigenous population due to physical appearance, perceived abilities and cultural signifiers such as language, dress and religious practices. With regard to perceived ability, whereas the natives consider farming as a “creative, necessary and important work that requires a specialization and knowledge” the exploiting class depreciated farm work as the lowest level of work, “that which requires the least capacity,” only “physical strength.” Even though the indigenous people, specifically those that have access to it, proudly worked the land, racist ideology denigrated this livelihood and embraced and promoted the idea that the discriminated are only capable of carrying out basic peasant work. This racist belief permeated the wage farm labor system in which many indigenous peasants worked and propped up “mechanisms of discrimination” that relegated the natives to the “the toughest tasks, in the worst working conditions and with the worst wage conditions, even discriminated within the same peasantry.”\(^7\)

The article maintained that racism was not only a mechanism of economic exploitation, but was also the most effective tool of oppression, even more effective than

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\(^7\) ALAI, “Acerca del Racismo,” 4.
violence. Racism, with its “destructive and denying essence,” had perpetuated Guatemala’s oppressive society. According to the organization, humiliation, conceptualized as “a set of attitudes, measurements and events that weigh simultaneously upon a person or a people in order to break and destroy any possible resistance” was a “principal characteristic” of racism, and encapsulated the destructive nature of racist ideology as it attempted to deny both the person and their identity. While the analysis presented in the article reflected some of the organization’s main perspectives on racism, it was published outside of the country for an international audience. ORPA’s views on racism and its perspectives on the indigenous question appeared in many documents distributed in Guatemala as well, as the organization attempted to reach the same discriminated population that was being analyzed within. Racism and discrimination were daily realities experienced by much of ORPA’s rural constituency, and the movement’s analytical discourse on the issues would have resonated loudly.

One 1981 document on class structure in Guatemala, “Know Something More about…the Class Structure in Guatemala,” included a section on racism and its intimate connection to class relations. The section emphasized for the Guatemalan audience the important role of ideologies in social, economic and political relations. While emphasis on the ideological was a key position of the movement and was frequently discussed in internal documents, external documents did not always delve into theoretical arguments. The document explained:

Racism is an ideological instrument of the superstructure, but due to the characteristics of the economic activity and of the exploitative system imposed by

the dominant class, it [racism] has played and continues to play a very important role reproducing and strengthening the principal aspects of the system. Without diminishing the importance of the economic base, as that would be unscientific, we are clear that the economic structure corresponds to the superstructure and the two have a particular dialectical conjunction…Racist discrimination and humiliation are not limited to ideas and attitudes, [but] have a clear correspondence in the economic structure, and this is reflected in the effects that it has produced at the societal level. For a long time, discrimination has meant death, misery, and above all over-exploitation.\textsuperscript{69}

The document maintained that the roots of racism and system of exploitation that it facilitated were found in the Spanish conquest and subsequent colonization that began over 450 years earlier. The colonizers formed a view of the indigenous race as inferior and almost non-human, institutionalizing systems of exploitation and forced labor. It was during the colonial period that the dominant class was “perfecting the mechanisms of exploitation and racism in order to guarantee the indigenous people’s labor and maintain the system of exploitation with the characteristics that exist today.” Independence did not signal the end of racist exploitation, as the system was so imbedded in Guatemala’s socioeconomic relations that the marginalization and exploitation continued to the present, pointing to the higher mortality and illiteracy rates that exist among the native majority as an indicator.\textsuperscript{70}

Another document from the early 1980s, simply titled “Before the Meeting of Intellectuals for the Sovereignty of Our America,” also focused on issues of race and ethnicity. As implied in the title, this document was not written for distribution within Guatemala, but instead for a gathering of leftist intellectuals, most likely in either Cuba or

\textsuperscript{69} ORPA, \textit{Conozca Algo Mas}, 4, 6.
\textsuperscript{70} ORPA, \textit{Conozca Algo Mas}, 4-5.
Nicaragua, two countries supportive of the revolutionary movements.\textsuperscript{71} This document attempted to shine a spotlight on indigenous issues, especially racism, to ensure that they were not neglected at the meeting. The text maintained that while some sectors believe that such superstructural issues should not even constitute part of the debate much less the political struggle, the organization argued that they must be studied and addressed fully. The fact that racism was part of the superstructure did not stop it from having very real effects on social relations in Guatemala. ORPA argued that even though the “foundation of racist discrimination is fallacy and irrationality,” historically, racism has been employed by the dominant class serving as “one of its most solid bastions and effective instruments of exploitation.” In very real terms, racism had a “completely adequate and functional framework in the economic, political and social structure of Guatemala.”\textsuperscript{72}

The document emphasized the divisiveness of racist beliefs and practices. Racist discrimination produced prejudices and imbedded them deep into the consciousness of the populace, prejudices that impede the revolutionary struggle because “the people” were hesitant to unite. Despite similar socioeconomic situations among peasants and industrial workers, racism created a cleavage between the indigenous and ladino population. ORPA hoped that this document would inspire the gathered leftist intellectuals to seriously discuss and address this obstacle to revolutionary unity, hopefully resulting in a revolutionary agenda intent to raise the consciousness of the

\textsuperscript{71} ORPA, \textit{Ante el encuentro de intelectuales por la soberanía de nuestra américa} (Guatemala: ORPA, unknown date). This document is undated, however, it appears to be from 1980 or 1981. A Guatemalan that was active in the international network of the organization and wishes to remain anonymous suggested in email correspondence that the meeting was most likely held in Cuba or Nicaragua.

\textsuperscript{72} ORPA, \textit{Ante el encuentro de intelectuales}, 1.
ladino population to overcome the racial divisions. Only by ridding the consciousness of these prejudices would “the people” truly be able to broaden the struggle.\textsuperscript{73}

ORPA argued that the initial hurdle that needed to be cleared was the denial of race and ethnic issues in society; before such issues could be addressed it was imperative to admit that such problems existed. However, the government and the sectors of society that benefitted from racial discrimination denied its very existence. ORPA wanted to bring this seemingly taboo issue to the forefront of Guatemalan social thought and force Guatemalans to reevaluate the very foundations of the social structures that had been in place for centuries.

ORPA’s external discourse highlighted the centrality of the indigenous population to the movement and the major role that the population would have to fulfill if the revolution were to succeed. In 1982, the organization disseminated a document derived from interviews that Marta Harnecker had conducted with Rodrigo Asturias, the interview was also published in \textit{Le Monde Diplomatique} under the same title “Guerrillas respond to Indigenous Historical Expectations.”\textsuperscript{74} In the document, Asturias briefly recounted his initial guerrilla experience of the early 1960s, which ended in his imprisonment, but more importantly resulted in the realization that the “main potential of the revolutionary war lay in the indigenous peasantry.”\textsuperscript{75} This realization was reflected in

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{73} ORPA, \textit{Ante el encuentro de intelectuales}.
\item\textsuperscript{74} Marta Harnecker, \textit{Guerrillas responden a expectativa histórica indígena} (Guatemala: ORPA, 1982). Harnecker, “Guerrillas responden a expectativa histórica indígena,” \textit{Le Monde Diplomatique en Español} (1982); A slightly different version of the interviews was in Harnecker’s 1985 book \textit{Pueblos en armas}, which is a collection of interviews with Central American revolutionary leaders. Harnecker is a Chilean sociologist and writer that studied under Louis Althusser in Paris. She was forced into exile from Chile after the overthrow of Salvador Allende’s government in 1973 and has primarily resided in Cuba ever since.
\item\textsuperscript{75} Harnecker, \textit{Guerrillas responden}, 2.
\end{itemize}
selecting a new area of operations in the early-1970s and the adoption of a new ideological approach geared toward the multiethnic reality of Guatemalan society.

Harnecker’s title for the document is drawn from Asturias’ discussion of how the local indigenous population received the organization. He maintained that the movement’s ability to organize clandestinely for eight years in a heavily populated zone without a single “denunciation” was made possible “due to the fact that ORPA’s political style, plan and practice corresponded to the people’s needs.” Admitting that it might be somewhat “risky” to make these assertions, Asturias delved deeper into a discussion of the historical expectations of the indigenous population. He suggested that the organization might be well received due to a local oral history, which they had began hearing as early as 1971, that held that “someday men would come down from the mountains that were going to liberate the people.” He maintained that such stories exist in “one form or another” in the oral traditions of the Mam, Cakchiquel and Tz’utujil speaking areas in which the organization operated. However, Asturias did not believe that they were fulfilling some prophecy, but instead stated that the stories should be interpreted as “an element of the tradition, memory and hope of a people that have been subjected to colonization, and created its legends or created its expectation to cope with the situation.” He concluded that only this sort of an understanding could explain why the people accepted and supported the organization.76

ORPA’s external discourse presented the movement’s struggle as the culmination of past rebellions, as the organization claimed to represent the grievances of the indigenous population. According to the movement, racial discrimination coupled with

76 Harnecker, *Guerrillas responden*, 4.
economic exploitation created an unparalleled explosiveness of revolutionary activity among the indigenous population.\textsuperscript{77}

\textit{Women's Issues}

ORPA’s external discourse addressed women’s issues in varying degrees of depth and presentation. Similar to the other areas of analysis, documents utilized illustrations and text to discuss the issues that women confronted, although the broader themes that transcended gender specificity, such as state repression, peasant issues and indigenous issues, heavily outweighed discourse directed specifically at women’s issues. The movement’s public discourse on the matter supported the position presented in internal documents on gender equality and the increased participation of women in the revolutionary struggle. Furthermore, attention to gender issues provided yet another example of the organization’s concern with the superstructure and its role in social relations.

An issue of \textit{Siembra} from April 1981 included a section on women in the struggle, and in society more broadly, titled “Men and Women Fighting Together.” The text criticized the existing gender norms in the country that had resulted in women not only being exploited outside the home, but within the home as well. Social ideologies have tended to restrict women to the family sphere through promoting specific roles and expectations. However, ORPA was attempting to alter those relations and the ideas that promoted them in order to provide a greater space for women. The \textit{Siembra} issues explained it as such:

\textsuperscript{77} ORPA, \textit{La Irrupcion del Pueblo Natural en la Guerra Revolucionaria} (Guatemala: ORPA, 1981).
Before we thought that women only served to do housework, to take care of her husband and children, to go to the market. In addition to the exploitation and humiliation that women suffered from the exploiters, [they] were also abused by the man of the family. This is the way of the exploiters. With the revolutionary war, we are living in a new world where women are respected, and are finding their true place [in society]. Today, women are involved in all tasks of the struggle, alongside men, searching for a new life for our children, and for our people.\textsuperscript{78}

Similar to other issues of \textit{Siembra}, the text avoided theoretical analysis, and focused very broadly on the lived experience of women in Guatemala. The text implied that the dominant class promoted and perhaps even benefited from these gender relations, but did not expound on that position. A couple illustrations of women participating in the struggle accompanied the text (Figure 4.12 below). One demonstrated an armed, indigenous woman weaving cloth, emphasizing the ability to continue trades and skills, including ones that may hold cultural or familial significance, while participating in the struggle. The other was an illustration of a full-time female guerrilla—armed and dressed in fatigues, complete with an ORPA patch on the sleeve.

\textsuperscript{78} ORPA, \textit{Siembra No. 9}, 10-11.
Another issue of *Siembra* highlighted the plight of women that moved to the capital city to work as domestic servants. Employing a combination of text and illustrations with captions, the document condemned the harsh reality of the domestic servants, such as long work hours, the lack of sustenance and the power dynamic between workers and employers, stating that these women suffer “the humiliation, exploitation and scorn of their bosses.” While all the illustrations represented a woman in indigenous dress, one specific illustration and accompanying caption is a direct assault on the culture of the Maya woman. In Figure 4.13 below, the boss is forcibly cutting the indigenous girl’s long hair. The girl exclaims “Not my hair!” as the boss says, “So that you will take off the corte, ignorant girl.”

In Guatemala, *corte* refers to the traditional, hand-woven skirts that indigenous women wear, and in many instances, including here, its usage implies the entirety of
indigenous dress, including the accompanying colorful blouse. Indigenous dress is the most obvious ethnic signifier in Guatemala. Furthermore, long hair carries important cultural significance for Maya women. This simple illustration not only speaks to the plight of female domestic servants, but also underscores the depreciation of and attack on indigenous culture by the non-indigenous population. In the above illustration, the boss woman is hoping that removing one cultural signifier will lead to other changes in the female worker.

Figure 4.13: ORPA, Siembra (Guatemala: Ediciones ORPA, 11/1979), 5.

Much of the external discourse on women was found in illustrations such as the one above. Throughout the movement’s publications women appeared in illustrations that highlighted state repression and the plight of the peasantry, and due to the many representations of indigenous women, the documents alluded to challenges that the
indigenous population faced as well, also demonstrating the interrelatedness of many of the recurrent themes found in the organization’s documents.

Conclusion

ORPA’s discourse covered a wide range of issues and challenges that Guatemalans faced. External documents criticized state repression, analyzed racist discrimination, sympathized with the peasantry and also reminisced about some aspects of Guatemala’s democratic revolution. The movement denounced the militarization of oligarchic power and the nefarious intentions of foreign imperialism. Despite the stated limitations, examining the movement’s public discourse demonstrated ideological consistency between ORPA’s internal and external documents. The organization was not misrepresenting itself to the public in order to gain greater support. In its literature, the movement grounded the struggle in a radical nationalist approach, which while borrowing aspects of Marxist analysis was intent on finding a path specific to Guatemala’s needs. Publications critiqued and analyzed Guatemala’s particular historical experience and contemporary problems. There was also consistency between the movement’s public discourse throughout the conflict, that is, before and after it joined the URNG coalition, highlighting the ideological autonomy of the member organizations. Even after forming the URNG, ORPA retained the ideological flexibility and creativity that had originally set it apart from its contemporaries.

The organization’s discourse underscored its emphasis on the role of ideas in the social problematic. Analysis of government corruption, state repression and the challenges of the indigenous population, women and the peasantry more broadly, were
intended to appeal to human emotion. As indicated in Chapter 2, ORPA believed that subjective factors such as revolutionary determination and moral strength were key to the struggle, central to making the revolutionary.

ORPA also pointed out that dominant social ideologies created, supported and perpetuated race and gender relations in Guatemalan society. The movement was committed to understanding the dominant ideology in order to effectively confront it, and its external literature attempted to appeal to the public’s sensibilities regarding those relations. To gain support for the struggle and develop well-informed militants, ORPA grounded its discourse in Guatemala’s historic experience and contemporary reality in order to appeal to a broad sense of injustice among the majority population.
Chapter 5: Experiences of the People in Arms

Those who joined ORPA came to the movement and to revolutionary struggle from various life experiences. The movement’s ranks included male and female, indigenous and ladino, student activists, middle-class urbanites, peasants and other working-class individuals. The generic “indigenous” label that has been used throughout encompassed natives from various ethnic subgroup communities of the Maya, including Mam, Kaqchique, Tz’utujil, Poqomam, and Quiche, among others. Members came from various religious backgrounds as well, and even Catholic clergy and nuns participated in the movement in different capacities. While people came from disparate backgrounds, one unifying factor was the basic desire to change the country’s political and socioeconomic structures, coupled with the assumption that peaceful avenues to change had been closed off by a repressive state, leaving armed struggle as the only option to effectuate the necessary changes. More often than not, this desire did not come from an abstract theoretical analysis of Guatemala’s social structures; instead, this desire came forth from a sense of injustice in the country’s existing social relations, which in turn, inspired a determination and commitment to social justice. While some middle-class professionals and university students were versed in explanatory social theories, they also shared personal anecdotes of witnessing the social inequities that existed and the desire to change them.

Within ORPA, members served in a variety of capacities, ranging from militants on the front lines to logistical support and international network soliciting support for the struggle in the exterior. Members served on both urban and rural fronts and some continued to lead a “legal” life of employment outside of the organization, while others
left legality behind and worked full-time for the movement. All members that remained in Guatemala, regardless of what role they would eventually work, were expected to spend a period of time in the rugged conditions of the mountain guerrilla camps, a requirement that was meant to build not only character and discipline, but to also forge unity and understanding between the members with different class and ethnic backgrounds.

This chapter looks at the different experiences of some of ORPA’s members, including the decisions that caused them to take up arms, their ideological understanding and their organizational experience. It attempts to understand just how the movement’s ideas were understood and internalized by members, and how they were translated into daily actions and interactions. For instance, it examines just how some members understood, practiced and experienced ideas of racial and gender equality, and looks at whether or not the very prejudices that existed in Guatemalan society continued within the movement. The chapter is organized into three sections. The first section examines the experiences of some former members looking at how they came into contact with ORPA and why they made the decision to join. The second section looks at some of the varied experiences of member and organizational development. Those who joined the movement in the early 1970s had a different organizational experience than those who joined in the 1980s. The third section looks broadly at how members understood, internalized and practiced key aspects of the movement’s ideology. This chapter employs some of the same categories that have been used to delineate ORPA’s ideology and discourse in previous chapters. Variations of categories such as the Guatemalan reality, issues of race, and gender issues, among others, appear here in the discussion of how
former members understood, internalized, practiced and experienced key aspects of the movement’s ideas. While the sentiments and opinions shared are not representative of every member of ORPA, they offer a glimpse into the varied experiences of the people that decided to take up arms and fight for a different future.

The limitations of this chapter must be clearly stated at the outset, as it is based on oral history interviews from a small sample of former members. While the sample includes both women and men, indigenous and ladino, peasants and urbanites, leaders and rank-and-file members, illiterate and university educated, it still represents just a small sample of the people that participated in the movement.¹ Most of those interviewed have continued to the struggle for social justice in some form. Some work for the URNG political party while others work for non-governmental organizations promoting indigenous rights, civil rights or human rights more broadly. Others dedicate themselves to farming or other trades, but have chosen to live in villages and towns completely populated by former guerrilla members, many working together in agricultural cooperatives trying to create a better society at the micro-level while promoting changes at the macro-level. Broadly, most of those interviewed stayed active in the movement to the end, and overall, had positive experiences in the organization. However, this does not signify that they were uncritical of problems within the movement and shortcomings of translating ideology into practice.

¹ Limited resources and time, as well as finding former members willing to talk, all played some part in the specific people interviewed. Another key aspect of coordinating these interviews also resulted in a different type of limitation. The ability to discuss such sensitive themes and topics with people in a country still coming to terms with the recent violence relies heavily on a network of contacts and introductions to others that might want to share their story. The result was that most interviewed were referred directly by a contact or perhaps another person interviewed, which makes the pool of interviewees anything but random.
Another limitation of the oral histories employed in this chapter is a limitation of oral histories more broadly: the possibility of selective and distorted memory. It is also important to remember that political understanding is a process in a perpetual state of evolution. Therefore, in discussions of understanding, internalization and practice of political ideas, it is hard to know whether or not former members are simply projecting back onto their past an understanding that has been constructed in the years since ORPA. However, despite such limitations, this chapter aims to share why some members joined the movement, how they understood and practiced the movement’s ideas and how they perceived those ideas to translate into daily interactions within the movement.

Reasons for Joining ORPA

ORPA’s internal and external publications regularly analyzed and proposed a specific interpretation of Guatemala’s reality, both in historic terms and in terms of the contemporary social situation. Various aspects of the organization’s analysis were recurring topics in interviews as former members related their personal stories of their life experiences before joining the movement and the reasons that they decided to join the armed struggle. The plight of the peasantry and the indigenous populations, government corruption and state repression were all frequent themes in the personal histories, as were broader themes of social inequalities, both class and racially driven.

The social situations and experiences of those interviewed fit into three broad categories: rural peasant, urban poor and urban middle-class student or professional. Of

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2 Such challenges, methods and debates of oral histories has been addressed elsewhere, see Steve Stern’s Essay on Sources in Remembering Pinochet’s Chile: On the Eve of London 1998, Book one of the Trilogy: The Memory Box of Pinochet’s Chile (Duke University Press, Durham & London, 2004), 215.
course, many nuances existed in each particular life experience, but similarities existed within the respective backgrounds, allowing for this sort of sub-categorization. The fact that most of the rural peasants and urban poor (frequently transplants to the city from rural areas) were indigenous and most of the urban professionals were ladino underscores some of the underlying racial aspects to social inequality in Guatemala.

A general awareness of social injustice and sense of duty was a commonality among former members. Some suffered discrimination and exploitation firsthand, while others witnessed it and empathized with it on some level. All the former members interviewed were asked what specifically attracted them to ORPA once they committed themselves to armed struggle. For many rural members, ORPA was the main organization, if not the only one, operating in and around their community, whereas urban members were in close proximity to urban cells of the other organizations.

*Rural Peasant Experience*

Many interviewed were rural peasants when they came into contact with the movement. The peasant experience included suffering the hardships that accompanied very little access to land, if not landlessness, and the exploitative conditions of wage or piece labor on large plantations. Apart from the similar social conditions that led each to join the organization, those hailing from the rural peasantry also usually joined the movement at a younger age than those in the urban areas, with some starting to work in community organizing while still in their early teens.

Hector, of Kaqchiquel Maya descent, was only 15 or 16 when he first came into contact with the movement and decided to join. Lacking educational opportunities, he had followed in the footsteps of his grandfather and father, starting to work on large
coffee and sugar plantations to the north of Chimaltenango from the age of 10 or 11. Opportunities remained limited, as “there were no opportunities to go and study, instead he had to concern [himself] with working…in order to buy food.” However, the area had a long tradition of peasant mobilization that formed part of the base of the popular movement that ousted the dictator in 1944 and supported the land reform of the early 1950s. He maintained that due to the popular organizing and “all the conflicts that had occurred on the plantations, [ORPA] organizers knew that there were people there that would participate in such a movement,” that there was a receptive audience. He had seen guerrillas pass by while working in the coast in the mid-1970s, but it was not until 1979, when he was 15 to 16 years old, that people began talking of ORPA. Eventually, some members came to the village. According to Hector, “it was very opportune that [guerrillas] came to the village” as he and other youth from the community had become more curious about this new organization. He explained, “With all that we had experienced on the plantations…this gave me the idea to want to know this movement, so I went to see them.”

Hector explained that both economic exploitation and ethnic discrimination prompted his inquietude and curiosity, inspiring him to join the movement when he was 16. The ideas of Asturias and ORPA had “validity” due to the difficult realities the workers faced, as they were “poor, without opportunities, remaining marginalized, excluded and exploited.” He also explained the racial discrimination coming from managers, and even other peasants, resulting in a denial of his heritage. In his case, this meant relinquishing his mother tongue of Kaqchikel due to the “cruel” conditions of the

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period. He maintained that the state-sponsored terror that was being reported around the country, specifically the Panzós massacre of 1978, added a certain bleakness to the future for the people, also inspiring him to participate in the struggle. With little prospect for a better future, Hector embraced ORPA’s social analysis and joined the organization.⁴

Nery, a member of the Mam ethnic group, shared a similar story of peasant hardships and discrimination that led him join the movement. He started working in coffee fields in the western department of San Marcos when he was just 14 years old. At that point, he did not necessarily have a political ideology, but had personally lived the “discrimination” and “inhumane conditions” experienced by the peasant laborer, both in wages and contracts. At the beginning, “I didn’t have any political formation, but I lived it in the flesh.” He also witnessed how the fear of discrimination resulted in a similar denial or rejection of ethnic and cultural heritage among the indigenous peasants that labored beside him in the fields. Similar to Hector, he did not learn his mother tongue of Mam. However, even though his personal experience coincided with many of ORPA’s perspectives, he admitted that it was only after joining that he developed a full theoretical understanding of the role of racism in Guatemala’s power structures.

Nery believed that peaceful avenues to change were being closed off, with the persecution of peasant leaders including the murder of some on a plantation on which he worked. The organization established a guerrilla camp very close to his village and a friend and coworker was already part of the movement. Initially, he was unaware of both due to the clandestine nature of the work. One day, the friend invited him to meet some members of the guerrilla, and they discussed the struggle. Nery explained that “It was

easy for me to understand why it was necessary to fight; I had lived it, I was living it. What one might not have recognized was that there was a possibility or a way to change [the situation].” Nery joined ORPA in January 1978, approximately a year and a half before the organization began military actions.5

Gonzalo Roberto Ambrosio, a Sipakapense speaker from Sipacapa municipality in the department of San Marcos in western Guatemala, shared a similar story of peasant hardship, and a general desire to struggle for a different future. However, his story differs from the others as he initially worked with the Resistance at the young age of twelve.6

The Resistance was a broad support network of people working in clandestine logistical support, as well as political organizing and recruiting, while continuing legal lives in their respective villages. Gonzalo shared how he and his twin brother started working on plantations at a young age. Their jobs included cutting sugar cane and working in the cotton fields. They were paid very poorly, and the owners would regularly cheat them on the measurements of piecework. As Ambrosio explained:

From a young age, we started to wonder why did they discriminate against us in this way? Why are we suffering? When we would demand our rights, they refused. They would say, “If you want you can work, if not, you can go. There are more people...that need it.” But we were thinking, we need to work out of necessity...So with all these things that we were feeling, thinking that it was not just – that the rich were screwing us.7

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6 As explained in the Introduction, the Resistance (Resistencia) consisted of irregular forces made up of full time militants that did not live full time military lives in guerrilla camps, but remained in their communities among people that supported them and concealed their involvement in the organization. Resistance militants were organized into squads that would come together for actions then disperse until the next action.
This was before ORPA began military operations, however, Ambrosio said that he had heard that popular organizations existed intent to make changes:

We had heard that there were many popular peasant organizations, as well as at universities and churches. They were united, and were demanding their rights so that there wouldn’t be this type of repression and exploitation by the wealthy. We realized there were various people that were struggling, fighting for a just cause.\(^8\)

Just as he was coming to know that popular organizations were clandestinely preparing and working for the cause of the people, the military arrived in an attempt to uproot the organizations before they really took hold. The military came to “investigate who was struggling, who was fighting…the government sent their people to kidnap and kill popular leaders.” He was 12 years old when his mother passed away, and he ended up going to live with his sister and brother-in-law. It just so happened that his brother-in-law was active in a Catholic social organization and had begun supporting ORPA. Ambrosio started attending meetings and participating in this Catholic social organization, which was where he became acquainted with the struggle. His brother-in-law explained to him:

Here in Guatemala there is a struggle, there is a war. We want Guatemala to change. Now we are going to take up arms to fight against the rich. We can no longer struggle politically, if we organize the government will have us kidnapped, have us killed…it is a voluntary struggle – voluntarily you join the struggle – you need to be clear in what you are doing.\(^9\)

In 1978, Ambrosio and his brother decided to join the struggle, however, since they were only twelve, they first worked in the Resistance carrying out assignments that included clandestinely transporting propaganda pamphlets and weapons hidden in baskets under bread. In 1980, at the age of 14, he believed he had a “clearer idea” of the situation. Of

\(^8\) Gonzalo Roberto Ambrosio. Interview conducted by author. Digital recording. Santa Anita, Guatemala, August, 11, 2010.

course, by this point, ORPA was operating militarily and clashing with the army in the area. Concerned that the town’s military commissioner would forcefully conscript him into the army and send him to fight, he weighed the option of joining ORPA in the mountains. He remembered one member explaining this decision to him.

You will be fighting for the just cause, fighting for the people. [However,] you are not going to be paid. There you will suffer hunger, thirst, fatigue, fear, sadness, cold, everything. Are you still willing? Are you thinking about this clearly? Since we are not sending you there by force. I decided to go.10

So in 1980, at the age of 14, Ambrosio decided to go to the mountains and become a full-time militant in the organization driven by a sense of injustice and partially by fear of being forcefully conscripted into Guatemala’s army. He stayed up in the mountains until the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996. It was there, in the guerrilla camp, that he gained greater knowledge and understanding of the social situation through ORPA’s program of political and ideological formation.11

Lucrecia, a Mam-speaking peasant woman from the western department of Quetzaltenango, also started her involvement with ORPA in the Resistance. Her parents were already active in the Resistance from the time she was eight years old. Her parents secretly gave political discussions to other members of the community in an effort to both broaden ORPA’s support network and challenge the misinformation that was coming from the official military and government channels. Lucrecia maintained that “little by little, ideas were developing in [her] mind,” and at 13 she had developed an appreciation

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for her parent’s efforts and their concern for the people, explaining that “I wanted to be a part of it, to work in this.” With her father’s permission, she joined the Resistance in 1982 and proceeded to work with other youth in the community, a participation that ranged from youth discussions about the struggle to late night actions of spray painting revolutionary messages and symbols in villages to indicate the organization’s presence. Between 1983 and 1984, the military established a greater presence in the area, prompting her to join the guerrilla full time at the age of 15. While in the mountains she continued to focus on political and logistical support, only then heading from the mountain guerrilla camps to communities for conscious raising efforts.12

_Urban Poor_

Former members whose families formed part of the urban poor detailed life experiences and reasons for joining the organization that typically differed from those who hailed from the urban middle-class, as we shall see. The urban poor consisted of people born in the city as well as those who had migrated there seeking economic opportunity usually settling in marginalized neighborhoods on the periphery of the city. This broad category included first- and second-generation migrants as well as some who had gained access to a university education despite dire economic conditions. Lieutenant Sylvia falls in this latter group. She was raised in the capital as part of the urban poor, eventually gained an education, and started classes at the national university before joining the guerrilla. She was the ninth of ten children born to illiterate, working class parents. Her father worked as a janitor and her mother made tortillas. Sylvia maintained

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that since she can remember she was “sensitive to social situations” and “worried about questions of injustice.” She remembered the impact walking home from school past the houses of prostitution, witnessing the dire conditions of both the women working there and the children born into that situation. While she was spared the physical violence that many women suffered, as Kaqchiquel Maya she experienced other forms of social abuse including racial discrimination. She stated that a sense of insecurity and inferiority caused an identity crisis, lamenting how she too adopted discriminatory phrases such as “pure indian” to mock brutish behavior.13

Sylvia explained how her social concerns initially led her to become active with the Catholic Church, which was preaching ideals and principles of social justice in the 1970s. She became part of one of the early catechumen communities in Guatemala City. Her concerns with social ills led her to pursue studies in psychology at the national university, San Carlos University (USAC), where she also began supporting groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Neurotics Anonymous in an effort to understand the human element of societal problems. As she continued to search for ways to promote social justice a classmate at the USAC began talking to her about ORPA and provided her with theoretical documents and other books in the mid to late-1980s. Initially, she had many doubts and concerns and was not sure she fully comprehended what joining the organization would mean. She believed that peaceful paths to change had been closed off, and despite being a self-proclaimed pacifist, she “convinced” herself that the armed struggle was a “necessary evil” and, hopefully, only a “temporary” one. After months of

personal deliberation, she joined the urban front, and was then transferred to a rural guerrilla front in 1989.\footnote{Sylvia (nom de guerre). Interviewed by author. Digital recording. Guatemala City, August 31, 2010.}

María Tuyuc had migrated to the capital city from the rural community of San Juan Comalapa when she was 12 years old. Her parents had come to the city seeking economic opportunities, as her “father was a peasant, but a peasant without land.” He therefore “had the necessity to come to the capital and search for work.” She was the second oldest of nine children, and along with the other older siblings became an important support for her parents. She started working “taking care of a child” at a very young age in Comalapa, and after arriving in the city she “studied at night and worked during the day in a store,” on top of helping out with her younger siblings at home. María explained that her older brother was the first to come into contact with ORPA and joined because he identified with the objectives of the movement. She could not remember whether he came into contact with ORPA through the university, his job as an accountant or a church group that he participated in, but he served as her introduction to movement, and she decided to join in 1979, just after military operations had started. According to María, the high levels of state repression made it an easy choice for her and her siblings who joined the organization:

There were only two choices for the youth, we take up arms and get on the side of the people, or we get on the side of the government’s army. So we had the ease of choosing, right? If we are poor we must struggle alongside the poor. This is the logic that we used.\footnote{Maria Roselia Tuyuc. Interview by author. Digital recording. Guatemala City, August 20, 2010.}

Even though María’s family had migrated to the capital before Comalapa became a target of state violence and did not personally experience it there, they still received the news of
the repression and disappearances of “various people that they knew from the village,” including “various cousins.” She maintained “all this also motivated them to fight” believing that if they did nothing, they would also be susceptible to state repression. “We were young, we were restless,” she continued, and “the only path that remained at this point was to fight.”

Urban middle-class/professional

Urban middle-class, and perhaps upper-middle-class was the third common social situation of those interviewed. These narratives typically included a university education, or at least the start of one, which opened their eyes to the great social inequalities that existed in Guatemala, inspiring them to take action and join the revolution. Like the other broad categories above, variations exist. Some had exposure or contact with the urban or rural poor in some capacity that highlighted both the class and race components of the country’s social problems. Others did not talk about personal experiences with the marginalized sectors, but had come to the same conclusions through studying the inequalities and discrimination that existed in Guatemalan society. Nearly all those who came from the urban, middle and upper-middle classes discussed the analytical and theoretical foundations that inspired them to join the movement. A strong sense of social justice was key in inspiring these members to join, as they were giving up some sort of privileged background in order to risk their lives for Guatemala’s have-nots, essentially joining an armed socioeconomic and civil rights movement.

In the case of Lydia Santos, it was a required practicum while a pre-law student at the USAC that put her in direct contact with the indigenous population and raised her

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awareness of the many problems that existed in Guatemalan society. While her social consciousness had been nurtured by teachings of liberation theology as a teenager studying at a Catholic school, it was during her second year at the USAC that she was required to set up a field work experience concerning some aspect of the legal system. At the encouragement of a friend studying architecture, she and a small group of fellow students traveled to Santiago de Atitlan to fulfill this requirement. There, they came into contact with the Tz’utujil Maya population in that part of Guatemala and began to appreciate the many issues facing rural Guatemala and the indigenous population more broadly. In Santiago, the students began meeting with some “restless” youth from the community, ranging from peasants to shopkeepers, many “in some way catechists,” who were forming a community group called “Pre-University Tz’utujiles,” but “in reality most of them were self-educated.” She explained:

In some way, we had to look at the system of land [tenure], and we touched on one of the most sensitive issues. Immediately, just saying “land” and “how is the land situation?” started all the discussion, because they all had their properties; properties that had been recognized by titles since their grandparents. However, all the mountains and all the surrounding farms were no longer theirs, but were [owned] by foreign companies or national owners that lived in the capital…so we started to see how the assembly of the laws was at the base of a great injustice and dispossession of land.\footnote{Lydia Santos. Interview by author. Digital recording. Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, August 11, 2010.}

She also accompanied medical students on visits to the surrounding plantations, witnessing the “terrible” conditions workers experienced. The students established relationships with these conscientious locals and were surprised that they possessed such a profound understanding of the situation, without “having read all that the students had studied.” These visits, which continued for a couple years, were “very important” for the
university students as they “helped them see a reality,” even if “they did not completely understand what the solutions were.” At that point, her solution was to be a “legal professional” with a “proactive sentiment” in order to promote change.

Lydia felt that there was a “common element” among the students in her group that perhaps better prepared them to confront the problems they witnessed; “they all came from [Catholic] schools” resulting in “greater social consciousness.” The Liberation Theology of the “rebellious Church” nourished a commitment to “principles of justice” and “solidarity.” Over time, as she and her fellow students were forming deeper understandings of the social reality, the architectural student who had initiated their visits to Santiago spoke with each one of them separately, informing them of an emerging struggle in western Guatemala, a “clandestine, illegal struggle” but nonetheless “legitimate…since it corresponds to the needs of the people.” This was in 1971-1972, a time in which the FAR and PGT were in disarray, and neither ORPA nor the EGP had yet emerged. Lydia had some doubts due to family pressures and responsibilities, but she made the decision, along with her student companions, to continue “learning the proposals of this struggle that was still in its initial phase.” After about six to seven months of theoretical discussions, she was invited to visit a guerrilla camp in the mountains for some further training in May 1973.

Lydia recalled an impactful event that occurred about a month prior to her departure. In the capital city, she and some others met up with Carlos, a member of the organization who had been organizing in the mountains and wanted to further explain the struggle. She remembered him as “very pleasant, very inquisitive about what we thought, and also very open,” and his gun really put the struggle into perspective. Once they
arrived in the mountains, they learned that Carlos was actually Rodrigo Asturias. Lydia felt that “going to the mountain was the defining moment…to see the perspectives that the militants had.” She had “seen the need for change, for justice, [change] in opportunities, to end exclusion, to end poverty,” and had attempted to realize such things through social movements, the Church and professional organizations at the university. She now understood that there were other paths and that a “struggle was reactivating…with a new approach.”

Manuel became involved with the organization while a law student in the western city of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala’s second largest urban area commonly called Xela, which is located much closer to the ORPA’s foundational camp than the capital city. His contact with the movement dated to the nascent period when Asturias assumed leadership of the faction of guerrillas associated with the FAR that had been operating in the region, only to break ties with the FAR and change tactical and ideological directions. At that point, the movement was simply called the “Organization.” According to Manuel, his militancy began years earlier in 1966 when he was 18 or 19 and joined the FAR’s urban front in Quetzaltenango. The FAR in the west was spared the massive counterinsurgency campaign that had occurred in eastern Guatemala in 1968. He explained that a disconnect existed between the urban front in Xela and the rural guerrillas, and therefore they were not entirely aware of the existing lack of political perspective and ideological formation until Asturias arrived and assumed control. Accordingly, the deficiencies exposed by Asturias and the subsequent transformations, such as defining a revolutionary perspective and approach for the movement, were precisely what inspired him and others in the urban

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front to disassociate themselves from the FAR and focus their energies on consolidating this new organization. He was attracted to the subjectivity of the movement in its approach to address Guatemala’s specific reality, and he considered it a “rupture with the dogmatic positions of the Latin American left, and a break with the official Marxism.” An important factor was the organization’s attempt to establish a multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural Guatemala.\(^\text{19}\)

Aníbal had family members active in the revolutionary agitations occurring in Guatemalan City in the late-1960s, when he was coming of age. While various family members shared leftist sympathies and discussed participation in the democratic experiment of the Arbenz era, a brother who was a member of the urban FAR began sharing political ideas and convictions with him while in his early teens. Despite pressures from the political right as well, having had family members and future brother-in-laws in the military, he “felt more inclined toward the people’s struggles.” He was greatly “impacted” when his brother was killed in one of the first urban confrontations in which the police raided a clandestine safe house. He “identified” with the ideas of his brother. His social conscious matured in this familial context, further encouraged by both a Jesuit education and later leftist elements at a public institute where he studied. He continued to mature politically and socially when he entered San Carlos University (USAC), the national university, in his associations with other students seeking new forms of struggle. He explained:

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\text{[My] first years of university where there were student groups, and we were radicalizing...understanding we were seeing not only the student or protest...}
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struggle, but now we were discerning a more direct participation in a clandestine movement. In the discussions occurring among the student groups at that time, there were positions that did not want anything to do with the organizations and parties that existed at that time which were the PGT, the communist party...and...the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR)...the restless [students] were in search of something new, something different...there was a feeling that something had failed and were looking for something different. It was in this context...with a group of friends, [fellow] students...we discussed from where and what type of organization we had expectations of participating in, and the idea was taking shape that it must be an armed struggle.20

According to Aníbal, this group of students discussed the need for a “serious preparation,” hoping to avoid any errors that previous organizations might have committed, and the idea that indigenous population needed to play a role in the struggle. One of the students in this group came into contact and joined ORPA, “although at that time it was not known as [ORPA]...simply an organization...defined by its participation in the armed struggle.” It was 1975, and “I was in my second year of studying medicine when I joined” the movement, he said.21

When asked why he and the other students with whom he associated opted not to work with the PGT or FAR, Aníbal explained some of the reasons that were debated among them at the time, the first being the ideological approach. While “we read, most of all...the theoretical aspects of Marxism” they were concerned that the prevailing “Marxist-Leninist” approach “which indicated that a Communist Party needed to be at the revolutionary vanguard” of a proletariat struggle did not “completely fit” Guatemala’s situation. Guatemalan communists “questioned” the revolutionary capacity of the indigenous population and posited that “armed struggle was no longer viable,” both emerging as official lines of the PGT and FAR (discussed in previous chapters). Aníbal

and the other students in the group had accepted that “there had to be an armed struggle, and that the indigenous population had to have a belligerent role in this struggle.”

Zully was also a student at the USAC when she joined the organization in 1975. A recent transplant to the capital city from the western department of San Marcos, during the day she taught natural sciences and language to children in a couple different Catholic schools. In the evenings she studied psychology at the university. At this time, her “desire to do things for the welfare of the country” coincided with the organization’s “ability to capture [the attention of] the people with those same concerns in the student environment or professional environment.” Zully credits her paternal grandmother, who raised her as a child, for instilling in her a sense of social justice and responsibility. While her grandmother was “not revolutionary, nor had revolutionary thoughts,” she was “a person with thoughts of social justice…with…great sensibility for others.” She maintained that her grandmother’s concern for others helped her see the world differently and made her more aware of her surroundings:

Even though I did not live in a situation of poverty, nor limitations….I think that from an early age…in my childhood, I was able to notice the many needs of the people, of my schoolmates, the children. There were barefoot children, [those] without anything to eat…and I grew up with these children.

Zully also explained witnessing the annual migration of indigenous farm workers descending to work on the coffee plantations from distant villages. From an early age she “incorporated a certain sensibility” for social issues that she carried into adulthood, which shaped her decision to commit her time and energy to the organization. The university

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“environment” provided her the opportunity to be active in such causes as faculty and students discussed “social issues” such as the “the poverty and the situation of the country,” highlighting the needs of the people. This all prepared and inspired her to become involved with the organization and officially join in 1975.24

*Member and Organizational Development*

ORPA’s internal documents detailed various aspects of member and organizational development, including an emphasis on the political and ideological formation of each member. The goal was to have a political-military organization in which each member had a clear understanding of the organization’s interpretation of Guatemalan reality and the basis of the struggle, in an effort to instill discipline and firm determination to carry it out. The movement’s leadership believed that ideas were crucial forces driving history, and aimed to utilize ideological formation to provide a theoretical foundation for the revolutionary struggle and the society they wanted to create. Despite this emphasis on political formation, members had very different experiences as to the amount of time they had for developmental and formative processes, which typically depended on when the militant joined the movement. Those who joined the organization before major hostilities began in the early 1980s had much more time dedicated to political and ideological development, while some of those who joined in the 1980s explained that while this was still important, the realities of the war limited the time that could be dedicated to such development. Of course, life experiences up until incorporation, specifically disparate levels of educational attainment would also shape

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each militant’s educational experience within the movement. For much of the peasantry, the political and ideological schooling provided by the organization constituted their first real book-based educational experience.

Nery explained that when he joined, the two things they focused on in the camp were “political formation and military training.” Days started with exercise at 6 a.m., followed by military training from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. The afternoon and evening were dedicated to political and ideological development, which included reading materials, group discussions and lectures. The amount of time dedicated to ideological development depended “on the level that one had” referring to the level of political understanding. He also mentioned that study plans were flexible depending on educational level, and illiterate members also received literacy classes from other members, followed by explanations of the organization’s theoretical materials and discussions of ideological themes.25

Hector shared how the plan of formation provided him a great educational and intellectual opportunity. Lacking the social conditions for schooling, Hector had joined his father in plantation work at a young age. While he had attended (and certainly learned from) peasant meetings in the past, he considered joining the movement as “an escape to the school of the insurgency in the mountains,” where he gained an education that helped him “determine his formation, participation and understanding along the way.” He believed that the organization’s emphasis on political and ideological development resulted in a very “opportune” and momentous time for him. He explained:

I believe this was always the base of our militancy. We were not bandits, delinquents. We were politically formed people with this ideology. It’s worth mentioning that these ideas gave us the strength to sustain so many years surviving a conflict of this magnitude…if it weren’t for the ideology, the ideas, and the formation. I can say it was advanced political capacity that provided stability in the emotional and in the morale, of course.

Hector mentioned that apart from the many ORPA documents used for political formation other books were available on revolutionary experiences in Cuba, Vietnam and the USSR, as well as books by Mario Payeras a leader of the EGP in Guatemala. However, he stated that once hostilities began, there was limited time to dedicate to political formation:

There was access to all type of literature. The problem was that we didn’t have time to read all this as we were preparing to defend ourselves, for military action. So it was suggested that we focus on ORPA documents in the time we had. We had little time to really study the other books and experiences, etc. But we had the task to study – so as to be sure of what we were doing.26

While still focused on ideological development and military training, member and organizational development in the city required a different approach due to the urban environment and the fact that most recruits retained “legal” lives. Zully discussed the clandestine period of political and theoretical development directed by her organizational contact, a process that started during recruitment and continued after joining the movement. Apart from ORPA documents, which were only available after “one consented to participate,” she remembered reading photocopied books by other intellectuals, specifically mentioning José Carlos Mariátegui and Frantz Fanon. She explained that she “really liked the style of work…the way in which [she] was learning new things” in this formative experience. Her experience not only included studying

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ideological materials, but also familiarizing herself with the urban terrain for “operative reasons,” studying the news to know “what was occurring in the country,” and “physical training.”

Zully continued her legal life during this process, like many other urban recruits, but a clandestine life was not always easy to keep hidden. She explained that some family members began to notice the “changes,” observing “…but you never used to read the newspaper so much,” and that her situation became even more complicated when someone discovered “prohibited” books that she had stashed at her uncle’s house between study sessions. She moved into an organization safe house as familial suspicions grew, but even then she maintained her legal life. She explains that members kept their legal lives “not to continue in them…but…as [our] way to also conceal what [we] were doing.” As recruits “assumed responsibility” they would usually be “selected” or asked to work “full time” for the movement, which she did after approximately a year.27

Some members maintained legality for much longer after joining the organization. Lydia Santos, for instance, continued her legal life for five years after joining in 1973. This included working her day job and studying at the university. She explained this period of ideological development:

We went along reading [organizational documents] and would get together to discuss them…any doubts…and everyone continued with their work, their family life, personal [life]. But we were also quickly taking dimension of what was the revolutionary experience, really to be a struggle set out as clandestine, as legitimate, but illegal. It required a series of basic approaches in one’s attitude, so in that sense, I feel that initially it was a lot of reading and documents of experiences. We had the advantage that two members…had been in the FAR for a time, and had had negative experiences. That is, they were very demanding…in

the work in the city. So one of the fundamental things, at least in our orientation, was to maintain our jobs, our legality, as good as possible. We also had to maintain our [ideological] study.28

Whereas the experiences of Hector and Nery in the rural camps and Lydia and Zully in the capital offer examples of the movement’s commitment to member development, those who joined after hostilities broke out had limited time to spend on theoretical development. María Tuyuc maintained that the organization placed great importance on the ideological development of members; however, some just had less time to dedicate to this development. Even though she joined in 1981, she still had some time to study and prepare during the recruitment process and while working in the urban front. However, she maintained that as hostilities spread, especially in the rural fronts, we “had to give preparation in three, four, or five days, or perhaps when just arriving the military closes in...and there was no time for preparation.” In her preparatory experience, she believed that the dedication of those responsible for theoretical training was an important aspect of organizational development as they “were very prepared people, with the ability for popular education.” ORPA trained a “group of people as its political cadre” that tended to the formation of new recruits. In her case, she would study organizational documents as well as external texts, then “regularly meet for an hour” to discuss the materials with the person responsible for her development in order to clarify any doubts.

According to María, the approach of those responsible for ideological training varied depending on the educational level of the member. Those with university backgrounds were given more to study, while those with little education had access to “popular materials, we called them ‘popularized’...for example, Principles and

Objectives with drawings.” Literacy classes were also given to members with little education. María believed that the “great thing about the organization was the availability of its cadres…people dedicated to give political attention.” The end result was that “each member had their own plan of formation,” customized to their education level and directed by someone dedicated to their development.²⁹ This organizational commitment and flexible approach to ideological formation, including the training of the cadre that would oversee the formation of new recruits, is well documented throughout ORPA’s internal documents, as we have seen.

Race and Indigenous issues

As outlined in the previous chapters, ORPA’s emphasis on a creative ideology geared toward Guatemala’s specific social, political and economic problems, motivated the leadership to develop perspectives and analysis on various sectors of the population that made up the national community. Key theoretical documents were circulated that analyzed challenges facing women and the indigenous population in Guatemalan society, as well as the role of those sectors in the revolution. The movement also examined the role of the petty bourgeoisie and urban intellectual in the revolutionary struggle. Such analytical perspectives stemmed from the movement’s emphasis on the importance of ideas, human actions and subjectivity in the struggle, an approach that differentiated ORPA from many contemporary movements.

All of the former members interviewed were asked about race as a key aspect of the movement’s ideology. They were specifically asked to expound on the role that the analysis of racism played in the organization and the extent to which the movement’s

perspectives were practiced among the members in daily interactions. Experiences varied from one militant to another for different reasons, not the least of which was ethnic origin of the member. However, most expressed the belief that the analysis on racism and discrimination was central to ORPA’s goal to establish a new society with full inclusion of the indigenous population and respect for its history and culture. Most expressed that in order to understand Guatemalan society, it was imperative to understand the role that racism had played in the construction of the existing social, political and economic relations. While some admitted that racism appeared within the movement as well, they felt that the organization was moving in the right direction and that members were generally trying to be better people. In fact, many posited that instances of racism within the movement demonstrated just how ingrained these ideas were within Guatemalan society, further underscoring the importance of ORPA’s analysis.

Lieutenant Sylvia believed that the purpose of all the theoretical documents was to create “ideal people,” but that “Racismo I and Racismo II really impressed [her] the most.” She continued that those documents “gave me a lot of inspiration…I remember when I read them, even crying at times, because much of what they said I had felt, I had lived before.” However, she also alluded to the difficulties in realizing those ideas in every day relations between indigenous and ladino members of the organization:

I definitely believe that there were good intentions for change, to be different, to be better in both directions – as we said at that time, to be the new man, I also say the new woman. But this formation that one had, even in the cells, in the blood, in the subconscious, even when one is very revolutionary, I don’t believe it is easy to stop having certain attitudes.30

Sylvia explained that racism was so pervasive in Guatemalan society that even she, a Kaqchiquel Maya, was regrettably guilty of using abusive phrases. She explained:

These documents on racism impacted me because I had felt victim of racist discrimination, although I don’t like that word very much [referring to victim]. Nevertheless, I also learned to say “puro indio” to mistreat or discriminate against someone. Someone that I wanted to offend, I would say “puro indio.” So all these constructions that one has are very difficult to get rid of, even when one wants to.31

Sylvia discussed the many ways that racism appeared in society and often in ways that were not that “evident” or even “direct discrimination,” ranging from paternalist attitudes to “a gesture, a look, a word” that people use out of habit, maintaining that such manifestations “say a lot about what one has learned.” She continued that “yes, there were efforts to change, to be different…but I believe there were these types of manifestations.” She maintained that racist attitudes traveled both directions, as many indigenous members felt that ladino militants from urban backgrounds would not last in the harsh conditions of the rural guerrilla camp, and would wash out. Some ladino members were even bothered when indigenous members conversed in their mother tongues. For her part, she “felt they had the right to do this, and it was our turn to experience, on a very small level, what the Maya population had lived for centuries” referring to larger implications of Spanish as the official language.

But yes, there were some of these manifestations, some commentaries or not understanding or comprehending some things that for me had to do with questions of racism…but in this mutual collision, we were little by little learning to appreciate one another, but at times, for me, with racist attitudes.32

Others shared experiences similar to Sylvia’s, maintaining that members were making efforts to apply the movement’s ideas to daily life and eschew the racism that permeated Guatemalan society. Yet, racist attitudes and actions still occurred within the guerrilla. When asked about racism and discrimination in the guerrilla fronts, Nery stated “Yes, there was…obviously, it was also there…[although] not as marked as in a village,” outside the guerrilla, but would always see things “reflecting some racist attitude,” even if “unconsciously.” He felt that perhaps this was due, at least in part, to limited time for political and ideological formation of militants that joined during military operations. Nery noted:

There were problems since many people that joined during [hostilities] had very little time to study [ideology]. So when we neglected that part [ideological training], problems arose that had to do with racism…but when there was time, we had to return to review how we are doing, see what was happening, check to see how we were deviating from what ORPA was asking, the formation.33

While racism crept into the organization at times, Nery was much more concerned with its pervasiveness in Guatemalan society and the importance the organization placed on directly confronting this social problem. He believed that while peasants were discriminated against due to class status, racial discrimination was a more important factor, explaining how the fear of discrimination would cause people to deny their identity and claim ladino heritage. One would feel “abused when working,” but it was not until joining ORPA that began to articulate an explanation, realizing that “racism was the main instrument to dominate the people and make them work for a miserable salary.”

ORPA’s analysis helped him understand just how pervasive racism was and the powerful role it played in “subjecting the people.”

Lucrecia admitted that she was young when she joined the Resistance and might not have fully comprehended the organization’s ideology. What impressed her most was the “discipline of the members, and the respect that existed within the organization.” She felt that racial equality “was practiced, but not by everyone.” The superiors would lead formative “discussions” so as to promote this among the members. Even though she learned Spanish while in the mountains, she maintained, “in the struggle, it did not matter what language one spoke,” explaining that she originally communicated with non-Mam speakers through translators. While not fully expounding on the movement’s position on racism, she felt “there was respect…I never received discrimination.”

Hector believed that Asturias “was very accurate” with his analysis on race and the effects of racism in Guatemalan society. Asturias understood the “present situation” of the country, and something that impressed Hector was that Asturias “practiced” ideas of racial inclusion in his daily interactions with others. Hector explained that he had personally experienced the historic discrimination and the loss of identity, such as not learning his mother tongue Kaqchiquel, as well as the lack of educational opportunities suffered by the indigenous people. However, Asturias’s articulation helped him gain a more profound understanding of the far-reaching effects of racism. As Hector recalled:

I realized that the effect of racism had been so cruel, and continues to be. The document that [Asturias] wrote was based in practice and those effects that we have experienced…the loss of identity and all of this. This is very painful for one

from the rural area and not have this [identity]...that was born and raised in an area of ethnic groups it is a loss of identity. But these are the effects of racism.\footnote{Hector. Interview by author. Digital recording. 29 de Diciembre, Guatemala, July 28, 2010.}

He felt that members did well to apply the movement’s ideas in daily life, limiting any racism, specifically in the camp in which he lived:

\begin{quote}
In the mountains, members really practiced the start of a new life, building the foundation of the new man. Of course, paying attention to rules and a style was very important...because this had lines and parameters. I believe this was very good. In the areas that I knew, I could not see racism.\footnote{Hector. Interview by author. Digital recording. 29 de Diciembre, Guatemala, July 28, 2010.}
\end{quote}

When discussing the application of ORPA’s ideology in daily life, and specifically ideas of equality, María Tuyuc pointed out that it was a constant struggle to better oneself, a continual transformative process, and that the legacies of inequality and racism in Guatemala’s social structures were not something that could be overcome instantly. In order to contextualize these things, Maria explained:

\begin{quote}
We have to start from the premise that we were men and women in a process of transformation. We need to remember that we are also products of an exclusionary racist system. I think this is something that we understood clearly, that we had to continue overcoming and continue transforming, each one of us. Nevertheless, it was a daily struggle.\footnote{Maria Roselia Tuyuc. Interview by author. Digital recording. Guatemala City, August 20, 2010.}
\end{quote}

She maintained that this “transformative process” was very crucial to the movement. Once someone made the commitment to struggle against the exploitative and racist system, it was “practically obligatory that you need to continue transforming your daily routine.” She believed that the political formation promoted by the movement provided a deeper understanding of the role of racism and minimized issues of discrimination within the movement.\footnote{Maria Roselia Tuyuc. Interview by author. Digital recording. Guatemala City, August 20, 2010.}
Lydia Santos maintained that most urban recruits and members were more attuned to the challenges facing the indigenous population than might have been expected. The “majority” of the people that we “worked with in the city…were from popular sectors, middle class and also workers,” and many had migrated to the capital from rural areas. Furthermore, communities surrounding that capital city were predominantly indigenous. Accordingly, “the experience of the indigenous population in rural areas was not that strange” to many urban members. Lydia maintained that this allowed members to quickly grasp ORPA’s perspectives on racism, and understand why the revolution needed to address it:

One very quickly understood that racism was a mechanism in the system to maintain domination, exploitation, and oppression…And in a certain way, this was a reality that quickly ‘clicked’ from the beginning. To see, in an assessment of history, that the struggle against discrimination, against oppression, against exploitation, had a very direct manifestation in the struggle against racism.40

Aníbal maintained that the organization’s analysis “helped us become aware that racism had affected all of us in society,” an ideology “implemented for many years, with the objective of keeping the [indigenous] population suppressed.” As a ladino, middle-class urbanite the ideas especially affected his social outlook. He explained:

I believe that the way the organization approached it was to remove a veil that did not allow one to really see Guatemala’s reality and to see themselves…as one was also reproducing this same ideology in their expressions, manifestations, in their way of seeing the indigenous people or not have deeper relations with them…This also helped us work with the compañeros of indigenous and peasant origin. They were also recovering their identity because many denied this. And they suffered this, but didn’t have any explanation as to why they were discriminated against, because no one had ever told them why it was so…I believe that at the beginning one was not aware of this, so I would say that the organization shed a lot of light

Aníbal believes that the analysis on racism not only provided perspective to ladino members who might have been disconnected from the challenges facing the indigenous population, but also provided insight and articulation to the very population that had been suffering racism and discrimination for generations. Some of the indigenous members interviewed, including Sylvia and Hector, expressed a similar sentiment of the analysis offering perspective to the native population.

This new perspective did not result in the absence of racist attitudes and acts within the organization. Aníbal maintained that first and foremost, this new perspective allowed them to understand that “we were not free from being racist…from practicing discrimination or reproducing it, and that it was going to be a long process” to completely root out such attitudes. One important difference between the organization and society more broadly was that when racism occurred within the movement it was highlighted, condemned and analyzed in an attempt to better understand and overcome it.

Reflecting on this type of conduct made us aware that we were not free from it. So it did not surprise us if someone in the [guerilla] front had racist attitudes, but it served us in the daily routine enabling us to clarify that you should not act that way, and explain why. This was done at the appropriate moment, perhaps not in some official formative activity…but pointing this out in everyday things was a way to better understand and recognize it…[the analysis on racism] helped us…through a new line of thought, to build and have new attitudes…this is the ideal of being a revolutionary, one is making it, constructing it, it is not completed…we were not exempt from racist manifestations because men and women were arriving to the fronts from urban areas, peasants arrived, [people] from indigenous communities, also from areas in which racist manifestations are the strongest.42

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Recruits were arriving from “distinct places,” many having only had “limited contact with indigenous people.” However, the organization provided a “space for interrelations and to discuss these topics collectively,” which Aníbal believed to be a “very educational…exchange.” Aníbal maintained that creating a new society and overcoming racism, in its many forms, was not as simple as joining the organization and dedicating oneself to the revolutionary struggle, but was instead a process. Furthermore, he posited that the organization was not void of racism and discriminatory acts, but they were trying to overcome these problems.  

*Women in the Revolution*

Women’s issues and gender equality were similar to race and ethnic issues in that they both were part of the ideological realm and that the end goal was to establish greater equality for a historically marginalized section of Guatemalan society. However, some people interviewed believed that this area of thought and practical application merited greater attention from the movement, something that did not appear to be lost on Rodrigo Asturias. The one internal document solely focused on women’s issues clearly states that it was a very general analysis of limited scope and that it was simply a jumping off point for further analysis.  

Two women interviewed shared personal stories in which Asturias admitted that the material was very limited and stated that it was up to other members, in these cases, female members, to continue developing that area of analysis. 

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44 ORPA, *La Mujer*, (Ediciones ORPA, Unknown Date).  
Sylvia, a woman who rose to the rank of lieutenant in the organization, spoke at length on this issue. She maintained that the lack of theoretical development on gender issues was especially clear after the peace was signed, as the area of analysis lacked sufficient theoretical foundation and education to promote greater societal changes after the war. Sylvia believed that women’s issues were not a priority of any political-military movement of the 1980s since many posited that if the revolution were to achieve social justice, women would be fine accordingly.

I say it was a topic that wasn’t a priority, not for ORPA, nor the URNG now. Nor do I pretend that it was in that moment – in the decade of the 1980s was it a priority in any political military organization because the idea was that it was in addition – if we achieve the revolution and social justice, then the women will also be fine.\(^\text{46}\) She highlighted that much greater efforts were given to indigenous issues, from writing and analysis, to incorporation in the struggle. She mentioned this not to take away from the importance of indigenous issues, but instead to suggest that ORPA was clearly interested in issues that some viewed as part of the superstructure, yet failed to develop a thorough analysis on gender equality like it had on indigenous issues. She maintained that “in the case of women there wasn’t all this effort – yes mentioned it, yes respected them, but according to my opinion [the analysis] was lacking.”\(^\text{47}\)

Similar to the racial ideologies, Sylvia maintained that gender identities (“how we learn to be women, and how we learn to be men”) were something that people “carry deep inside.” Gender relations were “very similar to racism, very subtle, very subconscious, but the same…were these manifestations that were difficult to overcome

from both sides,” and machismo appeared within the organization. However, she believed that members were trying to make positive changes in their daily interactions and that chores such as washing clothes and cooking, traditionally seen as the responsibilities of women in Guatemalan society, were divided equally between the members. Unfortunately, she considered this an ephemeral improvement, observing that, “when the peace was signed…practically the majority returned to traditional roles,” something she saw even in the demobilization camps among partnerships between militants that had been forged in the mountains. She believed that a more profound analysis and theoretical framework on issues of gender equality could have resulted in greater social changes by providing a foundation for those changes.48

The Petty Bourgeoisie

As indicated above, several former members interviewed for this research hailed from the urban middle class, and therefore had direct interest in a role for the urban, petty bourgeoisie and intellectual in the organization. Organizational documents highlight the importance of providing a role for this section of the population, so long as members understood that the impoverished and marginalized masses, both indigenous and ladino, needed to be the central focus of the movement.49 Lydia Santos explained that from the beginning ORPA intended to “create a broad organization” in which everyone could participate, and that the movement’s perspectives and analysis on their incorporation was in urban recruitment efforts, especially when approaching friends and family. She

49 Internal documents analyzed in Chapter 2 under the subheading Role of the Intellectual outline a role for this section of the population. See ORPA, “El intelectual en la guerra popular revolucionaria,” “La pequeña burguesía: sus limitaciones y lastres” and “La dispersion, una grave deficiencia” all reprinted in La Poesía Universal: Tomo I (Guatemala; ORPA, 1983).
believed that part of the movement’s success came from “not limiting participation to a certain profile, with certain characteristics,” but instead providing a role for all the people willing to become “conscious” of the situation:

When you really consider this struggle, it is clear that the fundamentally exploited and oppressed population that works in the fields, that is indigenous, that in some way suffers from the system of racism, is at the heart of [the struggle]. But where does that leave the petty bourgeoisie, or the middle class, or the popular sectors of the city?…So in some way, in the organizational aspect, it was an attempt to make a fabric. And there was a plan for the petty bourgeoisie that said they had a role…from the opportunity of being professional, of having greater resources, but, working very hard to gain consciousness [and perspective] from the interests of the indigenous peoples and popular interests.50

It was imperative that members recognized and embraced the popular forces at the heart of the struggle, while also employing any skills and knowledge that they had gained from class position in the service of the organization and struggle. The movement did not eschew the skills of middle-class professionals, but instead argued that “a professional could be a professional with a gun in hand.” Lydia maintained this was especially noticeable in the recruitment of doctors and medical students who entered the organization as “specialists” able to serve in medical capacities. Furthermore, ORPA’s focus on establishing an educated guerrilla movement required educated urbanites to serve in a variety of general educational initiatives that had little to do with any specific professional training, such as teaching literacy courses and leading discussions of theoretical documents.51

Hector spoke of the benefits of having members with university backgrounds to facilitate ideological development. Only having had access to a few years of formal

education as a child, he considered joining ORPA as “an escape to the school of the insurgency in the mountains.” He maintained that “many were very helpful to me there…people from the university that were there, that led classes, well, the discussions…For me, this was very opportune.” A couple members and an observer highlighted that the exchange between middle-class professionals and peasant members was not a one-way transfer of knowledge. Whereas university backgrounds enabled many urbanites to coordinate educational initiatives for other members, the peasants provided countless lessons of lived experience and practical knowledge of surviving the brutal conditions of guerrilla life, lessons that were frequently difficult to learn.

Religion

ORPA did not endorse or promote any specific religion or employ Liberation Theology in its literature but discussed acceptance of all spiritual belief systems so long as members did not let religion get in the way of revolutionary unity. This message was found in the movement’s first public document, which stated respect for all religions, arguing that the common socioeconomic situation should bring the people together, whereas religion can result in sectarianism. The text and accompanying illustration issued a call to arms for those from any religious background. Some of those interviewed began their journeys of radicalization in Catholic schools or religiously affiliated social activism, guided by socially conscious priests and nuns (usually of the Jesuit order). While not everyone interviewed had such a story, those who did shared a general attitude

of social justice and a desire to end the poverty and suffering of the population, which were general emphases of Liberation Theology.\textsuperscript{54} As discussed in the previous chapter, Asturias’ concern about dogma, and the importance of ideas (specifically the emphasis on moral strength, determination and a revolutionary spirit) would have allowed an easy transition from any religious or spiritual belief that promoted social justice and humanism.

Religion was a radicalizing force in some of the incorporation experiences shared above. Ambrosio became familiar with ORPA and the struggle when he attended meetings of a Catholic social organization with his brother-in-law.\textsuperscript{55} Sylvia found an outlet for her social concerns in the Church’s ideals and principles of social justice in the 1970s, and became part of one of the early catechumen communities in Guatemala City.\textsuperscript{56} Lydia also mentioned that her social consciousness had been nurtured by teachings of Liberation Theology at Catholic school as a teenager, which greatly influenced her approach to social issues as a university student.\textsuperscript{57} In these cases, the raised social consciousness and commitment to social justice instilled by Liberation Theology translated into a more radical approach for change. While the movement did not explicitly use religion due to its potential divisiveness, a commitment to social justice and respect for humanity were unifying factors for ORPA members whether they practiced a faith or not.

\textsuperscript{54} Please refer to the discussion on religion in Chapter 4 for more details. ORPA, \textit{La Guerra Necesaria}, 15.
\textsuperscript{55} Gonzalo Roberto Ambrosio. Interview conducted by author. Digital recording. Santa Anita, Guatemala, August, 11, 2010.
\textsuperscript{57} Lydia Santos. Interview by author. Digital recording. Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, August 11, 2010.
Some who were not radicalized in a religious setting talked about an organizational respect for religious beliefs and practices, as well as a mutual respect for the same among members. Lieutenant Sylvia maintained that religion was neither promoted nor prohibited by leaders. She felt that militants generally respected the religious beliefs of other members. While she personally did not retain the same belief system she had in her youth, Sylvia remained a “spiritual” person. The movement brought together “people of all different faiths…[and] I imagine that practiced in their own moments.”

Nery agreed that the movement promoted respect for all religions, noting that in the “politics of ORPA, it was necessary to respect all religions,” even if one did not personally agree. Manuel also stated that the organization respected all forms of spirituality and that the movement looked to incorporate the “best Christian humanism in Guatemala.” While many priests and nuns were active in the movement, this in no way excluded practitioners of other faiths and spiritualities.

**Conclusion**

People came to ORPA from a variety of backgrounds. While it is impossible to capture the many different experiences related to how and why militants joined the movement or their understandings and internalization of the ideology, this chapter examined some of those experiences. A basic unifying factor of the members, regardless of their life experience, was a desire to struggle for social justice. Some may have come to this determination through personally suffering injustices and others from simply

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witnessing the social inequities in Guatemalan society. Regardless, they all came together in a common cause in an attempt to alter the existing social relations through radical change.

ORPA’s internal and external discourse promoted changes in the various facets of social relations, including race and gender relations. While the movement’s ideology emphasized racial and gender equality, members admitted that discrimination still existed within the movement, which for many simply highlighted just how ingrained such ideas were in Guatemalan society. In some cases, such excuses seemed slightly apologetic, while others emphasized that the revolution was a process of change and not an immediate transformation. The members themselves were products of a racist, exclusionary system that had been around for hundreds of years, and even though social relations in the movement were undoubtedly better than society at large, discrimination, racism and machismo existed. For those interviewed, the movement represented an improvement in the immediate term and gave hope for a better future.
Epilogue

After 36 years, Guatemala’s civil war came to an end on December 29, 1996, when representatives of the government and the URNG signed the final Peace Accord declaring a “firm and lasting peace.” At that point, ORPA, as an entity, ceased to exist, and many of its members, together with militants from the EGP, FAR and PGT, entered legal politics as part of the URNG political party. The accords addressed many of the social concerns that ORPA had presented during the conflict including a prevision titled “Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples” with measures to recognize ethnic identity, protect cultural rights, combat discrimination and promote constitutional reforms to ensure political, social and economic rights for the indigenous population. The government officially recognized the importance of the indigenous population and culture in the national community and legally categorized Guatemala as a multicultural and multilingual country. It pledged to “promote legal and institutional reforms to facilitate, regulate and guarantee” indigenous participation in all aspects of society and combat discrimination. Despite the important elements and advancements contained in this accord, as well as the others, implementation has been a long and arduous process with many setbacks.¹

Despite the potential for change contained in the peace accords, the country continues to struggle with high levels of socioeconomic inequality and the systematic marginalization of the indigenous majority, some of the same problems that ORPA had

¹ For a study of the peace process, as well as the convoluted aftermath and referendum see Susanne Jonas, Of Centaurs and Doves: Guatemala’s Peace Process (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000); The complete texts of the different Peace Accords (most translated into English) are available on the website of the United States Institute of Peace http://www.usip.org/publications/peace-agreements-guatemala
criticized during the conflict. In fact, many of the organization’s ideas and analytical perspectives, especially those on the role of racism in social relations, seem as insightful and relevant today as they had been in the early 1970s. The Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), an organization formed by the Peace Accords, unintentionally provided perspective and support to some key aspects of ORPA’s analysis.

The CEH was given the official task of investigating the human rights abuses that were committed during the war, a daunting task considering the many abuses that were being reported during the conflict. The CEH was “not established to judge” (that would be left to Guatemala’s judicial system) “but rather clarify the history of the events of more than three decades of fratricidal war.” Its thorough, final report, *Guatemala: Memory of Silence* (1999), painted of grim picture of the country’s recent history that included over 650 massacres and other widespread human rights abuses. The CEH found state forces guilty of over ninety percent of the human rights violations, and the combined guerrilla movements responsible for three percent. The CEH estimated that over 200,000 people were either killed or forcefully disappeared during the conflict, and the report ruled that acts of genocide had occurred, as 83 percent of the “fully identified victims” were indigenous.² A 2006 URNG report registered 2,108 “fallen” militants from the four member organizations.³ The fact that only about one percent of the estimated

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³ 558 of the 2,108 were members of ORPA. Fundación Guillermo Toriello. *Memoria de los Caídos en la lucha revolucionaria de Guatemala* (Guatemala: Fundación Guillermo Toriello, 2006).
200,000 deaths were guerrillas is indicative of the military’s approach to national security by broadly targeting civil society and popular organizations.

The CEH report also included a historical section that attempted to provide context to the violent conflict and its widespread crimes against humanity. As historian Greg Grandin explains, “the CEH did what no other truth commission had done before or has done since: it gave a team of Guatemalan historians and social scientists (composed of intellectuals from across the political spectrum, absent the recalcitrant right) access to its research…and asked them to write an analysis of the ‘causes’ and ‘origins’ of the human rights abuses.” The product of this unprecedented move was a “sweeping interpretation of Guatemalan history that went well beyond the often vacuous ‘reconciliation talk’ of past truth commissions.”

This historical analysis retrospectively supported many of the ideas disseminated by ORPA during the conflict, especially the movement’s emphasis on the role of ideological factors, such as racism, in the country’s inequitable socioeconomic relations and the violence that sustains them.

The CEH’s historical analysis attempted to “demonstrate that the war was deeply historically and structurally determined, rooted in the exclusionary, racist, authoritarian and centralist economy, society and state that took shape in the last century.” It argued that the civil war, and Guatemalan history more broadly, could not be understood without first comprehending the dominant ideologies and evaluating their role in that history. Racism, among other ideas, had played a fundamental role in Guatemala’s social relations, resulting in political and economic marginalization of the indigenous majority.

The report noted:

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It is impossible to ignore the significance of ideological factors throughout Guatemalan history that contributed to the legitimating framework for violence: the discourse of “official history,” the persistence of a racist culture; the doctrine of the armed forces (national honor, authority, and hierarchy) and recent efforts to promote ladinización [that is, efforts to transform Mayans into ladinos].

The analysis maintained that independence did little to alter the country’s “entrenched colonial heritage and hierarchical system of social, cultural and economic relations,” and from the early days of the republic the “state evolved into an ‘exclusionary’ and racist entity…violence in the country has been wielded primarily by the state against the poor and excluded indigenous population.”

The findings argued that “racism, the ideological expression of colonization and subordination, originated during the Spanish invasion.” While “Spaniards may have been the first to consider themselves biologically and culturally superior to Indians…that belief was later taken up by Creoles and finally embraced by ladinos.” Therefore, “racism, conscious or unconscious,” is an important factor in understanding the violence committed during the conflict and in Guatemalan society more broadly. It has furthermore served as a key ideological reinforcement of the historical socioeconomic relations.

This historical analysis, compiled and released in the late 1990s, was reminiscent of ideas that Asturias began formulating in the early 1960s while incarcerated in Salamá, Guatemala. By the early 1970s, Rodrigo Asturias and other ORPA leaders had produced documents on the importance of ideology in producing and reproducing social relations.

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While the movement was concerned with various aspects of ideology, racism and its many manifestations took center stage in ORPA’s literature. The organization argued that since the colonial period, racism had served as an ideological tool to perpetuate a system of exploitation, oppression and marginalization for the indigenous majority. The movement believed that the dominant racist ideology was so central to Guatemala’s social structure that various elements on the Left, from intellectuals to political-military movements, had racist tendencies whether consciously or subconsciously.

ORPA’s literature exhaustively delineated the many effects of racism and discrimination in Guatemala’s history, which included perpetuating colonial economic relations to supporting an official history. The organization argued that racism and other ideological factors were so ingrained in the minds and practices of the Guatemalan people and structures that protective laws alone would be insufficient. ORPA maintained that there needed to be a fundamental shift in thinking. This, too, would take time, as was demonstrated by the permanence of racist attitudes among some members within the organization. However, the movement hoped to bring these previously ignored, or in some circles taboo, issues to the forefront of Guatemalan social thought and attack them head on.

Just as the historical analysis on the “causes” and “origins” of the violent conflict supported the important role of ideological factors in social relations, the implementation of some of the peace accords highlight the movement’s concern with the limitations of overcoming those same ideological factors through legislative mechanisms. On paper, the peace accords are radically progressive, especially in terms of Guatemalan history;
however, current social indicators and even commonplace attitudes of many Guatemalans indicate the permanence of a powerful racist ideology and an exclusionary state. While poverty is a major problem for the entire country with an estimated 50 percent of the population living below the poverty line, it remains clear the indigenous population lags far behind their ladino counterparts in nearly every social indicator, ranging from child malnutrition to literacy rates. Furthermore, manifestations of racism are all too common in Guatemalan society and phrases such as “puro indio” (pure Indian) remain in the vernacular. While legislation can promote inclusion and acceptance, powerful and historically rooted ideological factors appear to impede progress.

Rodrigo Asturias and other ORPA leaders were certainly not the first people to emphasize the role of ideological factors in social relations, but in an era of radical political movements, the organization went beyond the limitations of historical materialism to advocate a creative and flexible radical nationalism geared toward problems inherent to Guatemala’s specific social situation. While some aspects of the movement’s ideology may no longer be relevant to contemporary Guatemala, ORPA’s analytical perspectives on racism and the legacy of exclusion remain key to understanding Guatemalan society.

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8 In a discussion with Pedro Palma Lau, a former leader of ORPA, he felt that the Peace Accords represented ORPA’s flexible and creative approach to Guatemala’s problems more so than the other member organizations of the URNG. Pedro Palma Lau. Interview by author. Handwritten notes. Guatemala City, Guatemala, July 30, 2008.

9 The Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) has issued many reports examining a wide array of social indicators in Guatemala, and many are available online at http://cesr.org/

10 “Puro indio” is phrase commonly used to mock brutish behavior. Te salio el indio (someone has let out the Indian within) is another such phrase that is commonly used, see Konefal, For Every Indio, 15.
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