
Offshoring Migration Control: Guatemalan Transmigrants and the Construction of Mexico as a Buffer Zone

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ALEJANDRA RAMÍREZ RECALLS THAT in her first attempt to enter the United States, in October 1995, she hired coyotes (human smugglers) who did not have much experience. The journey was arduous: “They crossed about seven people, and they made us walk for three days.”¹ At one point, the migrants had to cross a river with a current so strong that it dragged one of them away. After finding the man alive, they continued walking. But two hours later, the migrants’ trek was cut short by immigration officials. Ramírez’s story includes many of the experiences typically identified with crossing the Mexico-U.S. boundary without papers: hiring coyotes, traversing unknown territory, wading a dangerous river, and being caught and deported. Yet her story took place not in the Mexico-U.S. border region but in Veracruz, a state in east-central Mexico, 330 miles from the U.S.-Mexican boundary. Ramírez was a Guatemalan transmigrant attempting to reach the United States. The officers who deported her belonged to Mexico’s Migration Services.

Ramírez’s experiences were not unique. In the early 1980s, thousands of Central Americans started heading to the United States to escape the growing violence and poverty in their home countries.² In response to this migratory flow, U.S. officials determined that instead of waiting for these migrants to reach the United States before apprehending and deporting them, they could convert Mexico’s territory into a buffer zone where the refugees could be interdicted before they even reached the U.S. border. As a result, Central American transmigrants had many of the kinds of encounters that are traditionally associated with border control throughout Mexico.³ Their trajectories help to

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¹ Alejandra Ramírez (pseudonym), interview by author, June 21, 2013, San Francisco, California, digital recording.

² While this article focuses on Guatemalan migration, it addresses phenomena that affected other migrant groups as well. Other Central Americans, and particularly Salvadorans, regularly experienced the same treatment in Mexico as Guatemalans. Thus, when issues that affected Central Americans more broadly are discussed, the term “Central American” is used instead of “Guatemalan.” For an analysis specific to the experiences of Salvadorans crossing through Mexico, see Cecilia Menjivar, *Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America* (Berkeley, Calif., 2000), chap. 3.

³ During this same period, U.S. officials started to increase internal checkpoints within the United States that also extended border practices north.

illustrate that the migratory process is often much more multidimensional than a simple linear move from one country to another.

U.S. officials' attempt to convert Mexico into a buffer zone in order to curtail Central American transmigration was part of a broader trend that began during the later years of the Cold War, when the United States and some Western European countries started to offshore migration control to less powerful nations.⁴ At the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, more than 50,000 Kurdish Peshmerga fighters poured into Turkey. A survey of 27,028 Iraqi Kurds found that 99 percent of them intended to resettle in Europe.⁵ Alarmed at this prospect, officials from Western Europe insisted that these refugees remain in Turkey, thus preventing many of them from reaching Europe.⁶ The end of the Cold War also incited fears among Western Europeans of a sudden influx of thousands of Eastern Europeans into their countries.⁷ Western Europe expected the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia—Central European states that were not yet members of the Schengen Area, Europe's "free movement" zone—to control the flow of Eastern Europeans so that they would never reach Germany, Austria, or Italy. They did so, for example, by introducing the so-called "first host country rule," in accordance with which asylum seekers who had passed through a country where they could have sought protection were denied asylum by all other countries where they subsequently moved.⁸ By the early 2000s, Spain and Italy were also attempting to convert Northern Africa into a barrier that would stop sub-Saharan refugees from reaching Europe.⁹ During these years, countries such as Mexico, Turkey, and Morocco that were traditionally thought of as "sending states" also began working to obstruct the passage of transmigrants.

The proliferation of outsourced border control during the 1980s and 1990s began to alter the purpose of buffer zones from serving the goal of military protection to protecting nations from unwanted immigrants. Imperial Europe had a long history of creating buffer states between two entities to prevent them from engaging in war. In 1873, for instance, Britain and Russia jointly drew the boundaries of Afghanistan so that it would act as a buffer between their two empires.¹⁰ Similarly, during the early Cold War years, buffer states were meant to protect countries from military invasions—as evidenced by

⁴ See also Cecilia Menjivar, "Immigration Law beyond Borders: Externalizing and Internalizing Border Controls in an Era of Securitization," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 10, no. 1 (2014): 353–369, here 357–360.

⁵ Ahmet İcduygu, "The Politics of International Migratory Regimes: Transit Migration Flows in Turkey," *International Social Science Journal* 52, no. 165 (2000): 357–367, here 362.

⁶ In April 1991, when another wave of Iraqi Kurds fled into Turkey to escape from the Iraqi military, Western European countries sent resources for the refugees to attain food and shelter in Turkey and advocated for the idea of creating a safe zone in Northern Iraq (where ultimately half a million Kurdish refugees were relocated). *Ibid.*

⁷ As Tara Zahra has noted, after 1989 Western Europe continued to wrestle with "an image of East European emigrants as heroic 'escapees' and 'freedom fighters' and ongoing suspicions that migrants from the East might be undesirable citizens, spies, or opportunists." Zahra, *The Great Departure: Mass Migration from Eastern Europe and the Making of the Free World* (New York, 2016), 270–271.

⁸ Sarah Collinson, "Visa Requirements, Carrier Sanctions, 'Safe Third Countries' and 'Readmission': The Development of an Asylum 'Buffer Zone' in Europe," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 21, no. 1 (1996): 76–90, here 83. See also Ludger Kühnhardt, *The Global Society and Its Enemies: Liberal Order beyond the Third World War* (Cham, Switzerland, 2017), 164.

⁹ Martin Baldwin-Edwards, "'Between a Rock & a Hard Place': North Africa as a Region of Emigration, Immigration & Transit Migration," *Review of African Political Economy* 33, no. 108 (2006): 311–324.

¹⁰ Charles S. Maier, *Once within Borders: Territories of Power, Wealth, and Belonging since 1500* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016), Kindle Location 4294.

Stalin's establishment of "friendly" governments in the Eastern Bloc that formed a protective ring against military attacks by the West.¹¹ By the 1980s and 1990s, the United States and Western Europe had become more concerned with the "invasion" of undesired migrants than with spheres of influence and military incursions.¹²

By pressuring other countries to act as buffer zones, the United States and Western Europe were following in the tradition of nineteenth-century imperial practices of controlling what entered and left less powerful countries and sites of informal empire. In the 1850s, the British Empire had begun helping to run China's Customs Service, which "governed the exchange of goods, the arrival and departure of vessels, and the comings and goings of people"; starting in 1898, Belgium had helped control Iran's customs service; and from 1905 to 1941, the United States had ensured that Santo Domingo paid its debts to Europe by taking over Dominican customs houses and collecting duties.¹³ By the late 1980s, the widespread practice of controlling other countries' customs had long since ended, but the practice of taking control over other countries' immigration had flourished.

Even while acting within this imperial lineage, Western European and U.S. policymakers in the 1980s often appealed to the interests of the government officials of the countries they were seeking to convert into buffer zones. A long history supported this practice. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, U.S. policymakers failed to persuade Mexico's leaders to stop Chinese migrants from using Mexico as a clandestine gateway to the United States.¹⁴ Their lack of success could be traced in part to their inability to convince their southern neighbors that restricting Chinese migration was in their interest, too. In the 1920s and 1930s, however, the Mexican government independently established immigration restrictions against Chinese workers because of rising local antipathy toward these migrants, which centered on ideas about economic competition, disease, and race-mixing.

The use of countries as buffer zones to decrease the flow of migrants had deep

¹¹ For an analysis of how the Soviet Union engaged in "imperial scavenging," see Austin Jersild, "The Soviet State as Imperial Scavenger: 'Catch Up and Surpass' in the Transnational Socialist Bloc, 1950–1960," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 1 (February 2011): 109–132.

¹² Collinson, "Visa Requirements, Carrier Sanctions, 'Safe Third Countries' and 'Readmission,'" 76–77.

¹³ Hans van de Ven discourages seeing British intervention as imperialism because it occurred at the bequest of the Qing. Van de Ven, *Breaking with the Past: The Maritime Customs Service and the Global Origins of Modernity in China* (New York, 2014), 6–13, quote from 4. Nonetheless, other historians have considered this part of the history of British imperialism. See James L. Hevia, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (Durham, N.C., 2004); and Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832–1914* (London, 2011). For this practice by British firms in India, see Steven Press, *Rogue Empires: Contracts and Conmen in Europe's Scramble for Africa* (Cambridge, Mass., 2017), 27. For Belgian intervention, see Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, updated ed. (New Haven, Conn., 2006), 65; and "Belgian-Iranian Relations," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, December 15, 1989, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/belgian-iranian-relations>. For the U.S. role in Santo Domingo, see Sidney Milkis, "Theodore Roosevelt: Foreign Affairs," Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/president/roosevelt/foreign-affairs>.

¹⁴ Elliott Young, *Alien Nation: Chinese Migration in the Americas from the Coolie Era through World War II* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2014), 99–101. See also Robert Chao Romero, *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882–1940* (Tucson, Ariz., 2010); Grace Peña Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican: Global Migration, Localism, and Exclusion in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Stanford, Calif., 2012); Julia Maria Schiavone Camacho, *Chinese Mexicans: Transpacific Migration and the Search for a Homeland, 1910–1960* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2012); Fredy González, *Paisanos Chinos: Transpacific Politics among Chinese Immigrants in Mexico* (Oakland, Calif., 2017); and Jason Oliver Chang, *Chino: Anti-Chinese Racism in Mexico, 1880–1940* (Urbana, Ill., 2017).

implications for human rights. As a rich literature on the history of human rights has shown, notions of individual rights rose to prominence in international politics beginning in the 1970s. During this decade, the defense of individual human rights was increasingly seen as a transnational mandate that extended beyond the protections granted by particular nation-states.¹⁵ In a parallel development, in the 1980s, migration control also began to extend beyond individual nation-states. Ironically, the transnational expansion of such practices opened the door to increased human rights violations. Government representatives in the United States and Western Europe were aware that migrants faced significant abuse in buffer countries. Western European officials regularly complained about Turkey's treatment of Kurdish refugees, U.S. officials knew that Central American transmigrants were vulnerable to extortion and violence throughout Mexico, and in the 2000s Human Rights Watch started to denounce the abuses occurring in Northern African countries that were trying to limit migratory flows.¹⁶ But to date, historians have not studied how the creation of buffer states for migration control transpired and how it shaped this history of abuse.

The history of Mexico's role in obstructing Guatemalan transmigration for the United States sheds light on these multiple issues. In the 1980s, U.S. officials persuaded Mexican authorities to enter into a Faustian bargain that breached Mexico's sovereignty. U.S. policymakers told the Mexican government that if it could suppress Central American migration into and through Mexico, they might be able ensure that Mexican migrants could continue heading to the United States. Mexico's leaders rapidly agreed. Less than a decade earlier, the country's top politicians had concluded that Mexico's economy was dependent upon Mexican emigration to the United States.¹⁷ For Mexican policymakers, limiting Central American migration seemed like a small price to pay in order to achieve their larger goal of ensuring that Mexican workers could continue to enter the U.S. The price seemed even smaller because they did not have to fear internal opposition given Mexicans' longstanding anti-indigenous sentiments.¹⁸ Still, by agreeing to enforce U.S. immigration interests—and sometimes even allowing U.S. immigration officials to work inside Mexico—Mexico's leaders effectively gave up their country's sovereign right to determine who was allowed to immigrate.¹⁹

¹⁵ Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010); Kathryn Sikkink, *The Justice Cascade: How Human Rights Prosecutions Are Changing World Politics* (New York, 2011); David Chandler, *From Kosovo to Kabul: Human Rights and International Intervention* (London, 2002).

¹⁶ İçduygu, "The Politics of International Migratory Regimes," 362; Baldwin-Edwards, "'Between a Rock & a Hard Place,'" 318–320.

¹⁷ Ana Raquel Minian, *Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration* (Cambridge, Mass., 2018), chap. 1.

¹⁸ Since the nineteenth century, Mexican officials had portrayed indigenous people as part of Mexico's past, and mestizo people as the nation's present and future population. See Raymond B. Craib, *Cartographic Mexico: A History of State Fixations and Fugitive Landscapes* (Durham, N.C., 2004), chap. 1; and Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs: Crafting a Modern Nation* (Berkeley, Calif., 1996). Because of these views, the Mexican government had long tried to acculturate Mexico's indigenous population. These efforts had been particularly strong in the Guatemala-Mexico borderlands, which had led Mexicans to view Guatemalans as indigenous and inferior. See Rebecca Berke Galemba, *Contraband Corridor: Making a Living at the Mexico-Guatemala Border* (Stanford, Calif., 2017), 38–39.

¹⁹ Although the United States had previously attempted to pressure Mexico to curtail Chinese migration, it had failed to do so. See Young, *Alien Nation*, 99–101. For questions of territory, sovereignty, and imperialism, see Maier, *Once within Borders*; Lauren Benton and Lisa Ford, *Rage for Order: The British Empire and the Origins of International Law, 1800–1850* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016); Andrew Fitzmaurice, *Sovereignty, Property and Empire, 1500–2000* (Cambridge, 2014); and Daniel Immerwahr, "The

This agreement also had a more sinister consequence: it led to widespread human rights violations against Central American migrants in Mexico. Converting Mexico into a buffer zone did not reduce Central American migration, but it did lead Mexican citizens and state officials to extort and abuse transmigrants. The increased abuse that migrants faced exposed the limits of the then-popular belief that human rights depended on transcending the sovereignty of the nation-state.²⁰ If anything, when the Mexican state ceased to be fully in charge of migration within the country, migrants became more vulnerable to abuse.

THE OFFICIAL BOUNDARY BETWEEN Mexico and Guatemala has a long, contested history, but even as late as the early 1980s, no one would have viewed Mexico as enforcing its southern border on the basis of U.S. interests. Central Americans had briefly been part of the Mexican Empire between 1821, when they gained independence from Spain, and 1823, when they declared their independence from Mexico and formed Las Provincias Unidas del Centro de América. The state of Chiapas, which had been under the political influence of the Capitanía General de Guatemala during the Spanish Empire, also split from Mexico but did not join the Provincias Unidas. A year later, in what Guatemalans have considered to be a rigged vote, all of Chiapas—except for the southernmost territory of the Soconusco—annexed itself to Mexico.²¹ In 1882, Guatemalan and Mexican officials signed the *Tratado de Límites*, which established the current international border.

In the early 1960s, Guatemalan authorities tried to rekindle this belligerent history to inflame nationalist sentiments. A CIA-sponsored coup in 1954 had deposed the democratically elected government of Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán. For the next forty years, Guatemalans lived in a state of war. Military officials kidnapped and killed those suspected of belonging to unions, agricultural cooperatives, or political groups. For Guatemalan state officials, reviving the memory of border disputes with Mexico was a way to promote solidarity within the country. In 1962, journalist and politician Clemente Marroquín Rojas, who in 1966 would become Guatemala's vice president, published *Mexico Has Never Possessed Its Own Territory South of the Rio Hondo*.²² In it he compared

Greater United States: Territory and Empire in U.S. History," *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 3 (2016): 373–391. For notions of indigenous autonomy in Mexico during this period, see Saúl Velasco Cruz, *El movimiento indígena y la autonomía en México* (Mexico City, 2003); and Michael F. Brown, "Sovereignty's Betrayals," in Marisol de la Cadena and Orin Starn, eds., *Indigenous Experience Today* (New York, 2007), 171–194.

²⁰ For the new wave of human rights historiography, see Moyn, *The Last Utopia*; Akira Iriye, Petra Goedde, and William I. Hitchcock, eds., *The Human Rights Revolution: An International History* (Oxford, 2011); Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (Cambridge, 2003); Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, N.J., 2009); Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York, 2007); Mark Goodale and Sally Engle Merry, eds., *The Practice of Human Rights: Tracking Law between the Global and the Local* (Cambridge, 2007); Robin Blackburn, "Reclaiming Human Rights," *New Left Review* 69 (2011): 126–138, here 132–134; and Jack Donnelly, "Human Rights at the United Nations, 1955–85: The Question of Bias," *International Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (1988): 275–303.

²¹ "Decreto de incorporación del Soconusco, México, 11 de septiembre de 1842," in *Reclamación y protesta del supremo gobierno del estado de Guatemala sobre la ocupación del Soconusco, por tropas de la República mexicana, con los documentos en que se fundan* (Guatemala City, 1843).

²² Clemente Marroquín Rojas, *México jamás ha poseído territorio propio al sur del Río Hondo* (Guatemala City, 1962).

Mexico's loss of territory to the United States to Guatemala's loss to Mexico: "Tejas, Nuevo México, Arizona, la Alta California . . . became U.S. territory . . . As this was happening, Mexico had already torn away from us precisely half of our territory."²³ Guatemalan newspapers also started contesting the national boundary. An article in *La Hora*, a newspaper from Guatemala City, declared: "Mexico . . . ought to return all the territories it has taken from our country."²⁴ Given the power imbalances between Mexico and Guatemala, it is unlikely that these authors expected the status of Chiapas to change. It is much more probable that their aim was to distract readers from Guatemala's internal divisions by casting Mexico as the enemy.

The Mexican government responded through its own publications. The Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística, which was in charge of mapping and boundary demarcation, published *Chiapas between Guatemala and Mexico: An Unjust Reason for Disagreements*, maintaining that Guatemalans were unfairly leveling the "rude accusation" that Mexico had "abused power by snatching . . . Chiapas."²⁵ Even though the book concluded that the border was legitimate, it also held that the boundary should be more permeable: "It is absurd that 82 years after the treaties that marked the border between Mexico and Guatemala," in an age when attempts were "being made to erase borders and tariffs," Guatemalans were still "talking and writing about things of the past."²⁶

While asserting that the national boundary's delineation on maps ought not to be questioned, in practice Mexico's leaders sought to keep the border permeable, because Mexicans benefited from the historically unobstructed circulation of people and trade between the two countries. Since the 1870s, landowners in Chiapas had actively recruited Guatemalans to work as seasonal laborers on their coffee plantations.²⁷ In 1961, Mexican politicians attempted to further increase the flow of goods and people across the Mexico-Guatemala border through the Programa Nacional Fronterizo (PRONAF).²⁸ Even while proclaiming the legitimacy of the national border, Mexican officials were often more concerned with upholding its permeability.

Nevertheless, Mexican government officials and landowners in southern Mexico sometimes closed the nation's perimeter when it was convenient for them to do so. This

²³ Ibid. Two years after the publication of Marroquín's book, the Guatemalan Ministry of Education reissued the 1875 treatise "The Matter of the Limits between Mexico and Guatemala by a Central American," the 1895 "Questions between Guatemala and Mexico—the Messenger of Central America," and the 1900 book *Memory on the Question of the Limits between Guatemala and Mexico*. "La cuestión de límites entre México y Guatemala por un centroamericano" and "Cuestiones entre Guatemala y Mejico," in Ministerio de Educación Pública, *Límites entre Guatemala y México*, 2nd ed. (Guatemala City, 1964); Ministerio de Educación Pública, *Memoria sobre la cuestión de límites entre Guatemala y México* (Guatemala City, 1964).

²⁴ Mario Crespo Morales, article in *La Hora*, quoted in Valentín Rincón Coutiño, *Chiapas entre Guatemala y México: Injusto motivo de discordias* (Mexico City, 1964), 5.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Sarah Washbrook, "Enganche and Exports in Chiapas, Mexico: A Comparison of Plantation Labour in the Districts of Soconusco and Palenque, 1876–1911," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 39, no. 4 (2007): 797–825, here 803. In the early 1900s, the Mexican federal government itself had attempted to increase the number of Guatemalan workers in Chiapas by providing them with plots of land, and in 1939 the Cardenista government allowed Guatemalans to acquire land if they naturalized as citizens. Stephen E. Lewis, *The Ambivalent Revolution: Forging State and Nation in Chiapas, 1910–1945* (Albuquerque, N.Mex., 2005), 114.

²⁸ Programa Nacional Fronterizo, *Tapachula, Chis* (Mexico City, 1962), sec. 5: "Evolución previsible."

made Guatemalan workers even more desirable to Chiapas's coffee planters: not only did these workers increase the supply of labor, thus reducing wages, but they could also be deported when they were not needed or when they tried to demand improvements in working conditions. In 1934, for instance, Chiapas's reactionary governor, Victórico Grajales, aided coffee planters by deporting Guatemalan agrarian activists who were protesting in the state.²⁹

Individuals who were living in the borderlands region during the 1960s and 1970s remembered when the national boundary did not impede the movement of people, trade, and culture. Mayan groups populated the entire Soconusco, and family relationships and commercial interchange spanned the border. Rosa Xicale, who lived in northern Guatemala, recalled that people continuously traveled back and forth between the two countries, and that the borderlands region in Mexico was "a place of commerce [where] Guatemalans went to sell things."³⁰ Some of her family members even lived in Chiapas. Such memories might be influenced by nostalgic notions of a better past, but they do indicate people's sense that the border was more permeable during the 1960s and 1970s.

Although movement between Mexico and Guatemala continued, in 1981 the border began to harden.³¹ This did not happen because of U.S. interests in Guatemalan migration, but was partially a result of the United States' presence in Guatemala during the Cold War. That year, Guatemalan government forces supported by the U.S. started accusing entire villages, particularly Mayan ones, of aiding rebel forces who were fighting against the government. Guatemala's leaders sent elite units to torture and kill people and burn their towns.³² Violence and genocide forced communities to escape across the border. Refugee Francisca Pérez recounted, "We realized that throughout the municipality the army was burning temples and killing people, burning and torturing; whole villages were destroyed. At that point, those of us in the village of Santa Agustina started to walk."³³ Entire families and communities left their land and headed to Mexico.³⁴ By 1982, there were an estimated 200,000 Guatemalans living in Chiapas.³⁵ Margarita Jiménez Sales, who took refuge in Mexico as a child, drew a picture depicting a clearly demarcated frontier: In Guatemala there is murder, in the Guatemalan borderlands there are fleeing families, and in Mexico there is refuge. The only woman who is smiling is already in Mexico. (See Figure 1.) For Jiménez Sales, the line that offi-

²⁹ Catherine A. Nolan-Ferrell, *Constructing Citizenship: Transnational Workers and the Revolution on the Mexico-Guatemala Border, 1880–1950* (Tucson, Ariz., 2012), 106.

³⁰ Rosa Xicale (pseudonym), interview by author, June 27, 2013, San Francisco, California, digital recording.

³¹ For an examination of how people and goods continued to cross the Mexico-Guatemala border after the 1970s, see Galemba, *Contraband Corridor*.

³² Beatriz Manz, *Paradise in Ashes: A Guatemalan Journey of Courage, Terror, and Hope* (Berkeley, Calif., 2004); Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York, 1993).

³³ *Nuestra historia del refugio: Por niños guatemaltecos refugiados en México* ([San José, Costa Rica], [1995]), 26.

³⁴ María Cristina García, *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (Berkeley, Calif., 2006), 48.

³⁵ Jan Rus and George A. Collier, "A Generation of Crisis in the Central Highlands of Chiapas: The Cases of Chamula and Zinacantán, 1974–2000," in Jan Rus, Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo, and Shannan L. Mattiace, eds., *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias: The Indigenous Peoples of Chiapas and the Zapatista Rebellion* (Lanham, Md., 2003), 33–61, here 43.



FIGURE 1: Drawing by Margarita Jiménez Sales, a Guatemalan girl who was a refugee in Mexico. Equipo SECFA de Costa Rica, *Nuestra historia del refugio: Por niños guatemaltecos refugiados en México* ([San José, Costa Rica], [1995]), 36.

cially marked the boundary between Mexico and Guatemala also marked the boundary between life and death.

During this crisis, the Mexican government became more invested in strengthening the lived reality of the border, but not in the way Guatemalan refugees might have imagined. By enforcing the contested boundary between the two countries, Mexican officials began to erode the autonomy of movement that indigenous people in the area had long enjoyed. Mexico's interdepartmental office responsible for defending refugees, the Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (COMAR), insisted that Mexico had a duty to provide Guatemalans with asylum, but the Ministry of the Interior (Secretaría de Gobernación) tried to prevent their entry, arguing that the refugees would deplete national services and spread radical ideas among the population in Chiapas.³⁶ When Mexican officials could no longer ignore the humanitarian crisis, they built official camps and settlements in Chiapas for the refugees, whom they referred to as "border visitors." Mexican authorities also instituted a 150-kilometer (93-mile) refugee zone.³⁷

³⁶ At a conference held in October 1984, Mexican officials and scholars concluded that it was "important to maintain . . . good relations with the existing governments of the area [Central America] . . . while also doing as much as possible to prevent manifestations of conflict within our country (presence of refugees, of revolutionary groups, impact of these at the local level, etc.)." "Informe del Seminario sobre migración e interés nacional," Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, México, Departamento de Concentraciones, Topográfica III-6359-1(5a).

³⁷ García, *Seeking Refuge*, 50.

If the “border visitors” traveled beyond this area, they would lose their legal status and their right to protection. Through this regulation, government officials constructed the refugee zone as different from the rest of Mexico. In other words, even before the United States became concerned with curtailing transmigration, Mexican officials were already trying to stop the movement of Central Americans northward.

Violence and human rights abuses against refugees in Mexico became widespread as the border zone materialized and began to stretch into the interior of the country. In 1981 and 1982, Mexican authorities deported 5,500 Guatemalans, often delivering them directly into the repressive hands of Guatemalan officials.³⁸ This action violated the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits the return of refugees to countries where they will face persecution.³⁹ Local communities in Chiapas also “conducted their own [violent] immigration policy.”⁴⁰ Fearing the impact of leftist guerrillas on the economy and politics of Chiapas, Mexican *caciques* (local power brokers) funded their own paramilitary groups, called Guardias Blancas, paying them to terrorize, kidnap, and murder refugees and aid workers who were believed to sympathize with guerrilla forces.⁴¹ Such practices not only violated the human rights of Guatemalan refugees but led to increased violence in the region.

Although the United States was heavily involved in the human rights abuses that occurred in Guatemala and produced the refugee crisis, including through the delivery of aid to the Guatemalan army, it was Mexico’s leaders who decided how to respond to the large number of Guatemalans fleeing north into Mexico.⁴² Mexican politicians moved to reinforce the Guatemala-Mexico border and to allow refugees to reside only within 150 kilometers of the official boundary. The political decision to prohibit Guatemalans from heading into northern Mexico predisposed Mexican policymakers to accept U.S. officials’ request for them to stop Guatemalan northbound migration through Mexico.

In 1983, U.S. officials changed course and sought ways to intervene in Mexico’s immigration practices to ensure that Central Americans did not reach the United States. During that period, Guatemalans had begun fleeing north in increasing numbers. A 1985 study estimated that there were anywhere from 750,000 to 1.3 million Central Americans living in the United States, and that approximately one-fifth of them had come from Guatemala.⁴³ Some of these refugees had left to escape bloodshed, others because economic conditions in Guatemala had drastically deteriorated as a result of the violence and the increased mechanization of agriculture, which had left workers without land and unable to find jobs.

Policymakers in Washington rapidly cast Central American refugees as a Cold War

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁹ The idea of non-refoulement had first been expressed in the 1933 Convention Relating to the International Status of Refugees and was then included in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Article 33(1) of which reads: “No Contracting State shall expel or return (‘refouler’) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.” *The Refugee Convention, 1951*, <https://www.unhcr.org/4ca34be29.pdf>. David Weissbrodt and Isabel Hörreiter, “The Principle of Non-Refoulement: Article 3 of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in Comparison with the Non-Refoulement Provisions of Other International Human Rights Treaties,” *Buffalo Human Rights Law Review* 5 (1999): 1–73, here 2.

⁴⁰ Garcia, *Seeking Refuge*, 54.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 260.

⁴³ Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, “Central American Migration: A Framework for Analysis,” *Latin American Research Review* 26, no. 1 (1991): 75–110, here 99.

problem, arguing that these individuals were potential communist subversives. In the 1983 congressional hearings on immigration reform, Republican congressman Larry J. Hopkins of Kentucky asked, “In the event that Central America falls and millions of people begin to walk north with El Salvador suddenly transfer[r]ing its problems to El Paso—what additional problems could this possibly cause?”⁴⁴ U.S. policymakers resorted to a Cold War solution. While the Soviet Union had used a buffer zone in trying to protect itself from a military invasion behind the iron curtain, the United States would use Mexico to protect itself from the infiltration of Central Americans.

Preventing Central Americans from reaching the United States, officials believed, would reduce unauthorized migration, which many Americans now viewed as one of the biggest problems facing their country.⁴⁵ An editorial published in the *Boston Globe* in 1982 held that “with domestic unemployment just short of 10 percent, and with social unrest and economic crisis affecting . . . the Caribbean and Central America, a revision of [U.S.] immigration law is overdue.”⁴⁶ In 1986, the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which heavily fortified the U.S.-Mexico border.⁴⁷ Throughout these years, the United States also used its resources and immigration agents to stop the flow of Central Americans in Mexico.

By dealing with Central American migrants in Mexico, U.S. officials could also avoid accusations that they were disregarding refugees’ civil and human rights. According to the Refugee Act of 1980, refugees who were physically present in the United States were eligible for political asylum even if they had entered the country without papers, as long as they could prove that they had a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.⁴⁸ Thus nonprofit and religious organizations claimed that the United States was violating refugees’ civil and human rights when it deported them.⁴⁹ Similarly, religious groups regularly protested the mistreatment of Central Americans in the country. Father Tomas Gomide of Corpus Christi Church in Mineola, New York, for instance, told the *New York Times* that the Catholic Church was truly concerned with this issue and insisted that even if “a person is without legal right, it does not mean that he is without his God-given human rights.”⁵⁰ Some U.S. politicians expressed similar views. Democratic congressman Mickey Leland of Texas told Congress that in Texas “we find that law enforcement officers are terribly abusive,” which made him “very fearful about the violation of human rights . . . by those law enforcement agents” if penalties against

⁴⁴ *Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1983: Hearing before the Committee on Agriculture, House of Representatives, 98th Congress, 1st Session, on H.R. 1510, June 15, 1983* (Washington, D.C., 1983), 8.

⁴⁵ Minian, *Undocumented Lives*, chap. 2.

⁴⁶ “The Immigration Control Act,” *Boston Globe*, August 27, 1982, cited in *Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1983: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law of the Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives, 98th Congress, 1st Session, on H.R. 1510, March 1, 2, 9, 10, 14, and 16, 1983* (Washington, D.C., 1983), 102.

⁴⁷ For a brief description of how the U.S.-Mexico border became militarized and the effects it had, see Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan J. Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration* (New York, 2002), 96–98.

⁴⁸ Arthur C. Helton, “Political Asylum under the 1980 Refugee Act: An Unfulfilled Promise,” *In Defense of the Alien* 6 (1983): 201–206, here 201.

⁴⁹ For more on the role of the Church and Central American migration, especially in later years, see Jacqueline Maria Hagan, *Migration Miracle: Faith, Hope, and Meaning on the Undocumented Journey* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), chap. 3.

⁵⁰ Patrick Boyle, “Wary Salvadorans Find Help on L.I.,” *New York Times*, November 20, 1983, LI-11.

immigrants were increased.⁵¹ Stopping migrants before they even reached the U.S.-Mexico border shifted the responsibility for human rights violations elsewhere.

There was little mention of the fact that stopping the flow of Central Americans in Mexico did not necessarily protect refugees. As historian Mark Mazower has argued, politicians in the United States often viewed human rights not as norms to be protected, but rather as a rhetorical measure that they could use to promote their own interests.⁵² This manipulation of the concept had, in fact, contributed to the crises occurring in Central America. In launching “Project Democracy,” a campaign to promote democracy around the world, Ronald Reagan used the language of human rights. In a speech in June 1982, he proclaimed, “We must be staunch in our conviction that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings.”⁵³ An article in the *Christian Science Monitor* the following year noted the irony of this strategy: “As Congress chews over President Reagan’s \$110 million proposal for increased arms aid to El Salvador, America is brooding over a far larger question: how best to spread the values of democracy among developing nations.”⁵⁴ By inducing Mexico to act as a buffer zone, U.S. officials continued to ignore actual human rights abuses.

MEXICANS’ OWN MIGRATION to the United States provided U.S. officials with a valuable bargaining chip to use in pressuring the Mexican government to limit the flow of Central American migrants. Since the late 1970s, Mexican politicians had insisted that Mexico benefited from its citizens’ ability to enter the U.S. In 1979, for instance, Mexico’s secretary of foreign affairs, Jorge Castañeda, told U.S. officials that the “800,000 Mexicans [who managed] to cross the border annually and stay in the United States at least for a temporary job” had helped his government “to partially solve the problem of unemployment in Mexico.”⁵⁵ At the 1984 meeting of the U.S.-Mexico Binational Commission, U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz warned Mexican officials that if Central Americans kept coming across the U.S.-Mexico border, the U.S. government would further reinforce it, which would obviously also prevent Mexicans from entering the country illegally.⁵⁶ Castañeda replied to Shultz that the United States ought to make “a clear distinction between [Mexican] migrants and [Central American] refugees” and assured him that Mexican authorities were “fully disposed to help solve the [Central American refugee] problem as best they could.”⁵⁷

⁵¹ *Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1983: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law*, 197.

⁵² Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea, 1815 to the Present* (New York, 2012), 329.

⁵³ Ronald Reagan, Address to Members of the British Parliament, June 8, 1982, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/60882a>, quoted *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Rushworth M. Kidder, “Project Democracy”: Reagan Tries to Export the US Way of Governing,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 16, 1983, <https://www.csmonitor.com/1983/0316/031654.html>.

⁵⁵ Speech draft, Jorge Castañeda, August 1978, caja 119B, expediente 19, Archivo General de la Nación, México, Fondo Porfirio Muñoz Ledo. For information on when it was presented, see James Daniel, “Mexico: America’s Newest Problem?,” *Washington Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (1980): 87–105, here 96.

⁵⁶ “Minuta sobre los trabajos de la IV Reunión de la Comisión Binacional México-EUA, Washington DC, 17 de abril de 1984,” folder 4^a, Reunión Washington 17 Abril 1984, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, México, Departamento de Concentraciones, Topográfica III-7803-4.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*; “US-Mexican Binational Commission, Washington DC, April 17, 1984,” 4, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, México, Departamento de Concentraciones, Topográfica III-7803-4; “Proyecto de

Among themselves, Mexican officials acknowledged that they needed to acquiesce to U.S. demands, noting, “In the design of any migration policy directed [at Central America], it is necessary to consider the external variable that relates to the influence of the bilateral relationship with the United States.”⁵⁸ Mexican administrators preferred to stop the flow of Central Americans rather than risk heightened immigration enforcement against Mexicans in the United States, especially since they were aware that the U.S. Congress was seeking to introduce immigration reform to lower the number of undocumented border crossings (the eventual Immigration Reform and Control Act). U.S. officials never committed to continue letting in unauthorized Mexicans, but Mexican officials still felt pressured to accept the U.S. terms.

Even though Mexico’s leaders were pursuing their own goals when they decided to clamp down on Central American migration, they knew that citizens might view the decision to serve U.S. interests in Mexico’s migration-related practices as an affront to Mexico’s territorial sovereignty, or its authority to control who entered the country. Not surprisingly, then, they did not publicize their discussions with U.S. officials on the topic. Instead, they drew on the existing notion that Central Americans were causing problems in Mexico to insist on the need to curtail transmigration.⁵⁹ Ironically, even as U.S. politicians were pressuring Mexico to change its immigration policies, they began reinforcing the need to augment the United States’ own immigration controls to protect U.S. sovereignty. In the 1983 hearings on immigration reform, Republican congressman Hank Brown of Colorado asserted, “[W]e are a sovereign nation and, as a sovereign nation, we have the right—and we have a duty to our own citizens—to control our own borders.”⁶⁰

That year, Mexican and U.S. authorities formally agreed to work on “border cooperation regarding the control of nationals of third countries” who were passing through Mexico.⁶¹ Mexican officials immediately increased migration controls. They sent over one hundred additional migration officers to refugee centers in Chiapas, and made it harder for Central Americans to renew their tourist permits or to obtain other migration documents in the interior of the country. They also increased the use of surveillance mechanisms to apprehend Central Americans who lived in Mexico City.⁶²

The rapid expansion of border controls in 1983 caused practical problems for Mexican authorities. Miguel García Granados, the head of Migration Services in Mazatlán, reported that he was having difficulty complying with the new policy. According to official regulations, agents needed to take apprehended migrants to Mexico City within seventy-two hours of their detention, but the country’s immigration services did not have the resources to do so. This problem, said García Granados, “presented itself in

agenda propuesto por el Departamento de Estado con visitas a la reunión de Grupo de Trabajo sobre Cooperación Consular” and notes “REF: Nuestro 328 y suyo—TELEX SRE,” folder 3^a, Reunión México 18–19 Abril 1983, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, México, Departamento de Concentraciones, Topografía III-7803-3.

⁵⁸ “Informe del Seminario sobre migración e interés nacional.”

⁵⁹ Larry Rohter, “Mexico’s South Fights Tide of U.S.-Bound Aliens,” *New York Times*, April 10, 1989, A-1.

⁶⁰ “Statement of Hon. Hank Brown,” in *Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1983: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law*, 143–144, here 143.

⁶¹ “Proyecto de agenda propuesta por el Departamento de Estado.”

⁶² Sergio Aguayo, “La línea móvil del Sur,” *Nexos*, July 1, 1984, <https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=4365>.

Mazatlán in a whole new way.” “In the past,” he explained, “illegals would be detained, their money would be embezzled, and they would then be released. Things are different now; the illicit practice is over, which has resulted in an inordinate level of undocumented [migrants] being detained.”⁶³ Whether or not the detention of Central Americans increased because there was less bribery, it is clear that in 1983 officials made a greater effort to ensure that migrants did not reach the Mexico-U.S. border.

U.S. officials continued to use Mexico as a buffer zone. In 1989 the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) sent intelligence officers, Border Patrol agents, anti-smuggling agents, and immigration agents to Guatemala City and Tecún Umán in Guatemala and to Monterrey and Mexico City in Mexico to help stop the flow of Central Americans. The role of the “INS Officers duty-posted to Mexico City and a team of three officers detailed to Monterrey” was to “provide information on smuggling patterns and alien movement through their areas of jurisdiction.”⁶⁴ Similarly, on September 3, 1990, the national newspaper *El Sol de México* quoted Michael Trominiski, the INS district director in Mexico City, as saying that he considered Mexico to be “the main checkpoint for Central American illegals.”⁶⁵ While U.S. officials believed that they were defending their country’s sovereignty against an “invasion” by Central American immigrants, Mexico’s sovereign immigration and border practices were being eroded.

Deportations of Central Americans from Mexico had increased so much that they sometimes surpassed the number of Central Americans being deported from the United States. Deportations of Central Americans from Mexico rose from 14,000 in 1988 to 85,000 the following year, and continued to rise, peaking for the decade at 133,000 in 1991.⁶⁶ In contrast, in 1989 the United States deported 12,133 Central Americans.⁶⁷ In other words, for Central Americans, Mexico constituted the most threatening country in terms of deportations.

Organizations that defended transmigrants began to depict Mexico as a buffer that was enforced by the United States. For example, the cover of a 1991 U.S. Committee for Refugees report on Central American migration represents all of Mexico as part of the U.S. arm stopping the flow of Central Americans north (while also removing Mexico’s sovereignty). (See Figure 2.)

Guatemalan migrants themselves stopped seeing Mexico as a nation-state that provided them with safety from the Guatemalan army and instead began to view it as a dangerous country that had to be traversed to reach the United States. Oral history interviews conducted with thirty-two Guatemalan transmigrants reveal that memories of

⁶³ Quoted in “Detuvieron en Mazatlán a 67 centroamericanos indocumentados,” *La voz de la frontera*, October 10, 1983.

⁶⁴ Appendix 6, “Immigration and Naturalization Service, Enhancement Plan for the Southern Border, Executive Summary, February 16, 1989,” in *Central American Asylum-Seekers: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law of the Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives, 101st Congress, 1st Session, March 9, 1989* (Washington, D.C., 1989), 288–308, here 304–305.

⁶⁵ Michael Trominiski quoted in Carlos Flores A., “La frontera SUR y las migraciones internacionales ante la perspectiva del Tratado de Libre Comercio,” *Estudios Demográficos y Urbanos* 8, no. 2 (23) (1993): 361–376, here 368.

⁶⁶ Rodolfo Casillas, “The Dark Side of Globalized Migration: The Rise and Peak of Criminal Networks—The Case of Central Americans in Mexico,” *Globalizations* 8, no. 3 (2011): 295–310, here 298.

⁶⁷ García, *Seeking Refuge*, 69.

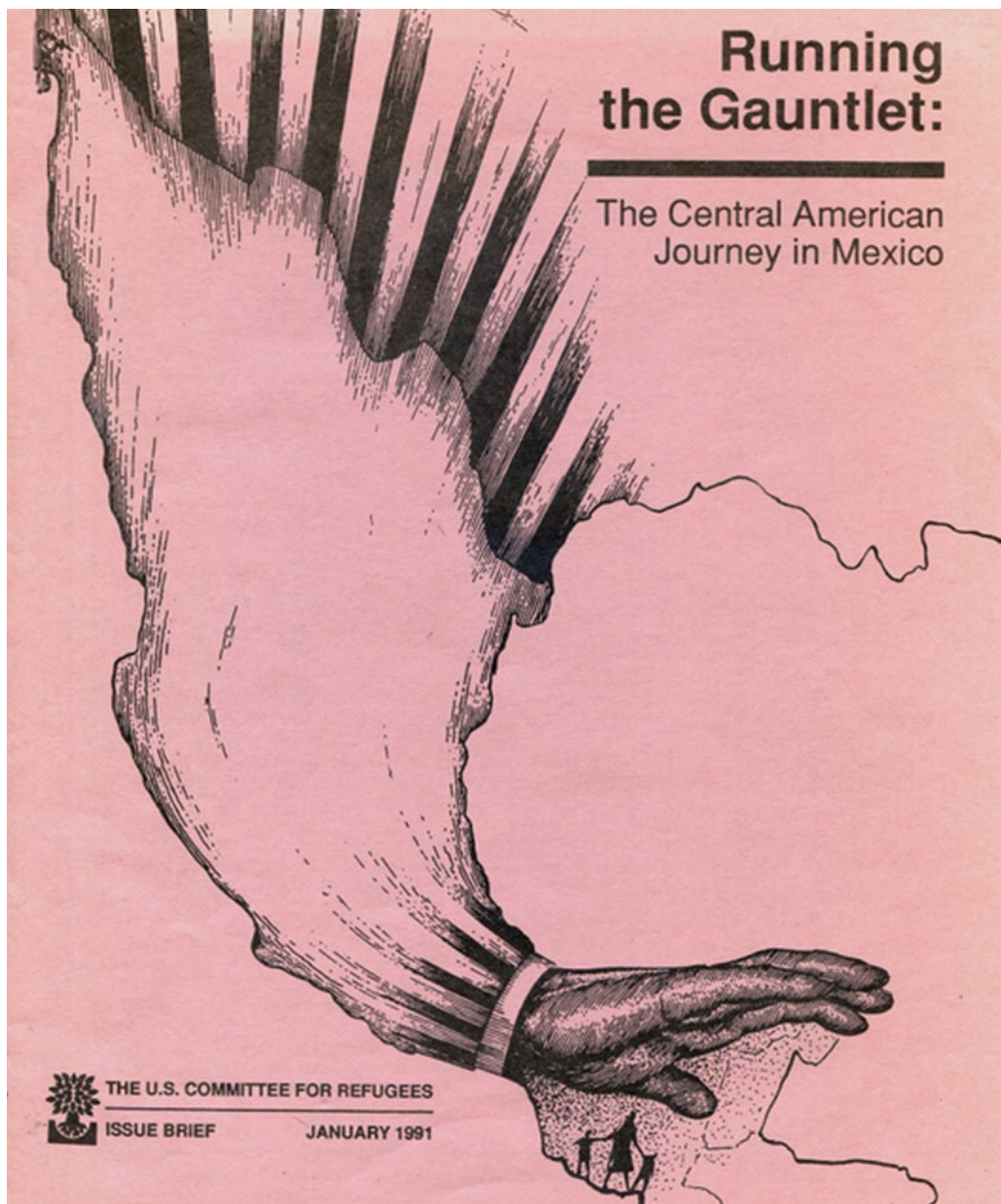


FIGURE 2: The cover of *Running the Gauntlet: The Central American Journey in Mexico* (Washington, D.C., 1991), an issue brief by Bill Frelick and the U.S. Committee for Refugees.

the territory were drastically different for migrants who crossed Mexico before the mid-1980s than for those who did so between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ In 2013, I conducted thirty-two oral history interviews with Guatemalan transmigrants in San Francisco and Chicago. Given that oral histories often disclose more about people's memories than about their actual experiences, I focused on the types of stories that were repeated by many migrants. I also matched these experiences to the other available sources. This method does not solve the problems inherent in oral history discerned by Daniel James and other scholars, but it does provide one of the few inroads into a

Only those who migrated after the mid-1980s viewed the entirety of Mexico as a buffer that they needed to cross. Of course, these migrants' recollections were influenced not only by the year of their journey but also by their sex, class, race, and reasons for migrating. One can also assume that their accounts were affected by events that happened long after they migrated. Still, the narratives of those who crossed Mexico after the U.S. pressured Mexican politicians to convert their nation into a buffer zone are notably distinct.

Teresa Herrera's recollection of her two journeys from Guatemala to California in the mid-1970s exemplifies the widely held belief among those who crossed Mexico during this period that their migration was relatively easy: "I didn't have a single bad experience," she insisted.⁶⁹ Herrera related that on her first trip, she traveled on a bus with her coyote and did not encounter any problems. On her second journey, she simply asked a bus driver to help her. He agreed, instructing her to remain silent and pretend to be asleep at checkpoints. Whenever migration agents stopped the bus, the driver told them that Herrera was his wife, and the officers would let them through.

Even though there are indications that migrants were already starting to perceive all of Mexico as a buffer zone in the 1970s and early 1980s, those who headed north during that period recall the experience of going through Mexico as completely different from entering the United States. In those years, most migrants who could afford it crossed Mexico with a professional migrant smuggler. They felt that they needed a coyote to lead them through the country because they did not know the route and had no legal documentation. Still, for them, the barrier to enter the United States was at the U.S.-Mexico border. For example, Jaime Gómez, who migrated in 1979, relates that he traveled easily by bus to Tijuana in northern Mexico, but to enter the United States, his group had to walk for approximately twelve hours to avoid INS officials.⁷⁰

In contrast, those who migrated in the early 1990s describe crossing the border as easier than traversing Mexico. Their narratives of their journeys describe all of Mexico as a treacherous buffer zone. León Ramos, who migrated in 1995, said: "Honestly, [before leaving] I thought that U.S. immigration enforcement was going to be worse, but no. All the shit is in Mexico."⁷¹ According to Ramos, his greatest fear when he entered the United States was being detained by the Border Patrol, which would have meant being deported to Guatemala and then having to cross through Mexico again. It is important to note that those who migrated in the 1990s did not think that Mexico was harder to cross than the border itself simply because the U.S. had scaled down its operations at the border. On the contrary, after the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration Reform

history that is absent from most traditional repositories. Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham, N.C., 2000); Peter Winn, "Oral History and the Factory Study: New Approaches to Labor History," *Latin American Research Review* 14, no. 2 (1979): 130-140; Jeffrey L. Gould and Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago, *To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920-1932* (Durham, N.C., 2008); Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, N.Y., 1991); Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class*, trans. Robert Lumley and Jude Bloomfield (Cambridge, 1987).

⁶⁹ Teresa Herrera (pseudonym), interview by author, June 26, 2013, San Francisco, California, digital recording.

⁷⁰ Jaime Gómez, interview by author, June 21, 2013, San Francisco, California, digital recording.

⁷¹ León Ramos (pseudonym), interview by author, June 21, 2013, San Francisco, California, digital recording.

and Control Act in 1986, border enforcement in the United States increased dramatically.⁷²

Guatemalan migrants' stories about attempts to "pass as Mexican" during the journey also convey how much harder it was to cross Mexico after the mid-1980s. Few Guatemalans who migrated before this time bothered to learn how Mexicans supposedly spoke and behaved because they did not expect to have problems with Mexican immigration officials. In the 1990s, in contrast, Guatemalan migrants regularly studied how to pass as Mexican before they even left their home country. They knew that Mexico represented a dangerous barrier and that they would be safer if they were perceived as being Mexican nationals. León Ramos recalls that "from the beginning" of the journey, his coyotes taught him how Mexicans were supposed to behave and made him learn the Mexican national anthem.⁷³ Moreover, those who crossed in the 1990s also explained that learning how to pass as Mexicans was important in order to ensure that if they were caught by U.S. officials while crossing the border, they would not be deported all the way back home but would only be sent back to northern Mexico. By the 1990s, traveling through Mexico had become so risky that the last thing Guatemalans wanted was to be sent back to their home country after they had reached the United States, as this would have meant having to cross Mexico all over again.⁷⁴ Those who crossed in the 1970s and early 1980s never mentioned this.

The earlier migrants' ability to recall geographic details also indicates that those who crossed Mexico in the late 1980s and early 1990s faced a more difficult journey than those who migrated earlier. Transmigrants from the 1970s and early 1980s tended to recall their journey in detail: they generally waded through the Suchiate River and then traveled by passenger bus, making stops at several cities, many of which they could still name. (The cities varied depending on the route they took, but often included Veracruz, Mexico City, and Guadalajara.) They could recall these details, in part, because they tended to buy their bus tickets at the counter themselves even when they were being led by a coyote. Once on board the buses, they were able to see Mexico from the windows. Not surprisingly, those who left in the 1970s and early 1980s and had a bad experience along the way were able to recall where that experience occurred. Juan Reyes, for instance, who tried to migrate from Guatemala to the United States in 1980, remembers that when he and other Central American migrants were in Mexico's eastern state of Veracruz, migration officials stopped the bus they were on "and asked us how much money we had . . . They would say 'and you won't give us anything?'" Officials wanted the migrants to give them "some money, and the truth is that out of ne-

⁷² The Immigration Reform and Control Act authorized an immediate 50 percent increase in the enforcement budget of the INS. In the early 1990s, the Clinton administration started a campaign known as Prevention through Deterrence. Approximately \$2 billion a year was funneled to new border security. The number of Border Patrol agents doubled between 1993 and 1999, from roughly 3,400 to 7,200, and new surveillance technology was implemented, including ground sensors, night vision cameras, and new physical barriers constructed along the border. Hagan, *Migration Miracle*, 61–62; Massey, Durand, and Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors*, 49.

⁷³ León Ramos, interview.

⁷⁴ For more on migrant passing, see Noelle K. Brigden, "Improvised Transnationalism: Clandestine Migration at the Border of Anthropology and International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2016): 343–354; and Duncan M. Earle, "Border Crossings, Border Control: Illegalized Migrants from the Other Side," in David W. Haines and Karen E. Rosenblum, eds., *Illegal Immigration in America: A Reference Handbook* (Westport, Conn., 1999), 396–412, here 400.

cessity and fear one . . . has to leave something.”⁷⁵ The group paid off the officers and continued on to Mexico City, the next stop on their journey. Not only was Reyes able to recall the general route he took, but he also remembered in what part of Mexico he encountered problems.

In contrast, many migrants who traversed Mexico in the 1990s had a hard time remembering where particular incidents occurred because their coyotes kept them hidden at all times: they regularly traveled in secret compartments inside buses, trucks, or trains, from which they could not see the route. Moreover, they experienced abuse throughout their journeys. For example, when Luis Parra, who migrated in the 1990s, recounted his migration story, he jumped from one unsafe experience to another without being able to pinpoint where each of them took place. Of one such instance he said: “I don’t remember very well [where that was]. But after that they took us to another house. There we got together with the group and waited for the . . . freight truck,” which took the group to another unspecified location.⁷⁶ Unlike those who rode passenger buses, migrants hidden in freight trucks were unable to see where they were heading. The lack of geographic precision in these migrants’ narratives reinforces the sense that they understood all of Mexico as a perilous country that needed to be crossed.

Descriptions of the modes of transportation used to cross Mexico are themselves revealing of how the country became a buffer zone during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Most Guatemalans who migrated a decade earlier recall traveling by car or, more commonly, as bus passengers. In contrast, those who left Guatemala in the 1990s describe the horrors of being trafficked in hidden spaces within freight trucks or buses. During the first part of Ramos’s journey in 1995, the coyotes hid migrants on specially built tanker trucks that carried gas: “The tank is big, and under it they had a divider, like a compartment near where the pipe goes, and they would put us down there, with [the] gas [pipe] above us.” The compartment, he said, was underneath a “false floor.”⁷⁷ For another part of the journey, the smuggling ring had modified a passenger bus, adding a secret compartment for hiding migrants under the gears. The space was so cramped that “when the driver stopped,” the clutch would “run through one’s back, and hurt it.” People vomited and urinated inside this claustrophobic hole, and many fainted once they were let out. The difference between the memories of those who crossed in the 1990s and those who migrated earlier is apparent. Jaime Gómez, for example, who traversed Mexico in 1979, complained that some of the migrants could not find a seat on the passenger bus because it was so packed.

Riding atop the cars of freight trains, otherwise known as “La Bestia” (The Beast), was also a much more prevalent memory among those who migrated after the early 1990s. Many migrants had jumped onto cargo trains in the early 1980s, especially in the northern part of Mexico, but during the 1990s this mode of transportation became more popular even though it was the most dangerous way to reach the United States. María García, who rode aboard La Bestia in 1994, recalls that each time they passed through a checkpoint in Mexico, the migrants jumped off the train, evaded migration officials, and then ran to jump back on, grabbing onto a ladder on the back of a car to

⁷⁵ Juan Reyes, interview by author, June 19, 2013, San Francisco, California, digital recording.

⁷⁶ Luis Parra (pseudonym), interview by author, June 19, 2013, San Francisco, California, digital recording.

⁷⁷ León Ramos, interview.

pull themselves up. These maneuvers were extremely dangerous. García narrates that while trying to jump back on the train, she slipped and hit her chest: “I fell . . . the train was just beginning to move . . . but it was slippery because it was raining a lot.” Although she felt that her chest was “destroyed” in the fall, she “stood up and ran even harder because the train was already gaining speed.” On this second try, she managed to hop on.⁷⁸ Although García survived and recovered from the accident, an uncounted number of migrants have lost their limbs and lives to La Bestia.⁷⁹

Even as crossing through Mexico became increasingly difficult, the number of Guatemalans and Salvadorans entering the United States continued to climb. (See Figure 3.) Their population in the United States grew fivefold from 1980 to 1990, swelling from 79,000 to 416,000, and rose steadily thereafter. By 2010, the number had reached 1.1 million. Migrants found ways to try to evade immigration authorities, paid extortion fees, and hoped for the best. After all, the construction of Mexico as a buffer zone did nothing to change the conditions in Guatemala that were forcing people to leave their home country. It did, however, increase human rights violations and crime in Mexico.

The United States extended border control beyond the U.S. nation-state during a period that also saw a growing demand for human rights protections that went beyond, and were not dependent on, the nation-state. Despite the transnational dimensions of these beliefs, the two practices worked against each other. In effect, extending immigration control beyond the U.S.-Mexico border led to the increased abuse of migrants’ rights. Human rights violations are known to take place in border zones. Migrants are subject to searches, increased surveillance, and the risk of violence. Extending the practices that were employed at the U.S.-Mexico border throughout Mexico only expanded the problem. But equally important, the construction of Central Americans as an “illegal population” in Mexico encouraged Mexican citizens and state officials to rob, sexually abuse, and extort transmigrants. Because Central Americans feared deportation, they had few recourses to complain.

Top Mexican authorities attempted to curb the extortion of Central Americans by state officials by cutting the number of checkpoints from one hundred to ten, increasing the salaries of migration authorities, and stiffening the penalties for extorting undocumented migrants.⁸⁰ But these measures were institutionalized alongside others that escalated deportation efforts and therefore did not help to reduce extortion.

In comparison with earlier migrants, Guatemalans who crossed Mexico in the 1990s included more references in their narratives to generalized extortion, not just by migration officials but by a wide range of state authorities. Alejandra Ramírez, who made the journey in 1995, remembers that her coyotes housed the migrants in a lieutenant general’s house one night and in a policeman’s home another night.⁸¹ Similarly, Luis Parra says that when he was walking to board a bus in a town near Oaxaca, federal police officers caught him and told him “[t]o give them money . . . and that if I didn’t give them money, they were going to hand me over to migration officers.”⁸² Farther

⁷⁸ María García (pseudonym), interview by author, June 24, 2013, San Francisco, California, digital recording.

⁷⁹ Cassandra Ogren, “Migration and Human Rights on the Mexico-Guatemala Border,” *International Migration* 45, no. 4 (2007): 203–243; Hagan, *Migration Miracle*, 75.

⁸⁰ Sergio Mastretta, “Frontera Sur: La ruta de los ilegales, I,” *Nexos*, September 1, 1991, <https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=6300>.

⁸¹ Alejandra Ramírez, interview.

⁸² Luis Parra, interview.

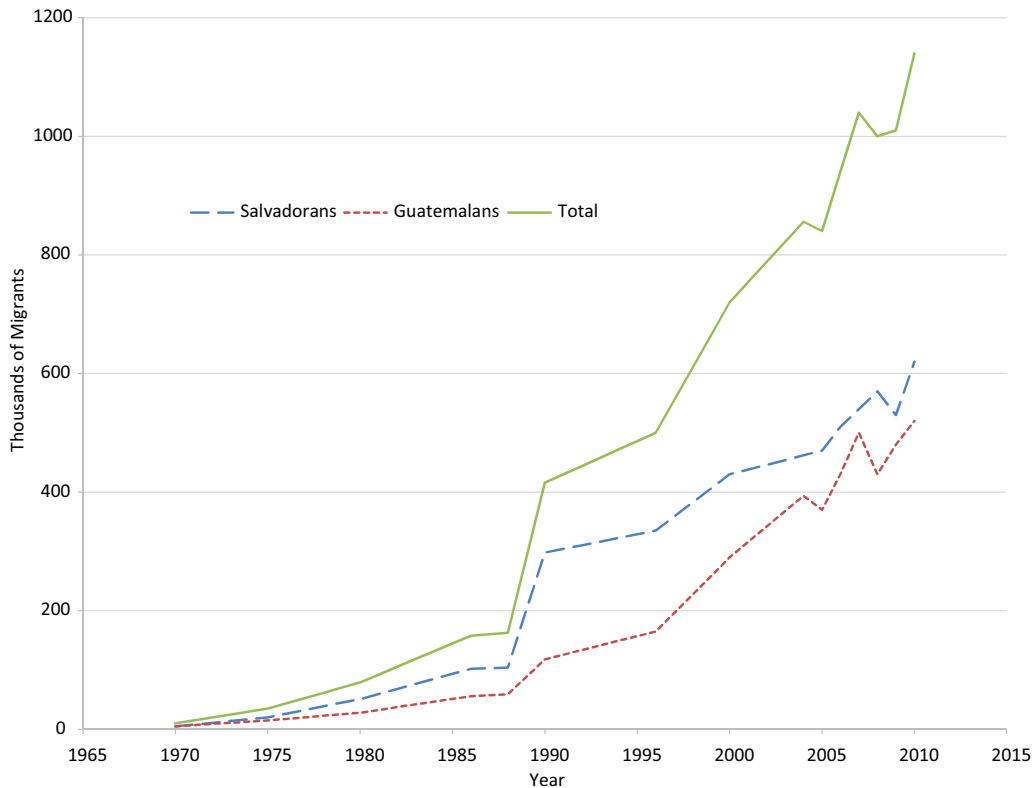


FIGURE 3: Estimated Size of the Undocumented Salvadoran and Guatemalan Population in the United States. Data shared by Douglas Massey from his project with Kerstin Gentsch, “Undocumented Migration and the Wages of Mexican Immigrants,” *International Migration Review* 48, no. 2 (2014): 482–499.

along the route, the military stopped the bus he was on “and collected money from [everyone in his group] right there.” Extortion was so common, Parra explains, that the “guide gave us more money as we went along.” This way the migrants would be able to pay the *mordidas* (bribes) and not have all their money taken away by the first officers who stopped them. During the early 1990s, Salvadorans who made the trip north described similar experiences, detailing how they had to pay bribes to go through Mexico and reach the United States.⁸³

Many Mexican citizens also engaged in extortion. Even Edmundo Salas, the head of inspection for Mexico’s Migration Services, acknowledged that Central Americans could reach the United States only after they passed “through a filter of ubiquitous extortion that was instituted by police authorities of all types (migration, state and federal police, municipal bodies, and army), international gangs of undocumented smugglers, and those who provided tourist, hotel, and restaurant services.”⁸⁴ Bus drivers would demand a *mordida* from Central Americans in exchange for transporting them, and hotel and restaurant owners would charge them extra fees. If they did not receive these payments, they not only would refuse to provide their services, but would often threaten to report the migrants to migration officials.

⁸³ Menjívar, *Fragmented Ties*, 75.

⁸⁴ Mastretta, “Frontera Sur, I.”

Human rights abuses against Central Americans contributed to the rising wave of delinquency in Mexico. Newspaper articles from the early 1980s reveal that transmigrants were already the victims of crime during those years, but they also demonstrate that these offenses were perpetrated by individuals rather than by organized gangs, and were not as violent. In 1980 a newspaper from Baja California considered it newsworthy that a migrant seeking to cross into the United States had been robbed by a man at knifepoint.⁸⁵ In contrast, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were an increasing number of newspaper stories about organized smuggling and crime. A typical article published in *El Sol de Tijuana* in February 1990 covered the story of a “dangerous gang” that was robbing migrants.⁸⁶ Even though the vast majority of crimes went unreported, from 1991 to 1995, authorities logged complaints from 147 Central Americans, including 80 Guatemalans, about the human rights abuses they faced while migrating through Mexico.⁸⁷ Some of the grievances exemplify the extreme violence that migrants could face: ten individuals complained of having been tortured, two of having been with someone who was murdered, three of having been mugged, and two of having been sexually abused.

Sexual violence haunts most of the narratives of those who crossed Mexico in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As migrant women traveled through more difficult terrain to evade state officials, they became increasingly vulnerable to the whims of the coyotes, drivers, bandits, and law enforcement officials they encountered. Feminist scholars and human rights organizations have documented how the militarization of the Mexico-U.S. border multiplied the incidence of sexual assault there.⁸⁸ The same trend seems to have occurred throughout Mexico, although it is impossible to know with any precision how many women experienced sexual violence. Women who have been sexually abused are often reluctant to report or talk about their experiences, likely because of the pain associated with remembering their story and because of the stigma attached to it.⁸⁹ María García alluded to sexual violence in saying that there were experiences she would not recount because she did not want to relive them.⁹⁰ Despite these silences, most of the migrants who were interviewed describe sexual abuse as rampant in the 1990s. “If there was a good looking woman,” León Ramos said, Mexican officials “would touch her—they would do bad things.” At one particular checkpoint, “there was a girl . . . they would touch her, put their hands on her, then they took her, hid her, they put her behind the bus and inside their police car.”⁹¹ Because of the greater danger women faced, they increasingly traveled with family members or hired a smuggler to get through more safely.⁹² But many coyotes themselves were responsible for abusing

⁸⁵ “Aspirante a bracero que detuvo a ‘pollero’ asaltante,” *El Mexicano*, March 31, 1980.

⁸⁶ “Cayó peligrosa banda de asaltantes de ‘pollos’: Su Centro de Operaciones era ‘El Bordo,’” *Sol de Tijuana*, February 20, 1990.

⁸⁷ “En Chiapas se registra el 50% de violaciones a derechos humanos,” *El Informador*, December 3, 1995, 9-A.

⁸⁸ Alicia Schmidt Camacho, “Ciudadana X: Gender Violence and the Denationalization of Women’s Rights in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico,” *New Centennial Review* 5, no. 1 (2005): 255–292; Allyson Collins and Lee Tucker, *Crossing the Line: Human Rights Abuses along the U.S. Border with Mexico Persist amid Climate of Impunity*, ed. Anne Manuel (New York, 1995); Sylvanna Falcón, “Rape as a Weapon of War: Advancing Human Rights for Women at the U.S.-Mexico Border,” *Social Justice* 28, no. 2 (2001): 31–50.

⁸⁹ Schmidt Camacho, “Ciudadana X,” 280.

⁹⁰ María García, interview.

⁹¹ León Ramos, interview.

⁹² Hagan, *Migration Miracle*, 78.

women. Patricia Contreras recalls that her smuggler, who she says “was on drugs,” started “touching” her near the groin during the journey and “tried to rape” her.⁹³ Likewise, Carlos Lendo recounts that coyotes “started touching women, to abuse them . . . they took them aside . . . some [women] would come back with a busted lip . . . one came back crying.”⁹⁴

Until the late 1990s, very few organizations existed to defend transmigrants’ rights in Mexico. Churches were among the main organizations that tried to do so.⁹⁵ The Church has a long history of working to empower Guatemalans in Guatemala by engaging them in learning about their rights.⁹⁶ In Mexico itself, churches led by Scalabrini missionaries set up migrant houses to protect migrants and refugees as early as 1985.⁹⁷ It was not until the late 1990s, however, that these houses spread from northern Mexico into the rest of the country to support Central Americans on the move. Las Patronas is another group that was created to help Central Americans in Mexico.⁹⁸ In 1995, sisters Bernarda Romero Vázquez and Rosa Romero Vázquez got some family members and friends together to toss food to Central American migrants who were riding atop La Bestia as the train passed through their town. Efforts to help transmigrants also spread in the United States. In 1981, Jim Corbett, a Quaker goat rancher in Tucson, Arizona, established contacts throughout Mexico, creating a network of “safe houses” for Central American refugees. His network sought to act as an underground railroad, similar to the one that hid escaped slaves before the U.S. Civil War.⁹⁹ Most of the network’s efforts, however, were directed at getting Central Americans across the U.S.-Mexico border rather than across Mexico.

The Mexican government did little to help. In 1995, its National Commission for the Defense of Human Rights published a study that detailed the various abuses that Central Americans faced. They included “arbitrary detention, harassment, abuse, extortion, rape.”¹⁰⁰ It also noted that even though Mexico and Guatemala had strong historical links and there were several studies that explained the problems Guatemalans faced, the mechanisms for actually defending the human rights of Central Americans remained “insufficient.” In the years that followed, Mexican officials failed to put the needed structures in place to protect migrants. After all, they were still conceding to the same pressure from the United States that had turned Mexico into a buffer zone in which Central Americans were an “illegal,” and thus vulnerable, population.

⁹³ Patricia Contreras (pseudonym), interview by author, July 15, 2013, San Francisco, California, digital recording.

⁹⁴ Carlos Lendo (pseudonym), interview by author, June 21, 2013, San Francisco, California, digital recording.

⁹⁵ For more on the role of churches, shelters, and other human rights organizations in defending migrants, see Hagan, *Migration Miracle*, chap. 3; Wendy A. Vogt, *Lives in Transit: Violence and Intimacy on the Migrant Journey* (Berkeley, Calif., 2018); and Christine Kovic, “Jumping from a Moving Train: Risk, Migration and Rights at NAFTA’s Southern Border,” *Practicing Anthropology* 30, no. 2 (2008): 32–36.

⁹⁶ Manz, *Paradise in Ashes*, chaps. 2–4.

⁹⁷ “Quienes somos,” La red de casas del migrante Scalabrini, <http://www.migrante.com.mx/quienes-somos.html>.

⁹⁸ Joseph Sorrentino, “The Patrons of Veracruz,” *In These Times*, July 26, 2012, http://inthesetimes.com/article/13505/the_patrons_of_veracruz.

⁹⁹ García, *Seeking Refuge*, 98.

¹⁰⁰ “En Chiapas se registra el 50% de violaciones a derechos humanos.”

IN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS, many Guatemalan migrants referred to the song “Tres Veces Mojado” (Three Times a Wetback) to explain the difficulties of going through Mexico. Sung by the popular Mexican band Los Tigres del Norte, the corrido tells the story of a Salvadoran transmigrant who crossed through Guatemala and Mexico in order to finally enter the United States. It powerfully conveys the notion that for Central Americans, Mexico was a buffer zone to be crossed: “Mexico is lovely, but how much I suffered / Crossing through it without papers is very hard / The five thousand kilometers I traveled through / I can say that I remember them one by one.”¹⁰¹ The song suggests that the trip through Mexico was harder than crossing the Mexico-U.S. boundary: “A Mexican takes two steps and there he is / Today they throw him out and the next day he is back / That is a luxury that I cannot afford / Without being killed or incarcerated.”¹⁰² While this song overlooks the real hardships Mexican migrants faced, it shows that for Central Americans, the more tangible and dangerous buffer that they had to get across was Mexico, not the U.S.-Mexico border. Refocusing the geographic lens of migration scholarship to include the whole territory through which these migrants traveled makes it easier to see how, under the influence of the United States, Mexico’s leaders turned their country into a buffer zone that made it harder for Central Americans to head north.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the United States and Western Europe took control of customs and border control in states such as China and the Dominican Republic that were perceived to be too weak to carry out such control themselves. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, such outright infringements and violations of sovereignty were politically no longer an option. Moreover, they were too costly both financially and potentially in terms of blood. Instead, U.S. officials found a different way to guide Mexico’s immigration practices: they appealed to Mexican politicians’ interests by insinuating that they would allow Mexicans to continue heading to the United States without papers. By doing so, they were able to steer Mexico’s immigration practices—an area generally considered essential to a country’s sovereign rule. Offshoring border control to the Mexican state, whose government was unable and unwilling to curtail extortion and violence in the flourishing smuggling business, did not prevent bloodshed. On the contrary, it opened the door to widespread human rights abuses.

Notions of national sovereignty are often regarded as responsible for the exclusion of foreign “others,” as those residing within particular nation-states seek to achieve ethnic exclusivity within their territories.¹⁰³ But the erosion of Mexico’s sovereign immigration control worked to further exclude and oppress Guatemalans within Mexico. In part, this occurred because the sociopolitical logic by which territoriality was the dominant way of establishing belonging remained intact.¹⁰⁴

The history of Central American transmigration through Mexico holds important

¹⁰¹ Although this might be interpreted as meaning that the migrant recalls his entire journey with geographic specificity, it is much more likely that this phrase is used to indicate that the migrant suffered greatly over every mile he traversed.

¹⁰² Los Tigres del Norte, “Tres veces mojado,” *Idolos del Pueblo* (sound recording, Fonovisa, 1988).

¹⁰³ Maier, *Once within Borders*, Kindle locations 5329–5332.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, Kindle locations 5344–5345.

political lessons about the costs of offshoring migration control practices.¹⁰⁵ Heightened immigration enforcement in Mexico did not reduce Central American migration, but it did create an opening for citizens and state officials to engage in extortion and violence, both of which continue to increase. As the Guatemalans who migrated in the 1990s explained, while they had to pay *mordidas* to state officials and bus drivers to go through Mexico, Central Americans in the twenty-first century also “have to pay,” but now it is violent criminal cartels they have to give their bribe money to: “If not, [they] kill you.”¹⁰⁶ Consternation over the dangers that Central Americans face in Mexico came to a head in 2010, when a criminal ring, allegedly the Zetas cartel, kidnapped and slaughtered seventy-two migrants from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.¹⁰⁷ Having failed to learn from the past, however, Mexico’s government continued to succumb to U.S. pressure on it to stop the flow of Central Americans. As a result, since 2011, migrant activists not only have denounced all of Mexico as a buffer zone, but have also declared that “Mexico is a migrant cemetery.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ These lessons seem particularly important as I finish writing this essay in November 2019 because the U.S. government is implementing new ways to offshore migration control. In January 2019, the Trump administration implemented “Migration Protection Protocols” (MPP), a policy under which asylum seekers who arrive at a port of entry on the U.S.-Mexico border are returned to Mexico and forced to wait there for the duration of their legal proceedings. In October 2019, Human Rights First, an independent advocacy organization, reported that there had already been 343 reported cases of asylum seekers in the MPP program who had been the victims of rape, kidnapping, and violent assault in Mexico. See “Orders from Above: Massive Human Rights Abuses under Trump Administration Return to Mexico Policy,” Human Rights First, October 2019, <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/hrfordersfromabove.pdf>. Additionally, the U.S. government has recently sought to expand its buffer zone farther south than Mexico, despite the high human costs of such actions. Between July and September 2019, the Department of Homeland Security announced that it had signed “Safe Third Country” agreements with Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, in accordance with which asylum seekers have to apply for asylum in the first country they enter on their route. The U.S. government intends to send asylum seekers who reach the United States back to the first country they passed through on their journey. However, far from “safe third countries,” Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras are the very countries that asylum seekers are fleeing. See Lauren Carasik, “Trump’s Safe Third Country Agreement with Guatemala Is a Lie,” *Foreign Policy*, July 30, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/30/trumps-safe-third-country-agreement-with-guatemala-is-a-lie/>; and Jonathan Blitzer, “Does Asylum Have a Future at the Southern Border?,” *The New Yorker*, October 3, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/does-asylum-have-a-future-at-the-southern-border>.

¹⁰⁶ Luis Parra, interview.

¹⁰⁷ Tracy Wilkinson, “Sifting for Answers in a Mass Grave in Tapachula, Mexico,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 12, 2012, <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-xpm-2012-sep-12-la-fg-mexico-mass-grave-20120912-story.html>.

¹⁰⁸ See, for instance, Karina Avilés and Octavio Vélez Ascencio, “México es un cementerio de migrantes: Solalinde Guerra,” *La Jornada*, January 4, 2011, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2011/01/04/politica/010n1pol>; and Roselia Chaca, “Migrantes ‘no van por sueño americano, huyen de pesadilla,’” *El Universal Oaxaca*, November 4, 2018, <https://oaxaca.eluniversal.com.mx/municipios/04-11-2018/migrantes-no-van-por-sueno-americano-huyen-de-pesadilla>.

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