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## Article

# In the name of poppy: Eradication and counterinsurgency in Southern Mexico

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# In the Name of Poppy: Eradication and Counterinsurgency in Southern Mexico

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COLLECTION: WHY  
THE DRUG WAR  
ENDURES: LOCAL AND  
TRANSNATIONAL  
LINKAGES IN THE  
NORTH AND CENTRAL  
AMERICA DRUG TRADES

**RESEARCH**



## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to demonstrate that, in Mexico, the policy of eradication of poppy crops has not only been motivated by its official reason, the anti-drug fight, but also been instrumentalized for the militarization of certain regions for counterinsurgent purposes, that is, to deal with guerrilla activity. Of an empirical nature, this demonstration is based on a mixed methodology, both quantitative and qualitative, as well as on two case studies: the municipalities of Atoyac and Ayutla in the southern state of Guerrero. The main finding of the investigation lies in an anomalous concentration of eradication tasks by the army in both municipalities in the late 1990s and early 2000s, despite relatively marginal drug production. This contradiction finds an explanation beyond the poppy, in the emergence there of two new guerrillas, around the massacres of Aguas Blancas (1995) and El Charco (1998), respectively.

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Mexico has long been one of the principal opium gum producing zones in the world. Even though there are many studies about drug trafficking in Mexico (Astorga 2015; Durán-Martínez 2018; Smith 2021; Valdés Castellanos 2013), only a handful of references focus specifically on opium (Blazquez 2019; Le Cour Grandmaison, Morris & Smith 2019; Ospina, Hernández & Jelsma 2018). The same can be said about the political dimension of this issue, properly speaking, for studies on this subject are also few and far between (Benítez 1997; Hernández-Corchado 2014; Montemayor 2010), as are critical analyses of the government's prohibitionist paradigm and official campaigns to combat drug-trafficking. There is still a need to provide elements that make it possible to bind the illegal opium trade to the State empirically, and to broaden our knowledge of its nature and of the spaces where it has emerged.

In this article, we aim to demonstrate that opium eradication policies have not been motivated only by the government's official approach to combat trafficking but have been instrumental in efforts to militarize certain regions of the country for purposes of counterinsurgency, that is, to suppress guerrilla activity. We take up the case of the state of Guerrero in southern Mexico, whose social history is marked by the emergence of numerous guerrilla movements.

The eradication of crops declared illicit (marijuana, poppies) is framed in the international regime that prohibits drugs, an approach to which Mexico has adhered since the first half of the 20th century when it ratified the International Opium Convention in 1925 and signed the Convention for Limiting the Manufacture and Regulating the Distribution of Narcotic Drugs in 1931. More recently, with the signing of the Vienna Convention in 1989, the Mexican State assumed a new posture that considers drug production and trafficking a 'threat to national security', thus legitimizing an ever-greater role for its Armed Forces in tasks related to prohibition.

Our research centers on the relations that unite illicit crops with the main institution entrusted with their eradication: the Mexican army. While in strictly legal terms, the General Prosecutor's Office (*Procuraduría General de la República*, now *Fiscalía*) should be responsible for eradicating illicit crops, in reality, the Department of National Defense (*Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional*, SEDENA) has emerged from the subsidiary role it played from at least the 1930s to control and execute, almost integrally, this aspect of the country's current anti-drug strategy (Astorga 2007). The onerous eradication campaigns that were the guiding axes of a succession of plans in this area—from the *Plan Cándor* in 1966 onwards<sup>1</sup>—allowed the army to expand its deployment across the land, its budget resources, and its protagonism in the State's anti-drug scheme.

In line with the postulates of Ruth Gilmore (2002, 2007) and Mariana Mora (2017), we propose conceptualizing the eradication of illicit crops as an element of State-building processes in peripheral regions whose social and political attributes pose threats to State order. Though this remains to be proven, we suggest that the process of selecting sites for eradication is not 'neutral'; that is, it does not obey exclusively technical or operative criteria but participates in a strategy developed to produce and govern geographies and bodies (Gilmore in Mora 2017). As a result, we interpret eradication campaigns as counterinsurgency measures that governments implement to suppress uprisings (Kilcullen 2010). We conceptualize programs against opium poppy cultivation as a form of contention imposed on spaces, social groups, and forms of organization that officialdom considers problematic for national security. In other words, military actions implemented to combat drug-trafficking can be understood as elements of disciplining strategies that the State imposes on marginal regions whose forms of social organization become targets for the punitive machinations of statehood.

In Mexico, counterinsurgency operations are outlined in the National Defense Plan DN-II and defined in the Manual of Irregular Warfare (*Manual de Guerra Irregular*) as 'those carried out with units of military, civil, or militarized personnel in areas adequate for combatting and destroying forces made up of enemies and traitors to the homeland that conduct military operations using guerrilla tactics' (cited in Orraca 2010: 31). The scope of these operations has been expanded to include Mexico's 'war on drugs', which is seen as one of 'the six principal

<sup>1</sup> Including the following plans: *Fuerza de Tarea Cándor* (1977), *Fuerza de Tarea Marte* (1987), *Fuerza de Tarea Azteca* (1996), *Directiva Azteca XXI* (2000), and *Plan General contra el Narcotráfico Milenio* (2001).

areas that participate in schemes of low intensity warfare' (Astorga 2007: 15). To mention one example, the Special Forces Aeromobile Group (*Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales*, GAFE) was organized in the 1980s with the objective of executing operations against drug-trafficking and insurgencies (Carvente 2014). In this light, eradicating illicit crops must be seen as an integral part of counterinsurgency measures in Mexico.

In the case of Guerrero, eradication operations can be seen as measures through which state violence has been practiced on marginal populations (Das & Poole 2004), like those in the sierras and mountainous areas of the state, regions inhabited by peasants and indigenous people whose relations with the State have long been characterized by violence, disposessions, and repression (Bartra 2000; Estrada 1994). This background explains the analytical utility of the two case studies on which our research is based: the municipalities of Atoyac and Ayutla. Some of the most important findings of our work revealed an anomalous concentration of eradication operations in these two municipalities, despite the fact levels of drug production there are relatively minor. Explaining this apparent paradox pushed us beyond the simple existence of poppy fields, back in time to two massacres—in Aguas Blancas in 1995 and in El Charco in 199—and two guerilla movements that emerged in response to those tragic events.

The text is organized as follows: first, we present the central hypothesis that guides our research, then we explain the methodological strategy adopted, which is both quantitative and qualitative. Finally, we discuss and interpret our findings and results from the two case studies, before closing the text with some brief conclusions.

## HYPOTHESIS

The regions in Guerrero with histories marked by intense social struggles (Benitez & Gaussens 2019) are, by and large, the same regions where most poppy eradication is carried out today. There are two specific regions whose names suggest they are located in the most rugged terrain in the state: the Sierra, in the west between the Costa Grande and the Hotlands (*Tierra Caliente*), and the Mountain (*La Montaña*) to the east. In the social history of Guerrero, the first was the bastion of the guerrilla movement that operated in the 1970s (Aviña 2014), while the second was stained with red after the inauguration of a municipal government led by the Mexican Communist Party in the 1980s, when it was dubbed the Red Mountain (Barrera & Sarmiento 2006). Because of their revolutionary traditions, both areas have suffered attacks and repression. The first wave was called the Dirty War (*Guerra Sucia*) (Rangel & Sánchez 2015), the second was marked by a militarization policy (Gutiérrez 2000). These two regions have long maintained resistance fronts that have made them targets of state violence.

In Guerrero, we can identify a historical coincidence between the origins of social movements, opium poppy cultivation, and the massive military interventions that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. Citing a metaphor from a book based on journalistic investigation, what took place was an encounter between 'the lady dressed in red and men decked out in green' (Padgett 2015), that is, poppies and soldiers. This story began in the Sierra of Atoyac, where the guerrilla movement called the Party of the Poor (*Partido de los Pobres*), led by Lucio Cabañas, was born. Alba Teresa Estrada (2015), a sociologist from Guerrero, described the following scenario:

The role of two peasant drug-traffickers, José Isabel and Anacleto Ramos, in the army's [efforts to] localize and hunt down Lucio Cabañas on December 2, 1974, is well-known [...] His supporters continued to suffer harassment, criminalization, and violence at the hands of the Mexican army until at least 1979. Paramilitary groups participated in encircling the guerrilla and the ensuing counterinsurgency operations. Many [members] of those paramilitary groups were from peasant communities in the Sierra coopted by the Army, which was responsible for surveilling the population and combatting the slightest sign of resistance. In return, they were granted free reign to bear arms and raise illicit crops in the vast, rugged Sierra. This was the starting point in Guerrero. The Sierra Madre del Sur where the guerrillas had their theater of operations is the region where these phenomena emerged most forcefully.

A decade later, a similar process occurred in response to organizational efforts in the Red Mountain, when counterinsurgency tactics were justified by the poppy cultivation in the region (Mora 2013: 180). The coincidence between counter-narcotics efforts and political repression was a strategy to legitimize the deployment of military forces. As Padgett (2015) proposes in his research, the poppy takes on the role of the ‘flower of counterinsurgency’.

## METHODS

To demonstrate that poppy eradication was used to justify the presence of state security forces in contexts of political mobilization, we designed a mixed methodological strategy that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches: a descriptive statistical analysis complemented by ethnographic and hemerographic methods. This reflects the goal of linking the eradication of poppy cultivation in Guerrero to the presence of guerilla movements there; in other words, relating a clearly quantifiable phenomenon with one that cannot be conceived in those terms by contrasting official statistics on eradication with observations and testimonies obtained through local level fieldwork. We also apply the case study method with two municipalities: Atoyac de Álvarez in the Costa Grande region and Ayutla de los Libres on the Costa Chica. In general, the spatial delimitation of the study circumscribes the state of Guerrero in southern Mexico, while the temporal scale of the analysis covers some 30 years, from 1990 to 2019, based on the statistical data on eradication that we were able to obtain.

Official data on the eradication of illicit crops in Mexico exists in the administrative records of SEDENA, the *Fiscalía*, and the Department of the Navy (SEMAR, since 1983). They are available in the statistical annexes to annual government reports since at least 1977. These figures, however, only tabulate the total surface area that federal government agencies declare as destroyed, so they do not allow any detailed analysis at the state or municipal levels. In an effort to achieve a greater level of disaggregation of these data, Paul Frissard, a member of the Mexican civil association Mexico United against Delinquency (*México Unido Contra la Delincuencia*), submitted requests for access to information to these three dependencies through the National Transparency System (*Sistema Nacional de Transparencia*). Responses allowed us to compile annual data by municipality or state on the poppy plantations that each agency declared as destroyed.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that accessibility to this information varied among the three agencies. SEDENA agreed to provide statistical annexes with the level of breakdown requested for the period 2000–2020. To complement those data, we found the response to a previous request that provided data for 1990–2012. SEMAR, in contrast, ‘formally declared the inexistence of the information requested’<sup>3</sup> for 2000–2005, though various government reports contain accounts of the Navy’s—albeit marginal—participation in eradication. The *Fiscalía* turned over figures broken down by state, not municipality, for the 2000–2018 period. According to these data, since at least the 1980s SEDENA has been in charge of most of the work of eradicating illicit crops,<sup>4</sup> so we can consider the figures it compiles are representative of an official version of eradication policies. It was in this context that we constructed a database that spans the evolution of the surface areas of poppy cultivation (in hectares) that SEDENA registered as destroyed annually, by municipality, during the study period (1990–2019).<sup>5</sup> Our main findings are presented in the following section.

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<sup>2</sup> The original files delivered by the authorities, the databases constructed with them, and the data cleaning protocols applied are available on the *México Unido Contra la Delincuencia* website: [www.mucl.org.mx](http://www.mucl.org.mx).

<sup>3</sup> *Oficio* 2895/19 where SEMAR declared having complied with the resolution of the review recourse RRA 08052/20 related to the access to information request number 0001300098820.

<sup>4</sup> From 1983 to 2019, the poppy surfaces registered as destroyed by SEDENA equal a total that ranges from 69% to 100% of all eradication in the country. In comparison, in the previous period, 1967–1982, when participation by the *Fiscalía* was more important, this proportion was notably lower, ranging from 20% to 78% of the national total.

<sup>5</sup> We identified a series of inconsistencies in the statistical annexes originally provided by SEDENA, as in the case of the names of municipalities that do not correspond to the state indicated and names of municipalities that do not coincide with any official name. The data cleaning protocol was conservative and prioritized the absence of false positives, that is, poppy surfaces erroneously registered in a municipality. For this reason, whenever it was not possible to determine the probable source of these inconsistencies, we recoded the variables of state and municipality as Not Specified.

The qualitative approach to the research problem was developed through a methodology based on ethnographic and hemerographic work. The responses to Paul Frissard's requests submitted to SEDENA defined a temporal frame that allowed us to contrast the records of the military presence with our own experience during fieldwork in Guerrero. From the outset, we noted that those records on poppy eradication in localities with which we were very familiar were inconsistent. Specifically, our attention was drawn to the data from two municipalities—Atoyac and Ayutla—which showed evidence of concentrated eradication activity, although we know that poppy cultivation there is only marginal. This led us to compare SEDENA's reports to the experiences of inhabitants of these two municipalities. We consider that counterposing official records to the experiences of victims of military intervention offers an alternative vision of a phenomenon that merits study from angles that go beyond a state-centered perspective. Moreover, it is important to add that the information obtained through fieldwork was complemented by intensive hemerographic research in a concerted effort to document the presence of the Armed Forces in certain zones of these municipalities, and to nourish our ethnographic findings.

The results for the municipality of Atoyac were obtained by Irene Álvarez during several periods of fieldwork in 2019–2020: first, in the context of a consulting project entitled 'Memorial to the victims of forced disappearance in El Quemado, Atoyac de Álvarez, Guerrero', sponsored by the Executive Commission for Attention to Victims (*Comisión Ejecutiva de Atención a Víctimas*), and later during her postdoctoral research at the College of Mexico (*El Colegio de México*). Her experience as both a consultant and researcher allowed her to observe, firsthand, the relation between agents associated with the State and a sector of the population that has long been victimized by political violence. It is important to clarify that her research was supported by relations of friendship consolidated through multiple visits and phone calls. The basis of trust established gave her informants sufficient assurance to feel they could speak of events that were profoundly traumatic for them and their families.

The results Pierre Gaussens obtained for the municipality of Ayutla are based on secondary sources that include an intensive bibliographic and hemerographic review and, as a primary source, a fieldwork diary compiled over several years in that municipality and more broadly in Guerrero. Gaussens has participated in social work activities from his position as a professor in the *Universidad de los Pueblos del Sur* (UNISUR) that allowed him to conduct many interviews and periods of observation, often of the participant type. His fieldwork was part of a wider research project focused on the historical genesis of the self-defense groups (*autodefensas*) that emerged in early 2013 in the Costa Chica (Gaussens 2021a). In Ayutla, specifically, he worked in two periods: 2012–2013, as a professor in the community of El Mezón, and 2017–2018, during the production of a documentary film on electoral processes based on normative systems. It was during the second period that he held the interviews with authorities from two localities in the Tlapaneca zone of the municipality that are cited in this text.

Finally, one of the most challenging aspects of doing research in Guerrero is, precisely, the question of the guerrilla, today a veritable taboo topic due to the great danger entailed in studying it and because it requires extremely high levels of trust with inhabitants. As one local researcher recognized, the existence of guerrillas 'bears a veil of taboo, a kind of open secret. [People] do not speak openly about it except in the intimacy and confidence of family and friends' (Berber 2017: 123). For this reason, many potential informants refused to speak to us or declared that they 'knew nothing about it'. Despite all our interviews with key actors in municipal politics with knowledge of local history over several years of fieldwork, our team had only limited success in holding conversations that focused on the topic of the guerrilla and in obtaining informants' consent to publish fragments of those encounters. Thus, our store of interviews is not large, but the dialogues achieved are sufficient to probe more deeply into the nature of political repression of peasant and indigenous sectors. Due to the sensitive nature of the information presented, we have modified all data that could reveal participants' identities.

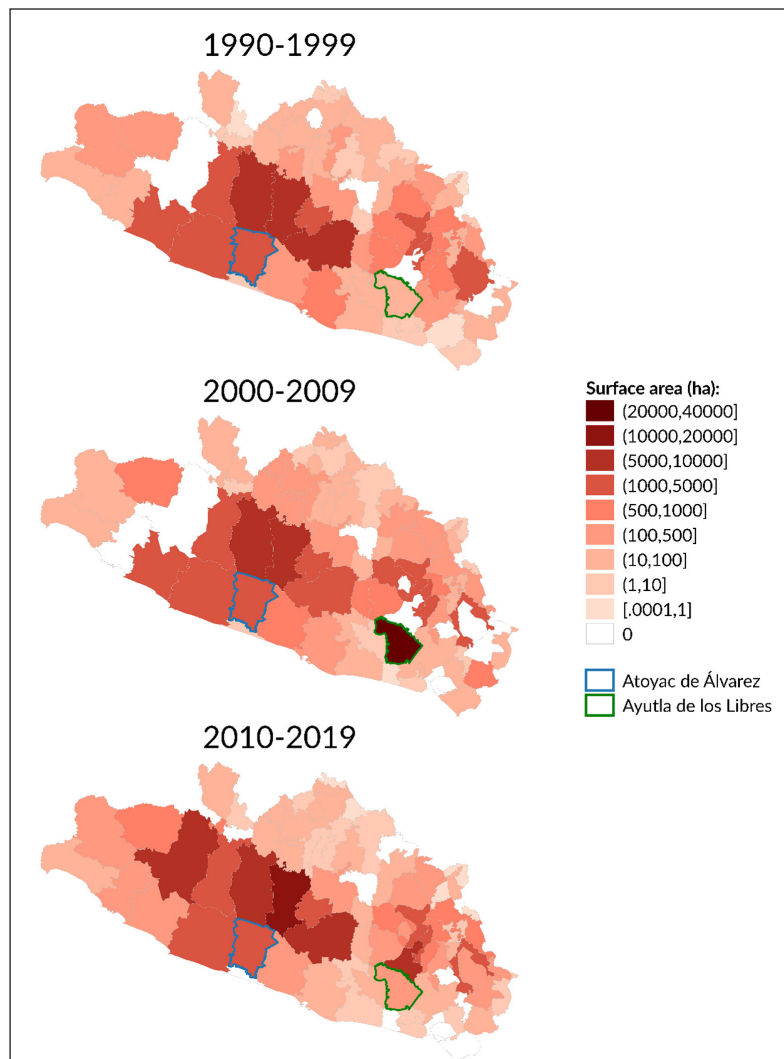
## RESULTS

The first fact that stands out is Guerrero's central role in the eradication of illicit crops in recent decades. In the 30 years of our study (1990–2019), virtually half (48%) of the entire surface



area of poppy plantations destroyed in Mexico was concentrated there, while from 1996 to 2013, this proportion ranged from 49% to 79% of the yearly national total. Similar results have been published in other studies (Astorga 2016; Resa Nestares 2016). Inside Guerrero, the municipalities with the highest number of hectares destroyed correlate geographically with the Sierra Madre del Sur, along an interior strip of land that crosses the whole state. This fringe is clearly depicted in the maps elaborated from the database we constructed (Map 1). Particularly visible on the map for the most recent decade (2010–2019), this strip of land is divided between the two large regions mentioned in the introduction: (1) the Sierra in the western area of the state, with its union to the Costa Grande and the Hotlands parallel to the Balsas River basin that sets the border with the neighboring state of Michoacán. Poppy cultivation takes place, above all, in the vast municipalities of the Hotlands: Coyuca de Catalán, Ajuchitlán del Progreso, San Miguel Totolapan, and Heliodoro Castillo, that—from east-to-west—form part of a zone called the *Sierra del Filo Mayor*. (2) On the eastern side is the region of the Montaña that includes smaller municipalities with production concentrated in Atlixac, Zapotitlán Tablas, Tlacoapa, and Acatepec, which form a vertical corridor from north-to-south.

**Map 1** Municipalities in Guerrero by surface area of poppy plantations recorded as destroyed by the army, by decade.



These two growing regions reveal an interior strip of land where they join and connect to the rest of the state through its geographic and political center, the region around the state capital, Chilpancingo, another poppy-producing municipality. While the Sierra is articulated with the central region through the municipality of Leonardo Bravo and the *Sierra de Chichihualco*, also known for poppy production, the Montaña is communicated along two routes, through the municipalities of Chilapa and Quechultenango, two more growing areas.

Our database allowed us to trace the evolution of eradication policies—or, at least, the version depicted in official records—in all municipalities from 1990 to 2019. One point that immediately

drew our attention was the clear evidence of a contradiction between areas with little or no poppy cultivation and eradication campaigns recorded as intensive. Poppies are not cultivated at all in several coastal municipalities for obvious reasons of physical geography because they have neither the climatic nor the topographic conditions necessary for growing this plant. This is the case, as well, of some municipalities in the Costa Chica where cultivation is minimal.<sup>6</sup> Curiously, we also found reports of poppy eradication in the coastal municipalities of Copala and Cuajinicuilapa for 9 different years, one third of the 30 years of our study period, even though no poppy cultivation takes place there, as we have verified during many periods of fieldwork.

Another key observation was that while the municipalities that reported the highest figures for hectares destroyed (Table 1) include not only those recognized, traditionally and locally, as major producers (General Heliodoro Castillo and San Miguel Totolapan in the Sierra, Atlixac and Zapotitlán Tablas in the Montaña), but also some that have relatively low levels of production. Among the latter, two cases stood out: Atoyac de Álvarez, a municipality where fields are extremely scarce but where the army has maintained a significant presence conducting anti-narcotic operations, and Ayutla de los Libres, where this contradiction is even more accentuated due to a concentration of eradication activities over a clearly defined period. These two municipalities experienced intensive eradication from, respectively, 1997–2002 and 2003–2006, atypical periods that signal a ‘before-and-after’ in their local histories, as shown by the peaks depicted in the following graphs (Figure 1).

MUNICIPALITY	SURFACE AREA (IN HECTARES)	PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL
Ayutla de los Libres	39,457.3	18.4%
General Heliodoro Castillo	37,551.2	17.5%
San Miguel Totolapan	21,724.4	10.1%
Chilpancingo del Bravo	18,590.2	8.7%
Atlixac	10,304.9	4.8%
Leonardo Bravo	8,760.7	4.1%
Atoyac de Álvarez	8,304.9	3.9%
Técpan de Galeana	7,253.8	3.4%
Coyuca de Catalán	6,711.9	3.1%
Ajuchitlán del Progreso	6,642.0	3.1%
Zapotitlán Tablas	6,505.8	3.0%
Acatepec	6,069.5	2.8%
Metlatónoc	4,428.4	2.1%
Petatlán	3,945.8	1.8%
Chilapa de Álvarez	2,580.0	1.2%
Other	25,705.3	12.0%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>214,536.1</b>	<b>100%</b>

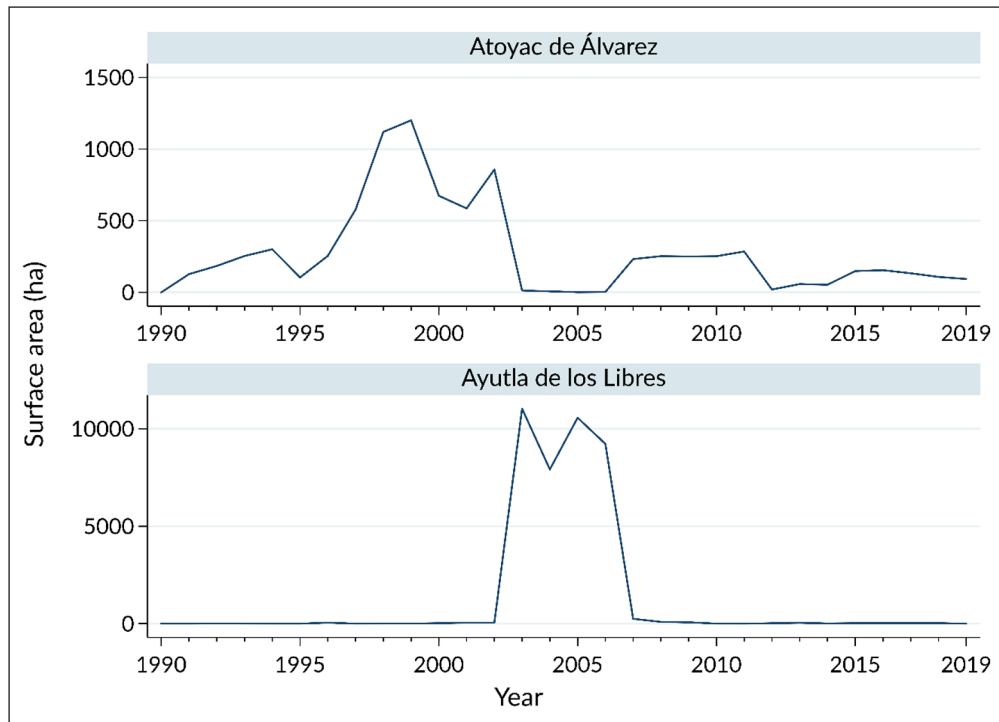
**Table 1** Municipalities of Guerrero according to the surface area of poppy plantations recorded as destroyed by the army (from 1990 to 2019).

## DISCUSSION

We know that poppies are grown in Atoyac and Ayutla, but volumes are minimal, especially when compared to neighbors like Heliodoro Castillo and Acatepec, respectively (Resa Nestares, 2016; Gaussens, 2018). The first is one of the largest producing municipalities in the Sierra, while Acatepec stands out in the Montaña. However, in the periods highlighted by atypically intense eradication activity in Atoyac and Ayutla, their neighbors show a reduced military presence. This is paradoxical because poppies do not have nearly the importance for the

<sup>6</sup> For this reason, the eradication activities reported in this region are less than in others and affected only a limited proportion of the 15 municipalities in the Costa Chica. For example, from 1990–2002 and later from 2010–2019, the poppy surfaces that SEDENA recorded as destroyed in this region represent 0% to 2% of the total for the state.





**Figure 1** Evolution of the annual surface area of poppy plantations recorded as destroyed by the army in the municipalities of Atoyac and Ayutla (from 1990 to 2019).

peasant-family economy there as they do in other zones. In Atoyac and Ayutla, poppy-growing is a complementary source of income for rural homes, as those municipal economies are sustained by agricultural products: coffee and mangoes in Atoyac and corn and hibiscus flowers in Ayutla. In other municipalities, in contrast, poppy cultivation is the principal source of income for families.

## ATOYAC: THE FLOURISHING OF GUERRILLA MOVEMENTS

In this section, we propose an explanation for the anomalous concentration of poppy eradication campaigns in Atoyac from 1997 to 2002, visible in the above figure. SEDENA's records for those peak years show a level of eradication that rose significantly compared to previous years. In fact, this municipality became the fifth most severely affected by military action in the state, with over 5,000 hectares destroyed in just six years. This information is surprising when we consider that poppy cultivation is scarce in Atoyac and limited to the highest altitudes of the Sierra where some peasant families cultivate it in a few small localities, as other fieldwork reports confirm (Ortiz 2018). The intense military presence, then, must respond to factors distinct from poppy eradication. We suggest that the main factor involved was the birth of guerilla movements in the Atoyac region in the 1990s in response to the massacre at Aguas Blancas.

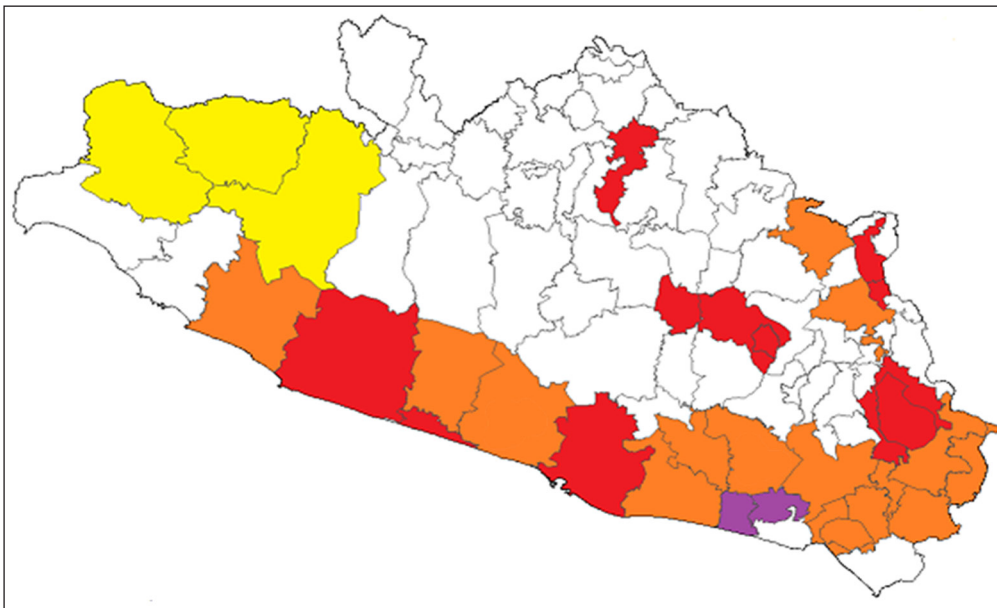
There can be no doubt that this massacre shaped the contemporary history of Guerrero and, specifically, of the Costa Grande region. In 1995, the Peasant Organization of the Southern Sierra (*Organización Campesina del Sierra del Sur*, OCSS), founded a year earlier by relatives of the victims of the Dirty War, held a demonstration to demand the return, alive and well, of one of its members and the acceptance of several other demands. On June 28, while crossing at Aguas Blancas, in the municipality of Coyuca de Benítez (Atoyac's neighbor),<sup>7</sup> a vehicle carrying demonstrators was ambushed by state police. The result was 17 peasants killed (Gledhill 2017). The following year witnessed the emergence of the Popular Revolutionary Army (*Ejército Popular Revolucionario*, EPR), whose first public appearance took place during the ceremony to commemorate the first anniversary of the massacre. The history of the EPR shows a front made up of several small armed movements (whose fusion is, in reality, a foundational myth) that converged momentarily in the only military actions of any importance that occurred from

<sup>7</sup> In fact, the eradication of poppies in the municipality of Coyuca de Benítez presents a similar behavior to that seen in its neighbor, Atoyac, with an increase in activities that also depicts an atypical period between 1997 and 2002. Indeed, for those years we can also review SEDENA's report on eradication in Benito Juárez, another neighbor, but one that has absolutely no poppies because it is a completely coastal municipality with no sierra. This reproduces, once again, the contradiction we pointed out in the cases of Copala and Cuajinicuilapa on the *Costa Chica*.

late 1996 to mid-1997 in various states, especially Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Hidalgo (Lofredo 2007a). At the national level, the EPR made its presence known through a series of military actions, most notably exploding *Petróleos Mexicanos* (PEMEX) pipelines in Veracruz and Tlaxcala in 2007. Despite these incursions beyond Guerrero's borders, it was clear that this state was the birthplace and headquarters of this guerilla group. Estimates suggest that over half of its rank-and-file members were from Guerrero (Gutiérrez 1998).

Press reports monitored from 1996–2013 indicate the presence of guerrillas in at least 32 municipalities in Guerrero, though evidence reveals more propaganda activities than military actions (Map 2). Not surprisingly, both Atoyac and Ayutla appear among the municipalities identified, because the guerrilla presence was concentrated in the two coastal areas known as Costa Grande and Costa Chica. Some groups, however, operated in the Hotlands, the Montaña, and some mountainous areas in the central region. Those groups divided the territory into various zones of influence, as shown in the following map where the EPR is in red, the People's Insurgent Revolutionary Army (*Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo Insurgente*, ERPI) in yellow, both in orange, and the People's Armed Revolutionary Forces (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias del Pueblo*, FARP) in violet.

**Map 2** Municipalities with guerrilla presence according to press reports (1996–2013).



Ethnographic work confirmed those reports but showed that the EPR was also active in the mid-sierra of Atoyac. Some members of the new guerrilla had not been born when, in 1967 and 1968, respectively, Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vázquez began their guerilla movements in Guerrero with the goal of achieving a redistribution of wealth in the region (Rangel & Sánchez 2006). While it is true that the EPR was not a direct continuation of those guerrillas, it was doubtless nourished by that historical experience and functioned in accordance with inherited schemes. Indeed, it has been characterized as 'a type of guerrilla that proved unable to overcome the limitations of its previous expressions' (Barrera & Sarmiento 2006: 693). The EPR took up many of the demands issued by the guerrillas led by Cabañas and Vázquez in a context that had not really changed all that much, as it was still marked by the hoarding of economic and political resources by regional elites and the ruthless repression of peasant organizations by the state government through police and military forces.

Members of the EPR approached families that had supported Cabañas and Vázquez—or had been accused of doing so—trying to recruit them. In 1996, for example, members of the EPR were present in rural communities of Atoyac and municipalities like Coyuca de Catalán, Ayutla, Cuauhtepéc, San Marcos, and Cruz Grande, performing propaganda. Soon after those meetings, soldiers made searches and interrogated attendees (Gutiérrez 1998). As a result, tensions between guerrillas and soldiers materialized and intensified in territories in the Sierra and the Coast.

The resurgence of the guerrilla led to a reactivation of the counterinsurgency that had been tested during the Dirty War and reinvented in Chiapas to suppress the *Zapatista* uprising in 1994

(Sierra Guzmán 2007). By late 1999, the aerial base at Pie de la Cuesta, the naval base at Icacos (both in Acapulco), and the seven existing infantry battalions had been reinforced by three more battalions and a garrison of GAFE. 'In 1997, the federal congressmen on the defense commission estimated that there were 23,000 soldiers in Guerrero, while the EPR affirmed there were 45,000' (Gutiérrez 2000: 93). In 1998, Abel Barrera (2001: 301) estimated that 'close to one-sixth of all the soldiers assigned to combat drug-trafficking in the country are found in Guerrero.' This massive troop deployment, planned to physically occupy the region, reproduced the basic schemes of the Dirty War because

... peasant and indigenous guerrillas were spreading under the complicit silence of an entire region [...] The armed nuclei, or those with military training, are just the tip of an iceberg. Extensive, complex family networks penetrate towns and ranches using a communication system that the army finds impossible to decipher or anticipate without recurring to indiscriminate razing. This indigenous and peasant support of the guerrilla is the circuit that the armies propose deactivating (Montemayor 2007: 34).

From the government's perspective, the danger was not only that the EPR might strengthen its social base and bring new members into its ranks, but also that it could forge links with other groups in Guerrero and armed movements in other areas of the country, like the Zapatista National Liberation Army (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, EZLN) in Chiapas, potentially detonating—in the view of the political system—an insurgent movement on a national scale.<sup>8</sup> It was hardly surprising, then, that the federal government became alarmed when EZLN sympathizers arrived in Atoyac in 1999. The authorities' anxiety increased when the Zapatistas denounced harassment by the Center of Information on National Security (CISEN) and the State Direction of Governance during their travels through Guerrero (Cervantes 1999). Upon comparing our hemerographic findings with the results of ethnographic fieldwork in the Sierra around Atoyac, we learned that the presence of the Armed Forces intensified throughout the 1990s, but the harassment of local populations by the army did not become intolerable until 1997.

One way to illustrate this situation is through stories of the forced displacement of families that were obliged to relocate time and again as they fled from military persecution. This is the case of the Pérez family (renamed to protect their anonymity). The family patriarch—we will call him Raymundo—was born in El Quemado, a locality in the mid-sierra, and lived through one of the cruelest episodes of political repression in 1972, when the army detained and tortured over 90 men who were accused of belonging to Cabañas' guerrilla, a traumatic event that has been documented by Castellanos (2007) and Ovalle (2019), among others. As a result, Raymundo decided to take his family to live in another ranch (whose name we omit), but harassment did not cease. In 1991, he was accused of drug-trafficking and jailed in Acapulco for a month. Upon his release, the family decided to establish their own village in an area far from where they had lived, but military repression pursued them even in their new refuge. On July 27, 1997, a confrontation took place between EPR guerrillas and soldiers in which, according to reports by some of our interviewees, the latter suffered substantial losses. Raymundo's son recalls,

So there was this fight with the EPR and they forced us to come down [from the Sierra] and [...] I said: Dad, know what? [...] Let's get out of here; look what's going on and the government's coming up a lot, they're going to harass us again, it's best to get out [...] I finally convinced him and we came here (Lucas, 18 December 2020).

Our interviewees recalled that in the years mentioned in this testimony (the late 1990s) it was common to see soldiers on the roads. Like many other Sierra families, the Pérez decided to emigrate to the Costa Grande where they remain today. Similar tales are told by other inhabitants of El Quemado, who recount that '...in that time there were a lot of soldiers [...] everyone fled' (Héctor, 19 December 2020). During our interview, Héctor's wife, Dora, added,

It was really tough, you know, in those days [...] they had helicopters, a small airplane [...] and tossed grenades [...] there were soldiers along the banks of the stream, the whole stream [pointing to a small current that divides the village]; soldiers were on guard to see if anyone tried to leave that way ...' (Dora, 19 December 2020).

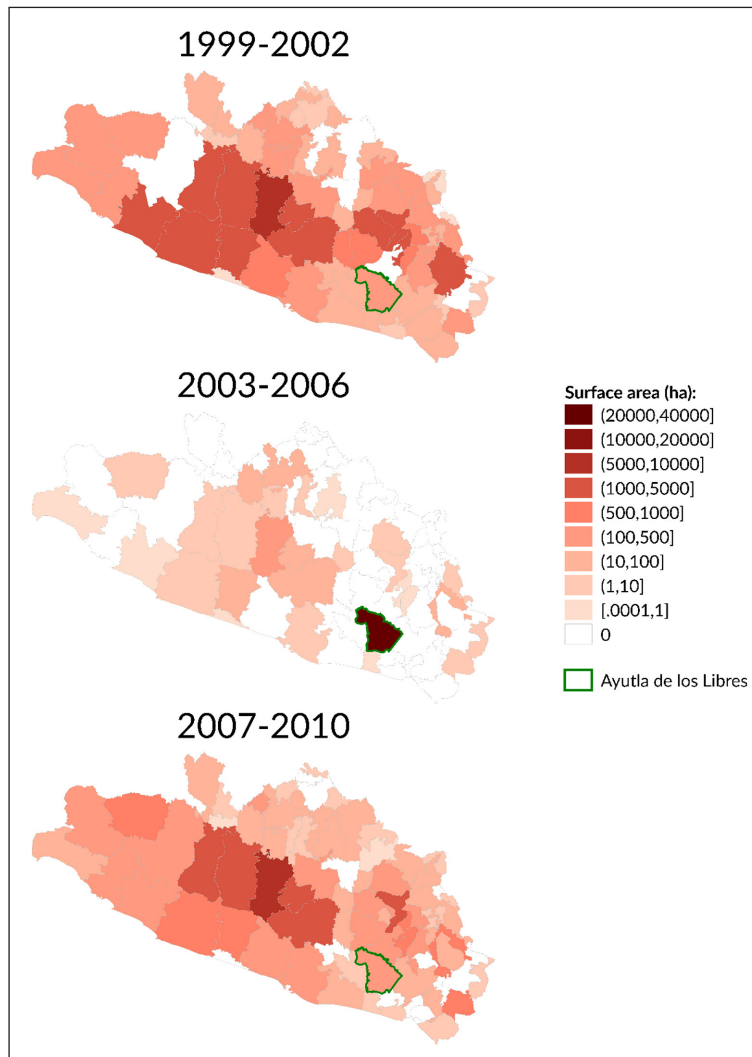
<sup>8</sup> For a comparison of the EZLN and its homologues in Guerrero, see the analysis by Lofredo (2007a).

Héctor and Dora stayed in their village but lived through a period of military repression similar to the one they had experienced in 1972.

In synthesis, we have no ethnographic data to suggest that the presence of the Armed Forces in Atoyac in the late 1990s was motivated by anti-narcotic actions. On the contrary, the combination of our hemerographic and ethnographic evidence leads us to conclude that the real motivation for military intervention in the years after the Aguas Blancas massacre was the emergence of the EPR. Atoyac was not a municipality with extensive drug cultivation, but the army used the eradication of poppy plantations as an official justification for its actions.<sup>9</sup>

### AYUTLA: ANOTHER MASSACRE, ANOTHER GUERRILLA, SAME EFFECTS

An even more atypical concentration of eradication activities in a specific municipality and period appears in our second case: the municipality of Ayutla de los Libres. There, from 2003 to 2006, SEDENA recorded the eradication of almost 40,000 hectares of poppy fields, virtually equal to the total area destroyed in the state (96.5% to 99.9% each year) and to over half of such operations in all the country (57% to 60.6%). In fact, for those four years, Ayutla was the municipality with the largest eradicated surface area in the three decades of our study period, well above large producer municipalities such as Heliodoro Castillo (37,551 hectares destroyed) and San Miguel Totolapan (21,724). Moreover, if we compare the 2003–2006 period to those immediately before and after, Ayutla clearly stands out on the map of municipalities in Guerrero as one that presents an abnormally high concentration of eradication (Map 3).



**Map 3** Municipalities of Guerrero by quadrennial surface of poppy plantations registered as destroyed by the army (from 1999 to 2010).

<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that political violence continued in Atoyac for the ensuing two decades, though the army's presence has not been as important as it was in the 1990s. Thus, not all this violence can be attributed to militarization. To cite one example, one of the founders of the OCSS, Rocio Mesino, was killed in 2013 after demanding the re-opening of investigations into Aguas Blancas. That crime, like so many others in Guerrero, went unpunished.

These results show a clear inconsistency, but this becomes even more problematic when we contrast them with the information obtained during fieldwork. People in Ayutla told us that poppies are grown in the municipality but almost exclusively in the northern zone, as occurs in Atoyac. More precisely, fields are located in the Tlapaneca (*Me'phaa*) indigenous localities of the municipality, a fact recognized by two community authorities we interviewed there (we call them Rodolfo and Celestino) and other people who live in this municipality. Both informants reported poppy cultivation makes only a minor contribution to peasant family production, a complement that represents a small proportion of the crops grown and a small percentage of household income. Production is characterized as artisanal, irregular, limited to small plots (a few hundred square meters), dispersed, and isolated. The opium gum harvested there is often bought *in situ* by intermediaries (*coyotes*) who transport it outside the area:

Not all the families are into it. Really only a few. Many of us think it's wrong. We don't do it because we like it but only out of necessity. We see it as a complement to cover extraordinary costs, like if somebody gets sick [...] It's good to have that money at that moment, but it's not much for the whole family or the whole year [...] Here, we usually have one harvest a year, but not everybody plants every year. One year yes, the next one no, it depends on each [person] [...] Fields are small, just a few meters so they can't be seen. Ravines are the best areas. They're hard to reach. The harvest isn't very big, maybe a kilo, at best two, not much more. The *coyote* comes by and takes it, so it's not our problem (Celestino, Plan de Gatica, 13 January 2018).

The fact that poppy production is concentrated in northern Ayutla is because the dynamics of the local market for illicit crops obeys external factors more than internal ones and is articulated more closely with the productive system of the Montaña than the Costa Chica region, where cultivation is marginal, as noted above. In effect, communities in northern Ayutla maintain more important ties with the neighboring municipalities of Acatepec and Zapotitlán Tablas than its main town (*cabecera*), the city of Ayutla. Those two municipalities are populated mostly by Tlapanecos, the indigenous group established along the vertical corridor that shapes the poppy-producing area of the Montaña. Significantly, Acatepec and Zapotitlán figure in the list of the municipalities with the largest eradicated surface area in the past 30 years (Table 1).

In a logic shared with our first case study, the stark contrast between cultivation and eradication requires an explanation that goes beyond official reasons and the war on drugs: once again, the presence of guerrilla activities. Ayutla was another site of an episode of harsh repression that triggered a spiral of violence just three years after the tragedy at Aguas Blancas. On June 7, 1998, the army perpetrated a massacre in the Mixteca (*Na savi*) indigenous community of El Charco, killing 11 people, mostly peasants (Gaussens 2021b). It was in response to that massacre that the ERPI, a new guerrilla group that split from the EPR, came into public view. Its emergence is seen as a schism in the *eperrismo* movement, because the new group included the most important figures of guerrilla groups in Guerrero, especially from the coast, almost the EPR's entire state committee, according to Lofredo (2007b). The ERPI was distinguished by an insurgent strategy that fomented the participation of its base supporters in decision-making, an approach that has allowed it to establish stable relations with non-armed sectors and non-clandestine social organizations. In this regard, the new group presents some similarity to Zapatismo in Chiapas.

The anomalous concentration of eradication campaigns in Ayutla in 2003–2006 finds its *raison d'être* in the emergence of the ERPI. Indeed, according to the *Tlachinollan* Human Rights Center of the Montaña (with offices in the city of Ayutla), since the massacre at El Charco, the municipality

finds itself under the gaze of police and military authorities. Policy [...] is elaborated following the script of counterinsurgency warfare. Recommendations by generals and the police inscribe the content of the policies to be adopted by the state executive branch and municipal government (Tlachinollan 2011: 86).

After El Charco, the municipality was militarized, with increased army operations and grievances by the civil population. In Rodolfo's words,



Soldiers were always around, as long as I can remember. From the times of Genaro [Vázquez] the *guachos* have been here. We see them now and then, more in the city where they have the battalion in Cruz Grande. Sometimes they'd come to the village or we'd see them pass along the roads [...] But after El Charco, things... changed. They came back to our village and others in the area, the Tlapaneca part of the municipality. But now they stay much longer, not just a few days... now weeks, months. They set up camps in the fields and stay there making their rounds. You run into them every day... on the way to the *milpa*. You leave the city and there they are [...] Our people were afraid. Women didn't want to leave [the village] and the children were scared. Harassment was constant (Rodolfo, city of Ayutla, 14 January 2018).

In another important finding, we discovered that from 1998 to 2004 this area registered 16 violations of human rights committed by the army in 7 localities, all against indigenous people and their communities (Tlachinollan 2004). One case referred to a forced sterilization campaign implemented in 1998 by Guerrero's Department of Health in which 32 men from 4 indigenous communities were sterilized (Gaussens 2020). In those same years, several cases of rape of indigenous women by soldiers were recorded (Amnesty International 2004).<sup>10</sup>

These aggressions were effectuated by elements of a battalion, the 41<sup>st</sup> Infantry [with its seat in Iguala], which has maintained a constant presence in the Tlapaneca zone of Ayutla [...] to the extent that this is the refuge zone for the indigenous with the greatest military presence in the state (Tlachinollan 2002: 21).

Together with the Mixteca area of the municipality, Tlapaneca communities, which are poppy producers, are most severely affected by counterinsurgency measures. Among many other examples, we can mention the case of forced sterilization imposed on the locality of El Camalote, the rape of Inés Fernández Ortega in Barranca Tecuani, and repeated military incursions into places in Plan de Gatica and Barranca de Guadalupe, where records document abuse of authority, violation of people's homes, taking of property, threats, illegal interrogations, and intimidation (Tlachinollan 2004). The fact that these places are sites of poppy cultivation justified military intervention, as Rodolfo recalled:

When we asked them, the soldiers said they were there to destroy plantations, but that's not true, poppies were just a pretext. Nobody who grows [poppies] in the village was affected. Nobody's fields were destroyed [...] Sure, they were up there in the hills, but they weren't looking for plantations. Several times they saw plants and didn't do anything [...] They threatened some people [saying] they were going to cut down the plants, but in the end nothing happened [...] but if you ran into them, they'd ask you about the *encapuchados* [men wearing balaclavas] 'where are they', 'who supports them', 'and so on'... They had a list with names. That's all they were looking for, the guerrillas (Rodolfo, city of Ayutla, 14 January 2018).

One final point to emphasize is that the counterinsurgency measures implemented involve not only exerting violence on towns, but also fomenting paramilitary activities by recruiting people and groups into *de facto* military service. 'This is what has happened in Ayutla. In many communities the army has become entrenched in the social tissue through linkages with caciques, entrepreneurs, or local groups' (Orraca 2012: 114). By taking advantage of internal divisions and pre-existing conflicts, counterinsurgency has succeeded in fragmenting community cohesion, even dividing them into two clearly opposed bands. A paradigmatic case is the locality of El Camalote (Orraca 2010), one of the four communities most severely impacted by the forced sterilization campaign, and the hometown of one of the women who was raped by soldiers. This is also the setting in which several social leaders have been murdered, including Galdino Sierra Francisco from Barranca de Guadalupe, a member of the ecclesial base communities who was killed in April 2000; Donaciano González Lorenzo, murdered in January 2001; and Andrés Marcelino Petrona, the social leader of El Charco and defender of human rights, killed in August of the same year (Schatz 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Raping women as a weapon of war is a widely-known phenomenon, one that also occurs in contexts of counterinsurgency, as Fulchiron (2011) and Boesten (2014) have demonstrated for the case of internal armed conflict in Guatemala and Peru, respectively. Thus, it is difficult to dismiss the relation to war of the rapes that occurred in Ayutla.



In light of these events, the data constructed through our fieldwork in Ayutla confirms the results obtained for the case of Atoyac: the militarization of these two municipalities for purposes of counterinsurgency used the pretext of eradicating illicit crops as an official justification. This explains the statistical increase observed in the destruction of poppy plantations in Atoyac and Ayutla in the years immediately following the emergence of new guerilla groups in response to the massacres at Aguas Blancas and El Charco.

## CONCLUSIONS

The prohibitionist basis of drug policy in Mexico has justified the military occupation of peasant and indigenous zones in Guerrero with a long tradition of political activism. We have succeeded in demonstrating this by correlating eradication activities and counterinsurgency measures, illustrated by case studies in two municipalities: Atoyac de Álvarez and Ayutla de los Libres. Clearly, the military actions of combatting drug-trafficking must be understood as elements of a disciplining strategy imposed by the State on regions with historical processes of social organization and mobilization. In this context, eradicating illicit crops strayed from its official purpose and was transformed into a means of exerting state violence on liminal populations like those in areas of the Sierra and Montaña of Guerrero.

In Mexico more generally, illicit crops are also synonymous with political violence. From its beginnings in the early 20th century and the adoption of the prohibitionist paradigm, the drug trade ‘was born under the shadow of interests in the political field and subedited to it. This continued for decades’ (Astorga 2016: 203). There can be no doubt that drug-trafficking continues to be an eminently political issue. In addition to the criminal groups that operate in drug markets, the issue of illicit crops also remits to the State, its institutions, and, especially, the agency officially entrusted with combatting them: the army. In this sense, demonstrating the link that unites eradication and counterinsurgency constitutes an additional element of analysis for understanding the contemporary political context of Mexico, one marked by the ‘war on drugs’ in which ‘drug-trafficking was converted into a mask for imposing a regime of order’ (Maldonado 2010: 359). Within this reordering of Mexico’s political system, Guerrero still finds itself—as it was back in the 1970s—among the states most severely affected by the militarism of official policy.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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