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POPULISM AND THE GUATEMALAN REVOLUTION:
POLITICS AND POWER IN TRANSITION, MAY 1944 - MARCH 1945

A Thesis Presented

by

TODD R. LITTLE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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History

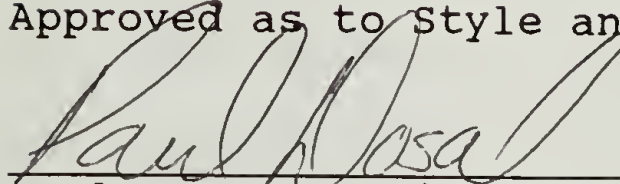
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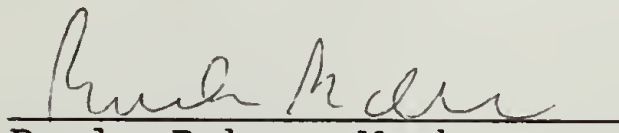
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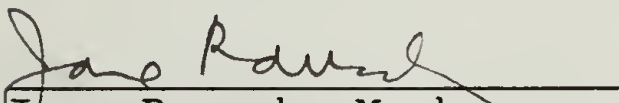
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The responsibility for any errors in interpretation or fact, of course, rest entirely with me.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On the evening of June 25, 1944, a group of about 60 women gathered in the safety of Guatemala City's San Francisco church.¹ At 6:00 p.m., the women, dressed in black to mourn the death of constitutional rule, began marching silently down Fifth Avenue two by two saying the rosary and holding candles. A few blocks away a cavalry unit awaited them with orders from Guatemala's dictator Jorge Ubico to disperse the gathering by whatever means necessary. As the procession passed the corner of Seventeenth Street and Fifth Avenue, both the cavalry and army units fired a volley of shots into the crowd. When the firing stopped, Maria Chinchilla, a school teacher from Guatemala City and a woman later identified as Señora Aresti, lay dead in the street. Twenty others were wounded as the bullets ripped through the crowd.²

¹Christine Anne Clamp, "The Overthrow of Jorge Ubico: A Case of Non-Violent Action in Guatemala" (B.A. Thesis, Friends World College, 1976), 89.

²U.S. Department of State, Records of the Department of State Relating to the Internal Affairs of Guatemala, 1930-1944, 814.00/7-2444, FBI report "Guatemala: Possible Revolution", July 24, 1944. All citations for Diplomatic correspondence come from the Records of the Department of State Relating to the Internal Affairs of Guatemala, 1930-1944, and they will be cited throughout this thesis as DOS with a decimal reference number, title, date, and page number where applicable.

With this event the Guatemalan Revolution began. The martyrdom of Maria Chinchilla and Aresti galvanized the opposition overnight behind the demand for Ubico's resignation. What had been muted requests for the restoration of constitutional guarantees became a unified call for an end to his archaic and brutal regime. The U.S. ambassador, Boaz Long, accurately predicted the political repercussions of Ubico's action: "I greatly fear this unfortunate incident may further incite the populace."³ Within five days massive popular pressure forced Ubico to resign, and within a year Guatemala had a new constitution, a popularly elected president, and a reformist Congress. The collapse of Ubico's regime ushered in a period of reform which changed Guatemala forever.

The revolutionaries who drove Ubico from power replaced an outmoded authoritarian dictatorship with a vibrant, reformist democracy. They exchanged nineteenth century caudillismo for a more inclusive political system based on the principles of economic and social justice. With the reforms they implemented, the dictator's opponents dismantled the old power structure and introduced modern economic, political and social institutions which enabled

³DOS 814.00/9-2944, Boaz Long to Hull, June 25, 1944.

them to address their nation's underdevelopment and renegotiate its dependency.

The Revolution also formed part of a much broader populist movement which swept all of Latin America from the 1930s onward. These movements emerged as a response to the socio-economic crisis brought on by the Great Depression. They addressed the problems of elite political dominance and economic under-development which they perceived as the root of the crisis. The populist movements which coalesced in this period were predominantly urban, reformist, multi-class alliances, which drew support from the middle and working classes and relied on a charismatic leader to hold the coalition together.⁴ It is difficult, however, to generalize about the nature of the reforms carried out by populist regimes because of the diversity of approaches these governments employed to address their social and economic problems. A list of populist leaders would include such important figures as Getulio Vargas, Juan Domingo Peron, Lázaro Cárdenas, and Victor Haya de la Torre. The Guatemalan Presidents Juan José Arévalo Bermejo and Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán belong in that list as well.

⁴This definition is based on the definition offered by Michael Conniff in his article "Toward a Comparative Definition of Populism" in Michael Conniff, ed., Latin American Populism in Comparative Perspective (Albuquerque, 1982).

Jorge Ubico's fall marked the end of Guatemala's Liberal oligarchic era and the establishment of a new populist order. By exploring the events between the overthrow of Ubico and the inauguration of Arévalo I will explain the emergence of the populist political coalition which ruled Guatemala from 1944 to 1954. This focus highlights the origins of the dramatic changes which shook the nation during the following "Ten Years of Spring." The revolutionaries eventually enacted landmark labor laws, set up a social security system, encouraged unionization, carried out land reform, and restructured the economic system. Those measures changed Guatemala's political and economic landscape forever. The oligarchy has never regained absolute power. Since 1944 they have had to share power with a politicized middle class and an increasingly independent military.

The Revolution also had its limits, and those limits tell a great deal about the nature of the political forces which combined to change the face of Guatemala's political life. Specifically, the revolutionaries, while instituting broad and sweeping reforms also reproduced a system based on class and ethnic division. While they pushed for inclusion in the political system, the revolutionaries did not

aggressively push for a complete reordering of the political system. This proved an important legacy of the Revolution.

The key to all of these crucial changes lies in the initial ten months of the Revolution. Many historians have studied the decade from 1944 to 1954, but none have focused on this pivotal period from June of 1944 to March of 1945.⁵ Between Ubico's fall and Arévalo's induction into office, the revolutionaries defined the basic tenets of their movement, enacted numerous structural reforms, and set up a constitutional system. Examining the nature of this transitional period emphasizes some important aspects of the decade of reform known as the "Ten Years of Spring." First, it places the Guatemalan Revolution in the context of a broader process of readjustment and reform which took place in Latin America after the Depression. Second, it expands our understanding of a key achievement of the Revolution, the expansion of political participation. Third, it explicitly focuses on the role of the middle-class and clarifies the origin of that class and the populist politics they implemented. And finally, by employing this approach I hope to expand historians' understanding of populism as a

⁵Throughout this thesis I use the phrase the Revolution to describe the ten year period from 1944 to 1954. When speaking of the specific uprisings of 1944 I refer to them as the June Revolution and the October Revolution.

whole. By combining a synthesis of the secondary literature on the Revolution with new insights drawn from newspaper accounts, Guatemalan Government documents, and U.S. Department of State sources, I will demonstrate that the revolutionaries and their vision of a new order were firmly within the mainstream of Latin American populism.

Placing the Revolution within the framework of populism helps clarify that Guatemala's political upheaval in the late 1940s was part and parcel of a much broader process which effected all of Latin America. Emphasizing this helps facilitate a comparative analysis of the various populist experiments in Latin America, and reveals the similarities and discontinuities in the political history of the nations of Iberoamerica. Applying the populist label to Guatemala helps us understand the local process of change and the more global political trends which it was part of.

This thesis consists of five sections. The first section discusses the historiography of both the Revolution and populism. The second explains the context within which the uprising against Ubico occurred and charts the emergence of the middle class and the factors which led to the advent of populism as a political force in the country. The next section provides an interpretive narrative of the events from June, 1944 to March, 1945 in an effort to reveal the

populist character of the Revolution. This section is the heart of the thesis, and focuses on the construction of a new political system by concentrating on the drafting of the Constitution of 1945. This focus is justified because the reforms embodied in the constitution provided the foundation for all reforms that followed. In the final section I offer some concluding remarks and discuss the legacy of the Revolution.

CHAPTER 2

THE LITERATURE

While a comprehensive history of the Guatemalan Revolution remains to be written, there is an extensive literature on many different aspects of the revolutionary process. These works can be broken down into broad chronological categories for the purpose of summarizing the historiography of the period. The first category is made up of contemporary accounts or works that were written during the "Ten Years of Spring" by observers of the Revolution.⁶ The second group is made up of the works which revolutionaries and their critics wrote immediately after the overthrow of the Arbenz regime in 1954. These books are largely the product of the Cold War and they debate the nature and extent of Communist influence in Guatemala in this period.⁷ The final category consists of the more

⁶The most interesting works in this category are: Kalman Silvert, A Study in Government: Guatemala (New Orleans, 1954); Carlos Samayoa Chinchilla, El dictador y yo (Guatemala, 1950); Jose Garcia Bauer, Nuestra Revolucion Legislativa (Guatemala, 1948); Samuel Guy Inman, A New day in Guatemala, a Study of the Present Social Revolution (Wilton, Conn, 1951).

⁷The works in this category are packed with interesting insights. Some of the best pro-revolutionary works are: Guillermo Toriello, La batalla de Guatemala (Mexico, 1955); Juan Jose Arevalo, La democracia y el imperio (Santiago, 1954); Luis Cardoza y Aragon, La revolucion guatemalteca (Mexico, 1955); and Manuel Galich, Por que lucha Guatemala, Arevalo y Arbenz: Dos hombres contra un imperio (Buenos Aires, 1956). On the side of

recent academic analyses of the Revolution. Naturally, these are the most useful and germane for this analysis.⁸

A review of the broad range of works on the Guatemalan Revolution lends support to the argument that this was a populist movement. Even though very few of the works explicitly describe it as populist, they all stress the middle class, reformist nature of the movement. Jim Handy, Kalman Silvert, Mario Monteforte Toledo, Edelberto Torres-Rivas, Thomas Leonard, and Kenneth Greib, the most important contributors to the historiography of the Revolution, agree on its basically bourgeois-democratic character. According to this argument the revolutionaries sought to establish democracy, modernize the economy, expand political participation, and break the power of the old oligarchy.

The clearest exposition of this interpretation, and the intellectual inspiration for the analysis presented here,

the critics the most effective works were published in English and are: James Daniel, Red Design in the Americas: Guatemalan Prelude (New York, 1954); U.S. Department of State, Intervention of International Communism (Washington, D.C., 1954); and Ronald Schneider, Communism in Guatemala, 1944-1954 (New York, 1958).

⁸The most important works in this category are; Tomás Herrera, Guatemala: Revolución de Octubre (San Jose, 1986); Thomas Leonard, The United States and Central America, 1944-1949 (University, Al., 1984); Jim Handy, Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala (Boston, 1984); Mario Monteforte Toledo, La revolución de Guatemala (Guatemala, 1975).; and Richard Immerman, The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention (Austin, 1982).

can be found in the work of Edelberto Torres-Rivas.⁹ He highlights the "nationalist reformist" nature of the Revolution and argues that it initiated a decade of important transformations in Guatemalan society. Torres-Rivas is correct in noting that the middle class did not simply reject the authoritarian rule of Jorge Ubico when they seized power in October of 1944; they also sought to modernize Guatemala. He interprets the Revolution as the demise of the old oligarchic system based on the power of the seignorial elite and its replacement by a new system that would deliver freedom and prosperity to sectors of society previously denied such benefits of progress. Torres-Rivas concludes, and this is the underlying assumption of the analysis presented here, that these changes only ushered in a new stage of dependent development. The middle class forced their way into power. The elite simply expanded the ruling caste to include the elements of the middle class which could no longer be

⁹His primary work is, Interpretación del desarrollo social centroamericano (San Jose, 1981), but the clearest and most concise explanation of his interpretation of the Revolution is in the essay "Guatemala: Medio siglo de historia politica (Un ensayo de interpretacion sociologica)" in America Latina: historia de medio siglo. ed. by Pablo Gonzalez Casanova (Mexico, 1981). Another very provocative work which places the Guatemalan Revolution in a more global context is Torres-Rivas', "Centroamerica: algunos rasgos de la sociedad de Postguerra", Kellogg Institute Working Paper #25 (Notre Dame, IN, 1984).

ignored. The power of the old oligarchy had been modified, but not entirely broken.¹⁰

Another key contributor to the literature is Mario Monteforte Toledo, a Guatemalan sociologist who participated in the Revolution. In his works, Guatemala, Monografía Sociologica and La revolución de Guatemala, Monteforte Toledo analyzes the growth of the middle class and its political ascendancy. He follows Torres-Rivas very closely when he writes that the 1920s and 1930s "opened the door to a new step in political life: the inclusion of both the salaried and the independent petty bourgeoisie and the working class, and the initiation of modern capitalism."¹¹

North Americans such as Jim Handy, Thomas Leonard, and Richard Immerman document the conflicts of the revolutionary decade without thoroughly analyzing the nature of the coalition which dislodged Ubico and uprooted the Liberal oligarchic order. Like Torres-Rivas and Monteforte Toledo, however, they employ terminology vaguely resembling populism but do not specifically define it as populist. For example, Jim Handy, in his work Gift of the Devil, says that the "character of the revolution was nationalist and democratic"

¹⁰Torres-Rivas, Interpretación del desarrollo social centroamericano , 171-6.

¹¹Mario Monteforte Toledo, Centroamerica, subdesarrollo y dependencia (Mexico, 1972), vol. 2 , 17.

with the establishment of a modern capitalist economy as its primary goal.¹² Richard Immerman closely follows this interpretation when he writes that the revolutionaries sought the "organization of a modern capitalist system and the rearrangement and revitalization of the social structure."¹³ And Thomas Leonard also pursues this same line of argumentation when he explains that the Revolution "promised a new order in building Guatemala's resources without foreign capital and a 'square deal' for the common man."¹⁴

The common thread here is that the authors agree on the general outlines of the Revolution without seeing it as part of the broader populist transition which took place throughout Latin America in the 1930s and 1940s. Only one author, Roland Ebel (a political scientist), explicitly calls this a populist political movement.¹⁵ The others are content to refer to the movement as "more or less populist" or

¹²Jim Handy, Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala (Boston, 1984), 103.

¹³Richard Immerman, The CIA in Guatemala, The Foreign Policy of Intervention (Austin, 1982), 38.

¹⁴Thomas Leonard, The United States and Central America, 1944-1949 (University, Al, 1984), 84.

¹⁵See Roland Ebel, "Populist Opposition to Populism: Middle Class Opposition to The Arevalo and Arbenz Regimes in Guatemala" Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the Southwestern Political Science Association (Spring 1988).

nationalist-democratic. These labels do not adequately describe the goals or achievements of the Revolution. They also obscure the fact that the Guatemalan who rose up against Ubico were very conscious of themselves as part of a broader Latin American effort to translate the democratic rhetoric of the war years into concrete political and social reforms for their nation.

In applying the populist label to Guatemala it is important to stress that there is no single phenomenon "populism." Latin American populism is very different from its counterparts in North America and Russia, and there are many different types of populism within Latin America. I will limit my discussion of populism to the Latin American variants.

There are a number of historical leaders and movements which scholars label "populist": Perón in Argentina, Vargas in Brazil, Cárdenas in Mexico, Batlle y Ordóñez in Uruguay, Velásquez in Ecuador, Gaitán in Colombia, and Haya de la Torre in Peru. All these and many more are understood to be part of some broader phenomenon called populism. The Guatemalan Revolution is contemporaneous with most of these populist movements and it shares many of their attributes such as; middle class leadership, urban character, a modernizing reformist vision, demands for political reform,

and increased participation. Again, explicitly viewing Guatemala's experience as part of this broader political trend helps us understand the dynamics of change which drove change both locally and throughout the continent.

It is important to note that in the 1930s and 1940s populism would not have been a term applied by the participants to their movements. Populism is an abstract idea which academic observers have applied to political movements after the fact in order to explain the momentous changes which swept much of Latin America and the world from the 1930s to the 1960s. It is a propos here to briefly explore the historiography of populism and to show how it has been applied to Latin American political history.

According to Michael Conniff, the first writer to conceptualize populism rigorously was the Argentine sociologist Torcuato di Tella.¹⁶ His paper, presented at a 1965 London conference, became the basic frame of reference in debate about populist movements.¹⁷ He defined populism as a movement

¹⁶Michael Conniff, "Toward a Comparative Definition of Populism" in Michael Conniff, ed., Latin American Populism in Comparative Perspective (Albuquerque, 1982), 24.

¹⁷See Torcuato di Tella, "Populismo y reforma en America Latina ", Desarrollo Economico 4 (1965), 391-425, and "Ideologias monoliticas en sistemas politicos pluripartidistas: el caso latinoamericano", in Argentina, sociedad de masas, ed. Gino Germani (Buenos Aires, 1965), 272-84.

...which enjoys the support of the urban working class and/or the peasantry but which does not result from the autonomous organizational power of either of these two sectors. It is supported by non-working class sectors upholding an anti-status quo ideology.¹⁸

Though a very basic formulation, di Tella's definition hit upon key elements of populism; mobilization of the masses by the middle class, discontent with the status quo, and the transformation of society by a multi-class coalition.

Social scientists (especially in Latin America) debated and discussed populism throughout the 1960s and 1970s. From this exchange blossomed a huge volume of scholarship so that the concept took on a life of its own. The intellectual interchange between the social sciences and history during this period led to new ways of thinking about political history, and in the late 1970s historians appropriated the idea of populism and integrated it into their work.

Between 1977 and 1983 historians produced several excellent books about populism. These works contributed substantially to our understanding of politics in post-War Latin America revealing continental trends and

¹⁸Quoted in Michael Conniff, "Toward a Comparative Definition of Populism" in Michael Conniff, ed., Latin American Populism in Comparative Perspective, (Albuquerque, 1982), 24.

commonalities.¹⁹ Unfortunately, the analytical framework of populism has not yet been vigorously applied to the experience of Central America as a whole or Guatemala specifically.²⁰ Initial attempts have been made to apply an analysis of populism to Guatemala, but they have been sketchy at best.

I will show through an interpretive narrative of the Revolution, that the movement which toppled the last of Guatemala's Liberal dictator's was not merely liberal democratic as has been claimed by most historians , but rather was populist in the fullest sense of the word. This thesis will combine new sources on Guatemala in this period with the systematic focus on populism applied so fruitfully to other countries in Latin America. By bringing these two

¹⁹The key works in the historiography of populism appeared from 1977 onwards. These works include: Christopher Mitchell, The Legacy of Populism in Bolivia: From MNR to Military Rule (New York, 1977); Paul Drake, Socialism and Populism in Chile, 1932-1952 (Urbana, 1978); Rafael Quintero, El mito del populismo en el Ecuador: Analisis de los fundamentos socio-economicos del surgimiento del 'Velasquismo', 1895-1934 (Quito, 1980); Michael Conniff, Urban Politics in Brazil: The Rise of Populism, 1925-1945 (Pittsburgh, 1981); Richard Sharpless, Gaitán of Colombia: A Political Biography (Pittsburgh, 1978); and Steve Stein, Populism in Peru: The Emergence of the Masses and the Politics of Social Control (Madison, 1980).

²⁰Only Costa Rican populism has been carefully studied in the work of Charles Ameringer and J.P Bell. See Charles Ameringer, Don Pepe: A Political Biography of Jose Figueres of Costa Rica (Albuquerque, 1978) and J.P. Bell, Crisis in Costa Rica: The 1948 Revolution (Austin, 1971).

strands together I hope to stimulate some new thinking about this crucial transition in Guatemala's history, while at the same time attempting to expand our understanding of populism as a whole.

CHAPTER 3

THE ORIGINS OF POPULIST POLITICS

The growth of the Guatemalan middle class during the early twentieth century and its subsequent disaffection with the established order led to the development of a strong populist movement which ousted the last of the Liberal dictators in 1944. This movement developed for a number of reasons. First, the growth of the middle class meant the growth of a new political force capable of mobilizing discontent. Second, economic crisis fostered a sense of urgency among the middle class whereby they were forced to make a choice between challenging the old oligarchy to restructure the economy or resigning themselves to sinking back into poverty. Third, Ubico's repressive rule heightened middle class resentment of the nation's archaic political system. Fourth, a surge of nationalism fed by a growing awareness of the nation's dependency contributed to the growth of populism, and that sentiment became a key component of the opposition's ideology. Finally, ideals of the Atlantic Charter and the political model of Latin American populism provided powerful inspiration to

Guatemalans seeking the language and legitimacy to transform their nation.

The middle class constituted the most important component of the political movement which drove Jorge Ubico from power in 1944. Very little, however, has been written on the emergence of the middle class as a political force despite its importance, and even less is known about the factors which led to its development. In most accounts the Guatemalan bourgeoisie appears fully formed around 1920, as if this social class materialized by spontaneous generation or simply arrived to fulfill its historical mission of transforming Guatemala into a "modern" democracy.

By 1944, the middle class made up approximately 17 percent of the population of Guatemala.²¹ Sixty percent of this group worked as administrators, teachers, government workers and military officers. The remaining 40 percent worked for themselves in business, medicine, law.²² Their origins, however, remain obscured by inadequate census materials and a lack of careful historical research.

The crucial question is, however, where did they come from? Working back from the 1940s when they made up almost

²¹Mario Monteforte Toledo, Guatemala: Monografía sociológica (Mexico, 1959), 257.

²²Ibid.

20 percent of the population, it is difficult to trace the development of the middle class empirically. The nucleus of this class, however, almost certainly formed during the economic boom periods of the late nineteenth century. It most likely expanded as the agricultural export sector stimulated demand for goods and services. In short, the economic success of indigo, cochineal and coffee in the late nineteenth century probably spurred the development of an independent, national bourgeoisie.²³ The appearance of this group can intuitively be linked directly to the processes of economic growth, expansion of the State apparatus, and urbanization in this period.

The expansion of the coffee economy during the booms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created new opportunities for the nascent middle class. The nation experienced a hundredfold increase in coffee production between the 1870s and the early 1900s, and the economy grew rapidly.²⁴ The progress of these years benefitted the coffee oligarchy almost exclusively. But the boom seems to have lead to the emergence of the middle class because the

²³Ibid., 250-257. See also Piero Gleijeses, "La aldea de Ubico: Guatemala, 1931-1944" in Mesoamérica 17 (June 1989): 25-59.

²⁴Chester Lloyd Jones, Guatemala, Past and Present (New York, 1966), 210.

elite needed doctors, lawyers, administrators, and government officials to keep the system running smoothly.

Urban growth, fueled by the role of the cities as commercial and distribution centers, also probably furthered the middle class' expansion. With an increasing population of city dwellers came the attendant demands for skilled workers and services. Native Americans who migrated to the capital to fill the needs of the expanding agro-export economy formed the bulk of the expanding middle class. In giving up their traditional dress, language and culture the traditional Native Americans became ladinos (or hispanicized Indians) and made a huge transition from the world of their ancestors to the world of the urban metropolis.

Guatemala City's emergence as the administrative and distribution center for export agriculture also spurred the expansion of the middle class. The population of Guatemala City and environs in 1893 stood at approximately 100,000, and this number grew to around 200,000 by 1921.²⁵ Fully 270,000 people lived in the city by 1940.²⁶ Quetzaltenango,

²⁵Ibid., 268.

²⁶This number is based on the 1950 census population for Guatemala City which was 283,000. For 1950 numbers see International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, The Economic Development of Guatemala (Washington, 1951).

Guatemala's second largest city mirrored the growth of the capital.²⁷

The expansion of the state apparatus throughout the Liberal era proved a crucial impetus for stimulating the development of the national bourgeoisie. The rising number of government positions provided jobs for an increasing number of urban salaried workers as teachers, technocrats, and civil servants. This expansion of the state bureaucracy intensified during the pre-Depression coffee export boom, and many people moved into the solid middle class in this period by landing a government job and gaining the economic security which allowed to become "respectable" members of society.

Urban growth, economic booms, and the expansion of the state provided the necessary conditions for the development of the middle class but these phenomenon do not explain the emergence of populism. It took the economic crisis of 1929, the restriction of personal liberties under Ubico, growing nationalism, and international political trends to forge the populist coalition which defeated Ubico.

²⁷For more information of demographic trends see Carol A. Smith, "El desarrollo de la primacía urbana, la dependencia en la exportación y la formación de clases en Guatemala", Mesoamérica 8 (1984): 195-278. See also Gilda Segrada Sagot y Jorge Arriaga, "El proceso histórico en la formación urbana Guatemalteca, 1773-1944", Anuario de Centroamérica 7 (1981): 43-70.

Until the 1940s the middle class had never acted independently because strong bonds linked them to the landholding oligarchy. Ties of patronage and dependence undermined the ability of the clase media to form themselves into an interest group separate from the oligarchy. The fact that they did eventually break these ties and formed a separate class with distinct interests can be linked directly to their vulnerable position in the economy. Economic crises, brought on by fluctuations in world coffee markets, continually exposed them to forces beyond their control. The Depression fostered growing discontent after the nation's coffee economy collapsed in 1929 when international price of coffee collapsed.

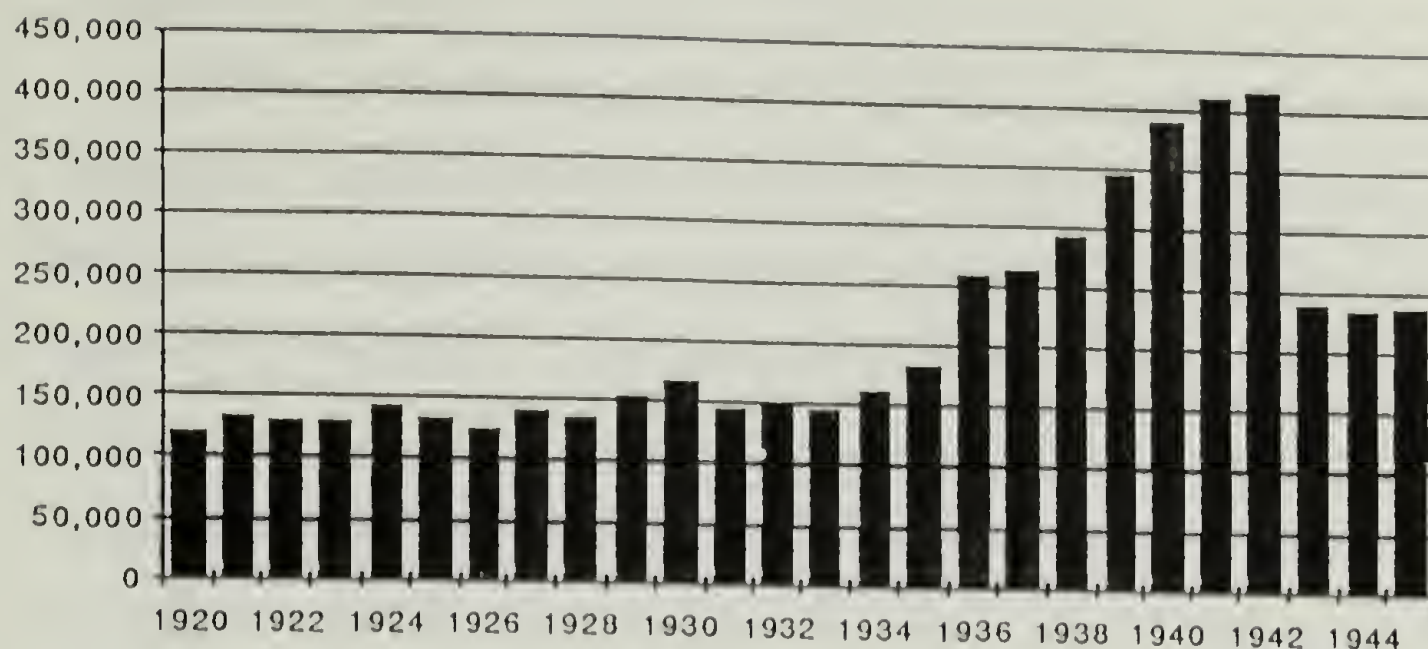
The impact of the Depression on Guatemala is intriguing. Although the downturn devastated the coffee economy, it actually stimulated domestic production of foodstuffs because imports became comparatively expensive. This had the effect of actually stimulating the national economy from about 1934 onwards (see the graph below). Thus the worst effects of the Depression had passed as early as 1933. The pressure on the middle class resulted from their links to government because state expenditures also plummeted as taxes from the coffee trade dried up. Since import and export duties supplied the government with around

90% of its revenues, the coffee slump spelled trouble for government employees. In the worst years of the Depression, Ubico "deferred" civil servant's salaries.

The middle class felt the greatest economic pressure, however, when World War II began. The wartime disruption of trade with Europe and the United States sent Guatemala's dependent economy into another tailspin. Production, which had expanded in the years following the collapse of 1929, plummeted, and the ensuing economic contraction set off a vicious bout of inflation which undermined the middle class' tenuous economic security. The chart below graphically captures the extent of the crisis brought on by World War II.²⁸

²⁸This chart shows the enigmatic reaction of Guatemala's economy to the Depression. After a brief downturn between 1929 and 1933, the economy experienced very substantial growth. This growth occurred mostly because of the expansion of production for domestic consumption. This economic enigma has yet to be explained satisfactorily by economic historians, but it provides interesting questions for further research.

Figure 1



Guatemalan Gross Domestic Product
1920-1945
(In thousands of dollars)²⁹

The economic problems brought on by World War II convinced the middle class that they needed political power to save themselves from falling back into the ranks of the lower class. The very economic forces which formed it, led the clase media to demand political power. The economic booms and busts also persuaded the bourgeoisie that they had to "modernize" Guatemala's economy. For generations they experienced, on a very personal level, the devastating price of dependency. When coffee prices fell or droughts hit,

²⁹Based on Victor Bulmer Thomas, The Political Economy of Central America since 1920 (Cambridge, 1987), Table A3, 312. The statistics are adjusted to take inflation into account.

their government jobs disappeared, their law practices atrophied, their teaching jobs were cut.³⁰

Ubico's restriction of political freedoms exacerbated tensions caused by the economic crisis. His repressive policies contributed to middle class mobilization behind populist demands. Just as the economy had expanded in the 1920s, so too had political freedoms. The fall of the dictator Estrada Cabrera in 1920 initiated a brief period of increased political freedom.³¹ This era of liberty ended, however, when Jorge Ubico seized power in 1931. Although he came to power promising reforms, as his term progressed it became clearer and clearer that he would tolerate no dissent and that he could not or would not deliver the promised reforms. He tightened his grip throughout the 1930s and increased harassment of the few opponents who dared to challenge him openly. By 1944 Ubico had complete control of

³⁰This scaling back of government expenditures during Ubico's reign testify to the middle class tenuous position. Although the economy had recovered by 1933, government expenditures remained well below 1928 levels for more than a decade. Ubico's fiscal restraint translated into lost jobs for many teachers and civil servants. For more on this see Kenneth Greib's Guatemalan Caudillo, the Regime Of Jorge Ubico, Guatemala 1931-1944 (athens, Ohio, 1979), 54.

³¹John Holger Petersen, "The Political Role of University Students in Guatemala, 1944-1968" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1969), 56.

the country, and the repression of his reign is still infamous in Guatemala today.

Ubico's spying, censorship, and harassment of opponents bothered the middle class which felt that such repression proved the backwardness of their country. During the political opening of the 1920s, many members of the clase media had become accustomed to freedom of expression and other civil rights. So Ubico's iron-fisted policies drove many to oppose him and the old ways of governing that he represented. By repressing his opponents, the dictator only fed the middle class' resentment.

A good example of middle class discontent arising out of Ubico's repression occurred at the University of San Carlos. During the 1920s, the predominantly middle class university students initiated a movement to press for institutional autonomy, student input into administrative matters, and curricula revisions. This effort reflected a similar drive throughout Latin America known as the University Reform Movement, which began at the Argentine University of Cordoba in 1918. The students had largely achieved their goals of autonomy and student co-government of San Carlos when Ubico seized power and reversed their gains.³² He soon placed the university under the direct

³²Ibid., 57.

control of the Ministry of Education and the students lost their input in administrative matters. This reversal bred resentment against Ubico in a vital sector of the middle class. The students' alienation assured that Ubico would have an articulate and influential opposition to contend with in the coming years.

Growing nationalism and anti-imperialist sentiment also fostered the growth of populism. National pride surfaced as a direct result of Guatemalans' increasing awareness of their country's underdevelopment and dependence.³³ An anonymous U.S. government observer in 1944 summarized the elements which fed these feelings when he stated,

The current factors of insecurity are related to a more general background of insecurities: a primitive, impoverished Indian population ruled by an absolute dictator, a national economy largely dependent on two export crops, coffee and bananas, and a general agricultural backwardness which

³³Dependency here is used as a descriptive term which refers to concrete structural conditions which govern the economic life of a country. It is a situation in which a country's development is tied to the export of a single crop for export to an extremely limited market. Economic growth within a dependent country is determined by external factors and not by domestic conditions. There are many other definitions of dependency, but this simple definition highlights the structural relationship of underdeveloped nations to their markets, and the overall impact on the economy. In the case of Guatemala, a strong dependency developed over time on the U.S. both as a market for Guatemala's goods and as a source of manufactured goods.

leaves four-fifths of the land totally uncultivated.³⁴

The agrarian oligarchy became the symbol of Guatemala's backwardness for the growing opposition and fueled middle class resentment. Their large estates, called fincas, dominated the economy, producing coffee and bananas for export and contributing over 95 percent of the total value of Guatemala's exports. Coffee alone, however, provided nearly three quarters of the country's export earnings, making it the linchpin of the entire economic order. The coffee oligarchy's complete control of the economy convinced a growing number of Guatemalans that thorough structural reforms were the only antidote to the nation's underdevelopment.

The banana industry, however, provided a base of operation for the single most important symbol of the nation's economic problems, the United Fruit Company. This company's activities, more than any other, fueled Guatemalan nationalism by providing a very concrete example of the nation's economic backwardness. UFCO, a Boston-based multinational corporation, had a de facto stranglehold over

³⁴U.S. State Department, "Current Factors of Insecurity in Guatemala" O.S.S./State Department Special Report, November 12, 1944, from O.S.S./State Department Intelligence and Research Reports; Latin America, 1941-1960 (Washington, 1975).

the economy which stemmed from its control (through subsidiaries and affiliated companies) of the nation's ports, railroads, shipping lines and electric company. Because of its dominant position in the economy, "La Frutera" ,as UFCO was called, could punish those who opposed it through freight rate manipulation or by denying them an outlet for their produce. Though they only commanded a small fraction of the economy, UFCO and its subsidiaries controlled Guatemala's economic development by directing the flow of commerce. The power wielded by the company distorted the nation's development by conditioning economic growth on corporate decisions made in a Boston board room, rather than on priorities set within the country.

Increasing reliance on the U.S. between 1931 and 1944 for both imports and trade outlets fuelled nationalism. The percentage of Guatemalan products consumed by North Americans grew steadily under Ubico and as a result dependence on U.S. markets deepened. In 1936 Guatemala sent just under 60 percent of its exports to the northern colossus. The disruption of links with Europe during World War II broke the old trade patterns, and by 1941, Guatemala relied on its northern neighbor to buy almost 80 percent of

its exports.³⁵ Guatemala also depended more and more on the gringos as a source for imports. The strengthening of dependent relations forced the Guatemalan middle class to question the benefits of such reliance on the greedy and expansionist yankees.

In the face of growing discontent, the Guatemalan bourgeoisie sought ways to articulate and legitimize its demands for structural reform and political liberalization. The global struggle between fascism and democracy provided the ideal rhetorical underpinnings for their challenge to oligarchic control. Roosevelt's progressive policies in the U.S. and the issuing of the Atlantic Charter clearly showed that democracy and economic opportunity were global concerns. The Guatemalan middle class clearly felt themselves part of a broader struggle against oppression.

The middle class also looked to Latin America's populist regimes when they sought a model for change. The reforms of Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas constituted an important frame of reference. Other leaders offered promising examples as well; Argentina's Perón, Peru's Haya de la Torre, and Brazil's Vargas each presented variations

³⁵John Adler, Eugene Schlesinger, and Ernest Olson, Public Finance and Economic Development in Guatemala (Stanford, 1952), 38. See also Kenneth Greib, Guatemalan Caudillo, the Regime of Jorge Ubico, Guatemala 1931-1944 (Athens, Ohio, 1979), 147.

on the populist theme. These leaders articulated programs which promised democracy and economic development. They showed that a distinctly Latin American political form did exist that could transform the continent.

Many Guatemalan politicians spent years exiled in Peru, Mexico, Chile, and Argentina, and they drew inspiration from the changes they witnessed there. Although no single populist formula existed, Latin American nations experimented with a variety of political forms which combined economic restructuring with the expansion of political participation. Exiled Guatemalans saw these reforms enacted in their host countries and decided that such models could address their own society's underdevelopment and dependency.

In 1944, the middle class seized power from the old oligarchy. The act of taking power and seeking solutions to the problems facing Guatemala temporarily welded together the opposition. Surging nationalism, demands for political liberalization, and the general crisis of the old oligarchic economic system combined to spur the development of populism in Guatemala. The middle class wanted power to control their own destinies and to develop the nation. Without the economic problems of the period and the repressive nature of

Ubico's regime, however, it is probable that Guatemala would never have experienced the populist challenge of 1944.

CHAPTER 4

THE REVOLUTION (May 1944 - March 1945)

The Revolution passed through five distinct phases between the overthrow of Ubico and the inauguration of Juan José Arévalo Bermejo, and each one of these phases illustrates a specific aspect of the populist nature of Guatemala's Revolution. The first phase lasted from the first tremors of social unrest in early May 1944 to Ubico's overthrow in July. The formation of an urban, multiclass political movement with middle class leadership defined this early period. The second phase lasted from General Ponce's appointment as president by Ubico in July until the return of Arévalo from Argentine exile in September. The formation of a number of political parties and labor unions characterized this phase. The expansive nature of the Revolution became clear in these months.

The broad and populist character of the Revolution did not take definitive shape until the third phase. Arévalo's return from exile marked the beginning of this phase which lasted until the armed revolt of October 20th, 1944. His charismatic leadership bound the coalition together in an open challenge to Ponce's plans to remain in power. The period from late October 1944 to February 1945 constitutes

the vital fourth phase of the Revolution because of the important reform carried out by the Junta which took over after Ponce's ouster.

The final phase lasted from February to March of 1945 as the revolutionaries drafted and debated a new constitution. They defined much of the nature of post-Ubico Guatemala through the constitutional changes they imposed. The expansion of political participation through the extension of suffrage characterized this period.

The promulgation of the Constitution of 1945 on March 13 and Arévalo's inauguration two days later signalled the triumph of the Revolution. The revolutionaries had succeeded in constructing the basis for a new socio-political order in Guatemala. From this point onwards the challenge became translating the vague promises of economic transformation and expanded political participation into reality.

A. The June Revolution (May - June 1944)

In May of 1944, full-fledged public opposition to Ubico emerged for the first time. The caudillo's opponents had planned and plotted secretly, but in early 1944 they began openly challenging the aging tyrant. During this period a broad-based coalition emerged which drew on all social

classes for it support. The middle class, however, provided decisive leadership, much as it had in other populist movements. The aspect of populism which emerged most clearly before June, 1944 therefore, was the urban, middle class leadership of a broad multi-class movement.

The overthrow of Maximilliano Hernandez Martínez, the dictator of neighboring El Salvador, in April by a student-led non-violent movement proved to be the event which set the Guatemalan opposition in motion.³⁶ The success of a non-violent movement in El Salvador led them to believe that they too could oppose dictatorship with passive resistance. The development of a peaceful strategy for opposing Ubico drew on similar plans employed against dictators in Bolivia, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Honduras, and El Salvador. Non-violence provided Ubico's opponents with the practical means for ridding themselves of tyranny.³⁷

³⁶For an interesting and careful historical study of the overthrow of Hernandez Martinez see Patricia Parkman's Nonviolent Insurrection in El Salvador; The fall of Maximilliano Hernandez Martinez (Tucson, 1988). This book is the most recent contribution to the literature on the topic, and it gives insights into the awareness of non-violence among the opposition in El Salvador and their use of passive resistance to bring down the dictator.

³⁷The idea of passive resistance was the basis of the early strategy against Ubico, and numerous State Department documents detail plans for non-violent resistance to the regime by the opposition. For an example of this see DOS 814.00/7-2444, FBI Report, June 22 1944, 12-23. See also Clamp, "The Overthrow of Jorge Ubico".

The overbearing presence of Ubico, with his arbitrary, personalistic rule, seemed archaic to the opposition. They desperately wanted to free Guatemala from caudillismo and bring it into the world of the Four Freedoms and the Atlantic Charter. The people of other Latin American nations had successfully rejected dictatorship and the Guatemalans wanted to do the same. Opposition sprang up throughout the country, but Guatemala City became the epicenter of the revolt against Ubiquismo. All of the major confrontations in this phase, and throughout the entire Revolution, took place in the capital.³⁸ The revolt, in essence, was an urban affair.

A group of forty-five prominent lawyers set off a chain reaction of open defiance to Ubico in May of 1944 when they requested the removal of a number of judges who held jurisdiction over the trials of the dictator's opponents.³⁹ In the hope of diffusing the situation, Ubico acquiesced and removed the judges. Within weeks teachers pressed the regime for wage and benefit increases.

³⁸The narrative of events in this section is drawn from several sources the most important of which are DOS 814.00/7-2444, FBI Report, June 22, 1944 and Christine Clamp "The Overthrow of Jorge Ubico".

³⁹ Silvert, Guatemala, 6.

The lawyers' success provided inspiration for students at the University who in turn provided leadership for the movement as a whole.⁴⁰ The University Students Association (Asociación de Estudiantes Universitaria, or AEU), founded in 1943, played a pivotal role.⁴¹ In addition to representing the university students, the AEU congress held the allegiance of a broad grouping of professionals and alumni. They spoke for hospital interns, court clerks, and teachers at primary and secondary schools because of these groups ties to the university. In the legal profession a strong link existed between the university and former law students because many junior partners in law firms continued taking classes as they worked.⁴² Students also filled the lower levels of the civil service. Because of their involvement in the professional community, the government, and the university the students were in a unique position to mobilize middle class discontent behind populist demands.

The students began slowly pressuring the dictator on June 3, by requesting the removal of Dr. Ramiro Galvez, the

⁴⁰For an excellent account by a participant which captures the role of the University students see Manuel Galich's Del panico al ataque, (Guatemala, 1977).

⁴¹Galich, Del panico al ataque, 225-230.

⁴²Silvert, Guatemala, 6. See also Galich, Del panico al ataque, 243-275.

dean of the Medical School and Dr. Oscar Espada, secretary of the Medical faculty. The students despised the two men because Ubico had appointed them to control the rebellious university. Galvez and Espada personified dictatorial rule within the university community.⁴³ To the surprise of everyone, particularly the universitarios, Ubico agreed to their removal and replaced them with individuals more acceptable to the students. This concession, another attempt to diffuse tension, opened the way for more student demands.⁴⁴

The students moved quickly to capitalize on their first success, and momentum began to gather. On June 7, students in the School of Pharmacy circulated petitions requesting the removal of their dean, Licenciado Soto, as well as demanding curricula reforms. They subsequently submitted the petitions to Ubico's Minister of Public Education, and the dean resigned.⁴⁵ Students in the School of Economic Science made a similar move when they demanded the resignation of the Secretary of their faculty, Licenciado

⁴³DOS 814.00/7-2444, FBI Report, July 22, 1944, 1.

⁴⁴Clamp, "The Overthrow of Jorge Ubico", 71.

⁴⁵DOS 814.00/7-2444, FBI Report, June 22 1944, 2.

Jiménez Pinto. Pinto also offered his resignation immediately.⁴⁶

All of Ubico's appointed officials at the University appeared to be doomed. On June 18, the Law students followed the lead of students in other Schools by requesting that Ubico remove Victor Mijanos, the newly appointed Dean of their faculty, who they claimed was unfit for the post because of his addiction to alcohol. They also demanded the removal of Carlos Girón Zirión, the Secretary of the Faculty whose close ties to Ubico made him undesirable. The students offered a list of prominent attorneys who would be acceptable and left the choice up to Ubico.⁴⁷

The law students raised the stakes on June 19 when they informed Ubico that they would boycott classes if he did not accede to their demands. The dictator informed a delegation of students that he would honor their request only if they would immediately resume attendance of classes. The fact that he met all of the demands reflected the student's influential position in the society as a whole. Peasants and worker were often shot or imprisoned simply for making demands, and their petitions were rarely met by the caudillo. The students, however, were the future doctors,

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

lawyers, teachers and civil servants which society relied on for vital services. They were also the sons and daughters of Guatemala's respectable middle class.

Ubico thought that he could neutralize the students' complaints by making some simple personnel changes. This miscalculation backfired when instead of being pacified, the universitarios got bolder and bolder. As they pressed their demands it became clear that Ubico could not satiate them without appearing weak.

The struggle escalated on June 21 when the AEU drafted a new set of demands. They insisted that Ubico release several imprisoned universitarios who had been held for six months without charges for their involvement in the University Students Association.⁴⁸ The group threatened to shut down the university and walk off their jobs as primary and secondary teachers within 24 hours if Ubico did not release their colleagues and institute reforms at the University.

The students called for university autonomy, a purge of political appointees at the school, increased input into university affairs and job security for professors. Interestingly, they included in the petition a request for an immediate wage increase for all members of the University

⁴⁸DOS 814.00/7-2444, FBI Report, June 22 1944, 5.

Students Association who taught at the primary or secondary level. Their demands reflected a clear self-interest. They did not demand any changes in the government; they articulated specific grievances of the university community. The students organized effectively to achieve their goals, but they had not yet come out in full rebellion against caudillismo.

Ubico recognized that the scope of the universitarios demands expanded each time he conceded. He understood that he had to stop them while they continued to address their own parochial concerns, while they remained isolated. Stopping the students, in the end, proved very difficult.

Ubico's decision to suspend constitutional guarantees on June 22, changed the nature of the protests.⁴⁹ His decree stated that such extreme measures were made necessary by

Nazi-fascist tendencies trying to obstruct maintenance of order so necessary at the present time because of the extraordinary circumstances created by the struggle which exists in the world in defense of democratic institutions and the freedom of nations.⁵⁰

⁴⁹El Imparcial, June 22, 1944.

⁵⁰814.00/7-2444, FBI report July 22, 1944, 6.

Ubico masked the suspension in anti-fascist rhetoric, but the point was clear; the students had gone too far. All national papers carried the decree, and throughout Guatemala City officials read it aloud with the accompaniment of martial music.

This decree was Ubico's greatest blunder. Even his closest advisers recognized the politically explosive nature of the student's demands. The professional community, and the middle class generally, supported the students and urged them on. The AEU responded quickly and effectively to Ubico's state of siege. Within hours, twelve public schools and all of the "national" schools called strikes. Soon the hospital interns, court employees, and university students walked away from their jobs. By June 24, every lawyer in Guatemala City had closed down their offices. Doctors refused to work at the hospital, although clinics remained open.⁵¹

This upheaval began to take its toll on Ubico and his associates. On June 23, the dictator convened the first cabinet meeting of his term. Prior to the strike, he had dealt with all major decisions himself. Because of the magnitude of the crisis, he now felt he needed to discuss the situation with his lackeys. Various ministers

⁵¹Ibid., 12.

immediately tendered their resignations, but Ubico refused to accept them. His secretary, Dr. Guillermo Cruz, made the point that they could show no weakness in the face of such volatile conditions, because any resignations might lead to demands for the resignation of Ubico himself.⁵² Cruz spoke these prophetic words even as the opposition grew stronger and more unified every day. The cabinet adjourned, resolved to hang on until the bitter end.

The next day, June 24, 1944, two lawyers, Jorge Serrano and Frederico Carbonell, presented Ubico with a petition, known as the Memorial de los 311, demanding the restoration of constitutional guarantees. The Memorial stated,

Guatemala cannot remove itself from the democratic imperatives of the era. It is impossible to frustrate with coercive means the uncontrollable impulses of that generous ideology which is being reaffirmed in the world's conscience by means of the bloodiest struggle between oppression and liberty.⁵³

The petition was a powerful testament to the broad multi-class nature of the Revolution. The list of signatories read like a Who's Who of Guatemala society. Members of the old elite, lawyers, industrialists, doctors, and even

⁵²Ibid., 14.

⁵³Roland Schneider, Communism in Guatemala, 1944-1954 (New York, 1959), 11.

Ubico's close friends signed. After the submission of this petition no one could doubt the breadth of the movement against Ubico.

The students' demands for reform at the University faded into the background as the opposition moved to define a broader agenda. The AEU, however, continued to provide leadership to the expanding movement. They organized two demonstrations on June 24. The first manifestation took place at noon with about 500 students and a large crowd of supporters. The group gathered in the central plaza in front of the National Palace and marched through the city. The police and the army did not molest the demonstrators and the crowd dispersed without incident.⁵⁴

At 6:00 p.m. that same day, the students mobilized for a second, larger demonstration with over 800 students and numerous supporters. The group formed a procession through the business district. They then systematically began to disrupt theatres, nightclubs, and restaurants, entering and forcing the patrons to leave. These actions effectively closed down the city center. Again the police and army did not harass the marchers.⁵⁵

⁵⁴DOS 814.00/7-2444, FBI Report, June 22 1944, 14.

⁵⁵Clamp, "The Overthrow of Jorge Ubico", 81.

That evening, however, Ubico resorted to the tactics he knew best to intimidate his opposition. He gave a group of police agents free reign in the city and as much alcohol as they could drink. The mob attacked the suburb of Colonia Ubico and disrupted a fair, destroyed a beer parlor, dance halls, and much other property. Looting and robbing, the mob proceeded into the central district of the capital. Another mob caused similar damage in the Avenida Bolívar district. Ubico used these "riots" by his own agents as a pretext for continuing the state of emergency.⁵⁶

The next day, June 25, another group of lawyers went directly to Ubico and demanded a repeal of the decree suspending civil liberties. They backed up their demand with the threat that the doctors and pharmacists would join the strike the following day. Ubico politely heard the jurists out and then dismissed them, making only vague promises and stressing the unsettled conditions which forced him to take such "regrettable" actions.⁵⁷

By 11:00 A.M. the opposition gathered again in the central plaza and once again marched through the business district. Ubico, however, decided to up the ante. Police,

⁵⁶Silvert, Guatemala, 6, and DOS 814.00/7-2444, FBI Report, June 22 1944, 16-19.

⁵⁷DOS 814.00/7-2444, FBI Report, June 22 1944, 20.

army and cavalry units dispersed the crowds using corrosive chemical bombs and truncheons.⁵⁸ Several people received serious burns from the chemicals and shrapnel wounds from the bombs.

In response to the violence of the morning demonstration, the opposition decided that only women should march that evening, presuming that Ubico would not fire on them.⁵⁹ As described in the introduction, a group of about 60 women gathered and marched through the city dressed in black and reciting the rosary.⁶⁰ Ubico, however, could not allow such an open challenge to his authority and he ordered troops to fire on the procession. Two women died in the street and stray bullets wounded 80 others.⁶¹ The movement now had martyrs, and the demands changed from humble requests for their rights to forceful calls for Ubico's resignation and a thorough transformation of Guatemalan society.⁶²

The strike spread further, and people waited for Ubico's response. An outraged populace flooded the National

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Christine Anne Clamp "The Overthrow of Jorge Ubico", 89.

⁶⁰Silvert, Guatemala, 6, and DOS 814.00/7-2444, FBI Report, June 22 1944, 20.

⁶¹DOS 814.00/9-2944, Boaz Long to Hull, June 25, 1944.

⁶²DOS 814.00/7-2444, FBI Report, July 24, 1944.

Palace with petitions, but the demonstrations ceased as the entire nation waited to see how Ubico would respond.

In the ensuing days, however, the opposition began pressuring Ubico's associates to convince him to resign or to resign in protest themselves. Ernesto Viteri y Bertrand and his law partner Eugenio Silva y Pena convinced Ubico's chief of police, Colonel David Ordoñez to talk to the aging dictator. Ubico fired Ordoñez on the spot for suggesting that he resign.⁶³ The opposition also convinced the Minister of Finance, José Gonzales to resign.⁶⁴

On June 29, 1944, Ubico resigned himself. The 66 year old caudillo had decided in April that if events got out of control he would rather leave peacefully than "with blood on his hands."⁶⁵ Feeling betrayed by the number of his close friends who had signed the Memorial five days earlier and wanting to avoid further bloodshed, Ubico retired to his coffee finca near the town of Antigua.⁶⁶

Ubico chose General Frederico Ponce Vaides to form a military triumvirate with Generals Eduardo Villagran Ariza and Buenaventura Piñeda. The selection process reveals how

⁶³Clamp, "The Overthrow of Jorge Ubico", 97.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵DOS 814.00/7-144, Long to State, July 1, 1944.

⁶⁶Grieb, Guatemalan Caudillo, 274.

little it mattered who specifically replaced the dictator. Throughout his regime, the generals who did not hold regular commands gathered daily at the National Palace to serve as errand boys and troubleshooters for the dictator. The day Ubico decided to resign, there were only three retired generals in his outer office due to the early hour. He appointed them to be the members of the troika which would run the country because they happened to be present at the right time, not because they were close associates or particularly competent.⁶⁷ These three generals formed the public face of the transitional government which was, in the end, a government of all of Ubico's generals. They represented Ubiquismo without Ubico.

The resignation of Ubico had come about because of the rapid formation of a broad-based, urban movement which mobilized to demand political change. The students had been forced by events to move beyond their parochial demands and lead a multi-class political movement against the dictatorship and in favor of reform. During the next phases of this populist revolution, the middle class leadership faced the challenge of transforming opposition to Ubico into

⁶⁷Kenneth Greib, "The Guatemalan Military and the Revolution of 1944" The Americas, 32:4 (April 1976), 532.

a coherent political movement for structural changes in Guatemala's socio-economic system.

B. The Ponce Interregnum
(July - September 1944)

The appointment of Ubico's triumvirate marked the beginning of the next phase of the Revolution, the battle over the fate of Post-Ubico Guatemala. Two processes characterized this phase. First, activists founded the political parties and labor unions which provided the base of support for the populist coalition which would rule the country for the following decade. And the second was the long struggle between the triumvirate and the opposition for power. During this time the middle class leadership of the movement had to articulate its vision of a new Guatemala and the vague outlines of the populist reforms they proposed took shape. In short, this period witnessed the expansion of political activity and the emergence of a unified populist opposition with a nebulous political agenda. The unification took place as the many political parties formed a broad electoral front behind the candidacy of Juan José Arévalo to oust Ponce and the triumvirate from power.

Political programs, however, were the furthest thing from the mind of Guatemalans as news of Ubico's resignation swept through the city. Thousands flooded into the streets

to celebrate.⁶⁸ They had brought down the tyrant. The triumvirate removed all troops from the city and let the people celebrate. Only later would it become clear that Ponce intended to maintain Ubico's system more or less intact with a new dictator at the helm.

In the tumultuous days following Ubico's departure, the citizens of the city tested the limits of their new freedom. When the National Assembly convened on the 4th of July, crowds packed the galleries, determined to make their voices heard. The crowd's disruptive enthusiasm forced the old Ubiquista Assembly to adjourn after accepting Ubico's resignation. The police and army moved in and cleared the Assembly hall.⁶⁹ In a closed session, the lawmakers, shaken by the anarchy in their chamber, appointed Ponce the Provisional President of Guatemala, with police and troops protecting them from "the forces of disorder."

The period from Ponce's appointment in early July to the return of Arévalo in early September provided the opposition with the opportunity to forge coalitions and political parties. Ponce had announced that election would be held in November to elect a new president. The opposition began preparations immediately.

⁶⁸El Imparcial, July 4, 1944.

⁶⁹DOS 814.00/7-444, FBI Report, July 4, 1944, 7.

The National Renovation Party (Partido Renovacion Nacional, referred to throughout as the RN) became the first opposition party when it formed on the same day that Ubico resigned. It played a major role in the months to come and throughout the Revolution. Because intellectuals and professionals made up the bulk of its members, however, the RN remained a relatively small party. The Popular Liberating Front (Frente Popular Libertadora, or FPL), the other major revolutionary party, also formally organized itself during this phase. Students and young professionals who had links to the University formed the majority of the FPL's membership. The RN and FPL soon began unifying behind the candidacy of Dr. Juan José Arévalo Bermejo, an unassuming pedagogue who became the focus of hopes for a new Guatemala. Arévalo rapidly emerged as the opposition's candidate of choice because of his strong appeal with the University students, who were the heart and soul of the movement.

Arévalo's background helped him garner support among a population that knew very little about him. Born in 1904 in Santa Rosa province, the future president was of rural middle class origin. His father owned and worked a small

farm and his mother taught in a local school.⁷⁰ Because of his mother's connections he gained entry to the renowned Pamplona Normal School from the age of six and from then on received instruction at the nation's best schools in Guatemala City. In 1927, Arévalo received Guatemala's most prestigious scholarship for study abroad, and spent the next seven years in Argentina pursuing a doctorate in education, which he completed in 1934.

In 1934, he returned to Guatemala and quickly entered the civil service. Ubico appointed him Subsecretary for Public Education, a post he held for two years before becoming disillusioned with the caudillo's repressive rule. Arévalo felt sure the dictator would not allow him an opportunity to try his ideas for educational reform, so he chose voluntary exile rather than the constant frustration of remaining in Guatemala. He decided to return to Argentina where he worked as a Professor of Education at the University of Tucumán. He remained there until the fall of

⁷⁰The following section on Arevalo's background is based on an extensive commentary by the U.S. Ambassador to Argentina. This document was not given a number in the DOS microfilm series, but it is referred to as "Despatch no. 17049, dated January 19th, 1945 from American Embassy, Buenos Aires entitled 'Antecedents of Juan José Arévalo, President elect of Guatemala'". Additional information is drawn from DOS 814.00/10-3044, "Confidential Report #1355-55, Major Victor Rose, Assistant Military Attache", October 30, 1944.

1944 when he travelled home once again to his native land to become the opposition's candidate for the presidency.

Arévalo's profession, background, and reputation combined to make him the ideal person to bind together the disparate elements of the revolutionary coalition. The students respected him because he was an educator, and the faculty knew of him through his pedagogical writings. His rural, middle class background gave him an understanding of the problems of both urban and rural communities. The fact that he had no ties to either the old landed oligarchy or the military also worked in his favor. Guatemalan politics had always been dominated by these two groups, and the revolutionaries sought a complete outsider to the political system, where even many opposition figures had been compromised. Because of these factors and because of his credentials as a fervent advocate of democracy, Arévalo became the standard bearer of the opposition by mid-summer of 1944, with the RN and FPL cooperating extensively to support his candidacy. This informal coalition later became the Frente Unidos de Partidos Politicos Arevalista (The United Front of Arevalist Political Parties or FUPPA).⁷¹

The organization of labor unions paralleled the formation of political parties during Ponce's reign.

⁷¹DOS 814.00/1-845, Long to Hull, January 8th, 1945.

Although only two unions actually formed with legal recognition, numerous guilds, mutual aid societies and worker's groups coalesced in the summer of 1944. The railway workers formed the first union in the weeks following Ubico's fall. In early July, they voted to change their mutual aid society into a full-fledged union, the Sindicato de Accion y Mejoramiento Ferrocarrilero (known as SAMF). SAMF became one of the strongest unions in Guatemala and, within a year, had roughly 5,000 members.⁷² The union proved to be a vital force in the nascent Guatemalan labor movement.⁷³

Another important step for Guatemala's union movement came when the teachers also began organizing. In July, 1944, educators laid the foundation for the Sindicato de Trabajadores en Educación de Guatemala (known as STEG). Although the union did not officially form until January 1945, the teachers recruited members and advocated their interests throughout this period.

In the nine months after SAMF and the teacher's group organized no less than 15 other unions formed. Carpenters, masons, tailors, construction workers, and cobblers all set

⁷²DOS 814.504/5-145, Long to State, January 1st, 1945

⁷³Edwin Bishop, "The Guatemalan Labor Movement, 1944-1959" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1959), 9.

up unions between July 1944 and May 1945. These groups represented more than 43,000 workers.⁷⁴ Not one union had existed prior to the fall of Ubico. The unions became an effective political force and joined the opposition to Ponce's plans to remain in power. Through the unions, many groups of workers gained a political voice.

The unions and the two major political parties coalesced into a strong unified movement in this period. The need to clearly articulate a political vision forced the opposition to begin formulating a platform. The workers began discussing labor rights; teachers called for an all out effort to eradicate illiteracy; lawyers called for political reforms, and together they called for a restructuring of the old order. The vague outlines of the populist reforms which would be carried out in the following years emerged in this period. The input of diverse social sectors combined into a disparate and sometimes jumbled vision of the future, but in the months that followed the revolutionaries would slowly define their platform, thereby defining the nature and extent of reform.

⁷⁴DOS 814.504/5145, Long to State, May 1, 1945.

C. Arévalo's Return
(September - October 1944)

Arévalo's return from exile in Argentina on September 3, 1944 changed the atmosphere dramatically. The opposition now had a leader to rally behind. In this period, the former educator bound the diverse elements of the revolutionary coalition together with his increasingly charismatic leadership. Without the emergence of a personalistic leader with charisma, Guatemala's Revolution could not have become a populist movement in the fullest sense of the word. After his return, Arévalo was able to carry his message to the people. And he went from being a writer to being a political leader. Arévalo's ideology became the ideology of the opposition as a whole. Peru had Aprismo, Argentina had Peronismo, and now Guatemala had its own populist doctrine, Arévalismo.

On his arrival at Guatemala City's Aurora airport, Arévalo received an ecstatic welcome from thousands of supporters.⁷⁵ A mass of wellwishers flooded into the streets of the city to see the motorcade pass in the largest demonstrations since the overthrow of Ubico. It took his car hours to reach the city center where an huge rally

⁷⁵El Imparcial, September 4th, 1944.

greeted him. The message was clear: Arévalo would be a formidable political opponent.⁷⁶

The idealistic former teacher had become a symbol of democratic change, but he faced the arduous task of leading the opposition to electoral victory. He was in the unusual position of heading a group he did not know, in a country he had not lived in for a decade. His greatest challenge was to translate his popularity as an anonymous exile into coherent political support for his campaign.

Arévalo struggled in the early months to define his ideas which he called "spiritual socialism."⁷⁷ In explaining this vague set of principles, he stressed more than anything the things they were not. He rejected materialist socialism and capitalism, seeking a "third way," a unique solution to Guatemala's problems. Arévalo attempted to formulate an alternative path to development, just as every other Latin American populist leader had done.

⁷⁶One of the best sources on Arevalo and the events of this period can be found in his autobiographical work El Candidato Blanco y el Huracan (Guatemala, 1984).

⁷⁷Arévalo's writings are extensive. For his early works see his Escritos politicos (Guatemala, 1945) which he wrote in exile in the early 1940s. Later essays from the period 1944-1947 are collected in his Discursos en la presidencia (Guatemala, 1948). One of the most interesting selection of his writings are in his autobiographical memoir on this period, El candidato blanco y el huracan, 1944-1945 (Guatemala, 1984).

In explaining "spiritual socialism," Arévalo stressed dignity, social good, and equality of opportunity. In his earliest writings from exile he declared -

We are socialists because we live in the twentieth century. But we are not materialist socialists. We do not believe that man is primarily a stomach. We believe that man is above all a will for dignity....Our socialism does not, therefore, aim at an ingenious distribution of material goods, of the stupid economic equalization of men who are economically different. Our socialism aims at liberating men psychologically, guaranteeing to all the psychological and spiritual integrity denied by conservatism and liberalism.⁷⁸

His ideas did not change appreciably in the intervening years between exile and his return home.⁷⁹ In February of 1945 during a speech he emphasized dignity again. He stated:

A few days ago, the railway workers' organization proclaimed a general strike which threatened to be a serious social and political problem; but these boys were not asking for higher salaries; but on the contrary, they were putting their economic position in danger in their effort to effect the expulsion from the company of a chief who took pleasure in crushing the dignity of Guatemalan workers. They were fighting therefore for

⁷⁸Quoted in Schneider, Communism in Guatemala, 17.

⁷⁹An interesting series of U.S. documents explain Arévalo's ideas as Americans tried to understand what his popularity would mean for U.S. Guatemalan relations. See DOS 814.00/7-1444, Long to Hull, July 14, 1944, DOS 814.00/8-2144, Long to Hull, August 21, 1944, DOS 814.00/8-2544, Long to Hull, August 21, 1944, and DOS 814.00/9-1444, Long to Hull, September 1, 1944.

dignity, and dignity is a spiritual quality and not a material quality.⁸⁰

With such declarations Arévalo gained more and more support from workers and peasants unaccustomed to hearing a presidential candidate discuss their concerns. He spoke of changing the system of land tenure, providing health care to the poor and enforcing labor laws to protect them. Although only a small number of universitarios and lawyers knew of him in July, by early October Arévalo had extended his support into new social sectors. By mid-October, he had garnered far more support than any other candidate.⁸¹

Arévalo showed that he could translate a vague body of political ideals into concrete support for his candidacy in these months. What had been a broad movement without any single leader now had an individual to draw them together. This task was simplified by the fact that Arévalo's political ideals were somewhat amorphous. In essence, by remaining vague about the specifics of reform, he became all things to all people, personifying the aspirations of all sectors of the coalition. In this respect, Arévalo typified Latin American populist leaders, and the instant support he

⁸⁰DOS 814.011/2-1645, Long to Hull, February 16th, 1945.

⁸¹Greib, "The Guatemalan Military and the Revolution of 1944," 535.

received from the populace on his return transformed him into the leader which the movement so desperately needed.

The interesting fact here is that Arévalo became the leader of a movement which had already coalesced. The opposition, in essence, created Arévalo as a charismatic leader. Although he proved an articulate and able leader, he could never have pulled the revolutionary coalition together simply on the basis of his guile and personal appeal. He became the spokesman for the movement and then began to exert more and more influence as time went on. In some ways, Arévalo is a classic case of a man created by circumstance who rose to the challenge. Luckily for the revolutionaries, he proved a very canny politician, because in the months after his return it took strong leadership to keep them unified as Ponce increased the pressure on them in the months to come.

Tensions mounted between the Arévalistas and the government as it became clearer and clearer that the general intended to run for president himself. Ponce even approached the Assembly to see if it would give him the necessary constitutional amendment to make his election legal. Ponce raised the stakes in late August and early September when he began to harass the opposition parties and labor unions. Hundreds of Indians were brought in from the

rural areas for independence day celebrations on September 15th.⁸² The peasants, armed with clubs and machetes marched through the capital on the appointed day with pictures of Ponce pinned to their shirts. The night before, the police had used them to disperse an opposition meeting.⁸³ The inhabitants of the city understood that if they resisted Ponce's plans to become president, he would make them pay dearly. The repression paralyzed the opposition.⁸⁴

On October 1st, Ponce's thugs shot Alejandro Cordova, the editor of El Imparcial, Guatemala's largest daily newspaper.⁸⁵ Cordova had been an outspoken critic of the government since the last days of Ubico. He had joined the opposition as middle and even upper class disenchantment with Ubico grew, and by October he had become one of the most effective opponents of Ponce's attempts to remain in power. Cordova's death signalled that the regime would stop at nothing to remain in power.

⁸²El Imparcial, September 15th - 17th, 1944. See also Kenneth Greib, "The Guatemalan Military and the Revolution of 1944", 538.

⁸³Diario de Guatemala, September 16th, 1944.

⁸⁴Greib, "The Guatemalan Military in the Revolution of 1944", 538. See also DOS 814.00/9-2244, Long to State, September 22, 1944.

⁸⁵Diario de Centro America, October 3rd, 1944. El Imparcial, October 3-6, 1944.

Ponce increased the pressure further in an effort to force the opposition to accept his presidential ambitions. He formed a new secret police to deal with the opposition and began to arrest student leaders.⁸⁶ The new dictator also closed down a number of newspapers and radio stations and forced others to "voluntarily" suspend operations.⁸⁷ He went so far as to buy up all of the newsprint paper stocks so that the opposition could not clandestinely publish papers.⁸⁸ It became more and more difficult for Arévalo's supporters to hold meetings as the government hounded them.

While he repressed the opposition, Ponce worked to convince the Legislative Assembly to approve his candidacy in spite of constitutional prohibitions. Ponce's secretary tried to convince the members to vote for the necessary amendment. He summoned them in groups of four and told them that if they did not approve the changes, things could get complicated for them.⁸⁹ Ponce's men employed similar tactics throughout the country, pressuring local

⁸⁶DOS 814.00/9-1944, Affield to State, September 19, 1944.

⁸⁷Greib, "The Guatemalan Military and the Revolution of 1944", 538.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹DOS 814.00/10-1344, Long to State, October 13, 1944.

functionaries and prominent families to sign a declaration in favor of Ponce's candidacy.⁹⁰

In this tense atmosphere, elections were held on October 13-15 for Congressional seats left vacant by oligarchs unwilling to face the fury of the populace. William Affield, the U.S. Chargé d'affaires, wrote sarcastically that Ponce's slate "won by a handsome, not to say fantastic margin garnering 48,530 votes out of a total of 44,571."⁹¹ The blatant fraud galvanized the opposition, so that the only question became how and when to rid the country of Ponce.

Three days after the polling ended, rumblings of revolt began. The garrisons in Esquintla and Quetzaltenango mutinied. Led by junior officers, the garrisons decided to challenge Ponce openly. These young officers provided a key element in the challenge to Ponce's plans to remain in power.⁹² They had carefully organized themselves, and by October they were ready to act. Their discontent centered on several issues related to their status and the state of the military under the Ubiquista system, which Ponce had

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Greib, Guatemalan Caudillo, 277.

⁹²The best source on this aspect of the Revolution is Kenneth Greib's Article, "The Guatemalan Military and the Revolution of 1944."

kept intact. Perhaps the most important issue was "servilismo," or the lack of professionalism within the military. The young officers objected to the fact that their institution had been reduced to simply another arena for Ubico and Ponce to reward those who followed orders blindly. The young officers listed their reasons for rebellion in an article in the army's magazine, Revista Militar. They pointed to:

- The appointment of incompetent and ineffective generals,
- Ubico's fear of the young officers,
- The appointment of an illiterate general to the position of Secretary of War because of his usefulness to Ubico,
- Use of troops by high officials to work on private projects
- Ponce's rule violated the constitution and the will of the people.⁹³

The professionalism of American officers stationed in Guatemala also inspired them. The contrast between themselves and the junior officers in the American forces made them feel the indignity of Ubico's and Ponce's policies all the more intensely. The officers who plotted against Ponce felt that the affronts committed against the institution of the army had to be addressed, and that they had a duty to defend the constitutional order.

⁹³"Por que actuó el ejército", Revista Militar, 1:2 (Jan./Feb. 1945).

The young officers had been working surreptitiously with the civilians for months, and in October they prepared to act. During the summer, civilians had made contact with disgruntled officers within the army. The leadership of the military faction came from Captain Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán, former director of the Escuela Politécnica, and, Major Francisco Javier Arana, commander of elite Guardia de Honor. Arana joined the conspiracy just three weeks before the revolt.⁹⁴ Jorge Toriello, a well respected businessman from Guatemala City, served as liaison between the young officers and the opposition. These three men provided the leadership of the revolt which finally ousted Ponce.

On the pretense of visiting his wife's family, Arbenz travelled to El Salvador and met with Toriello who was in San Salvador "on business." At this meeting Arbenz and Toriello finalized plans for an armed revolt. Arana remained in Guatemala to avoid arousing suspicion and worked to recruit other officers. His support was the crucial factor in the success of the revolt because of his positions as the head of the elite Honor Guard and as a tank commander.⁹⁵ The Honor Guard's support proved decisive since Ponce thought of Arana and the Guard as a bulwark

⁹⁴Silvert, Guatemala: A Study in Government, 8.

⁹⁵Ibid., 8.

against any rebellion and had entrusted them with all of the Government's tanks and most of the heavy armaments. When Arana joined the movement, he brought the firepower necessary to bring Ponce to his knees.

While Arbenz may have been a junior partner in respect to armaments, his role as chief officer at the Escuela Politécnica, Guatemala's West Point, had gained him the respect of the best trained and most progressive army officers. Arbenz translated this respect into support from junior officers around the country.⁹⁶ This support proved decisive during the revolt as these officers imprisoned their commanders and assured that the regime would get no support from outlying garrisons.

The conspirators made the final decision to revolt on October 15th, with most of the civilian leaders of the opposition in hiding due to Ponce's crackdown. In the presence of only a few officers, Arana and Arbenz planned a swift stroke. Shortly after 1:00 A.M. on October 20, the Honor Guard, led by Arana, began firing on the other forts in the city. The rebels had distributed arms to students and workers willing to fight to augment the number of rebel troops. With control of the country's twelve tanks and the

⁹⁶Greib, "The Guatemalan Military and the Revolution of 1944," 541.

support of these armed students and workers, the rebels rapidly subdued the two loyal garrisons in heavy fighting. A barrage of artillery fire from the Honor Guard's barracks fired at the main government fortification struck the ammunition magazine and brought the fighting there to a mercifully swift end.⁹⁷

By 4:00 a.m. that morning, Ponce agreed to meet with the rebels, but the fighting continued. The diplomatic corps soon became involved in brokering a settlement, and by noon the fighting stopped.⁹⁸ Ponce and his lackeys agreed to leave the country as long as their families and property were respected. In a single stroke the rebels had brought down the last vestiges of Liberal rule and had finally forced Ubico to leave the country. By October 22, they had restored order throughout the country and immediately organized the Revolutionary Junta, made up of Arana, Arbenz and Toriello as a transitional government until Arévalo could take office.

In the months following Arévalo's return from exile conditions in Guatemala changed decisively. The civilians in the Arevalista parties had forged an alliance with young

⁹⁷Ibid., 541.

⁹⁸DOS 814.00/10-2344, Affeild to Hull, November 7, 1944 and DOS 814.00/10-2044, John D. Erwin(U.S. Ambassador to Honduras) to Hull, October 20, 1944.

military officers who pledged to help them gain power. Now, the coalition had expanded to included discontented factions of the military. Just as the support of the military ensured the success of populist challenges to the old order in Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Mexico, the recruitment of Guatemala's young officers helped the movement achieve its goal of ousting Ponce.

Arévalo also helped the movement realize that goal. His appeal broadened the opposition and cemented together the various factions at a crucial time. He offered the movement against Ubico and Ponce the charismatic leader it needed and in the process transformed it into a movement in support of Arévalismo. This shift proved a decisive turning point in the development of populism in Guatemala as personalism and charismatic leadership, key elements of populism, emerged definitively. From this point forward a broad movement with effective charismatic leadership would remain a central fact of Guatemalan political life.

D. Consolidation of the Revolution (November 1944 - January 1945)

The overthrow of Ponce put an end to the old generals' dreams of Ubiquismo without Ubico. In the words of political scientist Kalman Silvert, the revolt signified "a thunder clap break with the past." During the subsequent

months the Revolutionary Junta outlined key aspects of a new constitutional order. Arbenz, Arana, and Toriello set the ground rules for change with a flurry of decrees that they began issuing less than a week after they took power.

As the first government of the Revolution, the Junta set in motion the machinery of reform. They achieved a sort of Revolution by decree between October of 1944 and March of 1945. Although the constitution embodied the ideals of the Revolution, the Junta set the tone for all the reforms that followed. Their decrees sent a clear signal that there would be thorough reforms to restructure the nation's political life, but that economic reform would come later, perhaps much later. They tackled many problems during this period and did everything from confiscate Ubico's property to outline who could vote. Between the October Revolution and late November, most of the Junta's decrees addressed the scheduling of elections and the punishments that should be meted out to Ubico and his associates. Their first decree dissolved Ubico's Assembly and called for new elections. Next they carefully removed Ubico's associates from high ranking positions and "intervened" his property.⁹⁹

In this early period the Junta sought to assuage the concerns of the indigenous population with a series of

⁹⁹DOS 814.00/1-444, Long to Hull, January 4, 1944,

decrees. Ponce had told the Indians that the revolutionaries would take their land and rape their women, so the Junta decided to move quickly to demonstrate their good will.¹⁰⁰ On October 31, they abolished the notorious forced labor drafts for road construction, disbanded the infamous vagrancy courts, and restricted the power of finca owners. With these decrees the Junta changed the legal relationship between the Native Americans and the rest of society. Concretely this meant that for the first time in their memory, the Native Americans would not have to neglect their crops to build roads as they had for so many years.¹⁰¹

The Junta also granted the university community the autonomy they had sought for so long. In Decree 12 issued on November 12, 1944, the University of San Carlos received the independence from government interference that students had agitated for since 1920. The Junta also guaranteed the University 100,000 quetzales and the proceeds from a new alcohol tax for operating expenses.

On November 28, 1944, the Junta issued Decree 17, its single most important decree, which declared the fundamental principles of the Revolution. This decree defined the

¹⁰⁰DOS 814.2-1444, Long to State, February 16, 1945.

¹⁰¹DOS 814.00/1-4444, Long to Hull, January 4, 1944.

parameters of law and governance for years to come. The decree stated in the preamble that the Junta guaranteed

the just desires of the people to attain effective political, economic, and religious liberty and a state of social well-being consistent with the demands of the times and the postulates of the revolution.¹⁰²

The decree went on to outline the ten principles of the revolution

I. Decentralization of powers of the executive and effective separation of powers of the State.

II. Abolition of the designates to the Presidency and substitution of them by a Vice President.

III. Alternation in the Executive Power, abolishing reelection and recognizing the right of the people to rebel when reelection is attempted.

IV. New constitution and organization of the army
...

V. Democratic organization of the municipalities by means of popular election of their members.

VI. Effective autonomy of the Judiciary.

VII. Autonomy for the National University.

VIII. Constitutional recognition of political parties organized in conformity with the law, and representation of minorities in the popular electoral colleges.

IX. Obligatory suffrage and secret vote for the literate man. Obligatory suffrage and public vote for the illiterate man, limiting its exercise to municipal elections. Recognition of the

¹⁰²DOS 814.00/11-3044, Long to State, November 30, 1944.

citizenship of the women prepared to exercise it.

X. Effective administrative probity.¹⁰³

The striking feature of this decree is its breadth and scope. It establishes by fiat a number of key provisions normally dictated by the constitution of a nation. In a single decree, the Junta swept away a whole body of law and precedent.

Arbenz, Toriello, and Arana also initiated a series of minor reforms which indicated the direction they intended to take the Revolution. They increased government pensions in an attempt to curb corruption and garner support from the bureaucracy. They also vowed to wipe out illiteracy and increased taxation of the wealthy. The Junta set the limits of reform and defined the questions on the Constituent Assembly's schedule. Despite undemocratic methods, they gained widespread respect for revamping the political structure and setting the agenda for reform. In November, 1944 the U.S. Ambassador, Boaz Long, commented in an assessment of the Junta's achievements, that

the attitude now displayed by the Revolutionary Government tends to convince even the most cynical that its present motives are as public-spirited as any manifestation that has appeared in Guatemalan

¹⁰³Translated in DOS 814.00/11-3044, Long to State, November 30, 1944.

life within memory. Up to the present, the Revolution of October 20 seems to be about as pure a 'democratic' revolution as Thomas Jefferson could have imagined in theory - overthrowing a 'dictator' and taking strides towards a progressive Constitution.¹⁰⁴

As the Junta enacted their reforms, the student faction of the Arevalista coalition pressured them to call elections for a new Legislative Assembly. In the light of the position as the leadership of the civilian opposition, the universitarios expected to win most of the seats in the new Congress if they capitalized on their popularity. They also distrusted the military members of the junta. The universitarios wanted control of the National Assembly to check any machinations on the part of the military.¹⁰⁵

The difficulties over the calling of the new Legislative Assembly in November typified the jockeying between the civilian opposition and the Junta. The election of the Assembly was supposed to lead to the appointment of an interim president to discharge all executive functions until a new president could be elected. To extract concessions from the civilians, Arana and Arbenz refused to issue an official decree calling the Assembly into order.

¹⁰⁴DOS 814.00/11-3044, Long to State, November 30, 1944.

¹⁰⁵Silvert, Guatemala, 9.

In negotiations that followed the civilians offered to allow the Junta ruling authority until the inauguration of the new president. They also offered Arana the position of Minister of War, effectively giving him control over the military, regardless of who took power. On November 28, after much maneuvering, the Junta called the Legislative Assembly into session with Decree 17. The decree also laid out the principles of the Revolution and set the guidelines for the transition to civilian rule.¹⁰⁶

In the negotiations over the calling of the Assembly, the civilians gave the Army a new, more favorable statute that redefined the relationship between the military and the Government. They granted the Army substantial autonomy from the office of the president. This reorganization was a direct consequence of concerns over servilismo and professionalism which had motivated the officers to revolt in the first place. Arana and Arbenz wanted to create a professional army which was free to develop without the interference of civilians. The reorganization decree read;

... A new constitution and organization of the Army which shall effectively guarantee its apolitical position and permit it to discharge the functions for which it was organized, that of defending liberty, the Constitution, and the national integrity, and creating within the new organization effective guarantees for its members,

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 9.

so that their profession may rest on a solid base which cannot be destroyed at the caprice of the executive, who shall have no voice in the technical or professional organization of the institution.¹⁰⁷

The tension between the Junta and the civilians dissipated, and both turned their attention to more pressing matters. Within two weeks the Junta called presidential elections for December 17-19, and one week later the Assembly set the Constituent Assembly elections for December 28-30.

Arévalo won handily as the candidate of the United Front of Arevalist Political Parties (Frente Unidos de Partidos Politicos Arevalista, or FUPPA). Garnering 85% of the votes, he won the freest election in the nation's tortured political history. His defeat of parties led by Adrian Recinos (Ubico's Ambassador to the U.S.) and Gregorio Díaz (Ubico's Ambassador to Ecuador), signalled a definitive break with the past. Now Arévalo had to maintain the momentum which had brought him to power and preserve the FUPPA's fragile unity in the difficult transitional period to follow.

FUPPA's success, however, depended on the mediating role of Arbenz, Arana and Toriello. The Junta contributed to the revolutionary consolidation not only by their steady stream of reforms but, more importantly, by guaranteeing

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 10.

free elections. By doing this they provided a solid foundation for the establishment of a stable government capable of carrying out the reforms the nation so desperately needed.

With the FUPPA's electoral victory in late 1944 and early 1945, Guatemala's populist revolutionaries had consolidated and legitimized their claim to national leadership. After Ponce's fall the Arévalista parties mobilized massive popular support into a strong mandate for change. Never had a single party legally obtained such a resounding victory. Never again would Guatemalan society be in such agreement. This period marked the zenith of the revolutionary coalition's unity. They had repudiated the past, now they faced the divisive task of constructing the future.

E. The Constitution (January - March 1945)

When the process of drafting the Constitution began in early January, 1945 the initiative shifted from the three man Junta to the Constituent Assembly. The new constitution codified the spirit of the Junta's reforms and became the revolutionaries' blueprint for a new Guatemala. The ideals expressed in the new Constitution reveal the populist nature

of the Revolution and the transforming vision of the coalition which ruled the country for the next decade.

Also the drafting of the constitution revealed the tensions within the revolutionary coalition and the limits to reform. The members of the drafting bodies revealed biases and prejudices which had remained latent until this point. The most obvious of these revealed themselves in the discussions about who could become a citizen, and by extension who deserved a voice in the nation's political life. By focussing on the debates about suffrage and citizenship I will reveal some the biases which limited the extent of political reform.

Although the legislators addressed a wide range of issues, the single most important debate focused on how Guatemala's political system should be democratized. This debate became the center of attention because many of the revolutionaries realized that no socio-economic change could occur without a complete revamping of the political system. Therefore, the revolutionaries put political reform at the top of their agenda. The inclusion of new groups of voters proved to be the key issue defining this debate. The polemics on the expansion of political participation

illustrates two important points.¹⁰⁸ First, the Legislative Assembly expanded political participation just as other populist regimes had throughout Latin America. Secondly, they did so cautiously with the goal of consolidating their political project.

The 140 men elected to the Legislative Assembly represented all factions of the coalition that had brought down Ubico. They ranged from conservative businessmen to radical unionists, but they shared some basic attributes. As a general rule, they were young (with an average age of 35); the vast majority had direct or indirect ties to the University, and many deputies represented the FPL and RN political parties.

On December 28 - 30, 1944 the nation went to the polls again and selected the members of the new Constituent Assembly. The 57 men elected had one task, to craft a new constitution. In keeping with Guatemalan parliamentary tradition, the Constituent Assembly then elected fifteen of its members, called La Comisión de los Quince (The Commission of Fifteen), to draft the new organic law. This group, more than any other, defined the nuts and bolts of Guatemala's post-Ubico political order. The Junta had set

¹⁰⁸The debates have been compiled in Diario de sesiones de la asamblea constituyente de 1945 (Guatemala, 1951).

the tone of reform, but the Commission defined the principles and legal mechanisms which carried it to fruition. They produced a draft which formed the basis for all subsequent discussions of the constitution and set the parameters for debate.

The composition of the Commission reflected the structure of the larger Legislative Assembly, and by extension the revolutionary coalition. The president of the Assembly, Jorge García Granados, chaired the Commission. Six liberals, six centrists, and two Social Democrats formed the rest of the committee.¹⁰⁹ Lawyers and law students, held fourteen of the fifteen seats, giving the Law Faculty at the University disproportional representation.¹¹⁰

The Comisión drew on two main sources for inspiration as it worked to formulate an initial draft. Guatemala's previous constitutions comprised the most important influence on the commission's draft. Many aspects of the 1879 Constitution remained intact in the 1945 document. The new constitution had a structure very similar to its

¹⁰⁹The fifteen members of the Commission were: Jorge García Granados, Francisco Villagran, Adolfo Almengor, Bernardo Alvarado Tello, Clemente Marroquín Rojas, David Vela, Jorge Adan Serrano, Jose Falla Aris, Jose Luis Bocaletti, Julio Antonio Reyes Cardona, Julio Bianchi, L. Alberto Paz y Paz, Manuel de Leon Cardona, Carlo Garcia Bauer, and Jose Rolz Bennett.

¹¹⁰Silvert, Guatemala, 15.

predecessors and the language echoed terms employed in the nineteenth century. An influential document called the Anteproyecto a la Constitucion drafted by students and faculty in the Law School served as the second important influence on the commission's work. Many initial discussions of the group focused exclusively on the suggestions included in this document.¹¹¹ In fact, the Anteproyecto contained suffrage restrictions very similar to those eventually adopted by the Assembly. Three key members of the Comisión participated in the formulation of the Anteproyecto, and they proved forceful advocates for the suggestions included in it.

The overall tenor of the constitution, however, was new. The drafting committee included guarantees which had never before been made to the Guatemalan people. Article 1 captures the new tone by stating;

Guatemala is a free, sovereign and independent republic, organized toward the primary end of assuring its inhabitants the enjoyment of liberty, culture, economic welfare and social justice. Its system of government is democratic-representative" (emphasis added).¹¹²

¹¹¹The entire Anteproyecto can be seen in published form in Anteproyecto a la Constitución de Guatemala, (Guatemala, 1947).

¹¹²Silvert, Guatemala, 218.

Ensuring social justice and economic welfare became the State's responsibility for the first time in the nation's history. With the constitutional reforms the members of the Constituent Assembly forged a new conception of the state and its responsibilities to the citizenry.

The Assembly also broke ground in guaranteeing new rights for workers. They outlined the basic elements of what would become Guatemala's first labor code in 1947. In a series of nineteen new articles the Assembly set a minimum wage, outlawed payment in kind, granted the right to free organization, mandated paid vacation, regulated female and child labor, and set an eight hour day. Article 66 even recognized unions and cooperatives as the basis for "social compatibility." This provision reflected the corporatist tendency of Latin American populism, where governments used unions and similar organizations to mobilize and control the people.¹¹³

Moving beyond simply guaranteeing worker's rights, Article 2 established the right to rebel if the government violated the constitutional order. This provision developed from the Revolutionary Junta's decree that the people could

¹¹³For an interesting discussion of this phenomenon in Brazil see Kenneth Paul Erikson's article, "Brazil Corporative Authoritarianism, Democratization, and Dependency" in Howard J. Wiarda and Harvey F. Kline, Latin American Politics and Development (Boulder, 1979).

resist if the Executive attempted to remain in power beyond the single term allowed by law.

The constitution also introduced precedent-setting ideas for the nation about private property. While recognizing the right to individual property, the document declared that all property had a social function (Article 90). The law went further to say that the State could expropriate land with prior compensation if the owner did not fully utilize it (Article 92).

In another break with tradition, the constitutional framers outlawed latifundia, striking at the heart of the oligarchic system they so despised. The law stated that existing large landholding could only be extended once "they may be organized for the benefit of society."¹¹⁴ This vague provision demonstrates that the revolutionaries wanted a legal basis to attack the nation's archaic agricultural system.

The new constitution went further to outline the State's duty to demonstrate a preference for the laboring masses in Article 88, which reads

The State shall orient the national economy for the benefit of the people, toward the end of assuring each individual an existence which is dignified and of benefit to society. It is the primary function of the State to develop

¹¹⁴Silvert, Guatemala , 219.

agricultural activities and industry in general, toward the end that the fruits of labor shall preferentially benefit those who produce them and that the wealth shall reach the greatest number of inhabitants of the Republic.¹¹⁵

State intervention to ensure social justice formed the basis of the new economic ideology which the revolutionaries sought to impose on the nation. The committee's ideas mirrored the efforts of Vargas, Peron, and Cardenas.

The assembly also nationalized all sub-soil rights, effectively nationalizing oil exploration and exploitation (Article 89). This law explicitly echoed the Mexican Constitution of 1917 which the populist President Lázaro Cárdenas employed in 1938 to nationalize American and British oil companies.

The constitution did not only address economic issues, however. Many provision dealt with social and cultural issues. In fact, Article 79 established the "development and dissemination of culture, in all its manifestations" as a primary obligation of the State. The entire seventh section of the constitution addressed cultural issues. Again, this provision reflected the efforts of other populist regimes. Much as Mexico encouraged "national" art, and the APRA movement of Peru drew on Indian "nationalism," Guatemala's

¹¹⁵Ibid.

revolutionaries sought to define their national culture in a positive way.

Although cultural and economic issues often preoccupied the revolutionaries, the transformation of the political system remained the most important project of the Constituent Assembly. Without changes in the political system, they had no way of safeguarding the socio-economic system they hoped to create. The desire to protect the advances embodied in the rest of the constitution focused the Assembly's energy on the creation of a new political order based on expanded political participation.

Article 9, which outlined citizenship and voting rights, formed the centerpiece of the Constituent Assembly's political reforms. While the members took great care to outline the responsibilities of the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches, they realized that electoral power would determine their ability to deliver the promised reforms. That realization created tensions within the Assembly over the speed and extent of democratic liberalization. Thus expansion of suffrage became the locus of controversy throughout most of the spring of 1945.

The real debate revolved around the granting of suffrage to illiterates and women, the two groups explicitly excluded by previous constitutions. The potentially

unpredictable nature of these groups' political allegiances made many of the revolutionaries wary of granting them political power through the vote. The final, somewhat convoluted, wording which the Commission settled on reflected their uneasiness about introducing democracy too quickly. Article 9, states:

Citizens are:

1. Males over eighteen years of age;
2. Guatemalan women over eighteen years of age who know how to read and write; Rights and duties inherent in citizenship are; to elect, be elected, and take public office. Suffrage is obligatory and secret for those able to read and write; optional and secret for female citizens, optional and public for illiterate citizens. All males of eighteen years who know how to read and write are obliged to register with the Civic Registry within the year they obtain citizenship. For women and illiterates, such registration is a right. Illiterates may exercise suffrage six months after having registered. ...No one may force a female citizen or an illiterate to register in the Civic Registry or to vote. Nor may any citizen be compelled to vote for a given person.¹¹⁶

The reason the Assembly chose this definition is clear. The total exclusion of illiterate women and restricted suffrage for illiterate men and literate women created an electoral bloc large enough to provide them with victory at the ballot box. Without losing control of the political system, they

¹¹⁶Ibid., 208.

ensured themselves electoral success. This somewhat bizarre, multi-level voting system grew directly out of the revolutionaries' attempt to bring about a transformation from above. They had made tenuous progress which only cautious political maneuvering could safeguard.

There did not exist any kind of populist model either that they could look to in trying to solve the problem of expanding the electorate. Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, all had granted differing amounts of political participation to illiterates and women. The disagreement among populist nations over the right of citizenship demonstrates the difficulties inherent in such a project.

The extent of the revolutionaries' caution is illustrated by the fact that not even a single member of the committee advocated universal suffrage. All of the members favored some sort of restrictions on illiterates' and women's votes. They shared a fear that somehow "unprepared" groups could undermine the new political order. On January 24, 1945 the Commission began its deliberations on the extension of suffrage to women. Speaking in the first minutes of debate, Alberto Paz y Paz, the representative from Zacapa, expressed the general sentiment in favor of restriction. He said

I think that women should not be excluded from political rights ... and I believe that the

majority of us are of the same opinion, naturally we need to put in place some limitations.¹¹⁷

The members of the Commission argued endlessly over the capacity of women to participate in the political system. After much debate, however, the fifteen members agreed to table discussion of women's role until they had decided the fate of illiterates which they thought might be easier to resolve.

The discussion of whether to extend the vote to those who could not read or write dragged on for several sessions. The fear that the "illiterate masses" would be used by some demagogue to revive Liberal tyranny remained the touchstone of debate. However, precisely this fear of demagoguery provided the impetus for granting illiterates the vote. Clemente Marroquín Rojas, a long time opposition figure from El Progreso in the Oriente region, gave the most succinct explanation of the Commission's thinking. He stated that if illiterates were not granted the vote, "the Liberal Party will triple its size inside of two months and with perfect right."¹¹⁸ Alberto Paz y Paz echoed this sentiment when he rose to warn of the consequences of denying the vote to illiterates. He said

¹¹⁷Comisión de los Quince, Diario de Sesiones de la Comisión de los Quince, (Guatemala, 1947), 83.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 88.

The Republic of Workers, as you want to put it in Article 1, constitutes precisely the group you would deny the right of citizenship We ought to prevent whatever demagogical movement we would arouse by such an act.¹¹⁹

The Commission soon realized that to deny illiterates the vote was to negate the democratic aspirations of the Revolution and, perhaps more importantly, to risk alienating a very volatile political force. David Vela, the editor of El Imparcial, highlighted this contradiction for the Commission when he proposed the formation of a sub-committee to consider the topic. He said that extension of the vote to the majority of Guatemalans (roughly 70 percent of the population couldn't read or write) was the key "to the democratic organization that you are going to give to the country."¹²⁰

Eventually, Jorge García Granados overcame the impasse with his deft political arguments. He pointed out that the responsibility for the previous dictatorships did not lie with the illiterate population. Ubico's rule

was the handiwork of the capital City, the handiwork of General Manuel Orellena, backed up by his cannons, by the U.S. Ambassador, and a group

¹¹⁹Ibid., 87.

¹²⁰Ibid., 92.

of Deputies that were the real civic
illiterates.¹²¹

Finally, on January 30, 1945, the Commission accepted wording which extended the vote to illiterate men with the condition that they vote publically. Literate men had the right to vote secretly, but the legislators wanted the new voters to cast their ballots in the open under the watchful eyes of electoral officials.

That same day they accepted the wording which empowered literate women to vote but disenfranchised illiterate women. The Commission spent many days thrashing out the details of the proposal. The fact that they granted literate women the vote and excluded illiterate women reveals the persistence of class antagonisms within the populist coalition represented by the Assembly.

In the discussions of women's suffrage, the issue quickly became not whether women should get the vote, but which women and under what circumstances. As the debate on citizenship for women proceeded, it became clear that the revolutionaries were very uncomfortable with the idea of giving the illiterate, Indian female population the vote. The Commission thought that these women were more susceptible to outside influences, that they would respond

¹²¹Ibid., 91.

to the agitation of the Catholic Church and reactionary forces. This fear was, in part, based on their knowledge of the role women played in the 1933 elections in Spain. Rural Spanish women, mobilized by the church, hurt the Republican parties badly.¹²² These women had only been granted the vote in 1931, so the lessons appeared clear. Newly enfranchised women could prove a powerful force when organized by the church. García Granados lived in Spain during the Republic and had close ties to the Republican government. He and other members of the Commission who had fought for the Spanish government against fascism had powerful memories of women mobilized by the forces of conservatism.

Similarly, many of the members of the Commission, including such influential figures as García Granados, Villagran, and Bianchi, had been exiled to Mexico during the previous decades where rural women participated in a number of conservative movements led by the church.¹²³ The Cristero revolt of the 1920s, which attacked the government of Plutarco Calles, had been supported by many poor, rural women who had close ties to the church. A more recent

¹²²W.M. Morton, Woman Suffrage in Mexico (Gainesville, 1962), 23.

¹²³For a discussion of attitudes towards woman suffrage in Mexico see William Blough, "Political Attitudes of Mexican Women: Support for the Political System Among a Newly-enfranchised Group", Journal of Interamerican Studies, 14:2 (1972), 202-203.

example, which many members of the Commission may have seen first-hand, took place during the 1939 elections. In that year, the Mexican Congress discussed extending the vote to women. However, during the campaigning for the 1940 elections large numbers of women participated in a conservative, church-backed challenge to the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional.¹²⁴ The Congress decided to postpone granting Mexican women the vote as a result of this challenge.

So this abiding fear of rural women's political role was based on the experiences of the Commission members. What is even more interesting is that the Commission almost seems to be saying that "our women" (read urban, literate, middle to upper class) can be trusted, while women we cannot influence are a danger to the revolutionary project. This attitude reveals the limits of the revolutionaries democratic ideology and highlights the importance of socio-racial and class identification within the revolutionary coalition.

The debate about granting women the vote followed much the same route as the debates about the political reliability of illiterates. Discussion once more focused on who had been to blame for the tyranny of the previous

¹²⁴Morton, Woman Suffrage in Mexico, 39-41.

decades. As with the illiterate male population, the Assembly members feared the rural masses generally because of the perception that Ubico's rule had depended on them. Clemente Marroquín Rojas challenged this assumption when he bluntly stated:

In respect to the fears of Representative Vela and of Representative Rolz about the influence of the priests over women, effectively there is no such decisive influence. You have observed that all women had a primordial role in the last marches, while the majority of men were in hiding. I have never seen a woman collecting signatures for the reelection of Ubico, but I have seen men collecting signatures.¹²⁵

He reminded the Commission that it was men like themselves, mostly urban and educated, who supported Ubico for so many years, not women.

García Granados made a very revealing comment toward the end of the debate. The Commission was arguing over whether or not the vote should be optional or obligatory for women. García Granados outlined the basis for their final decision to make the vote optional. He stated:

Women ought to vote optionally. The majority of women are not interested, and when obliged to vote they will ask advice of certain people. They are

¹²⁵Comisión de los Quince, Diario de sesiones, 80.

not going to vote according to their own
criteria.¹²⁶

Again, the revolutionaries expressed their fear that women cannot make political decisions for themselves. Outside influence and the haunting specter of reaction, dogged the revolutionaries as they tried to forge a new Guatemala.

Many of the deputies felt that educational restrictions could insulate the electoral system from outside influence. They proposed making reading and writing the basis for proving a woman's capacity to be a good citizen. This requirement effectively reduced the number of women who could vote to around 22,000. According to the 1940 census there were approximately 360,000 literate women in all of Guatemala. Of this number only 22,206 could both read and write.¹²⁷

This statistic reveals that, with a stroke of the pen, the drafting commission disenfranchised 340,000 women for decades to come by simply adding the requirement that they be able to read and write. Out of a total female population of roughly 1.6 million, about 800,000 had already been excluded by the provision which conditioned voting on the

¹²⁶Ibid., 176.

¹²⁷Asamblea Constituyente, Diario de sesiones de la Asamblea Constituyente (Guatemala, 1947), 131.

ability to read. Of the remaining 360,000 women who could read, only a tiny fraction could both read and write. The Commission deemed only a minute portion of the female population capable of executing the complicated task of voting (and, of course supporting them at election time).¹²⁸

In contrast to their view of rural women, the Commission felt a responsibility to recognize the competence of "their" women, the women of Guatemala City, who had acted so decisively in the struggle against Ubico. Representative Rolz Bennett made his admiration for these urban educated women explicit when he declared, "I remember the march of June 25th, in which women were more civic minded in many cases than we."¹²⁹ This sentiment was echoed by Francisco Villagran

I acknowledge the external influences that weigh on the spirit of women. We witnessed the brilliant actions of our wives, our daughters during the march in the last week of June that brought as its consequence the decision of Ubico to renounce his power.¹³⁰

The Commission trusted middle class women, so their only task was to decide what other women had the capacity to

¹²⁸Ibid.

¹²⁹Comisión de los Quince, Diario de sesiones, 84.

¹³⁰Ibid., 85.

exercise the sacred duty of voting. Who had shown the necessary civic spirit?

Women had proven their civic spirit in many ways during the preceding months through marches, organizing, forming auxiliaries to the political parties and many other ways. Women took part in the fighting that drove Ponce from power. To ensure that the Assembly did not forget their role in the Revolution, a group of middle class women formed the Pro-Citizenship Feminine Union of Guatemala (Union Femenina Guatemalteca Prociudadania), which directly addressed the Assembly during the debates. They sent a letter to the Constituent Assembly that Representative Manuel Fortuny read on February 6th, 1945. These women felt they had already demonstrated their capacity to vote, and so they respectfully demanded that suffrage be extended to them. The letter reads,

The directorate of the Pro-Citizenship Feminine Union of Guatemala that gathers in its bosom by the thousands women of the entire Republic, belonging to diverse social sectors and of all political and religious creeds courteously address you so that through your generosity may be carried to this Constituent Assembly the voice of Guatemalan women who reclaim for themselves the recognition of their political rights. The representatives know the decisive and overwhelming attitude that Guatemalan women had in the days before the October Revolution, and during the revolution itself, and because of that personal knowledge you are in a position to weigh the high civicism that embodied women's attitude, civicism

which put to the test the capacity of women to exercise their rights of citizenship and the complementary obligations which it brings. ... you can deceive yourself and perpetuate the injustice of the Organic Law drawn up in 1935, to declare expressly that citizenship is only a masculine privilege.

Signed,
Garciela Quan Valenzuela (President)
Elisa Hall Asturias (Vice President)
Angelina Acuña de Castaneda (Secretary)¹³¹

A similar letter, by Doña Rosa de Mora, challenged the members to fulfill the promise of the Revolution, and pointed out the dilemma they faced. She wrote,

Knowing your spirit of justice I hope that you will not place conscientious women in a condition inferior to that of the illiterate population. May God enlighten you for the good of the country.¹³²

Testament to the fact that middle class women could not be excluded from the political system is captured in an exchange between two deputies on the final day of debate about granting women suffrage. José Manuel Fortuny, who would later be important in the Guatemalan Worker's Party, proposed the exclusion of all women from voting "to defend the authentic principles of the revolution." He cited the fact that even Mexico had not granted women the vote after

¹³¹ Asamblea Constituyente, Diario de Sesiones, 151.

¹³² Ibid.

30 years as a revolutionary nation. In response Carlos Garcia Bauer, one of the original fifteen members of the drafting committee gave a stirring speech. After Fortuny's proposal, Garcia Bauer asked

Why have you forgotten so soon the heroic gesture of Guatemalan women? The 25th of June women brilliantly saved the Guatemalan Revolution. Guatemalan women sustained their efforts in the days of Ponce, they fought politically, founded clubs, braving all manner of danger, and Guatemalan women in the uniform of Army nurses on October 20th ran among the bullets. What are you thinking then?¹³³

He chronicled the contributions women had made to the life of the nation in a long speech which was punctuated with applause throughout. Finally, he concluded "Well then, give them the vote." That day, February 6th, 1945, the Assembly included wording which granted literate women the vote.

This dramatic climax to the debates reveals that the revolutionaries recognized the political role of middle class women. These women's participation in the Revolution and their position as members of the newly ascendent middle class gained them the right to a public political role. The politicians viewed them as allies in the consolidation of the Revolution.

¹³³Ibid., 164.

Another, interesting point here is that the Assembly granted the vote to illiterate men because of their fear of alienating the majority of the population as seen in the debate above. But, they granted literate women the vote, as we shall see, because they had proven their "civic spirit" (i.e. that they were politically reliable. And Illiterate women were excluded entirely, presumably because they had not proven their reliability and because they were not powerful enough to be actively feared. The complex, multi-tiered political system which the legislator created reflected biases, personal experiences, and political realities, but at the same time it reflects the cautious and pragmatic nature of the revolutionary coalition. They sought to guarantee the success of their political project, and the exclusion of illiterate women from the rights of citizenship was not a large price to pay, for the revolutionaries.

The tragedy of this period is that the Constituent Assembly even while recognizing the contribution of some women excluded the majority of women from the public political sphere for years to come, and in doing so they confirmed the class and ethnic biases of the Revolution. The rural masses had not participated in the Revolution to

any real degree and as a result their marginalization in the political and economic life of the nation continued.¹³⁴

The direction of change remained somewhat unclear in the Spring of 1945, but the revolutionaries had made the fateful decision to perpetuate a system based on ethnic and class divisions. In doing so they decided that politics would still be dictated from the capital without the participation of Guatemala's majority. Politics would remain the stuff of the urban, educated population, and in that respect not much had changed. What had changed is that new groups had forced their way into political power to shape Guatemala to their needs.

¹³⁴In his book Populism in Peru, Steve Stein stresses that a key element of populism is an effort to mobilize and control the masses. It is unclear to what extent the revolutionaries intended to construct the constitutional system as a means of direct social control, but the end result proved to be the same.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The inauguration of Juan José Arévalo on March 15th, 1945 signalled the definitive triumph of Guatemala's populist revolutionaries. They had succeeded in their goal of establishing a political system that could facilitate the restructuring of the nation's socio-economic order. With the new constitution and Arévalo as president, they now turned their attention to economic and social reform. They faced the challenge of translating the vague promises of Arévalismo into practice.

When the president elect took office, however, one thing remained clear: the direction and content of the reforms to come had already been determined by the nation's new law of the land. The laws which followed simply extended and elaborated the provisions of the 1945 constitution. The president and congress enacted laws which established a national health care system, founded the Guatemalan Social Security Institute, created a worker's compensation system, funded rural education programs, and

encouraged unionization. In short, they transformed the nation's socio-economic system by decree.¹³⁵

What then is the legacy of the initial twelve months of the Revolution? First and foremost, the nation now had a blueprint for change and a group of politicians determined to revolutionize the socio-economic system. There existed for the first time both the political will and the legal mechanisms for social change. This fact not only altered the political system, it generated new attitudes. For so many of the country's inhabitants, the realization that the nation's corrupt, dictatorial past had truly been repudiated created a sense of hope and optimism for the future.

Second, Guatemala's middle class had forced their way into power. Never again would the old oligarchy rule with such absolute control as it had prior to the overthrow of Ubico. The military also came into its own as an independent political actor in the uprisings of 1944. They had become the arbiters of Guatemalan politics with an agenda all their own, and no government could hope to remain in power without their support.

¹³⁵An excellent work which reviews the reforms of the Arévalo administration is Leo Suslow's, Aspects of the Social Reform in Guatemala, 1944 -1949: Problems of Planned Social Change in an Underdeveloped Country (Hamilton, N.Y., 1949). For a more concise summary of the basic elements of the reforms see Jim Handy, Gift of the Devil, 106-113.

Third, the nation's political system had been radically altered by the expansion of suffrage to new groups. Jacobo Arbenz's landslide victory in 1950 attests to the revolutionaries' success in creating electoral support for themselves. Out of an official total of 417,000 votes, Arbenz carried 263,234, with his closest challenger winning only 74,341.¹³⁶ Arbenz's overwhelming victory as a candidate for reform depended heavily on the votes of illiterates enfranchised by the 1945 constitution.

The 1950 elections marked the advent of modern mass politics in Guatemala. From 1944 forward political parties extended their reach further and further into the remote highlands in an attempt to garner support. Campaigns drew more and more people into the political life of the nation.¹³⁷ Although the military dictatorship established after 1954 resorted to electoral fraud and intimidation,

¹³⁶Marta Cehelsky, ed., Guatemalan Election Factbook, (Washington, 1966), 31.

¹³⁷For an interesting commentary on the impact of the Revolution on the political life of the rural majority see Robert Wasserstrom, "Revolution in Guatemala: Peasant and Politics under the Arbenz Government," Comparative Studies in Society and History, 17:4 (October, 1975), 443-470

broad sectors of society now had the sense that they had a right to a political voice.¹³⁸

Fourth, the nation had witnessed the emergence of a dynamic movement for reform which was populist in every sense of the word. The Revolution shared the attributes of being "urban, multi-class, electoral, expansive, 'popular', and led by a charismatic leader" with other populist experiments of this period.¹³⁹ Guatemala's variant, Arevalismo, grew out of the combination of economic discontent, growing nationalism, and desire for political liberalization. Just as groups in other countries sought a "third way" to achieve social and economic development, so too did the leaders of the uprising against Ubico.

The tragedy of Guatemala's populist movement to modernize is that it suffered a unique demise. Unlike Argentine Peronism, Brazil's Getulismo, Peru's Aprismo, and other movements which collapsed mostly due to internal problems, Guatemala's Revolution was attacked from without. It too suffered from internal tensions and disunity, but

¹³⁸For commentary on the growth of political expectations see John W. Sloan's "Electoral Frauds and Social Change: The Guatemalan Example," Science and Society, 34:1 (Spring, 1970), 78-91.

¹³⁹Michael Conniff, "Towards a Comparative Definition of Populism," in Michael Conniff, ed., Latin American Populism in Comparative Perspective, (Albuquerque, 1982), 13.

U.S. intervention proved the decisive factor in bringing the reforms of 1944 to an abrupt end in 1954.

In 1952, Jacobo Arbenz, the second president of the Revolution finally attacked the nation's archaic agricultural system with a thorough land reform. The law, known as Decree 900, set up a massive national land reform which redistributed unused land from the largest landholders in an attempt to make more efficient use of the land.¹⁴⁰ Within two years over 900,000 acres of land had been turned over to cooperatives and individuals. Fully 500,000 individuals out of a total population of 3 million gained access to land as result of the reform.¹⁴¹ Finally, the rural masses began to see the concrete benefits of the Revolution.

Arbenz's reform shook the nation's oligarchy to its core and began to break the centuries-old hold they had over the economy. Arbenz also attacked the United Fruit Company, expropriating 200,000 acres which the government immediately

¹⁴⁰For the literature on the Agrarian Reform see José Luis Paredes Moriera, Reforma agraria: un experiencia guatemalteca (Guatemala, 1963); Jesús García Añoveros, La reforma agraria de Arbenz en Guatemala (Madrid, 1987); Mario Monteforte Toledo, "La reforma agraria en Guatemala", Trimestre Económico, 19:3 (Jul.-Sept. 1952), 389-407; and Jim Handy, "The Most Precious Fruit of the Revolution: The Guatemalan Agrarian Reform, 1952-1954", Hispanic American Historical Review 68:4 (November, 1988): 75-705.

¹⁴¹Handy, Gift of the Devil, 128.

distributed to 23,000 peasants.¹⁴² The president realized that in order to change Guatemala from what he called "a dependent nation with a semi-colonial economy" into an independent nation he had to break both the elite and UFCO.¹⁴³

The challenge to UFCO, however, proved to be fatal for the Revolution. The U.S. government could not sit idly by and watch as an important American company had land taken from it. The new Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles and his brother Allen Dulles, the director of the CIA, began to plot the demise of Arbenz for so impetuously challenging American economic interests.¹⁴⁴ The Dulles brothers had served UFCO faithfully for years as negotiators for the company's contracts with Jorge Ubico in 1931 and 1936.¹⁴⁵ Now they had a chance to serve again.

¹⁴²Ibid., 142.

¹⁴³Ibid., 115.

¹⁴⁴The best account of this episode can be found in Richard Immerman, The CIA and Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention (Austin, 1982). Other works include: Arthur Schlesinger and Steven Kinzer, Bitter Fruit, The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala (New York, 1983); Edelberto Torres-Rivas "Crisis y Conyuntura crítica; La caída de Arbenz y los contratiempos de la revolución burguesa", Revista Mexicana de Sociología, XLI:1 (enero-marzo, 1979), 297-323; and José Aybar de Soto, Dependency and Intervention (Boulder, CO., 1975).

¹⁴⁵Handy, Gift of the Devil, 139.

The CIA armed and funded a polyglot group of exiled Guatemalan army officers and mercenaries to overthrow Arbenz. The agency even went so far as to supply planes, bombs and American pilots to the counterrevolution. Against the U.S., Arbenz and the Revolution did not stand a chance.

Internal tensions assisted the Dulles brothers in their plans. After 10 heady years of progress, the Revolution collapsed when attacked. Weighed down by the burden of rapidly delivering economic and social change and balancing the interests of so many different sectors, the populist coalition broke into fragments. Various groups which had been bound together by nebulous common goals began quarrelling as the reforms began to reallocate power and resources. Many of the early supporters of the Revolution turned to oppose it as the government began to carry the reforms further and further.

When the CIA-backed counterrevolutionaries began bombing Guatemala City and invaded the country, Arbenz faced the agonizing choice of capitulating because the Army would not support him or arming the workers and students and risking all out civil war. He capitulated.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶It is interesting to note that Arbenz confronted the same dilemma that Peron and Vargas faced when challenged by military opposition. All three gave up the reigns of power rather than plunge their nations into armed civil strife.

Colonel Castillo Armas, the Americans' hand-picked leader of the coup, immediately began undoing the work of the Revolution. He annulled the Constitution of 1945 and began persecuting the political parties, unions and peasant groups which formed the backbone of Arbenz's support. Castillo Armas' supporters killed hundreds of peasants accused of being "communists."¹⁴⁷ Almost overnight, Guatemala regressed to the days of Ubico.

In the decades since Guatemala's "liberation" by the U.S. backed coup the nation has experienced a frightful epidemic of violence. Poverty continues to hold the majority of the population in its grasp. The praetorian military dictatorships which have held the reins of power since 1954 identify all who challenge them as "communist." Labor unions struggle to survive in a nation where organizing means risking disappearance and torture. The country which held so much promise between 1944 and 1954 now bears the epitaph, "the land of eternal tyranny."

Arévalo's inaugural address reverberates across the decades in haunting condemnation of contemporary Guatemalan governments and their failure to address the needs of the majority. Even though he spoke of the days of Ubico and

¹⁴⁷John Gillin and Kalman Silvert, "Ambiguities in Guatemala", Foreign Affairs, 34 (April, 1956), 470.

Cabrera, he could just as easily have been referring to the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s when he said:

I had then the conviction - and I continue to have it - that a nation cannot be free while any one of its inhabitants are unfree, and that the dignity of the Republic is made of synthesis of the dignity that dwells, living and protected, in each of those that live off the earth. To attain this we must confront the peculiar social and economic structure of the country: of a country where the culture, politics and economy are in the hands of three hundred families heirs of colonial privileges or sell outs in foreign factories or members of an official administrative sect which protect those interests and expand geometrically their own. ... There must begin in Guatemala from various directions at once and promoted with integrity a liberating movement for the majority which lawfully restores the rights of citizenship wrongfully stolen and which promotes the stammered economic demands of the proletariat, the workers and the peasants. In this Guatemala, ravaged by foreigners and Guatemalans, the agents that suck dry the nation's riches and maintain culture on an aristocratic level must be confronted.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸Juan José Arévalo, Escritos Políticos y Discursos (Havana, 1953), 495-496.

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