

Everything is School

*Exchanges Between the Mexican Communist Party and
Cardenista Socialist Education, 1934-1940*

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A mis maestras, Ivette Orijel y Guadalupe Domínguez, quienes despertaron en mí, respectivamente, el interés por la historia de México y la curiosidad por sus lugares más extraños.

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Abbreviations

In the text, I refer to organizations by their translated English name yet use the initials that come from their Spanish names. The following list contains all abbreviations used in the text, the original Spanish, and the translated English version that appears in the text. Abbreviations are defined at their first appearance, and appear as just initials over the remainder of the text.

CC: Comité Central – Central Committee

CEP: Campaña de Educación Popular – Popular Education Campaign

CGT: Confederación General de Trabajadores – General Confederation of Workers

CMM: Confederación Mexicana de Maestros – Mexican Confederation of Workers

CNTE: Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores de la Enseñanza – National Confederation of
Workers in Teaching

CPUSA: Communist Party of the United States of America

CROM: Confederación Regional de Obreros Mexicanos – Regional Confederation of Mexican
Workers

CSUM: Confederación Sindical Unitaria de México – Unitary Syndical Confederation of Mexico

CTM: Confederación de Trabajadores de México – Confederation of Mexican Workers

ECCI: Executive Committee of the Communist International

FUNTE: Frente Único Nacional de Trabajadores de la Enseñanza – National United Front of
Workers in Teaching

ILS: International Lenin School

IOS: Instituto de Orientación Socialista – Institute of Socialist Orientation

JCM: Juventud Comunista de México – Communist Youth of Mexico

KUTV: Communist University of the Toilers of the East

LEAR: Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios – League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists

LNC: Liga Nacional Campesina – National Peasant League

PCF: Communist Party of France

PCM: Partido Comunista Mexicano – Mexican Communist Party

PNR: Partido Nacional Revolucionario – National Revolutionary Party

PRM: Partido de la Revolución Mexicana – Party of the Mexican Revolution

SEP: Secretaría de Educación Pública – Ministry of Public Education

SOTPE: Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores – Union of Technical Workers,
Painters, and Sculptors

STERM: Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Enseñanza de la República Mexicana – Union of Workers
in Teaching of the Mexican Republic

UNAM: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México – National Autonomous University of
Mexico

“The socialist city has neither church nor graveyard. . . . The old city grouped her low houses around a belltower. The socialist city groups her tall buildings around the school. And everything is school, from the factory to the club, to the theater, to the cinema and to the culture park..”

— Paul Vaillant-Couturier, *Les bâtisseurs de la vie nouvelle...*, 1932

Introduction

On May 8th, 1936, a group of students in the Oaxacan village of Matías Romero addressed a letter to the editors of *El Machete*, the biweekly newspaper of the Mexican Communist Party (PCM).

Comrade:

The Society of Students of the Coeducational Upper Primary School “Justo Sierra” ... permits itself to plead with you, to gift our school with a subscription of the accredited biweekly you dignifiedly direct.

You must not forget, that our Student Society, is made up in its totality by proletarian children, all of them children of workers, and therefore, unable to field the cost of a subscription, but thirsty indeed for the informations [sic], that can only be found in the columns of your important revolutionary newspaper.

In the name of studious youth, we give you, anticipated thanks for the attention you may serve to dispense us.

“For the Revindication of the Proletarian Childhood.”¹

The editors of *El Machete* deemed the letter interesting enough to publish in its May 17th issue, for its entire readership to peruse. It is not hard to see why, as the letter neatly encapsulated the different currents that defined education in 1930s Mexico. The school was named after Justo Sierra, the great educator of Porfirian Mexico, yet it bore the imprint of the educational revolution that had swept the country since the Revolution and had reached its apogee under the “socialist education” reforms of president Lázaro Cárdenas. Socialist schools opened primarily in rural enclaves such as Matías Romero, in the poor and majority-indigenous state of Oaxaca; students in such schools were thus working-class students, the “proletarian children” of peasants or workers. These schools were also coeducational, arousing the anger of the Catholic Church, which before the reform had largely held the majority share in education. And, by writing to *El Machete*, the students of “Justo Sierra” revealed

¹ *El Machete: periódico obrero y campesino*, No. 408, 17 May 1936, p. 2, microfilm, New York Public Library, New York City.

yet another facet of the socialist school: it served as a focus for social (and socialist) organization, in which communist networks often participated.

The era in which this letter was composed in fact marked the apex of the PCM's role in Mexican politics, as its influence waned following the end of popular front politics and the end of the Cardenas administration; by 1981, the PCM dissolved to merge with other opposition parties. Yet in the 1930s, the State hegemony that would define 20th-century Mexico was coalescing, and the PCM, dually invigorated by a strong Comintern and a strong current of radicalism in Mexican politics, sought a stake in that process. It had the most success claiming one in the realm of public education, which the State was in the process of reforming under a "socialist" paradigm. This thesis examines both directions of the exchange between the PCM and socialist education, arguing that, in the first half of the Cárdenas presidency, the Party was instrumental in shaping socialist education; while in the later half, the language and structure of socialist education shaped the PCM's approaches to Party reform.

Given that the PCM's most successful incursions into public life were in education, it is surprising that historiographies of the PCM and of *cardenista* socialist education—the state project of public education for modernization from 1934 to 1940—have largely followed separate, if parallel, tracks. Although the subjects saw simultaneous waves of interest in the 1970s and 1990s, major studies in each subject² did little more than nod at the other, briefly identifying public education as the government sector of largest PCM infiltration, but with little discussion of what its activities were; or separately identifying individual communists involved in socialist education initiatives, without delving into what it meant that they their belonged to the Party. This project interrogates these two historiographic strands, examining the ways in which the PCM's agenda shaped individual communists' participation in the socialist education reform, as well as the ways in which the project

² Major studies of socialist education in the 1970s include Victoria Lerner, *La Educación Socialista*; David L. Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921-1940*; and John A. Britton, *Educación y Radicalismo En México*, which remain touchstones in any examination of the topic; in the 1990s, that canon expanded with Mary Kay Vaughan's *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, which traces the interactions between State and civil society that emerged in socialist education. As for the PCM, Manuel Márquez Fuentes and Octavio Rodríguez Araujo's 1973 *El Partido Comunista Mexicano (en el período de la Internacional Comunista, 1919-1943)* is a classic history of the Party during the Comintern era, while in English-language scholarship the work of Barry Carr stands as required reading for students of the Mexican left, especially his 1992 *Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*.

of socialist education informed the operations of the PCM, primarily in the construction of its own educational element.

The PCM was not alone among world communist parties in turning its attention to education. During the 1930s, party school networks emerged in France, Spain, the United States, and many other countries with organized communist parties. Yet, as Marvin Gettleman has pointed out in his work on the New York City Workers' School of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA), scholarship around party schools has lacked an international dimension, focusing instead on individual national contexts.³ This project adds the Mexican example to existing scholarship on communist education, while simultaneously considering the context of global Comintern politics that drove individual parties to focus on education during this decade.

That is not to say that the PCM's educational incursions were entirely dominated by the Comintern line, but neither were they entirely independent from it. It is important to resist the reproductionist argument that PCM merely abided by the Comintern's prescriptions, or that "socialist education" merely reproduced them. The insufficiency of that argument is well addressed in major studies in both historiographies, most notably in Susana Quintanilla and Mary Kay Vaughan's 1997 compilation *Escuela y sociedad en el periodo cardenista*; and in Daniela Spenser's 2007 examination of the relationship between the Comintern and the PCM, *Unidad a Toda Costa*. But neither does this mean that "socialismo a la mexicana"—Quintanilla and Vaughan's term⁴—was independent from global communist currents: as Manuel Márquez Fuentes and Octavio Rodríguez Araujo argued in their 1973 study of the PCM, and as Barry Carr did in his own 1992 study of the Party, the PCM was heavily influenced by the Comintern's dictates, often to its own detriment.⁵ The most appropriate framework to study socialist education and its social implications remains the "hegemonic consensus" model advanced by Mary Kay Vaughan in her 1997 book *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, wherein the real cultural impact of the socialist education reform lay not in the top-down imposition of a state

³ Marvin E. Gettleman, review of *Review of Schooling for "Good Rebels". Socialist Education for Children in the United States, 1900-1920*, by Kenneth Teitelbaum, *International Review of Social History* 40, no. 1 (1995): 138–40.

⁴ Susana Quintanilla and Mary Kay Vaughan, *Escuela y Sociedad En El Periodo Cardenista*, 1. ed, Sección de Obras de Educación y Pedagogía (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997), 59.

⁵ Manuel Márquez Fuentes and Octavio Rodríguez Araujo, *El Partido Comunista Mexicano (En El Período de La Internacional Comunista, 1919-1943)*, 2 ed. (México, D.F.: Ediciones "El Caballito," 1981); Barry Carr, *Marxism & Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992).

program but in the negotiation between state and civil society that emerged around it.⁶ This thesis incorporates the PCM as another participant in that negotiation, one shaped—but not defined—by its unique connection to a global communist platform.

Chapter I charts the factors at the international, Mexican, and party level that led the PCM to focus on education between 1934 and 1940. From there, Chapter II traces the ways in which the PCM shaped the national project of socialist education, primarily in the first half of the Cárdenas presidency. The chapter argues that PCM intellectuals and publications were crucial in shaping the milieu in which discussions around education took place; when those discussions yielded the project of socialist education, the same PCM agents were crucial in defining the program and application of that project, as high-ranking functionaries and labor-organized teachers, respectively. Chapter III turns to the latter half of the Cárdenas years, in which the PCM's reputation as a rogue party, its disputes with major labor organizations, and the arrival of Leon Trotsky led the Comintern to scrutinize the Party more closely, accusing it of undiscipline and insufficient adherence to popular front politics. The chapter argues that the PCM drew on socialist education to address both of these deficiencies. It used the structure and language of socialist education as a model to reform its existing autodidactic education structure into a national party school system; and invoked socialist education as proof of the PCM's fulfillment of the popular front. Together, Chapters II and III offer a picture of the exchanges between Party and policy: just as the PCM's platform entered the project of socialist education through the efforts of Party members involved in the reform, the socialist education framework was profoundly entangled with the Party's approaches to cadre education.

It is not the project of this thesis to provide an expansive review of public education reform in Mexico, nor an exhaustive history of the Mexican Communist Party. Readers seeking those materials can count the work of David L. Raby and John A. Britton among the former, and work by Márquez Fuentes & Rodríguez Araujo, Carr, and (more recently) Carlos Illades among the latter. Nor does this thesis seek to reiterate the comprehensive reviews of *cardenista* socialist education done by Vaughan, Quintanilla, and Victoria Lerner. Rather, this thesis frames those intersecting

⁶ Mary K. Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 7–21.

developments within the cultural and intellectual sphere in which they occurred, providing a window into the points of tangency between a communist sphere governed by the popular front and a Mexican State approaching its hegemonic apex. Using PCM records, the communist press, and archives from Mexico's Ministry of Public Education, this thesis offers a fairer view of a party caught in the crosshairs of both global and national forces, and the ways in which it negotiated its own agenda between the push and pull of these larger actors. At heart, this project answers to a very simple necessity for anyone involved in Mexican public life: to understand the enduring (and ongoing) debates around public education, one should understand what forms they have taken in the past. Since 2020, the Mexican public education system has been undergoing widespread reform with the project of the New Mexican School (Nueva Escuela Mexicana),⁷ inviting back into the public discourse fears (or more accurately, tropes) that education is brainwashing the youth.⁸ It makes sense, as this thesis does, to look into the only time period where those fears were, arguably, founded.

⁷ For the official government declaration of the NEM, see Secretaría de Educación Pública, "Programa Sectorial de Educación 2020-2024," *Diario Oficial: Órgano del Gobierno Constitucional de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos*, July 6, 2020. There is also a handy 2024 presentation by the Subsecretary of Basic Education breaking down the New Mexican School reform into its most important components: see Martha Velda Hernández Moreno, "La Nueva Escuela Mexicana y su Impacto en la Sociedad" (Mexico City, 2024), <https://educacionbasica.sep.gob.mx/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/La-NEM-y-su-impacto-en-la-sociedad.pdf>.

⁸ One of the most egregious (and most memorable) such accusations was the television anchor Javier Alatorre's condemnation that the new textbooks for the NEM were "injecting the communist virus" into children. Humorously, the functionary overseeing the textbook reform has the given name Marx [Arriaga]; that conservative opposition has not seized onto this fact and mined it for propaganda can only be attributed to their evident lack of knowledge about what communism *really* is, beyond a useful shorthand for things they don't like. See Mark Stevenson and León Ramírez, "México: acusaciones de 'comunismo' y 'fascismo' marcan debate sobre libros escolares," *Los Angeles Times en Español*, August 10, 2023, sec. México, <https://www.latimes.com/espanol/mexico/articulo/2023-08-10/mexico-acusaciones-de-comunismo-y-fascismo-marcan-debate-sobre-libros-escolares>.

I.

Toward the Need for a Communist Education

The PCM's decision to focus on member education during the Cárdenas presidency (1934-1940) was shaped by the interaction of internal developments with shifts in national politics and international communism. Between 1921 and 1936, the Comintern prioritized the education of party leaders worldwide, coinciding with its growing interest in Latin America. Simultaneously, the “*cardenista*” period ushered in newfound toleration for the PCM, affording it, for the first time, a measure of stability from which to consider policy and practice beyond mere survival. This chapter traces three central forces driving this decision: the international, namely the Comintern's educational directives; the national, specifically the construction of an expressly socialist Mexican public education system; and the internal, tracing the perceived weaknesses within the PCM that made communist education urgent—and the Cárdenas years a critical moment to enact it.

The International Scope

The III Congress of the Comintern, held in the summer of 1921, was marked by the sense that the revolutionary world was changing. With new communist parties emerging around the globe, the communist tide was swelling; however, this tide was being slowed by institutional disorganization and a lack of centralized strategy. In his closing speech, Chairman Grigory Zinoviev blamed the “disparate conditions” faced by sister parties for “the revolution . . . not developing as rapidly as every honest revolutionary would and should desire.”¹ In order to carry out a uniform Communist strategy, to be adopted and replicated the world over, the Comintern needed militants willing and able to follow Moscow's directives.²

The Comintern, as Brigitte Studer has laid out, was both a *supranational* and a *transnational* organization, which steered global communism yet relied on national sections to organize its

¹ John Riddell, trans., “Speech at Closing of Third Congress by Gregory Zinoviev: July 12, 1921,” in *To the Masses: Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International, 1921* (Haymarket Books, 2016), 890–96, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zinoviev/works/1921/zinoviev05.htm>.

² A similar argument is advanced in Víctor L. Jéfets and Lazar S. Jéfets, “La Comintern y La Formación de Militantes Comunistas Latinoamericanos,” *Izquierdas*, no. 31 (December 2016): 130–61, <https://doi.org/10.4067/S0718-50492016000600130>.

application in specific countries. Efforts toward communist education thus represented efforts to bridge these two dimensions. Leaders of national communist parties were to become “cadres”—or members of the vanguard, in the Leninist sense³—at the supranational level by enrolling in the Comintern’s educational institutions. Later, these leaders were expected to return to their respective countries to reproduce this educational experience among their national party members, who were then to replicate this process as “cadres” at the local level.⁴ The first of these supranational institutions was the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV), which opened in October 1921, shortly after the III Congress, to educate cadre-leaders from “colonial” countries.⁵

A year later, however, such efforts had borne little fruit. At the IV Congress in the winter of 1922, Lenin deplored the previous resolution as too long, too complicated, and “too Russian” for foreign parties to properly implement.⁶ This was not a comment on the resolution’s ideological soundness, which he strongly defended. Rather, Lenin voiced the growing concern that communist parties around the world were blindly adopting the Comintern’s prescriptions, with little discernment for the specificity of the Russian national context vis-à-vis their own—and with too scant a theoretical background to even make that call. To correct this, the Comintern adopted a cadre-educational policy called Bolshevization, wherein national parties should learn the principles of Lenin and the example of the Bolshevik (Soviet) Communist Party in order to adapt them, *without blindly reproducing them*, to the unique situations of their respective countries.⁷ Bolshevization also placed emphasis on self-education, whose importance cadres would have to internalize if they were

³ Vladimir Lenin, “What Is To Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement,” in *Lenin: Collected Works*, trans. Joe Fineberg and George Hannah, vol. 5 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 347–530, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/>.

⁴ To distinguish between the two levels, I refer to students at these supranational institutions as “cadre-leaders” throughout the chapter, and to national Party members expected to become militants as simply “cadres.” This distinction is not present in Studer, from where the rest of this framework is drawn. See Brigitte Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137510297>.

⁵ Jéfets and Jéfets, “La Comintern y La Formación de Militantes Comunistas Latinoamericanos,” 134; Masha Kirasirova, “From Syrian Communist to Soviet Orientalist: Taha Sawwaf in the Comintern Files (1935–1953),” in *Russian-Arab Worlds: A Documentary History*, ed. Eileen Kane, Masha Kirasirova, and Margaret Litvin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 176–87, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/columbia/detail.action?docID=7251925>.

⁶ Márquez Fuentes and Rodríguez Araujo, *El Partido Comunista Mexicano*, 101–2.

⁷ John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, “Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern: A Historical Controversy Revisited,” *Labor History* 60, no. 3 (May 4, 2019): 165–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656X.2019.1572872>.

to remain at the vanguard once they had graduated from the Comintern's institutions and began to apply what they had learned at home.⁸

During this contentious period, Latin America was peripheral at best across the Comintern's priorities, including on the question of party education. Just as the Comintern had directed its Bolshevization policies at the "major" parties of Europe and the United States, it also intended for the CPUSA to "teach" Latin American cadre-leaders, as if they were effectively subsidiaries of the most important party in the Western hemisphere.⁹ The Comintern's lack of concern for Latin American cadre-leaders (and Latin American communist parties more broadly) was no doubt connected to the Comintern's Eurocentric priorities, and the veiled racism implicit in its deeming certain countries "colonial."¹⁰ But was also likely due in part to those leaders' lack of preparedness and experience relative to their European or American counterparts. Though it had been the first Latin American affiliate to the Comintern and was more advanced than its continental compatriots, the PCM was no exception: its Secretary General Rafael Carrillo Azpetia, widely considered by his peers to be among its best-prepared leaders, had only read the *Communist Manifesto* for the first time during a 1923 visit to Moscow. Thus, Latin American cadres were excluded from the 1926 inaugural class of the International Lenin School (ILS), which received 70 mostly European and American students.¹¹ After all, a KUTV-style education, with its mission to equip cadre-leaders for the nuanced application of communist theory and Bolshevik example, could scarcely benefit students who had not even grasped those basics.

But the Comintern would soon reconsider this attitude, and Latin America's exclusion would not long continue. In 1927, the Swiss Jules Humbert-Droz, secretary of the Executive Committee

⁸ Sebastián Rivera Mir, review of *The Transnational World of the Cominternians*, by Brigitte Studer, *Izquierdas*, no. 30 (October 2016): 333–37.

⁹ Manuel Caballero, *Latin America and the Comintern, 1919-1943* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 80; Jéfets and Jéfets, "La Comintern y La Formación de Militantes Comunistas Latinoamericanos," 134–37.

¹⁰ There is not enough space in this project to examine the racist implications of the foundational assumptions of institutions like the KUTV, built as they were on the idea that "colonial" cadres stood to learn from the Bolshevik experience, not just the communist theory. Masha Kirasirova's chapter on the Syrian communist Taha Sawwaf, who attended the KUTV, hints at some of the racist dimensions of Bolshevizing education, and the negotiations it underwent as "Eastern" cadres, armed with superior knowledge of their national situations, criticized the oversimplifying portrayals of the same offered by their "superiors." See Kirasirova, "From Syrian Communist to Soviet Orientalist: Taha Sawwaf in the Comintern Files (1935–1953)."

¹¹ Jéfets and Jéfets, "La Comintern y La Formación de Militantes Comunistas Latinoamericanos," 134–35. The authors' article provides an excellent survey of Latin American students at the ILS, as well as an overview of where they fit within the larger quotas and the scheme of the institution.

of the Communist International (ECCI), highlighted the need for the Comintern to “apply a special effort” in Latin America, “where there are many possibilities to develop our movement but there exists much ideological confusion.”¹² The first class of Latin Americans entered the ILS that year—though the first Mexican student, Xavier Guerrero, would not arrive until 1928.¹³ In total, about 121 Latin American cadre-leaders (of which 21 were Mexicans) received instruction in the Soviet system, with the vast majority arriving at the ILS between 1931-1936.¹⁴ Students at the ILS were educated along three modules: theory of Marxism and Soviet-style socialism; history of the Comintern, the U.S.S.R, and other American communist parties; and praxis, on how to apply Comintern directives to their local contexts. In 1931, the ILS began including a study of “the programs of the Comintern,” both broadly and in connection with specific parties’ situations.¹⁵ The ILS’s program was consistent with the Comintern’s broader goal of Bolshevization: it did not focus solely on theory, placed the U.S.S.R. as the model for international communism, and discussed the national applicability of its lessons.¹⁶ The Latin American cadre-leaders who went through its doors thus became the closest connection between the Europe-based Comintern and its remote Latin American subsidiaries.

The other side of Bolshevization, beyond the training of its students, was the expectation that they would replicate its model in their own countries. Thus, the IV Congress passed a resolution on “Communist Party Activity in the Sphere of Education,” proclaiming that “educational work in the ideas of Marxism is an essential task for all Communist Parties.” The resolution directed parties to establish party schools—with day and evening classes, lectures, and libraries—that could all be accessible to party members, regardless of their standing.¹⁷ The scale of this resolution was limited

¹² Quoted in JEIFETS and JEIFETS, 138.

¹³ Despite its small representation in this year, the PCM was given outside importance. In 1929 the PCM was tasked with finding students to fill the ILS quotas not only for Mexico, but also for Cuba, Colombia, Guatemala, Venezuela, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. Predictably, the PCM was unable to fill this quota, failing to send even the three students allotted Mexico. Hernán Laborde, who would later become the Secretary General of the PCM during the Cárdenas years, complained bitterly about this to the Comintern, arguing that it was harmful to the party to expect them to furnish so many students when it needed its own members for work at home and when its attentions were elsewhere preoccupied. See JEIFETS and JEIFETS, 138–39.

¹⁴ After 1936, no new Latin American cadres arrived, and the ILS closed in 1938. See JEIFETS and JEIFETS, 149; 151.

¹⁵ José Carlos Rueda Laffond, “Fábricas de comunistas: escuelas de partido y estrategias orgánicas en los años treinta,” *Historia y Política: Ideas, Procesos y Movimientos Sociales*, no. 40 (November 16, 2018): 263–97, <https://doi.org/10.18042/hp.40.10>.

¹⁶ Donald L. Herman, *The Comintern in Mexico* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Place, 1974), 18.

¹⁷ Fourth Congress of the Communist International, “Communist Party Activity in the Sphere of Education,” December 5, 1922, Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/4th-congress/education.htm>.

to party schools, but it would soon broaden: during the VI Congress in 1928, the Comintern took a “left turn,” becoming staunchly antiparliamentarian and encouraging “class against class” politics in its national sections.¹⁸ As a result, the Comintern’s new policy on education broadened its scope from national party schools to schooling more broadly, establishing that “in destroying the capitalist monopoly of the means of production, the working class must also destroy the capitalist monopoly of education,” and calling for Parties to seize control of all schools to “raise the general cultural level of the proletarian masses” so as to train them for eventual revolution.¹⁹ This hardline position softened again with the Comintern’s shift to Popular Front politics in its VII Congress of 1935: parties should now strive not to wrest control of education altogether from social-democratic elements, but rather collaborate with them to continue work in the education and mobilization of the masses.²⁰ This did not, however, exempt parties from continuing to hone their own internal education.

In the summer of 1936, the Comintern determined that where Communist Parties were legal they should organize national party schools, favoring the model of the French Communist Party (PCF)’s schools—which had been operational since the 1920s and fairly successful—but modified by detailed programs drawn from each country’s concrete characteristics.²¹ Using the PCF as a model reflected an outsized optimism on the Comintern’s part, as the PCF’s centralized, comprehensive schooling program²² was undoubtedly too ambitious for the budding parties of the developing world, which were struggling to organize their member structures, let alone a schooling system. However, in holding up the PCF as an ideal, the Comintern offered a vision of what national parties should strive for: wide-reaching, nationally-rooted, practically-driven, and systematic communist

¹⁸ Carr, *Marxism & Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, 29; 34.

¹⁹ “The Programme of the Communist International, Comintern Sixth Congress 1929: IV. The Period of Transition from Capitalism to Socialism and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.” (Modern Books Ltd., 1932), Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/6th-congress/ch04.htm>. Caballero also offers an analysis of this change in educational policy—see Caballero, *Latin America and the Comintern, 1919-1943*, 88.

²⁰ Jane Degras, ed., *The Communist International, 1919-1943: Documents*, vol. III (Royal Institute of International Affairs, n.d.), 362–63.

²¹ Rueda Laffond, “Fábricas de comunistas,” 282–83; Claude Pennetier and Bernard Pudal, “La certification scolaire communiste dans les années trente,” *Politix*, no. 35 (1996): 69–88, <https://doi.org/10.3406/polix.1996.1956>.

²² The program included a central school with provincial and regional networks; two blocks of study, one about the theory and history of Communism at large and another one concerning the French national situation; schools specifically for Black and Indochinese communists within the PCF; schools devoted to agitprop and journalism; mail-order courses; multiple options for the duration and level of instruction; lectures and discussion groups; and complementary training in practical matters like propaganda, cell organization, and speechwriting. See Rueda Laffond, “Fábricas de comunistas,” 283.

education. Though some other parties already had party schools (including parties in developing countries),²³ the Comintern's 1936 mandate to establish party schools renewed the imperative for communist parties around the world, placing it on the agenda of any party that had not already organized such a network. The PCM, confronted with an unprecedented opportunity, would be one of those grappling with the new educational directives in a profoundly changed country.

The Mexican Scope

In 1917, Mexico found itself with a virtually clear slate before it. Seven years of Revolution, which had begun with opposition to the dictator Porfirio Díaz and morphed into a multistage civil war, had drawn to a close; now, the task at hand was to fulfill the promises for which those seven years were fought. The autocratic Porfiriato had entailed a complete denial of civil and political participation; now, a popular movement had defeated it, ushering in a climate of mass politics and social mobilization that would become the defining characteristic of post-Revolutionary Mexico.

Leading politicians and revolutionaries rode the momentum of these popular movements into a burgeoning state-building effort, where the State was conceived as the enactor of the Revolution.²⁴ Plutarco Elías Calles, a prominent Constitutionalist military and political leader from Sonora, assumed the presidential mantle in 1924 after the assassination of president-elect Álvaro Obregón and co-opted post-Revolution social turmoil to secure complete control of the state. Calles solidified the state's primacy in civil society by neutralizing other loci of power: he reformed the army as an arm of the state; incorporated organized labor through collusion with major leaders of the Regional

²³ To name just a few examples, the CPUSA's flagship was the New York Workers School, and Spanish communists managed to organize a network of schools even amid the Civil War. There were even schools in developing countries—the first formal party school in Latin America actually predated the Comintern's dictate: Ecuador's Escuela Leninista de Educación Marxista-Leninista y Economía Nacional had been operational since 1929.

For the CPUSA, see Marvin E. Gettleman, "The New York Workers School, 1923-1944: Communist Education in American Society," in *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism*, ed. Michael E. Brown et al. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993), 261–80; Robert Zecker, "'A People's University': Communist Workers' Schools, 1923-1956," LAWCHA, September 22, 2024, <https://lawcha.org/2024/09/22/peoples-university-communist-workers-schools/>.

For the Spanish case, see Rueda Laffond, "Fábricas de comunistas."

For the Ecuadorian case, see Jéfets and Jéfets, "La Comintern y La Formación de Militantes Comunistas Latinoamericanos," 147.

²⁴ The post-revolutionary landscape and its implications for state-building are chronicled in Alan Knight, "Mexico, c. 1930–46," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America: Volume 7: Latin America since 1930: Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean*, ed. Leslie Bethell, vol. 7, *The Cambridge History of Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1–82, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521245180.002>.

Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM, Confederación Regional de Obreros Mexicanos); and declared war on the Catholic Church and religious education, sparking the Catholic guerrilla uprisings dubbed the Cristero War (1926-1929). Calles remained de facto leader through three interim presidencies between 1929 and 1934. This virtually uninterrupted rule would allow him to consolidate his State-driven project for the nation—whose flagship, founded in 1929, was the National Revolutionary Party (PNR, Partido Nacional Revolucionario), described by interim president Emilio Portes Gil, who would later be the PNR’s president, as “the Revolution made Government.”²⁵

Education was an important part of the Revolutionary promises the State was tasked with delivering. The Revolution was meant to reach those whom the Porfiriato had marginalized; thus, education was meant to offer education to those who had never received it: indigenous people, peasants, workers, women, and the “humble.”²⁶ Within the emerging framework of the new revolutionary state, the Ministry of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública, SEP) was created in 1921, and the philosopher José Vasconcelos named its head. Vasconcelos, the Revolution’s “cultural *caudillo*,”²⁷ expanded literacy and public education throughout the country; however, without an ideological framework for revolutionary education, his policies were largely shaped by the same elitist classical liberalism that had yielded the Constitution of 1917.²⁸ To gear education toward Mexico’s revolutionary ideals, the SEP looked to another great Western educator: in 1923, it adopted as official policy the action pedagogy of John Dewey, which stipulated that children should learn by doing if their education was to prepare them for life.²⁹ In formulating his vision of education, Dewey was contending with the implications of modernity for a blossoming American empire,³⁰ not

²⁵ Quoted in Márquez Fuentes and Rodríguez Araujo, *El Partido Comunista Mexicano*, 134.

²⁶ Victoria Lerner, *La Educación Socialista*, 1. ed, Historia de La Revolución Mexicana; Período 1934-1940 17 (México, D.F: Colegio de México, 1979), 132.

²⁷ A *caudillo*, in the vocabulary of Revolutionary Mexico, is a personalist leader with strong political sway, almost always military. Though there is no direct translation, close cousins include “strongman” or “warlord.”

²⁸ David L. Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921-1940*, trans. Roberto Gómez Ciriza, 1 ed., SepSetentas (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, Dirección General de Divulgación, 1974).). One of Vasconcelos’s projects, for example, was the distribution of classics of the Western canon to rural schools, which though well-intentioned far outpaced the literacy level of the targeted population.

²⁹ Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, 27.

³⁰ This understanding of Dewey as pedagogue comes from the two lectures delivered by Prof. Casey Blake at Columbia University on February 6th and 11th of 2025, for the course “U.S. Intellectual History.” For a concise formulation of Dewey’s understanding

with an agrarian, popular, post-Revolutionary context; however, many of the most important constructors of the SEP's pedagogy in the 20s (such as Moisés Sáenz) had been his students at Teachers' College of Columbia University, and had been profoundly influenced by his proposals.³¹ The chief problems facing the SEP at this juncture were the number of schools and the preparation of teachers, many of whom had not even completed an elementary education when they came under the SEP's umbrella. However, what was important to "democratize the instruments of culture" (as the Deweyian imperative went) was getting schools up and running as soon as possible, so as to address the rampant illiteracy that hampered higher educational initiatives; the professional preparation of teachers and the specifications of their work could come later.³²

The SEP's prioritization of scale over substance meant that, even as the federal schooling system expanded, the pedagogical field was left open for the incursion of other currents. The 1917 Constitution had merely stated that state education should be "lay," which different currents interpreted as fit their needs: the Catholic Church, which had previously controlled most of the schools in the country, interpreted laity as ideological neutrality, essentially sanctioning the continuance of religious education. Other prominent currents included the rationalist education espoused by anarchist emigrés from Spain, who believed that education should be atheistic and emphasize individual reason. Under the militantly anti-religious Calles, this third wing grew louder, and in 1932 a proposal to declare education not only *areligious* but *anti-religious* was seriously discussed at a national pedagogical conference. Amid these debates, the notion of a socialist education began to appear; however, it was often tangled up or with the "active" and "rationalist" schools, as all three ascribed great importance to manual work over books and espoused a revolutionary orientation.³³ An early defense of socialist education as a distinct project came from Vicente Lombardo Toledano, a professor at the National University (UNAM), leader of the teachers' union, and Marxist who would in time become known as the foremost point of contact between international communism

of education's role in society, see John Dewey, "The Need for Industrial Education in an Industrial Democracy (1916)," in *The Political Writings*, ed. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro (Hackett, 1993), 121–24.

³¹ Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921-1940*, 34.

³² Raby, 19.

³³ The discussion of different ideological currents in education, and socialist education's place amid it, is discussed in Lerner, *La Educación Socialista*, 13–19, as well as in the first chapter of Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921-1940*.

and the Mexican context. At the VI CROM Convention in 1924, Lombardo Toledano emphasized the uniqueness and superiority of socialist education over other currents, proposing a vision of an education that was “dogmatic, affirmative” in its precepts and that, when related to the productive process, could prepare man for life.³⁴

In 1929—the same year when the SEP became the vehicle for “cultural policy” within the newborn PNR’s agenda³⁵—the Great Depression altered the battleground for pedagogical debates, tipping the balance decisively toward socialist education. Around the world, the Depression toppled the prestige of laissez-faire liberalism in favor of more radical and statist approaches³⁶—a big coup for the PNR, whose state-driven approach to politics was emboldened by the global trend. As in many countries, this turn also strengthened Marxist currents in the Mexican sphere and elevated the mystique of the school as a cell for real social change.³⁷ As Lerner argued in her landmark study of socialist education, the radical character of this moment was evidenced by the rapid disappearance of lay education as a serious pedagogical consideration in the 1930s. Rather, there was broad support for ideologically-rooted federal education, despite competing visions for what orientation it should take. The different currents also had a second point of agreement: the revolutionary character of education should fit under the revolutionary project of the state.³⁸

By 1933, that project was embodied by the PNR’s Six-Year Plan (Plan Sexenal), through which the party intended to shape the upcoming presidential term according to Calles’s vision. Influenced by the Soviet Five-Year Plans, the Plan Sexenal stressed the role of the “interventionist state” in domestic production, promised labor rights, and prioritized the agrarian question.³⁹ The Plan Sexenal also included a proposed reform to Article 3 of the 1917 Constitution, establishing that

...the education which the State imparts will be socialist and in addition to excluding any religious doctrine, will combat fanaticism and prejudices, for which the school will

³⁴ Lerner, *La Educación Socialista*, 18–19.

³⁵ Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, 4.

³⁶ Quintanilla and Vaughan, *Escuela y Sociedad En El Periodo Cardenista*, 85–86.

³⁷ Quintanilla and Vaughan, 53.

³⁸ Lerner, *La Educación Socialista*, 77.

³⁹ Knight, “Mexico, c. 1930–46,” 10.

organize teaching and activities in such a way as to create in youth a rational and exact concept of the Universe and social life.⁴⁰

The word “socialist,” not unlike its outgoing predecessor “lay,” remained malleable in this context. To many teachers who were on the frontlines of enacting it, “socialism” meant merely the fulfillment of an active education, in benefit of society. To more orthodox leftists who read “scientific socialism” in plain “socialism,” Article 3 clearly squared with the goals for the socialization of land and the collectivization of the means of production, except that it would do so “progressively,” without deviating from the ideals of the Revolution and the frame of the (liberal) 1917 Constitution.⁴¹ At this time, the SEP was in the hands of the young Marxist lawyer Narcisso Bassols, who as the Minister of Education from 1931 to 1934 declared that “the Ministry of Education believes vehemently that there exists a powerful tie, an indestructible link between the school and the *ejido*,”⁴² and who followed his fellow Marxists in conceiving of education as a vehicle for the modernization of the country and for the creation and promotion of a national civic culture. This did not mean that Bassols fell into the camp of the orthodox leftists who hoped the “socialism” in Article 3 would be of the scientific variety. Bassols—a *callista* functionary through and through—understood “socialism” in the same way as the State (and Calles) did: as a surrogate for modernity, reading the namesake U.S.S.R. not as a communist country but as a success story for industrialization and for the development of a cohesive national consciousness.⁴³

Calles viewed education as a tool to bring the nation’s youth into the fold of Revolution, which was a State project. Children belonged to the country, not to their families, and the State was obligated to mold them into a revolutionary national conscience.⁴⁴ In his famous “Grito de Guadalajara,” a speech delivered in on 20 July 1934 alongside president-elect Lázaro Cárdenas, Calles inflamed one of the most conservative cities in the country by declaring: “it is necessary that we enter

⁴⁰ Juan de Dios Bojórquez, “DECRETO que reforma el artículo 3o y la fracción XXV del 73 constitucionales.” *Diario Oficial: Órgano del Gobierno Constitucional de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos*, December 13, 1934, Volume LXXXVII, No. 35 edition, sec. Poder Ejecutivo - Secretaría de Gobernación.

⁴¹ Lerner, *La Educación Socialista*, 77.

⁴² Quoted in Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921-1940*, 108. The *ejido* was the system of land ownership implemented after the Mexican Revolution, which granted land to peasant communities for communal use. In an *ejido*, the government owns the land and awards it to a peasant community, which then farms it under State oversight.

⁴³ See Knight, “Mexico, c. 1930–46,” 10; and Lerner, *La Educación Socialista*, 75.

⁴⁴ Lerner, 75.

the new period of the Revolution, which I call the psychological revolutionary period; we must seize the consciences of children ... because they are and must belong to the Revolution.”⁴⁵ In this pronouncement, Calles was indeed following the example of the U.S.S.R, but so too that of Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Germany in eliding nationalism for socialism.⁴⁶

Yet Calles’s specific, increasingly controversial political construction would not remain under his successor, Lázaro Cárdenas. A career politician, general, and governor of the state of Michoacán from 1928 to 1932, Cárdenas was a protégé of Calles who had crushed revolts within the military and dismantled agrarian protests. Though one of the more left-leaning figures in the PNR, Cárdenas therefore seemed like a safe bet for the continuation of the tight-gripped *callista* project. However, once in office, Cárdenas moved quickly to assert his political autonomy: he purged *callista* functionaries from his cabinet, waged a protracted battle for public opinion with Calles, and eventually exiled Calles himself.⁴⁷ It is hard to overstate the importance of the *cardenista* period: as Alan Knight has contended, the 30s can be defined as the story of the “rise and rule” of *cardenismo*,⁴⁸ and the Cárdenas presidency marked the culmination of the State as the agent of the Revolution. Cárdenas’s policies laid the foundations on which the modern Mexican state would build thereafter: he created a structure for the land reform promised by the Revolution, empowered the growth of Mexican industry by nationalizing oil, and established Mexico as a notable actor in diplomacy by welcoming *en masse* refugees from the Spanish Civil War. As Mary Kay Vaughan argued in *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, Cárdenas’s policies also propitiated a period of interaction between the state and the people, creating a nexus between both groups that would forge the first true iteration of Mexican civil society.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ “‘El Grito de Guadalajara’ de Plutarco Elías Calles (1934),” in *Enciclopedia Histórica y Biográfica de La Universidad de Guadalajara* (Guadalajara, Jalisco: Universidad de Guadalajara), accessed February 25, 2025, <http://enciclopedia.udg.mx/articulos/el-grito-de-guadalajara-de-plutarco-elias-calles-1934>.

⁴⁶ Toward the end of his presidency, Calles’s leanings became suspiciously autocratic: as a possibly apocryphal story holds, Calles was in bed reading *Mein Kampf* when he was shuttled out of the country following his exile in 1935. The story appears in Knight, “Mexico, c. 1930–46.”

⁴⁷ Knight, 11–18.

⁴⁸ Knight, 7.

⁴⁹ Though it is really the argument of the entire book, it appears most succinctly summarized in Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, 199.

The hallmark of Cárdenas's government was his agrarian policy, which endeavored to take Mexican peasants out of their "feudal" condition. Cárdenas was not the first to pay attention to the rural: the Revolution had brought with it a reappraisal of the peasantry, owed a debt of distinction as the sector that had contributed the brunt of Revolutionary troops.⁵⁰ Later governments also became less supportive of large landowners in general, as their diffused, localized power threatened the centralized state sovereignty coalescing in the 1920s and 30s. Thus, the SEP had included peasants in its purview from its earliest days. As its ideology overcame more patronizing liberal perspectives, rural schools ceased trying to "discipline and channel the energies of rebellious peasants" and instead sought to correct the rural population's exclusion from the modern and national, particularly in the realms of home life, industry, and agriculture.⁵¹ Though some of the SEP's programs were "tinged by a romantic cult for the peasant life,"⁵² early rural schools were primarily shaped by the everyday rural experience, since, for a lack of other third spaces (except for churches, which carried their own imposition of religious authority), the rural school was the meeting place and the center of a town's life. To quote David L. Raby, in these early rural enclaves "the school had the shape the community gave it and not the other way around." This formation was compatible with, if not a crystallization of, the SEP's original foundations in active education: in a visit to Mexico in 1926, Dewey himself described the rural education he had witnessed as the world's greatest display of the unity between school and community that his pedagogical theory had envisioned.⁵³ Thus, long before Cárdenas entered the presidency, the rural had served as the sphere in which the Revolution could most easily fulfill its promises, as it represented the country's most-lagged sector, both socially and economically, which education could be used to target.

Cárdenas, however, was not just interested in improving the peasants' material conditions, but sought to integrate them in his project for a 'Mexican' nation.⁵⁴ To bring the rural into the "nation," he had to bring the countryside out of its quasi-feudal condition, which in turn implied a

⁵⁰ Knight, "Mexico, c. 1930-46," 4-5.

⁵¹ Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, 4; 189; Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921-1940*, 27.

⁵² Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, 27.

⁵³ Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921-1940*, 29-30.

⁵⁴ Lerner, *La Educación Socialista*, 96.

“transform[ation of] the behavior, loyalties, and identity of rural Mexicans.”⁵⁵ Socialist education, with its twin imperatives of modernization and state consolidation as written into the Constitution, presented a path to further both strands of this goal. Yet if socialist education was to become a vehicle for *cardenismo*, rather than a remnant of *callismo*, it would have to remake itself in the agrarian, popular image of Cárdenas’s Mexico.

As scholars of socialist education have noted, Cárdenas largely continued, in practice, Bassols’s program to create a national consciousness and foster the development of the modern revolutionary state;⁵⁶ however, during the Cárdenas years socialist education developed an entirely new agrarian-populist ideology, which had been absent from the pedagogical debates of the early 1930s. This ideology reoriented the concept of the “Mexican people” toward the country’s rural majority, so crucial to Cárdenas’s project, and for the first time considered the indigenous population as part of what it meant to be Mexican. In its historical narratives, socialist education therefore placed workers and peasants at the heart of the Mexican people, transporting them from the margins to which the Porfiriato had subjected them into a role as makers and heirs of revolution. The heroes of history, lionized in this pedagogy, were those who had defended workers and peasants both in Mexico and abroad, from Revolutionary agrarian leader Emiliano Zapata to the Polish-German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg. The flipside to this central role was an exaltation of work: as protagonists of history, the worker and peasant must accept and love the duty of working for the improvement of their country and their people. Thus, the education that prepared them must be a tool for improvement, aiding in industrialization and modernization. Improvement also meant that socialist education should raise the quality of life of the people by extirpating diseases and vices, raising literacy, and including women in its scope of national life. It should also do away with the obstacles toward its desired modernization—namely, “prejudice,” or the religious excesses and superstitions that the *cardenista* ideology perceived as excessively coloring rural life.⁵⁷ The shift from the anti-religiosity of the Calles years was subtle, but important: religion was presented not as an enemy of

⁵⁵ Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, 46.

⁵⁶ Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921-1940*, 53.

⁵⁷ There is no small amount of descriptions of socialist education. The synthesis here draws from Lerner, *La Educación Socialista*, 98–99; Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, 5, 40; and Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social en México*, by and large the canonical books on the subject.

the State but as an obstacle to the modernization of the country, without which what it meant to be “Mexican” could not be defined. Thus, though the practice of socialist education remained as Bassols and Calles had intended it—state-led, modernizing, and anti-clerical—its stakes had changed under the new ideology: education was not just a tool of the state but the midwife⁵⁸ for the birth of a new and true Mexican people.

As the vehicle for Cárdenas’s national vision, education required a reinvigorated SEP.⁵⁹ State spending on school increased one percentage point every year between 1934 and 1940, climbing from 15% to 20% of the national budget.⁶⁰ To keep pace with the expansion of schooling, the socialist SEP also differentiated between three types of schools: in cities, workers’ schools would teach manual and manufacturing labor, whereas urban schools would train students for intellectual labor, resembling the genteel school more closely. Meanwhile, in the countryside, rural schools would raise the productivity of the countryside and link the peasant to his land, both by asserting his property over it and by developing his national sense of self as connected to it.⁶¹

Opposition to socialist education was as manifold as its inroads into different sectors of society, whose old stewards were threatened by the reform. Large landowners viewed teachers as communist agitators promoting revolt and anti-social fervor among the peasant class.⁶² Similarly, the clergy, who remained influential in rural areas and in private education, fought back against the imposition of a “godless” socialist education by encouraging absenteeism, strengthening its private schools, and mobilizing Catholic parents against this encroachment on the rights of their children.⁶³ By mid-1935, with opposition mounting, Cárdenas attempted to address it: he asked teachers to shift their focus from social justice, class struggle, and “de-fanaticization” toward the redistributive elements of the program, and toward the role of schools as links in a chain of association to the

⁵⁸ cf. Dewey’s famous remark that “Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.” In the case of Mexico, not democracy but the modern Mexican State, christened by its Revolutionary imprint, would be brought forth into the world by education. See Dewey, “The Need for Industrial Education in an Industrial Democracy (1916),” 122.

⁵⁹ Raby, 53.

⁶⁰ Knight, “Mexico, c. 1930–46,” 26–27.

⁶¹ Lerner, *La Educación Socialista*, 104.

⁶² Many landowners maintained that the peasants had never revolted until the teachers had arrived and started “preaching their doctrines toward inducing those people to take over what doesn’t belong to them.” The irony of levying such accusations after an entire seven-year Revolution had been largely fought by revolting peasants seemed to escape them. Quoted in Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921-1940*, 126.

⁶³ Lerner, *La Educación Socialista*, 36–46.

burgeoning PNR—in short, toward socialist education as a project of state-led nationhood. Thus, socialist education entered a second phase: its official program became the mobilization of workers and peasants for their Constitutionally-given rights, and its social component removed express focus on the church to instead sanction the questioning of arbitrary authority of any stripe.⁶⁴

Despite these attempts at correction, the undoing of socialist education had been spelled from early on. As leftist opponents of the program had correctly diagnosed, it was difficult to push a socialist program in a non-socialist country,⁶⁵ and most of the enclaves where socialist education succeeded were geographically isolated, preventing the reform's reach from encompassing a cohesive, national whole. Moreover, to complete such an ambitious, dogmatic program in such a short time would have required an impossible scale of mobilization and pedagogical diffusion, although crash-course programs such as the Institute of Socialist Orientation (IOS, Instituto de Orientación Socialista)—to be discussed in Chapter II—were valiant efforts.⁶⁶ Still, the early anti-religious component, notwithstanding its retraction in mid-1935, had doomed socialist education from the beginning. Looking to capitalize on the opposition to Calles's rampant anticlericalism, Cárdenas had emphasized at the start of his term that socialist education was not intended to counter religion, only fanaticism;⁶⁷ now, with Cárdenas's own policy perceived as no less atheistic, he could no longer count on this support. Furthermore, if the general population was clear on the anti-religious component to socialist education, the same could not be said of its other parts: halfway through Cárdenas's term, there were still questions about what exactly socialist education was. Even Lombardo Toledano, who had been instrumental in defining and distinguishing socialist education over a decade earlier, claimed at the 1936 National Congress of Worker Education that state pedagogy had not truly changed, and that there was still widespread confusion as to what it meant.⁶⁸

Beyond its ideological limitations, socialist education also faced material. Unable to properly federalize and oversee the rollout of the program, the government relied on individual teachers, who

⁶⁴ Quintanilla and Vaughan, *Escuela y Sociedad En El Periodo Cardenista*, 88–89; Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, 67.

⁶⁵ Lerner, *La Educación Socialista*, 91–92. Lerner herself makes this argument throughout the entire work.

⁶⁶ Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Educación Pública (AHSEP), box 259/3089/1 and box 259/3089/1. Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City, Mexico.

⁶⁷ Knight, “Mexico, c. 1930–46,” 17.

⁶⁸ Lerner, *La Educación Socialista*, 104–5.

were left at the mercy of state governors during a period of conservative ascendancy, in which many local leaders targeted ostensibly left-wing teachers with violence, rape, and even murder.⁶⁹ By 1936, many once-fiery teachers were counseling moderation, and labor groups soon decided to turn away from radicalism for the sake of self-preservation.⁷⁰ Even in villages with the most dedicated teachers, there were material limits to what they could achieve: illiteracy remained widespread and about 58% of peasant children did not attend school, prevailed upon by their parents for agricultural labor needed for the family's subsistence.⁷¹

The de facto end of socialist education came in 1938. The Mexican economy had been severely hit in 1937 by the halt to U.S. imports of silver, exacerbated by Cárdenas's 1938 decision to expropriate Mexican oil, and the president was forced to dampen much of his radical politics in response to the backlash. Cárdenas's rightward shift mirrored a larger tactical retreat from radicalism in 1938: Lombardo Toledano, who throughout the 30s had been the Comintern's chief agent in Mexico, declared that "in Mexico we will not Sovietize the government," and the "*rojillos*" ("little reds") who represented the SEP's most radical wing quietly exited the Ministry. Furthermore, the global left had been weakened by the rise of fascism in Germany, Italy, and Spain, and dealt a further blow in August 1939 by the Nazi-Soviet. Yet the organized left remained strong in Mexico, strengthened by a decade of major political influence. Among the leftist groups who peaked in the 1930s was a small yet influential cohort: the Communist Party of Mexico.

The PCM Scope

Founded in 1919, most of the PCM's early leaders were foreigners, most prominent among them the Indian communist Manabendra Nath Roy. Although they were not wholly alien to the Mexican context (some had been connected to important revolutionary leaders),⁷² they were

⁶⁹ Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, 67. Raby chronicles these aggressions in chapter V of his book. See David L. Raby, "La 'Educación socialista' en México," *Cuadernos Políticos*, no. 29 (September 1981): 147–97.

⁷⁰ Lerner, *La Educación Socialista*, 94.

⁷¹ Lerner, 123; 131.

⁷² Manuel Caballero has argued that the PCM leaders being foreigners did not mean they were wholly alien from the Mexican context, or artificially grafted onto it. He bases his argument on the fact that a certain number of those foreigners was well-connected with important government figures during the Mexican Revolution, citing links between M. N. Roy and Venustiano

disconnected from the largely anarcho-syndicalist and “reformist” homegrown labor movements, which had little in common with the Soviet paradigm they followed.⁷³ In the beginning, most of the PCM’s <1,000 members were foreigners, and equally foreigner-heavy delegations to the Comintern were limited in their capacity to advocate for or consider the Mexican or even the Latin American perspective. At the II Congress of the Comintern in 1920, the first one the PCM attended, the PCM was nominally representing Latin America but none of its three delegates were Mexican—and, in fact, it was the CPUSA that raised the Latin American issue at the Congress, not the PCM.⁷⁴ The same disconnect was true at home, and as the PCM struggled to grasp the reality of the Mexican proletariat, it could only rely on Comintern directives to forge a consistent party line. This often led the PCM to make sweeping declarations that further alienated the labor bases they aimed to court—such as opposing anarchism following the III Congress of the Comintern, opposing the Calles government as a reformist endeavor, and severing ties with the agrarianist National Peasant League (LNC, Liga Nacional Campesina), even though the LNC made up the bulk of the PCM’s popular base, after the Comintern’s “left turn” forbade collaboration with “reformist” factions.⁷⁵ The PCM’s stance toward the post-Revolutionary governments was thus marked by a violent oscillation between hostile, even irrational, opposition and uncritical acceptance, dictated largely by the Comintern’s changes in policy and the PCM’s obligation to follow in their stride.⁷⁶

It would be inaccurate, however, to attribute all of the PCM’s inconsistencies to the Comintern. Recent scholarship by Sandra Pujals paints a vivid portrait of the extreme ideological heterogeneity within the PCM, which drove infighting, stalled action, and made a cohesive party line unreachable, with members often processing interpersonal disputes as ideological deviations.⁷⁷ To

Carranza, the revolutionary leader who drafted the 1917 Constitution of Mexico and who would assume the Presidency after the end of the Revolution that same year. See Caballero, *Latin America and the Comintern, 1919-1943*, 47.

⁷³ These two strands of Mexican communism are drawn in Márquez Fuentes and Rodríguez Araujo, *El Partido Comunista Mexicano*, 86. A further look into the anarchist tradition in Mexican leftism, and its genealogy in connection to the PCM, is in Carr, *Marxism & Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, 39.

⁷⁴ Caballero, *Latin America and the Comintern, 1919-1943*, 26.

⁷⁵ Carr, *Marxism & Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, 43.

⁷⁶ The “violent oscillation” phrase is borrowed from Carr, 39. Márquez Fuentes & Rodríguez Araujo make a similar point.

⁷⁷ Pujals’s metaphor for the PCM is that of a “Cominternist sarape,” referring to the Mexican garment woven from threads in different colors, thicknesses, and even materials. The sarape metaphor weaves a Mexican communism that is thoroughly heterogeneous, even as it is “Cominternist” in self-declaration. Pujals also quotes specific instances of interpersonal disputes, often romantic in character, involving figures like David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, Julio Antonio Mella, Vittorio Vidali, and Tina

make matters worse, the PCM was put in an impossible position by the Stalin-Trotsky split in the final years of the 1920s. In contrast to a growing global alignment with the Stalinist Comintern, Mexico harbored the seat of an “autochthonous” faction of communists increasingly linked with Trotsky, who in 1937 would emigrate to Mexico.⁷⁸ While the PCM ultimately took a staunchly anti-Trotsky line, its small size meant it could hardly afford the resulting fractures. In March 1934, the Mexican section of the International Red Aid—the Comintern equivalent to the Red Cross—issued a letter to its “comrades,” announcing their withdrawal from the PCM, blaming it on the Party having “renounced the policy of LENIN, to kneel before the policy of Stalin” and dubbing “anyone who does not see in Stalin a perfect being and in his ignorant bureaucrats a group of infallible little angels ... a ‘counterrevolutionary Trotskyist.’”⁷⁹ Though clearly mocking the PCM’s rhetoric, the letter leaves clear the knee-jerk opposition of the PCM to any dissent from its line, even when the PCM was largely unable to define what its own line was beyond what the Comintern prescribed it should be.

Despite its erratic character, the PCM achieved rare, brief moments of importance, most significantly after the CROM’s decline in the organized labor movement toward the end of the 1920s. Having founded the Unitary Syndical Confederation of Mexico (CSUM, Confederación Sindical Unitaria de México) in 1928 as a left-turn-tinged negation of “reformist” labor organizations, the PCM saw a gap where the CROM had stood and called the National Assembly of Worker-Peasant Unification in 1929, from which two groups with strong radical currents and significant PCM ties—the CSUM and the General Confederation of Workers (CGT, Confederación General de Trabajadores)—emerged as the most important labor organizations. The victory at the Assembly and the triumph of the CSUM imbued the PCM with new confidence, leading it to participate in more and more visible workers’ protests.⁸⁰ But the increased prominence of the PCM in the labor movement, combined with a chill in Mexico-U.S.S.R. relations that culminated in the 1930 severance of diplomatic ties, unleashed the worst repression the PCM had faced thus far. Though the

Modotti. See Sandra Pujals, “El sarape cominternista: algunos retazos impensados de México como puente transnacional y emporio revolucionario, 1919-1941,” *Historia Mexicana* 72 (January 1, 2023): 1413–56, <https://doi.org/10.24201/hm.v72i3.4585>.

⁷⁸ Pujals, 1422.

⁷⁹ Letter to the comrades of the Red Aid. In relation to their position on the thesis: “Fascisms and the tasks of communist parties,” which motivated its withdrawal from the CP, Mexico, D.F., 21 May 1934, box 06, code 6, exp. 05, Fondo Partido Comunista Mexicano (PCM Fond), Centro de Estudios del Movimiento Obrero y Socialista (CEMOS), Mexico City, Mexico.

⁸⁰ Márquez Fuentes and Rodríguez Araujo, *El Partido Comunista Mexicano*, 132–33; 137; 154–55; 157.

party had been illegal since 1925, it had also never been existentially targeted, deemed too inconsequential in national politics to justify it. That changed with the ascent of the CSUM and without the CROM's hegemonic presence to counterbalance communist influence. Under President Emilio Portes Gil, the PCM was declared illegal, *El Machete* (the Party's mouthpiece newspaper) was closed and its printing plant destroyed, and Party members were arrested, killed, or exiled to Mexico's prison colony in the Islas Mariás.⁸¹ The persecution forced the PCM into clandestine operations, disrupting the momentum it had gained in the labor movement and, with it, its most serious possibilities to enter the Mexican political stage as a relevant actor.

The PCM would remain clandestine until 1934, when Lázaro Cárdenas assumed the presidency and halted the persecution of the PCM as one of his first official acts.⁸² He did so despite the party continuing to toe the Comintern line against him, denouncing him in a 1933 pamphlet as a "big murderous soldier and a dangerous demagogue."⁸³ But the PCM was again forced to do an about-face in its position against Cárdenas by the Comintern's 1935 popular front directive. Cárdenas, although vehement in asserting that he was not personally a communist, was the friendliest a president had been to the PCM in its fifteen years of existence, and in 1935 the PCM was allowed to operate as a legal political party again. The Comintern's popular front policy thus came right in time with the end of the PCM's persecution: allied with Cárdenas and assured that no official action would undermine them going forward, the PCM emerged from its most unstable period to find itself in a stronger position than ever before, from where it could begin to think about organizing the masses without an existential threat looming overhead.

Whether due to Comintern-prompted oscillation or internal inconsistency, the PCM's instability and confusion likely explain its low membership and frequent leadership turnovers.⁸⁴ Prospective or existing members were alienated from the party by the constant disorder in it,

⁸¹ Carr, *Marxism & Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, 45.

⁸² Karl M. Schmitt, *Communism in Mexico: A Study in Political Frustration* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 16; Márquez Fuentes and Rodríguez Araujo, *El Partido Comunista Mexicano*, 159.

⁸³ It is hard to translate into English the sheer contempt in describing Cárdenas as a "soldadón asesino y peligroso demagogo." Pamphlet: "¡Abajo los partidos burgués-latifundistas! ¡Lucha electoral independiente de las masas trabajadoras! ¡Viva el Bloque Obrero y Campesino!" [Down with bourgeois-landowning parties! Independent electoral struggle of the working masses! Long live the Worker and Peasant Bloc!], 18 May 1933, box 05, code 5, exp. 02a, PCM Fond, CEMOS.

⁸⁴ This argument is posed by Donald L. Herman, *The Comintern in Mexico*, 79.

isolating the party from doing serious work among the masses. Years of clandestine operation left the PCM a highly disorganized party—though it had never been particularly structured, developing a cell system only in 1925, six years after its founding, and then only under the direction of the CPUSA leader Bertram Wolfe.⁸⁵ Any progress made at the end of the 1920s was undone by the Portes Gil repression. Thus, when the PCM found itself on more solid footing at the beginning of the Cárdenas presidency, it was ill-prepared to take advantage of its new political opportunities, overly reliant on the individual efforts of its members, including for the all-important task of recruitment, and without a centralized structure to oversee them.⁸⁶ The party was therefore in dire need of organization, not to mention—given its present reliance on them—of disciplined cadres.

The PCM's pivotal moment came at the tail end of a wave wherein the Comintern had dedicated more attention to the education of communist cadre-leaders around the world, including in Latin America, and prescribed that individual parties should also pay that same attention and develop national systems of cadre education. It also came at a time when the PCM found itself on newly stable ground, and therefore able to seriously undertake constructive projects rather than merely struggle for its own survival. Accustomed as it was to follow the Comintern's prescriptions, it was only natural for the PCM to turn to cadre education as a solution to its widespread disorganization.

The Comintern and the PCM's conundrums and commitments were, in a way, analogous. Just as the Comintern's educational directives were marred by a lack of comprehension of the

⁸⁵ Márquez Fuentes and Rodríguez Araujo, *El Partido Comunista Mexicano*, 124.

⁸⁶ PCM publications of this era, intended for widespread distribution, contain impassioned pleas for readers to submit articles of any kind, no matter whether they are in pencil or with poor grammar, or even photographs, drawings, or cartoons. That the central press of the PCM relied on volunteers and had to constantly beg for them speaks to the party's disorganization. A JCM bulletin from 1935, which publicly labels a would-be contributor as a "saboteur" for not turning in an article on time, illustrates the stakes riding on individual contributors, and the Party's extreme dependence on them. See JCM Federation, Regional Committee of the D.F. Recruitment bulletin no. 1, August 1st campaign. Objective of the bulletin and organization of recruitment campaigns, second fortnight of May 1935, box 07, code 7, exp. 06, PCM Fond, CEMOS.

For examples of such publications and individual calls to assist in recruitment, see Communist Youth Federation of Mexico. Central Committee. Circular no. 12. "To all organisms of the Federation requesting an answer to the circular referent to the recruitment campaign. Information about recruitment in some places and circumstances." Mexico, D.F., 23 May 1935, box 07, code 7, exp. 07, Fondo PCM, CEMOS. See also Communist Youth of Mexico, Regional Committee of the D.F., "Boletín Guardia Roja" no. 1, 15 September 1934, box 06, code 6, exp. 16, PCM Fond, CEMOS. See also Confederación Sindical Unitaria de México, Circular no. 17. "To the federations, comrades, unions and unitary groups, as well as all members of the revolutionary syndical movement. Proposal of printing and distribution of the unitary syndical letter so that equal action can be followed in all the syndicates and centrals of the country against war and fascism," Mexico, D.F., 18 September 1934, box 06, code 6, exp. 18, PCM Fond, CEMOS.

“colonial” parties it sought to develop, the PCM’s need for cadre education was ingrained in a movement whose foundations were divorced from organic mass movements in Mexico. Both at the global and the local level, communist education was working with a handicap from the beginning, seeking to impose an education from the top while unquestionably disconnected from the bottom. Yet the PCM had the advantage of working within a country undergoing its own educational revolution, where reflection and rethinking on educational methods were a part of the current national conversation. In socialist education, as we will see, the PCM would find a window to influence its standing within Mexican politics and a paradigm to evaluate its own approach to education.

II.

Putting the “Socialist” in Socialist Education

One of the most widely referenced fragments in the historiography of socialist education is Karl M. Schmitt’s 1965 claim that “if one desired a good teaching job” in 1930s Mexico, “the best avenue was through affiliation with a communist cell in the Education Office.”¹ The major scholars of socialist education—including Victoria Lerner, David L. Raby, Barry Carr, and Mary Kay Vaughan—have all nuanced Schmitt’s claim as exaggerated to segue into their own discussion of the subject; nonetheless, it is true that the SEP, and the socialist education it enacted, was the most successful area for involvement of the PCM in the *cardenista* government.² This chapter details the involvement of the PCM in the enterprise of socialist education, from participating in early discourses around it in the pages of *El Machete* to its major influence in high-ranking SEP posts and teachers’ labor unions, to argue that the PCM line significantly shaped the reform.

Despite its eventual success in the realm, the PCM did not initially favor socialist education, echoing the prevalent criticism among the Mexican left that the reform was an invalid manifestation of socialist ideology because the government behind it was not itself socialist.³ In its first-ever bulletin, the Mexico City division of the Communist Youth of Mexico (JCM, Juventud Comunista de México) criticized President Abelardo Rodríguez’s 10% reduction in federal educational spending for 1934. Though three months were yet to pass before the reform Article 3 enshrined “socialist education” in the Constitution, the term had already entered the discourse on education, enough for the bulletin to dispute it by arguing that “the Socialist School that is being BUILT in the SOVIET UNION” was the ‘real’ socialist school. The bulletin referenced the education expenditures within the First Five-Year Plan, pointing to its success in elementary education and literacy campaigns. Having lionized the Soviet example (“THAT’S HOW SOCIALIST CULTURE IS BUILT!!”), the article ended on an indictment that “THE SCHOOL OF WHICH THE P.N.R. SPEAKS”—that is, socialist education—“IS A MANEUVER TO SUBJECT US MORE TO THE BOURGEOIS

¹ Schmitt, *Communism in Mexico*, 19.

² Carr, *Marxism & Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, 57.

³ Quintanilla and Vaughan, *Escuela y Sociedad En El Periodo Cardenista*; Lerner, *La Educación Socialista*, 64; 93.

GOVERNMENT; TO COVER UP THE APPALLING REIGNING CULTURE,” still wielding the “social-fascist and bourgeois” language of the left turn.⁴

Comintern directives were highly influential in defining the PCM’s line toward socialist education. The JCM’s little yet caps-heavy article merely toed the left-turn line from the beginning of the Cárdenas years. After the VII Comintern’s popular front directive, the PCM changed its tune on both the Cárdenas government and socialist education, which it reevaluated as a step toward progress and as a way to weed out educational reactionaries hiding behind a “freedom of teaching” banner.⁵ Thus, a little over a year after the JCM published its all-caps indictment of socialist education, the communist-led National Confederation of Workers in Teaching (CNTE, Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores de la Enseñanza) issued a circular to Mexico City teachers condemning the deplorable conditions they faced, calling for the federalization of education, summoning them to a protest and strike in front of the SEP, and expressing its “firm resolution to defend”—not just support—“the Socialist School.”⁶

In the span of a few months, the PCM had gone from a rigid criticism of socialist education to an equally rigid support of it, following the VII Comintern in its own about-face. But, as this chapter will argue, the PCM’s policy toward socialist education transcended mere support: many of its members were instrumental in shaping the pre-1934 milieu in which discussions on education took place, and once those discussions yielded socialist education, many PCM members were active participants in the educational organisms that enabled the new policy’s operation nationwide—as SEP functionaries, or those directing it; and as teachers, or those enacting it.

⁴ All capitalization in quotes is preserved from the original. Red Guard Bulletin, Regional Committee of the D.F., Communist Youth of Mexico, 15 September 1934, box 06, code 6, exp. 16, PCM Fond, CEMOS.

⁵ Lerner, *La Educación Socialista*, 65.

⁶ National Confederation of Workers in Teaching, Secretariat of Organization and Conflicts. Circular to the teachers of the D.F. in defense of socialist education, invitation to the rally strike of 31 March [sic; the invitation was for January] 1936, Mexico, D.F., 28 January 1936, PCM Fond, CEMOS.

Early Discourses of Education in *El Machete*



The masthead for *El Machete*, with a raised fist holding a machete as its logo. The header appeared in every issue, identifying the paper as the organ of the PCM as a section of the Communist international. From *El Machete*, No. 155, 9 March 1929, p. 1.

In 1924, the Union of Technical Workers, Painters, and Sculptors (SOTPE, Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores y Escultores), to which the communist muralists David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera then belonged, founded a small newspaper to serve as its primary organ, running articles that criticized the government, opposed imperialism, and offered a communist perspective on events. The paper was named *El Machete*, evoking the long knife that could be used as much to “cut cane” as to “behead vipers” in the paper’s motto.⁷ In 1925, the paper became the official organ of the PCM as a section of the Comintern, playing host to discussion and debate between members and sympathizers and diffusing the Party’s positions to a national and international readership, which by the 1930s included subscribers as far as New York, California, and Chicago.⁸

El Machete was more than a communist newspaper: its explicit connection to the Comintern, of which every issue’s header reminded readers, transformed it into a key platform to convey and discuss the Soviet experience in its applicability to the Mexican case, and thus into an early Bolshevizing project. At a time when Mexico’s leadership, under Plutarco Elías Calles, was looking

⁷ David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Masthead from “El Machete,”* 1924, Photo-relief and letterpress, Sheet: 9 3/16 × 18 5/16 in. (23.3 × 46.5 cm), 1924, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/716828>.

El Machete has been studied extensively as pertains to its early-days connection to Mexican muralists and graphic arts. These articles also offer overviews of *El Machete* writ large. See Robert Herr, “‘El Machete Sirve Para Cortar La Caña’: Obras Literarias y Revolucionarias En ‘El Machete’ (1924-1929),” *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 33, no. 66 (2007): 133–52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25485833>; John Lear, “La revolución en blanco, negro y rojo: arte, política y obreros en los inicios del periódico El Machete,” *Signos Históricos* 9, no. 18 (2007), <https://signoshistoricos.izt.uam.mx/index.php/historicos/article/view/255>.

⁸ *El Machete*, No. 413, 6 June 1936, p. 4.

to the Soviet Union as one example of a state-building project, the government often commissioned or sponsored trips to the Soviet Union for diplomats, intellectuals, and laborers, whose resulting dispatches often ended up not just on government desks but in the pages of *El Machete*. Through this channel, contributors' reflections found their way into the public sphere;⁹ the readership of *El Machete* may be small and mostly urban, but this meant that it was concentrated among intellectuals participating in policy discussions of the time, whose readership thus involved them in the potential Bolshevization represented by the paper.

As one of the most important features of both the Soviet and the Mexican modernizing projects, education was a frequent subject for these dispatches, and an area where the Bolshevizing impulse was most clearly felt. In February of 1925, *El Machete* ran "Education in Soviet Russia" by Rafael Ramos Pedrueza, a teacher, diplomat, and intellectual who had been sent on a SEP-funded trip the previous year to document cultural changes in the U.S.S.R.¹⁰ Ramos Pedrueza would later become one of the most recognizable PCM members in the sphere of education, and he was already involved with the PCM when he adapted his recollections for an article in *El Machete* on Soviet education and its lessons for Mexico. The piece spotlighted Soviet policymakers Nadezhda Krupskaya and Anatoly Lunacharsky as the "great educators of the Russian people,"¹¹ who had succeeded in

⁹ In my discussion and understanding of the public sphere, I am much indebted to Prof. Alfonso Salgado and Prof. Pablo Piccato, whose courses on the public sphere in Latin America were crucial in developing a framework for the writing of this thesis. I am also borrowing from Michael P. Johnson's tacit interpretation of newspapers, even small ones, as windows into the discussions then important to specific sectors of society. See Michael P. Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (October 2001): 915–76, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2674506>.

¹⁰ The complete portrait of Ramos Pedrueza's life and work is impossible to glean from any one source. Relevant for this section, he served as a Congressional Deputy between 1921-1923 and at the conclusion of his legislative term was commissioned by President Álvaro Obregón to undertake a 6-month trip of Europe (including the U.S.S.R.), part of which was financed by the SEP. For details about his life, see Javier Rico Moreno, "Rafael Ramos Pedrueza," in *Diccionario de La Revolución Mexicana*, ed. Javier Torres Parés and Gloria Villegas Moreno (Mexico, D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2010), 589–92, https://hal.science/hal-03820380v1/file/90_Diccionario%20Rev.%20Mex%20c2021%20OCR%20Opt%20P.pdf; Carlos Sola Ayape, "Marxista y revolucionario. El mexicano Rafael Ramos Pedrueza y su lectura de la Guerra Civil española," *Revista Complutense de Historia de América* 50, no. 1 (June 17, 2024): 259–75, <https://doi.org/10.5209/rcha.95838>; Carlos Sola Ayape, "Hagiografía de Javier Mina, en clave marxista: Rafael Ramos Pedrueza y su exaltación del guerrillero navarro y héroe nacional de México en el cardenismo," *Araucaria* 44, no. 2 (2020): 563–84, <https://doi.org/10.12795/araucaria.2020.i44.26>; Rafael Ramos Pedrueza, "Pedro Moreno," in *Lecturas históricas mexicanas*, ed. Ernesto de la Torre Villar, vol. 4, 5 vols. (Mexico, D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 2015), 251–55, https://historicas.unam.mx/publicaciones/publicadigital/libros/lecturas/T4/LHMT4_026.pdf; and "B Colección Rafael Ramos Pedrueza," Archive directory, Censo - Guía de Archivos de España y de Iberoamérica, accessed March 8, 2025, <http://censoarchivos.mcu.es/CensoGuia/fondoDetail.htm?id=1261226>.

¹¹ Krupskaya was Lenin's wife and the Soviet deputy education commissar from 1929 to 1939. Anatoly Lunacharsky was the first head of the People's Commissariat for Education, from 1917 to 1929.

“saturat[ing]” the culture, from theaters to libraries and museums, with “Lenin’s thought and will.” Ramos Pedrueza also described and praised Soviet schools, “each a little Soviet,” for their station as coeducational hubs of political activity, and similarly praised the School of Agriculture. The article ended on the “vehement wish” that readers “engrave in your consciences, that it is the first time in human history that a prodigious effort with stupendous success ... has transformed the mentality of the Russian people, ... preparing that people for a new life, through proletarian culture.”¹² Implicit in this wish was the Bolshevizing hope that Mexico, through the intellectuals in whose “conscience” such a lesson was to be “engraved,” would do the same.

Notably, some of the calls for and opinions on education in the pages of *El Machete* read practically like socialist education rehearsing its lines, well before the term entered serious contention in pedagogical debates. As early on as January 1925, the paper reported on a contest held in the U.S.S.R. to find “the best Soviet school teacher,” whose criteria stipulated that “the teacher [be], in his village, a powerful lever that sets in motion not just the schooling work, but also all of the region’s cultural activity.”¹³ The vision of the schoolteacher presented in this report, as not just an educator but as a nexus for the political and cultural life of his students, dovetailed almost perfectly with the vision for teachers that socialist education would advance almost a decade later. In this, *El Machete* also differentiated itself from other contemporaneous educational discussions, largely focused on expanding schooling rather than defining the role of teachers—which socialist education would later emphasize.

El Machete’s treatment of education not only squared with what would later be the vision of socialist education, but mirrored its characteristic language of ‘prejudice’ and ‘defanaticization’ before it had even begun to be used in official terms. A series of reports on the 1928 V Congress of the PCM devoted a column in the July 7th issue to the Party’s resolutions on anticlericalism, which had determined that the Party should “3) Educate the mass and free it from all prejudices” and “5) Demand that antireligious education be instituted in schools, to make of children free men and not slaves of prejudice.”¹⁴ Though the ‘antireligious’ school here espoused by the PCM was closer to the

¹² *El Machete*, No. 31, 5 February 1925, pp. 3-4.

¹³ *El Machete*, No. 30, 22 January 1925, p. 3.

¹⁴ *El Machete*, No. 122, 7 July 1928, p. 2.

vision of the almost-atheistic rationalist school, the language of “prejudice” would later appear in the proposed reform to Article 3, which established that State education must “fight fanaticism and prejudices.”¹⁵ Similarly, in March 1929, *El Machete* printed the CSUM’s demand that, as a step in the fight against clericalism, the government must undertake a “permanent educative labor, tending toward the defanaticization of the people, without clumsily hurting the sincere religious sentiment.”¹⁶ The word “defanaticization,” again, would become a hallmark of socialist education, connected to Article 3’s consignment to “fight fanaticism.” Beyond the word match, the article’s discursive strategy emphasized the anti-clerical element of socialist education while cautioning that it did not imply an opposition to religion altogether. The same discursive strategy would be employed by Lázaro Cárdenas to court support from the more moderate wings in his early-presidency struggle for power with Plutarco Elías Calles, whom these wings perceived as a rabid atheist; once socialist education was in place, Cárdenas would employ it again in the face of mounting opposition from the clergy. That the rhetoric employed by the President to assert and defend his educational project had appeared in a small communist newspaper half a decade earlier shows *El Machete*’s influence in shaping discourses around public education.

Pieces like these, as this section has argued, show not only that “school was in the air” in the 1920s, but that the PCM was very much *in there* with it. Through the discourse in *El Machete*, the PCM participated in the early currents that fed into socialist education, and was thus involved in propitiating the radical discursive climate that would become dominant in the 1930s. Influenced as it was by the Soviet model, the PCM’s involvement also makes it possible to identify a Bolshevizing streak in such discourses. Though Vicente Lombardo Toledano often gets the only credit as an early diffuser of socialist education (and while it is certainly true that he was its earliest public defender), a closer reading of where and when education is featured in *El Machete* shows that the PCM also participated in these discussions, early on espousing the line that eventually became the government’s. How these pieces transcended the sphere of the press to enter policy discussions was no mystery: among *El Machete*’s readership (and the PCM’s membership) were many SEP

¹⁵ Bojórquez, “DECRETO que reforma el artículo 3o y la fracción XXV del 73 constitucionales.”

¹⁶ *El Machete*, No. 155, 9 March 1929, p. 2.

functionaries—with some, like Pedrueza, even contributing pieces—through whom the reflections and ideas in the pages of the paper found a direct channel to influence official policy.

The SEP and its In-House Communists

The SEP had been notoriously accommodating to radical politics since its earliest days, and its leftist pitch reached a high during the Cárdenas administration, in part due to the communist sympathies of his two Ministers of Education. The first of the two, Ignacio García Téllez (Minister from 1934 to mid-1935), was tolerant of communists at best and a rumored communist at worst: in a series of oral history interviews in 1964 and 1965, former President Emilio Portes Gil recalled that, though García Téllez may not have been a communist, he certainly encouraged them “as was the fashion,” and remembered having to walk back, as PNR President between 1935 and 1936, the Minister’s declarations that “Mexico was going toward communism.”¹⁷ Even if these recollections are not entirely accurate, they reveal that García Téllez was proximate enough to communist elements to warrant such rumors, or at least deeply immersed in the radical ‘fashion’ of the time. In mid-1935, García Téllez was replaced by Gonzalo Vázquez Vela to quell mounting opposition; his exit also marked socialist education’s exit from its initial ultra-radical, anti-clerical phase.¹⁸ But Vázquez Vela, who was Minister until the end of Cárdenas’s term, would prove no less radical than his predecessor. In 1938, Vázquez Vela declared dialectical materialism to be the groundwork of Mexican education, and distributed pamphlets to that end with writings by Marx, Lenin, and Stalin.¹⁹ Though Vázquez Vela was not a confirmed member of the PCM, his inclusion of Stalin among the socialist canon aligned him more closely with the Comintern sphere, especially in the wake of Trotsky’s 1937 arrival in Mexico. Under Vázquez Vela, a growing number of communist functionaries entered the SEP’s high places, known in the parlance of the time as *rojillos* (“little reds”). The most famous of the *rojillos* was Luis Chávez Orozco, who had entered the SEP in 1934 as the Secretary of Libraries by invitation of Ignacio García Téllez and in 1936, by Vázquez Vela’s recommendation, was appointed the

¹⁷ James Wallace Wilkie and Edna Monzón de Wilkie, *Frente a la Revolución Mexicana: 17 protagonistas de la etapa constructiva: entrevistas de historia oral*, vol. 4: Candidatos y presidente, Cultura universitaria. Serie Historia (México: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2004), 40; 114–15.

¹⁸ Quintanilla and Vaughan, *Escuela y Sociedad En El Periodo Cardenista*, 59.

¹⁹ Herman, *The Comintern in Mexico*, 115.

Subsecretary of the SEP and tasked with articulating the mission and procedure of socialist education for functionaries around the country.²⁰ Chávez Orozco had been recognized as a foremost historian of Mexico since the early 1930s and, despite claiming never to have held PCM membership, was well-known as a virtual communist.²¹ Even if not card-carrying PCM members, the communist sympathies of the SEP's highest leaders pushed an already-radical SEP farther to the left.

Under these leaders, vocal PCM members reached the highest ranks of the SEP bureaucracy. Among them were José Mancisidor, who led the Department of Secondary Schools; Marco Arturo Montero, the Chief of the SEP's Radio Section; Roberto Reyes Pérez, head of the "España-México" group; Rafael Ramos Pedrueza; and Luis G. Monzón, who in the 1920s had been the country's first (and only) communist senator.²² Monzón had been a prime conduit through which *El Machete's* Bolshevizing element reached policy circles: his recollections of his voyage to the U.S.S.R. became the longest such dispatch published in the paper, spanning several issues, and his pamphlet *Details of socialist education implementable in Mexico*, which he wrote as a SEP functionary, drew on his time in the U.S.S.R. to frame Mexican history in Marxist terms and hold up schools as an area of resistance to capitalism.²³ These functionaries helped to populate programs with texts both sympathetic to, and avowedly communist. Notable selections included Chávez Orozco's *Historia patria* [*National History*] as an elementary history textbook, and PCM member and teacher labor leader Gaudencio Peraza's

²⁰ James Wallace Wilkie and Edna Monzón de Wilkie, *Frente a la Revolución Mexicana: 17 protagonistas de la etapa constructiva: entrevistas de historia oral*, vol. 1: Intelectuales, Cultura universitaria. Serie Historia (México: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2004), li; 57.

²¹ Chávez Orozco made this claim in Wilkie and Monzón de Wilkie, 1: Intelectuales:103. However, Victoria Lerner in *La Educación Socialista* identifies him as the most famous *rojillo* and a known communist by his colleagues and contemporaries.

²² Monzón had been a representative to the Constitutional Congress of 1916-17. He served as a senator for Sonora between 1917-1918 and held the distinction of being the only communist senator when he served again for San Luis Potosí 1922-1924—a distinction for which he was often fêted in the pages of *El Machete*: a January 1925 issue, with Monzón fresh off his term, offered a small profile on him, an invitation to a talk he was delivering, and information about where and how to publish pamphlets he had written. After his senatorial term was over, Monzón took a trip to the U.S.S.R., contributing multiple installments of his impressions for the paper over 1926. Monzón's piece was given enough space, over enough issues, to cover virtually every aspect of his visit in detail. See *El Machete* No. 30, 22 January 1925, p. 3.

For a complete list of Mexican Senators, see Manuel González Oropeza, "Los senadores de la república," in *Las facultades exclusivas del Senado de la República*, ed. Senado de la República, LX Legislatura (Mexico, D.F.: Editora Laguna, S.A. de C.V., 2008), 110; 114, <http://ru.juridicas.unam.mx:80/xmlui/handle/123456789/11934>.

²³ Herman, *The Comintern in Mexico*, 115–17; Lerner, *La Educación Socialista*, 65; 87; Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921-1940*.

Alma Proletaria [*Proletarian Soul*] for 2nd grade reading.²⁴ Abetted by the radical climate that pervaded in the Ministry, PCM members across all areas of the SEP were able to influence the pedagogical orientation of the socialist education reform.

Nowhere was this influence more visible than in the Institute of Socialist Orientation (IOS, Instituto de Orientación Socialista). The IOS was created in December 1934, following the reform of Article 3, to “establish the normative principles of Elementary Education[,] base of the whole educational system[,] and prepare the individual [teacher] for the service of the community for a more equitable regime of the socialization of the means of production.”²⁵ The IOS was not the first overseeing organ created by the SEP; however, it was tasked with more than oversight, intended “to serve,” in Engracia Loyo’s phrasing, “as [a] compass in the agitated sea of confusions generated by the reform of Article 3,”²⁶ directing the application of the reform and ensuring that it was neither distorted by teachers nor exploited by groups looking to project their own agenda onto it. The IOS held teacher training courses in cities, established Cultural Missions to extend its reach to rural schools, and published materials intended to help teachers assimilate the socialist education policy on their own.

PCM members were deeply involved in IOS missions. As part of the courses taught in the Cultural Missions, Ramos Pedrueza taught “Organization and administration of rural socialist schools” and “Interpretation and technique of the subjects of the program in the socialist school,” while PCM member and communist teacher Enrique Corona taught “Social sciences in the socialist elementary school.”²⁷ At a more localized level, several of the leaders of specific Cultural Missions were also PCM members—such as Alfonso Ramírez Altamirano, the Head of Cultural Mission No. 7 in

²⁴ Beatriz Concepción Adaya Carrillo, “El Instituto de Orientación Socialista: Catálogo Histórico” (Bachelor’s degree, Mexico, D.F., Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1998), 325; 327, TESIUNAM, https://repositorio.unam.mx/contenidos/el-instituto-de-orientacion-socialista-catalogo-historico-299036?c=ympq6&d=false&q=*&i=1&v=1&t=search_1&as=0.

In Mexico, it is possible to complete a bachelor’s degree through a thesis that catalogues an archival repository; Ms. Adaya Carrillo’s work is one such thesis, cataloguing materials pertaining to the IOS.

²⁵ The quote’s awkwardness is not an error of translation but a faithful recreation of the stilted tone of the original statement as quoted in Adaya Carrillo, 15.

²⁶ Engracia Loyo, “El Instituto de Orientación Socialista y la formación del maestro revolucionario (1935-1937),” in *Lázaro Cárdenas: Modelo y Legado*, vol. 3 (Mexico City: INEHRM, 2009), 235, https://inehrm.gob.mx/recursos/Libros/Lazaro_CardenasMLT3.pdf.

²⁷ Adaya Carrillo, “El Instituto de Orientación Socialista: Catálogo Histórico,” 329–30.

conservative Jalisco, who identified himself as such in a May 1936 letter to *El Machete*.²⁸ Furthermore, among the materials that the IOS diffused to teachers were communist classics like Engels's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*; revolutionary literature like Max Beer's *Social Struggles and Modern Socialism*; and writings by Nikolai Bukharin and a selected few Mexican Marxists.²⁹

Because the character of the reform had to be defined and applied as soon as possible, the IOS worked on overly ambitious timelines, hosting intensive “crash courses” for teachers to assimilate what the reform demanded of them. The most important of these sessions was held in Mexico City's Palace of Bellas Artes in early 1935, drawing some 500 attendees from the surrounding area; the contents would later be reprinted in brochures and distributed around the country.³⁰ To judge how well teachers had adopted the policy's prescriptions (and to ensure attendance), the IOS asked teachers for short essays on one or all of the course's subjects, to be turned in a month after the end of the course.³¹ Several names associated with the PCM were in the roster of instructors for the Bellas Artes campaign. Marxist intellectual and SEP Director of Fine Arts José Muñoz Cota³² taught “Proletarian Arts and Literature,” while “Mexican Social and Economic History” was taught by indigenist anthropologist Miguel Othón de Mendizábal, a communist sympathizer whose own work looked to the U.S.S.R.'s treatment of “nationalities” as a prospective model for how Mexico ought to handle questions of indigenous governance.³³ Even the lecture title betrayed a *rojillo* perspective,

²⁸ *El Machete*, No. 407, 13 May 1936, p. 2.

²⁹ Loyo, “El Instituto de Orientación Socialista y la formación del maestro revolucionario (1935-1937),” 261.

³⁰ Loyo, 248–49; Adaya Carrillo, “El Instituto de Orientación Socialista: Catálogo Histórico,” 23–24.

³¹ The Bellas Artes campaign comprised eight subjects: “History of Religions,” which traced the origin of religious sentiments from prehistoric times and the role of the church since the Middle Ages; “History of the International Labor Movement,” which chronicled the First, Second, and Third International; “History of the Mexican Labor Movement;” “World economic and social history;” “Mexican economic and social history;” “Cooperativism,” which explained what it was and provided recommendations for the implementation of cooperatives in elementary schools; “Proletarian Arts and Literature,” which gave suggestions on how to incorporate the teaching of art into the classroom; and “Modern Education Systems,” which surveyed the different educational currents in Mexico, from the time of the church-led schools to the present reform, and offered distinctions between the Deweyan progressive school, the labor school, and the socialist school, presenting the latter as the culmination of educational systems. A list of courses and instructors is in Adaya Carrillo, “El Instituto de Orientación Socialista: Catálogo Histórico,” 23. The summary of course contents is my own, summarized from an analysis of a sample of 379 pages of teachers' essays, including roughly equivalent proportions of each subject. Materials come from “Trabajos breves sobre los cursos de educación socialista, sustentados en el Palacio de Bellas Artes,” Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Educación Pública (AHSEP), box 259/3089/1 and box 259/3089/2.

³² Wilkie and Monzón de Wilkie, *Frente a la Revolución Mexicana: 17 protagonistas de la etapa constructiva: entrevistas de historia oral*, 2004, 1: Intelectuales:liv.

³³ Andrés Medina Hernández, “Un Capítulo En La Olvidada Historia de La Antropología En México (1906-1940): Miguel Othón de Mendizábal, El Constructor,” *Bérose - Encyclopédie Internationale Des Histoires de l'anthropologie*, 2019; Juan Rodríguez Cuéllar, “La cuestión nacional y la Leyenda Negra en México: Othón de Mendizábal y Berzunza Pinto,” *La Razón Comunista*, March 6, 2022,

as Luis Chávez Orozco himself had been the first historian of Mexico to use the formulation “social and economic history” in the title of a book.³⁴ Arguably the most central lecture—the lone pedagogical topic—was “Modern Education Systems,” taught by Rafael Ramos Pedrueza.³⁵ The selection of a confirmed PCM member for the task of articulating the vision of socialist education to its practitioners displays the importance of communists in shaping it.

As such, the material in some courses went explicitly beyond nationalist and crypto-socialist ideology and towards the global communist line as espoused by the PCM. “History of the International Labor Movement” asked teachers to interpret the First, Second, and Third International as a movement born of the work of the “fighter and genius thinker” Karl Marx.³⁶ Similarly, though the view of the church advanced in “History of Religions” would seem at first pass to fit the *callista* and *cardenista* opposition to the clergy, the IOS did not in fact reflect this exact opposition. Whereas Calles viewed the Church as the enemy of the State and Cárdenas treated it as an obstacle to modernization, the IOS displayed a decidedly communist conceit, presenting a view of the church as exploiter—espousing the PCM’s own critique of the clergy as acting in tandem with reformists, imperialists, and landowners in oppressing the people. The IOS course even adopted the language of the Comintern’s VI Congress, which had described the Church as “the agency of the former ruling class,” and which then trickled down into teachers’ characterization of “religion [as] the medium of which the capitalists have availed themselves to exploit the proletariat.”³⁷ Just as the Comintern’s VI Congress had dictated that



An *El Machete* cartoon with the PCM’s stance toward the Church, depicting “Imperialism. Reformism. Clergy” stepping on a worker/peasant figure. From *El Machete*, No. 17, 16-23 October 1924, p. 1.

<https://www.larazoncomunista.com/post/11-6-la-cuestión-nacional-y-la-leyenda-negra-en-méxico-othón-de-mendizábal-y-berzunza-pinto-iii>.

³⁴ Wilkie and Monzón de Wilkie, *Frente a la Revolución Mexicana: 17 protagonistas de la etapa constructiva: entrevistas de historia oral*, 2004, 1: Intelectuales:lii.

³⁵ Adaya Carrillo, “El Instituto de Orientación Socialista: Catálogo Histórico,” 23.

³⁶ AHSEP, box 259/3089/1, exp. 5, p. 6.

³⁷ AHSEP, box 259/3089/1, exp. 1, p. 16.

communist education efforts “must prevent all church interference in State-organised educational affairs,”³⁸ IOS courses led participating teachers to the conclusion that socialist education reform could not complete its liberating mission without combatting religion. Teachers would later be individually blamed for being too fanatical in their anti-clergy actions; however, for many teachers this was not a natural inclination but a change that took conscious, instructional work. Another teacher’s conclusion that



Be Alert Workers!! Behind the Priest is the Rich Man who Exploits us
An *El Machete* cartoon, representative of the PCM’s stance toward the church. The priest’s speech bubble reads “Obey your patron blindly and resign yourself to your poverty so you can earn heaven and the 50000 indulgences...” From *El Machete*, No. 19, 30 October-6 November 1924, p. 2.

the Church will always be the biggest obstacle to progress and because it has always been the ally of all exploiters and she herself has organized one of the best systems of exploitation, as it is impossible to evade supported as it is by concepts that seem as if of divine origin, thus socialism has in its program the anti-religious fight,

though in agreement with the communist view of the church as exploiter, was still marked by the conspicuous crossing-out of a capital C at the beginning of the word “church,” to be replaced with a lowercase one.³⁹ Teachers were unlearning the conventional reverence for the institution, ingrained in the Catholic culture of Mexico, as an active part of their IOS instruction. More than individual

³⁸ “The Programme of the Communist International, Comintern Sixth Congress 1929: IV. The Period of Transition from Capitalism to Socialism and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.”

³⁹ AHSEP, box 259/3089/1, exp. 22, p. 20.

zeal, it was IOS guidance that infused socialist education with an anti-clerical bent, from which the Cárdenas administration would attempt to backtrack starting in mid-1936, but which fit neatly with the PCM's own attitude toward the Church. The same insight can be extended to the IOS at large: despite being blamed on their own political proclivities, the communist ardor of which individual teachers were later accused bore the direct imprint of the IOS's program, shaped as it was by the PCM's line.

This section has argued that PCM members were crucial in shaping the policies of socialist education from the top down: in their roles as SEP functionaries, communists wielded considerable influence over both the logistical and pedagogical aspects of the reform, into which the Party line often found its way. But if communists had been well-placed among those directing socialist education, they were even more influential among those enacting it: the teachers.

Skin in the Game

In his comprehensive study of teachers as a labor group in the 1930s, David L. Raby argued that “the most important factor in the success or failure of a school was inevitably the teacher himself,” as teachers were the chief translators of SEP policy at regional and local levels, charged with making the State's project legible to those who were to be integrated within it.⁴⁰ As it became clear that rural education was inseparable from the social and economic development of the countryside, teachers became political actors: they assembled villages into production cooperatives and sanitation brigades, organized workers into associations, and mobilized peasants to claim their stake in the *cardenista* program of land reform. Aware of their role as social agents, teachers as a labor group were more politicized than their counterparts: in socialist education, teaching was inseparable from the larger project of integrating the destitute population into the modernizing, equitable state, and it was teachers who confronted that destitution on the daily.⁴¹ Teachers thus became “vanguard agents of

⁴⁰ Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921-1940*, 18; Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, 12.

⁴¹ This claim is beautifully made in Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921-1940*, 94. Raby's account is more stirring and rhetorically powerful than any summary I could give it, and worth reading in full.

the state in its efforts to penetrate the space of private capital,” facilitators of the broader social change of land reform to which education was central.⁴²

Given the significant communist input in their pedagogy and the radicalism to which their profession was inclined, it comes as no surprise that teachers were overrepresented in the PCM. Teachers made up a third of the total party membership, its second-largest constituency after workers—who, at 36%, were even then a narrow majority.⁴³ Of 40,000 teachers in the country, this meant that about one in eight were registered communists, while as many as half were non-member sympathizers.⁴⁴ The Party had been keenly aware of this popular base, and acted accordingly: in the earliest days of the Cardenas administration, PCM communications consistently included “teachers” in their definition of the working class and supported educational struggles, despite still officially opposing Cardenas and the Plan Sexenal.⁴⁵

Teachers’ overrepresentation in the PCM also implied the overrepresentation of communists in teachers’ national labor organizations. Teachers’ labor confederations were broadly dominated by leftist teachers’ unions, among which PCM militants wrought outside influence,⁴⁶ and communist influence in teachers’ unions remained strong when the Cárdenas administration founded the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM, Confederación de Trabajadores de México). The CTM was the largest confederation of labor unions since the CROM’s heyday, and similarly intended to

⁴² Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, 33; Raby, 84–85; 70–72.

⁴³ Though calculating the exact PCM membership is always tricky, most sources seem to agree that teachers made up a third of the PCM’s membership and that membership around that time was likely around 17,000 (see Carr, *Marxism & Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, 57 and Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921-1940*, 91–92). Tellingly, contemporary sources also agree: Vittorio Codovilla of the ECCI and Earl Browder of the CPUSA each quoted the same figures in their reports to the Comintern on the PCM plenary of 1937 (see primary documents in Daniela Spenser, *Unidad a Toda Costa: La Tercera Internacional En México Durante La Presidencia de Lázaro Cárdenas* (México, D.F.: CIESAS, 2007), 376–77; 310).

⁴⁴ Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921-1940*, 91–92.

⁴⁵ PCM, Secretariat of Agitation and Propaganda of the CC. Bulletin no. 5, Organ of the Secretariat of Agitation and Propaganda, 1 March 1934, box 06, code 6, exp. 04, PCM Fond, CEMOS.

⁴⁶ One such union was the Coahuila Federation of Teachers’ Unions (Federación Coahuilense de Sindicatos de Maestros), whose leader, José Santos Valdés, had been an avowed communist with PCM contacts since the early 1930s and who would later become prominent in the party’s ranks. Communists’ influence also stretched to the larger unions: in the early 1930s, the League of Workers in Teaching (Liga de Trabajadores de la Enseñanza) was affiliated to the Communist International of Education Workers, and was led at different points by Rafael Ramos Pedrueza, Miguel Arroyo de la Parra, and Gaudencio Peraza, all PCM members. The League unified with the Federation of Socialist Teachers of Mexico City (Federación de Maestros Socialistas del D.F., itself headed by communist sympathizer Rafael Méndez Aguirre) into the National United Front of Workers in Teaching (FUNTE, Frente Único Nacional de Trabajadores de la Enseñanza). By 1936, the FUNTE had turned into the CNTE, which would become crucial in leadership of the teachers’ unions—and which made no secret about its communist proclivities.

Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921-1940* offers a superb chronicle of the movements, meldings, and metamorphoses of the various teachers’ labor groups during this time period. See pp. 70-79, 115, 142-45.

serve as a pillar for the state. Non-communist elements within the CTM, however, would move to curtail communists' sway in the Executive Committee, relegating PCM member Miguel A. Velasco to the post of Secretary of Education although he had originally won a bigger post: the Secretariat of Organization, Propaganda, and Agreements. Though Velasco ceded the position in the name of "unity at all costs," the incident provoked discontent from the unions in the CTM, who interpreted it as an affront to the democratic principles of CTM governance, and drew especial ire from communist unions: the Secretariat Velasco had ceded was second only to the General Secretariat, and would have given communists a larger stronghold on the union movement at large.⁴⁷ Yet that the CTM could not abide Velasco as Secretary of Organization yet was willing to tolerate him as Secretary of Education demonstrates the larger association between "communists" and "education," transcending the CTM, that existed at the time.

Despite this small setback, communists continued prevailing in labor disputes about education over the more moderate Confederation of Mexican Teachers (CMM, Confederación de Maestros Mexicanos), and the PCM also continued to be an active participant in shaping organized teacher labor. The 30s had been defined by protracted struggles to unify multiple teacher unions into a larger confederation; in 1938, the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM, Partido de la Revolución Mexicana)—into which the PNR had transformed—took a step toward the culmination of that process, founding the Union of Workers in Teaching of the Mexican Republic (STERM, Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Enseñanza de la República Mexicana). Importantly, the STERM had come as the result of a PCM initiative, and in 1939 most of its leadership positions were held by PCM members, among them Gaudencio Peraza and the economist Manuel Germán Parra.⁴⁸ That a PCM project not only enjoyed support from the governing party, the SEP, and the CTM but was allowed to exert influence is testament to the degree to which communists were not only imbricated with education but openly known to be so.

Teachers' labor unions were important because, though teachers were the crucial component of socialist education, in practice they were often mistreated. Teachers were poorly paid: over 50%

⁴⁷ Schmitt, *Communism in Mexico*, 17; Spenser, *Unidad a Toda Costa*, 67.

⁴⁸ Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921-1940*, 70–79.

of magisterial strikes were because of delays in salary, mostly due to states' financial insolvency but often leveraged by conservative governors as tools of political repression. It took an intervention by the government, almost always requested by the national labor union federations, to get states to pay.⁴⁹ But the State could only step in so far: as education was not wholly federalized during this period, the State's ability to guarantee teachers' safety and salary depended on its friendliness with the local governor, and any interventions by the president were viewed as overstepping and politically costly. This also meant that the State could never fully ensure the protection of rural teachers, who suffered persecution, violence, rape, and murder at the hands of local opposition, often with minimal if any prosecution.⁵⁰ The PCM, therefore, had skin in the game in advocating for socialist education: it was concerned not just with defending labor rights, but with defending a substantial coalition of its own members from danger on the field.

This active political stand mitigated the party's opposition to the early Cardenas regime, and helped to enable its popular front turn. One of the earliest overtures on this front was a December 1935 letter from the PCM's Political Bureau to the PNR requesting greater government protections for teachers.⁵¹ In clarifying its position toward the early Cárdenas administration, the letter's tone was somewhat unfriendly, far from the effusive (if conditional) support for Cárdenas that would characterize later communications; this was understandable, as the PCM was contending with how to apply the popular front to a government it had dubbed fascist mere months ago, and remained a little wary of PNR President Emilio Portes Gil, who as President of Mexico had forced the PCM into hiding. Setting down and setting aside these reservations, the letter expressed the PCM's desire for measured cooperation with the government, and laid out a list of demands to achieve this.⁵² One

⁴⁹ Raby, 86–87.

⁵⁰ See Knight, "Mexico, c. 1930–46," 33–34; Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, 12–13, 48. Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921–1940*, 147–97 is a landmark chapter in chronicling the abuses suffered by rural teachers.

⁵¹ One of the signatories of the letter was Miguel A. Velasco, later (controversially) the CTM's Secretary of Education. The letter was followed up 11 days later by a letter proposing the united front and offering support for President Cárdenas and the expulsion of Plutarco Elías Calles, also consulted in the CEMOS archive.

PCM, Political Bureau of the Central Committee. Letter to the National Executive Committee of the National Revolutionary Party in which [the PCM] fixes the position before the government of general Cárdenas and before the PNR and proposes a common and coordinated action of both parties, 6 December 1935, box 07, code 7, exp. 19a. PCM Fond, CEMOS.

⁵² Unitary Syndical Confederation of Mexico. Circular no. 4, to the unitary organizations and to all members of the CSUM. Position of the organization before the elections with the change to the six-year plan as fascist measure by the government, 23 February 1934, box 06, code 6, exp. 03, PCM Fond, CEMOS.

demand was the “Effective defense of peasants and rural teachers against cristero bands,” along with the “disarmament of the White Guards”—paramilitary militias that defended the interests of landowners and local politicians in rural areas⁵³—and the “arming of peasants and rural teachers.” The letter was the firmest, most direct communication the PCM had established with the PNR up to that point; that teachers were included in such a document marks the importance of that sector to the PCM, and reveals the Party’s awareness that teachers, as its largest popular base and as the agents of the PNR’s educational project, were a good channel for the kind of government cooperation the Party needed to fit the new consign of the popular front.

Integrated as they were in both the social fabric of the peasantry and the State project of modernization-through-education, teachers were the metric by which the PCM measured its political advances. As such, those advances were deemed substantial: by the 1937 VI Congress of the PCM, an unofficial midpoint self-evaluation of popular front participation, teachers’ work was particularly emphasized as success stories for PCM initiatives. A delegate from the central state of Guanajuato, for example, deemed that “the magisterial fraction has achieved one of the exemplary conquests of the entire Republic,” achieving control of all seats in the local teachers’ labor group, which allowed them to diffuse PCM policies among other schools in the states. A delegate from the southeastern state of Yucatán regaled attendees with a triumphant tale of how teachers had organized to educate and free peons from local haciendas. A delegate of Sonora declared the success of a teachers’ unification initiative led by communists, which had organized solidarity pacts with all the other unions in the state. And a delegate of the Atlantic coast state of Veracruz extolled how, despite bad conditions, persecutions, and unpaid wages, local teachers had persevered in “conquering” the Technical Central Council that ruled education in the state, and called for other teachers in the country to make similar moves to really “effect the conquests of socialist education and thus ... be

⁵³ Gema Kloppe-Santamaría, “Violence in Postrevolutionary Mexico,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History* (Oxford University Press, August 31, 2021), <https://oxfordre.com/latinamericanhistory/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.001.0001/acrefore-9780199366439-e-859?d=%2F10.1093%2Facre%2F9780199366439.001.0001%2Facre%2F9780199366439-e-859&p=emailAeG0rQ4U1I5Gc>.

able to implant a true school.”⁵⁴ Although some stories may have been embellished,⁵⁵ the strong desire to claim such achievements indicates that the success of communist teachers was widely acknowledged.⁵⁶

El Machete was even more prolific in its publication of teachers’ for a communist readership interested in the advances of the Party and willing to read teachers as representatives of those advances. The paper frequently published stories about teachers organizing,⁵⁷ protesting,⁵⁸ and suffering violence.⁵⁹ Consistent with the role teachers held in socialist education, these articles understood their teacher-subjects primarily as political agents, not individuals. The June 1936 rape of Teresa Valencia in by a group of “rogues” was thus portrayed not as a gender aggression or even a personal attack, but as a “new attempt by the ávila-camachistas”—supporters of the *caudillo* Maximino Ávila-Camacho,⁶⁰ who in 1937 became governor of Puebla, where the attack had taken place—“consummated on the person of the director of the school [emphasis added].”⁶¹ The rape was thus interpreted as a political aggression, channeled through the person of the teacher without being personally directed at her. In the frequent stories it ran about them, *El Machete* interpreted teachers less as individual actors or even pedagogues, and more as a group that could offer communists a foothold in the rural sphere and a stronghold in national labor.

The inclination to treat teachers as political, not personal or pedagogical, subjects was made more evident by *El Machete*’s conspicuous decision not to publish multiple stories written by teachers about their pedagogical labor or individual political action. In May 1936, *El Machete* received a report

⁵⁴ VI PCM National Congress. Records, volume 2, 1937, box 11, code 143, exp. 02, PCM Fond, CEMOS.

⁵⁵ “Embellished” does not mean they were false—the teachers’ takeover of the labor group in Guanajuato also appears in Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921-1940*.

⁵⁶ VI PCM National Congress. Records, volume 2, 1937, box 11, code 143, exp. 02, PCM Fond, CEMOS.

⁵⁷ See *El Machete* No. 408, 17 May 1936, p. 2 and No. 413, 6 June 1936, p. 2 on a union in Cosamaloapan, Veracruz; No. 408, 17 May 1936, p. 2 on a union in Zacatecas; No. 420, 1 July 1936, p. 2 on a convention in Celaya, Guanajuato and a union in Chicontepec, Veracruz that went on strike immediately after forming; and No. 481, 20 June 1937, p. 2 on teachers unionizing in Piedras Negras, Coahuila.

⁵⁸ See *El Machete*, No. 410, 27 May 1936, p. 4 for news of a protest by the Federation of Revolutionary Teachers to demand safety, back pay, and protection from the governor; No. 411, 30 May 1936, p. 4 for news of a mobilization of teachers’ organizations to free jailed teachers in Puebla; No. 419, 27 June 1936, for twin demands from unions in Oaxaca for back pay and in Veracruz for the right to strike; No. 423, 11 July 1936, on a teachers’ strike in Cosamaloapan, Veracruz; No. 427, 30 July 1936, p. 2 on Veracruz teachers’ demands for back pay; and No. 481, 20 June 1937, p. 2 on Sonora teachers’ protest over the state governor’s targeting of the revolutionary element within the magistrate.

⁵⁹ *El Machete*, No. 458, 6 February 1937, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁰ Maximino was the brother of Manuel Ávila Camacho, who would be Lázaro Cárdenas’s successor in the Presidency.

⁶¹ *El Machete*, No. 415, 13 June 1936, p. 1.

by Alfonso Ramírez Altamirano, the head of the IOS Cultural Mission no. 7 in Tizapán, Jalisco, updating readers on the Mission's advances in the socialist orientation and professional preparation of teachers in the region. *El Machete* did not print the missive: it merely printed a blurb about it under the heading "A Report of Extreme Interest," explaining that the report "does not fit materially in our four little pages." Despite the lamentation that this exclusion was "to be terribly regretted, as the comrade's report is of primary importance for the numerous edifying experiences it encases,"⁶² *El Machete* did not offer readers another avenue to access Ramírez Altamirano's report. The same treatment—acknowledging a teacher's report on education only to lament the lack of space to print it—was afforded that same month to Catarino Dávila Martínez,⁶³ writing from a jail in Zacatecas where he had landed for political activities related to his teaching post, and in July to Humberto Gómez Martínez's appraisal of public education.⁶⁴ In its choice to regularly publish pieces that cast teachers as an organized labor group yet to refuse pieces where teachers' roles were individual or pedagogical, *El Machete* reflected the PCM's interest in teachers as its principal base in organized labor, which could therefore offer the PCM the greatest sway of influence at the national level.

This section has argued that the PCM could not but support socialist education: the teachers carrying it out were not only by and large communists, but also represented the strongest foothold the party enjoyed in rural areas and in national organized labor. On the ground, teachers who were members of the PCM therefore took on dual roles: as socialist educators, they were the foremost interpreters of the PNR's project in the countryside; as communists, they were the principal channels through which the PCM could reach a rural constituency and hold influence over the broader labor movement, one of the crucial tasks for any communist party to accomplish. With a widespread presence among SEP functionaries who translated the communist line into the orientation of the reform, and a body of teachers to enact it, this chapter has argued, the PCM was therefore profoundly enmeshed within the theory and practice of socialist education.

⁶² *El Machete*, No. 407, 13 May 1936, p. 2.

⁶³ *El Machete*, No. 410, 27 May 1936, p. 2.

⁶⁴ *El Machete*, No. 410, 27 May 1936, p. 2.

III.

The Weapon and the Shield

Just as the PCM had been instrumental in shaping socialist education in its earlier days, socialist education would in turn become an essential instrument when the Party was seized by a desperate need for self-improvement. Between 1936 and 1937, the Comintern began scrutinizing the PCM more closely, deeming unsatisfactory the Party's internal discipline and its compliance with the popular front. This chapter will argue that, in the face of this scrutiny in its first section, the Party clung to the area of public life it knew best: socialist education. After laying out the reasons behind the Comintern's scrutiny in the first part, the second part argues that, under pressure to improve internal discipline, the PCM turned to the structure and rhetoric of socialist education to overhaul its insufficiently autodidactic system of cadre education, relying on the same set of successes to conceptualize its National School of the Party. Under further pressure to prove its adherence to the popular front, the final section of this chapter will show how PCM invoked socialist education as the foremost proof of its collaboration with the Cárdenas government.

A Party Under Fire

If by 1937 the PCM was finally finding its stride in national politics, the same could not be said for its standing in global communism. The Comintern had seen the PCM as both rogue and insignificant since its founding days, dispatching corrective envoys throughout the 1920s with little effect,¹ and its continued insubordination began to create greater conflict as the Comintern increased its Latin American focus through the 1930s. Almost immediately upon the Comintern's 1930 establishment of a regional authority, the Caribbean Bureau, the PCM came into ill rapport, disobeying directives issued in each of the next two years.² By 1934, the Bureau had fully soured on

¹ The Swiss Edgar Woog, alias "Alfred Stirner," had to repeatedly intervene as a corrective in the PCM's operations during the 1920s, which Jéfets and Reynoso argue is telling of the Comintern's struggle to rein in the PCM. See Victor Jéfets and Irving Reynoso Jaime, "Edgar Woog, alias 'Stirner', y el Partido Comunista de México, 1919-1929," *Historia Mexicana* 72, no. 3 (January 1, 2023): 1361–1412, <https://doi.org/10.24201/hm.v72i3.4584>.

² Sandra Pujals, "'Con Saludos Comunistas': The Caribbean Bureau of the Comintern, Anti-Imperialist Radical Networks, and the Foundations for an Anti-Fascist Culture in the Caribbean Basin, 1927–1935," in *Anti-Fascism in a Global Perspective* (Routledge, 2020).

the PCM, reporting to its Central Committee (CC) that it was too disorganized to meaningfully capitalize on Mexico's wave of labor radicalization. Chief among the Bureau's critiques was the PCM's lack of an appropriate Party education, and the Bureau demanded that the Party "organize in a more serious and effective manner special courses in the regions, and a national school" rather than simply scold members who did not meet its standards.³

The following year, the dual forces of Cárdenas, who granted the PCM legal status, and the Comintern's mandate for popular front collaboration, forced the party into a new position. That October, the party sent its proposed popular front platform to the Comintern, recanting its previous hostility toward Cárdenas and outlining its plan for the popular front—the ninth point of which was "support for 'socialist education.'" The PCM resolved to make recruitment and education a central concern of its activities, planning to improve party discipline by organizing a National School of the Party, expanding its recruiting reach, and developing a culture wherein militants endeavored to improve and educate themselves. The letter's promise was explicit: if it managed to enact all these changes, "the Party [would] achieve ... a powerful popular movement of masses."⁴

Any Comintern goodwill the PCM had accrued by its letter vanished by 1936, as conflicts with the CTM brought the PCM further under fire. At the beginning of the popular front period, the Comintern snubbed the PCM by entrusting CTM Secretary General Vicente Lombardo Toledano with building popular front alliances, deeming him to be better connected to the Cárdenas government than the PCM was (though, as Daniela Spenser has pointed out, the PCM's political marginalization was largely the product of adhering to the Comintern's shifting party line).⁵ Though this was a setback for the PCM's place in the popular front, the Party's growing influence in the CTM promised to reclaim it some ground, enabled by its stronghold among teachers. Yet a growing anti-democratic skew in the CTM since 1936, largely targeting communists, had led to discontent from its PCM-affiliated members. CTM leadership had suspended communist secretaries in the General

³ Absent from the Bureau's appraisal was any acknowledgment of the PCM's clandestine conditions, to which the Party's undisciplined operation during the early 1930s could mostly be attributed. See "The Caribbean Bureau to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Mexico, 15 February 1934. RGASPI, Fond 495, Reg. 108, Exp. 169.," in *Unidad a Toda Costa: La Tercera Internacional En México Durante La Presidencia de Lázaro Cárdenas*, by Daniela Spenser (México, D.F.: CIESAS, 2007), 85–105.

⁴ "Apéndice 1: Carta Que La Delegación Del Partido Comunista de México Ante El VII Congreso de La Internacional Comunista, Dirigió al Comité Central Del Partido a Raíz Del Congreso (Octubre 1935)," 321–23.

⁵ Spenser, *Unidad a Toda Costa*, 78.

Council, prevented communist-heavy labor federations from adhering to the CTM, and relegated the communist Miguel A. Velasco to a lower post despite having fairly won a higher one. Thus, in April 1937, 23 unions containing 55.7% of workers disaffiliated from the CTM. Sensing the potential for a communist upsurge (or, worse, a takeover), Lombardo Toledano appealed to the Red International of Labor Unions and CPUSA General Secretary Earl Browder, accusing the PCM of divisionism within the CTM while highlighting his own credibility as a Comintern agent. The ploy worked: at the June 1937 CC plenary of the PCM, Earl Browder instructed the PCM to stick to national unity, leaving the PCM no alternative but to exhort the disaffiliated unions to return to the CTM. While the PCM was thus able to limit further harm to its reputation in the Comintern, its sway among unions was weakened, as those who had left the CTM in solidarity only to be compelled to return in the name of national unity lost trust in the PCM.⁶ The CTM episode also contributed to the Comintern's impression that the PCM was not fulfilling the popular front, and signaled that by failing to do so the PCM was in dire need of discipline.

Leon Trotsky's arrival to Mexico in January 1937 exacerbated these brewing tensions, threatening to disgrace the PCM in the Comintern's eyes. The arrival turned Mexico into a more important subject in the U.S.S.R.'s foreign policy (and espionage) than the size, sway, or international standing of its communist party warranted, and brought the existing frictions over the PCM's adherence to the Soviet line to a head.⁷ The PCM was by no means pro-Trotsky: in the first issue of *El Machete* after his arrival, the front page was almost rabid in skewering the expatriate, and subsequent issues published a series of heavy-handed cartoons depicting Trotsky in cahoots with Hitler, along with pieces criticizing Trotsky and calling for Cárdenas to expel him.⁸ But the Trotsky affair earned the PCM the distrust of Lázaro Cárdenas, who thereafter saw the PCM as more loyal toward the U.S.S.R. than toward Mexico, especially after the attempts (and ultimate success) at Trotsky's assassination.⁹ Trotsky's arrival, therefore, not only attracted further reproach from the

⁶ For the whole saga of the PCM, the CTM, and the Comintern, see Spenser, 64–69.

⁷ Spenser, 47, 76–81; Barry Carr, *Marxism & Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 67–69.

⁸ *El Machete*, No. 454, 16 January 1937, p. 1; 3.

⁹ Lombardo Toledano was savvy: in private correspondence with Comintern leaders, he was apologetic toward the U.S.S.R. for Mexico's reception of its enemy, but made no public attacks or demands of Cárdenas. The CTM, however, was no less hostile to Trotsky, with Lombardo Toledano viewing him as an ally of Hitler and Trotsky, in turn, deeming Lombardo Toledano an agent of



Top: Hitler holds an armed Trotsky up to a microphone tagged as “Coyoacán Radio Diffusion,” after the Mexico City neighborhood in which Trotsky was living.

Right: a burly worker takes “Trotskyists” by the collars as they hold a bomb over the U.S.S.R., which a Nazi hand is preparing to light. The title, “Cogidos!!” means “Caught!” or “Nabbed!” From *El Machete: periódico obrero y campesino*, No. 458, 6 February 1937, p. 1 (**top**) and p. 3 (**right**).



Comintern, adding to its impression of undiscipline within the PCM, but also cost the Party valuable political currency with the Cárdenas government, in turn fueling the Comintern’s accusation that it had not successfully pursued the popular front.

As an extension of its scrutiny, the Comintern sent Earl Browder and Argentinian agent Vittorio Codovilla to the 1937 Plenary of the CC of the PCM, an unsubtle signal that Party leadership was not trusted to enforce the party line. PCM Secretary General Hernán Laborde could take a hint, and he therefore delivered a speech lauding the virtues of autocriticism¹⁰ as the means to “rectif[y] . . . our mistakes” so that “our party will be able to grow more quickly and on firmer bases,” rhetoric that had become standard fare within the PCM.¹¹ The PCM’s focus on self-criticism, in line with the

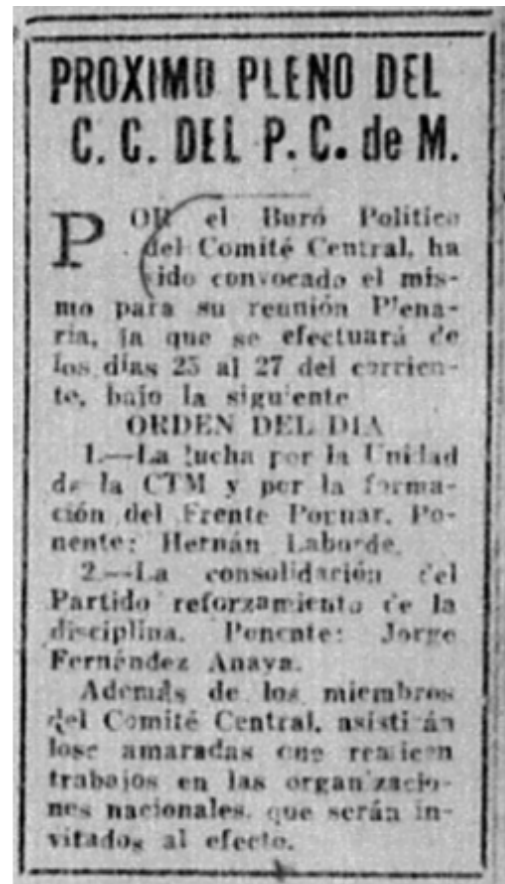
the U.S.S.R. and the intellectual author of the atmosphere of hostility he encountered in Mexico. See Spenser, *Unidad a Toda Costa*, 71–74; Wilkie and Monzón de Wilkie, *Frente a la Revolución Mexicana: 17 protagonistas de la etapa constructiva: entrevistas de historia oral*, 2004, 4: Candidatos y presidente:255.

¹⁰ Instead of the conventional “self-criticism,” I use “autocriticism” to more closely reflect the Spanish *autocrítica*, and thus to match the language of the PCM at this juncture.

¹¹ Vittorio Codovilla a.k.a. Pérez, “Report on the Plenary of the CC of the Communist Party of Mejico, 1 August 1937. RGASPI, Fond 495, Reg. 108, Exp. 194.,” in *Unidad a Toda Costa: La Tercera Internacional En México Durante La Presidencia de Lázaro Cárdenas*, by Daniela Spenser (México, D.F.: CIESAS, 2007), 391.

Comintern's practice during the popular front, had been inaugurated by the Party's October 1935 letter to the Comintern, as the party felt obligated both to publicly acknowledge its failures and to make strategic changes. At the 1937 Plenary, Laborde foregrounded autocriticism to signal to the Comintern that the Party was making efforts to bolster its discipline, though those efforts had begun before the Plenary. Laborde's speech bound up autocriticism with the need for recruitment and for more robust preparation, shaping its approach to discipline to match what the Comintern understood by the term: discipline encompassed the expansion of a party's membership, the preparation of its existing cadres, and the necessary self-critical practice to keep recruitment and education sharp.

Party organs thus became, at least in part, tools of accountability and enforcement within the framework of autocriticism. In a summer 1936 column, *El Machete* singled out individual outposts of the publication for public scrutiny, mostly focusing on basic administrative operations, such as payment due to the paper's central organ. The party was determined to make a show of running a tight ship: even ostensibly positive evaluations, such as for the outpost in Orizaba, Veracruz, paired compliments with critiques ("it is a good administration, but static").¹² The Orizaba report was nevertheless the most positive column *El Machete* ran that summer; that even *El Machete's* points of pride



A small ad in *El Machete* communicating the upcoming Plenary of the CC and its agenda. The two points in the agenda correspond exactly with the Comintern's two imperatives: the PCM would address (1) "the formation of the popular front" and (2) "the consolidation of the Party reinforcement of discipline." Though the agenda was presented without further comment, it was clear that the PCM had taken into account the Comintern's two main reproaches. From *El Machete*, No. 481, 20 June 1937, p. 1.

¹² *El Machete*, No. 419, 27 June 1936, p. 2.

Other outposts evaluated included Torreón (No. 413, 6 June 1936, p. 2), Chiapas (No. 415, 13 June 1936, p. 2), Oaxaca (No. 417, 20 June 1936, p. 2), Chihuahua (No. 420, 1 July 1936, p. 2), Nuevo Laredo (No. 421, 4 July 1936, p. 2), Aguascalientes (No. 422, 8 July 1936, p. 2), Matamoros (No. 423, 11 July 1936, p. 2), and Morelia (No. 427, 30 July 1936, p. 2).

were subject to critique, rather than taken as a local victory, marks the pervasiveness of autocriticism in the Party's mindset during this period. The following summer, in the same issue in which the PCM announced the upcoming CC Plenary, Hernán Laborde penned a piece stating the PCM's new "formula:" "unity at all costs." Under the new formula, rather than criticizing the CTM and Lombardo Toledano for the previous year's fallout,

...we will analyze our own conduct, to discover and autocriticize the errors we may have committed and that may have contributed to creating a situation in which we, the communists, forced to avoid a division we neither wanted nor sought, were unable to avoid it.¹³

The PCM, in other words, was determined to uphold the popular front and to sow no new enemies while doing so, a mission it could only fulfill under the guidance of autocriticism. That such a "formula" appeared in *El Machete*, intended for diffusion among the Party's base, extended the mindset of autocriticism across the broader Party, thereby implicating members in its prescriptions for discipline and popular front unity.

Autocritical attitudes also extended to the evaluation of the Party's prowess in the popular front, reaching even the realm in which it had arguably been most successful: education. At the same VI National Congress of 1937 where regional delegates had sung the praises of their local teachers, party officer Carlos Sánchez Cárdenas delivered a speech arguing that, though communists had certainly intervened in some positions of power within the SEP, they had been "more like stamps stuck on an envelope." Just as "a stamp, without changing the shape of the envelope," helped "a letter to reach its destination," the presence of communists in the SEP had allowed the Ministry to claim "it is following a revolutionary line" without actually having to do so. Sánchez Cárdenas thus claimed that the PCM had moved at the tail of the government, without pushing its own revolutionary line on the educational apparatus its members had joined.¹⁴ This, as the previous chapter has argued, was not true, as communists within the SEP had been instrumental in shaping its more radical elements;

¹³ *El Machete*, No. 481, 20 June 1937, p. 1.

¹⁴ VI PCM National Congress. Records, volume 1, 1937, box 11, code 143, exp. 01, PCM Fond, CEMOS.

however, Sánchez Cárdenas's claim reflected the autocriticism that the Party had adopted to quell the Comintern's demands.

PCM leadership knew that they could not afford to continue to incur the ire of Comintern leadership if they wanted to make meaningful inroads in Mexican politics, which would require demonstrating a willingness to correct internal errors and build discipline. Pairing well with their previous struggles at institution-building, autocriticism satisfied this first point, as a visible demonstration of personal and institutional accountability, and aided in the second, guiding the Party toward enforcing discipline from the ground up. Yet changes in rhetoric would be insufficient to free the PCM from scrutiny, or to sufficiently quell the party's lack of discipline: a systematic and concrete approach was needed, one grounded in the coalescing values of the PCM while still upholding the Comintern-enforced line. What the Party needed, in short, was a system of education—and it knew just where to find it. So, too, did the Comintern: Browder's remarks at the 1937 Plenary that “teachers are key people in the whole country,” and further that “the teacher is the person around whom all kinds of progressivist forces can knit together [*aglutinar*] for the progressivist fight”¹⁵ implied a growing awareness by the Comintern of the role teachers played in the PCM's operations and in the political situation of the country at large. This awareness would not escape the PCM's eye, and, as the next two sections will argue, it would rely on the socialist education that had yielded those teachers to defend itself against the Comintern's incursions.

Appropriating Socialist Education

Systematized education had not been a priority for the PCM throughout the 1920s. Most of its educational initiatives were autodidactic, in line with Bolshevization's prescription that good communists should strive to cultivate themselves, and the didactic role for the Party was to furnish them with the opportunities to do so. *El Machete* was the chief tool of diffusion for these opportunities,

¹⁵ Earl Browder, “Report on the Plenary of the PCM in July, 8 July 1937. RGASPI, Fond 495, Reg. 108, Exp. 1.,” in *Unidad a Toda Costa: La Tercera Internacional En México Durante La Presidencia de Lázaro Cárdenas*, by Daniela Spenser (México, D.F.: CIESAS, 2007), 311.

announcing public lectures and courses by socialist intellectuals and leaders;¹⁶ advertising pamphlets and books of socialist theory; and running a “Marxist Education” column that abridged or serialized key texts of communism, as well as clarified the Party line.¹⁷ Educational opportunities were scattered and standalone, announced almost cursorily in the communist press and boosted only by admonitions to readers that “one cannot be a good militant if one does not know the theories.”¹⁸

The opportunities diffused through *El Machete* did not exist in a vacuum of communist theory, but were connected to the Mexican context and the project of Mexican public education. Advertised lectures often took place in SEP buildings,¹⁹ an early—if diffuse—connection between communist education and the official school apparatus. Advertisements for books and pamphlets also offered memorabilia emblazoned with revolutionary leaders’ images, including that of Emiliano Zapata, who appeared before Lenin, Marx, and former Soviet ambassador to Mexico Alexandra Kollontai on the list of revolutionaries whose photographs were for sale. By placing Zapata first in the pantheon of revolutionaries, *El Machete* connected its own project of communist revolutionary diffusion to the broader revolutionary

LIBROS
A 35 CENTAVOS.
"Socialización de la Sociedad", por Augusto Bebel.
"El Socialismo Agrícola", por E. Vandervelde.
"La Humanidad Futura", por Gustavo Hervé.
"La Revolución a Través de los Siglos", por A. Hamou.
Análisis de la Situación Internacional (Tesis del Partido Comunista de México). 10 Cts.
Medallones de LENIN, en yeso.
9 Cms. de Diámetro \$ 1.00
40 Cms. de Diámetro \$ 5.00
FOTOGRAFÍAS A \$ 0.50
Zapata, Lenin, Marx, Kollontay. Dibujos proletarios, tallados en madera y una serie de fotografías simbólicas.
Colección de 12 Canciones Revolucionarias \$ 0.15

Ad for books, pamphlets, and communist memorabilia in *El Machete*. From *El Machete*, No. 118, 9 June 1928, p. 4.

¹⁶ Lectures and courses advertised included a talk by the German professor Alfons Goldschmidt, a course on class struggle by the CPUSA leader Bertram Wolfe, and conferences by Diego Rivera on the Soviet Union and by the Bolivian revolutionary Tristan Moroff.

Advertisements for those events appear in *El Machete*, No. 5, first fortnight of May 1924, p. 7 (Goldschmidt); No. 17, 16-23 October 1924, p. 4; No. 19, 30 October-6 November 1924, p. 4; No. 28, 8-15 January 1925, p. 4; No. 30, 22-29 January 1925, p. 3 (Wolfe); and No. 120, 23 June 1928, p. 1; 4 (Rivera & Moroff).

¹⁷ The “Marxist Education” column ran, in the summer of 1928, a series on “The ABCs of Communist Politics,” which defined key terms in Marx (i.e. “wage,” “surplus,” “capitalism”), laid out the basics of Lenin’s *Imperialism*, tackled the agrarian question, and concluded by describing the role of the Party. In November of that 1928, the column reproduced Engels’s “Principles of Communism,” and in January 1929 began a serialization of the Communist Manifesto, which continued until it had been printed in its entirety. After the “left turn” in 1928, the column reinforced the anti-anarchist party line by running a text by Max Strypyansky (possibly a pen name) critiquing Peter Kropotkin’s anarchist theories, especially conspicuous given the anarchist roots of the Mexican left wing.

For the series “The ABCs of Communist Politics,” see *El Machete*, No. 113, 5 May 1928, p. 3; No. 115, 19 May 1928, p. 3; No. 117, 2 June 1928, p. 3; No. 125, 4 August 1928, p. 3; No. 126, 11 August 1928, p. 3. For Engels and the Manifesto, see No. 138, 7 November 1928, p. 2; and No. 147, 12 January 1929, p. 3. For the anti-anarchist critique, see No. 154, 2 March 1929, p. 3.

¹⁸ *El Machete*, No. 113, 5 May 1928, p. 3.

¹⁹ The 1924 talk by Prof. Alfons Goldschmidt took place in the SEP courtyard, while the 1928 talk by Tristan Moroff was hosted at the National Preparatory School. See the respective announcements for those events.

project of 1920s Mexico, thus making its own initiatives more legible to a Mexican public. The “Marxist Education” column performed a similar maneuver, including in its series “The ABCs of Communist Politics” a section on the agrarian question and thereby folding the most important promise of the Mexican Revolution into the communist scope.²⁰ These advertisements marked some of the first notable efforts to craft a distinctly communist education that was at the very least compatible with the values of the Mexican Revolution.

Though *El Machete*'s diffusion capabilities were the PCM's foremost avenue of cadre education during the 1920s, this did not mean that the Party was ignoring more organized means of education, and several such initiatives began appearing in the latter part of the decade as the PCM gained its footing. Toward the end of 1927, the local branch of the Party in Mexico City began offering courses on “History of the Proletariat,” “Historical Materialism,” and “Foundations of Communism” as part of its weekly sessions.²¹ By 1928, the Party had set up a small-scale “Workers’ School,” which continued to offer courses in theory and history²² and began organizing mass cultural events, such as a January 1928 “great rally” in memory of Lenin that promised lectures, singing, and even a screening of Sergei Eisenstein’s “intense revolutionary drama” *Strike*.²³ Though it never reached the status of a national schooling structure, the Workers’ School represented the PCM’s earliest efforts at organizing a cadre education, in which members could become not just communists but active members of the Party. The school even offered a course about the first five years of the PCM’s existence,²⁴ an early attempt by the Party to bring its members into contact with its history and to foster a culture of belonging to it. It also offered courses to train teachers in its “revolutionary teaching method” so as to expand the potential reach of the school,²⁵ thereby ensuring its educational apparatus could be reproduced and improved and representing an effort, years before the IOS, to train teachers in a socialist pedagogy for the diffusion of socialist materials. Any progress in formal education,

²⁰ *El Machete*, No. 125, 4 August 1928, p. 3.

²¹ *El Machete*, No. 94, 24 December 1927, p. 3.

²² *El Machete*, No. 97, 14 January 1928, p. 2.

²³ *El Machete*, No. 98, 21 January 1928, p. 1.

²⁴ The course promised to take students through a history of the PCM’s foundation, its interactions with the labor movement, and its relations with the Soviet Union. The curriculum for the course was also printed in full in *El Machete*, making a distilled version of this institutional history available to readers at large. *El Machete*, No. 101, 11 February 1928, p. 2.

²⁵ *El Machete*, No. 118, 9 June 1928, p. 3.

however, was dashed by the repression of the PCM in the early 1930s, which reduced its ability to access SEP spaces for public lectures and to publicly announce details of meetings and courses—compounded by the government destruction of the printing plants for *El Machete*, through which those opportunities reached the Party's members.

When the PCM returned to legality and *El Machete* returned to printing, the newspaper continued to function as a diffuser of educational opportunities. It invited readers to lectures and cultural events,²⁶ advertised books and pamphlets (now published by its own press),²⁷ and ran a column excerpting communist theory that fit the PCM line, which became largely devoted to anti-Trotsky writings from 1937 onward.²⁸ It also added a column of artistic criticism, in which the International Red Aid-affiliated²⁹ critic Gastón Lafarga reviewed movies and plays deemed to have revolutionary import, assessing the pieces' revolutionary qualities on equal or higher terms as their artistic merits.³⁰ Lafarga's review of *Fuenteovejuna*—Lope de Vega's classic Baroque play about a group of peasants who lynch their oppressive commander, and band together in collective solidarity when they face retribution—opened with an address to the Minister of Education that the play “be represented at no cost and with prior explanation to the workers of the country and the city.” Workers and peasants, the review considered, stood to learn from the rural protest and solidarity in the play, from the “eternal heroism of the people” that was as much visible “in Fuenteovejuna in the XVII century” as “in Asturias in 1934, [and as] in Matamoros Laguna and Opichén in 1930 and 1934,” thus connecting the lesson of the play with similar resistance in the Spanish Civil War and the Mexican countryside.³¹ Revolutionary culture thus clearly carried an educational function; that *El Machete*, its

²⁶ One such event was a free July 1936 homage to Maxim Gorky at the Palace of Bellas Artes in Mexico City, hosted by the communist-affiliated League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (LEAR) and featuring the exiled Spanish actress Margarita Xirgú, the leftist Mexican composer Silvestre Revueltas conducting the National Symphony Orchestra, and a speech by Vicente Lombardo Toledano on the new U.S.S.R. constitution—which reportedly received a standing ovation. See *El Machete*, No. 419, 27 June 1936, p. 1.

²⁷ *El Machete*, No. 413, 6 June 1936, p. 1.

²⁸ *El Machete*, No. 454, 16 January 1937, p. 3.

²⁹ Gastón Lafarga to Silvestre Revueltas, “Carta de Gastón Lafarga a Silvestre Revueltas,” March 27, 1936, Portal de datos abiertos UNAM, Biblioteca Digital Silvestre Revueltas, https://datosabiertos.unam.mx/FaM:BDREV:EP_AM06.

³⁰ Among the pieces Lafarga reviewed were the film *Sanders of the River*, starring the African American communist Paul Robeson; Jean Bommart's play *Blanc et Rouge*, which depicted interactions between Lenin and Trotsky in a manner Lafarga found unsatisfactory; and the Margarita Xirgú company production of the Spanish baroque classic *Fuenteovejuna*, which Lafarga praised heartily. See *El Machete*, No. 411, 30 May 1936, p. 3; No. 414, 10 June 1936, p. 3; No. 417, 20 June 1936, p. 1.

³¹ *El Machete*, No. 417, 20 June 1936, p. 1.

chief distributor, looked to the SEP to amplify it was only possible in a context where individual communists had made inroads into the Ministry.

Lafarga's column reflected a growing trend within *El Machete* of the mid-1930s to explicitly equate cultural diffusion with revolutionary action. An advertisement for books from the publisher Ediciones Frente Cultural claimed that "our books represent more bread, more land, more wages, more culture and popular freedom," explicitly tying the attainment of revolutionary ends to the purchase of cultural materials.³² This relation extended to the circulation of *El Machete*: in June 1937, the paper began a campaign to get all PCM members to subscribe.³³ Writing at the top of the front page, the CC member and prominent railroad labor organizer Valentín Campa reminded readers that "revolutionaries, but above all, communists, are obligated to undertake serious efforts to augment the sales and radius of subscribers."³⁴ Even as he acknowledged that *El Machete's* "content and its presentation needed to develop," Campa's exhortation included cultural diffusion within the revolutionary duties of a communist, and the campaign to get all members to subscribe to *El Machete* was adopted as an official resolution of the Party's CC the following month.³⁵

The campaign to turn all PCM members into *El Machete* subscribers reflected the main problem with the Party's primarily autodidactic educational strategy: the supply of opportunities, however profuse, was not



Ad in *El Machete* to order a set of revolutionary books from the publisher Ediciones Frente Cultural." From *El Machete*, No. 481, 20 June 1937, p. 2.

³² *El Machete*, No. 423, 11 July 1936, p. 1; 4; No. 424, 15 July 1936, p. 1. *El Machete*, No. 481, 20 June 1937, p. 2.

³³ *El Machete*, No. 481, 20 June 1937, p. 2.

³⁴ *El Machete*, No. 481, 20 June 1937, p. 1.

³⁵ Codovilla, "Report on the Plenary of the CC of the Communist Party of Mejico, 1 August 1937. RGASPI, Fond 495, Reg. 108, Exp. 194.," 377.

matched by a corresponding demand. If it actually wanted its members to learn, the Party could not simply rely on them to take individual initiative and scold them when they did not—an approach for which the Bureau of the Caribbean had already reprimanded them in 1934. Thus, when the 1937 CC Plenary foregrounded the threat to the PCM’s standing in the Comintern unless it improved its discipline, the Party began looking inward toward a new education system to do exactly that. It did not need to look very far.

With years of experience shaping and enacting socialist education, the PCM’s imported many of its lessons into its own internal efforts at cadre education, adapting the rhetoric and structure of socialist education to its needs. The rest of this section will trace those adaptations and argue that, as the Party continued to work through its educational direction, its concept for education became profoundly entangled with the socialist education it had used to give it shape.

The July 1937 CC Plenary had clearly spooked the PCM: at its VI Congress the next month, the first point of order called for the National School of the Party to be organized in no more than three months. The antidote for the undiscipline with which the Comintern was unhappy was education: “Educational work,” Laborde said in his opening remarks, “must be combined with the constant struggle for the reinforcement of Party discipline . . . against deviations.” Laborde’s call came immediately after a denouncement of Trotsky, leaving no doubts as to what those “deviations” were and tracing a direct connection between the PCM’s need for discipline and its need to prove adherence to the Comintern line, here expressed as opposition to Trotsky.³⁶ The Congress’s General Resolution placed education as the Party’s mission: to be successful, the PCM must transform into a true party of the masses, for which it would have to transform members into militants through schools, study circles, collective readings, and literary diffusion. The National School of the Party must be formed, along with regional schools, as settings for the fight for party discipline.³⁷

Education and discipline thus became almost synonyms in the PCM’s vocabulary: an educated member of the Party was a disciplined member, and a member could not be disciplined without being

³⁶ VI Congress of the PCM. Report on the first point of order of the day of the VI Congress of the PCM, 21-25 January 1937, box 09, code 9, exp. 01, PCM Fond, CEMOS.

³⁷ General Resolution Adopted by the VI Congress. The PCM in the struggle for the popular front, for the defeat of reaction, and for the development of the Mexican revolution, January 1937, box 09, code 09, exp. 01a, PCM Fond, CEMOS.

educated. As had been the goal of the Comintern's program for cadre education, this semantic link between education and discipline trickled down from the CC, with its Comintern preoccupations, to leaders of local branches, who began seeing in education a solution to their own recruitment deficiencies. In the first issue of *El Constructor del Partido* (*The Builder of the Party*), a publication of the PCM's National Commission of Organization, leaders in the prominent PCM states of Veracruz and Yucatán cited the importance of organizing the National School of the Party and emphasized the role that education would play in solving their recruitment and retainment problems.³⁸

Increasingly, then, the teacher came to be understood not just as an educator, but as an instrument for recruitment and for the discipline required to make that recruitment successful. The two articles in *El Constructor* had come after a larger piece on "The Role the Teacher Plays in the Construction of our Party," which concluded that "our party must use [the teacher] in its work to construct and reinforce discipline." More than an agent of discipline, however, the article cast the teacher as the nexus between the PCM and the masses. As a figure in daily contact with the people, the teacher was uniquely positioned to slowly earn their trust, and therefore to serve as the vehicle through which the Party program could reach them.³⁹ The teacher thus represented the Party's best-positioned agent to carry out the twin directives of reinforcing discipline and expanding recruitment. This role was not new, but one that teachers already had experience with. The project of socialist education expected them to serve both as educators and as social agents, carrying the modernizing imperative of the new Mexican State to its most rural reaches and making sure it took root there. The PCM's demand was thus but an expansion of the same role, asking teachers to bring the good news of communism in addition to the gospel of the State. To the PCM, the teacher was as much a party organizer as a socialist educator—or, more accurately, could be a Party organizer *because* he was already a socialist educator.

Socialist education was clearly the framework under which the PCM was trying to define its own educational imperatives, and this became most apparent when the Party called a Pedagogical Conference in February 1938. The Pedagogical Conference had two essential tasks: to define to all

³⁸ PCM, National Commission of Organization. "El constructor del Partido", no. 1, pp. 3-7, México, D.F., 16 November 1937, box 09, code 9, exp. 05, PCM Fond, CEMOS.

³⁹ PCM, National Commission of Organization. "El constructor del Partido", no. 1, pp. 2-3.

its members what the party line was in regard to the “Socialist School” and to study the most effective pedagogical methods in use, as well as the best ways to ensure that teachers would follow them.⁴⁰ It is not sufficient, however, to read the Pedagogical Conference merely as an opportunity for the PCM to present its platform on socialist education, as other scholars have done.⁴¹ By these objectives, the PCM was too late to the punch: socialist education had been undergoing a rightward shift since 1936, which just the next month after the Conference would be exacerbated by the reaction to the national government’s expropriation of oil. Besides, many of the exponents at the Pedagogical Conference had been deeply involved in shaping the program of socialist education from within the SEP, implicating the PCM line in the project. The Conference did provide a forum for the PCM to voice its thoughts about socialist education, but was by no means the first avenue through which it did so; rather, the Conference’s real importance is that it reveals how profoundly socialist education influenced the PCM’s approach to intra-Party education and discipline.

The Conference solidified the PCM’s existing line that the teacher was a crucial Party instrument, and thus that education was tantamount to discipline. In his inaugural speech, Secretary General Hernán Laborde argued that the PCM was obligated to participate in socialist education because of a “duty to the people,” following every mention of “duty” by noting that its necessary corollary was the education of Party members. “The best way to become good communists,” Laborde concluded, “is study linked to struggle; and the best way to win the people for a consequential revolutionary position consists on educating them.”⁴² Laborde’s speech made the stakes of the Conference clear: good communists were not just educated, but educators—a role which, though framed by the socialist teacher, compelled PCM members to become invested in propagating Party discipline.

Discussions that were otherwise about socialist education were therefore veiled opportunities to discuss Party imperatives, the most conspicuous of which was the Comintern-mandated imperative

⁴⁰ Hernán Laborde, Inaugural speech of the Pedagogical Conference of the CP of Mexico, p. 1, 193[8], box 08, code 8, exp. 10, PCM Fond, CEMOS.

⁴¹ For examples of this treatment, see Elvia Montes de Oca Navas, “La disputa por la educación socialista en México durante el gobierno cardenista,” *Educere* 12, no. 42 (September 2008): 497 (though Montes de Oca misidentifies the date of the Pedagogical Conference as February 1937); and Gerardo Peláez Ramos, “Trabajadores y propuestas educativas: tres conferencias,” News blog, *Rebelión* (blog), August 4, 2014, <https://rebelion.org/trabajadores-y-propuestas-educativas-tres-conferencias/>.

⁴² Hernán Laborde, Inaugural speech of the Pedagogical Conference of the CP of Mexico, p. 7.

for discipline. In the first keynote speech of the Conference, the teacher and labor leader Gaudencio Peraza provided an overview of the educational reform's successes and shortcomings, proposing that teachers should be promoted based on teaching merit rather than achievements in the sphere of labor organization or revolutionary action. This was not merely pedagogical concern; merit-based promotions, which would detach ostensible displays of party loyalty from promotions, would help test teachers' true revolutionary spirit and discipline.⁴³ During the second day, Laborde intervened to argue that one of the main problems of socialist education was the frequent desertion of the job by teachers, for which they must propose concrete measures of control and discipline.⁴⁴ "Control," presumably, was in the SEP's hands; "discipline" could be in the Party's. And in the final keynote speech, teacher Ignacio Márquez R. proposed that communist teachers make a concerted effort to go among the soldiers, who could learn their "historical role" from the teachers while the teachers could learn discipline from them, thus solidifying the communist's dual educated-educator role.⁴⁵

Márquez was speaking about the Popular Education Campaign (CEP, Campaña de Educación Popular), a 1937 initiative by the SEP to eradicate illiteracy within three years after it declared literacy the first basic step toward socialist education.⁴⁶ The CEP had brought together the CTM, the UNAM, the Workers' University, the SEP, and individual teachers in a common pursuit; thus, the PCM viewed it as the truest link between the government and teachers, and the truest manifestation of the popular front.⁴⁷

⁴³ *Hacia Una Educación al Servicio Del Pueblo: Resoluciones y Principales Estudios Presentados En La Conferencia Pedagógica Del Partido Comunista*, Ediciones Sociales Internacionales (Mexico: Imprenta Mundial, 1938), 34–35.

⁴⁴ *Hacia Una Educación al Servicio Del Pueblo*, 158–59.

⁴⁵ *Hacia Una Educación al Servicio Del Pueblo*, 188–89.

⁴⁶ The CEP was one more in a series of literacy campaigns undertaken by the government as one of the most basic promises of the Mexican Revolution: in 1910, at its outset, 72.3% of the population over 10 years of age could not read or write, whereas by 1930 that number had fallen to 61.5%. The CEP focused on indigenous people and adult workers, and was widely diffused through the press, the radio, and festivals, which all drew ordinary Mexicans into the "army of literacy." However, it had only limited success: by 1940, the literacy rate had fallen only a few points to 58.2%, and the total number of illiterates had actually grown by approximately 320,000.

For a review of the SEP's literacy campaigns, see Alba Alejandra Lira García, "La alfabetización en México: campañas y cartillas, 1921-1944," *Traslaciones: Revista Latinoamericana de Lectura y Escritura* 1, no. 2 (December 2014): 134 and Louise Schoenhals, "Mexico Experiments in Rural and Primary Education: 1921-1930," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 44, no. 1 (February 1, 1964): 22–43, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00182168-44.1.22>. For historical literacy statistics, see "Educación," in *Estadísticas Históricas de México*, 4th ed., vol. 1 (Aguascalientes, Ags.: Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, 2000), 100, https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenido/productos/prod_serv/contenidos/espanol/bvinegi/productos/integracion/pais/historicas/EHM%202.pdf.

⁴⁷ *Hacia Una Educación al Servicio Del Pueblo*, 173–74.

Márquez's reading of the CEP not only presented this view, but revealed the connections between the PCM's stance on education broadly and its developing plans for a party education. Márquez weighed in on the CEP's initiatives to prepare teachers (including institutes of professional preparation, an increase in normal schools, and the establishment of mail-in courses for teacher preparation) to judge that Communist teachers must target the problem themselves with collective libraries and study circles, moving away from "anarchic disorder."⁴⁸ Collective libraries and study circles represented a shift in the burden of learning from the individual to the group, which not only made it easier for the Party to hypothetically retain control over learning environments—an organized group was easier to oversee than the "anarchic disorder" of each individual—but also marked a departure from its previous emphasis on autodidactic communist education. Márquez's determination that the first task of the CEP should be to create a structure for its realization belied the fact that such a structure, implicit in the initiatives he had already referenced, was already under construction—and out of the PCM's hands. Such a determination, then, more closely mirrored the PCM's own imperative to assemble a structure for their own cadre education, echoing the 1937 calls for the construction of a National School of the Party. As for who should be in charge of such structures, Márquez considered that "one of the most interesting aspects of the work of the CEP [was] the formation of *dirigentes* [leaders], of active agents who organize groups, shock brigades, and who canalize the daily tasks of the education of the people." Within the CEP, it was teachers who must serve as these *dirigentes*, while also "fostering private initiative" to make every worker, peasant, and student a leader in improving the groups they belonged to.⁴⁹ Though referring to teachers, Márquez's words could have just as well been used to describe cadres, whose task was to sow and direct communist action among the masses they belonged to; his description of the *dirigentes* was thus one more manifestation of the communist's educated-educator role in its application to party discipline. All considered, the PCM's resolution at the end of the conference that the fulfillment of the CEP must be a central task of the Party was more than an assertion of the popular front: it was an implicit

⁴⁸ *Hacia Una Educación al Servicio Del Pueblo*, 192.

⁴⁹ *Hacia Una Educación al Servicio Del Pueblo*, 191–96.

acknowledgment that the Party had begun to think about its own methods of education, and that the framework in which it was doing so was intimately connected to the blueprint of socialist education.

Still, a framework was not enough, and over the next year the PCM struggled to raise the education of its cadres, let alone get an organized Party school network off the ground. At the VII Congress of the PCM in January 1939, Hernán Laborde continued to place the Party's low political level as one of its main problems, judging that "the party is growing without consistency, ... lacking the iron discipline, solidity, and consistency, that befits a Communist Party" and delivering his often-quoted determination that "we have a party of cotton and we need a party of iron." To fix these issues, Laborde stated, the Party needed a National School with regional and local outposts. It also needed to develop a monthly Party magazine as a real "theory organ," to correct misconceptions about revolution and to "widen, reinforce, and elevate the Party cadres and help us form the thousands upon thousands of new leaders we need now." The VII Congress was motivated by the awareness that this was a critical moment for the Party, which had grown quickly over the past three years, to either continue to grow and progress or else stagnate and regress. Raising the political level of its growing membership was the only way to ensure that the latter would not happen.⁵⁰

To this end, the PCM had created a Commission for Education, but testimonies by regional leaders at the VII Congress made clear that the Commission's labor was insufficient and called for a more effective centralized education. As a speaker summed it up, "we need cadres, many cadres, thousands of cadres"—but the Party needed to go beyond just saying it needed cadres and create instead the norms that would yield them. Creating cadres entailed "the training of national organizers," as "our knowledge is very meager," and the only way to increase this knowledge was to acquire "experiences" by collaborating between regions, with a functional National School of the Party as the arbiter of this collaboration. The testimony of a Oaxacan delegate was a case in point: though he coincided on the paramount importance of cadre creation education, his branch of the Party was brand new and in one of the country's poorest states, meaning it held few of the industrial jobs that may lead to an organic syndical education. The Oaxacan delegate suggested that the Party

⁵⁰ Congress of the PC of Mexico, "United by one candidate, against fascism and following the work of Cárdenas," in *La Voz de México*, no. 133, Mexico, D.F., 30 January 1939, box 13, code 11, exp. 01, PCM Fond, CEMOS.

develop a national uniform syllabus for all party schools, to reduce the disadvantage of PCM branches at the margins of the Party's urban strongholds. Another speaker considered that the existing National School of the Party was "insufficient" to generate the requisite number of cadres: "in the way in which the National School of the Party is working, it [would] yield them in ten years." The same speaker laid out the deficiencies in the PCM's education network and offered proposals to address them, such as a traveling course through which teachers would explain the stakes of the upcoming presidential election of 1940 to people across the country. But these ambitious proposals were met with a reminder of the limitations the Party faced in implementing them: after the speaker presented them, a voice from the audience yelled out, "We need money."⁵¹ Taking account of the issues raised at the Congress, the Party set out to improve its national education structure.

In October 1939, the PCM's National Commission of Education and Literature circulated a series of recommendations to state and sectional committees for the organization of their schools. Written by Jorge Fernández Anaya—who had presented the five points for party discipline at the 1937 Plenary and was now in charge of the Commission—the circulars represent the clearest documented proposal for a cohesive Party education system. The basic unit of the Party school would be the sectional school, one per each sectional cell, which cell leaders would be required and cell members invited to join. After the sectional schools were up and running, the Party could build state schools, from which the students for a National School of the Party could then be selected. The term of study would be one trimester, and the plan of study would be in five parts: 1) the problem of War; 2) the recent September Plenary of the CC and the application of its political line, especially as it pertained to the upcoming presidential election; 3) the problems of illegal struggle and the defense of the Party; 4) Party statutes; and 5) history of the Bolshevik Communist Party, a vestige of the old Bolshevizing imperative. All schools, the circular concluded, should be up and running by the first week of November, so that a full trial trimester could be completed in time to be discussed at the Extraordinary Congress, upcoming in March 1940.⁵² A follow-up circular made it clear that the

⁵¹ VII National Congress of the Mexican Communist Party, vol. 2, 1939, box 14, code 144, exp. 02, PCM Fond, CEMOS.

⁵² PCM. National Commission of Education and Literature. Circular no. 2, to the state and sectional commissions of education and literature of the party. Regarding the organization of party schools, Mexico, D.F., 31 October 1939, box 13, code 11, exp. 08, PCM Fond, CEMOS.

Commission really meant it: “this movement is generalized across the Republic and it is not convenient for anyone to fall behind in the work, as it would harm the collective labor and lag relative to the other [state and local] Committees.”⁵³

Though these plans represented a “collective labor,” the Party still “recognized that the best method of study is the individual one.” More than an ideological conviction, individual study was a logistical necessity: the circular’s emphasis on attendance records and its reprimand to existing schools for not already keeping them made evident how decentralized the whole enterprise of cadre education was, without enough trained cadres to work toward it being otherwise. As centralization would not occur overnight, “our principal preoccupation in the Schools must be to give our comrades the fundamental elements of Marxism and a method by which they can continue their study themselves and be capable of orienting themselves in the different problems” facing each cell.⁵⁴ Individual learning, therefore, was important both as a logistical concession and as a desired competency, whereby members would learn to think for themselves in the face of changes.

The latter part was especially important because both communism and country were on the verge of major change. In August 1939, the Nazi-Soviet Pact had strained the popular front, forcing communist parties worldwide to contend with the fallout. More immediately, the ongoing project of the Mexican state was about to be put to the test by the 1940 presidential election, which would elect as the successor of the revolutionary Cárdenas either the moderate general (and Cárdenas pick) Manuel Ávila Camacho or the businessman Juan Andreu Almazán—whom the PCM dubbed the “enemy” in the official materials it distributed to sectional schools.⁵⁵ The threat of imminent change amplified “the obligation all communists have of studying on the same course,” not only “to be true guides of the masses” but because otherwise they may “constantly become disoriented before the multitude of changes that are operating with such speed, in our country, with the motive of the presidential electoral campaign and the consequences of the current inter-imperialist war.”⁵⁶

⁵³ PCM. National Commission of Education and Literature. Circular no. 3, to the state and sectional commissions of education and literature of the party. Regarding the organization of study circles, Mexico, D.F., 31 October 1939, box 13, code 11, exp. 09, PCM Fond, CEMOS.

⁵⁴ PCM. National Commission of Education and Literature. Circular no. 2, p. 2.

⁵⁵ PCM. National Commission of Education and Literature. Circular no. 2, p. 3.

⁵⁶ PCM. National Commission of Education and Literature. Circular no. 3, p. 1.

Educated communists, therefore, were asked not only to be at the vanguard of the Party, but of the country at large. This demand echoed that made of socialist teachers at the beginning of the Cárdenas years, who were called to serve as the vanguard of the Mexican state project. For the PCM, the drive for a party education had become entangled with the imaginary of socialist education.

This entanglement transcended rhetoric, as the grassroots structure of the PCM's schools mirrored the structure of their socialist education counterparts. The PCM had placed the sectional school as its basic unit and main center of action, from which a central school could then be built. In so doing, it had eschewed the Comintern-sanctioned PCF model of building the party school around a flagship institution even as it retained other key features, such as Bolshevization. The PCM's approach drew from its experiences with socialist education, whose own units of focus were rural schools outside of principal enclaves. It was in those settings that the PCM, through the third of its membership represented by teachers, had encountered education—and therefore only natural, as its own conception of education became increasingly entangled with that of the socialist reform, that it would replicate those same settings. The decentralized format would also enable communists to continue participating in socialist education, and therefore fulfill the dual educated-educator role that the PCM had prescribed for its members.

This section has argued that the PCM's experience of socialist education gave it the rhetoric and structure with which to begin conceiving its own educational system, so as to satiate the Comintern's demands for recruitment and retention. Initially, the PCM based its approach on the figure of the socialist teacher, whom it viewed as both a key agent in recruitment and a model of what a cadre should be. As the PCM drew on socialist education to shape its party education, the two became entangled in its imaginary, creating an image of a good communist as simultaneously educated and an educator, and whose strivings in one direction were inextricable from the other.

Socialist Education as Defense

In giving it the vocabulary to develop a system of Party schooling, socialist education had already provided the PCM with a tool to address the first deficiency—undiscipline—for which the Comintern had reprimanded it. It would also prove a useful defense in addressing the second deficiency—the realization of the popular front. In direct addresses to the Comintern and its

emissaries over the late 1930s, the PCM would consistently invoke socialist education as proof of its engagement with the popular front, to fend off charges to the contrary levied against it.

Socialist education had entered the Comintern's awareness at the beginning of the popular front era. An early report on the PCM to the Comintern, most likely by a PCM leader, gave a mention of socialist education its own paragraph, explaining that

The 'socialist education,' which Calles conceived almost exclusively as a demagogic and anticlerical maneuver, with Cárdenas acquired all the signification of an advanced program of educational reforms linked to some material help to poor children, such as school breakfasts, trips, and vacation camps.⁵⁷

This description somewhat mischaracterized socialist education, but did so in a way that would have been legible to the U.S.S.R., as Soviet educational initiatives often provided “material help” of the kind described in the letter. Despite this skew (or perhaps behind it), the paragraph was an eager demonstration of the PCM's willingness to fall in line with the popular front, distinguishing between Calles and Cárdenas's takes on socialist education as if to prove—as the Party's 1935 letter had promised—that the Party had indeed internalized the popular front and reevaluated Cárdenas accordingly.

After the 1937 Plenary, having been reprimanded by Earl Browder and the Comintern as to their fulfillment of the popular front, the PCM needed to prove its adherence to it, for which socialist education proved again an accessible tool. In a May 1938 speech at the Convention of the CPUSA, Hernán Laborde acknowledged that “our Party is still politically weak and its leadership is not sufficiently mature;” however, he foregrounded that admission with a boast that “the Mexican government has established a system of education—the socialist school—that is the most advanced in the world outside the Soviet Union,” with which the PCM was collaborating.⁵⁸ It was, to be sure, a boast: scarcely three months earlier, at the Pedagogical Conference, Laborde had been quick to

⁵⁷ “Report on Mexico for the Comintern, n.d., 1935. RGASPI, Fond 495, Reg. 17, Exp. 251.,” in *Unidad a Toda Costa: La Tercera Internacional En México Durante La Presidencia de Lázaro Cárdenas*, by Daniela Spenser (México, D.F.: CIESAS, 2007), 185.

⁵⁸ “Speech of Hernán Laborde at the Convention of the Communist Party of the United States, New York, 31 May 1938. RGASPI, Fond 495, Reg. 108, Exp. 203.,” in *Unidad a Toda Costa: La Tercera Internacional En México Durante La Presidencia de Lázaro Cárdenas*, by Daniela Spenser (México, D.F.: CIESAS, 2007), 341; 336.

point out the “concrete problems” in socialist education for the party to address.⁵⁹ Yet Laborde’s remarks at the Convention were not meant to render a faithful portrayal of Cárdenas’s reforms; rather, by stressing the ‘socialist’ nature of the school and its similarities to the U.S.S.R., Laborde sought to highlight an area where the popular front had succeeded, so as to offset the subsequent acknowledgment of his own Party’s weaknesses—which Earl Browder, in attendance at his own party’s Convention, had been the Comintern’s agent in communicating.

That same year, Laborde addressed a memo on Mexico to the Comintern, listing all of Lázaro Cárdenas’s achievements and among them “the Socialist School, a very advanced system of education, an entire complex of measures to take the country out of its semi-feudal lag and elevate the cultural and material life of the people.”⁶⁰ Socialist education, Laborde knew, was all but dead by then: Cárdenas had already nationalized oil and begun moving rightward in the face of international reaction, and prominent *rojillos* had already been removed from the SEP’s ranks. At home, the PCM had mirrored the rightward shift, resolving at the Pedagogical Conference that teachers should pay more attention to their pedagogical labor than their revolutionary action and walking back the anti-clerical bent that had found its way through its members into the IOS materials.⁶¹ But on the global communist stage, Laborde continued to hold the line on socialist education, raising it as a testament to the popular front and the PCM’s participation in it. That it was a bluff, as he must have known all too well, was less important than the opportunity to highlight the area of government where the PCM could be argued to have had the most popular front influence—all the more important since, after the whole 1937 debacle with Lombardo Toledano and the CTM, the PCM could no longer claim its presence among labor unions as another such area. Again, socialist education was the easiest shorthand for the PCM to defend its popular front prowess.

In the mid-1930s, the PCM was forced to grapple with a perfect storm of issues, all of which placed it under the Comintern’s scrutiny: the imperative to carry out the popular front, the arrival of an avowed Soviet enemy on Mexican soil, and a labor dispute that robbed it simultaneously of its

⁵⁹ *Hacia Una Educación al Servicio Del Pueblo*, 158–62.

⁶⁰ Hernán Laborde, “Memorandum about Mexico Written for the Comintern, n.d., 1938. RGASPI, Fond 495, Reg. 17, Exp. 212,” in *Unidad a Toda Costa: La Tercera Internacional En México Durante La Presidencia de Lázaro Cárdenas*, by Daniela Spenser (México, D.F.: CIESAS, 2007), 345.

⁶¹ *Hacia Una Educación al Servicio Del Pueblo*, 75; 72.

syndical influence and of its legitimacy before the Comintern. To maintain its standing as a section of the Comintern, the PCM therefore faced the two imperatives identified in the first section of this chapter: to improve its recruitment and discipline structures, and to prove its adherence to the popular front. As the realm of public life in which the PCM had been most successful, this chapter has argued that socialist education was both the weapon and the shield with which the PCM undertook its pursuit of these imperatives, furnishing the Party with a rhetorical and structural model for its own schools and with a sturdy defense of its popular front involvement.

Conclusion

The PCM's imperative in the 1930s had been to prove itself worthy of each letter in its initialism. Becoming a *Party* in any meaningful way meant overcoming fifteen years of rampant disorder and clandestine operations and establishing itself as a legitimate political bloc, with a disciplined and centralized organization. To earn its designation as *Communist*, the Party had to prove its loyalty to the Comintern and the international communist project of the popular front. And to earn its standing as *Mexican*, the PCM had to defend its place in the project of state-building headed by Lázaro Cárdenas. This thesis has argued that socialist education was the policy through which the PCM tried to attain all three of its goals, looking to it as a template for its own disciplinary reorganization, as proof of its involvement in the popular front, and as an area within the *cardenista* project in which the PCM could (and did) participate.

During the Cárdenas years, the PCM and socialist education were profoundly intertwined, as education was openly the wing of government where the PCM held the most influence. This open secret, however, had its drawbacks. Vulnerable to excess scrutiny, communists acquired a reputation for arbitrariness, corruption, and *chambismo*,¹ which not only decreased the prestige of the PCM in the public eye but also provided ample fodder for right-wing opposition to socialist education.² As *cardenista* policy was forced to the right in 1938, the SEP could no longer afford to be plagued by accusations of communism, and the *rojillos* who made up its most radical wing quietly exited the Ministry that year.³ Yet the mutual influence of the PCM and the SEP was substantial enough that, for some teachers and functionaries, their mission in the SEP took precedence over their militancy as communists, contributing to a renewed crisis of discipline within the PCM. Teachers who were excessively Jacobin or demagogic in their interpretation of socialist education often drew the ire of other PCM leaders, especially as the imperative of the united front became more pressing. Faced with the competing need to preserve discipline and a teaching sector that was fiercely political on its

¹ *Chambismo* (in the helpful definition of Barry Carr) was a term “frequently employed during 1939 and 1940 [...] understood as a combination of a “jobs for the boys” style and an unseemly and opportunistic searching for positions in the government apparatus and in union bureaucracies.” Barry Carr, “Crisis in Mexican Communism: The Extraordinary Congress of the Mexican Communist Party (First of Two Parts),” *Science & Society* 50, no. 4 (Winter 1986/1987): 405.

² Carr, *Marxism & Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, 58–59.

³ Lerner, *La Educación Socialista*, 175–78.

own unyielding terms, about half of the members the PCM expelled between 1937 and 1939 were educators.⁴ Nonetheless, many teachers harbored leftist sympathies even after the defanging of communists within the CTM, the exit of the *rojillos* from the SEP, and party expulsions. Even if radicalism was par for the course in being a teacher, the extensive and highly visible presence of the PCM within organized teacher ranks during the period when they became a key labor constituency no doubt solidified the continued radical orientation of teachers.

Teachers' radicalism would outlive the socialist education that had first empowered them. The reform to Article 3 had been left unratified since 1934, and when it came around again in December 1939, Congress removed "socialist" considerations from the Article before ratifying a new version. In 1940, when Manuel Ávila Camacho ascended to the presidency, many of the remaining expressly radical teachers and SEP functionaries who had survived the 1938 exit of the *rojillos* were terminated, and the most radical textbooks were withdrawn as well.⁵ Within a year, all remnants of socialist education were excised from the SEP: in its 1941 holistic report, the SEP did not even mention the word "socialist" once, a staggering fact given that the term had named the entire education system only a year prior. The Minister of Education in 1941, Luis Sánchez Pontón, was a leftist and a former IOS instructor whom opposition forced to resign within ten months of his appointment, replaced by a conservative Catholic, Octavio Véjar Vázquez—though he, too, was fired soon, due to his anti-union sentiments (teachers, after all, remained exceedingly radical as a cohort of organized labor). Over the 1940s, socialist education would return as a bogeyman, agitated every so often by conservative sectors to ward off encroaching leftist threats, or trotted out by moderate politicians to court the conservative vote.⁶

The quick and brutal death of socialist education, however, should not be taken to mean that it had no impact. Through the teachers deployed to enact it, the reform improved the material conditions and literacy levels of the villages where it took root, and for many communities it was the vehicle through which the fight for land was organized. By bringing the agrarian promises of the Revolution to the communities most isolated from it, socialist education rendered the school a locus

⁴ Carr, *Marxism & Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, 57–58.

⁵ Lerner, 189–91.

⁶ Carr, *Marxism & Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, 151.

of social activity, a “center of ideological fermentation and social activism,”⁷ and an important site for negotiations between the State and civil society. Socialist education was the means through which the Revolutionary project of the State entered the schools and, through them, the masses; this thesis has argued that, by participating in this reform, the PCM claimed and earned a stake in that Revolutionary endeavor.

But a crisis within the PCM, independent of the waning socialist education, would render the Party unable to continue participating in the Mexican State-building project. In March 1940, the Party called an Extraordinary Congress, where—impelled by the Comintern—it ousted several hundred members, dissolved its Secretariat, and removed key leaders, including Hernán Laborde, its Secretary General since 1929. The expulsion of Laborde, along with his fellow rail labor leader Valentín Campa, would lead thousands of PCM members to abandon the Party and draw an abrupt end to the period of unprecedented growth and influence it had enjoyed during the Cárdenas years.⁸ Many of those who were expelled or resigned with the purges were important leaders in the PCM’s educational front: Gaudencio Peraza and Manuel Germán Parra, who had been keynote speakers at the Pedagogic Conference, left the party, as did teacher labor leaders like the STERM’s Hermenegildo Peña.⁹ Just as the persecution at the start of the 1930s had stymied the Party’s 1920s growth, the Extraordinary Congress halted any advances in party education that the PCM had made since 1937, and a Party School would not be underway again until 1954.¹⁰ Thoroughly weakened, the PCM had no choice but to adjust to the rightward shift that swept Mexican politics during World War II, and in 1945 supported another reform to Article 3 that eliminated socialist education from the constitutional sphere once and for all.¹¹ The reform came two years after Josef Stalin had dissolved the Comintern to appease his wartime allies; ironically, the PCM had followed the defunct Comintern to the last.

⁷ Raby, *Educación y Revolución Social En México, 1921-1940*, 44.

⁸ For a thorough account of the Extraordinary Congress, see Carr, “Crisis in Mexican Communism: The Extraordinary Congress of the Mexican Communist Party (First of Two Parts)”;

Barry Carr, “Crisis in Mexican Communism: The Extraordinary Congress of the Mexican Communist Party (Second of Two Parts),” *Science & Society* 51, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 43–67.

⁹ Carr, *Marxism & Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, 77.

¹⁰ Schmitt, *Communism in Mexico*, 58.

¹¹ Carr, *Marxism & Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, 133.

At the surface level, then, the PCM ultimately failed in its triple pursuit. The outcome of the Extraordinary Congress reflected the Party's inability to satisfy the Comintern even with the reforms it had undertaken (though, given the climate of purges at large, it may better reflect the impossibility of surviving the Comintern in this period) and hampered its ability to continue operating as an organized party in Mexican politics. But even that window of opportunity had already narrowed: the downfall of socialist education had effectively nullified the PCM's foremost area of influence, and the distrust that the Trotsky affair had earned the Party marginalized it in the ruling party's eyes—a stigma that remained as the PRM transitioned again in 1946 into the present-day Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI, Partido Revolucionario Institucional). Yet, as is the view of this thesis, this did not relegate the PCM to irrelevance; rather, its incursions into socialist education place it as an active agent in the political negotiation space of the Cárdenas years, whose influence had a lasting impact. This thesis has traced both directions of that negotiation, using Chapter II to trace the influence of the PCM on the socialist education project and Chapter III to examine the framework that socialist education furnished the PCM with for the construction of its own educational structure.

Tracing the PCM's role within socialist education adds a seldom-acknowledged dimension to the party's legacy, situating it as one more participant in such a project, rather than the marginal role to which it is often relegated by historians who see it as an aberrant curiosity of the Mexican left rather than a fruitful actor in it. Though almost a century removed, the story of the PCM during the Cárdenas years can offer a better framework through which to read the Mexican State in its interactions with the left—especially now that the institutional left, first in Andrés Manuel López Obrador (better known as AMLO) and now in Claudia Sheinbaum, sits on the presidential seat and another left-leaning educational reform is underway. More than just the shadowy work of identifying communist influence in government affairs—work that can too often make the historian feel like J. Edgar Hoover¹²—studying the interactions between an avowed communist party and a heterodox yet radical government can offer a glimpse into the exchanges that shaped both, refusing the idea that only the Comintern's prescriptions guided global communist parties yet also resisting the idea that

¹² Hoover *did* have something to say about communist education in the U.S. See John Edgar Hoover, "1938 Memorandum to Attorney General Homer Cummings and President Franklin Roosevelt on the Spanish Civil War and the New York Workers School," *Science & Society* 68, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 361–63.

communism was an irrelevant actor in 20th century Latin America. The Cárdenas administration remains, both in historiography and in the public imagination, the decisive period in the construction of the modern Mexican State. Any evaluation of its legacy must also contend with the heterogeneous space in which it was forged—a heterogeneity that, for better or worse, included the bogeyman (or, if I may briefly indulge, the specter) of communism.

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