

TORN FROM THE WORLD

A GUERRILLA'S ESCAPE

FROM A SECRET PRISON

IN MEXICO

JOHN GIBLER

CITY LIGHTS
BOOKS

**TORN
FROM THE
WORLD**

A Guerrilla's Escape
From a Secret Prison in Mexico

John Gibler



This PDF file remains the property of
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be
reproduced, copied or used in any way
without prior written permission.

City Lights Books | Open Media Series

CITY LIGHTS
BOOKS

Copyright © 2018 by John Gibler
Translated, revised and expanded from the Spanish original by John Gibler.

All Rights Reserved.

Originally published in Spanish as *Tzompaxtle: La fuga de un guerrillero* by Tusquets Editores (Mexico) in 2014.

Cover design by: Victor Mingovits, victor@mingovits.com

The Open Media Series is edited by Greg Ruggiero.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Gibler, John, author.

Title: Torn from the world : a guerrilla's escape from a secret prison in Mexico / John Gibler.

Other titles: Tzompaxtle. English

Description: San Francisco, CA : City Lights Books, [2018] | Series: Open media series | "Translated, revised and expanded from the Spanish original by John Gibler." | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018007078 (print) | LCCN 2018027884 (ebook) | ISBN 9780872867833 | ISBN 9780872867529

Subjects: LCSH: Tzompaxtle Tecpile, Andrés—Interviews. | Guerrero (Mexico) :

State)—Underground movements. | Ejército Popular Revolucionario (Mexico)

| Disappeared persons—Mexico—Interviews. | Victims of state-sponsored terrorism—Mexico—Interviews.

Classification: LCC F1286 (ebook) | LCC F1286 .G5313 2018 (print) | DDC

972/.73—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018007078>

This PDF file remains the property of
City Lights Books are published at the City Lights Bookstore

261 Columbus Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94133

www.citylights.com

reproduced, copied or used in any way
without prior written permission.

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

CONTENTS

Prologue to the English Edition 17

The Journalists 21

The News Reports 37

They Tear You from the World 55

The Silences 101

The Interview 107

A Piece of Being 133

Writing and Violence 161

The Social Worker and the Lawyer 175

An Incredible Escape 195

The Brothers 203

Tzompaxtle and Nube 219

The Disappeared 243

Endnotes 251

Acknowledgments 262

About the Author 263

This PDF file remains the property of
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be
reproduced, copied or used in any way
without prior written permission.

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

PROLOGUE TO THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION

TORN FROM THE WORLD is a book about Andrés Tzompaxtle Tecpile and his struggle to survive torture and forced disappearance, about the logics, techniques, and infrastructure of torture and forced disappearance, about social struggle and armed anti-colonial insurgency, and about writing. While I worked on the first Spanish edition of this book between 2011 and 2013, I was terrified to see how the State practice of forced disappearance had been incorporated into the tactics used by the entrepreneurs of kidnapping and extortion, how there was a kind of steroid-fueled resurgence of forced disappearances happening under the guise of the so-called War on Drugs. Those forced disappearances continue unabated. No one knows how many people are now disappeared in Mexico, but the only and almost certainly understated official federal number is more than 30,000.

Some six months after this book's original February 2014 Spanish-language publication in Mexico, more than 100 municipal, state, and federal police as well as non-uniformed armed men attacked the students of Ayotzinapa

in Iguala, Guerrero, killing six people, wounding dozens, and forcibly disappearing 43 students. Those students are still being disappeared as I write these words. The present tense here is important, for reasons I discuss in *I Couldn't Even Imagine That They Would Kill Us: An Oral History of the Attacks Against the Students of Ayotzinapa*, published under a different title in Spanish in April 2016 and in English in November 2017.

As I worked on this book in 2013, I never even imagined that on September 26, 2014, the State would forcibly disappear 43 socially committed and combative college students approximately 57 miles away from where undercover military agents disappeared Tzompaxtle on October 25, 1996.

This book screams, or tries to. I have sought to share this with you. It should not be pleasurable. The screams are all around us and within us, and not listening to them makes it too easy to acquiesce, to accept a thinly veiled participation in the machinery that produces the screams of horror. This book aspires to combat such acquiescence, to fight against that machinery and those who operate and benefit from it. And because the screams are not only those of horror and pain, but also those of uprising—confrontation, survival, and struggle.

The structure of this book may seem frustrating to some. I try to share, in a way, the investigator's task with the reader. I show you things, share with you things I've found, but do not alert you to what I believe to be mistakes in different people's memories or reporting, or not, even though I am continually trying to show several things that I believe. But I do not tell you what is true in this

story beyond that I believe in the truth of Tzompaxtle's story, and am sharing with you the reasons why. I share here what various people—several journalists, a lawyer, a social worker, a guerrilla, a brother, a partner—told me, what newspapers printed at the time, and most important, what Tzompaxtle himself told me.

This book is also concerned with the combat that different kinds of truths must face, particularly the ways in which states and courts and lawyers and laws will try to undermine the truths and the truth-telling of people who have suffered—often at the hands of the State, or in a way sanctioned by the State—by seeking out and attacking “errors” in their testimonies. One ambition of this book, in both content and form, is to disarm such strategies of delegitimization and re-victimization by showing how discrete mistakes in memory do not challenge or undermine the truth of traumatic memories, and what is more, often the “mistakes” of memory reveal truths of a different order.

This PDF file remains the property of
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be
reproduced, copied or used in any way
without prior written permission.

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

THE JOURNALISTS

A MAN WALKED UNWORRIED DOWN the street. He wore his hair and beard long and unkempt. He was on his way to the park for a bit of exercise, to run and stretch his muscles. A well-known journalist in Chilpancingo, the capital of Guerrero, his home state, and a man of the Left who often wore T-shirts with images of Vladimir Lenin and Ho Chi Minh, whose friends called him “The Wolf” or “The Fierce Wolf” or “Steppenwolf.” From 1974 to 1981 he worked in Mexico City as a subway train conductor, and there people called him “Locoman.” When he received his first paycheck, at the age of 18, he gave half to his parents and spent the rest taking his friends record shopping. “Pick out any one you like,” he told them. With his second paycheck he bought a stereo. He and some friends helped distribute *Madera*, the clandestine newspaper of the Communist League of September 23, an urban guerrilla group, in the subway. He worked his way through the Carlos Septián García Journalism School, paying tuition with his salary from the subway. After graduation he returned to Chilpancingo and founded the Autonomous University of Guerrero’s radio station, Radio UAG. He wrote for various local newspapers, served as the local correspondent of

Agence France-Presse, and led the morning news program on Radio UAG.

It was around 10:00 a.m., the morning news program was over, and his plan was to go for a quick run, return home, take a shower, and hit the streets—as he did every day—to follow the news. He was strolling along when a man touched his back and said: “Hello.”

He saw a face he did not recognize. “Hello,” he responded.

The man wore a wig and a fake mustache.

“There’s no need to be afraid,” this man said, sensing the tension in the Wolf’s shoulders and seeing the surprise in his face.

“I’m thinking the same thing,” the Wolf said, “Look at you, you’re wearing a disguise, your mustache is fake.”

“No,” the man said, “don’t be afraid, there’s no need to worry. We’re not doing anything wrong.”

“Okay, then. How do you know me?”

“You are Sergio Ocampo.”

“Yes.”

“You work in Radio UAG.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Would you be interested in participating in a press conference?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“We would like to invite some journalists here in Chilpancingo, in Guerrero, and maybe one or two national or international correspondents to participate in an interview.”

“Ah. Okay, absolutely.”

This conversation took place on an October day in 1996. Four months earlier, a previously unknown Guerrero-based guerrilla group, the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR), had made a public appearance to coincide with the first anniversary of a police killing of local activist farmers and *campesinos*—the Aguas Blancas massacre. The EPR's move was the first time since Lucio Cabañas's guerrilla organizing from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s that an armed insurgent group had carried out a public action of such magnitude in Guerrero. It was also the first guerrilla action in Mexico since the January 1, 1994, armed uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN).

On June 28, 1995, then-governor of Guerrero state Rubén Figueroa Alcocer and his lieutenant governor, José Rubén Robles Catalán, organized the ambush of more than 90 unarmed *campesinos* traveling in two flatbed trucks between Tepetitla and Coyuca de Benítez. The *campesinos*, members of the Campesino Organization of the Southern Sierra (OCSS), were on their way to a widely publicized protest in Atoyac. State police stopped the two trucks and opened fire on the second truck, killing 17 people and wounding 23.¹ The police filmed the massacre. They also planted guns in the murdered men's hands and then filmed and photographed them lying there on the ground. State government officials edited the video to make the massacre look like the *campesinos* had been armed and had initiated a confrontation with the police. The state government sent the manipulated images to the media. Not long afterward, however, someone leaked to journalist Ricardo Rocha the original, unedited video showing the unarmed dead. Rocha broadcast the unedited video on his nightly national news

program. The case became a national and international scandal that went all the way to the Mexican Supreme Court. Figueroa resigned. None of those responsible for ordering, planning, and executing the massacre were held responsible.²

During the public event marking the first anniversary of the massacre, about 100 armed women and men marched out from the mountainside wearing makeshift uniforms, their faces covered with bandannas. A group of EPR combatants climbed onto the stage and read a manifesto: “We no longer wish to wait defenseless for the forces of repression and death to seize our lives with impunity.”³ The politicians present at the anniversary, including Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas—the former presidential candidate, Mexico City mayor, and co-founder of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)—left the event, scandalized. Cárdenas said that those armed men and women were “a pantomime,” not a guerrilla army. The public, however, once they had recovered from the scare, applauded the armed men and women. A number of the attendees wanted to follow the guerrillas back to the mountains as they left, something the rebels did not allow. The supportive popular reaction was not surprising. In his book on armed movements, *Guerrillas: Journeys in the Insurgent World*, Jon Lee Anderson writes:

If the conditions are right, guerrillas can emerge from within any society. If people perceive themselves to be irrevocably disenfranchised by their governments, or oppressed within their country, then violence is almost bound to occur. People take

without prior written permission.

up arms for many different reasons, ranging from outrage over economic inequities and social injustices to systematic forms of cultural, racial, and political discrimination.⁴

In Guerrero's indigenous and *campesino* communities, such reasons are among the few things to be found in abundance.

The people of Guerrero have suffered political and economic violence for decades, if not centuries. Consider the following: in 1996 the state population was about 3 million people. Two million of them had never seen a doctor. About a million of them had never set foot in an elementary school. Half of all parents did not know how to read or write. Approximately 1 million people worked in the fields and their homes every day of the week without anyone paying them a cent. Each year, hundreds of thousands of tourists filled the luxury hotels of Acapulco during their vacations. Industrial-scale poppy and marijuana production fed both domestic and international drug markets. Three out of every four roads were made exclusively of dirt. Hunger represented a mortal risk for one out of every three children born in non-indigenous communities, and half of all children born in indigenous communities.⁵ In Guerrero, to be “dying of hunger” never was, and still is not, something that one says casually before lunch.

One must also consider the fact that on December 30, 1960, a soldier shot Enrique Ramírez point-blank in Chilpancingo as Mr. Ramírez tried to hang a banner that read: DEATH TO THE BAD GOVERNMENT. At the protest

that formed in response to his killing, soldiers first shoved and beat people, then opened fire on the crowd. The soldiers killed fourteen people, including three children, and wounded forty. A year later, state police killed eight people and wounded at least ten more from the Guerrero Civic Association led by Genaro Vázquez, a schoolteacher. They were protesting electoral fraud. On May 18, 1967, just as schoolteacher Lucio Cabañas grabbed the microphone to address a crowd of parents and teachers from the Juan N. Álvarez Elementary School, state police mixed in with the crowd, took positions on rooftops, and opened fire on the crowd. Five people were killed and twenty wounded. Three months later, state police massacred eighty agricultural workers in Acapulco.⁶

Lucio Cabañas escaped from what came to be known as the Atoyac Massacre and took up arms, founding the Party of the Poor in 1967. Genaro Vázquez got tired of state repression, took up arms, and founded the National Revolutionary Civic Association in 1969. Both Cabañas and Vázquez were rural elementary school teachers and graduates of the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers College in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero. The Mexican federal government sent a third of its armed forces to kill both men, “disappearing” hundreds—some say thousands—of people in the process.⁷

“Guerrilla movements in Guerrero have been constant,” writes Carlos Montemayor in his essay “*La guerrilla recurrente*” (The Recurring Guerrilla War).⁸ He argues that armed movements represent “the final, armed phase of a prior social violence.”⁹ The state, Montemayor writes, always denies these social roots of armed movements,

insisting on viewing and representing guerrilla groups as military threats to “social peace” that can only be addressed through a military campaign of annihilation. Thus successive governments send development projects and death squads to the rebel territories until they feel satisfied with the tally of the dead. Then they leave. With this experience of social trauma as both a motivating and a unifying factor, the survivors, the witnesses, and the families of the disappeared and the dead begin to organize and, some time later, once again rise up in arms. “The peace achieved through negotiation and social change would be one thing,” writes Montemayor, “the peace achieved via the extermination of the social bases and insurgent core groups quite another. According to the Mexican experience, we may conclude that every time the state has opted to exterminate the social bases, they have set in place the conditions for the recurrence of guerrilla war.”¹⁰

On August 28, 1996, two months after its first public appearance at the anniversary of the Aguas Blancas massacre, EPR commandos simultaneously attacked police and soldiers in various cities across four states. That day eight police, three soldiers, two civilians, and two guerrillas died in the attacks. More than 20 people sustained gunshot wounds.¹¹ The guerrillas were not pantomiming.

Sergio Ocampo wondered whether or not the guy with the fake mustache was connected with the guerrillas. “I didn’t have any contacts,” Ocampo told me. “I had met some people from the guerrillas when I worked in the subway. But when I came here to Chilpancingo, everything had been shattered by the repression and the disappearances of

thousands of people. At that time, here at the university, there was no revolutionary energy.”

During the 1980s and the early 1990s, Ocampo saw communiqués from the verbosely named Clandestine Revolutionary Workers Party—Union of the People—Party of the Poor (PROCUP-PDLP) published in newspapers like Mexico City’s *La Jornada* and *Unomásuno*.¹² He had never, however, attended a clandestine press conference with the guerrillas, as none are known to have been held during those years. The man who approached him in the street asked him to invite other journalists to gather later at a restaurant. A contact would meet them there.

Ocampo invited Maribel Gutiérrez, who wrote for both *La Jornada* and *El Sur* (based at that time in Acapulco); Héctor Téllez, a photographer with *El Sur*; Jesús Guerrero, a correspondent with *Reforma*, a newspaper in Mexico City, and the German agency DPA; and a Guatemalan reporter living in Chilpancingo.¹³ When the contact arrived, he gestured to the Guatemalan and said: “He can’t go; he’s too tall and not from here. He’ll get you all in trouble.” The Guatemalan reporter had to leave.

The contact gave Ocampo purple strips of paper with instructions printed in linotype. Ocampo read them and then destroyed them. He told me: “The instructions that I remember said to go to Tierra Colorada, take a bus to Acapulco. From Acapulco go to Frog Park, I think, or Turtle Park, frog or turtle. Walk through the park. Walk back. Take another bus to Chilpancingo. Go to Zumpango.”

Jesús Guerrero told me that they spent two days going around in circles before getting to the final meeting point. “These kinds of meetings with the guerrillas are not easy.

You have to take all kinds of security measures. We were in Acapulco for a day and a night, and then on Friday they brought us back. We had to go to Chilpancingo after passing through Tierra Colorada and then on to Zumpango.”

Maribel Gutiérrez barely recalled the initial trips they made. “That was a long time ago,” she told me. “I’ve done fifteen hundred things since then. What is more, we had no idea that everything would become so important and would have to do with something so serious as someone getting disappeared. But, yes, we had been traveling for a day, perhaps two days.”

Héctor Téllez said they had been traveling for two days. “We went through various municipalities in Guerrero state: Acapulco, Tierra Caliente, Costa Chica. We finally got to Zumpango del Río. We made contact with the guerrillas’ personnel there.”

The four journalists arrived at the central plaza in Zumpango del Río sometime between seven and eight at night on October 25, 1996. Ocampo recalls, “The final directions said: ‘Go to the park in Zumpango, you will see a man with a black [Chicago] Bulls hat.’ I remember that the Bulls symbol is a red animal, an ox or something. That was the last instruction we received. We didn’t have any problems. Then we got to the park and it seemed like a hundred people were wearing baseball caps. Not all were Bulls caps, but several were. If I remember correctly, at that point in the 1990s Michael Jordan was the king of basketball. Everyone had Bulls caps.¹⁴

“We walked in circles around the park and started getting nervous,” Ocampo told me. “We sat down for a while to watch the different people wearing Bulls caps, looking

to see if any of them looked like they could be guerrillas. We didn't see anyone. About 20 minutes after getting there, two young men walked by and gestured to us with a nod of their heads. We gestured to them the same way and then followed them."

Jesús Guerrero, Héctor Téllez, and Maribel Gutiérrez did not mention this part of the story. Ocampo, in contrast, emphasized the time they spent walking around the plaza looking for the contact with a Bulls cap: "We were on the west side of the park and, after walking around in circles, when we sat down, well, sure, it was confusing; people looked at us strangely. It would have been easy for military intelligence to spot us. The EPR attacks had just happened. I remember well that those old books about the Bolshevik Revolution said to be wary of parks. Parks are not ideal for people involved in these kinds of activities."

When I asked her about that night, one of the first things that Gutiérrez told me was: "If we had known, do you think we wouldn't have written about it for the newspapers? That would have been very unprofessional of us, to say the least. In the moment, we didn't understand anything."

Ocampo returned to the moment when they established contact: "Two boys walked by nodding to us. I think they were indigenous or *campesino* and maybe 14, 15, or 16 years old. One of them was wearing a Bulls cap. We walked behind them. Out of nowhere we heard a sound like a firecracker. As soon as we heard the sound, the two *compas** started shouting: 'We've got a tail! We've got a tail!' We

* Short for *compañero* or *compañera*, a friend and companion in struggle.

had been walking in a line down a narrow, dark street that would take us to a dirt road. ‘We’ve got a tail! We’ve got a tail!’ Much later they told me that the sound we thought was a firecracker was actually a gunshot. Time to run! We all started running. I didn’t see that one of the *compas* had been grabbed.”

This is what Gutiérrez told me had happened: “A number of journalists from different media were on our way to an interview. And then, all of a sudden, they told us that . . . I don’t remember exactly, it was a long time ago: ‘We’re being followed. You all need to go; the interview is suspended. Everything is cancelled. Keep going along this path, you’ll arrive over there, alone.’ And that’s what we did. We didn’t know anything else. I don’t remember how much time passed after that night when they grabbed him—but it was much later—that we learned that he had been going with us.”

This is what Guerrero told me had happened: “We got there around seven or eight at night. We were in this little plaza where we were to meet the contact. After a while, we saw a group of militants coming our way with their backpacks, maybe about four or six of them. They were marching. I thought it was strange. We got to the plaza. It is a small town and people easily recognize who’s who. What’s up with a group like this, marching? I thought: ‘If the cops see these guys they’ll shoot ’em dead right here.’

“Then they took us out to this hill,” Guerrero continued. “Walking away from the plaza, away from town, uphill, I think heading toward the highway, they handed us some water containers. We kept walking. We went by a trash dump.

“The guy next to me was Rafael. He said: ‘We’ve got a tail, we’ve got a tail.’ And we all started running. I knew it was him because I saw his face and recognized it. We came to a kind of ravine and hid there. After a while we went farther, toward a barbed-wire fence. I heard something like when someone chambers a bullet in a gun. I guessed it was the *compas*. Then they shouted out to someone. One of the *compas* grabbed Maribel and lifted her over the fence. We climbed over the fence. They took us to a kind of ravine. Sergio says—I didn’t see it—that some of the *compas* had taken out their guns, in case soldiers or military intelligence showed up.

“Someone said: ‘It’s not going to happen; we’re suspending the interview.’ They left then. We stayed there hiding for about 20 minutes. Then we started out again and came upon a high school near a hill and saw a bonfire. There were some students partying there. We also saw a white van. My guess was that the van belonged to the Army, the men who grabbed Rafael.”

This is what Téllez told me had happened: “They took us away from the zócalo in Zumpango del Río. We were on the edge of the town when we heard a gunshot. One of the guides said that the interview would be cancelled because they were being watched. At that moment we heard that one of the members of their group had been grabbed—the one who had been taking care of the security of the journalists—and the leaders told us that the press conference had to be cancelled. So we left. We took a different route near a dry riverbed and got to the highway. Disappointed, we then went to Chilpancingo. You know, before getting to Zumpango del Río we had spent two days

wandering through different municipalities until they felt safe, but . . . their security protocols failed when their compañero got taken.”

Ocampo continued describing what happened like this: “We all ran toward a cliff. I’d say we ran about 300 meters. We ran quite a bit until one of those boys who was acting as the rearguard helped us get over a fence. I remember that he grabbed Maribel and picked her up and set her down on the other side of a barbed-wire fence. He took an AK-47 out of his backpack. He told us: ‘Go!’ And we said: ‘You go on. We doubt they’ll do anything to us.’ So the boy took off. Then we came out near a high school building, I think it is the UAG High School 36 that is there in Zumpango. We saw all sorts of strange things on that walk. We were already, you could say, freaked out by everything that had happened. We took a mini-bus back to Chilpancingo.”

All the journalists except Téllez told me that they did not know that someone had been taken that night until the EPR published its first communiqué. Téllez, in contrast, said that they did know then, but he did not mention any of the EPR communiqués denouncing the forced disappearance.

Ocampo told me: “Later, three days later, the newspapers published the communiqué, saying that one of those guys we met that night had been detained. Later we found out that his name was Rafael. I felt really bad. I thought: ‘What mistake did I make?’ We didn’t have cell phones then, and they prohibited us from using the phone at all. Did any of the other reporters use the phone? What happened?”

Guerrero said: “A week or so later, I can’t remember exactly, the EPR sent a communiqué saying that one of the *compas* had been disappeared. Didn’t he escape later? Didn’t he return to civilian life?”

Gutiérrez said: “We didn’t know anything that night, not until a long time later when the bulletin came out. But we weren’t even sure about that, or anything.”

Téllez said: “None of it caused a stir until the state government found a safe house in Palomares, Acapulco, where the so-called Rafael had lived. They found uniforms, bandannas, and letters to the editors of *El Sol de Acapulco*, *El Sur*, *Novedades*, *Diario 17*. . . .”

Everyone except Téllez speculated as to what may have happened. Gutiérrez said: “Look, did they grab Rafael because of us? I don’t think so. Or because we made a mistake with the directions or followed the wrong person? No. No.”

Guerrero said: “I feel like what happened that day in Zumpango was the guerrillas’ mistake. Why did they send us to such a visible place? . . . There was a clash between guerrillas and police near Zumpango. Near the Curva del Cristo there was an ambush. On June 28, 1996, when the EPR made a public appearance in Aguas Blancas, they also carried out several other actions, including one in the Curva del Cristo. They ambushed a group of police and wounded one or two of them. With the appearance of that EPR cell, the state sent a shit ton of spies to Zumpango. I think that it was a mistake having us go there. There were eyes all over that place.”

Throughout my interview with him, Ocampo continually came back to the issue of responsibility: “We don’t

know whether the state had already seen us traveling through so many places: Chilpancingo, Tierra Colorada, and Acapulco, back and forth again. I later thought that it would have been easy to have us meet them somewhere along a highway or something, and if they'd seen that we were being followed they could have sent us a message, or just left us standing there. We already knew that we were supposed to wait ten minutes and if no one came, then they wouldn't be coming. . . . We were left wondering what had happened. That was really hard because later we learned how they tortured that guy. Everyone . . . I at least felt a weight on my conscience, because they tortured him really badly. . . . I think, I don't know . . . I can't tell you that we didn't make some mistake. Maybe we did. But we followed their instructions to a T."

This PDF file remains the property of
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be
reproduced, copied or used in any way
without prior written permission.