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Ticket to the Past: A Political History of the Mexico City Metro, 1958-1969


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Introduction: Metro and Modernity in Mexico City

Built upon the ruins of the Aztec capital stands a city of monstrous proportions. Mexico City, capital of the Mexican nation, sprawls an estimated 573 square miles across the Valley of Mexico. Over 8.84 million people call the city their home, while over 21.1 million live within the capital's greater metropolitan areas.¹ An urban goliath, it presently constitutes the largest urban conglomeration in the Americas and the twelfth largest metropolitan region in the world.² As its urban edges stretch into the smoggy horizon, Mexico's capital city looms large not just in life but in Mexico's collective cultural imagination.

Dominating the landscape, Mexico City enjoys a public transit system befitting of its tremendous size. Mexico's *Sistema de Transporte Colectivo* (STC), or Mexico City Metro, has grown to become the second largest metropolitan transit system in the Western Hemisphere, with tracks spanning a total of 141 miles citywide.³ Since the construction of Line One first began in 1967, the system has also constituted the largest and longest-standing public investment in modern Mexican history; in 1987, just two decades after the first subway tracks were laid, more federal money went toward Metro development than toward the states of Aguascalientes, Baja California, Durango, Morelos, Nayarit, Quintana Roo, Tlaxcala, Zacatecas, Campeche, and Colima combined.⁴ Mexico City's Metro has transformed the daily lives of Mexico City's residents and has grown to become the backbone of urban life in the nation's sprawling capital.⁵

In drafting plans for the initial construction of the city Metro, Mexican activists and policymakers sought not only to improve public transit in the congested capital, but also to construct a new, modern image of Mexico in the eyes of the world. With the 1968 Olympics scheduled to take place in Mexico City, Mexican leaders hoped to showcase the capital as a thriving, industrial metropolis and saw the newly proposed Metro project as critical to achieving that end.⁶

While the subway's debut missed the Olympic Games by one year, politicians' hopes for the Metro were realized at least in part; soon after Line One's initial opening in 1969, the Metro received widespread praise both at home and abroad for its elegance and state-of-the-art design. Writing for *Américas* in July 1970, for example, Arbon Jack Lowe described the Metro line's "sparkling new, orange cars" and "shining steel rails" and noted the system's modern, computerized control center.⁷ With the christening of the capital's first subway line, Lowe wrote, "Mexico City has joined the ranks of such Hemisphere cities as Buenos Aires, Boston, Chicago, Montreal, New York City, Philadelphia, and Toronto."⁸ In the eyes of many foreign

¹ Censo de Población y Vivienda (2010), Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), found in Mario Luis Fuentes, "México social: retos y desafíos de las metrópolis," *Excelsior*, March 18, 2014, <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/2014/03/18/949218>.

² World Map, "Populations of 150 Largest Cities in the World," World Atlas, <http://www.worldatlas.com/citypops.htm>.

³ "Line 12 of Mexico City's metro (subway) reopens," *Geo-Mexico, The Geography and Dynamics of Modern Mexico*, ISSN: 1927-1549. <http://geo-mexico.com/?p=8202>.

⁴ Bernardo Navarro Benítez, *Ciudad de México: El Metro y Sus Usuarios* (Departamento del Distrito Federal: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM), 1993), 9-10.

⁵ Sistema de Transporte Colectivo, *El metro cumple: 20 años llevándole a su destino* (Distrito Federal: 1989), 27.

⁶ Diane E. Davis, *Urban Leviathan: Mexico City in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 164.

⁷ "Mexico's Metro," 22, no. 7 (July 1970): 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

observers, Mexico City's cutting-edge Metro helped to elevate the capital—and, by extension, the nation it led—into the ranks of the world's most elite centers of postwar civilization.

Yet behind the Metro's initial construction lay far more unseemly aspects of Mexican politics and history. Throughout every step of Mexico's postwar economic expansion, Mexican leaders advanced particular economic policies at the behest of their own clientelist interests and political coalitions. As strenuous patterns of urban growth reshaped urban life at mid-century, these interest groups entered into increasing conflict over the future of the nation's capital. As a central component of urban redevelopment, Metro expansion thus came to serve as a proxy war between political coalitions pitted against each other by the stresses of urban growth. The resulting disputes revealed increasingly anti-democratic, corporatist tendencies within Mexican party politics, as well as the continuing, outsized influence of foreign companies and investors in national policymaking. With all this in mind, the capital city's Metro appeared less an emblem of modernity upon inauguration day than a symbol of the political disorder at the heart of Mexico's historical heritage.

This essay focuses on the first major episode of political conflict over the Mexico City subway, chronicling disputes over initial Metro construction between 1958 and 1969. Conflict over the line would take place principally between two of the most powerful office holders in 1960s Mexico—the mayor of Mexico City, Ernesto Uruchurtu, and the nation's president, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz—each of whom represented competing, cross-class coalitions who for various reasons either opposed or championed continued urban growth in Mexico City. Díaz Ordaz's eventual triumph over Uruchurtu reflected not just the growing political dominance of pro-growth business interests within Mexico's ruling party, but also the increasingly authoritarianism of the Díaz Ordaz regime. In 1968, the president's autocratic tendencies helped spawn student protests and ultimately discredit Mexico's ruling party, *el Partido de la Revolución Institucional* (PRI), in the eyes of many Mexicans. Mexico City's subway, therefore, did not emerge as the product of genuine policy debate, but as the result of contemporary political forces tearing Mexican society at the seams.

“A Monstrous, Inflated Head”: Historical Background of Urban Mexico

In order to understand the political conflict surrounding the development of the Metro line, it is important to review the social and economic forces lending context to this episode in Mexican history. As occurred throughout much of Latin America at this time, Mexico experienced unprecedented levels of economic and demographic growth during the postwar period. Major advances in both education and health care significantly reduced premature deaths, causing the national mortality rate to decline from twenty-three per thousand in 1940 to ten per thousand in 1970. Infant mortality dropped dramatically, as well, while birth rates remained largely constant, resulting in an unrivaled Mexican population explosion; between 1940 and 1970, Mexico's population rose by an astronomical 150 percent, with over half the nation's people under 20 years of age.⁹ Mexico's unparalleled rates of population growth severely strained national resources and ultimately contributed to growing social and political unrest at mid-century.

Nowhere in Mexico did citizens experience the effects of this growth more dramatically

⁹ Gilbert M. Joseph and Jürgen Buchenau, *Mexico's Once and Future Revolution: Social Upheaval and the Challenges of Rule since the Late Nineteenth Century* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 156-7.

than in Mexico City. As Mexico rapidly industrialized over the course of the mid-twentieth century, urban businesses and manufacturing jobs attracted millions of rural migrants to the nation's city centers in search of employment and economic opportunity.¹⁰ The largest share of these immigrants travelled to the nation's capital, where the PRI had concentrated federal investments and industrial infrastructure since the early 1930s.¹¹ As a result, Mexico City's population swelled, doubling from 1.4 million to 2.8 million between 1940 and 1960.¹² Moreover, this growth does not account for the development of *ciudades perdidas*, or "shantytowns" on the capital's periphery, which developed as migrants proved unable to settle within the already-overcrowded city proper.¹³ Adding these settlements to the mix, Greater Mexico City's population appears to have grown even more rapidly than the city center, rising from 1.7 million people to 5.4 million within a mere two decades.¹⁴ As the city grew by leaps and bounds, problems of pollution, congestion, and overall urban manageability multiplied. The pace at which these challenges arose left city leaders powerless to respond to urban growth in a deliberative fashion. In the words of the Mexican author Octavio Paz, macroeconomic forces at mid-century thus transformed Mexico City from a peaceful and orderly national capital into "a monstrous inflated head, crushing the frail body that holds it up."¹⁵

At the same time, policy decisions within the PRI and its federal administration reshaped Mexico's political landscape in the late 1950s. Having ruled Mexico since the late 1920s, party officials maintained firm control over national politics by incorporating non-dominant social and economic sectors into the party's formal political coalition. These groups included lower-class Mexicans—such as workers, peasants, unionists, migrants, and other so-called "populist groups"—as well as members of Mexico's economic elite, including small-business men and industrialists.¹⁶ This diverse set of alliances allowed the PRI to pursue a business-friendly, pro-growth agenda while ignoring the interests of Mexico's traditional middle class. PRI officials paired developmentalist policies with government social spending and an increasingly authoritarian approach to dissent and civil unrest; under President Adolfo López Mateos (1958-1964), the federal government suppressed strikes against state-owned businesses and jailed prominent dissenters like muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros.¹⁷ López Mateos' successor, President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970), would prove even more repressive. As a result, tensions mounted at mid-century between Mexico's ruling elite and the increasingly frustrated, disempowered middle class.¹⁸

The Iron Mayor: Ernesto Uruchurtu and the Anti-Subway Coalition

In the midst of these extraordinary political and economic pressures emerged one of the

¹⁰ Ibid., 157.

¹¹ Davis, *Urban Leviathan*, 2.

¹² Davis, "The Social Construction of Mexico City: Political Conflict and Urban Development, 1950-1966," *Journal of Urban History* (Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi: Sage Periodicals Press) 24, no. 3 (March 1998): 365.

¹³ Joseph and Buchenau, *Mexico's Once and Future Revolution*, 157.

¹⁴ Davis, "The Social Construction of Mexico City," 365.

¹⁵ *Return to the Labyrinth of Solitude*, 343.

¹⁶ Diane E. Davis, "The Rise and Fall of Mexico City's Subway (METRO) Policy, 1964-1976: Pro- and Anti-Urban Growth Coalitions, National Development Strategies, and the State" (PhD dissertation, UCLA, 1986), 171-2.

¹⁷ Joseph and Buchenau, *Mexico's Once and Future Revolution*, 158.

¹⁸ Ibid., 164.

most talented dynamic leaders of mid-century Mexico. As the appointed mayor of Mexico City in late 1952,¹⁹ Ernesto P. Uruchurtu would go on to rule the nation's capital for an unprecedented fourteen years.²⁰ Nicknamed "the Iron Mayor," Uruchurtu presided over one of the most transformative periods in Mexico City's history and used his unique position to gain nearly absolute power over city affairs. Critically, in order to do so, Uruchurtu crafted his own urban policy platform to craft a delicate yet powerful coalition of urban interests

Like most previous mayors of Mexico City, Uruchurtu enjoyed strong ties with the PRI and national party leaders. Having entered politics in 1945, Uruchurtu rose to assume major positions within the national government, including secretary-general of the PRI and later Secretary of Gobernación.²¹ Uruchurtu also maintained a longstanding relationship with then-President Miguel Alemán, whose personal friendship with Uruchurtu dated back to the pair's days in preparatory school.²² Through Alemán, Uruchurtu became closely connected with the conservative wing of the PRI and the coalition of national industrialists that had brought Alemán to power. As Mexican manufacturing grew, these national industrialists began to comprise an increasingly influential constituency within the capital city and thus played a major role in both supporting and shaping Uruchurtu's eventual administration. Uruchurtu's policies as mayor reflected the influence of these businessmen, as he sought explicitly to keep industry's tax burden low. This goal became particularly challenging in the early 1960s, as some of Mexico City's wealthier manufacturing firms began to move outside the formal bounds of Mexico City, depriving the city of needed revenue and forcing local officials to raise taxes. As a consequence, Uruchurtu sought throughout his administration to curb urban growth on the edge of Mexico City, since he feared expanding opportunities for remaining businesses to relocate would compel him to enact additional tax increases.²³

As mayor, Uruchurtu fostered political linkages independent of his direct relationship with the PRI. Recognizing the rising political dissatisfaction of middle-class Mexicans, Uruchurtu saw an opportunity to establish a large base of political support outside of the national party. Accordingly, the forty-six-year-old mayor sought through a series of public policy measures to appeal directly to middle-class urbanites. Under Uruchurtu, city government tightly regulated the price of taxis, nightclubs, and movie theaters, of which the middle class traditionally served as the largest source of patronage. Uruchurtu also invested heavily in city beautification, developing parks, flower gardens, and other recreational civic features near predominately middle-class districts.²⁴ At the same time, he staunchly opposed urban redevelopment, fearing that renewal projects would contribute to a rise in rent that would force middle-class families and their businesses outside of the city center.²⁵ Uruchurtu's plans to relieve congestion through slum clearance and effective public transit further complemented the interests of middle sectors and ingratiated him with the city's middle-class residents.²⁶

The young mayor's focus on improving public transit tied him to yet another base of

¹⁹ Until 1997, the President of Mexico maintained exclusive authority to appoint the Mayor of Mexico City (officially known as the Governor of the Federal District). Mexican President Venustiano Carranza embedded this prerogative into the 1917 Constitution on the basis that federal mayoral appointments would limit municipal infighting. See Davis, *Urban Leviathan*, 55.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

²² Davis, "The Rise and Fall of Mexico City's Subway (METRO) Policy," 153.

²³ *Ibid.*, 155-7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 171-2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

political support within the city. In 1958, Uruchurtu created *Unión de Permisarios de Pasajeros en Camiones y Autobuses en el Distrito Federal*, a body composed of both private and public membership that sought to regulate the city's urban transit industry. Through the Unión de Permisarios, Uruchurtu developed an alliance with the city's most powerful union federation, the *Alianza de Camioneros*. As one of Mexico City's largest and best-organized syndicates, the Alianza wielded significant political influence, having placed a number of its own members in local and national political office. With the Alianza's power on the rise in the late 1950s, Uruchurtu came to depend on the union for both political support and cooperation in improving the city's transit system. As a result, Uruchurtu was receptive to union interests and generally supported transit policies that benefited bus drivers.²⁷ Perhaps predictably, the Alianza's interests largely revolved around maintaining bus drivers' private monopoly over mass transit. The continuation of this monopoly depended upon Mexico's physical containment within a region wholly serviceable by bus—a condition made increasingly difficult by the rapid pace of Mexican urbanization at that time. Uruchurtu's relationship with the Alianza thus gave him further reason to oppose urban growth, as physical expansion of the nation's capital could render the city's bus-only transit system obsolete and jeopardize the Alianza's transportation monopoly.

In developing a substantial political coalition as mayor, therefore, Uruchurtu represented the collective political interests of his various bases of urban support. These bases included a group of conservative national industrialists linked to then former-President Miguel Alemán, politically neglected middle-class residents of the capital city, and the Alianza de Camioneros. For different reasons, all of these groups staunchly opposed the rapid expansion in Mexico City that had been taking place since 1940. It does not seem surprising, therefore, that Uruchurtu would structure his administration's policy initiatives throughout the 1950s around his opposition to continued urban growth. These anti-growth forces would likewise play fundamental roles in shaping the young mayor's policy position on the proposed Metro line years later, as the project posed a direct threat to the interests of nearly all of Uruchurtu's political allies.

Race Toward Rail: The Rise of Pro-Subway Interests

While Uruchurtu's political coalition proved formidable throughout the mayor's tenure, macroeconomic forces at mid-century gave rise to new and powerful interest groups that would challenge Uruchurtu's political agenda. Between 1940 and 1970, Mexico's economy grew at an astonishing annual rate of 6.4 percent, more than doubling the size of the national economy during that time.²⁸ Over the course of this so-called "Mexican Miracle," Mexico's large, internationally linked industrialists began to develop access to resources located beyond Mexico's borders. As firms' foreign connections grew, so did their interest in reshaping Mexican economic policy for the benefit of their own international partners.²⁹ These interests, aligned closely with those of the Mexican tourist industry, frequently led firms to promote economic development projects as opportunities to attract foreign investment, while paying little attention to the concerns of the local groups affected. The rise of international Mexican industrialists thus produced a serious challenge to constituencies in staunch opposition to urban

²⁷ Ibid., 165-6.

²⁸ Joseph and Buchenau, *Mexico's Once and Future Revolution*, 156.

²⁹ Davis, *Urban Leviathan*, 163.

growth.

Chief among these international Mexican firms stood Ingenieros de Civiles Asociados (ICA). ICA constituted one of Mexico's most influential and accomplished engineering conglomerates.³⁰ The firm boasted a vertically integrated system of production that allowed it to undertake construction, electro-mechanical engineering, track inlay, and civil works.³¹ As Mexico's principal engineering contractor, ICA established firm footholds throughout the nation's federal bureaucracy, developing a virtual monopoly over national public works contracts during a period of heavy federal infrastructure development. Consequently, ICA came to wield considerable political influence by the late 1950s, with many employees going on to hold prominent political offices themselves.³² These connections transformed the young engineering firm into a crucial powerbroker in Mexican politics, as ICA could use its political linkages to shape the prospects of aspiring candidates' electoral careers.

Indeed, ICA's linkages spanned beyond the boundaries of Mexico itself. From its founding in 1947,³³ ICA enjoyed unique connections with French technology exporters and financial companies. The firm's principal banking institution, for instance, Banco del Atlántico, developed out of the 1949 merger of French and Mexican capital investments. ICA also maintained strong ties with the Mexican firm *Compañía Mexicana de Comercio Exterior* (CMCE) and its subsidiary *Financiera de Exportaciones e Importaciones* (FINEXIM), both of which managed and facilitated the sale of French technology and consumer products to Mexico.³⁴ The origins of these firms prove just as striking: according to records held by the *Banque Nationale de Paris*, CMCE constituted a subsidiary of the French firm *Compania Frances de Promocion Industrial* (COFIE)—a manufacturing company which sells, among other things, the parts and equipment for city subways.³⁵ Given ICA's extensive connections to French businesses, it seems more than plausible that the firm's practices were in large part influenced by the interests of its European associates.

To ICA, the potential construction of an underground subway line in Mexico City proved especially appealing. As Mexico's largest and most respected engineering firm, ICA would be guaranteed nearly exclusive contracting rights by the Mexican government over the line's construction. Given the sheer scale of the Metro project, the firm would stand to make an enormous sum from initial planning and construction fees alone. At the same time, Metro construction would greatly benefit French technology producers and financial institutions with close ties to the Mexican conglomerate, as the project would offer an enormous opportunity to market French subway equipment to one of the largest metropolitan regions in the world. Moreover, ICA and its French-affiliated banking institution had begun developing large portions of downtown Mexico City through the 1950s—investments whose value would significantly rise in response to the introduction of a nearby subway system. As a result, ICA would emerge as one of the most prominent coalition advocates behind construction of the early Metro line, proposing and later lobbying directly on behalf of the initial subway project.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was ICA that initiated public debate over the Metro in 1958,

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

³¹ Davis, "The Rise and Fall of Mexico City's Subway (METRO) Policy," 88.

³² *Ibid.*, 120.

³³ "Nuestra Historia: Surgimiento," ICA, <http://web.archive.org/web/20130709010526/http://www.ica.com.mx/surgimiento.html>.

³⁴ Davis, "The Rise and Fall of Mexico City's Subway (METRO) Policy," 93.

³⁵ *Banque Nationale de Paris*, "Mexico: Jeux Olympiques 1968 (Paris, 1978), cited in *ibid.*

as the firm began to conduct its own private transit study in support of a city Metro. In a report misleadingly entitled “Study of Fast Lanes for Mexico City,” ICA compiled extensive information on the urban Metro systems from 33 different countries. Drawing from this study, ICA developed a private report on the state of mass transit in the capital city. This second report outlined a range of issues plaguing the existing bus system, including excess demand, long commute times, and the overlapping, circuitous bus routes.³⁶ The authors concluded that Mexico City required an alternative form of mass transit, and that the new system would have to be constructed underground in order to avoid the stifling congestion of city streets.³⁷ These conclusions naturally set the stage for ICA’s efforts in 1960, as after intense preparation the firm all but formally proposed the Metro project to city officials.³⁸

Despite ICA’s extensive overture, however, Mexico City’s most powerful local official remained unshakably opposed to the proposal. In the Metro project, Uruchurtu immediately saw a host of direct challenges to the interests of practically every major component of his political coalition. With respect to the bus drivers’ union, a new Metro system would not only threaten Alianza’s monopoly on mass transit, but would also facilitate the outward expansion of Mexico City to an extent that would undermine private buses’ viability as a means of citywide transport. As discussed earlier, urban expansion would also contribute to the exodus of larger industrial firms to low-cost satellite cities outside of the Distrito Federal. Businesses’ movement from the capital would deplete Uruchurtu’s limited tax base and force him to raise revenue through tax hikes on remaining industrialists. Moreover, a downtown subway line would predictably augment already-soaring housing prices in the city center, spiking monthly rents and pricing middle-class families and small businessmen out of the area. This is all not to mention the astronomical cost of the project itself, which ICA conservatively estimated to hover around nearly 130 million pesos per year.³⁹ Uruchurtu would have to raise taxes ever higher to accommodate for even a fraction of the project’s price tag, placing increased financial strain upon the city’s already beleaguered middle class. For the sake of his own political survival, Uruchurtu could not, and would not, support the Metro project.

Full-Speed Collision: The Public Clash over Subway Construction

Foreseeing the threat ICA’s efforts posed to the continuity of his political coalition, Uruchurtu decided to preemptively communicate his opposition to the Metro construction to public officials. As early as March 1962—before public discussions of the Metro line had even begun—Uruchurtu vaguely referenced the inordinate costs of mass rapid transit and proclaimed that he would not leave “a single cent” on the books of city government upon his departure from office.⁴⁰ Later that same year, the mayor publicly eschewed an offer by the Director of the Parisian Metro Authority to study the feasibility of subway construction in the Distrito Federal.⁴¹ When the French returned in 1964 with an even more generous offer to finance Metro

³⁶ Bernardo Navarro Benítez, *Ciudad de México: El Metro y sus usuarios* (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM): Distrito Federal, Mexico: 1993), 35.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁸ Davis, *Urban Leviathan*, 150.

³⁹ Davis, “The Rise and Fall of Mexico City’s Subway (METRO) Policy,” 48.

⁴⁰ “Uruchurtu no va a dejar deudas: los compromisos del Departamento del DF serán cubiertos,” *Excélsior*, March 19, 1962, found in Davis, *Urban Leviathan*, 154.

⁴¹ “Seguirá la obra constructiva de la capital: México es una ciudad sin deudas, le dijo Uruchurtu a Dubost,” *Excélsior*, November 6, 1963, found in Davis, *Urban Leviathan*, 154.

construction,⁴² Uruchurtu rejected them yet again. To any studious political observer of the time, the implications Uruchurtu's action lay clear: so long as he remained mayor, ICA's and French investors' collective vision for a city Metro line would remain tabled indefinitely.

It did not take long, however, before national politics began to turn in favor of pro-Metro forces. During the 1964 presidential elections, large, internationally linked industrialists seized power within the PRI, as the faction's standard-bearer, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, carried the day against Miguel Alemán's handpicked candidate, Antonio Ortiz Mena.⁴³ Critically, Díaz Ordaz sported particularly close ties to ICA, as his wife's family included some of the founding members of the engineering organization.⁴⁴ Political analysts from this period also suggested that the president-elect owed his victory to ICA, as the firm assumed principal responsibility for marshaling decisive bureaucratic support for Díaz Ordaz's candidacy.⁴⁵ Moreover, as the principal negotiator of Mexico City's successful bid for the 1968 Olympics, Díaz Ordaz had developed close relationships with the nation's growing tourism industry, including businesses like DESC and Industria y Comercio that saw the Metro as necessary to both hosting the Olympics and expanding their industry.⁴⁶

As a result, Díaz Ordaz's victory effectively consolidated pro-Metro business groups under the banner of a single political coalition; just as Uruchurtu came to defend the concerns of those opposed to continued urban development, so did Díaz Ordaz embody through his policies the interests of Mexico's growing, pro-development industries. Accordingly, by the time Díaz Ordaz assumed office in late 1964, Mexico's incoming president had already endorsed the Metro line proposal, setting him on a direct collision course with Uruchurtu and the mayor's formidable urban political alliance.

Díaz Ordaz began to challenge Uruchurtu's Metro stance over the first several months of 1965, releasing a series of public statements asserting the necessity of the Metro for a successful Olympics, and decrying Uruchurtu's recalcitrant opposition. Díaz Ordaz stated that in the absence of substantive policy shifts by the mayor, "Uruchurtu... would be responsible for the role that Mexico would play in the Olympic Games."⁴⁷ Soon, public officials and real estate developers began openly distancing themselves from the mayor and criticizing Uruchurtu's position on the project.⁴⁸ In September of that year, Díaz Ordaz's public criticisms of the mayor expanded to blame Uruchurtu for practically every contemporary national and urban problem; according to the nation's president, issues ranging from urban poverty to the defeat the national soccer team fell squarely at the at the young mayor's feet.⁴⁹ In spite of the new president's efforts, however, Uruchurtu held firm, arguing publicly that the financial challenges of Metro construction continued to be "insurmountable" and that the city ought to channel its resources "towards improving... transportation services which the bus lines and taxis [already] offer, along

⁴² "Los franceses tienen plan y dinero para construir aquí un ferrocarril subterráneo," *Excelsior*, November 9, 1964, found in Davis, *Urban Leviathan*, 154.

⁴³ Davis, *Urban Leviathan*, 164.

⁴⁴ Davis, "The Rise and Fall of Mexico City's Subway (METRO) Policy," 119.

⁴⁵ Bertha Lerner de Sheinbaum and Susan Ralsky de Cimmet, *El poder de los presidentes: alcances y perspectivas (1910-1973)* (México, Distrito Federal: Instituto Mexicano de Estudios Políticos, A.C., 1976); and Luis Gonzaga y Armendriz, "Díaz Ordaz, Sucesor de López Mateo," *Impacto*, July 29, 1981, 44-46, cited in Davis, "The Rise and Fall of Mexico City's Subway (METRO) Policy," 119.

⁴⁶ Davis, *Urban Leviathan*, 164.

⁴⁷ Antonio Elizondo, "De ardor mueren los quemados y los enanos," 65, found in *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴⁸ Davis, *Urban Leviathan*, 166.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 165.

with expanding and reshaping the city street system.”⁵⁰

As the mayor’s opposition to Metro construction remained unfazed, conflict between the mayor and Mexico’s president became far more serious. Indeed, Uruchurtu’s political intransigence not only risked delaying the Metro construction until after the Olympics, but also constituted a major challenge to the authority of Díaz Ordaz. With public unrest mounting against the PRI in Mexican society—particularly among members of the Uruchurtu-friendly, urban middle class—Uruchurtu’s lack of cooperation with federal leadership transformed the mayor in Díaz Ordaz’s eyes from a mere nuisance to an existential political liability.⁵¹ Left unchecked, Uruchurtu’s position on urban development threatened to provide an alternative political agenda to the PRI, enabling the nation’s dissatisfied middle classes to contest power with the ruling party.⁵² Hence, as stakes rose in the Metro conflict, it became clear that Díaz Ordaz needed to remove Uruchurtu from power in order to ensure his continued control of Mexican politics.

Metro Moves: The Fall of Uruchurtu and the Anti-Subway Coalition

In July of 1965, a prime opportunity arose for Díaz Ordaz to undermine the sitting mayor, as bus strikes paralyzed Mexico City. The strikers—most of whom came from radical, independent union groups—protested declining wages, poor work conditions, and the monopolistic control of the Alianza over the city’s bus industry. By November, over 1,700 bus drivers had left their jobs in protest, causing an effective shutdown of the city bus system. As the strike continued throughout 1966, Uruchurtu’s carefully crafted transport network devolved into chaos. With an estimated 8 million commutes into Mexico City daily in the mid-1960s,⁵³ Mexico City depended critically upon effective bus and transit services for its economy. Uruchurtu’s failure to maintain control of mass transit greatly frustrated city residents, particularly local business interests and the middle class who depended on the buses for access to crucial jobs. As a result, the mayor’s continued opposition to the Metro and focus on bus-oriented solutions became politically untenable, creating a legitimate basis for Díaz Ordaz to challenge him as mayor in late 1966.⁵⁴

That a wave of bus strikes hit Mexico City in the midst of the Metro conflict cannot be seen as simply incidental. To be sure, bus drivers raised legitimate grievances against Uruchurtu and his Alianza allies, but the issues about which they protested were not at all new, making the particular reasons for striking in 1965 especially curious. Moreover, the fact that the walkout was allowed to last for so long suggests that the national government was complicit in promoting the transit shutdown. Before 1965, bus strikes in Mexico City had been practically non-existent. This was largely true thanks to the tight control of the capital’s bus driver unions by Joaquin del Olmo of the Federation of Workers of the Distrito Federal (FTDF), a formal branch of the government-run National Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM).⁵⁵ With no recent change

⁵⁰ Ernesto P. Uruchurtu (public address, September 1, 1965), found in Manuel Perló Cohen and Sandra Murillo López, *¿Que opinan los usuarios de la nueva Línea 12 del Metro? Elementos para la evaluación de una política pública del transporte en el Distrito Federal* (Distrito Federal, Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), 2014), 28, my translation.

⁵¹ Davis, “The Rise and Fall of Mexico City’s Subway (METRO) Policy,” 190-2.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 193.

⁵³ Navarro, *Ciudad de México*, 37.

⁵⁴ Davis, *Urban Leviathan*, 171.

⁵⁵ Davis, “The Rise and Fall of Mexico City’s Subway (METRO) Policy,” 208.

in bus driver working conditions in 1965, it seems unlikely that del Olmo would so suddenly lose control of the unions just the Metro conflict began. Furthermore, Díaz Ordaz's decision to appoint del Olmo a federal deputy shortly after his supposed failure to control the unions strongly indicates that the instigation of the strikes aligned in the expressed interests of the President's administration.⁵⁶ It thus appears that the city bus strikes of 1965 and 1966 were at the very least prolonged, if not initially encouraged, by Díaz Ordaz's regime.

By the summer of 1966, Díaz Ordaz had set the stage for Uruchurtu's political demise. The mayor's middle-class political base had eroded drastically, along with the political support of Mexico City's small-scale industrialists. Uruchurtu's coalition in tatters, Díaz Ordaz simply needed an excuse to push for the long-time mayor's removal. That opportunity arose on September 12, 1966, when Uruchurtu razed a large squatter settlement on the southern edge of the capital known as Santa Colonia Ursula. Taking the side of displaced squatters, members of the federal Chamber of Deputies met the following day and voted to publicly censure Uruchurtu for his actions.⁵⁷ In early October, Díaz Ordaz and his legislative allies took the legislature's sanction one step further and successfully pushed a resolution through the Chamber to force Uruchurtu's resignation.

With Uruchurtu gone, Díaz Ordaz wasted little time in securing the interests of his pro-Metro political coalition. Within a week of Uruchurtu's forced resignation, Díaz Ordaz appointed a close political ally of his administration, Alfonso Corona del Rosal, to assume the Mexico City mayoralty. Three weeks later, Corona del Rosal announced that his new administration would formally accept ICA's Metro proposal for consideration. As officials involved in the Metro conflict of this period have attested, formal consideration of the project in October 1966 constituted less the beginning of the Metro policy debate than "a substantive indication of the project's approval."⁵⁸ Indeed, in a clear indication of project certainty in late 1966, ICA inaugurated a new subsidiary, Ingenieros de Sistemas de Transporte Metropolitano (ISTME) to manage all Metro-related design and planning activities several months before Díaz Ordaz had even formally announced the project.⁵⁹

By the spring 1967, construction work on the Metro began. Undoubtedly, the new project constituted "the largest [public] project in the history of the Distrito Federal."⁶⁰ Metro construction carried an estimated price tag of around 2.5 billion pesos,⁶¹ requiring significant financing from both public and private entities. In order to pay for the project, Díaz Ordaz and Corona del Rosal directed city and national public funds towards Metro construction. Díaz Ordaz also purchased more than 1.6 billion pesos in initial loans from both private banks and—unsurprisingly—the French government.⁶² These funds were channeled almost entirely toward contracts with ICA, which enjoyed exclusive planning and construction rights on the project; in fact, despite the appearance of a "consortium" of private engineering contractors recruited for Metro design, all firms within the consortium constituted wholly-owned subsidiaries of ICA's

⁵⁶ Davis, *Urban Leviathan*, 168-9.

⁵⁷ Davis, "The Rise and Fall of Mexico City's Subway (METRO) Policy," 215.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁶⁰ "Empieza el proyecto más grande en la historia del D.D.F.," *Excelsior*, June 20, 1967, found in Sistema de Transporte Colectivo, *El metro cumple*, 26.

⁶¹ López and Cohen, *¿Qué opinan los usuarios de la nueva Línea 12 de Metro?* 28.

⁶² Olividio González, "El Metro de Ciudad de México," *Revista latinoamericana de estudios urbano regionales (EURE)* (Santiago, Chile) 14, no. 42 (March 1988): 42; and Cohen and López, *¿Qué opinan los usuarios de la nueva Línea 12 de Metro?* 28.

business conglomerate.⁶³ After years of planning and construction, ICA, DESC, COFIE, and other large industry supporters of Díaz Ordaz finally realized their decade-long vision: gliding across shining steel rails on September 1, 1969, a fleet of sparkling new Metro cars opened their doors to the public.⁶⁴

Conclusion: “A Ticket to Modernity”?

Less than a month before the Metro’s opening, Mexico City’s new transit authority, Sistema de Transporte Colectivo (STC), partnered with ICA’s ISTME subsidiary to release a promotional booklet entitled *The Mexico City Metro Is*. Filled with pictures of the elegant new Metro line, the booklet invoked concepts of democracy and modernism to describe Mexico’s newest public work. “The Mexico City Metro is for you, for him, for her, for us, and for them” the booklet began. “[It] is the democratization of speed...a new form of urban energy...a new system of time...a ticket to speed, security, comfort, modernity.”⁶⁵

Yet whatever Mexican authorities claimed the new Metro line represented, debate and later conflict surrounding the subway’s construction tells a far different story. Indeed, the battle over the initial Metro line’s implementation between Uruchurtu and Díaz Ordaz barely resembled the kind of policy debates typically found in modern, democratic societies. Rather, it reflected some of the most unseemly features of Mexico’s past, from clientelist political traditions and European corporate imperialism to the often brutal, authoritarian tendencies of the Mexican state. Viewed from this context, Mexico City’s Metro system proves less a symbol of modernity than it does an emblem of the country’s troubled historical legacy.

In a certain sense, however, the capital city subway line did herald progress in Mexican politics, as it marked the beginning of the autocratic PRI’s slow decline from power. Díaz Ordaz’s penchant for authoritarianism redounded to the rise of student and middle-class protests in the late 1960s, as ordinary Mexicans felt ignored and disenfranchised by the PRI’s corporatist, quasi-dictatorial leaders. As with the subway battle years earlier, government officials responded to these events with increased efforts to silence political dissent. The government’s response ultimately culminated with the tragic student massacre at Tlatelolco, in which untold hundreds were gunned down by Mexican troops with the support Díaz Ordaz. The Tlatelolco massacre initiated what some historians have called “the beginning of a new era” in Mexican politics by sparking widespread disillusionment with both the PRI and government as a whole.⁶⁶ Indeed, it should come as no surprise that as PRI officials sought to assuage the public’s dissatisfaction in the wake of student massacre, Mexico City’s government promptly halted construction of the underground subway.⁶⁷ While the government’s pause of Metro construction lasted briefly, the PRI continued to decline in its authority, ceding ground to other political parties in the 1980s and 1990s to make way for a more democratic form of government.

Today, in the eyes of most casual observers, Mexico City’s Metro stands a testament to modernity, progress, and all that Mexico has sought to become. As the political history of Metro

⁶³ *Enciclopedia de México*, entry for “METRO” (Distrito Federal, Mexico: Editorial Internacional, 1974), found in Davis, “The Rise and Fall of Mexico City’s Subway (METRO) Policy,” 87.

⁶⁴ Davis, *Urban Leviathan*, 172.

⁶⁵ Angel Borja Navarrete et al. *El Metro de México es* (Distrito Federal, Mexico: ISTME-STC, August 1969).

⁶⁶ Joseph and Buchenau, *Mexico’s Once and Future Revolution*, 164.

⁶⁷ Davis, “The Rise and Fall of Mexico City’s Subway (METRO) Policy,” 256.

system shows, however, Mexico's largest public works project speaks no more to nation's future than it does Mexico's enduring past.

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