

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In a village in the northern Colombian region of Urabá, in the Department of Antioquia, unknown assailants dressed in military uniforms selectively assassinated two families, first beating them to death, then hacking their bodies to pieces and throwing them into mass graves. Four adults were killed, and three minors: a boy of eleven, a girl of six, and an eighteen-month-old baby.

It sounds like a typical massacre from *La Violencia*; however it happened on the morning of February 21, 2005. The village in which the attack occurred is called San José de Apartadó.¹ In 1997, the village declared itself a “Community of Peace,” where no armed group—whether guerrilla, paramilitary, police, or army—was allowed to enter. The decision of the village was supported by the Organization of American States’ Interamerican Court of Human Rights in Costa Rica.² More than 150 residents of San José de Apartadó have been killed since the village officially became a Community of Peace.³

The residents, supported by the Jesuit human rights activist Javier Giraldo and by Gloria Cuartas, ex-mayor of Apartadó (the municipality where the village is located), claimed that the army was responsible for the killings, and that community members

¹ “A garrote mataron a líder de la Comunidad de Paz de Apartadó,” *El Tiempo* 28 Feb. 2005: 1-7; Jesús Abad Colorado, “El camposanto de San José de Apartadó,” *El Tiempo* 27 Mar. 2005: 1-6, 1-7.

² “Alguien miente,” *Cambio* [Bogotá] 7 Mar. 2005: 24.

³ Abad 1-6; and “A garrote.”

would only make formal accusations before the Interamerican Court of Human Rights.⁴ The army brigade in the area had been attacked by the FARC less than two weeks earlier, leaving seventeen dead—the theory is that the civilians were slaughtered in San José in retaliation for the guerrilla attack.⁵

After the massacre, army officers and members of the departmental and national governments, including current President Álvaro Uribe Vélez, have made the claim that San José de Apartadó has been used as a place of rest and relaxation for guerrillas of the FARC since it became a Community of Peace. According to this theory, the two murdered families wanted to leave San José because they no longer wanted to be associated with the guerrillas; the massacre was supposedly perpetrated by the FARC in order to prevent them—or anyone—from leaving the community.⁶ Such talk implies that the defenders of the community, such as Father Giraldo and Gloria Cuartas, are also guerrilla sympathizers,⁷ which is unlikely given the way in which they have criticized the FARC in the past.⁸ Additionally, the government claims that no community has the right to deny access to the army or the police, and that the armed forces will enter San José de Apartadó at will. In protest, most of the residents moved to a nearby hill when police arrived on April 3.⁹

⁴ “La versión de Gloria Cuartas y el sacerdote Javier Giraldo,” Cambio 7 Mar. 2005: 22.

⁵ “Alguién miente,” 25-26.

⁶ “La versión militar,” Cambio 7 Mar. 2005: 23; “Alguien miente,” 25-26.

⁷ See especially an editorial by former Uribe Vélez government minister Fernando Londoño, in which the international human rights community is blamed for discrediting and tying the hands of the Colombian army in its war against the guerrillas. Fernando Londoño Hoyos, “San José de Apartadó: es la clave de la versión política de la guerra,” El Tiempo 14 Mar. 2005: 1-21.

⁸ Gloria Cuartas, personal interview, San Vicente del Caguán, Colombia, 25 Jun. 2000. The interview took place at a public audience on women’s issues in the demilitarized zone created for the dialogue between the FARC and the government (1999-2002) in the Colombian llanos.

⁹ Catalina Oquendo, “Policía encontró a la mitad del pueblo,” El Tiempo 4 Apr. 2005: 1-7.

The two sides have competing conspiracy theories—one of guerrillas, the other of soldiers—but consider the massacre itself: what political motivations does someone have to justify clubbing to death an eighteen-month-old baby and hacking the small body to pieces with a machete? The discursive framework in this incident is similar to that which was encountered during *La Violencia*—the victims were seen as part of some larger conspiracy, threatening the nation. If the perpetrators were from the military or the paramilitary, the victims were dangerous guerrilla sympathizers; if the perpetrators were the guerrillas, the victims were collaborators with the oppressors of the people. In either case, those that lost their lives had certainly lost their humanity in the minds of the perpetrators before the massacre occurred.

It is dangerous in Colombia to examine too closely more recent incidents of political violence, such as that of San José de Apartadó. For the historian, it is (somewhat) safer to reach back into Colombia's past to seek explanations for similar instances of eliminationist violence. Today may be a conflict between guerrillas, paramilitary groups, the army and the police, yesterday it was between Liberals and Conservatives. In both cases, the vast majority of the dead are civilian non-combatants. We can ask similar questions in order to arrive at some approximation of the discursive framework for political violence: Why is inflammatory political rhetoric so readily received? What are the conspiracy theories that are being spread? and What is the political context in which the conspiracy theories are generated?

In the case of political rhetoric on the eve of *La Violencia*, we have seen how conspiracy theories, grafted onto pre-existing nationalistic tropes based on the two parties, provided a discursive framework for the massacres of *La Violencia*. The rhetoric

of bipartisanship—*convivencia*—did not serve the party-based patron-client relationships as well as the rhetoric of antagonism. A one-party state which shut out members of the opposite party provided more benefits to the local *gamonales* and their clients. The politicians generating the rhetoric had professionalized, acquiring respect for themselves as experts with specialized knowledge based on advanced study, travel abroad, and the proper use of Spanish—it would seem that their professional qualifications made their words that much more acceptable to party members. The conspiracy theories were also accepted since they originally came from Europe—provincial political concerns in Colombia were somehow dignified when placed in the context of an international struggle against the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy or a Nazi-Falangist plot.

This study of political rhetoric in Colombia ends in 1945, at the moment López was resigning from the presidency and Gaitán was organizing his movement. Most of what happened next has already been discussed. With the election of Conservative Mariano Ospina Pérez with a plurality of the vote in 1946, Conservatives on the local level applied the same tactics as the Liberals after 1930 to guarantee election results: fraud and political violence.¹⁰ The Conservative conspiracy trope examined here became more elaborate, with Protestants and Communists mentioned more frequently as plotting against *la patria*, while the conspiracy-mongers were too embarrassed to publicly include Jews in an international plot after the extent of the Holocaust was revealed.¹¹ Liberals continued to claim that Conservatives—especially Laureano Gómez—were Nazi-

¹⁰ Despite the widespread violence, the efforts of the Conservatives were less successful than those of the Liberals after 1930: the Liberals still won majorities in the legislative and municipal contests of 1947 and 1949. Villar 414-416.

¹¹ Henderson, *When Colombia Bleed* 143-149; Builes, *Cartas* Vol. 2; and Miranda 325-352.

Falangist sympathizers.¹² One Liberal guerrilla even took as his *nom-de-guerre* “Lister,” after a prominent communist Republican general from the Spanish Civil War.¹³

The partisan press continued to broadcast the conspiratorial tropes with every massacre and assassination, despite a call among certain Colombian journalists to *desarmar los espíritus*—“disarm the spirits”—and use a less inflammatory tone in reporting on *La Violencia*: “To disarm the spirits, it is necessary to begin by defusing explosive words.”¹⁴ Significantly, this call to *desarmar los espíritus* came in January 1948, a few months before Gaitán’s assassination. Certain journalists had recognized that the conspiratorial rhetoric of the previous years had already contributed to *La Violencia*, but it was already too late to turn back the clock. After the events of April 9, it was even less possible to change the routine of accusations and counter-accusations in the press and in congress—the newspapers continued *armando los espíritus* rather than *desarmando los espíritus*. Government censorship was only implemented on a large scale in late 1949, but by then, the perpetrators of *La Violencia* did not need the newspapers or the radio to remind them of the reasons to kill the perceived enemies of party and *patria*.

The conspiracy tropes, however, became less and less important as *La Violencia* continued: violence beget violence in a cycle of revenge, even on a national scale. For instance, in September 1952 the burial in Bogotá of eight policemen killed by Liberal guerrillas in the department of Tolima inspired Conservative mobs to burn the homes of Liberal leaders in Bogotá, along with the newspaper offices of El Tiempo and El

¹² See, for instance, Arciniegas, *State* 163 and Raúl Andrade.

¹³ Gonzalo Sánchez, “Violencia, guerrillas y estructuras agrarias,” *NHC* Vol. II, 144.

¹⁴ “Para desarmar los espíritus, es necesario comenzar, por descargar de explosivos las palabras.” “El estado de sitio,” *Semana* [Bogotá] 24 Jan. 1948: 9.

Espectador.¹⁵ Still, political violence was not common in the capital outside of this incident and the events surrounding Gaitán's assassination in 1948. Most violence occurred in rural areas, where issues other than the partisan conflict increasingly influenced the motives for massacres and forced displacement as *La Violencia* wore on, particularly the economic opportunities that arose in taking abandoned property.¹⁶

There were two attempts to resolve the partisan conflict, first by the military government of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla and second by the National Front. In 1953, the end of the Gómez administration and the acceptance by many Liberal self-defense groups of a general amnesty granted by the new Rojas regime effectively ended the most violent and the most partisan phase of *La Violencia* (which coincided with the Ospina Pérez and Gómez presidencies, 1946-1953).¹⁷ However, the Rojas regime took a populist turn, while at the same time contributed to a resurgence of *La Violencia* by not extending the amnesty to communist self-defense groups and by favoring Conservatives in certain local conflicts. The populism of Rojas shut out many of the traditional politicians (who organized a civic resistance to the regime).¹⁸

La Violencia as a partisan conflict was resolved by the professionalized politicians under the National Front agreement, in which the two parties split all elective and appointed offices over a period of sixteen years, with the presidency going back and forth four times, beginning with the Liberals. The same politicians involved in generating political rhetoric from 1930 to 1945 were still in power during the National Front. The two framers of the agreement were Alberto Lleras Camargo and Laureano

¹⁵ Lleras Restrepo, *De la república* 418-424.

¹⁶ Ortiz 289-321; Roldán 187-218, 246-277; and Henderson, *When Colombia Bled* 129-130, 149.

¹⁷ Oquist 6-7.

¹⁸ Sánchez, "La Violencia," 153-167.

Gómez—Lleras Camargo, whose newspaper El Liberal had claimed that Gómez was part of a Nazi-Falangist conspiracy, and Gómez, who had depicted Liberals as part of a vast international Judeo-Masonic plot to destroy Christianity.

Liberal-Conservative violence ended under the National Front, but at the same time the agreement inspired various guerrilla groups. Convincing Liberal and, especially, communist “self-defense” groups to lay down their arms was a difficult task. From this incomplete process arose both the FARC and the ELN, which still exist, along with other smaller groups. The largest legal opposition to the National Front during the 1960s was led by Rojas Pinilla, whose group, ANAPO, united dissidents of both parties. As a Conservative, Rojas Pinilla ran for president in the April 19, 1970 election; many feel that electoral fraud prevented Rojas from winning the presidency. It was the closest that a populist had come to being elected to the nation’s highest office; disappointed left-wing members of his movement formed another important guerrilla group, the *Movimiento de 19 de Abril* (“April 19 Movement”—M-19).¹⁹

The M-19, which was urban-based, was perhaps the most popular of the guerrilla groups of the 1970s and 1980s. The group negotiated an agreement with the government in 1989 and laid down their arms²⁰—several former M-19 leaders are now prominent politicians.²¹ The FARC tried to enter civilian politics in the 1980s by organizing their own political movement, the *Unión Patriótica* (“Patriotic Union”—UP). However, since

¹⁹ Sánchez, “La Violencia” 165-166.

²⁰ This came after the disastrous and controversial attempted takeover of the Palace of Justice in November 1985 by the guerrilla group. During the fire fight with army units, the building caught on fire and most Colombian supreme court justices were killed, along with all of the guerrillas. Ana Carrigan, The Palace of Justice: A Colombian Tragedy (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993).

²¹ Antonio Navarro Wolf has gone the farthest in his post-guerrilla political career: Health Minister in the administration of César Gaviria (1990-1991); co-president of the 1991 Constituent Assembly, unsuccessful presidential candidate in 1990 and 1994; mayor of Pasto, 1995-1998, and currently serving as a senator. He writes a weekly column in the newsweekly Cambio and is considering running for president in 2006, or mayor of Bogotá in 2007. “No va más,” Cambio 4 Apr. 2005: 18.

the FARC refused to lay down their arms, UP militants became targets of the army and paramilitary groups; at least 3,000 were assassinated.²²

The exponential growth of the cocaine trade in the 1980s was grafted onto the pre-existing guerrilla conflict. Narcotraffickers invested heavily in land in rural areas traditionally dominated by the FARC; guerrilla demands for “taxes” and the FARC’s policy of selective kidnappings sparked an ongoing war with narcotraffickers, who united with ranchers along the Caribbean coast and in the middle Magdalena River valley to form paramilitary groups. The Colombian army has supported these groups both actively and passively since the mid-1980s, allowing them to operate practically at will.²³

The FARC, in the meantime, has also benefited from the cocaine trade. Initially, most of the coca leaf was grown and processed into coca paste in Bolivia and Peru, where chewing coca and drinking coca tea have been part of indigenous traditions since before the arrival of the Spanish. Coca paste was then flown to Colombia where it was processed into cocaine and shipped to the U.S. and Europe. In the mid-1990s, U.S.-aided efforts to diminish coca-growing in Bolivia and Peru had enormous success; coca cultivation then moved to Colombia, precisely to regions long-controlled by the FARC. “Taxes” on coca growers has made the FARC independently wealthy.²⁴

The illegal drug trade would not exist without the demand in the U.S.—the problem will not be solved in Colombia until North America faces its own cultural realities and seeks other solutions. Nevertheless, it was not geographically pre-ordained that Colombia would become the cocaine capital of the world—cocaine labs and

²² Dudley 5.

²³ Dudley 65-76, 117-126,141-151.

²⁴ Robin Kirk, *More Terrible than Death: Violence, Drugs, and America’s War in Colombia* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003) 232-235. Opium poppy cultivation in Colombia, which began in the early 1990s, has also been very lucrative; Colombia now provides most of the heroin to the US market. Kirk 228-229.

shipment networks could very well have been set up in other countries in the region. The drug gangs sprouted up in Colombia because the government has never had a complete presence over large parts of rural territory, making the maintenance of coca farms and cocaine laboratories that much easier. The lack of government presence deepened during *La Violencia*, when Liberal or (less frequently) Conservative bands set the rules and organized protection in isolated communities all over the country.

The massacres and assassinations of *La Violencia* contributed to making violence an expected and, in many ways, accepted part of the political landscape, along with the rhetoric of conspiracy and counter-conspiracy. Although the National Front ended the Liberal-Conservative conflict, no effective public recognition of the dead of *La Violencia* has ever been made by the government or the traditional political parties. Benedict Anderson points to the importance of both memory and forgetting in transforming a violent national civil conflict into a “reassuring fratricide” necessary for the construction of the idea of “nation.” In the United States, for instance, an entire history industry exists based on the detailed study of the U.S. Civil War, an event generally presented as a conflict between brothers and an important step in national development rather than as a struggle between two separate nation-states—this aspect has been “forgotten.” In contrast, the violent mid-twentieth-century conflict between Colombia’s two traditional parties, along with the nineteenth-century civil wars, was “forgotten” without “memory,” making electoral competition more viable without considering the problem of (or the solution to) violence in Colombia. No national remembrance of past bloodshed has been attempted in order to make any of the long history of political violence into a “reassuring fratricide.” No monuments to the victims of *La Violencia* exist—in contrast to, for

example, the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington or the recently inaugurated Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. The lack of a memorial is emblematic of the larger National Front policy to forget a tragedy that should not have been forgotten. Public acceptance of the history of violence in the last sixty years would contribute to reconciliation and peace. The discursive framework for *La Violencia* still exists in Colombia; habits of the mind need to be radically changed if spirits are to be effectively disarmed.