Introduction

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MARÍA EUGENIA VÁSQUEZ PERDOMO's memoir recounts the compelling story of a highly unusual personal journey. Born in Cali, Colombia, the country's third-largest city, in 1951, Vásquez Perdomo came of age amid the radical student politics of the National University, where she gave up her previously "bourgeois" existence, exchanging, as she tells us, her makeup and miniskirts for jeans. For her, this would be no mere alteration in appearance but a deep submerging of self within the society of her revolutionary *compañeros* and their shared goal of liberating Colombia from poverty and oppression. Takeovers of academic buildings soon gave way to life as a revolutionary *guerrillera*, an existence that would define her identity for the next eighteen years.

An unstinting devotion to "the cause" sustained her clandestine and risky life, taking precedence over her personal self—over loves won and lost, over two sons given birth, and even over her own comprehension of what it meant to be a woman. Whether transporting hidden weapons, fronting for an urban safe house, holding foreign diplomats hostage, attempting a rural insurgency, going into exile, or doing time in jail, Vásquez Perdomo acted completely as the soldier that she was. Her identity as a revolutionary suppressed her identity as a woman, an experience not unknown to other

female Latin American radicals of her generation. "The fact that I was a woman by biological definition didn't bother me," she recalls, "but I wasn't very aware of what it meant, either, in a world that made us all the same in ideology. Equality weighed more than difference."

Women and Guerrilla Movements in Latin America

Vásquez Perdomo lived through an era of revolutionary struggle in Latin America whose impulses for change directed themselves primarily against the oppressions of class and imperialism. Matters of gender occupied a distinctly secondary position in left-wing agendas. Revolutionary guerrilla insurgencies appeared in various parts of Latin America following the triumph of Fidel Castro's Cuban guerrilla fighters in 1959. In the words of the Mexican intellectual and former foreign minister Jorge G. Castañeda, an expert on Latin American radicalism, "The Cuban Revolution impacted the left in Latin America as nothing had ever done before. . . . Before Fidel entered Havana, the left in Latin America was reformist, gradualist, or resignedly pessimistic about the prospects of revolution. For the three decades that followed, revolution was at the top of its agenda."[1]

The sudden emergence of the Cuban revolutionary regime inspired the belief that a relatively small cadre of armed revolutionaries—the revolutionary *foco* so widely publicized in Latin America by the writings of Che Guevara and Régis Debray—could create the appropriate conditions for successful national revolution.[2] In the early 1960s, rural guerrilla insurgencies appeared in Colombia, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Peru, and Venezuela. Some Latin American insurgents have left widely read personal accounts of their exploits, among them Héctor Béjar's saga of lost causes on the Peruvian altiplano and Omar Cabezas's adventures in the Sandinista insurgency in Nicaragua.[3]

1. Jorge G. Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left after the Cold War* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 67–68.
2. Ernesto Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, with an introduction and case studies by Brian Loveman and Thomas M. Davies Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985); Régis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America*, trans. Bobbye Ortiz (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967).
3. Héctor Béjar, *Peru 1965: Notes on a Guerrilla Experience,* trans. William Rose (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970); Omar Cabezas, *Fire from the Mountain: The Making of a Sandinista*, foreword by Carlos Fuentes, trans. Kathleen Weaver (New York: Crown, 1985).

Vásquez Perdomo's story forms part of a new wave of testimonial literature in Latin America that seeks to heal the wounds left by a long generation of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary conflict, recognizing, as one author put it, that "recovery begins with memory."[4] Nevertheless, her tale is something of a rarity. For one thing, "women have generally been under- or misrepresented in stories of war, and are most often seen as grief-stricken, powerless victims."[5] Vásquez Perdomo was an active combatant who ultimately discovered that she was a victim as well. For another, most book-length insurgent testimonies have derived from men's memories. Initially, relatively few women fought in guerrilla movements in Latin America, although Che Guevara himself declared in *Guerrilla Warfare* that "the woman . . . can work the same as a man and she can fight." Nevertheless, as Vásquez Perdomo notes, politics and military affairs tended to remain "clearly inscribed in the man's universe. Men's things." War, by its very nature, has tended to discourage gender equality. While open to women, Latin American guerrilla movements remained male-dominated organizations, and male attitudes usually confined women to purely supporting roles in revolutionary warfare. Guevara's text revealed his clear preference for using women to transport "objects, messages, or money," to teach revolutionary recruits, to provide medical care, and to carry out their "habitual tasks of peacetime," such as cooking and sewing.[6]

This pattern held true in Colombia, even though the origins of its guerrilla insurgencies differed considerably from other areas of Latin America. Left-wing guerrillas appeared during the last phase of the widespread political violence that convulsed Colombia between 1946 and 1966. Known as *la Violencia*, this highly complex period is only partially understood by scholars, although new research has tended to show that it remains "inextricably intertwined" with the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary struggle and the other forms of conflict that Colombia has experienced ever since Vásquez Perdomo was a teenager.[7] While some women are known to have taken part in combat during la Violencia and the early years of revolutionary insurgency in Colombia, most remained active in the support networks that sustained

4. Alison Brysk, "Recovering from State Terror: The Morning After in Latin America," *Latin American Research Review* 38, no. 1 (2003): 239.

5. Olivia Bennett, Jo Bexley, and Kitty Warnode, "Introduction: Our Words," in *Arms to Fight, Arms to Protect: Women Speak Out about Conflict*, ed. Olivia Bennett, Jo Bexley, and Kitty Warnode (London: Panos, 1995), 2.

6. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare,* 132–34.

7. Mary Roldán, *Blood and Fire:* La Violencia *in Antioquia, Colombia, 1946–1953* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 1.

armed combatants.[8] This gendered division of labor certainly reflected sexism, but at times it embodied good strategy as well, particularly in clandestine urban operations where a woman might attract less suspicion than a man.[9] As she acknowledges, Vásquez Perdomo could ferry weapons and messages through urban security zones more safely than could any male. On more than one occasion, she used her femininity to distract guards, disguise the presence of a guerrilla safe house, or escape a government "manhunt."

Many more women became involved in guerrilla activities during the "second wave" of insurgencies that washed over Latin America in the late 1960s. In Nicaragua women composed about one-quarter of the Sandinista combatants, including several well-known officers by the time of the successful overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship in 1979.[10] In more recent years, women such as Comandante Ramona and Comandante Ester have acted as prominent spokespersons for the Zapatista rebels in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. Observers have remarked on the high visibility of female soldiers in the ranks of the guerrilla forces that still operate in Colombia today.[11] Second-wave movements during the 1970s–1980s, such as Vásquez Perdomo's own M-19 in Colombia, proved more attuned to local circumstances than did earlier guerrilla organizations, and more adept at incorporating women into their ranks. Vásquez Perdomo declares that "in Colombia you had to shoot to be heard," and shoot she did. She took part in key M-19 armed operations such as the capture of the embassy of the Dominican Republic in 1980 and the guerrilla landing on the Pacific coast near the Mira River in 1981. She worked closely with top figures in the M-19, among them Jaime (el Flaco) Bateman, Alvaro Fayad, Iván Marino Ospina, Lucho Otero, Rosemberg Pabón, and Carlos Toledo, all of whom appear in her narrative.

Yet, as women continue to discover, greater female participation in revolutionary action does not guarantee gender equality. Despite a "visibility never before seen in any political party in Peruvian history," women in the Shining Path found themselves manipulated by "patriarchal relations [that] were reproduced to benefit the party." The number of women did increase in combat ranks and in other important activities, such as intelligence, but

8. Gonzalo Sánchez and Donny Meertens, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics: The Case of "La Violencia" in Colombia*, trans. Alan Hynds (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 192.
9. Linda L. Reif, "Women in Latin American Guerrilla Movements: A Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 18, no. 1 (1986): 153–54.
10. Ibid., 157–61; Patricia M. Chuchryk, "Women in the Revolution," in *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Nicaragua*, ed. Thomas W. Walker (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 145.
11. Donny Meertens, *Ensayos sobre tierra, violencia y género: Hombres y mujeres en la historia rural de Colombia, 1930–1990* (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2000), 412.

the Sendero Luminoso never developed a serious women's agenda as part of either its program or its mode of operation. Similarly, female combatants in guerrilla forces in Colombia today rarely win top leadership positions.[12]

Even when revolutionary movements attained power, as in Nicaragua, a comprehensive attack on sexism and traditional gender roles proved elusive. The Sandinista Revolution was "reasonably successful in involving and integrating women" and brought about many institutional changes benefiting them. Nevertheless, women's share of the membership of the military and the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) dropped in the decade following the revolutionary triumph. No women held top FSLN leadership roles. While some see this as the result of security considerations or mistaken decisions, others have argued that men articulated Latin American revolutionary projects within a masculine narrative that inherently subordinated women.[13] Critics have faulted both Latin American radicalism and the post-conflict settlements for their failure to give women a central voice. As Paulina, the Chilean activist who survived torture without betraying her husband, tells him in Ariel Dorfman's play, *Death and the Maiden*: "Of course, I'm going to listen to you. Haven't I always listened to you?"[14]

Vásquez Perdomo's Experience

Readers of Vásquez Perdomo's story will quickly see how much she listened to the revolutionary cause and how long it took her to develop a woman's voice. Over many years, Vásquez Perdomo's female identity subordinated itself to her militancy. Only toward the end of her career as a revolutionary did issues of gender undermine her total devotion to guerrilla activity. At the start, this commitment drew upon her childhood fondness for drama—she imagined herself as Tania, the "heroic guerrilla warrior" immortalized in Cuba for having given her life in Che Guevara's failed attempt at revolution in Bolivia in 1966–67.[15] Fortunately, Vásquez Perdomo proved far more able than the ill-fated Tania. Overcoming the initial nervousness of her first revolutionary venture—helping to steal guns from the house of a friend—Vásquez

12. Isabel Coral Cordero, "Women in War: Impact and Responses," in *Shining and Other Paths: War and Society in Peru, 1980–1995*, ed. Steve J. Stern (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 349–53; Meertens, *Ensayos sobre tierra*, 412.
13. Chuchryk, "Women in the Revolution," 158–59; Ileana Rodríguez, *Women, Guerrillas and Love: Understanding War in Central America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
14. Ariel Dorfman, *Death and the Maiden* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 30.
15. Jorge G. Castañeda, *Compañero: The Life and Death of Che Guevara*, trans. Marina Castañeda (New York: Knopf, 1997), 362.

Perdomo promptly accustomed herself to the rigors of living a secret life. Her acting skills served her well as she eluded the government dragnets that characterized Colombia during the presidency of Julio César Turbay Ayala. Through her experiences, she discovered happily that government security forces expected any guerrillera to be "something like a tomboy." In employing her feminine charms to revolutionary advantage, Vásquez Perdomo remained acutely sensitive to her surroundings and capable of assuming the persona needed for survival in virtually any setting. Like Yolanda, the ballet dancer and Peruvian revolutionary in the Nicholas Shakespeare novel (and John Malkovich movie) *The Dancer Upstairs,* Vásquez Perdomo operated as the "woman no one suspected."

None of this could take place without a frightfully high cost. Unlike Yolanda, no detractor could say that Vásquez Perdomo benefited from her looks alone or lacked "the meat and gristle of character."[16] For years she lived a homeless "gypsy life" of false ID cards, transient loves, and constant insecurity. She often carried a cyanide pill with her with which to take her own life in case of capture. As time wore on she began to fear schizophrenia, discovering that "two diametrically opposed women lived inside me . . . pitted against each other." One woman executed the difficult tasks of a guerrillera with aplomb, the other sought the personal life that revolutionary militancy denied. Vásquez Perdomo's remarkable resiliency and her knack for drawing strength from friendships enabled her to navigate through the dangers of personal disintegration. At times her cohort of revolutionary compañeros filled the role of family, deadening the pain inflicted by her physical separation from her sons and by the constant anxiety of her clandestine existence.

The M-19 itself first separated Vásquez Perdomo from the guerrilla identity that had sustained so much personal sacrifice. Against her objection, it ordered her to Libya, where she arrived in April 1987 in the subordinated role of compañera to a male combatant. In the process of becoming more militaristic in character, the M-19 deprived Vásquez Perdomo of her customary levels of responsibility. The military training mission soon proved a farce. Even worse for Vásquez Perdomo, she found herself a female outsider in two male-dominated worlds, that of the local M-19 organization and that of Libyan society. No longer a functioning guerrillera but a dependent figure in a man's world, she could not withstand the devastating news of the death of her elder son, Juan Diego. His loss at age thirteen robbed Vásquez Perdomo of all sense of tomorrow, of a proximate future in which she could

16. Nicholas Shakespeare, *The Dancer Upstairs* (New York: Anchor, 2002), 265.

make up for years of lost motherhood and compensate for the aspects of herself she had negated in becoming a guerrillera. "I had no real referent," she writes. "All my sacrifice was unfounded, there was nothing more than an immense emptiness. . . . I began my existence as a ghost."

Leaving the M-19 involved more than just finding a new occupation. As Vásquez Perdomo put it: "The person I had been up to that moment had exploded into a million pieces. . . . For many years my identity had been formed by my politics, my belonging to the M-19, my ideals. . . . Now all of that was not enough." Throughout her time of armed struggle, exile, and prison, Vásquez Perdomo had never lost the support of her mother, an anchor in life who now helped with the difficult reconstruction of self following her return to Colombia. Slowly the "world populated by ghosts" began to recede. Vásquez Perdomo discovered that writing gradually wove the fibers of a life, bringing together the strands of old and new. Anthropology, the career she had long ago abandoned for life as a guerrillera, now beckoned once again. As she recalls, "I slowly discovered that it was nice to be outside the organization even though it hurt me, if only in the sense that I now felt in control of my own life. I no longer had to live for others." Ownership of her life entailed a retrospective understanding of how the inequalities of gender had operated as an unseen presence in her guerrillera world. This perception enabled her to open a new chapter in her life, embracing existence as a "draft idea that is invented every day."

The Colombian Past

María Eugenia Vásquez Perdomo's story reminds one of the title of playwright Lillian Hellman's autobiography, *An Unfinished Woman*.[17] Vásquez Perdomo recounts her experiences as a step forward in the project of constructing who she is. In doing so, she urges her readers to accept the unorthodox route toward selfhood that her life has taken. In a similar fashion, in his 1982 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez asked inhabitants of the North Atlantic world to avoid measuring Latin America "with the yardstick that they use for themselves, forgetting that the ravages of life are not the same for all, and that the quest of our own identity is just as arduous and bloody for us as it was for them."[18] Vásquez Perdomo's story is both an individual and a Latin American

17. Lillian Hellman, *An Unfinished Woman: A Memoir* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969).
18. Gabriel García Márquez, "The Solitude of Latin America," 8 Dec. 1982, http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1982/marquez-lecture.html.

story—in particular, a Colombian story. Few Latin American societies fit García Márquez's words as well as his native Colombia does when he spoke of how much "the immeasurable violence and pain of our history are the result of age-old inequities and untold bitterness." Nearly two centuries after independence, Colombia remains an unfinished nation-state characterized by widespread violence and severe social and political divisions. Seventeen years after Vásquez Perdomo's departure from the M-19, the country's condition appears critical. Colombians consider themselves "unprotected in life and property as at few times in the past. The indices of homicides, personal injuries, kidnappings, and forced displacement of families and neighborhoods are among the highest in the world. And they show no sign of declining."[19] Today Colombia's motto might well be the lament reputedly uttered by Simón Bolívar, the hero of its wars for independence, during his last months of life: "How will I ever get out of this labyrinth!"[20]

It is important to set Vásquez Perdomo's story in the context of the endemic violence—the "labyrinth"—in which Colombia has remained trapped since the end of World War II. Vásquez Perdomo credits her insurgent leaders with linking revolutionary activity to "youthful longings," making it "compatible with love, with *la rumba*, with theater, with laughter and studying. They didn't demand sacrifices of us, they offered us life alternatives." Ultimately, she discovered within herself the need to fulfill other dimensions of human existence. Nevertheless, her comments illustrate the point that structures of violence have come to offer different "life alternatives" for large numbers of Colombians. As one expert on the state of affairs in Colombia noted recently, "Many former combatants miss their old guerrilla lifestyle and are nostalgic about the collective feeling of security, power, and belonging that they experienced in their underground activities."[21] Violence has been a potent factor in shaping ways of life since 1946, when la Violencia commenced, the product of complex national and local political rivalries and unresolved social conflicts. During the past sixty years, national life in Colombia has evolved into a "war system" in which the commonality among the protagonists—and the protagonists in Colombia have multiplied over time—is the use of violence. Today violence links the leading actors—government

19. Frank Safford and Marco Palacios, *Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 345.
20. Gabriel García Márquez, *The General in His Labyrinth*, trans. Edith Grossman (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 267.
21. Gonzalo Sánchez, "Problems of Violence, Prospects for Peace," in *Violence in Colombia, 1990–2000: Waging War and Negotiating Peace*, ed. Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, and Gonzalo Sánchez (Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 2001), 27.

officials, politicians, military, police, narcotics traffickers, guerrilla movements, paramilitaries, landowners, entrepreneurs, and agents of the United States government—in a dynamic system characterized by three features: (1) the failure of political institutions to resolve conflicts; (2) a political economy that makes war "the best available option" for leading protagonists; and (3) a relative impasse in the efforts to end armed conflict either by force or by negotiation. One of the principal challenges to Colombians today is how to make peace desirable to those in the "war system."[22]

The origin of this "war system" and its contemporary modes of operation constitute the primary concerns of research on Colombia today. Historians interpret nineteenth- and early twentieth-century trends as background rather than as direct cause of the country's propensity for endemic violence over the past six decades. They stress that Colombia entered the twentieth century with a relatively weak national state and a two-party political system prone to extreme partisanship. The experiences of the nineteenth century failed to overcome the obstacles to national unity that geography and economy posed. At the time of independence in 1830, Colombia was a relatively self-sufficient agrarian society. Even within the more heavily populated highlands, dispersed settlement was the norm. Colombia's commerce proved too meager a force to generate economic and demographic concentration. As late as the 1850s, only the capital city of Bogotá approached a population of 30,000. The remaining "urban" residents of Colombia lived in 710 other municipalities, none of which possessed more than 15,000 people and 300 of which even had fewer than 2,000 inhabitants. Colombia remained a rural country with rather small cities well into the twentieth century.[23]

Throughout the nineteenth century, transportation proved a major barrier to change. At the time of independence, in the words of one prominent historian:

> The most obvious of all the obstacles to political and economic integration and development of New Granada [Colombia] was the difficulty and cost of moving from one province to another, and sometimes even within provinces. Actual distances were not great: in a direct line, Bogotá was only about 200 kilometers from Medellín, or 600 from the Caribbean coast at Cartagena. The problem was, instead, that the national territory was broken by a succession of mountains and valleys

22. Nazih Richani, *Systems of Violence: The Political Economy of War and Peace in Colombia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 3–4; Sánchez, "Problems of Violence," 30.
23. Safford and Palacios, *Colombia*, 9.

> into isolated compartments, held together by a road network suited for draft animals and human carriers but not for wheeled vehicles, and by a system of river transportation that was also highly primitive for the most part.[24]

By mid-century, overland freight shipment in the dry season still cost ten to thirty times as much as in the United States, and that ratio doubled during periods of rain or civil strife. Transportation by water was easier and cheaper than by land, especially once steamboats began to ply the Magdalena River in 1847, but most Colombians did not live along riverbanks. Throughout the century, Colombia continued to suffer from weak export revenues, disconnected internal markets, and relatively low economic growth. After the mid-1840s, new exports in the form of tobacco and coffee did improve the situation somewhat, yet the pace of development remained exceedingly modest. Early in the twentieth century, Colombia possessed fewer than three hundred miles of rail lines, a population of only 4 million people, and per-capita export revenues less than one-third the Latin American average.[25]

Armed conflict was a prominent part of the political life of this physically divided and economically fragmented society throughout the nineteenth century, but most wars were skirmishes in which relatively few Colombians participated. Rather than indicating any peculiar Colombian proclivity for violence since independence, the nineteenth-century conflicts appear ordinary for their time, at least until the War of a Thousand Days between 1899 and 1902.[26] Worthy of note, however, are the profound and enduring loyalties engendered by Colombia's two elite parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives. Consolidated in the 1840s, the two parties established permanent nationwide organizations by the 1880s, leaving political affiliations—"hereditary hatreds"—deeply entrenched in Colombian society. Often faction ridden, the two parties varied little in social class composition and were anything but internally uniform in their political positions. Nevertheless, the Liberals and Conservatives did manifest—however unevenly and inconsistently—differences in their views on government organization, economic policy, and, especially, the role of the Roman Catholic Church in public life.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the ascendancy of either the Liberals or the Conservatives depended considerably on the fate

24. David Bushnell, *The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 74.
25. Safford and Palacios, *Colombia*, 5, 14, 235.
26. Roldán, *Blood and Fire*, 14.

of Colombia's export economy.[27] The Liberals dominated during the mid-century flourishing of tobacco shipments abroad but gave way to Conservative hegemony in 1885 after several years of depressed agricultural exports. Despite the high levels of partisanship that developed, Liberal and Conservative elites in the nineteenth century usually managed to limit political violence. As Gonzalo Sánchez put it, "These were, in the final analysis, conflicts between gentlemen of a single lineage."[28] Nevertheless, the potential of this "two-party system" for extended violence of a more modern sort was borne out during the War of a Thousand Days. The conflict began as a Liberal revolt in the midst of a severe plunge in world coffee prices. It ultimately degenerated into bloody guerrilla warfare in which elite party leaders could neither agree among themselves nor rein in the combatants. The length of the war undermined the country's ability to deal effectively with the United States over the issue of a canal through the Colombian province of Panama, contributing to yet another national disaster in 1903, when the United States engineered a Panamanian breakaway. In retrospect, the War of a Thousand Days offers some echoes of the present-day "labyrinth" in the weakness of Colombian political institutions, the inability of Liberal and Conservative leaders to end the violence of their partisans, and the brutality and prolonged character of the conflict.[29]

Once it ended, the War of a Thousand Days gave way to a long era of political cooperation and economic progress. Both the destruction caused by the war and the ignominious loss of Panama shocked the political elite into rejecting civil war as an acceptable mode of political competition. Internal divisions within the Conservative and Liberal Parties helped strengthen centrist elements on both sides, who found ways to cooperate in the interest of national stability and to guarantee minority party representation in Congress despite severe partisan disagreements over the outcome of elections. Between 1903 and 1946, Colombia's population nearly tripled, its economic output grew fivefold, and roads, rails, and airways combined to knit the country's diverse regions more tightly together. While bananas and petroleum gained important shares of Colombia's export trade, these were the years of the "coffee republic," and the rapid expansion of this crop became "the most decisive phenomenon in Colombian economic history in the twentieth

27. Charles Bergquist, *Coffee and Conflict in Colombia, 1886–1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978), 7–8.

28. Gonzalo Sánchez, "*La Violencia* in Colombia: New Research, New Questions," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 65, no. 4 (1985): 790.

29. Charles Bergquist, "Waging War and Negotiating Peace: The Contemporary Crisis in Historical Perspective," in Bergquist et al., *Violence in Colombia, 1990–2000*, 198–99.

century."[30] By 1920, coffee generated more than 60 percent of Colombia's export earnings, a position that it would maintain or exceed for nearly half a century.

Still, not everything was harmonious, and the coffee republic's political handling of social questions ultimately gave rise, after 1946, to a period of uncontained strife. Colombian coffee grew on both large estates and smaller farms, and from the 1920s onward land struggles in coffee zones became an increasingly salient part of Colombian political life. Peasant smallholders, responsible for about three-quarters of Colombia's coffee production, endured miserable living conditions despite the crop's success as a source of national income. In the influential interpretation of historian Charles Bergquist:

> Accumulation of capital in the most important sector of the Colombian economy depended on relations of production and exchange that grossly exploited coffee workers and small and medium producers. Colombia's ability to expand coffee production and to capture a larger share of the depressed world market during the crisis of the 1930s—as well as its capacity to mount an impressive record of import-substituting industrialization during the same period—depended on the willingness of small producers and their families to subject themselves to an ever greater degree of exploitation.[31]

Coffee producers of all sorts—landless workers, sharecroppers, renters, and smallholders—"found themselves locked in constant combat with one another and with large landowners and merchants to improve their position and to avoid proletarianization."[32] Throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, coffee production, smallholding ownership, and population all expanded amid an acute competition for survival. Land invasions, squatters' movements, and peasant leagues reflected serious agrarian unrest. Those who lacked land sought it in order to become small producers. Small producers, for their part, desperately needed more land in order to sustain themselves and provide a viable inheritance for their children.

Land struggles in coffee-growing areas occurred alongside other forms of social strife in Colombia during these decades, as a modern proletariat took shape in the nation's oil fields, banana plantations, textile factories, mines, and railways. At the same time, newly expanding lower- and middle-class

30. Safford and Palacios, *Colombia*, 272.
31. Charles Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America: Comparative Essays on Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 277.
32. Ibid., 278.

urban populations sought services and opportunities. Efforts at popular organization often met with repression from the Conservative governments that remained in charge of Colombia until 1930. In 1928 the military carried out a particularly notorious massacre at Ciénaga in the Caribbean banana enclaves of the United Fruit Company. The Liberals took over government in 1930 and engaged in social reforms in an effort to modernize Colombian socioeconomic conditions. Particularly notable was the "Revolución en Marcha" of President Alfonso López Pumarejo (1934–38). Historians now interpret these efforts as one of the chief causes of la Violencia. Between 1930 and 1938 the liberal governments of Enrique Olaya Herrera and López Pumarejo abolished literacy requirements, thus allowing all males to vote; accorded workers the eight-hour day and the right to strike; allowed women to own and dispose of their own property; provided for stronger taxation; passed a modest land-reform bill; and generally asserted the power of the national state to mediate between socioeconomic groups in conflict. In 1936 Public Law 200 proclaimed that private property had a social function. Even more important than what López Pumarejo did is what he did not do—automatically take sides with the propertied elements in their disputes with labor.[33]

The biggest effect of the Liberal reforms was to alarm major segments of the elite in both parties, particularly an increasingly militant and authoritarian faction of Conservatives headed by Laureano Gómez. Fears of revolution, communism, and popular self-assertion brought a backlash that sought to contain and roll back social change, thwarting López during his second presidency (1942–45) and provoking him to resign before his term was over. Despite the efforts of Communists and other radicals to provide leadership, the new popular forces were too diverse to create an independent vehicle of political expression outside the world of the traditional parties. The female textile workers in Medellín, for example, did not find Colombian unionism sufficiently sensitive to their needs as women to wean them away from Liberalism and Conservatism.[34] Many of the popular movements depended for their political representation on the left wing of the Liberal Party, championed by the charismatic populist Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. Some argue that Gaitanismo represented a coherent, unified, national movement of working- and middle-class interests that saw its struggle as that of a darker-hued people against a lighter-skinned, privileged oligarchy.[35] Others disagree, arguing, for

33. Bushnell, *Making of Modern Colombia*, 188.

34. Ann Farnsworth-Alvear, *Dulcinea in the Factory: Myths, Morals, Men, and Women in Colombia's Industrial Experiment, 1905–1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 231.

35. W. John Green, *Gaitanismo, Left Liberalism, and Popular Mobilization in Colombia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 2, 12, 266.

example, that the economic circumstances and cultural horizons of peasant coffee growers imbued them with smallholder individualism. In a world of individual, family, and small community, they pursued their interests through the partisan ranks of the Liberal and Conservative Parties, generating political tensions at the local level and undercutting "the power of an organized labor movement in which they were potentially the most important part."[36]

These differences of opinion form part of the larger unsettled question of whether Colombia was at the brink of revolutionary change. Whatever the case, many in the elite, particularly Conservatives, remained hostile to the reforms of the previous years and determined to reverse them. Increased partisan hostility between the two dominant parties generated opportunities for underlying local and regional antagonisms to boil over, a setting in which socially marginalized elements could pursue their aims more forcefully and their enemies could seek to repress or even to exterminate them. The state had lost its capacity to mediate social conflicts, one of the primary aims of the reforms enacted by the government of López Pumarejo. Conservatives recaptured the presidency in 1946 when Gaitán ran as an independent, splitting the Liberal ranks. Following their victory, Conservatives commenced "cleansing operations" against sources of popular activism throughout the country. Over the next twenty years, political violence cost the lives of an estimated 200,000 Colombians and obliged another 2 million to flee their homes. La Violencia was a traumatic blow from which Colombia is still reeling, an "extraordinarily heterogeneous and complex phenomenon" that still perplexes *violentólogos*. "Indeed," notes one analyst, "recent studies of *la Violencia* raise as many questions as they answer." Research has shown that "the notion of a single, blanket interpretation of violence" no longer remains tenable, and that la Violencia contains "many manifestations and meanings" in which local circumstances appear "the most significant factor in determining the nature of violence and its objectives."[37] From this wider perspective, observers now see strong elements of continuity threading together the social struggles of the 1920s–40s, la Violencia and the subsequent era of Vásquez Perdomo's guerrilla career, and Colombia's present-day "labyrinth." La Violencia marks the start of more than half a century during which Colombian elites have been able to influence, but not to contain, the proliferation of political violence, giving rise in recent years to the term las Violencias.[38]

36. Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America*, 312.
37. Roldán, *Blood and Fire*, 5, 23, 29.
38. Sánchez and Meertens, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics*, 194–96.

La Violencia and las Violencias

Following the Conservative victory in 1946, Gaitán became the most prominent figure in the Liberal Party and its likely candidate in the 1950 presidential elections. His assassination in Bogotá on 9 April 1948 convulsed the nation. A popular uprising, the Bogotazo, caused widespread damage in the capital, while other protests, often violent, took place throughout Colombia. A hasty power-sharing arrangement among Conservative and Liberal Party leaders did not deter clashes at local levels, and in any case the agreement fell apart in less than a year. During the latter part of 1949 the Conservatives nominated the militant authoritarian Laureano Gómez for president, whereupon the Liberals announced their intention to abstain from elections. Outgoing president Mariano Ospina Pérez closed down Congress and declared a state of siege. Congress did not meet again for another nine years.

With the threat of social revolution quashed by government force, cycles of conflict broke out at local levels around the country between 1948 and 1953, the most destructive years of la Violencia. Conservative repression of Liberals, not just Gaitanistas, and armed Liberal responses reinforced old partisan affiliations and the authority of local bosses. In Bergquist's words,

> With the breakdown in public authority and social control on the local level, the struggle for individual gain became a nightmare of land grabbing, robbery, and extortion. The means used to accomplish these material ends degenerated from polite and subtle persuasion to armed threats, house burnings, and brutal slayings. Once the Violence began in a region it fed on itself. Relatives, friends, and co-partisans avenged the crimes against victims by retaliating against their alleged authors, against those authors' families and friends, or simply against those identified with the opposite political party. In doing so they often simultaneously accomplished cherished material goals and settled old social debts and long-smoldering personal grudges.[39]

La Violencia meant selective, purposeful violence shaped by the diverse dimensions of local power struggles. Intense conflicts over land, for example, took place in many of the coffee-growing regions where agrarian agitation had been prominent during the previous generation. Liberals and Communists established autonomous guerrilla forces in the cattle-raising areas of the

39. Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America*, 361–62.

eastern plains. In Antioquia violence resulted from the hostility of centrally located inhabitants toward the Afro-Colombians who had settled in outlying regions.

Partisan Liberal-Conservative violence diminished substantially following the June 1953 coup of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla. Yet the ambitious general, who modeled himself somewhat after Juan Perón of Argentina, succeeded neither at ending la Violencia nor at creating a new political system. La Violencia continued as a type of banditry under the aegis of local political bosses, landowners, and mafiosos, especially in coffee-growing areas. "The seasonality of the coffee harvest permitted exploitative armed bands to concentrate their extortions during a clearly delimited harvest period. By threatening to kill harvest workers or to drive them away, these rural mafiosos could bring landowners to their knees."[40] Those involved in *bandolerismo* rejected government amnesties. In addition, Communist rural self-defense forces continued to operate in several locales despite assaults upon them by the Colombian armed forces.

After initially supporting the initiatives of Rojas Pinilla, Liberal and Conservative leaders distanced themselves from his clumsy pretensions. The outcome was his overthrow in 1957 and the installation the following year of a joint Liberal-Conservative National Front that distributed power equally between the two parties. Under the provisions of the National Front, Liberals and Conservatives split all elective and appointed positions and alternated the presidency. The system continued until 1986 in accord with subsequent modifications that ended the presidential alternation in 1974 but required an "equitable" division of government posts. The National Front curbed Liberal-Conservative partisanship, extended government authority, and employed the armed forces in counterinsurgency operations against the *bandoleros*, thus bringing la Violencia to an end in the mid-1960s.

By then, however, a new form of political violence—revolutionary insurgency—had already broken out. Like so many of their peers throughout Latin America, Vásquez Perdomo and her compañeros acted from the conviction that "only a revolution would change the country." No alternative seemed possible to them in the face of Colombia's static governing system, monopolized by the National Front. When Vásquez Perdomo entered the National University in 1970, the share of those who bothered to vote had fallen from three-quarters of people over twenty-one in 1957 to less than one-fifth.[41] For those afflicted with what Vásquez Perdomo calls "revolutionary measles" or

40. Safford and Palacios, *Colombia*, 353.
41. Ibid., 330.

"militancy fever," only armed action held out the prospect of a fundamental solution to all of Colombia's problems.

Vásquez Perdomo began by painting walls at night with revolutionary slogans such as "ELN EPL FARC = VICTORY." As the multiple acronyms indicate, various groups have engaged in revolutionary insurgency in Colombia, each with its own origins, ideological perspectives, and tactics. The three most important guerrilla organizations have been the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN, or Army of National Liberation), the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)—both of which still exist—and the Movimiento 19 de Abril (M-19, or 19th of April Movement), the organization to which Vásquez Perdomo devoted so many years of her life.

The ELN developed from efforts of youthful Colombians, many of them students, to carry out the *foquista* strategy that Che Guevara described in his account of the Cuban Revolution. They discovered that la Violencia had not left a viable foundation for a rural guerrilla campaign that could achieve national revolution. After several harrowing years of internal divisions, disappointed hopes, and costly defeats, the ELN entered a more stable period in the 1980s, aided by the revenues it could extort from oil producers in Arauca. The roots of the FARC ran much deeper than those of the ELN, going back to the self-defense organizations formed by the Communist Party in some rural areas as early as the 1920s. Longtime FARC leader Manuel Marulanda, known as *Tirofijo*, or Sureshot, was a veteran of guerrilla activities during la Violencia. Under the impact of Plan Lazo, an aggressive counterinsurgency campaign of the Colombian army, the defensive character of these communities shifted, leading to the formation of the FARC in 1966. By the 1980s, it had evolved into an independent guerrilla organization, separate from the Communist Party, with its own political and military doctrines.

Vásquez Perdomo's organization, the M-19, responded to the changing sociological conditions of Colombia. Despite the country's levels of violence, its economy grew rapidly after World War II, doubling in size by 1965. Conservative governments gave particular support to industry. Bogotá was one of the fastest-growing capital cities in Latin America. As Colombia urbanized, underemployed and underserved lower- and middle-class city dwellers found the National Front ill equipped to respond to their needs. Former general Rojas Pinilla returned to political life to organize a new populist party, the Alianza Nacional Popular (ANAPO, or National Popular Alliance). The ex-general came within two percentage points of defeating the official Conservative nominee for the presidency in 1970, leaving large numbers of people convinced that fraud had robbed him of victory. The M-19 emerged in 1973

as the armed wing of ANAPO, gathering in heterogeneous supporters on the left, including former elements of the FARC.

From its inception, the M-19 gained a broad following through eclectic tactics and a flair for the spectacular. In 1974 it "liberated" Simón Bolívar's sword from a museum; five years later it made off with a large quantity of weapons from a military installation in Bogotá. Vásquez Perdomo describes in detail the 1980 seizure of the embassy of the Dominican Republic during a diplomatic reception, after which the M-19 held officials from various countries hostage for two months as it negotiated with the government. The strengths of the M-19—its freedom from dogmatism and its inventiveness—also left it without clear direction. In the words of one commentator, the M-19 could act foolishly, "like adolescents on a joyride, ignorant of consequences."[42] Having started as an urban movement, like the Tupamaros of Uruguay, it capriciously took up guerrilla activity in the countryside. Vásquez Perdomo relates the dreary experience of her participation in a poorly planned and badly executed rural expedition in 1981 that landed her in prison. As she saw it, the M-19 contained everything "from dreamy poets and peace diplomats to men who wanted war. This was the M-19, a complex multiplicity of beings willing to think in the company of others, to deliberate publicly. . . . We tried to infect the excluded country with our dreams of power."

These "dreams of power" could prove costly. The M-19 suffered repression and torture during the presidency of Julio César Turbay Ayala (1978–82). The group's kidnapping of the family members of narcotraffickers cost it dearly in lost lives when the drug lords retaliated. The beleaguered M-19 responded to the peace overtures of President Belisario Betancourt (1982–86), even signing a truce. Negotiations for entry into the legal political process proved difficult, however, for distrust remained deep on both sides. Impatient and fearful, the M-19 foolishly seized the Palace of Justice in Bogotá in November 1985. The armed forces responded by attacking the building and setting it ablaze, leaving the M-19 commandos dead and killing many others, including eleven justices of the Supreme Court.[43]

Vásquez Perdomo was in Cuba when news of this disaster reached her. The sadness that it induced formed a link in the chain of events that pulled her away from the M-19 over the next two years. Her departure foreshadowed the guerrilla organization's fate. Militarily and politically weak, its popularity

42. Robin Kirk, *More Terrible Than Death: Massacres, Drugs, and America's War in Colombia* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 107.

43. Ana Carrigan's *The Palace of Justice: A Colombian Tragedy* (New York: Four Walls, Eight Windows, 1993) provides a vivid account of this episode.

seriously damaged by the attack on the Palace of Justice, the M-19 accepted a government amnesty in 1990, demobilizing, laying down its arms, and entering the legal political process. At first the M-19 fared well in the domain of electoral politics, despite the assassination of its former leader and 1990 presidential candidate, Carlos Pizarro. Stepping in with just a few weeks to campaign, Antonio Navarro Wolf won 13 percent of the vote for the M-19, a more than respectable showing. Optimism surged the following year with the publication of a new constitution for Colombia, one inclined toward a more pluralistic and decentralized system of government. Yet within a relatively short time, it became clear that the new document could not free Colombia from its system of violence. The initial electoral success of the M-19 rapidly faded and the organization virtually disappeared from the political landscape.

Las Violencias Continue

Although intermittent peace negotiations between the government and the guerrillas have gone on since the early 1980s, a considerable upsurge in violence has been the country's reality since then. Local and national political candidates of the FARC-supported Unión Patriótica suffered high rates of assassination between 1985 and 1990, effectively ending electoral participation as a possible mode of reintegration of that guerrilla group, regardless of the question of whether the FARC leadership ever seriously entertained the possibility of laying down arms. Like the rest of the apparatus of violence, the FARC found its situation profoundly affected by the expansion of narcotics trafficking in Colombia. Operating primarily in sparsely populated rural regions where the government was weak, the FARC provided protection to cocaine processing labs and to the peasant growers of marijuana and coca. Cultivation of the latter expanded as U.S.-sponsored eradication programs in Bolivia and Peru made coca growing in Colombia more advantageous. Mutual cooperation between narcotraffickers and the FARC proved lucrative for both. Meanwhile, the ELN also prospered, benefiting from its opportunities to extort revenue from expanding oil production in its regions of influence. While Vásquez Perdomo's M-19 stumbled, surrendered, and disintegrated, the FARC and the ELN have continued to grow in the last two decades of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first. During the 1960s, Colombian insurgents never numbered more than 500, and in subsequent years they fell to even fewer. Over the past quarter-century, however, drugs, oil, and guerrilla control over local municipalities have amounted to a transformative difference. By 1986, the FARC had risen to 3,600 insurgents,

reaching 7,000 in 1995 and 15,000 in 2000; over the same period, the ELN leapt from 800 to 3,000 to 5,000.[44] As the pieces of the "war system" fell into place, the increase in the number of guerrilla operatives brought an intensification of Colombian counterinsurgency programs, heavily supported by the United States through funds, advisers, and military equipment.[45]

Another crucial element in the "war system," the paramilitary forces, gained in importance as well, the product of three influences—local peasant community opposition to the FARC or the ELN; the efforts of the armed forces to use local civic-militia brigades against the guerrillas; and the desire of narcotraffickers (and, at least on one occasion, Texaco) to have their own armed brigades. Narcotraffickers and others of wealth had grown tired of guerrilla kidnappings for ransom, and death-squad organizations mushroomed after the model of Muerte a Secuestradores (MAS, or Death to Kidnappers), founded in Cali in 1981.[46] (Colombia remains the world leader in kidnappings, with about a third attributed to the guerrillas).[47] Bitter enmity arose between the drug lords and the leftist insurgents once the narcotraffickers began using their wealth to buy up land in guerrilla zones of operation. Narcotics kingpins used their armed networks against those deemed to be guerrilla supporters, such as rural peasant communities or political candidates of the Unión Patriótica. Throughout much of the 1980s, government officials were also targets of narcotics traffickers, as the latter fought a war to eliminate extradition to the United States. In addition, death squads "cleansed" neighborhoods of street people, prostitutes, addicts, and other urban "undesirables." Violence corroded the nation's institutions, producing widespread criminality and impunity. Colombia's murder rates rank among the highest in the world. "With violence an everyday affair for Colombians," notes Gonzalo Sánchez, "the time of the living has become the time of the dead."[48]

Even as the traffickers eased up in their offensive against the government once the 1991 constitution prohibited extradition, paramilitary organizations continued to flourish under the dual patronage of the drug world and the armed forces. They increased in size, developed systems of coordination,

44. Safford and Palacios, *Colombia*, 362. Alma Guillermoprieto provides excellent critical descriptions of life among the FARC in *Looking for History: Dispatches from Latin America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002).

45. Information about U.S. counterinsurgency and counternarcotics efforts in Colombia can be found on the web site of the Center for International Policy at http://www.ciponline.org.

46. Gabriel García Márquez offers a compelling account of the kidnapping of a member of a prominent Colombian family in *News of a Kidnapping*, trans. Edith Grossman (New York: Knopf, 1997).

47. Sánchez, "Problems of Violence," 17.

48. Ibid., 9.