

THE MYTH OF MADERA

ANDRES F. HIJAR

Department of History

APPROVED:

Samuel Brunk, Ph.D., Chair

Michael Topp, Ph.D.

Gregory Rocha, Ph.D.

Charles H. Ambler, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

THE MYTH OF MADERA

By

ANDRES F. HIJAR, B.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of History

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

December 2004

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	page
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER	
1 MYTH	18
2 BEFORE THE ASSAULT	28
3 THE COUNTER-INSURGENT DISCOURSE	42
4 THE PRO-INSURGENT DISCOURSE	57
5 THE MYTH OF MADERA TODAY	72
6 CONCLUSION	86
BIBLIOGRAPHY	89
CURRICULUM VITAE	94

In 1965, a group of professors, peasants and students attacked the military fort at Madera in Chihuahua. It was a suicidal action.

____ La Jornada¹

Nothing happened here; absolutely nothing... what went on here could have happened at a dance or a bar...

____ Praxedes Giner, Governor of Chihuahua in 1965.²

INTRODUCTION

On September 23, 1965, thirteen men ideologically identified with socialist ideas attacked the military fort in the town of Madera, Chihuahua with the immediate intention of taking over the ammunition and weapons stored at the small base. The headquarters were guarded by at least 120 soldiers, three times more than the regular amount. Francisco Ornelas, one of the survivors, claims the rebel group was aware of the increase in numbers of soldiers that night; nonetheless, the decision to attack was made despite being outgunned and presumably outnumbered 8 to 1. Ornelas claimed “our confidence was high, we thought we could take them with the element of surprise on our side.”³ The assault resulted in the death of the two figures heading the action, college professors

¹ *La Jornada*, 23 September 2002.

² *La Jornada*, 23 September 1995.

³ Francisco Ornelas, interview by author, tape recorded, Chihuahua, 25 May 2003.

Pablo Gómez Ramírez and Arturo Gámiz, as well as seven others. Four men among the attackers were able to escape death that morning. After the fight was over, the bodies of the fallen were paraded around Madera by the military for everyone to see and subsequently dumped together into an unmarked grave. This event later became known as the attack on the fort of Madera. This isolated fight in the mountains of Chihuahua has since generated countless articles, at least five books, and is now considered by many intellectuals and political figures as the first armed movement to surface in Mexico based on communist ideas.⁴

Immediately after the fight was over, a battle of opposing discourses ensued. From the government's position, claiming that nothing happened or that the assault was the work of criminals, to the claim that the rebels were heroes and martyrs, these actors appealed to the emotions of Mexicans in the hope of manipulating perceptions regarding the causes for the assault. The news of the attack dominated national and state newspapers the following day. This placed Madera and the state of Chihuahua at the center of attention in Mexico. Interpretations were decorated either to enlarge or undermine the meaning of the action and designed to be effective in shaping the behavior of others. The images and labels used by both sides had more to do with defending

⁴ Carlos Montemayor, a Mexican writer known for books and articles about guerrilla uprisings in Mexico and Rosario Ibarra de Piedra, a Mexican political activist well known for her mobilizations demanding the resolution of countless cases of missing persons, victims of the political oppression of the 1970's, are two political figures promoting Madera as the first socialist uprising in Mexico.

specific interests than with efforts to understand the action. These exaggerated and fantastical interpretations turned out to be the founding blocks of what gradually became the myth of Madera.

A pro-insurgent discourse by sympathizers and promoters of the ideas set forth by Gómez and Gámiz surfaced days after the action. Their positions were published in a handful of political journals with national circulation that were outside governmental control. These voices labeled the event a sacrifice and the figures involved in the assault heroes. Gómez was presented as a selfless individual and a model to follow. The actions of the government, such as denying the bodies of the rebels a proper burial, were highlighted as inhuman, intransigent, authoritarian, and arrogant. A clear defeat became a success story in the words of certain individuals who interpreted the event as a heroic stand.

After the attack, an environment of confusion and misinformation dominated the landscape of Mexican society. Unconfirmed and wild rumors like the one claiming that the airport in the city of Chihuahua was taken by rebels, later confirmed as a mistake, started to surface throughout the state. Madera became occupied by the military when troops from Ciudad Juárez were sent to reinforce the fort. In addition, at least a thousand paratroopers landed in the high mountains of the state looking for the rebels who made it out alive.⁵

⁵ *El Universal, El Norte, El Herald*, 24, 25, 26 September 1965.

Despite the amount of publicity and the unprecedented military actions Madera generated, news about the attack dissipated quickly from media outlets. By September 30, 1965, newspapers, both at the state and national level, stopped covering the consequences of the assault at Madera. On the second, third, fourth and fifth anniversaries of the action, news about the incident could not be found even in the state newspapers. The attack on the fort was becoming a distant memory. However, in 1973, *La Liga 23 de Septiembre*, an urban guerrilla movement, surfaced nationally and memories of sacrifice, heroism and bravery constructed around the action were again used, eight years after the fact. The assault on the fort was now used to justify and legitimize *La Liga's* actions, putting Madera back in the national limelight after a time in which its resonance seemed in danger of becoming extinct. *La Liga's* tactics included the kidnapping and murder of prominent political and economic figures in Mexico. One of its most notorious actions was the murder of Eugenio Garza Sada, a prominent business leader from Monterrey, in a failed kidnapping attempt in 1973. These kinds of actions helped little in making *La Liga's* vision appealing to a wide segment of Mexican society and provided the regime with the justification necessary to employ harsh means to deal with the group. As a result, it was virtually eliminated by 1977. Nonetheless, the name of the organization still resonates today due to the extensive coverage of the movement's actions by the media and the campaign of persecution by the regime, which created countless disappearances and executions, some of them still not solved today.⁶

⁶ Carlos Marín, "Autorretrato inédito de La Liga 23 de Septiembre," *Proceso*, no. 360 (1983), 16-19.

The adoption of the date of the assault by *La Liga* is clear evidence that its genesis was partly a product of the language promoting insurgency started in 1965. Madera and *La Liga* fed off of each other at a time in which the initial attack was becoming a distant memory. More notably, the adoption of the date of the assault as the group's name was an instant reminder to society and the government of the Madera episode. The legacy of Madera was useful for *La Liga* in many ways. It gave it immediate legitimacy with segments of Mexican society already resisting the regime, who identified with the fallen rebels and their ideals. *La Liga* thus took advantage of the perception of heroism and sacrifice already created around the date. The publicity generated by Madera gave *La Liga* instant recognition, and the way in which Gómez, Gámiz and the others were treated by the regime provided it with the ideal justification for the use of violence to achieve political change. The connections between the two groups are evident. Both of them sought a complete change in the Mexican political system by any means possible, and both groups came from the northern states of Chihuahua and Nuevo Leon respectively. *La Liga* declared war against the Mexican state and the main weapon to achieve this goal was violence. As a result, the only precedent *La Liga* had to define itself was Madera, since the assault was the only frontal attack against the government after the revolution on the northern part of the country. As a result, September 23rd became a natural flag to rally behind for *La Liga*. Although it is true that Madera was not the first armed movement to try to overthrow the regime after the revolution, other previous struggles in the south, such as the Cristero rebellion or Ruben Jaramillo's uprising in Morelos, did not achieve the level of publicity Madera generated. More notably, the mythical usefulness of

these social uprisings was tainted by unfortunate circumstances. For example, Jaramillo was talked into surrendering by the government and later brutally killed at home. Madera became a military endeavour never tried before in Mexico. In other words, Madera meant bravery, prowess, initiative, while the other precedents did not.

The assault on Madera influenced rural movements as well, such as Lucio Cabañas' rebellion in Guerrero from 1971 to 1974. The Madera incident provided his group with lessons in how not to conduct a revolutionary guerrilla campaign. Cabañas clearly learned from the mistakes committed in Madera. Gómez's lack of mass support was a key to his demise, according to Montemayor, and Cabañas felt this element was a must for any guerrilla to be effective in the long run.⁷ Another mistake by Gómez and Gámiz was to engage in conventional military tactics against the Mexican military. This example was utilized by Cabañas whenever his men pressured him for a frontal attack against the government.⁸ In using the experiences of the men in Chihuahua as lessons to strengthen and continue its struggle, the movement headed by Cabañas kept the myth alive and active as well.

The myth influences Mexican society today in the form of books, articles, ceremonies, and conferences promoted by groups that can be labeled as sympathizers and promoters of the ideas proposed by Gómez and Gámiz. Among the figures actively remembering Madera are Gómez's children, especially Alma Gómez; Mexican political

⁷ Carlos Montemayor, *Guerra en el Paraiso* (Mexico: Diana, 1991).

⁸ *Ibid*, 220-275.

analysts Carlos Montemayor and Sergio Aguayo; social activist Rosario Ibarra de Piedra; and the four survivors of the attack. These figures defend and promote certain leftist political positions and have worked in order to present Madera in a positive manner.

Finally, Madera is present as public history in the form of colonias (neighborhoods), schools, and streets in the cities of Chihuahua, Madera and Juárez that are named after Gómez, Gámiz, Madera, or September 23rd. Gómez's children, Alma and Pablo, who have had significant political careers, founded some of these colonias. These colonias are the product of land invasions that were later legalized after years of negotiations with the authorities. The fact that the government regulates and recognizes these neighborhoods provides the memory of Madera with some legitimacy and gives the cities an insurgent presence. For some government officials and journalists, however, they are a celebration of illegality and, more importantly, a constant reminder of an episode in history that should not be remembered.

Madera can be credited with providing these two important social movements with a precedent to learn from, but more notably, the mythical components that made Madera unique were effective tools that were later used by these groups to shape the behavior of their members. One of these components was the assault itself, which became mythical when the alleged conditions (the presumption that they were outnumbered, outgunned and under trained) became known. *La Liga* found the violent legacy of Madera useful and so did Cabañas. But this same legacy was used in different ways for different purposes. While for *La Liga* it became a cry to fight and perhaps, more importantly, the ideal precedent to define themselves, for Cabañas it was the perfect

example of why patience is such a high virtue for a revolutionary. *La Liga* and the movements in Guerrero are two social movements that used the myth of Madera in different ways.

At the same time the pro-insurgent rhetoric was being constructed, a counter-insurgent message, promoted by federal and state governments and some media outlets, was established too. It would also have a lasting impact. The Mexican federal government's position regarding the event was published in all the newspapers with national circulation on September 24, 1965. It was an official message explaining its response to the attack and the actions taken to ensure future stability in the state. The official position made the raid an act of criminals, communists, murderers and agitators. The effort to discredit the Madera rebels continued on subsequent days through the continuous labeling of the individuals involved in the attack in negative ways, with the intention of making the action seem a decision of desperate fools.

Madera was also valuable for the government. As a result of the Madera experience, the federal government refined its response to future uprisings. The decisions by federal and state governments that helped September 23rd achieve mythical status were later avoided in the responses to Cabañas' movement in Guerrero and *La Liga*. Among these mistakes were the parading of the bodies all over Madera as if they were trophies and making frequent references to the assault during the subsequent days. Madera also made the regime aware of certain mistakes in its utilization of language after the attack in 1965, such as describing the action as bold and adventurous, that were later avoided. Language used to undermine both Cabañas and *La Liga* during the 1970s was

more consistent in its attack against the groups' credibility, composition, actions, and ideology in order to make these groups appear dangerous to the stability and security of everyone. The emphasis on the insecurity these groups caused became key in the extermination of 1970s rebels because it provided the regime with the perfect justification to use extreme measures to deal with them.

The documentation of contemporary social movements in Mexico is limited and most of it focuses on the ideological and political aspects of such groups. Joe Foweraker and Ann Craig define social movements by their political practices towards the state and civil society and explain that their demands are "immediate, pragmatic, and concrete."⁹ According to these authors, the movements seek institutional recognition and, despite their sometimes radical rhetoric, they pursue their goals through legal channels. Gámiz and Gómez clearly started this way, but in a relatively short time decided that lawful processes were too slow in meeting their demands. Although it is true that the movements in Chihuahua and Guerrero sought institutional recognition when they first surfaced, they do not necessarily fit Foweraker and Craig's definition of social movements since these rebels decided to use violence when their demands did not receive immediate or concrete responses.

Armando Bartra writes explaining the scarcity of material that, "acceptable studies do not exceed a dozen and most of them drift in unexplored oral testimonies and

⁹ Joe Foweraker and Ann Craig, *Popular Movements and Political change in Mexico* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 1990), 6.

primary sources.” It is also true, however, that Bartra’s research is at least twenty years old. Nonetheless, Bartra’s work, Los herederos de Zapata, is one of the best sources on the post-revolutionary social movements in Mexico available. He explains that one of the reasons why social movements in general have not been researched enough is because the Mexican regime co-opted surviving members of these groups and incorporated them into the government. This type of political maneuvering has a precedent in the revolution when the newly formed government hired some of Zapata and Villa’s former intellectuals, such as Antonio Díaz Soto de Gama.

As a result, most of the history of such groups turned out to be the story of the regime’s agrarian policies, instead of theirs. Bartra writes, “the movements are there, their histories still need to be written.”¹⁰ Los herederos de Zapata takes an ideological approach to analyze contemporary social movements. Bartra explains that most of them were inspired by socialist ideas and that the main concern for the vast majority of these groups was land. His work is not limited to those groups that decided to resort to violence. Bartra’s book also documents the agrarian struggles and land invasions by peasants demanding the distribution of great extensions of land owned by a few individuals. When the author does talk about those groups that became radical in their approach, he explains that most of them can be traced to previous legal struggles for land that were ignored by the government. Bartra analyses many movements, and as a result

¹⁰ Armando Bartra, *Los herederos de Zapata* (Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1985), 9-10.

he fails to provide much information on any given one. Nevertheless, the book is an effective overview of the post-revolutionary social movements in Mexico.

More specific and recent works on social movements include Carlos Montemayor's, Guerra en el paraiso, and his latest book, Las armas del alba,¹¹ which document the uprisings in Guerrero and Chihuahua respectively. Both books pay great attention to details and both are based on oral interviews and other sources. However, probably due to the closed political situation in Mexico and Montemayor's need to protect his sources, both books are marketed as novels. This is important because novels can leave room for exaggerated and sometimes fantastical interpretations of events. Montemayor claims his book is based on facts. But throughout the book, he makes important claims that eventually consolidate the myth, such as the number of soldiers present that night and the presumption of sacrifice by the rebels, that instead of being analyzed are presented as facts. This only adds to the mythical components found in Madera, which can be found in both of Montemayor's novels. José Santos Valdez's 1968 book, Madera, is another work dealing with the dynamics in Chihuahua and specifically with Gómez's life before the assault.¹² Chapter 4 will analyze all three books.

Neil Harvey's book, The Chiapas Rebellion, is one of many works documenting the Chiapas uprising of 1994.¹³ The important aspect of Harvey's work is that he traces

¹¹ Carlos Montemayor, *Guerra en el Paraiso* (Mexico: Diana, 1991), and, *Las armas del alba* (Mexico: Planeta, 2003).

¹² José Santos Valdez, *Madera* (Mexico: Laura, 1968).

¹³ Neil Harvey, *The Chiapas Rebellion* (London: Duke University Press, 1998).

the Zapatista movement in Chiapas from a sociological point of view, making his book different from previous works, which take a political or ideological approach. Harvey analyses the beginnings of the Zapatista movement by focusing on its mass support, not its leadership. Previous works about the Zapatistas deal mainly with the leaders of the movement and fail to explain who supports the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), only adding to the ongoing mythical construction of the group and its leadership. The fact that Harvey focuses on other issues rather than the leadership weakens the mythical aspects of this modern day rebellion, which is heavily based on the charismatic figure of their leader, who calls himself Marcos. Although Harvey never makes this claim, my thesis is similar to Harvey's in the sense that both studies undercut the many mythical aspects of both movements.

Finally, Timothy Wickham-Crowley's, Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America analyzes the insurgent movements during the decades of the sixties and seventies in Latin America.¹⁴ Although he does not cover Mexico, Wickham-Crowley takes a look at the insurgent uprisings in Cuba, Peru, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Guatemala. Only in Cuba and to a certain extent Nicaragua were any of these insurgent movements victorious. He analyzes all of them and compares them in order to see why some were successful while others were not. Wickham-Crowley looks at their leadership, rank and file, mass support, and resources. At the same time, he analyzes the

¹⁴ Timothy Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America* (Princeton University Press, 1992).

political regimes that created the conditions against which they rebelled and their degree of support internally and externally, including the support they got from the United States.

In the case of Gómez's guerrilla, some of Wickham-Crowley's conditions were present. Gómez and Gamiz derived from universities and their support came from students and peasants (squatters and sharecroppers). This insurgent movement did not have mass support and the best evidence is the lack of a massive response after Madera. However, according to Wickham-Crowley, Cuba and especially Nicaragua, contrary to most perceptions, did not have mass support and still were successful.¹⁵ But the regime in Mexico was stable, American support in terms of training and resources was present, and finally, the upper class in the country clearly sided with the government.¹⁶ A strong regime enjoying United States' support, according to Wickham-Crowley, is the key ingredient necessary for an insurgent movement to fail.

Although the subject of analysis in both works is the same, he bases most of his conclusions on quantitative data. He ignores the mythical aspects of all of these movements, which of course can not be measured. More notably, in those rebellions that were victorious, Cuba and Nicaragua, the mythical aspects of both uprisings were strong and this results in the necessity not to overlook such aspects in any social movement.

¹⁵ Ibid, 169, 269, 276.

¹⁶ For evidence of United States involvement in Mexico, see Carlos Montemayor, *Las armas del alba*, and *Guerra en el Paraiso*. For more information on the same subject see Aguayo's *La Charola*.

None of these works, whether general or specific, deal with what I would characterize as the mythological dimension of recent rebel movements. Most of them analyze the ideology, composition and motives of social movements. As a result, the subtle messages, such as labels, descriptions and hidden emotional appeals are not given any attention. My work will focus its analysis on these messages and how they are utilized by people or groups, such as *La Liga*, Cabañas or the Gómez family, to legitimize and promote specific behaviors.

This paper is an historical documentation of the myth of Madera. As such, I draw from sources that previous works analyzing Madera, particularly Montemayor's, Las armas del alba, failed to mention. His work lacks footnotes, endnotes and a bibliography. The same is true for Santos Valdez's book, Madera. Montemayor's claim to historical legitimacy is the interviews on which he says the book was based. Santos Valdez's only source is his personal relationship with Gómez. This does not mean these books are not accurate, but they also contribute to the myth-making process. In fact, Montemayor has been key in placing Madera back in the political dialogue. Montemayor appears constantly on national television, tours around the country presenting his books, and writes for numerous newspapers, especially *La Jornada*, a leftist newspaper, in which he makes constant references to Madera. This is the difference between my work and the rest. While the majority of material available on Madera celebrates, condemns, glorifies or justifies the assault and its participants, I analyze the claims that Madera generates.

The primary sources for this thesis start with interviews conducted with the children of Pablo Gómez, Alma and Pablo Gómez. Their political actions have been

crucial in keeping the myth alive. They have, for instance, organized celebrations at the state university during the 30th, 35th and 38th anniversaries of the assault, at which historians, social activists, and political figures have spoken about the meaning of Madera and its value for Mexican society. I also interviewed two people present during the attack. Julieta García Hernández, a woman living in the town at the time of the incident, sheds light on the actions the federal government took in the zone after the assault. Another interview is with one of the survivors of the assault, Francisco Ornelas. His testimony refutes the ideas of martyrdom created around the action, since his account of the dynamics before the assault differs from either the heroic or the suicidal interpretations made by others after the fight was over. He is a key component in the commemorations organized to remember the attack. Five more interviews, two with school principals and three with residents of colonias named after Gómez or Gámiz are also analyzed. In addition, I have examined newspapers, journal articles, and books that have analyzed, reported on, or mentioned the Madera incident between 1965 and the present.

Since my argument is based on the idea that the assault on the fort in Madera became a myth due to the efforts of people with specific interests and ideologies, it is important to provide a definition of the word myth and how it is used in this particular instance. Chapter one will address this issue.

The eventual construction of the myth would have been difficult without certain elements of the Madera attack, which are discussed in chapter two. One of these was the political awareness that went beyond local concerns, which provided the movement with legitimacy because its demands included a wide spectrum of socially disadvantaged

elements of Mexican society, such as workers, students and peasants. More critically, the ideology probably would have gone unnoticed without the attack itself. The presumption that the rebels were outnumbered 8 to 1 and still decided to attack provided the elements necessary to label the assault as a selfless act. This provided a perception of bravery and heroism, which in turn created images of boldness and memories of sacrifice that are still present today and that other groups would find useful. A key reason the myth became so effective lies in the combination of these two characteristics lacking in many previous movements in Mexican history. Chapter two will also analyze the social and political context that gave rise to the attack by tracing Gómez and Gámiz's actions before the decision to fight.

The next two chapters, three and four, will present analyses of the counter and pro-insurgent discourses that followed the attack in order to detect the specific ideologies and interests behind the construction of the myth. Chapter four will analyze the specific events that strengthened the myth, which are Lucio Cabañas' movement of 1971 and the formation of the urban group called *La Liga 23 de Septiembre* in 1973. After a hiatus in the 1980s, the myth resurfaced again in Chiapas with the EZLN, in 1994. Then, in 1995 and 2000 came the 30th and 35th anniversaries of the assault at the fort, during which connections and similarities between the Zapatistas and Madera were made.

Today the myth continues to gain strength. For the 38th anniversary conferences were organized by various elements of civil society in the cities of Chihuahua and Ciudad Juárez, at which the book, Las armas del alba, written by historian and political analyst Carlos Montemayor, was presented. The final chapter will analyze the presentation of the

book in the state capital, at which time Montemayor and the four survivors reflected on the importance of keeping the assault alive in the memory of Chihuahua and Mexico. Montemayor's book, the first of three novels he has planned on Madera, is also subjected to analysis due to the probability that his latest book is another ingredient added to the myth. Most of the information and analysis provided above is aimed at placing Madera in the right perspective. In other words, the incident itself would not have drawn attention of historians without key elements that were added by others. These ranged from exaggerated labels, such as the claims that the rebels were fools and suicidal, to unfortunate decisions by the government, military and the media that made Madera an historical event almost immediately. More notably for this work, it became a myth when others decided to remember it each year, and use the memory of Madera for different purposes. Madera represents various concepts (heroical, suicidal, desperation, criminality, and social mobilization) and is used in various ways by different individuals to defend certain interests. This flexibility is one of the elements that turned the attack into a myth. Finally, the assault on the fort in Madera took place eight years after the attack in 1957 of the military fort in Moncada, Cuba and three years before the killing of scores of students in Mexico City in 1968 by the Gustavo Díaz Ordaz regime. This means that both the national and international context in which Madera took place were ones in which the demand for political pluralism was synonymous with instability, intolerance, and violence.

1 MYTH

The word myth has many different connotations and definitions, which often oppose each other and this makes mythical ideas, events and figures complex. According to Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, myth is defined as "ostensibly historical events."¹⁷ This definition is reductionist, but the importance of it is that it indicates myths are related to historical events, which is not always the case. The importance of myths is not whether their foundations are truthful or not. It lies in the fact that their influence is significant in shaping the behavior of an individual or an entire society; thus making myths a focus of analysis by social scientists seeking to understand their effectiveness. Samuel Brunk's work on myth in "Remembering Emiliano Zapata" goes a long way in explaining the enigma that myth can sometimes comprise. Brunk writes, "it is difficult to make a precise distinction between myth and history, given that both fall short of truth in that both cut down experience to a thinkable, and therefore meaningful size."¹⁸

My definition of myth is that it is a set of ideas that organizes everyday experiences, such as going to church, saluting the flag each morning, or putting on a uniform every day, with the goal of shaping and licensing behavior. It is a reality for the person receiving and believing in it. Myths make emotional appeals because emotions are most effective when the goal is the manipulation of a targeted audience. The reason such

¹⁷ *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed. (Springfield, Mass: Merriam-Webster, 1993), 770.

¹⁸ Samuel Brunk, "Remembering Emiliano Zapata," *HAHR* 78:3 (1998), 460.

appeals are useful is because they are self-serving and not rational. Since the audience is not asked to spend time analyzing them, they are easily received and the effects are immediate.

In his book Mythologies, Roland Barthes affirms that anything can become a myth because it is a type of speech, but is more than that, “it is a system of communications,” and a “message.” A thing or idea becomes a myth when “it is decorated, adapted to a certain type of consumption laden with literary self-indulgence, revolt, images, in short with a type of social usage which is added to pure matter.”¹⁹ This means that an idea becomes a myth when elements that awaken emotional feelings in an audience are added.

The status of myths as potentially “untrue,” due to their highly emotional and sometimes fantastical ingredients, does not mean they should not be subjected to rigorous analysis, because myths can shape the behavior of large numbers of people. Myths can be useful both for those promoting and those believing in them. Particularly when the myth comes from the elite, the promoters can serve their own interests because the status of creating or being part of a myth can enlarge authority, justify leadership, and impose a moral order. On the part of the receiver, feelings of comfort, security and worthiness arise from following and believing in the myth. This signifies that myths can be changed, and facts can be rearranged, in order to accommodate the necessities of a society, group, or

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 109.

individual. Brunk's work on myth sheds some light on this, explaining that myths must be broad and ambiguous enough to be attractive to groups with different interests.²⁰

Myths are important in any society; all segments can benefit or be affected by them. They can help nations and cultures expand territorially, economically and ideologically. They are tools that justify and license the action of taking over other cultures. Likewise, myths empower cultures in danger of disappearing by creating memories of "past greatness." Even though this greatness might not be factual, myths are able to uplift people's sense of culture, race or nation. In addition, myths can create an enemy to help a particular group identify itself as a community. In other words, myths make a group special, and at the same time they make another group, perception, idea or culture the "other." One reason to invent an enemy is to create an identity, which in turn results in feelings of belonging to a group. This makes manipulation when assigning behavior more effective, since there is security in that sense of belonging.²¹

In The Power of Myth, Joseph Campbell emphasizes that myths are a way to introduce individuals into society through initiation ceremonies that give them a purpose.²² This gives a meaning to life; without it, the person is left with nothing. Furthermore, Campbell argues that myths explain to people who they are by assigning roles within a society. Without myths, there is no sense of identity. This could lead to a society that is easily swayed by different messages coming from outside, which could

²⁰ Samuel Brunk, "Remembering," 488.

²¹ Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday), 7-67.

²² *Ibid*, 10-50.

result in an entire generation lacking any sense of the past, jeopardizing the existing social structure. In order to avoid these dynamics, the key is to discover how myth functions and how it has served mankind in the past as well as how it may serve today.²³ Campbell seems to believe that myths are essential in people's lives, but it is also possible that myths could manipulate and curtail rational processes since the proposed behaviors are clearly outlined. This could create humans lacking any initiative, making them act in predictable patterns to specific stimuli. In other words, myths can hinder people's lives by making them conform to the assigned response, which in turn stops intellectual development. One example of this type of behavior is nationalism, which is clearly an imagined concept that makes people act in certain predictable patterns and can sometimes curtail initiative. I am not claiming that myth is always a negative thing, it is only a realization that myth is a complex phenomena that can not be limited to right or wrong because it affects people in different ways.

Inevitably, the question of when and how an idea, perception, or ideology becomes myth surfaces. Claude Levi-Strauss claims a myth is such only if a great number of people follow and adopt it.²⁴ Campbell, on the contrary, claims that if one person decides to model his behavior on someone else, the latter enters the mythical realm. The same applies to an idea; it takes one individual adopting a concept to make it a myth. But clearly those myths that influence a significant amount of people should be the focus of

²³ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (New York: Princeton University Press), 381-385.

²⁴ Enrique Florescano, *Mitos Mexicanos* (Mexico: Taurus, 2001), 11.

study. Their scope of influence needs to extend beyond local origins, and the amount of time in which the myth stays in the collective memory is significant as well. Why waste time analyzing a myth that influences a small segment of society for only a short time? This does not mean that myths need to reach a “national” level in order to become important; it only means those that reach the most people are the most significant in terms of influencing others.

The particular significance of myth in Mexico can be traced to the great Toltec, Aztec and Mayan civilizations. Mexico as a nation was largely constructed and based on myths. Enrique Florescano, a Mexican historian, writes regarding the genesis of mythical ideas in Mexican culture, “in Mexico, from ancient times, myth is one of the main expressions of collective thought.”²⁵

In fact, according to Florescano, in Mexico, myth came first and history later. Myth had a specific and crucial function in pre-conquest Mexican society. In Memoria Mexicana, Florescano describes how myth was used to explain the order of things and the consequences if the behavior dictated was not followed. It was thus utilized to organize everyday life. It was a living reality for both the Aztecs and the Mayans. It provided basic answers about the world and established methods of interaction between the rulers and everyone else.²⁶ Instead of history, according to Florescano, which today can be used to legitimate authority and hierarchies, Mexico had myth. It was probably the only tool to

²⁵ Florescano, *Mitos*. 12

²⁶ Enrique Florescano, *Memoria Mexicana* (Mexico: Taurus, 2001), 13-38. 134.

keep stability and order in a highly hierarchical society in which the elite was very interested in maintaining things as they were.

Florescano traces the elements that made myth effective in pre-Hispanic Mexico. One of these elements was sacrifice, which can be seen in both the Aztecs and the Mayans as a key ingredient. For both civilizations, their creation myths included the sacrifice of other beings, who most of the time had some type of connection with the existing rulers and promoters of the myth. This provided the rulers with the power to claim divine connections, thus legitimizing and enlarging their authority and popularity. The sacrifice of others also implied feelings of gratitude, guilt and sometimes vengeance of those believing in the myth, which in turn could have created individuals who ordered their everyday life based on these emotions. The presence of sacrifice in Mexico since ancient times is important because it establishes how it has been used for centuries to influence and shape behavior.

Myth did not stop being useful once these two civilizations grew weaker. When the Spaniards arrived, they realized they needed to provide an explanation of their presence and why the existing structure had to be replaced. Myth was again used to establish new hierarchies and ultimately a new social order. One of the tools the Spaniards used was to take mythical places and figures already established for centuries and convert them into tools aimed at changing society to fit their own image. One example of this process was the decision to keep the original places of worship and the figures of reverence of many pre-Hispanic deities. However, names, appearances and purposes were changed to fit Spanish interests, beliefs and perceptions. A clear example

is the figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who before the Spaniards arrived was the Aztec goddess named Tonantzin and was later used by them to exemplify the successful conversion of the Indian to Catholicism.

David Brading's, First America, and Jacques Lafaye's, Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe, are both excellent books in which the evolution of Guadalupe and Quetzalcóatl, two key Mexican figures, are traced.²⁷ Both of these figures are myths ultimately used by the creole elite to consolidate groups of people for the specific purpose of achieving the concept of a nation. Quetzalcóatl, an ancient pre-Hispanic God, was used by the Spaniards, probably due to his status as a creator God, to argue that Mexico had a prior history of evangelization by a white, long bearded man.²⁸ Quetzalcóatl also exemplifies the element of sacrifice. According to Lafaye, this long white bearded man sacrificed in order to preach the gospel in the Americas long before Cortés' arrival, thus giving Mexicans the status of a chosen people. The Virgin became the symbol of the nation, and was utilized by Creole intellectuals to create the concept of Mexico as a chosen nation by God. In other words, the myth of Tonantzin was broad enough to first capture pre-Hispanic society, then useful in promoting and spreading Catholicism, and later key in creating what we know today as Mexico.²⁹ Guadalupe was the symbol that

²⁷ Jacques Lafaye, *Quetzalcóatl and Guadalupe* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995).

²⁸ Ibid, 211-216.

²⁹ David Brading, *First America* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

the independence of Mexico was based on and the driving force that united Indians, creoles, and mestizos, all of them with different interests, into one nation.³⁰

The myth of Madera differs from the subjects of these works because it is a myth of the left. Disenfranchised groups use myths to counteract those imposed by segments of society with economic, religious and political power. It is logical to argue that these groups should be exposing reality and transforming it instead of creating their own myths. If myths are partly to blame for the existing structures in society, to fight them by creating another myth is not logical. Barthes claims the left and revolutionary language cannot create myths. He states “the bourgeoisie hides the fact that it is the bourgeoisie and thereby produces myth, revolution announces itself openly as revolution and thereby abolishes myth.”³¹ However, this contradiction, the presence of a myth, can be seen in the rhetoric of communism. Communism accepts the premise, a mythical one, that a great strike will eventually arise, ending in the labor class owning the means of production. In other words, it proposes a mythical ending that is not operational nor embedded in reality, since a universal strike is highly unlikely to take place. The interests of revolutionaries do not lie in creating individuals capable of going through life without myths in order to make sense of their reality. There is not enough time or resources for such an endeavor. Their goal is to create followers, believers and doctrines, and that is why myths are created. Thus, myths are necessary to the left and the language of revolution. Although it

³⁰ Ibid, 228.

³¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, 146.

is not Barthes' intention, arguing that the left should not create myths can result in the weakening of its sphere of influence, because the majority of people react to emotional stimuli and myths are effective vehicles of such stimuli. Having said that, the rhetoric of those interested in social change is dangerous and uncomfortable. The myths of the left are not as easily accepted because to do so means a significant change in behavior, such as leaving comfort, stability and the perception of security behind.

Brunk's work tracing the evolution of the myth of Zapata is an analysis of Zapata's continuous metamorphosis that can be compared to the design of the myth of Madera. The similarities are multifold. Zapata started, like Madera, as a local myth. The elements that catapulted his image into the mythical realm, such as the perception of sacrifice, the treatment of the body, the numerous accounts of his resurrection, and the element of betrayal can also be seen in Madera. Brunk explains that the religious element was key in making Zapata a myth. This perception started with stories about Zapata riding throughout Morelos months after his death and the perception that he knew his death was near. More notably, just like Madera the religious element is not supported by any evidence, it is the product of rumors and desires. The myth of Zapata is used by different people to promote and defend different interests, and like Madera, the myth is ambiguous enough to attract many followers.

The examples of myth making enterprises mentioned above are aimed at understanding how myths are used today. The works by Florescano, Brading, Lafaye, and Brunk not only provide a clear demonstration of how historians use myth, they also provide the background needed to understand the importance of myth in Mexico and the

elements that make it such a crucial tool in the political, social and religious life of the country. Finally, with Guadalupe, and Quetzalcóatl, I have demonstrated that the element of sacrifice not only goes back a long way in Mexico, but its effectiveness in making people adhere to myths is so significant that it has been used in Mexico for centuries.

2 BEFORE THE ASSAULT

In this chapter, I will describe the social context present in the state of Chihuahua before the rebels' decision to attack the fort. This is important because these conditions helped in the follow up mythological construction of the myth of Madera. Prior to the assault, from 1960 to 1965, an active peasant movement, headed by an organization called the Unión General de Obreros y Campesinos de México (UGOCM), engaged in numerous strikes, land invasions and political rallies protesting the social conditions and land distribution in Chihuahua. Jacinto López, an agrarian leader from the state of Sonora, founded the UGOCM in 1946.³² As one of the leaders of the UGOCM in the state of Chihuahua, Gómez had the support necessary in terms of numbers to concern the regime. Some marches and rallies had more than 2000 people attending them. The UGOCM was a significant political force in the northern states of Durango, Sonora, Sinaloa and Chihuahua. It was an independent union comprised of peasants, factory workers, students and professors who organized to demand equal distribution of land, better wages and working conditions, more schools, and access to credit.³³

Pablo Gómez was a physician and a professor in the federal system, which meant

³² www.ugocm.org.mx

³³ For information on the UGOCM, see Bartra, *Los herederos de Zapata*, 68-70. See also, José Santos Valdez, *Madera* (Mexico: Laura, 1968), 164-170.

the regime had the final say in terms of where his next assignment would be. Married and the father of five children, he was almost 40 years old when he was killed in Madera. He was a professor at the Normal School of Education in Flores Magón, Chihuahua and later in Saucillo, Chihuahua. Part of Gómez's work consisted in integrating a large number of people together and mobilizing them to the state capital to demand land from the government through legal channels. Alma Gómez explains that these maneuvers consisted of land invasions, protests outside federal offices and political rallies at which her father read speeches. These actions were designed to pressure the authorities to resolve demands in a swift and satisfactory manner.

Sucesos, a political magazine with national readership and one of the few media outlets that made an effort to give some background information regarding Gómez's activities prior to the incident, described some of the many actions of the UGOCM between 1962 and 1965. One of them was a three hundred-kilometer march in 1962, of 600 peasants, from Madera to the city of Chihuahua. This protest, led by Gómez, was aimed at delivering a letter to President Adolfo López Mateos explaining the land situation in the state. Another mobilization took place from November 5th to the 26th of 1963, when more than 300 peasants camped outside the Agrarian Department in the city of Chihuahua, with the support of professors and students, demanding a solution to the

agrarian problems.³⁴ Governor Praxedes Giner Durán's response consisted of closing the schools throughout the state in which the UGOCM had influence.³⁵

In an interview conducted on May 25, 2003, Alma Gómez summarized her father's actions with the UGOCM in 1964, which were the most dramatic in terms of creating powerful enemies within the state. Alma indicates that Gómez organized groups of peasants from Saucillo, Delicias, Camargo, Temosachic, Flores Magón, Casas Grandes and Madera. Their demand was the distribution of great extensions of landed property of Bosques de Chihuahua, a large timber company, owned by Eloy Vallina, member of a powerful and wealthy family in the state. This large region, which was under the control of the company, was part of Gómez's area of influence. It contained numerous natural resources, such as woodland areas ideal for the timber industry and streams that fed the entire region. The company hired private guards to protect the property from invasions and to drive away those already inhabiting the land. This situation created many confrontations between the guards and the peasants and the law protected only those that could afford it once the legal status of the land became questioned. This increased the pressure on the squatters in the form of imprisonment, beatings and even murder.³⁶ The state government ignored the conduct of the private guards and those who hired them; as a result, displacements, hangings and rapes became tools to terrorize the peasants.

³⁴ The Agrarian Department is the federal agency in charge of land related issues.

³⁵ Víctor Rico Galán, "Chihuahua de la desesperación a la muerte," *Sucesos*, no.1693 (1965), 12-26. For more information on Gómez's actions prior to the assault see Santos Valdez, *Madera*.

³⁶ Santos Valdez, *Madera* 135-150.

None of Gómez's mobilizations achieved any significant change. In fact, Alma Gómez claims that official decisions regarding rightful possession of the land took up to twenty years to establish. The pressure on Pablo Gómez from the Mexican government reached a high point in 1965, when he was ordered to transfer immediately to a school in the southern state of Veracruz or risk being fired. A difficult decision presented itself to Gómez: heeding government desires would have meant leaving all his work behind. Gómez did not want to start all over again somewhere else. The transfer was a clear effort by the regime to weaken the UGOCM and dissolve the conglomerate of forces Gómez was able to put together. This particular circumstance made violent resistance for Gómez necessary.³⁷ "The roads were being closed," states Alma Gómez, when asked about her father's eventual decision to take arms.³⁸

Arturo Gámiz was 25 years old when he was killed in Madera. He joined the UGOCM in 1959 after a three-year period with the Communist Party. In that same year, Gámiz entered the state's school of Education in Flores Magón. During his time in the UGOCM, he engaged in land-related struggles similar to those of Gómez. However, Gámiz decided to move away from the UGOCM around the end of 1963 after perceiving that legal resistance was going nowhere. He operated in a different area of the state than Gómez, mainly close to Madera, but according to media reports, Gámiz and Gómez got together a month before the assault.³⁹

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Alma Gómez, interview by author, tape recorded, Chihuahua. 25 May 2003.

³⁹ *El Heraldo*, 24 September 1996.

Gámiz engaged in guerrilla type warfare against the Mexican regime at least a year before the decision to attack the fort was made. According to the regime, Gámiz was responsible for blowing up a bridge and killing Florentino Ibarra, a known cacique of the region on March 5, 1964.⁴⁰ On July 15, Gámiz was blamed for the ambush of a group of policemen and then in 1965 for attacking soldiers of the 32nd battalion and disarming them. None of the captured soldiers or policemen were injured or killed in these actions.⁴¹ These activities were preceded by constant efforts on the part of Gámiz and Gómez to achieve a dialogue with the state authorities. Gámiz's group sent a message to Governor Giner via the media, in which they made him aware that they would like to see him in the mountains, leading his troops. This would convince him that it was easy to send soldiers to fight and insult teachers hiding behind a desk, but it was not the same to fight. This message was a clear challenge to Giner's capacity to lead and provides insight into the perception the leaders of the movement had of him, which was that he was a coward and an ignoramous.⁴²

Governor Giner Durán's behavior is important in order to understand Gómez and Gámiz's eventual decision to take up arms. José Santos Valdez, an inspector of the Normal school system who knew Pablo Gómez well, wrote a book called Madera, The Reasoning of a Martyr, in 1968. Regarding the governor's conduct, Valdez writes,

⁴⁰ The word cacique, according to the Real Academia Dictionary means "individual that possesses excessive influence in political and administrative matters." For more information on the word cacique, see Carlos Montemayor's article, "El retorno de los caciques," *La Jornada*, 15 January, 2003.

⁴¹ *El Heraldo*, 24 September 1996.

⁴² *La Jornada*, 23 September, 2002.

“everyone is aware that the responsibility for the deep discontent lies with General Giner. He is guilty of not listening to the complaints of the injured, refusing to punish the criminals and using the law to serve the rich. Giner is an inept, reactionary man.”⁴³ Valdez shows Giner attacking the reputations of all professors by claiming that sexual encounters among professors and students were a constant reality in the schools that supported the UGOCM. In addition, Valdez demonstrates that Giner labeled Gómez’s group as criminals, bandits and rebels in the press.⁴⁴

The dynamics between the rebels and the authorities created an environment in which personal antagonisms became another obstacle to resolve the land problems. This created an atmosphere in which any initiatives to resolve legal issues swiftly would have been ignored by the governor. Giner’s lack of diplomacy, tolerance and civility was a major factor contributing to the rebel’s decision to attack the regime.

Nonetheless, the social discontent in the state of Chihuahua was not an isolated situation in Mexico. In fact, Madera was preceded by various significant movements of resistance and protest against the conditions present in the nation. The Mexican regime responded with violence to the national railroad strike of 1961 and the medical strike of 1964 that demanded better wages and working conditions. The government’s methods consisted of imprisoning and killing movement leaders, dissolving strikes by bringing in scabs and reacting to public protests with aggressive police tactics. This was despite the

⁴³ Santos Valdez, *Madera*, 117-118.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

fact that these movements never used violence as a tool to achieve their demands. In fact, Madera was the first socialist movement that instead of merely resisting went on the offensive.⁴⁵

Local movements of resistance surfaced as well, the most prominent was in Morelos, led by Rubén Jaramillo, an agrarian leader. Jaramillo rejected legal resistance because he perceived it as useless and took arms using guerrilla tactics. His uprising was resolved by the federal government in a violent fashion in 1962 when Jaramillo was “convinced” to surrender and was later assassinated at his home, along with his family, by soldiers.⁴⁶

Jaramillo’s struggle, for some, is the genesis of the subsequent social movements in Mexico because he was one of the first to violently resist the regime after the revolution.⁴⁷ However, while Jaramillo was indeed before Madera, the assault on the fort was the first frontal attack against the regime, something Jaramillo never attempted. The Cristero rebellion is another important precedent, however, due to its evident religious connection, the mythical usefulness of this movement is not as appealing for the left as Madera or even Jaramillo.

The majority of post-revolutionary social movements in Mexico were local in nature. The scope of such movements was limited to their region, and more importantly,

⁴⁵ Sergio Aguayo, *La Charola* (Mexico: Grijalbo, 2001), 120.

⁴⁶ Carlos Montemayor, *La Jornada*, 2003.

⁴⁷ Bartra’s, *Los herederos de Zapata*, 90-93, is one source calling Jaramillo the second coming of Zapata and giving the movement credit as the starting point for post revolutionary movements in Mexico.

most of these movements lacked ideologies that went beyond local interests, since their immediate demands comprised only their region. These facts made their extermination by the government easier. The failure to consider ideologies that addressed national or global issues meant that their movements would never expand beyond their origins. Carlos Montemayor, who specializes in this type of history and has documented similar groups that have flourished in Mexico since 1965, calls this type of uprising a rural guerrilla. He explains that the environment existent in rural areas of close family ties acts as a powerful cohesive force that replaces ideological preparedness.⁴⁸ The assault at the fort in Madera breaks this mold because the movement had global concerns that differentiated the individuals involved in the assault from the previous uprisings. More importantly, the attack on the fort is still a unique event in the history of the socialist guerrilla groups in Mexico, since it was and still remains the only attempt to take a fort. These two characteristics, a structured ideology and the attack itself, made Madera different from previous organizations fighting for similar demands. That is the reason why Madera is seen as more valuable for the left because it provides a legacy of heroism, bravery and martyrdom that others do not.

At a meeting in the mountains of Durango in February 1965, the movement produced a document that criticized what the members perceived as a world dominated by imperialism and capitalism. “These regimes of exploitation of minorities by the majority, that generate misery, ignorance and injustice everywhere they appear, which in

⁴⁸ Carlos Montemayor, “El EZLN y Chiapas,” *Fractal*. No. 8 (1998).

turn demeans, frustrates, and curtails men from developing their personalities, have not always been around.”⁴⁹ The passage presents the group’s concern about the economic inequality capitalism brings, resulting in the dehumanization of individuals at the bottom of the economic scale that perceive their situation as hopeless. More notably, it gives a solution to this problem by making it clear that the system is relatively new; therefore, its presence is temporary and, with the right action, it can be eliminated.

In regard to imperialism, the document stated, “when the possibilities to get richer are limited or extinguished, corporations reach other countries with their tentacles, they invade them with their capital and military. Their claws grab and exhaust natural resources in weaker countries and turn them into markets for cheap products.”⁵⁰ This description of imperialism shows the group’s vision regarding what an imperialist system needs to expand and survive. This provided the group with an international projection, which meant that they had a vision about the world system and this fact strengthened the myth of Madera by giving it an added dimension.

After the analysis of capitalism, the document presented a review of Mexico’s history. It explained how the Spanish conquest created the foundation of a nation ruled by a bourgeoisie whose concern was not the nation, but its own self-interest. This privileged class was thus uninterested in resolving poverty and inequality in Mexico. To prove this,

⁴⁹ Segundo Encuentro en la Sierra, *Heraclio Bernal* (Chihuahua: Ediciones Línea Revolucionaria, 1965), 3,9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*

the authors focused on land and educational issues. “There are eight million acres” they wrote, “in the large estates of Chihuahua that could support the 50,000 families requesting land from the state.” In regard to education they asserted that in Mexico, out of one thousand children that start elementary level, only forty of them went to high school and only one went to college.”⁵¹

This set of ideas helped legitimize the movement’s actions because it had clear demands (land distribution, access to education, access to credit, and the end of the latifundia), goals, and a vision of the “right” government (socialist) for Mexico. The group claimed socialism was the most effective form of government, a system that would ensure that the injustices of capitalism would not exist. To support its claim that socialism was the best form of government, the group provided evidence of the situation peasants and laborers enjoyed in Russia at the time. It also explained the educational system in Russia, where almost everyone that wanted to attend school was guaranteed an education.⁵²

Another factor that helped to promote the decision to attack was the international context, which included a Cuban Revolution that successfully overthrew a corrupt and bureaucratic regime in 1959. On top of that, the individuals in charge of the revolution in Cuba embraced communism by the early 1960s. As such, they were a living example that the “great idea” of workers’ emancipation was not as distant as in the past. Gómez and

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² The group never adopted a name.

Gámiz perceived the Cuban revolution as a victory against imperialism and capitalism, against the entire system they perceived as perverse. The Cuban experience showed that the unprivileged mass of people could rise against their oppressors and improve their conditions. Such was Gómez's hope, according to his son.⁵³

The attack itself has been well documented and analyzed. Víctor Rico Galán's article in *Sucesos* three weeks after the event remains one of the best articles on it. However, the most accurate description of the assault so far is found in Montemayor's, Las armas del alba. The rebels were aware of the increase in the number of soldiers, but they were not sure exactly how many more there were. The number of soldiers turned out to be, presumably, at least 125, a fact later used to describe the event as an act of bravery, immolation, and sacrifice. For security reasons, the rebels were divided into three different groups, each group had around 10 or 15 individuals that were supposed to meet at Madera. The group in charge of the high caliber weapons did not arrive on time. This meant some of the rebels did not possess the weapons necessary for their endeavor, but they still went ahead with the assault, giving mythmakers another ingredient to use in the myth's construction.

The action was planned for September 17, but the rebels had to hold on until the twenty-third in hope that the others, who never made it, would arrive from different parts of the state. The possibility that someone was arrested and decided to talk was on

⁵³ For evidence of Cuba's revolutionary influence, see Pablo Gómez, interview by author, Ciudad Juárez, May 8, 2003.

everyone's mind.⁵⁴ Indeed, the others never arrived and the leaders had no way of knowing if they were caught. Gámiz, the figure with the most military experience, faced with this scenario, decided to go ahead with the attack. This was preceded by an argument with Gómez, who felt the conditions were not ideal since they were outnumbered and outgunned. According to Montemayor, Gámiz's reply to Gómez was that maybe he was scared. Gómez reiterated the uncertainties they faced, but being new to combat did not press his efforts to stop the action after Gámiz told him that ideal conditions would never be present. The decision was made and the soldiers repelled the attack, forcing the rebels to retreat. Gómez, the main ideologist, and Gámiz, the group's military leader, were both slain, along with seven others. The military confirmed the death of only six soldiers. In Las armas del alba, Montemayor tells us that more than 50 soldiers were really killed in the attack. His evidence is the testimony of people who claimed they saw railroad cars full of dead soldiers hours after the attack.⁵⁵

After the fight was over, things changed dramatically in Madera and the state of Chihuahua. According to the regime, tranquility prevailed in the region once the rebels were repelled.⁵⁶ However, the situation described by other sources, including the account of an individual living in Madera at the time, is different than that described by the regime.

⁵⁴ Carlos Montemayor, in *Las armas del alba*, details how the men were worried that the others could have been arrested and tortured in order to snitch out the group.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 178-212.

⁵⁶ *El Nacional*, 24 September 1965.

Rico Galán, a journalist for *Sucesos* and *Siempre* describes in an ironic tone the scene in Madera after the assault. He notes that the praise received by the soldiers, through media reports the day after the assault, was due to the behavior of the troops, which consisted of the imprisonment and civil rights violations of scores of peasants in Madera and surrounding areas.⁵⁷ *Proceso*, a political monthly magazine still in circulation today, which has always questioned the government's actions and policies, published testimony of a peasant regarding the situation in Madera: "after the shooting...the troops detained hundreds of peasants, almost the entire town; they then took us to the fort. Once in there, they (the soldiers) stripped us down and we remained there for a while."⁵⁸

José Santos Valdez wrote, "after the shooting had ended, groups of soldiers went out to look for the fugitives. However, they would not find them since the peasants hid them."⁵⁹ Julieta García Hernández, fourteen years old at the time of the assault, relates that Madera was besieged by the military for several days. The soldiers, who were acting wildly, controlled access in and out of town. The local radio station, XESW, announced that no one was allowed to leave his or her house until further notice. She adds that paratroopers were sent to the area; according to her, this caused a lot of fear among the local population.⁶⁰ This process of harassment on the part of the authorities was another

⁵⁷ Rico Galán, "Chihuahua de la desesperación," 12-26.

⁵⁸ Francisco Ortíz, "El asalto al Cuartel de Madera," *Proceso*, no. 99 (25 September 1978.)

⁵⁹ Santos Valdez, *Madera*, 18-19.

⁶⁰ Julieta García Hernández, interview by Graciela de la Rosa, tape recorded, Ciudad Juárez, 11 May 2003.

element later used to feed the myth, and commonly found in other Mexican myths like that of Zapata.

This chapter is aimed not only at providing a context that would explain the causes for the assault, but it also demonstrates how these previous social struggles and the government's response to them helped in the construction of the myth.

3 COUNTER-INSURGENT DISCOURSE

The counter-insurgent message started to take shape the morning after the assault. The Mexican regime, protecting its political system and those segments of society that benefited from it, reacted quickly and vigorously to control perceptions of the attack. The federal government published an official message in all the national newspapers on September 24, 1965. The following is a passage from that message: “the military repelled the aggression, rapidly killing Pablo Gómez, the main leader of the agitators, Arturo Gámiz, second in command... and two more criminals not yet identified. The rest of the members fled and will be persecuted until extermination.”⁶¹ Later in this missive, the government claimed, “with the death of the main leaders, tranquility will come back to the region.” The message also praised the soldiers for their actions and minimized their casualties by claiming that only six soldiers lost their lives.⁶²

The statement attacks and labels the rebels by describing them as criminals and agitators. This was an effort to dehumanize the participants and to undermine the legitimacy of the action by making it the act of lawless men. In addition, it was meant to justify the result, which was in its rhetoric the death of bandits rather than students and

⁶¹ *El Universal, El Día, El Nacional, El Herald*o, 24 September, 1965. The word “*exterminación*” is used in this message.

⁶² *Ibid.*

professors. The fact that they were students and professors is never mentioned in the message.⁶³

The government also minimized the action by describing it as an isolated and random event. The last part of the statement suggests it was the inspiration of a handful of people without any support from the local population. These false claims not only isolate the event, but assign its causes to “agitators and criminals” rather than to the existing social structure and conditions. This was done to avoid dealing with the causes that produced the uprising in the first place and to treat the incident as merely a military problem, not a social one.

This passage also shows the government’s decision to shape public opinion and rearrange facts in order to prepare the persecution that followed the event. This was done to explain the campaign to the public in and outside the state of Chihuahua. The labels used in the message are designed to justify the announced manhunt for survivors, since to exterminate criminals is more accepted than to kill professors and students. It was, in addition, an attempt to stop the event from becoming meaningful and thus the object of myth. It makes remembering it a shame, since to glorify the act of agitators promotes an environment of insecurity and destabilizes a system that had been in place for 36 years of apparent peace and prosperity.⁶⁴

⁶³ The words agitators (agitadores), criminals (criminales) and bandits (bandidos) are the labels utilized by the regime in the message to describe the group.

⁶⁴ The ruling party for 36 years, the PRI, was founded in 1929, though it originally had another name.

The military's actions after the attack, aimed at promoting the counter-insurgent message, backfired and later became tools for revolutionary rhetoric. The soldiers paraded the uncovered bodies of the rebels all over town in a truck, refused to turn them over to the relatives, and finally buried them together in a mass grave. All of these actions were ordered by the High Military Command.⁶⁵

In 1978, *Proceso* presented the account of Dolores Mena de Bohórquez, a Madera resident at the time, who claimed that the image of the bodies was still engraved in her mind. She remembered the bodies being thrown in the truck as if they were pieces of wood, and feeling sad for the dead men.⁶⁶ Julieta García Hernández remembers the bodies being exhibited in a house at the town plaza by the military. She claims the images of headless bodies impacted her for life, and that most of the town rejected this specific action by the soldiers.⁶⁷

These reactions are important testimonies because they suggest that the treatment of the bodies only helped make the event timeless instead of providing a lesson for others not to follow as the regime presumably expected. The rebels were potentially converted into martyrs, lifting them further into the mythical realm. In fact, in newspaper accounts of the event both today and in 1965, the parading of the bodies is one of the facts always mentioned. This mistake by the regime is even more outrageous given that the bodies of other Mexican heroes went through similar ordeals, which made them more memorable.

⁶⁵ Rico Galán, "Chihuahua de la desesperación," 13-20.

⁶⁶ Pinchetti Ortiz, "El asalto al cuartel de Madera, el 23 de septiembre de 1965."

⁶⁷ Julieta García Hernández, interview by Graciela de la Rosa, tape recorded, Ciudad Juárez, 11 May 2003.

Emiliano Zapata's body was displayed and photographed by the regime. Miguel Hidalgo's head was put on a stake to serve as an example. This can even create doubts and rumors about the identification of the bodies. Samuel Brunk documented, in "Zapata's Eyes," the rumors created when the decision to display Zapata's body was made. He writes, "in contending that Zapata survived Guajardo's ploy and could therefore return, the men were making him into a man God in the style of the Pre Colombian figure Quetzalcoátl and, of course, Jesus Christ."⁶⁸ Similarly, *Sucesos* states that the town refused to believe in Gámiz's death. Some people, claiming they knew him, stated that the body shown at Madera was not his. The article indicates that even his mother failed to recognize him in photographs. The reason his identification was difficult was because Gámiz's head was partially mutilated, but the presence of golden teeth was the final evidence that it was indeed Gámiz. According to the regime, the body of Arturo Gámiz was identified by September 26.⁶⁹

The message in which the federal government responded to the attack gave the leadership of the movement to Gómez. This was another mistake by the regime because it automatically enlarged Gómez's image, helping in the construction of the myth. In recognizing Gómez's leadership, the state provided him with a measure of recognition and perhaps even legitimization.

⁶⁸ Samuel Brunk, "Zapata's Eyes," *Heroes and Hero Cults in Latin America*, Samuel Brunk and Ben Fallaw, ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, forthcoming).

⁶⁹ *El Heraldo, El Norte*, 26 September, 1965.

While the federal government announced the persecution of “agitators,” it also claimed the region was stable. This is a contradiction because campaigns of persecution and extermination do not create a perception of “tranquility,” which they claimed existed now that the leaders were dead. The documentation describing the campaign that followed the assault at Madera is considerable. It runs in direct opposition to the official position the Mexican government wanted to promote, which was that the region was stable. Thus, it provides evidence for the argument that the effort to control the situation in the state included hiding information and was designed to curtail support for the insurgents. Portraying such conditions was aimed at deflecting national attention from the region in order to make operations swift and effective for the military. The description of the situation was also aimed at preventing protest in places other than Chihuahua, where people might not be familiar with the social conditions mentioned in chapter two. The environment of persecution turned out to be a key ingredient in the construction of the pro-insurgent myth. Previous myth making endeavors, such as the myth of Emiliano Zapata, were strengthened by the stories of persecution the locals suffered at the hands of the military, which were justified in the name of security. These campaigns consisted of burning villages, rounding up men in order to extradite them to other states, and blocking access in and out of towns. Likewise, Lucio Cabañas’ movement in Guerrero was

defeated using the same strategy but to a greater degree.⁷⁰ Both Zapata and Cabañas have inspired myths and the element of persecution was key in this process.⁷¹

Days after the assault, on September 25th, the Mexican federal government claimed, in yet another official statement published nationally that, “The event at Madera is finished...throughout the region tranquility is complete.”⁷² Two days later the national headlines declared, “Chihuahua Legislature Asks the President for Military Help... Due to the Dangerous Situation Prevalent in the Region.”⁷³ These statements demonstrate the poor communication between federal and state authorities, exposing their lack of cohesion. The state’s request contradicted the federal government’s position on the attack because suddenly it was not the random, isolated incident the federal government first described. In addition, it gives the impression, true or not, of a federal government without any real grasp of the situation in Chihuahua. More importantly, it undermines the interpretation of the assault that the federal government tried to impose since other branches of government were now questioning their “truth.”

In fact, the state legislature labeled the action as “bold and surprising.” These words, which were originally designed to justify the call for increased military presence,

⁷⁰ La Jornada, 21 march 2004. Mass graves are still being found in Guerrero, and countless of men and women are still missing after more than thirty years.

⁷¹ For a complete account of the campaign of persecution by the Mexican army against Zapata in Morelos, see John Womack’s, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1968) 97-128. For the campaign in Guerrero against Cabañas, see Carlos Montemayor’s, *Guerra en el paraíso*, (Mexico: Diana, 1991), 150-300.

⁷² *El Nacional, Novedades*, 25 September 1965.

⁷³ *El Universal*, 27 September 1965.

only enlarged the action by giving it extraordinary characteristics meant for great events. This could make it appealing for groups and individuals to imitate such a dramatic initiative. The regime's decision to control the interpretation of the attack was a mistake; it would have been wiser to ignore it as they did with Cabañas in Guerrero, where most of his actions were denied. This was possible due to the geographical isolation of the state of Guerrero, which was similar to Chihuahua's high mountain region.

Different rumors, ideas, and interpretations kept surfacing in the days after the incident. On September 29, 1965, Secretary of State Luis Echeverría, when asked whether the event at Madera had any connection with international communist groups, stated, "Mexico is not a platform for any guerrilla infiltration with Castro-communist ties."⁷⁴ This was another effort to isolate the event in order to minimize its importance by erasing the perception that the group had the support of international organizations. While labeling an individual or a group as communist was a way to attack it, in this instance to make that charge would have meant to accept that the group had an ideology and international connections.

The regime learned from Madera. In 1971, in the state of Guerrero, when the movement led by Lucio Cabañas tested the system again by engaging in guerrilla type warfare with federal troops, the regime responded with an extended campaign of dehumanization of the figures and minimization of the military actions by the rebels. The movement was eventually isolated and destroyed in 1974, when Cabañas was killed. The

⁷⁴ *El Nacional*, 29 September 1965.

bodies of the rebels, instead of being displayed, were now hidden and never photographed by reporters. The government's message promoted through the media was refined and became a constant attack on the integrity, sexuality and motives of Cabañas and his people. While the rebels in Madera were attacked verbally as well, the degree to which Cabañas was minimized was much greater than that in Madera. His military actions were denied by the Mexican military most of the time, and when it did mention them, they were labeled as ambushes and the actions of cowards.⁷⁵ The regime realized the effectiveness of these tactics after its experience with Madera; as a result, it improved them to prepare its military occupation of the entire state of Guerrero. Furthermore, it refrained from providing elements that others could use to make Cabañas a hero. Still, Cabañas' work organizing communities for more than 10 years and the military's presence in Guerrero, which reached a high of 24,000 soldiers, were significant enough that the efforts by the regime to stop Cabañas' figure from being mythologized were useless.

The counter-insurgent discourse was not limited to the regime; few Mexican newspapers at the time were concerned with investigating the event or the reasons behind it. The following are some of the headlines published in newspapers with national circulation on September 24th, 1965. "Confrontation Between Criminals and the Army Resulted in Death of Thirteen People"; "A Group of Unruly Individuals Attacked the

⁷⁵ For a complete account of the government's official position regarding Cabañas, see Carlos Montemayor, *Guerra en el Paraiso*, 30-56.

Military Fort at Madera”; and “Several Dead In a Scrimmage in Chihuahua.”⁷⁶ The media limited its coverage to the government’s side of the story, ignoring the journalist ethic of presenting differing interpretations of the same event. Their headlines indicated that the media’s position was clearly against the uprising and in complete accordance with the perception of the government regarding the attack. Moreover, instead of searching for the reasons behind the assault, the media exploited the sensationalism of the action in order to increase fear in its readership, which would help them sell papers. This also means that the information available to the country in 1965 was partial at best and filtered by media outlets in accordance with the regime. The media, specifically newspapers at the time, comes out of this analysis as a collaborator with the state’s policies and actions. The newspapers, by focusing on the inflammatory aspects of the story, neglected to provide any insight into the circumstances surrounding the assault, but they did generate publicity that ended up helping the myth of Madera.

El Universal was the only newspaper with national circulation that made an effort to analyze the social conditions behind the event at Madera, stating that one of the reasons was the presence in the territory of, “caciques employed by the land owners, among them is José Ibarra, who was accused by communities of robbery, murder and rape.”⁷⁷ Although the article hinted at the possibility that personal grudges might explain

⁷⁶ *El Nacional, Novedades, El Día*, 24 September 1965.

⁷⁷ *El Universal*, 24 September 1965.

the uprising, at the same time it presented an image of how caciques dealt with their adversaries in Chihuahua.

The state media, specifically the Chihuahua City paper, *El Norte*, reported the incident at Madera in a different way than its equivalents in Mexico City did. The differences between the national newspapers and *El Norte* are a reflection of the political situation in Mexico. As the political center of the country, the nation's capital was heavily guarded by the regime; as a result, the closed political system controlled most of the national media, especially newspapers, which were based in Mexico City, in order to curtail opposing interpretations and views. Looking at their coverage the day after the event and in the days that followed, which was concentrated on the military, not the social, aspects of the attack, it is evident that national newspapers were interested in the results of the event and not in its causes.

El Norte's headline on September 24, on the other hand, read, "Brave Attack on the Military Fort at Madera." The paper reported that the serious land problem in Chihuahua appeared to be the source of the bloody encounter. According to this account, the land dispute finally climaxed on September 23rd after a series of imprisonments, assaults and displacements for the past three years. More notably, the word "brave" was chosen to describe the assault. This term is usually used to label heroic deeds, not the actions of criminals. *El Norte*, in other words, did not turn a blind eye to the political and social reality in the state. Rather, it reported the land problem at the time of the assault. The numerous actions Pablo Gómez and Arturo Gámiz engaged in before the assault, which included sit-ins at public offices, protests and rallies that were reported by *El*

Norte, meant that *El Norte*'s readership was aware of the conditions present in the state and familiar with Gómez and Gámiz. As evidence of that, *El Norte* printed 51,314 copies on September 24, 1965, at least double the usual number.⁷⁸ The first edition was not enough for everyone interested in news about Madera. It was in *El Norte*'s best economic interest to impartially report the situation in Madera since its readers were not going to be misled by unbiased press after previous coverage of Gómez and Gámiz's protests. *El Norte* indicated Gámiz was the leader of the group, instead of Gómez. This contradicted the message of the federal government, which claimed Gómez was the main leader. This fact further demonstrates the regime's lack of familiarity with the dynamics in Chihuahua because indeed Gámiz was the military leader.

During the following days *El Norte* reported that doubts about Gámiz's body surfaced when people familiar with the Gámiz family claimed the slain body appeared to be that of Gámiz's brother, Emilio.⁷⁹ The rumors around Gámiz's body became another factor in the eventual construction of the myth of Madera. On the 27th, the paper presented a description of how the attack was planned and why. Its information appears to be correct if compared to what we know today in terms of the number of soldiers and rebels and the treatment of the bodies. However, *El Norte* suddenly stopped publishing information concerning Madera on September 30 and failed to recall the event on the following anniversaries. Why *El Norte* chose to stop covering the incident and its

⁷⁸ *El Norte*, 24 September, 1965.

⁷⁹ *El Norte*, 25 September, 1965.

immediate anniversaries is not known. Its editorial line ignored the attack in the days after it, which demonstrates a failure to present a clear position regarding the event and might explain their sudden change, since the editorial line is supposed to clearly establish the paper's opinion on any given subject.⁸⁰ In other words, *El Norte* took the easy position to report the event, but failed to create a debate around it.

El Herald, the other state newspaper, was less effective than *El Norte* in terms of providing insight into the causes of the attack. The morning of the 24th, *El Herald*'s headline read: "Arturo Gámiz's Bandits are Exterminated."⁸¹ It later informed its readers that a ceaseless persecution to eliminate the rebels was underway. It also provided plenty of space for the military and the regime to express their positions regarding the attack. This paper's interest in the incident had more to do with its violent nature than what caused it in the first place. This is evident in articles that focused on the number of dead and injured and the persecution that ensued. However, in its effort to exploit the bloody nature of the action, the paper presented photos of the slain rebels laying on the ground with their faces mutilated.⁸² This is important because the public could thus see prominent members of the community dead. These pictures are still shown today and they are key for the myth-making process due to their graphic content. In both the accounts published today and in 1965 continuous references are made to these photographs. *El Herald* stopped covering the incident by September 27, and just like the

⁸⁰ *El Norte*, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30 September 1965.

⁸¹ *El Herald*, 24 September, 1965.

⁸² *Ibid.*

rest of the state and national newspapers, it failed to provide any information on the subsequent anniversaries. However, in its effort to exploit the sensationalistic nature of the incident, instead of curtailing the myth, *El Heraldo* promoted it. Just like *El Norte*, *El Heraldo's* editorial line does not mention Madera; as a result, we can only surmise why they stopped. In *El Heraldo's* case, to explain why their failure to analyze the event is easier than in *El Norte's* case. Again, their coverage of the attack, which concentrated on the sensationalistic aspects of the story leaves me to conclude that they did not want to dig in for information that would effectively explain the assault, instead, they went for the immediate impact of gore images and exaggerated information.

During the 30th anniversary of the assault, *El Heraldo de Chihuahua* published an article by Mario Góngora, a regular contributor to the editorial section of the newspaper, in which the author condemned what he called a commemoration of hate, exploitation, and death. However, in his criticism of the attack, Góngora made important mistakes, such as claiming that *La Liga 23 de Septiembre* was the group involved in the incident. This demonstrates a clear ignorance of the facts on the part of the author, who did not bother to check his information before covering such an important event in the life of the state. More critically, the labels used by Góngora to describe the incident convey a clear dislike of those celebrating and remembering Madera. For Góngora, promoting an illegal act might promote illegality. His assertions are evidence that the myth still causes others to feel the need to attack it and this strengthens the myth because it keeps a continuous debate around it. During the same anniversary, *El Heraldo* interviewed state officials who

pointed out that although the demands made by the men at Madera in 1965 were justified, the means taken to achieve them were wrong.⁸³

High school history textbooks did not mention the incident at Madera until 1993. Even after that date, the explanation is incomplete, since the causes of the assault are not fully explained and, more notably, the mythical characteristics present in the assault, such as the treatment of the rebel's bodies and the claims of martyrdom are never analyzed. In the celebrations of the 30th anniversary, the union representing the professors of the state of Chihuahua demanded that the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP), the official institution in charge of education in Mexico, include the events at Madera as part of the historic legacy of the state. The union claimed that four of the fallen in 1965 at Madera were its members; more importantly, it believed the incident was crucial to the destiny of the state, though it did not explain why.⁸⁴

On the 35th anniversary, *El Heraldo* published another article in which one of the relatives of former governor Giner made an effort to defend him by claiming that his behavior needed to be placed in context. The author listed what he considered the positive aspects of Giner's regime, such as building schools and roads. He explained that the governor was a former revolutionary who never went to school and, despite this, became one of Francisco Villa's trusted lieutenants.⁸⁵

⁸³ *El Heraldo*, 20 September, 1995.

⁸⁴ *El Diario*, 26 September, 1995.

⁸⁵ *El Heraldo*, 23 September, 2000.

During the celebrations of the 38th anniversary, the state newspapers did not present any articles or stories condemning the attack on the fort in 1965. There was no anti-insurgent message present in the national newspapers either.

The purpose of this chapter is to prove that the anti-insurgent discourse was inadvertently, as effective as the pro-insurgent rhetoric, which I will talk about in the next chapter, in making Madera a myth. In addition, it suggests that the counter discourse may have been improved based on the experience in Madera to become an all out attack against subsequent social movements in Mexico. This rhetoric ultimately helped justify the numerous illegal arrests, executions and clandestine graves that are still talked about today.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ *La Jornada*, 21 March, 2004.

4 THE PRO-INSURGENT DISCOURSE

The establishment of a pro-insurgent discourse immediately after Madera was the responsibility of a few intellectuals who identified themselves with leftist positions, most of them based in Mexico City. They saw in the assault a great opportunity to criticize the Mexican political system. These authors turned the rebels into heroes and martyrs willing to sacrifice for others. These labels came out around two weeks after the first negative impressions regarding Madera surfaced in national and state media. This meant that the pro-insurgent discourse had to deal with a public already conditioned to see the Madera rebels as criminals and communists.

Siempre, a national weekly magazine that is still published today, provided a different account of that night in Madera than the one presented by the authorities through the media. This article was one of the first efforts at turning the action into a critical event in Mexican insurgent history. The author of the article entitled, “Chihuahua, un Problema,” was José Santos Valdez, a Mexican political analyst and former colleague of Gómez, who wrote for several magazines (*Siempre*, *Política*, *Revista de Revistas*). He humanized the participants by explaining that the majority of them were students and professors. More notably, this article is one of the first efforts to build the mythical concepts of sacrifice and heroism in respect to the attack. “The truth is,” the author writes, “that the attack was more than guerrilla warfare; it seems like an act of

immolation, as if the audacity of the gesture and the sacrifice of the attackers was a cry to the nation for attention to resolve the deep social problems in Chihuahua at last.”⁸⁷

The words used by Valdez to describe the event are meant to create an emotional response to the death of a group of individuals who gave up their lives by knowingly entering into a situation in which they could lose everything. Valdez utilizes words like immolation, audacity, sacrifice, and cry to describe the rebels and the incident. This language contains a great emotional charge meant to induce positive feelings towards the attackers and the assault. He presents a group of men who knew their fate, but ignored it in order to promote a cause larger than any individual concern. In fact, the term “sacrifice” has an obvious religious connotation, as well as a cultural and historical background in Mexico. Valdez’s evidence of sacrifice is the number of soldiers present at the fort, the weapons used by the rebels, and their lack of training. He also mentions conversations he had with Gómez where it became clear that Gómez felt that only through the sacrifice of some individuals could conditions be changed.⁸⁸ The result is a tool that shapes the behavior of others since the ideas set forth by those “sacrificing” have divine connections (Jesus, Quetzalcóatl, Zapata). Furthermore, the word implies an awakening, or resurrection, giving Gómez redemptory status, and making him a semi-God figure and a model to follow. In other words, the influence and significance of the

⁸⁷ José Santos Valdez, “Chihuahua, un problema,” *Siempre*, no. 641 (1965) : 8.

⁸⁸ Santos Valdez, *Madera*, 135-169.

element of sacrifice in Mexico is such, that any individual who is perceived as someone who sacrifices for others becomes almost divine.

Santos Valdez is the same individual who wrote the book Madera three years later. Valdez's concern in both the book and the article was to connect ideas of sacrifice and martyrdom with the event at Madera. He claimed his reasons for writing about the attack derived from a friendship with Gómez. Valdez also claimed that the official interpretation did not portray the motives that pushed Gómez into violent resistance. Therefore, he decided to write this article, and ultimately the book, to describe the real motivations behind the attack.

In its next edition, *Siempre* indicated that the rebellion was not an isolated event when it claimed that the group had been in the area engaging in guerrilla warfare fourteen months before the attack. For the first time after the event, Gámiz was quoted, saying, "for several years, as the answer to our demands, we have been laughed at." *Siempre* also quotes him as saying, "we will see now if in the heads of those people, bullets go in, since reason does not."⁸⁹ The article, by author Alberto Domingo, a well-known political analyst who wrote during three decades for *Siempre*, is an intentional effort to cast a mythical aura around the individuals leading the attack at the fort. It is aimed at making clear that it was the product of social demands being ignored for decades by the regime

⁸⁹ Alberto Domingo, *Siempre*, no. 64 (1965).

and, more critically, reinforcing Santos Valdez's effort to convey that these men were brave, heroic and willing to die for their convictions.

The idea of a defeat turned into a victory and the image of sacrifice and resurrection can be seen in this article as well. Domingo wrote, "they might say out of failure nothing arises but deception, impotence, silence... but the blood of the young never falls over barren land. From that, a sword arises to defend the land from its undeniable reality... because of the sacrifice of the young men of Chihuahua, a drop falls and thunder ignites."⁹⁰ Again, the language used in this article (deception, impotence, silence) adds to the mythical aura already taking shape.

Siempre comes out of this analysis as a media outlet that was fair and balanced in its political coverage. These two articles, in October and December 1965, were the only ones it published regarding the assault at Madera. The journal ignored the subsequent anniversaries of the incident, revealing that it did not promote a revolutionary discourse as its norm. During the end of the sixties and the seventies, *Siempre* provided information and editorial space to Fidel Castro's Cuba in 1963, Salvador Allende's coup in Chile, and the kidnapping of the elected governor of Guerrero, Rubén Figueroa, in 1973. More notably, Alberto Domingo provided a constant questioning of the policies and actions of the regime. At the same time, *Siempre* included authors who condemned the socialist revolution in Cuba, justified the coup in Chile and attacked the kidnapping of Figueroa by calling it an act of cowards.

⁹⁰ Ibid

Sucesos, a political journal with national circulation, presented an article in its October 1965 edition, twelve pages long, that came complete with photographs of the mutilated bodies and the ceremonies honoring the fallen soldiers. The article, written three weeks after the assault by Víctor Rico Galán who was later imprisoned by the regime in 1970 when he took his personal struggle to armed resistance, provided useful information regarding the incident itself. This included a body count, names of all the rebels killed and various military details, such as the presumption that a group of soldiers were waiting for them and the claim that the rebels were significantly out gunned, all of which was ignored by other media outlets. First, the author provided some context regarding the political and social situation at the time in the state of Chihuahua. “Three hundred large landowners possess eight million acres of land,” Galán wrote, “while a hundred thousand ejidatarios have only 4.5 million acres. On top of that, there are sixty thousand peasants without a piece of land.”⁹¹ This description presented the readers with a different scenario to explain the events in Madera than the one presented by the government.

Galán demonstrated his interest in making the event the act of martyrs when he stated that in the situation in which the assault took place the only possibility was dying. He wrote, “to die was, after all, inevitable. How can ten men dominate more than a hundred soldiers?” Galán told his readers that Gómez had a 16-caliber shotgun, barely enough to kill a bird, which had to be reloaded each time he pulled the trigger. As a

⁹¹ Rico Galán, “Chihuahua de la desesperación,” 13-20.

result, Gómez was not able to effectively defend himself and died holding a white flag with the inscription, *Viva la Libertad*.⁹² As I mentioned in the introduction, according to Francisco Ornelas, Gómez's nephew, the group was aware of the increased number of soldiers prior to the assault; nevertheless, they decided to go on with the attack, and sacrifice was the furthest thing from their minds.⁹³ The account of Ornelas presents a problem for the efforts of *Sucesos* and *Siempre* to label the assault as a sacrifice and the leaders as martyrs without having the testimony of survivors. It supports the argument that the myth was constructed with the specific purpose of promoting certain interests.

Galán refuted the regime's interpretation of the assault by telling a different story about the government's claim that the soldiers did not have prior knowledge of the attack. In doing this, he added another ingredient to the myth: betrayal. While the government claimed the soldiers were ready to eat and thus were unprepared for an attack, Galán claimed that only part of the troops were getting ready to eat. At the same time, a complete section was waiting, fully armed, at the main building. The fort had around 120 soldiers that night, at least 100 more than during normal operations.⁹⁴ If this is true, the government either had specific information concerning the attack or it was a remarkable coincidence.

Sucesos was not the only source that mentioned the possibility of betrayal. In

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Francisco Ornelas, interview by author, tape recorded, Chihuahua, 25 May 2003.

⁹⁴ Rico Galán, "Chihuahua de la desesperación," 13-20

Madera, Santos Valdez hints that the rebels might have been betrayed by someone close to them. He does not mention any names, but he focuses on the fact that spies throughout history have destabilized and sabotaged revolutionary movements. “Spying and infiltration need to be the focus of attention for those fighting for social issues,” he wrote, “in order to create a well organized surveillance that does not allow traitors to infiltrate the revolutionary ranks.”⁹⁵ Santos Valdez’s evidence was simply the attack and its outcome, which is difficult to explain without either an element of betrayal or a death wish.

Pablo Gómez Caballero, Gómez’s son, claims the perception of betrayal persists today. He explains that a captain in the military whose last name was Barajas trained Gómez, Gámiz and other individuals involved in the assault in Mexico City. It later became known that Barajas was still working with the military.⁹⁶ Alma Gómez also asserts that Barajas was still connected with the military when he made contact with her father. The captain did not have any specific information, but he was aware that the group was looking at the fort in Madera as a potential target and that local support for the group was strong in the town.⁹⁷

Emilio Gámiz, Arturo Gámiz’s father, in an interview with *Proceso* in 1978, claimed a similar plot. Gámiz explained that one of the survivors of the assault assured him that Captain Barajas betrayed the group, despite his son’s trust in him. Gámiz also

⁹⁵ Santos Valdez, *Madera*. 138-143.

⁹⁶ Pablo Gómez, interview by author, tape recorded, Ciudad Juárez, 8 May 2003.

⁹⁷ Alma Gómez, interview by author, tape recorded, Chihuahua, 25 May 2003.

noted the unusual number of soldiers present, and asserted that, once the shooting started, a train lit the railroad, exposing the rebels.⁹⁸ The element of betrayal follows a long line of myths using this concept. Judas betrayed Jesus, and this led to his sacrifice and redemption. Zapata experienced the same fate. Now, the individuals at Madera were also possibly the victims of what Dante's Divine Comedy considered the greatest sin of them all.

The only state media outlet that presented the assault in a balanced manner was *El Norte*. The day after the incident, this paper included the article describing it as bold and later added that the rebels were well prepared, since they were positioned to ambush the soldiers and had the element of surprise in their favor. The paper emphasized the agrarian problem in the state as the main cause of the discontent and the eventual decision to fight on the part of the rebels.⁹⁹ Although *El Norte's* description of the incident is positive towards the rebels, it is unlikely the paper had any affinity with the insurgents since by September 30th, its coverage of Madera stopped, and as I mentioned before, their editorial line ignored Madera completely.

The promotion of the insurgent discourse in 1965 can be attributed to specific individuals, as opposed to the counter-insurgent rhetoric, which had the resources and media of the regime to spread its message. Galán, Valdez and Domingo raised their

⁹⁸ Ortiz Pinchetti, "El Asalto al Cuartel de Madera, el 23 de Septiembre de 1965."

⁹⁹ *El Norte*, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, September, 1965.

voices, but despite the efforts of these important journalists, Madera was erased from media outlets on its first anniversary and the subsequent ones.

President Luis Echeverría's visit to Madera in 1971 became another ingredient in the pro-insurgent construction of the myth. The reason for the president's trip to Madera was the distribution of more than 735,000 acres of land, including 258,000 from Bosques de Chihuahua, the same corporation that Gómez and Gámiz wanted to take down. Echeverría's visit to Madera took place three years after the massacre of students in 1968, and during the height of the Cabañas rebellion in Guerrero and the beginning of the urban uprising of the 1970's. This meant that Echeverría had to compromise in order to keep an image of stability and plurality, after years of political oppression. Madera seemed the perfect platform to start on this road. Echeverría's land distribution speech took place in front of peasants and former sympathizers of Gómez's struggle. This fact was later used as a sign of victory by the insurgent side. Francisco Ornelas claims the real success of the assault was precisely this land reform.¹⁰⁰ Of course, Echeverría tried to separate the attack on Madera from the agrarian reform, saying that the assault was a mistake because it was "self-defeating, illegal and incomplete." Still, his decision to conduct the distribution in Madera boosted the myth six years after its initial construction.¹⁰¹

After a few years in which the media ignored Madera, *La Liga 23 de Septiembre*, an urban communist group, took shape in 1973. It operated mainly in the center and

¹⁰⁰ Francisco Ornelas, interview by author, tape recorded, Chihuahua, 25 May 2003.

¹⁰¹ Excelsior, 17 April 1971.

northern part of Mexico, using tactics of terror to challenge the regime. Among its numerous activities, the kidnapping attempt and subsequent murder of Eugenio Garza Sada in 1973 stands out due to the amount of press coverage it generated. Such actions naturally made *La Liga* a target of the regime. The group was heavily infiltrated by security operatives, which led to the imprisonment or death of most of its members by 1979.¹⁰²

La Liga's decision to adopt the date of the Madera assault as its name brought Madera renewed national attention. *La Liga* used the violent legacy and recognition Madera entailed to justify and legitimize its own tactics. For *La Liga's* members, violent methods were valid in order to achieve change immediately. *La Liga's* evolution into a radical, intolerant and destructive movement caused other leftist organizations to distance themselves from it. Alma Gómez, as one of the beneficiaries of the myth, feels the necessity to separate her father and Madera from *La Liga's* interpretation and usage of them because *La Liga's* memory, according to her, taints her father's legacy. She explains that her father resorted to violence as a last alternative and believed in the democratic process; in fact, he never completely abandoned it. As contradictory as this might sound, Gómez's hope, according to his daughter, was that violent resistance and democracy would eventually converge and work together for the same goal. This type of discourse has a precedent in the Russian Revolution, which Gómez had affinity for, as I explained in chapter two. Alma Gómez talks about *La Liga's* legacy, explaining that the

¹⁰² Sergio Aguayo, *La Charola*, 119-139. See also *El Diario*, 21 March 2003.

problem with its political stand was that it was extremely suspect of other leftist organizations. *La Liga's* vision of resistance was a frontal attack against the Mexican state; any other organization trying to legally resist the regime was harassed and threatened by *La Liga* members. In fact, Alma Gómez claims some members of other organizations were murdered.¹⁰³ In the name of a conviction, *La Liga's* radicalization led to internal strife and its lack of respect for human life led to the legitimization of murder.

When asked if *La Liga* could be perceived as a vindicator of his father's actions Pablo Gómez Caballero explains that the mere fact of adopting as their name the date of the assault honored the men at Madera. Gómez understands that the group had its problems, but that did not change the fact that they honored the event by adopting it as their name. This is important because Gómez Caballero sees the usage of the Madera myth by *La Liga* different than his sister and other leftist organizations, and this demonstrates the nature of myth, which entails a flexibility that must be present to reach a wide audience.

La Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre was one of the main organizations using the myth of Madera to shape its and other's behavior. *La Liga* found the myth useful to legitimize its presence and the myth benefited from this decision because its existence was jeopardized by the fact that the event was no longer remembered. As a result September 23rd regained the national attention necessary to become once again an active symbol in the political life of Mexico.

¹⁰³ Alma Gómez, interview by author, tape recorded, Chihuahua, 25 May 2003.

The myth's influence did not stop in Mexico City and the northern part of the nation. It reached as far south as Guerrero where, in 1971, a rebellious movement led by Lucio Cabañas surfaced. Cabañas' actions, among them the kidnapping of Governor Rubén Figueroa in 1973, left a mark not only in Guerrero, but in the entire country as well. Again, Cabañas' group used the myth of Madera, in more ways than one. According to Carlos Montemayor's Guerra en el paraíso, Cabañas was interested in using and learning from the experiences of previous mobilizations that used guerrilla tactics against the Mexican military to learn new strategies, expand his group's political platform and avoid mistakes that could jeopardize his cause.¹⁰⁴

Cabañas mentioned Gómez, Gámiz and the assault on the fort frequently. He gave them credit for the fact that their struggle combined ideology and armed resistance, which made Gómez and Gámiz worthy of great respect.¹⁰⁵ However, Cabañas was also aware of the mistakes that killed the movement in Chihuahua, and he specifically mentioned the assault on a military fort as a mistake since it was a frontal attack against a stronger position. Furthermore, he claimed that not every movement of resistance needs an event such as Madera to be effective, and that fighting against the entire military cannot be achieved successfully in an environment such as the one present in Madera at the time.¹⁰⁶ The conditions in Madera, according to Cabañas, were not ideal since mass support for an

¹⁰⁴ *El Heraldo*, 23 September 1995, Carlos Montemayor writes in regard to the connections between both organizations.

¹⁰⁵ Montemayor, *Guerra en el Paraíso*, 129.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 46-47.

armed movement was not there yet. More importantly, Cabañas remarked that a revolutionary needs to prepare for a long struggle and also be aware that feeling pressured to change things rapidly could be his demise. These reflections are direct lessons from the experiences of Gómez and Gámiz. Cabañas utilized the myth to shape specific behaviors on the part of his followers and companions aimed at making the movement more durable than the one in Chihuahua. Although it is true that during this time period, Mao and Castro were influential revolutionary figures, according to Montemayor, Cabañas specifically used Madera, probably because it was more familiar to his men than Mao or Castro. The myth was used to prevent actions that could have jeopardized a movement that comprised an important segment of the state of Guerrero from 1971 to 1974. It was designed to curtail any desires for taking the fighting into a situation that would only bring defeat as a result. In using the perceived desperation of the men at Madera, Cabañas illustrated what impatience can do to a movement.¹⁰⁷ The Cabañas movement used the myth by going beyond the labels and realizing that martyrdom and heroism were not going to change the political and social conditions. In other words, they used the myth to avoid the same fate than the rebels of Madera.

At the same time, Cabañas made an important effort to ensure that his rank and file were aware that they needed ideological preparation to make their vision influential outside the state of Guerrero. Cabañas admired this characteristic in any rebellious movement. Even though Castro's rebellion in Cuba and Mao in China had an intellectual

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 52.

element, it is likely that Cabañas extracted this trait in part from Madera. The intellectual factor was utilized by Cabañas to generate a specific result. Montemayor demonstrates the effort made by the rebels in Guerrero to be ideologically prepared. One of these efforts was the invitation to the mountains by Cabañas of members of *La Liga* in an attempt to expand the rebels' political vision.¹⁰⁸ He also forged a direct connection to Madera. As I mentioned in chapter two, the Madera rebels were divided into three different groups in order to avoid capture and detection. Two of the three groups never made it for different reasons. Salvador Gaytán, who was supposed to carry the high caliber weapons to Madera as a member of one of the groups, was not able to get to Madera because of a flooded river. Gaytán helped the movement in Guerrero by providing it with weapons and ammunition, linking Madera and Lucio Cabañas.

After the demise of *La Liga* and the death of Cabañas in 1975, the Mexican regime was successful in keeping other movements of violent resistance from achieving the publicity and influence of those groups formed in the seventies. The eighties were a period of economic crisis and mounting pressure from what Foweraker defines as new social movements.¹⁰⁹ As a result of this political environment, which in theory presented alternatives for non-violent groups, the myth of Madera disappeared from the national debate. In Chihuahua, the myth weakened as well. The media neglected to remember this event in the life of the state throughout the decade of the eighties. In fact, only because of

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 129-131.

¹⁰⁹ Joe Foweraker, *Popular Movements and Political change in Mexico*, 5.

the celebrations of the 30th and 35th anniversaries of the incident, plus the appearance of other rebellious groups in Mexico in the middle of the nineties, would the myth resurface in state and national media.

The pro-insurgent discourse was solely based on emotional elements meant to create an impact on the receiver. I have already discussed in detail how the element of sacrifice has deep roots in Mexican culture. The utilization of sacrifice, betrayal and religious concepts is a clear effort to make Madera a myth and rally the left in Mexico.

5 THE MYTH OF MADERA TODAY

The key figures responsible for keeping the event at Madera alive in the collective memory of the people of the state of Chihuahua, and of México, have been intellectuals and social activists who have identified with leftist ideas and want to place Madera as the first socialist inspired guerrilla movement in Mexico. This endeavor would have been more difficult without the appearance of the EZLN in the state of Chiapas in January 1994, when the group took over the state capital, San Cristóbal de las Casas. The rebels then abandoned their positions and retreated to isolated areas, where they had the support of the local population. EZLN actions did not surprise the inhabitants of Chiapas, because conditions in the state had become unbearable for the Indian population. They were being displaced from their lands by caciques by means of rapes, beatings and murders. The caciques acted on behalf of those owning great extensions of land. Local authorities turned a blind eye to the caciques' actions and sometimes helped in oppressing the population by imprisoning resistors and dividing villages with promises and gifts. A new group that would soon develop its own myth, the EZLN, was born due to social conditions similar to those that made possible the myth of Madera.

The dynamics in Chiapas provided the myth of Madera with a new vehicle to again make an appearance in the political life of Chihuahua and the nation. In 1995, thirty years after the assault, relatives, intellectuals, survivors and some government officials remembered Madera by organizing a conference called "*Primeros Vientos*" in the city of

Chihuahua. Alma Gómez was one of the organizers of the conference, in which the Madera raid was remembered and redefined to fit the contemporary political environment. One way in which this was done was to draw a connection with the EZLN.

Rosario Ibarra de Piedra is a social activist whose son, a former *La Liga* member, was kidnapped by the federal government in 1975. At the time of the conference, she was a federal legislator for the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). Ibarra de Piedra spoke at the conference to make a connection between Gómez, Gámiz and the leaders of the EZLN, Subcomandante Marcos and Comandante Tacho, by saying that all of them could be compared to each other without being specific as to how.¹¹⁰ She also said that this comparison provided legitimacy to the leaders of the EZLN.¹¹¹ Ibarra de Piedra supported her perception of a link by adding that the assault at Madera was caused by the same ideals as those of the Zapatistas, mainly demands for land and social justice. The celebrations of the thirtieth anniversary were described in the state newspapers, which also published articles that described the numerous mobilizations of Gámiz and Gómez's before the assault. The papers offered documentation of the incident, but did not provide any new information. The national media concentrated its coverage on Ibarra and Montemayor's claims that Madera was a crucial point in the insurgent life of Mexico as the first socialist inspired guerrilla group.¹¹² This is important because the differences in terms of content between state and national newspapers are marked. While the state

¹¹⁰ *El Diario de Chihuahua*, 23 September 1995.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*

¹¹² *El Heraldo, El Diario, La Jornada*, 22, 23, 24 September, 1965.

newspapers focus on personal issues, the national media prioritized the political significance of Madera. At the “*Primeros Vientos*” conference, Montemayor claimed the event at Madera helped similar movements by providing them with instant legitimacy, since the action awakened a lot of people to a different reality than the one presented by the system. The state claimed that Mexican society was stable and that armed groups did not exist. This new reality automatically provided these groups with members and sympathizers. He commented, “on September 23, 1965, with the guerrilla assault at the fort in Madera, a process of social transformation in the nation began. The sacrifice of the men at Madera created a national conscience that permeated the country.” Montemayor added, “the event generated a process that has not yet ended.”¹¹³ Later in the talk, he compared Gómez with the father of Mexican independence Miguel Hidalgo, revolutionary hero Francisco Villa and the most prominent face of liberalism in Mexico, Benito Juárez.¹¹⁴ By making these claims, the author hints that without the awareness and repercussions Madera created in Mexico and other parts of the world, the EZLN would have been oppressed and crushed by the regime.

The similarities between the EZLN and Madera are evident. Both movements were fed essentially by the same demand: land. Grave agrarian situations, in both instances, were caused by a few powerful individuals who took advantage of their economic positions and privileges to acquire great extensions of land at the expense of

¹¹³ *Diario de Chihuahua*, 20 September 1995.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*

the peasants, who were displaced. Both situations were derived from the negligence, ineptitude and sometimes complicity of the state and local government officials. Both Pablo Gómez and the EZLN's leader, Marcos, were educated men. The men that participated in land invasions, political rallies and public protests in 1965 were students, peasants and professors. The basis of support for the EZLN is the Indian rural population in Chiapas, with some non-Indians, such as students and intellectuals that arrived in recent years. However, the EZLN's military actions are not led by Marcos, as opposed to the case of Gómez, and especially Gámiz, who led forces into combat. Although Marcos has never said it, this might be partly explained as the realization by Marcos that he is more useful alive after studying the Madera movement and watching it die when the leaders were killed.

The EZLN uses the memory of Gámiz, Gómez and Madera to legitimize its struggle. In a speech on September 29, 1995, the EZLN, via Marcos, mentioned the names of Gámiz and Gómez as figures to remember and be thankful for, since their selfless action paved the road for struggles such as the EZLN's.¹¹⁵ This was aimed at giving the EZLN a heroic past that provided it with added validation. This in turn made its elimination more difficult because this glorious past connected it with another movement already associated with bravery and sacrifice. The EZLN used this argument to claim that the reasons it fought could be traced to other groups, besides the forces of Emiliano Zapata, engaging in similar struggles.

¹¹⁵ www.ezln.org

The EZLN clearly learned the lessons of Madera, and others, in terms of having the international connections necessary to make their extermination difficult. The movements in Chihuahua, Morelos and Guerrero were isolated and this made the eventual solution of the government easier to accomplish. The EZLN has the support of numerous international organizations, which makes the federal government seek to resolve the conflict with the appearance of civility.

The 23rd of September also became the foundation for a change in the way the Mexican regime solved social conflicts. It took time, but the government learned that to respond in the same manner against the rebels in Chiapas would have only strengthened the EZLN's position and provided Marcos with instant martyrdom, as it did with Pablo Gómez, Lucio Cabañas and *La Liga*.

The EZLN is not the only armed rebel group utilizing Madera to validate its own struggle. The EPR, Ejército Popular Revolucionario, based in the state of Guerrero, surfaced on July 10, 1996. During the celebrations of the 31th anniversary of Madera, the EPR sent a two-page document to state media outlets in which it made the announcement that it was remembering Madera. More notably, it claimed that its struggle is the continuation of a fight that started in 1965. The following is a phrase from the statement sent by the EPR to *El Diario*: “after 31 years, those men massacred in Madera by an illegitimate government have to be remembered.” Later the message added, “this murderous and oppressive government that insists in silencing freedom and justice with

bullets, prison and torture, needs to be removed.”¹¹⁶ The EPR utilized the myth to shape and validate its own behavior. By claiming to be defending the ideals of what it called the martyrs of Madera, the EPR used the mistakes made by the regime in 1965 to legitimize and rationalize its use of violence. These two groups, the only armed movements officially recognized by the Mexican government, use the myth to promote or legitimize their demands.

The regime that paved the way for armed groups to rise found itself out of the presidential office four years after the EPR’s appearance. This could mean that the promoters of the myth at Madera have to rethink their positions in the new political era beginning in Mexico. In the 2000 federal elections, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) lost the presidential office that it had occupied for more than 60 years. Vicente Fox, candidate for Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), beat the PRI with more than half of the total votes. This meant that the regime that created a homogenized political context in Mexico that resulted in privileges and concessions for a few powerful individuals was no longer in control. Nevertheless, this perceived opening of the political system does not change the fact that the country is still suffering from some of the same problems that caused the assault in 1965, such as poverty and unequal land distribution. Thus, the myth and the ideas it promotes can still be used, even after the removal of the PRI regime.

¹¹⁶ The message was sent to *El Diario*, published by, *El Heraldo*, 23 September, 1996.

On January 14, 2003, in the city of Oaxaca, Carlos Montemayor announced the September publication of his new novel about Madera. Montemayor explained in a press conference the reasons behind the novel. He claimed the book was an old idea that had been with him practically since the day of the assault. He answered a question regarding the tardiness of the work by claiming that for a long time the information available was limited for various reasons. One reason was the fact that it was in the hands of the participants of these rebellious movements who were afraid of coming out as long as the PRI was still holding power. The other reason was that official intelligence was classified until recently.¹¹⁷ Lastly, having personally known Gámiz and his struggle during his student life in Chihuahua during the sixties, the uprisings in the state were personal to him. As a result, Montemayor had to distance himself from them. Those were the reasons he worked first on the novels, Guerra en el paraíso and Los informes secretos, which dealt with social movements in places other than Chihuahua.

Alma and her brother Pablo, are key figures in keeping Madera alive in the collective memory of the state. Alma is active with various political organizations in land occupations in the state capital, organizes peasants demanding agricultural credits from the state, builds schools, participates in different unions, and is a member of El Barzón, a group dedicated to protecting debtors from creditors that want to confiscate their property. Alma was also a state representative in the 59th legislature in Chihuahua, a

¹¹⁷ *La Jornada*, 14 January 2003.

position she used to officially recognize schools, neighborhoods and ejidos that were products of illegal invasions. Pablo is the representative of El Barzón in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. He has also led invasions of numerous acres of land in Juárez that later became legal colonias, or neighborhoods, after years of negotiations. In addition, his office provides advice to those engaged in legal processes aimed at deciding rightful ownership of land.¹¹⁸ Despite his role in keeping the myth alive, when Pablo was questioned about who or what groups he perceives as vindicating his father's legacy today, he stated, "I really do not know who adopts the fight today, I have not thought about that question often."¹¹⁹ But the reality remains that Alma and Pablo engage in actions similar to those of their father. The difference lies in the political context. The elder Pablo Gómez achieved no significant gain from lawful resistance and this frustrated him to the point of leaving this type of protest and resorting to armed resistance. His children inherited a nation in which legal venues of resistance are more effective in achieving social and political change. When asked about his perception regarding Mexico's political context since 1960, Pablo Gómez Caballero stated, "yes, there has certainly been a significant change since the days of the assault at Madera. Mexico is more democratic and the actions that my father engaged in before the assault no longer make you a criminal or agitator."¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Alma Gómez, interview by author, tape recorded, Chihuahua, 25 May 2003.

¹¹⁹ Pablo Gómez, interview by author, tape recorded, Ciudad Juárez, 8 May 2003.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

Alma and Pablo Gómez have both been members of the legislature. This would have been almost impossible in 1960 for individuals such as their father, fighting for these types of social demands. The fact that the promoters of an insurgent myth have been part of congress expands the myth's influence. Their activities are a constant reminder of Madera in the state. The colonias they have helped organize are often named after figures that participated in the assault. The cities of Chihuahua, Madera and Ciudad Juárez have colonias, schools and streets named Pablo Gómez, Arturo Gámiz, Madera and 23 de Septiembre.

These colonias are an undeniable insurgent presence, since these names are already associated with insurgency in the social and political life in the state of Chihuahua. Their formation is a product of an idea that started thirty-eight years ago. The people living at these colonias, however, are not aware of who Gámiz or Gómez were, and more importantly these colonias do not make an effort to remember or celebrate Madera in any way.¹²¹ However, the schools do not follow this trend. At the Pablo Gómez elementary school in Ciudad Juárez, the school principal, professor Armando Cota, described in detail the activities organized by parents, school, alumni and students each anniversary of the attack and on the *Día de Muertos*, which takes place on November 2. During these celebrations, altars made by the students are decorated with photographs of Pablo Gómez. At the same time poetry remembering Gómez's legacy is

¹²¹ Rosario Sánchez and María López, interview by Graciela de la Rosa, tape recorded, Ciudad Juárez, 17 February 2004.

performed by the children. The legacy of Gómez was explained by the principal as the memory of an individual who sacrificed his life for the benefit of society and for a better future.¹²² In addition, the photograph of Pablo Gómez is painted on a special wall. This is evidence that the myth's influence is not limited to intellectuals, family members or former participants. The meaning of the myth at this particular school is precisely what the left and the mythmakers wanted to achieve. The myth is present in its purest form, directly influencing young children and their parents to be aware of the sacrifice and martyrdom of Gómez. Similar activities go on each anniversary in the schools of Chihuahua named after Gómez or Gámiz.

At the 38th anniversary of the assault, Alma and Pablo Gómez, the four survivors, relatives of both Lucio Cabañas and the dead Madera rebels, Carlos Montemayor, and General Francisco Gallardo organized the presentation in Chihuahua of Montemayor's new book, Las armas del alba. More than a thousand people attended.¹²³ The book was also presented in the cities of Parral and Ciudad Juárez.¹²⁴ The state media provided complete coverage of the book's presentation both in the cities of Chihuahua and Ciudad Juárez. Articles in the newspapers focused on the survivors and their lives 38 years later. *El Heraldo* conducted highly emotional interviews with relatives in which they labeled their fallen family members as heroes. More notably, one of the articles focused on the treatment of the rebels' bodies after the incident was over, providing further evidence that

¹²² Armando Cota, interview by Graciela de la Rosa, tape recorded, Ciudad Juárez, 12 February 2004.

¹²³ The author of this work, Andrés Hajar, was present and recorded the entire talk.

¹²⁴ *El Sol de Parral*, 21 September 2003.

the decision by the regime to display the bodies was a mistake because it provided ingredients to make the myth powerful.¹²⁵ *El Diario* had an interview with Montemayor in which he explained that his book was based on testimonies from survivors and people familiar with Gómez and Gámiz's struggle.¹²⁶

The national media, especially the liberal newspaper *La Jornada*, concentrated its coverage on Montemayor's book and the four survivors. The paper's headline on the 24th was, "The Attack in Madera was the Detonator that Changed the Country." In this article, Francisco Ornelas claimed, "after Madera, other movements surfaced, like that of Lucio Cabañas, Genaro Vázquez's *Movimiento de Acción Revolucionaria* and *La Liga 23 de Septiembre*."¹²⁷ The next day, *La Jornada* printed an article entitled, "The Attack in Madera, Icon Representing the Dignity of an Entire Generation." The paper also presented a photograph of Montemayor and the survivors hugging and claiming, "this is Madera."¹²⁸ The push to make Madera the starting point for subsequent movements is evident in the interviews of Montemayor and the survivors. This might be a response to political interests of some of these individuals. Montemayor just published a book based on Madera, the first of a trilogy. Florencio Lugo, a survivor, has also written a book in which he explains that Madera is still valid since neo liberalism is now the enemy. Thus,

¹²⁵ *El Heraldo*, 23 September, 2003.

¹²⁶ *El Diario*, 24 September, 2003

¹²⁷ *La Jornada*, 24 September, 2003.

¹²⁸ *La Jornada*, 25 September, 2003.

the ideals of 1965 can still be applied to fight it since this economic system creates abrupt economic disparities similar to those present in 1965.

The celebration of the thirty-eight anniversary (at the City Theater in downtown, Chihuahua) lasted for more than three hours. The presentation began with a summary of the political and social situation that precipitated the assault, provided by Alma Gómez. Later, each of the four survivors had a moment to express his views regarding the incident and what it means today. Finally, it was Montemayor's turn to talk. He claimed that his book took more than three years to write and that all his information was based on primary sources, mainly oral interviews with survivors, individuals familiar with Gómez's movement and inhabitants of Chihuahua and Madera in 1965. The talk was interrupted a couple of times. First, a woman lost control and started crying out loud in the theater. Then, a couple of men jumped from their seats yelling revolutionary slogans. These situations demonstrate the high emotional charge the myth holds for some people.

The book itself, Las armas del alba, provides the best description so far of what went on before and specifically during the assault. Montemayor's attention to detail is evident in his description of each of the figures that participated in it. He gives names, dates, places to support his contentions. The book also mentions the perception of betrayal, the elements of persecution and extermination, and the rhetoric utilized by the regime to undermine the movement before and after the assault. On the issue of betrayal, Montemayor provides new information. According to the author, the soldiers were aware of the presence of rebels in Madera; as a result, more soldiers were sent from Ciudad Juárez to Madera. They were camping in a lagoon, which was located close to the fort.

However, the rebels never saw them. They were only aware of the increase in numbers at the fort, but not outside of it. The fact that the military expected something supports the idea that the group was betrayed. The book also demonstrates the activities, after the assault, of the federal and state authorities, exposing their lack of cohesion and experience in dealing with such an event.

Finally, the celebrations of the thirty-eight anniversary had a former general, Francisco Gallardo, as a guest speaker invited by Carlos Montemayor. Gallardo had been imprisoned by the regime for speaking out against the army until three years ago, when President Vicente Fox pardoned him. His role in the conference was supposed to be a counterpart to that of the survivors, but he spoke instead to criticize the military's structure and practices in Mexico. He barely spoke about Madera in the time he had to express his views. Nonetheless, his presence established a precedent that may mark future utilizations of the myth because even though he is officially out of the military, his name and rank are still associated with the regime. Ramón Mendoza, one of the four survivors, jokingly commented that now a general was present in a pro-insurgent rally. Almost everyone in the theater laughed at this remark. However, this is not a laughing matter. The possible adoption and utilization of the myth by the state is a clear option now that the myth has strengthened. The benefits of the myth for the state, or others, could be many. In a time in which the political environment in Mexico is constantly being transformed, the myth can be used to legitimize authority and consolidate political alliances. This can be done by promoting Madera, thus, projecting an image of populism. The guardians of the myth, mainly the left, need to be aware of the fact that the myth's

expansion will create unforeseen connections that might not be in accordance with what they have defended and promoted for 38 years.

CONCLUSION

One of the main purposes of this work is to place Madera in the right perspective. Madera is a myth of the left. It is also true that Madera is not yet a national myth, although it was during the seventies and it is now making a comeback with the efforts of intellectuals based in Mexico City, who have decided to revive it for different reasons. Every time a new social movement surfaces in Mexico, Madera is back in the national picture, placed there by those who know that it is associated with insurgency. A large number of people have come to see Madera as the first event, supported by socialist ideas, in the post-revolutionary insurgency in Mexico. Gómez and Gámiz are perceived as unique men with extraordinary traits. Madera thus conglomerates forces, which in turn create alliances that influence political life in Mexico.

Another central theme in this work is myth and its complexity. By tracing the historical evolution of myth in Mexico, I was able to establish not only the importance of myth, but more notably, the elements that for millenia have made myths effective in Mexico. Events, ideas and individuals that have become mythical, like Madera, are more important than “historical” events by themselves. Myth influences far more people than most historical events. Samuel Brunk writes in Remembering Emiliano Zapata, “myth is popular and communal in a way that history generally is not.”¹²⁹ This thesis documents

¹²⁹ Samuel Brunk, “Remembering Emiliano Zapata: Three Moments in the Posthumous Career of the Martyr of Chinameca,” *HAHR* 78:3 (1998): 460.

the subtle elements that were put together by specific people with the objective of shaping their behavior and that of others. This is what makes Madera a myth.

Except for works by Thomas Benjamin, Ilene V. O'Malley¹³⁰ and Samuel Brunk on the revolution and its implications in Mexican society, the mythological aspects of social movements in Mexico have been overlooked by historians. As a result, the hidden messages in the description of movements that eventually influence others are not documented. The motives, biases and prejudices of those individuals that use myths to serve their own interests are not examined. The value of analyzing such movements from a mythological point of view is that it allows the analyst to make important conclusions about how their influence is achieved. Previous works fail to discover what makes these groups so influential. This is because they do not address the question of how these movements of resistance pursue their goals of shaping others' behavior. In other words, the focus of analysis only answers the question of what vehicles are used to shape others' morality, but not how. The emotional appeals used to influence others are not documented or analyzed because they cannot be measured. The only way we can decipher the meanings of these labels is by going beyond them. One way this can be accomplished is by analyzing the different aspects that turn any given event into myth.

The fact that it is called myth can leave a feeling of uncertainty in most people,

¹³⁰ Thomas Benjamin, *La Revolución* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000). Ilene V. O'Malley, *The Myth of the Revolution: hero Cults and the institutionalization of the Mexican State, 1920-1940* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).

this is probably due to the fact that the word myth, as historians use it, does not match the popular definition. Myth is commonly seen as fantastical and sometimes as a lie. For example, when I asked Alma Gómez if she believed Madera was a myth, she immediately said no. She thought that myths were nothing but lies and to label the assault as such would only undercut the value of Madera. But the reality remains that myths persuade others, sometimes without the recipient even noticing, and this is precisely why they are so effective. As such, instead of providing a history of heroes, caciques, criminals, martyrs or agitators, which only adds to the existing material, I present a history of labels, actions and explanations that may or may not be in accordance with reality. However, they do provide a clear picture of how Madera became a myth and its implications in the near future for Mexican society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

NEWSPAPERS

Excélsior, Mexico, 1965, 1971.

El Día, Mexico, 1965.

El Diario, Ciudad. Juárez, 1995, 1997, 1996, 2002, 2003.

El Diario, Chihuahua, 1995, 1997, 2003.

El Herald, Chihuahua, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973,
1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1995, 2000, 2003.

El Paso Herald Post, 1965.

El Paso Times, 1965.

El Nacional Mexico, 1965.

El Norte, Chihuahua, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976,
1995, 2000, 2003.

El Universal, Mexico, 1965.

La Jornada, Mexico, 1995, 1997, 2000, 2002, 2003.

Reforma, 2002.

BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Aguayo, Sergio. La Charola. Mexico: Grijalbo, 2001.

Campos Chacón, Sergio. “Chihuahua 23 de Septiembre”. Cuadernos del Norte Vol.3:12
Nov-Dec. Chihuahua 1990.

Domingo, Alberto. Siempre. no. 64 1965.

Montemayor, Carlos. Guerra en el paraíso. Mexico: Diana, 1991.
Las armas del alba. Mexico: Planeta, 2003.
“El EZLN Y Chiapas”. Fractal. No. 8 1998.

Ortíz Pinchetti, Francisco. “El Asalto al Cuartel de Madera, el 23 de Septiembre de
1965”. Proceso. No. 99 1978.

Rico Galán, Víctor. “Chihuahua de la Desesperación a la Muerte”. Sucesos. no.1693,
1965.

Santos Valdez, José. Madera. Mexico: Laura, 1966.
“Chihuahua, un problema”. Siempre, no. 641 1965.

Segundo Encuentro en la Sierra, Heraclio Bernal, Chihuahua: Ediciones Línea
Revolucionaria, 1965.

ORAL INTERVIEWS

Alma Gómez, interview by author, tape recorded, Chihuahua, 25 May 2003.

Pablo Gómez, interview by author, tape recorded, Ciudad Juárez, 8 May 2003.

Francisco Ornelas, interview by author, tape recorded, Chihuahua, 25 May 2003.

Julieta García Hernández, interview by Graciela de la Rosa, tape recorded, Ciudad
Juárez, 11 May 2003.

SECONDARY SOURCES

- Aguayo, Sergio. El panteón de los mitos. Mexico: Editorial Grijalbo, 1998.
Los usos, abusos y retos de la seguridad nacional mexicana. Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 1990.
- Almada, Francisco R. Apuntes Históricos del municipio de Madera. Chihuahua: 1945.
El ferrocarril de Chihuahua al Pacífico. Mexico, DF, 1971.
- Barthes Roland. Mythologies. New York: Hill and Wang, 1957.
- Bartra Armando. Los herederos de Zapata. Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1985.
- Benjamin Thomas. La Revolución. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000.
- Blanco Moheno. Roberto. La noticia detrás de la noticia. Mexico, DF, 1967.
- Bascom, William. "The Myth-Ritual Theory". Journal of American Folklore 70.
- Brading, David. The First America. Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Brunk, Samuel. "Remembering Emiliano Zapata: Three Moments in the Posthumous Career of the Martyr of Chinameca". HAHR 78:3 1998.
"Zapata's Eyes". Heroes and Hero Cults in Latin America. Austin: University of Texas Press, forthcoming.
- Campbell, Joseph. The Power Of Myth. New York: Doubleday, 1988.
"The Historical Development of Mythology". Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Vol. 88 N. 2
The Hero With a Thousand Faces. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1948.
- Cardoso, Miriam L. La ideología dominante. Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 1975.
- Carr, Edward Hallet. What is History? New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963.
- Córdoba, Arnaldo. La nación y la constitución. La Lucha por la Democracia en Mexico. Mexico: Claves latinoamericanas, 1989.

- Davis, Charles L. and Kenneth M. Coleman. "Political Symbols, Political Decay and Difuse Support for the Mexican Political System". Journal of Political and Military Sociology. Vol. 3, 1975.
- Gutiérrez, R. "EL PSUM y el Debate de la izquierda en Chihuahua". El Cotidiano. Vol. 3:13 Mexico Sep-Oct 1986.
- Harvey Neil. The Chiapas Rebellion. London: Duke University Press, 1998.
- Frankfort, Henry, Frankfort, H.A., Wilson, John, Jacobsen Thorkild, and Irwin, William. The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1946.
- Florescano, Enrique. Mitos Mexicanos. Mexico: Taurus, 2001.
Memoria Mexicana. Mexico: Taurus, 2001.
- Hirales, Gustavo. "La Guerra Secreta, 1970-1970". Nexos. 1982.
- Huerta García, Raúl. "La Región de la Sierra Tarahumara". Mexico, IIEc/UNAM.
- Krauze, Enrique. "Chihuahua ida y vuelta". Vuelta. Vol. 10:115 Mexico, Junio 1986.
- Lafaye, Jacques. Quetzalcoatl y Guadalupe. Fondo de Culture Economica, 1995.
- Levi-Strauss, Barthes, Dumezil, and Propp. Structuralism in Myth. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1996.
- Luna Jurado, Rogelio. "Los maestros y la democracia sindical". Cuadernos políticos. Vol. 14 Mexico, Oct-Dec 1998.
- Montemayor Carlos. Mal de Piedra. Mexico: Premia, 1981.
- Murray, A. Henry. Myth and Mythmaking. New York: George Braziller, 1960.
- Orozco, Víctor. Biblioteca de las Entidades Federativas: Chihuahua. UNAM: 1991.
- Osorio, Rubén. Cruz Chávez: los tomoches en armas. UACJ: Meridiano 107 Editores, 1991.
- Padgett, L. Vincent. The Mexican Political system. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1966.
- Parra Orozco, Miguel Angel. Oro Verde. Chihuahua: Servicios Informativos del Norte Editores, 1991.

Piñeyro, José Luis. El Ejército Mexicano: pasado y presente. Mexico: UAM-A and UAP 1987.

Rocha Islas, Martha Eva. "Las defensas sociales en Chihuahua: Una paradoja en la revolución". INAH 1988.

Vargas Valdez, Jesús. "Centenario de la rebelión de Tomochic". Cuadernos del Norte, Vol. 3:14, Chihuahua 1991.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Andres Hajar was born on June 19, 1976 in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico. The only son of Fernando Hajar and Graciela de la Rosa, he graduated from Cathedral High School, El Paso, Texas in 1994. The same year he went on to UTEP and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Criminal Justice in the summer of 2000. He then entered the Graduate school pursuing a Masters of Arts in History, which he completed in the winter of 2004.

Permanent address: 4212 Buckingham
El Paso, Texas 79902

This thesis was typed by Andres Hajar.