

Reviews

Parte de guerra

(War Dispatch)

Julio Scherer García and Carlos Monsiváis

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The publication of this book by Julio Scherer García and Carlos Monsiváis (the former an obligatory reference for courageous, intelligent, honest journalism in Mexico; the latter a writer and chronicler as original as he is encyclopedic) brings the public for the first time, with appropriate commentary, an essential part of the government version of the bloody repression that practically ended Mexico's student movement on October 2, 1968. That essential part is nothing less than the version of then-Minister of Defense General Marcelino García Barragán.

Neither the general himself nor his son, politician Marcelino García Paniagua, both of whom had promised the documents to Julio Scherer, delivered them. Only a few years ago, after both the general and his son were dead, Javier García Morales, the son of García Paniagua and general's grandson, finally tendered them. I mention this because I think it important to note the general and his son's extreme reticence that made them postpone delivery time and time again and in the end, never hand them over, according to Scherer himself. This reticence contrasts with the willingness that many participants in the 1968 student movement have shown in presenting their own accounts in a multitude of books, magazines and newspapers, from then to now, practically the end of the century.

Actually, no one ever believed, either inside Mexico or abroad, that the killing of dozens (if not hundreds) of students, children, men and women in Tlatelolco's Three Cultures Plaza was the responsibility of armed students, as the official dispatches alleged on the day of the events that bloodied Mexico City. But now, in light of the document written in the hand of General Marcelino García Barragán himself, more about that somber October 2 is becoming clear.

And aiding in that clarification are the "war dispatches" of a secret document that Scherer also publishes, dating from July 29 to October 2, 1968: General José Hernández Toledo (second in command of operations on October 2, wounded almost from the start of the events) "sign[ed] a secret document, 'Aztec Mission,' and beg[an] the record of a real and imaginary war" (p. 57).

A real war because from the very beginning, as is clear from Hernández Toledo's document itself, authorities saw the students as an enemy army to be vanquished; this is the only explanation for the presence of troops on Mexico City streets poised for repression from the end of July on. An imaginary war because

the students and popular groups that supported them at no time acquired the characteristics of armed communist revolutionaries that official paranoia ascribed to them.

In the end, General Marcelino García Barragán's version of the events is even more important: he blames the beginning of the fire fight on another general, Luis Gutiérrez Oropeza, at that time head of the president's joint chiefs of staff who met and came to decisions daily and directly with then-President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. The following is, in my judgement, the essential, unvarying nucleus of the events as seen in this account, told several times in detail throughout the document: on the very night of October 2, Gutiérrez Oropeza requested that García Barragán free two officers assigned to the joint chiefs of staff who had fallen into army hands. "General, sir, I assigned officers armed with machine guns to shoot at the students; all managed to get out of there except two; they are dressed in civilian clothes; I fear for their lives. Could you please order that they be kept safe?" This is a terrible, decisively corroborating confession.

However, General Marcelino García Barragán does not refer to the existence of the Olympia Battalion, a special corps of army soldiers and officers. According to an overwhelming number of statements by members of the National Strike Council (CNH) (the leadership of the movement whose members were arrested October 2 in the Three Cultures Plaza), it was members of the Olympia Battalion who, also dressed in plain clothes and wearing white gloves on their left hands, began the fire fight, to which the army immediately responded. The students and their supporters at the rally, then, were fired at from both sides by the Olympia Battalion and the army.

It seems impossible that General Marcelino García Barragán could not know of the existence of the Olympia Battalion, composed of members of his own army. What is clear and can be deduced from the revelations of García Barragán himself, is that there was a total lack of coordination between the military bodies that perpetrated the massacre that day. One decisive element demonstrates the existence of the Olympia Battalion: a few years ago, former student leader and CNH member Raúl Álvarez Garín published a complete list of its members.

The book's second part, by Carlos Monsiváis, entitled "'68: The Ceremonies of Injury and Memory," is a magnificent chronicle of the many faces, both personal and collective, who met together that tumultuous year. In the first pages, Monsiváis points

out that the government, authoritarian and paternalistic, had to take sides in the Cold War.

The Mexican government, like all the others in the U.S. sphere of influence, exchanged brutal repression of the legitimate desire for democracy, equality and social justice for a denunciation of Soviet totalitarianism.

Thus, in the view of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz and his collaborators, the National Strike Council became the malignant brain behind a vast, profound "communist conspiracy" with no less an aim than overthrowing the government and inaugurating a dictatorship like Cuba's or the Soviet Union's.

This is a false and falsified idea of what the student movement really was. It was an opposition movement, to be sure, but fundamentally a legal one that raised democratic demands which Monsiváis alludes to time and again: the students' leit motif was the demand for respect for human and civil rights.

But the anticommunist view of Díaz Ordaz and the rest of Mexico's top civilian and military authorities took on monstrous proportions in 1968, exactly the proportions of a "real war" against the students and their followers. On several occasions, Monsiváis simply transcribes fragments of the "war dispatches," that list the troops and arms mobilized against the imaginary enemy, practically defenseless, except for the sticks, stones and molotov cocktails carried by some, facing the exaggerated, disproportionate military force that unleashed all its madness on October 2 in Tlatelolco.

Thus, Monsiváis tells us, alluding to the authoritarian essence of the regime, the repression of October 2 can be understood as the highest point of a series of actions of incivility and infamy originating long before 1968. "But the massacre of Tlatelolco transcends ritual and is, gratuitously, the most caustic description of the frailty of a civilizing process. Tlatelolco is no isolated event, the day when barbarism suddenly confronted the students and their willing or circumstantial allies. On the contrary, Tlatelolco is the logical answer of a political apparatus spawned and shaped in impunity" (p. 238).

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