Courage Tastes of Blood

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In the grand scheme of world relations, it is sometimes easy to forget how different ethnicities are affected. During the latter half of the 20th century, the Cold War began, arising from political disagreements and militaristic tensions over the spread of communism. While the focus of the war was primarily between the United States and the Soviet Union, we often overlook the affects it had on other places in the world. One such example is the Mapuche community of Nicolás Ailío located in southern Chile. In her book Courage Tastes of Blood, Florencia Mallon takes on the role of a radical historian in order to communicate a more personal account of modern Chilean history during the 20th century. By spending time with the community and conducting one on one interviews with those who lived during the country’s reform, Mallon was able to identify the primary challenges of land disputes and a militaristic dictatorship that the natives faced.

The foundation of communism depends on chaos between social classes which would ideally result in the elimination of privately owned property so that all resources and goods can be shared by the entirety of the public. Although the government under the control of Allende was not communist, the Mapuche community of Nicolás Ailío have been fighting to keep their territory private (Mallon, 2005). Often times, established boundaries and land settlements were disregarded or disrespected, so in an attempt to protect natives from private contracts that would sell their land without their consent, the Chilean government created the Law of Indigenous Settlement which “would begin with the legal settlement of the native population on their ancestral lands, and only afterward would government officials have the right to define how much land was left for other uses” (Mallon, 2005, p. 36). Despite its effort, the Law of Indigenous Settlement did little to protect the Mapuche from injustice as they continued to lose in legal battles regarding land ownership well into the 1940s and 1950s.

This term of injustice was only the beginning. By the early 1970s the Nicolás Ailío community had decided to create a defense plan that included the capture of the Rucalán property in a surprise attack. In an interview with don Heriberto Ailío, one of the men who participated in the capture, he recalls, “Taking the fundo at the time was totally illegal…but whose permission had they asked earlier when they’d taken over our lands in the first place?” (Mallon, 2005, p. 134). Though in the moment it may have been a victory, the citizens of Nicolás Ailío would come to realize the mistake they had made. Almost three years later a group of both Mapuche and non-Mapuche people had not forgotten their losses and had sought out the help of the Movimiento Campesino Revolucionarios (MIR) and the Popular Unity government to help get their land back. The result was a military dictatorship in which men, women and children were subjected to “repression, physical punishment, hunger, and terror…” (Mallon, 2005, pg. 182). The soldiers interrogated, tortured, and arrested men on the accusation of being MIR terrorists although more often than not there was no evidence to justify the actions, similar to the methods used by the communist government of Russia. The militaristic occupation as well as the persistent fear of being captured resulted in people feeling alone and scared, “[t]he sense of personal loss made worse by the fact that, soon after the allanamiento, fear made people turn against each other, trying to find someone to blame for the horror they were facing” (Mallon, 2005, p. 158). While some created scapegoats for their fears, others turned to their religion to answer their prayers.

In the midst of terror and tragedy there is always hope. For the people of Nicolás Ailío that hope was seen through their relationships, both with their families and with God. When the soldiers started their raids, doña Eduardina remembers them looking for her brother, don Heriberto, “…what could we do against those people who were armed, so we just prayed. There is God, we knew there was a God, all day we spent praying, praying to the Lord… (Mallon, 2005, p. 157). In a time when they felt the most hopeless, the family was able to come together and pray for the safety of their loved ones. Another member, Hugo Ailío, found a similar feeling of community and security in his faith, as he walked into a church he recalls, “…the brothers and sisters were singing, and the brother greeting people at the door treated me with so much love…” (Mallon, 2005, p. 155). The religious community had brought together a broken people and gave them a sense of security and a support system with “political prisoners and their families perhaps the ones who relied most on their spirituality and their belief in God to get them through” (Mallon, 2005, p. 163). From the early 1970s into the early 1990s, the Mapuche community of Nicolás Ailío was subjected to brutal harassment from their military, an experience which seemed to strengthen them spiritually. However, this is only one side to story.

Historians, more often than not, are non-bias in order to present history in the most accurate and honest light. In the case of Florencia Mallon, it is noted that she “sympathetically reconstructed the remarkable efforts of communities to survive or reconstitute themselves in the face of state repression and sinking resources…” (Mallon, 2005, XIV). A significant portion of Mallon’s primary evidence comes from the testimonies given to her from the generations of natives from Nicolás Ailío who lived during the resettlement, reforms, and dictatorships throughout the century. However, it is important to note that while Mallon does identify as a radical historian in her book she also acknowledges that she is still a historian and therefore realizes that many of the testimonies given to her often contradict one another and that becomes her task as the historian, to decode how the different narratives contribute to the greater story of the community as a whole (Mallon, 2005, p. XIV). The larger the magnitude of the event, such as with a national movement or world war, the harder it becomes to write from a radical perspective. In the case of repression and injustice, radical historians allow for a new story to be told. Although some views and events may be skewed in the direction of the oppressed, it is better than facing the brutality and mistreatment quietly. In events such as the ones seen with the Mapuche community where they are helpless against their military, asking for their experiences and allowing them to tell their stories seems the honorary thing to do, to give them a voice.

Mallon is able to recreate the story of the Mapuche people primarily through the interviews she conducted and then interpreting them, both through sentences of explanations and through the incorporation of third person to encourage the reader’s participation, for example, when she talks about the events of Landarretche’s life she follows by adding, “We can imagine how profoundly insulted Landarretche must have felt” (Mallon, 2005, p. 129). The inclusion of the word ‘we’ allows for the reader to take part in the community and have a better understanding of the mentality of these people. In addition, she asks questions, “Why did Landarretche stretch himself so thin, risk so much financially…Why did he do it that way?” (Mallon, 2005, p. 126). By asking the reader to think about these answers and the motives that sparked the question, Mallon is going beyond basic reiteration.

The job of a radical historian is to do more than tell a story, it is to educate a population. Unlike with standard textbooks that present the facts as they are, books such as Mallon’s incorporate personalities and questions, forcing the reader to feel and think about how people interact with one another and in turn how these interactions affect the community and the course of its culture. When the world and its conflicts seem so far, stories such as the Mapuche’s give it life and bring it closer.

Bibliography

Mallon, F. (2005). *Courage Tastes of Blood*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.