

THE EXECUTIONS

The Zapatistas justified the executions by taking Reyes's rumormongering as established fact. "Rumor equaling fact" is an ancient ploy of the human mind and is even used today for partisans' advantage. The Zapatistas needed weapons, particularly ammunition. Reyes and other locals who wished the Monroys harm told stories that resonated well. Certainly, the Monroys' economic condition presented evidence of their being able to afford a cache, had they wanted one. Besides, they had been fraternizing with the Carrancistas and the Americans who were supporting them, and both had the wherewithal to pay for a hidden cache. The task was to extract a confession or, failing that, to dismantle the store and find the cache anyway.

Vicente Morales had been building an adobe-block partition in the store. Being more specific about his accusation, Andrés Reyes suggested the weapons cache was there, somehow hidden by the partition. Zapatista soldiers extracted Monroy from his family compound and questioned him vigorously. He and Morales denied the accusation, and Guadalupe stoutly defended both, telling the soldiers to tear the store down block by block if they did not believe her.¹ They partially obliged, ransacking the store, not finding their target but hauling off whatever they could conveniently carry.

ARRESTS AND TORTURE

Shortly thereafter, Zapatista soldiers detained Morales, Monroy, and Monroy's three sisters, Natalia, Jovita, and Guadalupe. Along with others of San Marcos's more well-to-do citizens, the soldiers held them in detention in a local home commandeered as an improvised prison. The high security walls, topped with broken glass embedded in concrete, that economically secure people characteristically constructed to keep out hooligans and thugs could also keep people in.

Despite dismantling the Monroy store and finding nothing, the Zapatistas were so convinced that the hidden arms cache existed somewhere that they pulled Monroy out of their makeshift prison and further pressured him into disclosing the whereabouts of his secreted munitions. The Zapatistas were on the cusp of desperation, it appears, because they were running short of ammunition. Force evolved into torture. Monroy could truthfully say only that he knew of no arms. Unlike his brother-in-law McVey, he did not even possess a rifle for personal protection or for use on his ranch.

To stop the torture, as so many others wracked with unbearable pain in similar situations have done, Monroy could have tendered a false confession. However, its falsity would quickly be verified and his personal condition thereby made worse. In misery and anguish, he brought up his sacred texts, telling the soldiers again that the only arms he had were his Bible and Book of Mormon and offered to give copies to them. The soldiers were rabid but mostly ignorant defenders of traditional Catholicism whom the Carrancistas had acutely offended by violating their churches. With many Zapatista combatants not blessed with even an ability to read or write, Monroy's offer, at best, went unnoticed. At worst, it inflamed the soldiers more. They returned Rafael to their makeshift prison and rethought their options.²

FURTHER DEPREDATIONS

Unconvinced that Monroy was being truthful, Zapatista officers sent a new contingent of soldiers armed with sledgehammers to the Monroy store. The soldiers again ransacked the place, this time even knocking down partitions. They also further availed themselves of whatever they had not already destroyed or confiscated. Again finding no weapons, they moved their search to the Monroy home where a terrified Jesusita was secluded, the Zapatistas not allowing her to see her children or present evidence and witnesses (only one was willing) to counter the accusations.

The Zapatista commander, General Reyes Molina, and some of his soldiers entered the Monroy home three times before the killings and searched every room and every piece of furniture.³ They wanted food from the kitchen as well as the arms, the ammunition, and papers proving that Rafael was a Carrancista colonel.⁴ They found nothing. They told Jesusita that unless they received these things by 9:00 p.m. that very day, they would shoot Rafael.⁵ Jesusita was apologetic and consumed with anxiety and fear.

MONROY, AN INFLAMMATORY CHALLENGE TO THE ZAPATISTAS

Rafael presented an inflammatory challenge to the Zapatistas. Their methods so far had been unsuccessful in obtaining a confession or in finding the weapons through their own searches. They would try something else. From their make-shift prison, they force-marched Rafael and Vicente to a nearby large tree where they hung them to unconsciousness several times, loosening their nooses long enough each time to revive them and enquire if they were ready to confess.⁶ The alleged secret cache yet remaining elusive and the day drawing on, the soldiers apparently returned Vicente to his confinement quarters but questioned and beat Rafael several more times. Frustrated in their failure to extract the information they were certain resided in the inner yet secret reaches of Rafael's mind, they abruptly returned him to be with his incarcerated siblings and their friend Vicente in the Zapatista "House of Confinement."⁷

In the early evening of 17 July 1915, Jesusita tried once more to gain access to the prison house as she brought an evening meal to Vicente and her children. Without someone to bring meals, the prisoners did not eat—at least not often. As she passed by a kitchen window, Rafael and Guadalupe happened to be looking out. Guadalupe called out to her in a sobbing voice: "Mother! You are as a feather in the wind, alone, dragged along by your pain. All of your children are prisoners."⁸ Not permitted to enter, Jesusita left the food and returned to her home.

Rafael was distraught, perhaps realizing that his end was near. Usually serene in the confidence of his innocence but now perhaps feeling that the Lord would not extricate him from this predicament, he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the tears from his eyes. Still, he refused to be angry, refused to curse his tormentors, and refused to relinquish the firm foundation of his faith.⁹ He had told the mother whose six sons the Carrancistas had murdered that she

would eventually see justice but that it might well have to await the next life. Rafael Monroy was a firm believer in justice and in the next life.

Before finishing their meal, the Monroys and Vicente heard the movement of soldiers and weapons outside, followed shortly by an order for Rafael and Vicente to appear at the door and accompany them. On leaving the room, Rafael called out, "Nata, come with me." Natalia stood and was going to follow him, but the guards pushed her back.¹⁰

THE FIRING SQUAD

Presumably on orders of the local Zapatista commandant, the "sanguinary" General Reyes Molina, the soldiers marched Rafael and Vicente a short distance away, not out of earshot, probably to the hanging tree, and lined them up to be executed by gunfire. No family members were present—the sisters were still detained, and Jesusita and perhaps Eulalia as well were back in the Monroy compound.

Later that evening, Rafael's sister Guadalupe heard a soldier say that the men were offered clemency if they would repudiate their alien religion and cease to pervert the land with its ideas. Rafael and Vicente had explained that their testimony would not allow them to deny their faith. Rafael reportedly said, "Gentlemen, I cannot renounce my religion because I know that I have made covenants and have accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ."¹¹ They asked to pray, a request that the executioners surprisingly allowed. The men pled with the Lord to have compassion upon their families, their unborn descendants, and even the soldiers who they said had no idea what they were doing. Afterward, Rafael stood up, folded his arms and said, "Gentlemen, I am at your service." The shots rang out. It was 17 July 1915. The civil war raged on.¹²

That even in the face of mortal consequences Monroy and Morales refused to deny their faith and repudiate their testimonies sealed their distinction as martyrs. Rafael Monroy's grave remains a hallowed place where six generations of his descendants and others, including the author, have paused to pay immense respects for the strength of character and conviction that these martyrs presented at such a dreadful moment in their short lives.

News of the executions quickly circulated among the Zapatista soldiers who were temporarily bivouacked in San Marcos but not involved in the slayings: "What did they find in the Monroy house?" "Why did they kill the bricklayer?"

The questions highlight the social-class nature of the civil war. It was hard for ordinary Zapatista soldiers to think of Rafael and Vicente as being equally worthy

of execution. Rafael was relatively well educated and economically prosperous, part of an emergent rural middle class in Hidalgo—that butchery they could understand. Vicente was a bricklayer, a servant, only marginally literate, speaking rough Spanish as a second language to his native Otomí, part of Mexico's economic underclass that included more than half the population—the soldiers had trouble comprehending such a wanton killing of someone like him. The Zapatistas were fighting *for* the Vicentes of Mexico by directing their fury against the *porfiriato*, that national and international cabal that had ruled Mexico for nearly three decades and which the Zapatistas quite correctly viewed as contributing to their oppression and economic impoverishment.¹³ Why execute the intended beneficiaries of Zapatista sacrifices? The soldiers wondered. Some even marveled.

Beyond speculating on the reasons for the executions, the soldiers had trouble embracing the idea that men of such disparate social standing could equally yoke themselves in a religious brotherhood the Zapatistas ill understood, if not loathed, for its foreign origins. They understood the two men to be shepherds of an emergent flock of Mormons in Hidalgo. The belief “better to put an end to this while we can” has justified martyrdoms throughout the ages, including those of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, two of Mormonism's principal founders.

The rebels' leading light, Emiliano Zapata from the state of Morelos, today a veritable national icon in Mexico, had popularized the phrases, “Land or Liberty,” and “Better to die on your feet than live your whole life on your knees.” All that notwithstanding, had Zapata been on the scene, he may have seen the error about to be committed in San Marcos and might have countermanded the executions that his remote commander had authorized.¹⁴

THE ZAPATISTA ENIGMA

However many factors a social scientist or a historian may marshal to try to account for an historical event such as martyrdom, in the end, even in mob violence, the matter usually depends on a leader's decision somewhere along the line. “Spontaneous violence” is indeed violent but hardly ever spontaneous. It can have a host of underlying causes, as we have pointed out. However, there is almost always a simple decision. Shoot or do not shoot. Marshal a mob or do not marshal a mob. Spread a rumor and inflame a population or try to calm the waters. Some identifiable individual usually makes such decisions.

San Marcos observers have posited that the executions were simply the product of a rogue firing squad devoid of significant leadership. This is likely

not the case. Zapatista General Reyes Molina was definitely on the scene, and he unquestionably was giving the orders for everything else, so presumptively, he also gave orders for the executions.

How, then, can one definitively explain the decision of one man? Without a psychiatric examination, that would be quite difficult, and even with one it would perhaps be improbable. Nevertheless, the historical evidence we have suggests two important psychological ingredients tormenting Reyes Molina—unbridled anger and vindictive revenge. These two psychological factors, and perhaps others, exploded on the principal underlying disputes: the irritation that the new Mormon religion had sparked; the subsequent persecution of the new members, complete with the unremitting gossip directed against them; the Monroys' economic well-being and their association with the hated Americans; and the excesses of the civil war itself. Rampant rage and vindictive revenge were likely the triggers in Reyes Molina's tormented mind that ignited his decision to order the executions.

Aside from indigenous groups like the Tarahumaras or Rarámuris in the Copper Canyon area of northwestern Mexico,¹⁵ the Zapatistas as a social class were among the most harmed in pre-Revolutionary Mexico. Poor, marginalized, deprived, exploited, robbed, dispossessed, suppressed, all in the name of industrialization and colossal theft under the *porfiriato*, the Zapatistas arose in Morelos and attempted to throw off their yoke. In the withering gunfire of the civil war, they gave as much as they got, and both they and their enemies suffered.

In their fury at having been denied the munitions they sought, the Zapatistas went to Monroy's ranch, El Godo, just before the executions and ran off or killed all Rafael's remaining livestock and further sacked his store there. They confiscated his bedding, his wife's treasures, and all that the couple had.¹⁶ The following day when Jesusita, her daughters, her daughter-in-law, and her niece were trying to get their dead buried, the Zapatistas returned and ransacked the Monroy compound again—twice—searching for the cache of arms and munitions they had not yet found.¹⁷

If they weren't troubled at possibly having made a mistake and thinking to exonerate themselves by finding evidence to justify the executions, then the Zapatistas were frantically looking to address the scarcities in their war matériel. In any event, they remained convinced that the cache existed. There was some urgency. Within weeks, fortified Carrancistas returned from their Pachuca stronghold and in a rout flushed out the Zapatistas from Tula and its environs.

No matter the forces in control at any given moment, atrocities, injustices, and violations occurred in every town and village where the war impinged. At the national level, and in retrospect, Mexicans see the Zapatistas—particularly Emiliano Zapata—as national heroes. They sacrificed to restructure Mexico’s society, economy, and, ultimately, politics to permit a strong, vibrant, and more just nation to emerge.

At Emiliano Zapata’s tomb in the center of Cuautla Morelos stands an enormous and heroic statue of the rebel. With a large Mexican hat, a cape, a bandolier of cartridges strung over his shoulder, and a rifle propped in his left hand, he holds in his right hand the scroll of the *plan de ayala*. It is the plan that set forth many of Zapata’s goals for his people. Zapata was one of the greatest idealists in Mexican history, and at least a few of his principles are now partially realized in a modernizing state. Overall, the nation is better for it. Tragically, along the highway of conquest, individual Zapatista commanders made decisions that snuffed out the lives of innocent people and devastated their loved ones. Rafael Monroy and Vicente Morales and their families were among them.

NOTES

1. Monroy Mera, “Como llegó el evangelio,” 26.
2. Guadalupe Monroy recounts the dramatic events in Monroy Mera, “Como llegó el evangelio,” 25–27.
3. Monroy Mera, “Como llegó el evangelio,” 26.
4. Monroy Mera, “Como llegó el evangelio,” 26.
5. Monroy Mera, “Como llegó el evangelio,” 26.
6. Monroy Mera, “Como llegó el evangelio,” 27.
7. We have no idea how the owners of the house were dealing with this confiscatory issue. The prisoners were pretty much confined to the kitchen, which may have reduced their being involved in any potential damage to the house. Some of the Zapatista soldiers were apparently quartered in the house, temporarily enjoying accommodations beyond their wildest dreams. The soldiers were not known for exercising restraint when they commandeered other people’s property. On the kitchen issue, see Monroy Mera, “Como llegó el evangelio,” 26.
8. Monroy Mera, “Como llegó el evangelio,” 26. Guadalupe’s anguished expression in the elegance of her own tongue: “¡Madre mía! Vas como pluma en al aire, sola, arrastrada por tu dolor, pues todos tus hijos están presos!”

9. Monroy Mera, "Como llegó el evangelio," 27.
10. Monroy Mera, "Como llegó el evangelio," 27.
11. "Martirio en México," 3.
12. All information about what actually went on at the killing site is derived from secondary sources, thus explaining some of the variations. Mark Grover has Rafael repeating Christ's words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Grover, "Execution in Mexico," 20). Rey L. Pratt concurs in this imagery (Rey L. Pratt, "A Latter-day Martyr," 723). A new history video in the Church's visitors' center in Mexico City has Rafael saying, as he raises his hands holding his scriptures, "These are the only arms I have, the arms of truth against error" (email from Hugo Montoya, 3 March 2014, 2–3). Elsewhere, Pratt quotes Monroy as saying, "I love my religion more than life itself and I cannot abandon it" ("Un mártir de los últimos días," 8.) According to the Monroy family, Rafael's words were, "Gentlemen, I cannot abandon my religion because I know that I have made covenants and accepted the Gospel of Jesus Christ" ("Martirio en México," 3).
13. Daniel Cosío Villegas, *Historia Moderna de México: El Porfiriato—Vida Económica* (México DF: Editorial Hermes, 1994; winner of the Clarence H. Haring Prize, 1996). See also Friedrich Katz, *El Porfiriato y la Revolución en la historia de México: una conversación* (México DF: ERA, 2011).
14. The "Liberation Army of the South" (*Ejército Libertador del Sur*), commonly known as the Zapatistas, had a loose command structure and was organized into small units, quite independent one from the other, rarely numbering more than one hundred men and women (females were also combatants and held command posts), each headed by a jefe or minigeneral. The unifying element was the charismatic Emiliano Zapata, who, while giving overall direction, did not issue field-level commands in small forays such as occurred in San Marcos. However, at the time of the executions the Zapatista San Marcos occupiers were in alliance with the Villista Tula occupiers, who may have issued the command.
15. The substantial literature on the Tarahumaras, ranging from *National Geographic* to university press publications, is skewed toward studies of their religion, their culture, and their phenomenal prowess as maxi-long-distance runners. An interesting introduction into their philosophy and religion is María Elena Orozco H., *Tarahumara: una antigua sociedad futura* (Chihuahua: Subcomité Especial de Cultura de COPLADE del Gobierno del Estado de Chihuahua, 1992). A university press publication from the period is Wendell Clark Bennett, *The Tarahumara, an Indian Tribe of Northern Mexico* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), updated with the collaboration of Robert M. Zingg and published in 1976 by the Rio Grande Press in Glorieta, New Mexico.
16. Monroy Mera, "Como llegó el evangelio," 27.
17. Monroy Mera, "Como llegó el evangelio," 28.