COMMENTARY

Fiction as History: The bananeras and Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude*

EDUARDO POSADA-CARBÓ

Abstract. This article, inspired by a TV interview with the Nobel Prize-winner Gabriel García Márquez, revises the ways that the fiction in One Hundred Years of Solitude has been accepted as history. In particular, it raises some questions about how literary critics and historians have accepted as history García Márquez’s rendition of the events during the strike that took place in Colombia in 1928. It examines the repressive nature of the Colombian regime and of the strike itself; it also examines the idea that following the strike there was a sort of ‘conspiracy of silence’ to erase the truth from the nation’s history.

The subject of this article was first suggested to me by an interview Gabriel García Márquez, the Colombian Nobel Laureate, gave to a Channel Four TV programme one evening in 1990. In that programme, the late Colombian journalist Julio Roca goes in search of Macondo, as depicted in One Hundred Years of Solitude. At some point, García Márquez was asked about the ‘masacre de las bananeras’ – as the repression of a strike against the United Fruit Company in 1928 is now generally known. His answer came as a surprise. García Márquez replied that only a handful of people – three or five – had died during the strike – a far cry from the figure of 3,000 given in his novel and commonly accepted in Colombia today:

... The banana events – García Márquez said – are perhaps my earliest memory. They were so legendary that when I wrote One Hundred Years of Solitude I wanted to know the real facts and the true number of deaths. There was a talk of a massacre, an apocalyptic massacre. Nothing is sure, but there can’t have been many deaths. But even three or five deaths in those circumstances at that time...

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would have been a great catastrophe. It was a problem for me... when I discovered it wasn’t a spectacular slaughter. In a book where things are magnified, like One Hundred Years of Solitude... I needed to fill a whole railway with corpses. I couldn’t stick to historical reality. I couldn’t say they were three, or seven, or 17 deaths. They wouldn’t even fill a tiny wagon. So I decided on 3,000 dead because that filled the dimension of the book I was writing. The legend has now been adopted as history...¹

Indeed, the number of casualties are thus first recorded in one of the new dialogues of his novel:

José Arcadio Segundo no habló mientras no terminó de tomar el café.  
– ¿Qué?  
– Los muertos – aclaró él -. Debían ser todos los que estaban en la estación."²

Perhaps more significant to the narrative is the skepticism with which José Arcadio Segundo’s revelation is received:

La mujer lo miró con una mirada de lástima. ‘Aquí no ha habido muertos’, dijo. ‘Desde los tiempos de tu tío, el coronel, no ha pasado nada en Macondo’.

This was to become the ‘official version’:

...La versión oficial, mil veces repetida y machacada en todo el país por cuanto medio de divulgación encontró el gobierno a su alcance, terminó por imponerse: no hubo muertos."³

The tale of a hurricane in the shape of a U.S. banana company that sweeps away Macondo is well known to the readers of One Hundred Years of Solitude: Macondo was a prosperous place until it was exploited, corrupted and destroyed by the fruit company; this wave of destruction reached a peak during a general strike, when 3,000 workers were slaughtered by the Colombian army; this episode was erased from the collective memory – the recollection of the events by one of the survivors was contradicted by the false version accepted by the historians, and repeated in the school textbooks: ‘aquí no ha habido muertos’.⁴ History became legend. García Márquez reveals to us now that the apocalyptic massacre described in his book did not occur in such dramatic dimensions; but now ‘the legend has been adopted as history’.

Two contradictory legends and two contradictory versions of history popularised by the work of a novelist; does it matter? For some literary critics it matters a great deal, as their analysis of One Hundred Years

¹ My Macondo, Dal Weldon, dir., (Channel Four, London, 1990), in British Film Institute, London.
² Gabriel García Márquez, Cien años de soledad (Barcelona, 1995), p. 375. ‘– Eran más de tres mil – fue todo cuanto dijo José Arcadio Segundo –. Ahora estoy seguro que eran todos los que estaban en la estación’; idem, p. 382. See also idem, pp. 408, 423, and 429.
³ Idem., p. 377.
‘emphasize the condensed accuracy of its historical vision’. And of course the question ‘of how we are to take what is offered to us as “reality”’ in the novel is often at the centre of the literary debate. According to Michael Wood, ‘the texture of the novel is made up of legends treated as truths – because they are truths to those who believe them – but also...of real facts that no one believes in’. It is not my intention, however, to enquire into the ways García Márquez uses history for artful, literary purposes. My concern runs in the opposite direction: to what extent has the fiction in One Hundred Years of Solitude been accepted as history? From this perspective, the subject matters for a variety of reasons.

For a start, García Márquez himself has often encouraged the view that his work is a faithful reflection of reality. ‘Lo que pasa’ – he said in a 1968 interview – ‘es que en América Latina, por decreto se olvida un acontecimiento como tres mil muertos. Esto que parece fantastico, está extraído de la más miserable realidad cotidiana’. However, regarding the number of casualties, as Stephen Minta has observed, ‘García Márquez has insisted that accuracy in this instance was never his primary consideration’. Nonetheless he has been consistent in his attacks against a supposedly ‘official history’ and in his intentions to lead a new reading of Colombian history.

There is, as already noted, a school of thought that follows this line of interpretation. According to Gene Bell-Villada, ‘behind García Márquez’s scrupulousness in rendering the history and folklore of his region is a larger fidelity to reality itself’. For Gerald Martin, One Hundred Years of

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5 As Michael Bell observes, there are two main lines of interpretation around One Hundred Years of Solitude: one stresses the imaginary dimension, the other the historical vision – the latter ‘usually by regional specialists’. See Bell, Gabriel García Márquez (Basingstoke and London, 1993), p. 2.
6 Michael Wood, García Márquez, 100 Years of Solitude (Cambridge, 1990), p. 58.
Solitude is ‘a socialist...reading of Latin American history’; the apocalyptic events of the banana strike ‘are patently historical ones’.\textsuperscript{11} Stephen Minta also considers that the account of the strike and the massacre is ‘in rough accord with the known facts’, although there is ‘a conscious exaggeration of detail’.\textsuperscript{12} At least two other literary critics – Gustavo Alfaro and Lucila Inés Mena – have also argued that García Márquez’s description of the bananeras faithfully reflect the historical facts.\textsuperscript{13} More recently, in his weekly column in Cambio\textsuperscript{16}, Dario Jaramillo Agudelo echoed a view that has been increasingly gaining currency: that the ‘true’ Latin American history has been rescued by fiction:

Ya desde la aparición de los caucheros en La vorágine, de las bananeras en Cien años, la verdad de la historia... ha tenido que ser rescatada por la ficción.\textsuperscript{14}

Historians have been more cautious than literary critics when treating One Hundred Years of Solitude as a historical source.\textsuperscript{15} Very few have gone as far as Alvaro Tirado Mejía, whose Introducción a la historia económica de Colombia – in his section on the United Fruit Company – quotes at length García Márquez’s description of some of the circumstances surrounding the strike in Macondo. Yet this is a popular text, widely read by Colombian students in secondary schools.\textsuperscript{16} Fiction here has become a major source for a historian. The most comprehensive and detailed study of the 1928 strike, written by Roberto Herrera Soto and Rafael Romero Castañeda, though still critical of the United Fruit Company, diverges substantially from García Márquez’s account of the massacre and its aftermath.\textsuperscript{17} It is my impression, however, that the interpretation offered

\textsuperscript{12} Minta, García Márquez, p. 169.  
\textsuperscript{13} Gustavo Alfaro, Constante de la historia de Latinoamérica en García Márquez (Cali, 1979); and Lucila Inés Mena, ‘La huelga de la compañía bananera como expresión de lo ‘real maravilloso’ en 100 años de soledad’, in Bulletin Hispanique, LXXIV (1972), pp. 379–401; and her La función de la historia en Cien Años de Soledad (Barcelona, 1979), pp. 63–99.  
\textsuperscript{14} Dario Jaramillo Agudelo, ‘Su mejor novela’, Cambio\textsuperscript{16}, 13 January 1997.  

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by this book has not been given sufficient attention.\textsuperscript{18} The dominant view among historians still resembles García Márquez's picture of the banana zone – although not necessarily quoting \textit{One Hundred Years as a source}, and acknowledging some degree of cautiousness in accounting for the number of casualties. Even Judith White's monograph – one of the few detailed modern studies of the strike –, closes quoting that passage of the novel: 'debían ser como tres mil muertos'.\textsuperscript{19} Though Colombians are not great readers, they are great readers of García Márquez's works. It would not be an exaggeration to say that \textit{One Hundred Years of Solitude} contains today's 'official version' of the developments in the banana zone in the 1920s. A recent biography of García Márquez by Dasso Saldívar states that since the publication of the novel in 1967, 'la mayoría de los colombianos empezaría a hablar de los tres mil muertos de las bananeras del Magdalena'. Saldívar also stresses that this tragic event marked 'de forma indeleble la conciencia histórica de todo el país'.\textsuperscript{20} According to Germán Arciniegas, a leading figure who many would identify with the intellectual 'establishment' and the Academia de Historia de Colombia, 'Macondo es punto de referencia para la interpretación de toda nuestra historia'.\textsuperscript{21}

The purpose of this article is therefore to raise some questions about how literary critics and historians have accepted as history García Márquez's rendition of the events during the 1928 strike, and the impact of the banana industry on the region, in general. As such, I should stress that it does not intend to contest García Márquez's use of history in the novel. It does aim, however, at challenging the use of \textit{One Hundred Years
of Solitude as a historical source. There are, in particular, three aspects of the subject that merit serious reconsideration: the extent to which the activities of the United Fruit Company merely brought misery and destruction to the region; the repressive nature of the regime and of the strike itself; and the idea that following the strike there was a sort of 'conspiracy of silence' to erase the truth from the nation's history. As I have dealt with the first aspect elsewhere,²² this paper will concentrate on the latter two points.

The 'matanza de las bananeras'

'It is probable that the last two years have been the least eventful in the history of Colombian internal politics', the British Minister observed in his 'Report for Year ending June 1928'.²³ Little could he foresee at the time how significant the events of December 1928 would become for the history of the country. They helped to bring down the Conservative Hegemony, a regime that dominated Colombian politics from 1886 to 1930. They marked the rise of the career of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán – a Liberal who became the outstanding Colombian populist, a leading protagonist in the politics of the country until his death in 1948. They provided the labour movement, and later the Communist Party, with symbols and martyrs in their struggle against capitalism and imperialism. They came to weigh heavily on the country's perception of the army and of the role of foreign capital. And they inspired García Márquez's masterpiece.

The banana strike has been considered as 'the central shaping episode of the entire novel'.²⁴ How apocalyptic was this event in fact? To what


The extent was General Carlos Cortés Vargas—who ordered the shooting against the strikers—the bloodthirsty officer now depicted in the dominant literature? And how repressive was the Conservative regime? It is possible to distinguish three moments in the development of the strike and its subsequent quelling: the events leading to the adoption of the state of siege on the evening of 5 December; the actual shooting the following morning and its immediate aftermath; the final outcome after the parliamentary debate six months later. A cursory examination of the first and last moments, before looking at the ‘masacre’ itself, may help to throw some light on the ‘repressive’ nature of the regime.

The banana strike broke out on 12 November 1928, after the United Fruit Company refused to meet the demands from the Unión Sindical de Trabajadores del Magdalena. Next day General Carlos Cortés Vargas, the newly appointed military commander of the banana zone, arrived at Santa Marta and then proceeded by train to Ciénaga. He was soon joined by a regiment of troops from Santa Marta, and an additional one from Barranquilla. News of sabotage against the railway moved the army into action: some 400 strikers were arrested. However, most of them were soon freed by the civilian authorities, to the dismay of Cortés Vargas. According to Ignacio Torres Giraldo, a contemporary union leader and co-founder of the Partido Socialista Revolucionario (PSR), that none of the major leaders of the strike had been arrested by 4 December gave labourers hopes for a settlement regarding their demands. The government indeed took some action against the strikers, but there is little evidence of strong repressive measures before 6 December. Moreover, the authorities did not seem to be in a position to enforce the law. At the end of November, for example, the Magdalena Governor issued a decree


26 For an account of the origins of the strike, and a discussion of these demands, see the works by White, Historia de una ignominia; Herrera Soto and Romero Castañeda, La zona bananera del Magdalena, and LeGrand, ‘El conflicto de las bananeras’.

27 Carlos Cortés Vargas, Los sucesos de las bananeras (Bogotá, 1979), pp. 30–1, 68, 79.

28 Ignacio Torres Giraldo, Los inconformes. Historia de las rebelldias de las masas en Colombia, 5 vols, (Bogotá, 1978), vol. 4, p. 948.
forbidding meetings that could obstruct public roads. According to the alcalde of Ciénaga, this decree ‘no pudo cumplirse debido a que el número de agentes de policía era insuficiente para impedir, aun por medio de la fuerza, los centenares de obreros que obstruían las vías’.29 Similarly, an arrest warrant against the leaders of the strike could not be enforced. ‘Salvaguardiados por los obreros en número considerable’, while they spoke to the crowd, the authorities could only watch them from a distance.30 A police inspector in Sevilla did effectively impede members of the union from organizing a meeting to publicise their cause, but he allowed ‘que la propaganda se hiciera por medio de carteles murales’.31

There was no shortage of propaganda during the strike. A recent publication by the CSTC (Confederación Sindical de Trabajadores de Colombia) accuses Cortés Vargas of censuring the press. However, any attempt that may have been made at silencing the press does not seem to have been effective. The same CSTC publication acknowledges that active propaganda against the army officers was carried out by the Diario de Córdoba, and by ‘hojas volantes, afiches, pancartas, murales’.32 Raúl Eduardo Mahecha – the predominant leader of the strike, and indeed an active figure in the Colombian labour movement during the 1920s, particularly in the oil industry – made good use of his own printing machine.33 The Barranquillero newspapers, La Nación and La Prensa, which supported the strike, circulated in the banana zone, and their reports were echoed by the opposition press in Bogotá. The impact of these publications should not be underestimated. ‘In centers such as the banana zone, where but few possess the ability to read’ – a document from the State Department noted – ‘these leaflets are read aloud to an admiring and incredulous crowd of illiterates whose awe of the printed word leads them to believe anything’.34

29 Victor Fuentes, Los sucesos de las bananeras (Santa Marta, 1929), p. 10.
30 Fuentes, Los sucesos, p. 11.
31 G. Castañeda Aragón, Papeles de la huelga del Magdalena en 1928 (Barcelona, 1931), p. 10.
32 CSTC, Bananeras, 1928–1978 (Bogotá, 1928), p. 95. Cortés Vargas referred to the Diario de Córdoba as ‘el alma mater del movimiento, sus ediciones eran devoradas por el pueblo’, Los sucesos, p. 69. Historians, however, have not yet been able to locate any surviving copies of this newspaper; I owe this reference to one of the anonymous JLAS readers.
34 ‘Difficulties of the United Fruit Company in Colombia’, 17 December 1930, National Archives of the United States (USNA), Washington, RG 59/821.6156. On newspapers being read aloud in the plantations, particularly El Estado, see Herrera Soto and Romero Castañeda, La zona bananera, p. 39.
If, for a moment, we leave aside the episode of 6 December and its immediate aftermath, the final outcome of the banana strike does not add to a picture of a strong repressive, ‘dictatorial’ regime – as labelled in some publications. Press censorship might have prevailed in the banana zone from 6 December until the end of the state of siege on 14 March the following year. But elsewhere newspapers attacked the government and the army without any apparent constraint. Much has often been made of some 600 detainees who faced criminal charges in military courts in January 1929. Out of these, however, only 31 strikers were condemned to sentences of between two and twenty five years in prison. Furthermore, all of these were freed nine months later as a result of the parliamentary debate led by Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. One of those freed, Alberto Castrillón, was launched as the presidential candidate of the Partido Socialista Revolucionario on 6 December 1929, an already symbolic date. Meanwhile Cortés Vargas and his former superior, the Minister of War, Ignacio Rengifo, suffered demotion. A British report did not think much of a government that ‘apparently lacks the courage to justify the strong line reasonably taken on the ground of preserving the public peace in the face of an organised and openly subversive outbreak’. The dismissal of Cortés Vargas and Minister Rengifo was described by the British Minister as ‘a pitable act of weakness ... a telling sign of the internal decay within the Conservative ranks ... an abject submission to the will of self-appointed and unauthorized body of citizens and students’.

This apparent weakness has not been fully acknowledged by some historians, who tend to interpret the nature of the regime through the measures that the government, in a campaign led by the Minister of War, took against the ‘Red Menace’. Fearing a communist revolution, the government issued in 1927 decree 707, known as the ‘Ley Heroica’, conferring on the Police strong repressive powers against communist

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35 See, for example, Bananeras, 1928–1978, p. 88.
36 On his arrival at Barranquilla in June 1929, the Bolivian Ambassador and man of letters, Alcides Arguedas, was impressed by the harsh language employed by newspapers in their attacks against President Abadía. See his La danza de las sombras (Bogotá, 1983), p. 25. ‘... freedom of the press and freedom of speech are the order of the day’, in ‘Colombia. Report for year ending June 1928’.
37 Torres Giraldo, Los inconformes, vol. 4, p. 919; Cortés Vargas, Los sucesos, pp. 167–68.
39 ‘Hoy a las cinco de la tarde será proclamado candidato comunista’, El Tiempo, 6 December 1929. That Castrillón was candidate in the 1930 presidential election has passed almost unnoticed among Colombian historians. See also Torres Giraldo, Las inconformes vol. 4, p. 1005; Uribe, Los años escondidos. Sueños y rebeldías en la década del veinte (Bogotá, 1994), p. 310; and M. Medina, Historia del Partido Comunista de Colombia (Bogotá, 1980), vol. 1, pp. 150–1.
suspects. In 1928, the government introduced various projects to Congress, labelled as ‘proyectos liberticidas’ by the opposition. One of them became law later that year. These measures, however, did little to deter a growing opposition against the regime, not only from the Partido Socialista Revolucionario but perhaps more significantly from Liberals and even fellow Conservatives. As Malcolm Deas has observed, this campaign against the Red menace was ‘unsuccessful and much ridiculed’. Moreover in the Atlantic Coast, as the union leader Torres Giraldo acknowledged, ‘las gentes no tenían en cuenta el Decreto Liberticida’. Even the authorities, ‘sobre todo en las ciudades le miraban sin darle ninguna importancia’. Only in some villages of the banana zone – but ‘claro que no en Santa Marta ni en Ciénaga’, the authorities occasionally managed to limit the activities of the likes of Torres Giraldo. Historians and literary critics looking for a repressive regime would be better advised to cross the frontier to Juan Vicente Gómez’s Venezuela: in Colombia there was no La Rotunda – the infamous jail where Gómez imprisoned his opponents with leg-irons.

There is no doubt, however, that the army, led by General Cortés Vargas, took repressive measures on the eve of 6 December, which ended in bloodshed and persecution of the strikers and their leaders. The exact number of casualties will probably never be known. Herrera Soto has put together the various estimates given by contemporaries and historians, ranging from 47 to 2,000. And, of course, there is the figure popularised by García Márquez – 3,000. Cortés Vargas took responsibility for 47 casualties, in itself a significant number, an almost unprecedented bloody affair of this nature in Colombian history. For Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, then a young Congressman, the number of casualties was ‘not as important’ as other charges against the army: that the action of the army was cowardly and pre-planned; that the wounded were ‘rematados con la bayoneta’; that the dead bodies were thrown into the sea; that the officers, including Cortés Vargas, were drunk; that women from Ciénaga were forced to attend orgies; that the army acted not to protect Colombian but US interests.

41 Deas, ‘Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela’, p. 661. For a critical view of these measures, see Gerardo Molina, Las ideas liberales en Colombia, 1917-1934 (Bogotá, 1974), pp. 176–87. On the civilian successful opposition to the Minister of War’s campaign, see Abel, Política, iglesia y partidos en Colombia, pp. 229–31.
42 Torres Giraldo, Los inconformes, vol. 4, p. 898.
43 See Manuel Caballero, Gómez, el tirano liberal (Caracas, 1994); and Deas, ‘Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela’, pp. 678–80.
44 Herrera Soto and Romero Castañeda, La zona bananera, p. 79.
45 Quoted in Torres Giraldo, Los inconformes, vol. 4, p. 966.
46 1928. La masacre de las bananeras, pp. 116–18, 123.
Gaitán’s serious allegations were widely publicised by the contemporary press. His account seems to have been a major source for García Márquez’s story. How reliable was Gaitán? The question has hardly been raised. On the contrary, some literary critics such as Lucila Inés Mena—who argue that One Hundred Years of Solitude keeps faithfully to reality—based their argument on Gaitán’s account, ‘la fuente de información más veraz...acerca de la matanza’. Nevertheless, the union leader Ignacio Tores Giraldo recalled in his memoirs, on a sarcastic note, how Gaitán claimed to have ‘almost concluded the investigation’ the very first day of his arrival in Ciénaga. Gaitán, after all, was politically motivated, and as such he had good reasons to exaggerate; his diatribes recall the earlier insulting rhetoric of the Liberal pamphleteer José María Vargas Vila.

In contrast to Gaitán’s, General Cortés Vargas’s account of the events has been given very little credibility or even attention. García Márquez seems to have used it when describing some details of the massacre: the short warning to leave the plaza as the army prepared to shoot, the responses from the crowd, and the final order of fire. There is indeed some naivety in the way Cortés Vargas described his decision in taking such a ruthless step. He did not question his course of action: he received news

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47 Gaitán’s speeches were published in full by the major national newspapers. See ‘Comenzó ayer en la Cámara el sensacional debate sobre las bananeras’, ‘El régimen militar cometió abusos fiscales en la zona’, ‘El R. Jorge Eliécer Gaitán hizo ayer terribles revelaciones sobre las bananeras’, ‘El R. Gaitán terminó ayer sus gravíssimos denuncios sobre los crímenes de las bananeras’, in El Tiempo, 4, 5, 6 and 8 September 1929. These speeches were later compiled as 1928. La masacre de las bananeras (Bogotá, Ediciones Los comuneros, n.d.), a little book that ran into various editions, readily available today in Colombian book stores. See also ‘La responsabilidad constitucional del Presidente Abadía en la matanza de las bananeras’, El Tiempo, 4 December 1929.

48 Mena, ‘La huelga de la compañía bananera’, p. 73. Saldívar’s biography of García Márquez is the most recent example of how Gaitán’s account is accepted as an unchallengeable truth; García Márquez. El viaje a la semilla, p. 71.

49 Torres Giraldo, Los inconformes, vol. 4, p. 966.


51 White, for example, hardly cites Cortés Vargas’s Los sucesos de las bananeras. Mena does quote this source in a couple of occasions, while Saldívar does not seem to have bothered to consult the book. Before being commissioned to the Coast, Cortés Vargas was head of the History Department at the Army’s Estado Mayor General, from 1926 to 1926. During this period, in 1924, he published a three volume history book, Participación de Colombia en la Libertad del Perú. For a sympathetic biographical note on Cortés Vargas, see Roberto Herrera Soto’s prologue to Los sucesos de las bananeras, pp. 11–17.
of the decree conferring on him state of siege powers on the night of 5 December; he prepared the troops to face the crowd; at 1:30 in the morning, after some drum beatings, one of his officers gave the crowd five minutes to leave the plaza; then he ordered 'Fuego!'. Why did Cortés Vargas decide to open fire? Any enquiry into the means used by Cortés Vargas in repressing the strike and his motives for choosing them would have to examine in detail at least two further questions: what were the circumstances surrounding the strike?, and under what conditions did the army face the strikers?

Estimates, varying a great deal, put the figures of strikers throughout the banana zone at between 11,000 and 30,000 people. These were not only banana workers. What might have started as a sectorial labour dispute evolved into a general strike, which counted on the support of the local population. As Charles Kepner described it, the strike 'was a far-reaching mass movement, covering the entire banana district, and aided by planters, merchants and others who were not workers'. In addition, the involvement of the Partido Socialista Revolucionario (PSR) – which had taken over the leadership of the strike – gave a revolutionary undertone to the events. Raúl Eduardo Mahecha – a co-founder and leading member of this party, signed the 'pliego de peticiones', as the 'Secretario de debates' of all the unions which called for the strike in 1928. Alberto Castrillón, a PSR activist recently returned from Moscow, joined the movement together with some other PSR members sent by the party from Bogotá and Girardot. Mahecha would later reveal the existence of divisions between him and the central leadership in Bogotá, where news of the outbreak of the strike was received with some surprise, as it was thought premature. But a national assembly of the PSR had met in July 1928, which approved the launching of a general insurrection to coincide with a labour strike in the banana zone – originally planned to take place in 1929. The PSR leadership later met in Chocontá with veteran Liberal revolutionaries – who had fought in the Guerra de los Mil Días (1899–1902), including General Leandro Cuberos Niño, and Venezuelan

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52 Cortés Vargas, Los sucesos, pp. 87–90.
56 See Uribe, Los años escondidos, p. 261. Other members of the PRS involved in the leadership of the strike included Russo, Erasmo Coronel and Sixto Ospino; Medina, Historia del Partido Comunista, p. 132. For PSR’s involvement, see also CSTC, Bananeras, p. 104.
anti-Gómez forces to coordinate an insurrection in both countries. News in November 1928 that the PSR had been accepted as a branch of the Communist International added to the governmental fears of an ‘amenaza bolchevique’. On 18 November, the PSR had warned Mahecha ‘no confundir la huelga con la insurrección’, but as the events unfolded it instructed its members to ‘lanzarse a la acción directa’.

With the benefit of hindsight it is easy to argue that the government over-reacted to the ‘insurrectionary threats’. Indeed contemporary publications of the opposition against the Conservative regime, such as El Espectador, accused the government of creating an ‘imagined revolution’. Medófilo Medina also refers to the ‘novelón del gobierno’, ‘una farsa montada’. But the evidence above, mostly from sources close to the PSR, suggests that the 1928 strike was no simple industrial dispute. The authorities not only feared social unrest as a result of a ‘communist insurrection’ – real or imagined; they probably feared even more a Liberal rebellion. For those facing the strike, the concern for the consequences of a continuing general breakdown of law and order therefore was probably genuine, particularly bearing in mind the weak position of the state forces.

With barely 15 men policing Ciénaga, the Police was palpably weak. Thus the government had to rely on the Army. Cortés Vargas initially counted on the support of 200 trained soldiers, plus an equal number of young conscripts without much experience. They were later joined by a regiment of 300 Antioqueños. This small number of troops – referred to as a ‘gran contingente del ejército’ by some historians – was spread throughout the banana zone, though Cortés Vargas was reluctant to divide them. In Ciénaga, where from 1,500 to 4,000 strikers took over the

57 Representing the Venezuelans were Arévalo Cedeño, General Carabaño, and Pedro Elías Aristigueta. See Uribe, Los años escondidos, pp. 242-52. The anti-Gómez forces launched a frustrated revolution in 1929. See Caballero, Gómez. El tirano liberal, pp. 289-326.
58 Torres Giraldo, Los inconformes, vol. 4, p. 939; CSTC, Bananeras, p. 104.
60 Medina, Historia del partido, p. 135.
62 Victor Fuentes, Los sucesos de las bananeras (Santa Marta, 1929), p. 10.
63 Natives from the interior department of Antioquia.
plaza on 5 December, Cortés Vargas was backed by 300 soldiers. These troops probably shared the general conditions of the Colombian army described in a 1928 British report as 'a half-trained, half-organised and ill-equipped handful'. Their level of armaments was considered 'inadequate', the training 'elementary in the extreme'. In addition, there were rumours of disaffection within the ranks in Barranquilla – a Liberal stronghold. Thus Cortés Vargas counted on only a small force – ill trained and ill equipped – to counter what was perceived as a general insurrection. He had motives to doubt the loyalty of his troops. On 2 December, a leaflet signed by the PSR leader Tomás Uribe Márquez, incited the strikers to 'organizar un movimiento de simpatía hacia los soldados'. The following day El Estado, an influential newspaper from Santa Marta, published an interview with the Secretario de Gobierno of Magdalena Department, who said that the contingent of Antioqueños had been brought into the zone because the army commander could not trust the local soldiers. Public order deteriorated, forcing Cortés Vargas to divide his forces to patrol the zone. Uribe Márquez’s leaflet called the strikers to ‘organizar la acción directa sorpresiva mediante el sabotaje de las comunicaciones..., la intervención forzada al trabajo rompehuelgas, la destrucción de zonas bananeras’, although he stated that these were defensive actions and that they should not become ‘conducta abierta de rebeldía en guerra’. He also suggested that the strike should be turned into an anti-imperialist movement.

Incidents of direct confrontation between the strikers and the army were limited. There were, however, some violent encounters. Strikers blocked communications and transport. Confrontations between strikers and strike-breakers, as would be expected, were particularly bitter. On 4 December there was damage to property, as the Fruit Company attempted to resume work. A group of strikers surrounded and disarmed 30 soldiers on a banana plantation; the news was reported the following day in El Estado as ‘una asonada bolchevique, que pide a grito herido la intervención pronta y eficaz del gobierno nacional’. Reports like this encouraged a perception of general disaster among the authorities; and perceptions were probably more crucial than reality in determining the sequence of

65 The army was also described as ‘distinctly inferior to that of Peru and Venezuela, and barely equal to that of Ecuador’; see ‘Colombia. Report for the Year ending 1928’.
66 Cortés Vargas, Los sucesos, pp. 62, 66.
67 Cortés Vargas, Los sucesos, pp. 66, 67. LeGrand raised doubts about the authenticity of this letter, suggesting that it might have been fabricated by Cortés Vargas. LeGrand, ‘Las bananeras’, p. 210. María Tila Uribe, Uribe Márquez’s daughter, however, reproduces the text of this letter in her memoirs. She also claims that this and other letters by Uribe Márquez were widely read by the strikers; Los años escondidos, pp. 262–5.
68 El Estado, 5 December 1928, quoted in Valdeblanquez, Historia del departamento del Magdalena. See also Herrera Soto and Romero Castañeda, La zona bananera, pp. 47, 51.
events. Both Cortés Vargas and the Minister of War continually received alarming news. So did other local authorities. On 4 December the Inspector of Sevilla reported that ‘[el] pueblo ha salido armado [para] impedir embarque’. The following day, a dispatch from the alcalde in Ciénaga read: ‘Inspector Corregimiento Riofrío ha tenido necesidad de abandonar población en vista obreros discurren calles, amenazantes, armados machetes’.69 Also on 5 December, a railway employee reported that 5,000 men armed with machetes had left Santa Marta. During the previous two days, the Governor had cabled Minister Rengifo with news of ‘graves desórdenes’, again referring to men armed with machetes. Cortés Vargas might have exaggerated when he described ‘el movimiento de amotinados, armados de machetes, revólveres y escopetas’.70 And machetes were probably carried by banana workers in the normal course of their work. Machetes were, none the less, visible. Salvador Bornacelli – the general secretary of the union in Aracataca – recalled years later how on 5 December, as they travelled by train from Santa Marta, ‘donde quiera que pasábamos se veía gente con machete’, although according to Santander Alemán, a worker on the railway, some 7,800 machetes were collected by the leadership of the movement and locked away that day.71

The task of guaranteeing public order was not eased by the discrepancies between the military commander and the civilian authorities, particularly the Magdalena Governor, who was the highest authority in the region until the state of siege was adopted on the eve of 6 December. The military commander was originally of the view that, with the support of civilian authorities, he was capable of controlling the strike.72 Yet as early as 14 November there were clear disagreements between Cortés Vargas and the Governor on how to handle problems of public order. Cortés Vargas complained that his initial policy of a firm hand with the leaders of the strike was frustrated by the Governor’s orders; that the actions of the Governor had been counter-productive. Judges freed those imprisoned by the army. So did the Governor. The Alcalde in Ciénaga, according to Cortés Vargas, supported the strikers – an accusation that the alcalde later rejected.73 National authorities in the distant capital were not that helpful. The Governor himself, who opposed the firm hand policy

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70 Cortés Vargas, Los sucesos de las bananeras, p. 80.
71 See their recollections in Arango, Sobrevivientes de las bananeras, pp. 68 and 74. Later, in June 1929, Mahecha acknowledged that during the confrontations that followed the shooting at the plaza on the eve of 6 December, strikers counted on ‘ciento siete rifles Gras y unas cien escopetas pésimamente municionadas, y algunos centenares de machetes’; Arango, Sobrevivientes (second ed.), p. 141.
72 Cortés Vargas, Los sucesos de las bananeras, p. 31.
73 See Fuentes, Los sucesos de las bananeras, and Cortés Vargas, Los sucesos de las bananeras. The complaints against civilian authorities in the latter figure prominently.
pursued by Cortés Vargas, had earlier complained that the national government ‘no se ha penetrado [del] grave peligro [de la] zona bananera, donde han encontrado campo propicio agitadores comunismo’. The President, according to one contemporary observer, seemed unaware of how serious the problems were, ‘perdido quizá en sus sueños...’. Cortés Vargas would later complain about the ambiguous position taken by the civilian authorities. He saw his major responsibility as that of restoring order for both internal and external reasons: a further deterioration of law and order could have caused ‘mayores males’, including a US intervention on Colombian soil.

Whether or not Cortés Vargas had to order to fire the way he did at dawn on 6 December is indeed questionable. But the charges, raised among others by a CSTC publication, that Cortés Vargas consciously let the situation deteriorate so he could ‘resolver a su antojo la situación’, as a preconceived act – ‘un asesinato planeado conjuntamente por él y los altos directivos de la United Fruit Company’ – seem unsubstantiated.

*A conspiracy of silence?*

A careful revision of the ‘masacre de las bananeras’ along the lines suggested above may still come to the conclusions that the casualties were too high; that Cortés Vargas and the army behaved ruthlessly; that had labour demands been met, the strike would have ended peacefully; that in the final analysis the arrogance of the United Fruit Company and its reluctance to come to terms with labour demands were ultimately responsible for the tragic outcome. There will always remain contested views and interpretations. However, the thesis that there was ‘a conspiracy of silence’ among the Colombian elite to suppress the truth from the collective memory – supported mainly by those who attempt a historical reading of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* – does not stand up to even a cursory examination of events.

Certainly those who were directly involved as major protagonists did not remain silent. On 20 July 1929, Alberto Castrillón, one of the leaders of the strike, sent from prison a full report giving his version of the strike to Congress, soon published in book form that year – *120 días bajo el terror militar*. General Carlos Cortés Vargas, in turn, edited a set of documents

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74 Castrillón, *120 días bajo el terror militar*, p. 38.  
75 Castañeda, p. 19.  
76 CSTC, *Bananeras*, p. 100.  
77 See Bell-Villada, *Garcia Márquez*, p. 105; and Martin, *Journeys through the labyrinth*, pp. 230 and 383.  
78 A. Castrillón *120 días bajo el terror militar o la huelga de las bananeras* (Bogotá, first ed. 1929; reprinted in 1974). In this text Castrillón appealed to the legislators to do justice as representatives of the republic in a democratic country. His line was condemned by the Communist International: ‘... ha dirigido al parlamento colombiano una súplica en
with his own explanation and defense - *Los sucesos de las bananeras* - also in
1929. Following Gaitán’s accusations in Congress, Cortés Vargas again
replied in the columns of *El Nuevo Tiempo*, and his refutation was
reprinted as a pamphlet - *El General Cortés Vargas Contestá al representante
Gaitán*.\(^{79}\) The Alcalde of Ciénaga, Víctor Fuentes, who had been accused
by Cortés Vargas of supporting the strike, also published his own version
in July 1929; so did the Magdalena Governor, José María Núñez Roca.
In 1931, Gregorio Castañeda Aragón, a *Magdalenense* poet who held an
official position during the strike, published his *Papeles de la huelga del
Magdalena en 1928*, also containing accusations against Cortés Vargas.

Jorge Eliécer Gaitán has of course received all the credit for exposing
the massacre. This was not a minor, private venture. He arrived in the
banana zone on 18 July 1929, and stayed there the following ten days. He
held mass interrogations and gave ‘speeches before the crowds’. On his
return journey to Bogotá, he stopped ‘whenever he could to tell the
growing crowd about the massacre’.\(^{80}\) On 3 September, after a motion
presented by the Liberal representative Gabriel Turbay, Gaitán started a
debate in the Lower House which lasted for 15 consecutive days. ‘The
galleries’, as described by Sharpless, ‘were filled with spectators; crowds
waited outside in the Plaza de Bolívar to accompany Gaitán home after
each session; newspapers carried full accounts of the speeches’.\(^{81}\) Any
‘conspiracy’ to silence the dead was frustrated by Gaitán’s successful
campaign. As Herbert Braun noted, Gaitán ‘made sure that that would
not happen’.\(^{82}\)

Gaitán acquired fame on this occasion, but he was not the only one to
accuse the army and the government of slaughtering the strikers. Nor did
he start the accusations. According to Torres Giraldo, three lawyers from
Magdalena – Manuel Robles, Rafael Campo and Linao Loayza – ‘em-
pezaron a hacer luz sobre el horrendo crimen’.\(^{83}\) Some of their articles,
published by the Conservative press in Barranquilla, were echoed

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\(^{79}\) These two works were reprinted in one volume in 1979 as *Los sucesos de las bananeras.*

\(^{80}\) H. Braun, *The assassination of Gaitán: Public Life and Urban Violence in Colombia* (Madison,
1985), p. 58. ‘He stopped at every major populated area along the way, attacked the
government for its illegal action and corruption, and urged the people to give him
support in the coming congressional debate’, Sharpless, *Gaitán of Colombia: A Political

\(^{81}\) Sharpless, *Gaitán of Colombia*, p. 58.

\(^{82}\) See Braun’s observation on García Márquez’s novel and Gaitán’s actions, regarding the
tale that silence surrounded the dead of the massacre, in Braun, *The assassination of
Gaitán*, p. 211, fn. 23.

\(^{83}\) Torres Giraldo, *Los inconformes*, vol. 4, p. 963.
elsewhere in the country, particularly by the Bogotáno Liberal newspapers. ‘Ni siquiera se sabe a cuantos centenares ascendieron los muertos en esa carnicería unilateral’, El Tiempo commented in July 1929. On 4 September that year, after one of the congressional debates, the Bolivian Ambassador visited El Tiempo, the headquarters of the political opposition. There Arguedas greeted Gaitán, ‘el orador de la tarde’, who was next to Eduardo Santos, the newspaper’s Director and an already influential figure in the Liberal party. Arguedas could also hear the Congressman Camacho Carreño reconstructing in dictation his speech in the Chamber on the bananeras, to be published by El Tiempo, together with that of Gaitán, the following day. The work of cartoonists, such as that of Ricardo Rendón—like that of writers and politicians—is also evidence of the lack of ‘silence’ surrounding the event.

Quite the contrary. What happened in Ciénaga on 6 December 1928 was almost immediately the focus of public controversy. Soon afterwards the ‘‘masacre’ became a political symbol, skilfully exploited by the opposition, Liberal and Revolutionary Socialist alike, against the Conservative regime. Even disaffected Conservatives used it to attack the government: on 19 May 1929, El Espectador published an interview with the Conservative cacique Pompilio Gutiérrez, who referred to Cortés Vargas as a ‘fiera’, responsible for the killing of 1,000 people. ‘Abajo el asesino de las bananeras’ read the placards carried by mass demonstrators in Bogotá the following June. According to María Tila Uribe, the bananeras coloured all political events in Colombia during 1929 and 1930.

Certainly the first anniversary of the ‘masacre’ did not pass unnoticed. On 4 December, El Tiempo published in full Gaitán’s report accusing President Abadía of constitutional responsibility for the ‘matanza de las bananeras’. On 6 December, the same newspaper reported that the Unión Obrera de Colombia, among other labour organisations, had invited workers to join in the ‘primer aniversario del salvaje asesinato perpetrado en millares de vidas de nuestros hermanos de la Zona Bananera’. On the evening of that day, at 5:00 p.m., ‘una gran masa de obreros y de elementos izquierdistas’ gathered in the Parque Santander, from where they marched along the Calle Real to reach the Capitolio—the Congress building. Here they were delivered a speech by Felipe Lleras

Camargo, a member of the Liberal Bogotano elite but himself a socialist sympathiser. The demonstration then found its way to the Teatro Municipal, where Alberto Castrillón, one of the leaders of the banana strike, was launched as a presidential candidate for the 1930 contest.90

Rather than a 'conspiracy of silence', the masacre de las bananeras was followed by press accusations, congressional debates, and street demonstrations. The activities of the opposition were not fruitless. Both the Minister of War, Ignacio Rengifo, and General Carlos Cortés Vargas were removed from their official posts – although this did not happen immediately. The political rewards for the opposition went to the Liberal party not to the PSR. As noted, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán's career was largely built on the reputation he gained for his intervention in the 'matanza de las bananeras' debate. Perhaps more significantly, the regime did not remain politically immune. On 9 February 1930, a Liberal, Enrique Olaya Herrera, defeated a divided and demoralised Conservative Party, bringing an end to half a century of Conservative hegemony.

**Conclusions**

In 1989, when his novel on Simón Bolívar – El general en su laberinto – was published, Gabriel García Márquez acknowledged that he had never before worked with historical data. 'Lo había trabajado periodísticamente' – he added. 'Pero eso de rastrear hasta el fondo no lo había hecho'.91 Yet some literary critics, such as Gene Bell-Villada, still want us to believe that One Hundred Years of Solitude is 'quintessential Latin America history'. The idea that novels are truer to history than history itself has a long tradition in the region. 'La novela latinoamericana', wrote Germán Arciniegas in 1932, 'es en lo general un documento más exacto que la historia'.92

There are historiographical and literary trends sustaining that there should be no distinction between history and literature, for which all readings of the past are equally fictitious.93 However, as Alan Knight has observed, 'historical narratives are not the equivalent of fictional texts; they are a different genre': 'magical realism may work for literature, but it is the kiss of death for history and the social sciences...'.94 The historian's approach towards the past has to be different. 'The poetry of

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90 'El candidato comunista fue proclamado en el Municipal', El Tiempo, 7 December 1929. Castrillón's speech was published here in full.
91 Interview with María Elvira Samper, Semana, 14 March 1989.
history’, G. M. Trevelyan pointed out, ‘does not consist of imagination roaming at large, but of imagination pursuing the fact and fastening upon it’.\(^{95}\) The poetry of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in contrast, rests on imagination exaggerating the facts. As García Márquez himself admitted in the Channel Four interview that inspired this article, he could not ‘stick to historical reality’ regarding the outcome of the 1928 strike.\(^{96}\)

This does not mean that literature and history should be fully disassociated. Nor does it imply that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* cannot convey a sense of the Colombian past. However, as this article has shown, it does raise serious questions about the extent to which the novel can be used as a piece of historical evidence — as a source, in particular, to interpret the complex events of the 1928 strike and its aftermath. ‘Nos complacemos en el ensueño de que la historia no se parezca a la Colombia en que vivimos, sino que Colombia termine por parecerse a su historia escrita’, García Márquez observed in one of his recurrent indictments against a supposedly ‘official history’ of the country.\(^{97}\) The paradox here is that, since the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1967, Colombians’ perceptions of the bananeras started to resemble not the ‘Colombia en que vivimos’ but the ‘historia escrita’ by the novelist.

‘It is never safe to forget the truth which really underlies historical research’, Herbert Butterfield concluded in a classical essay: ‘the truth that all history perpetually requires to be corrected by more history’.\(^{98}\) Seven decades after the events of the bananeras took place, it may be time to put passion aside and attempt to rewrite the whole episode. The result of the enquiry may be equally tragic, but we may get a more balanced view of the nation’s history, less apocalyptic, without heroes and villains, and a better understanding of the conflicts faced by Colombians in their past.

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\(^{95}\) Quoted in Evans, *In Defence of History*, p. 250. See also Trevelyan’s ‘History and Literature’, *History*, vol. IX, No. 34 (1924), pp. 81–91.

\(^{96}\) My Macondo, Dan Weldon, dir., (Channel Four, London, 1990), in British Film Institute, London.

\(^{97}\) García Márquez, ‘Por un país al alcance de los niños’, p. 6.
