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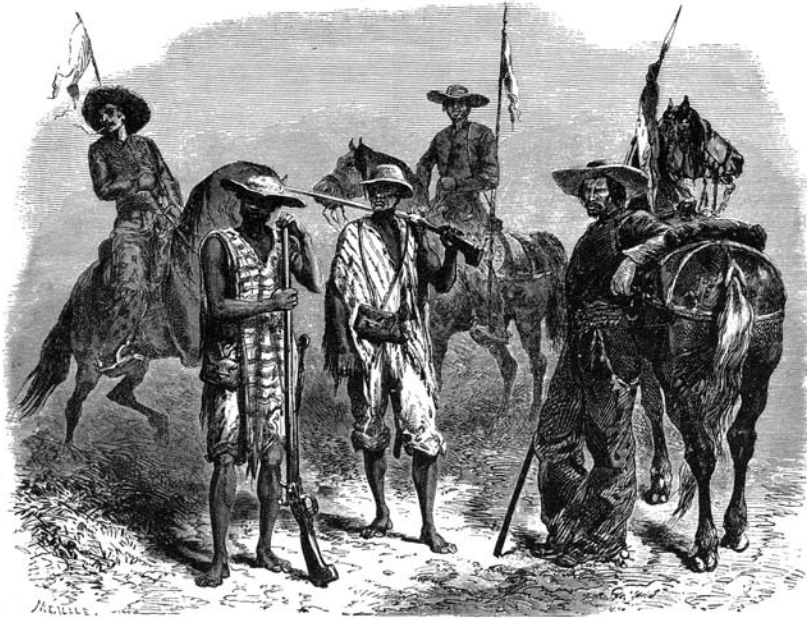
A Girl's View of War in the Capital

Soledad Acosta de Samper

A young woman's diary provides a direct narration of what it was like to live in Bogotá during one of the many nineteenth-century wars that convulsed Colombia. Twenty-one-year-old Soledad Acosta (1833–1913) is well-read and passionate about politics—she copies poetry in both English and Spanish into her diary entries, reports on troop movements, and worries about the man she hopes to marry. Later in life, as Acosta de Samper, she became a prolific writer and publisher, producing novels and dramatic works, biographies, essays, and reportage. A feminist, she advocated women's education and personal freedom. The man she married publicly supported her writing career and supported women's education—that was José María Samper Agudelo, the intellectual and Liberal Party politician who is here described as one of the “brave and splendid” young upper-class men from Bogotá (cachacos) who joined forces with the Conservatives to defeat an insurrection led by General José María Melo. Melo supported career army men and the city's artisans, who favored protectionism against cheap imported goods, special privileges for militia men, and a rough egalitarianism in political life. For Acosta, daughter of an Independence-era general and an educated Scottish mother, an insurrection that promised to favor self-made military men and artisans over propertied families was a thing to be feared—although part of what comes through in the diary is how exciting it all was.

April 20

Finally, faithful diary, I find my way back to you. Oh! How many trials and tribulations have I suffered these last few days! Wars, agitation, sorrows, terror! I've even been locked up in the recesses of a monastery! My God, is this life? My God, why do you leave my wretched country at the hands of savage military men? Lord, is it to have us know the pains and misfortunes of life and not love our earthly dwelling so much?¹ How much can happen in four days, how much can change in our hearts, our lives. Woe is me! On Sunday the world smiled upon me, there was no cloud in my sky, what was yet to come in my life was sowed with flowers and pleasure—I thought my future was blessed! And now. Now [. . .]

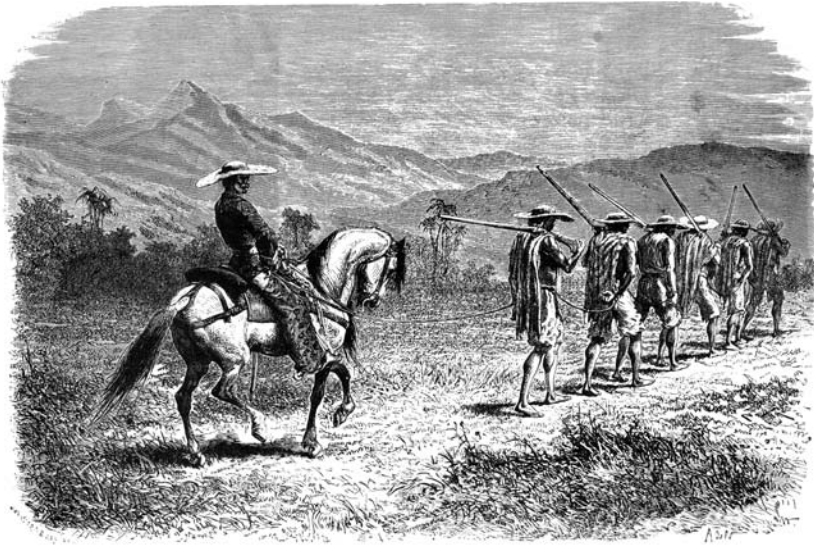


Soldiers in the Cauca Valley, ca. 1862. Engraving by Alphonse de Neuville, from a sketch by traveler Charles Saffray. “Nothing could be more extravagant,” wrote Saffray, “than those groups of men, of all colors and sizes, equipped in the most grotesque possible way.” In Eduardo Acevedo Latorre, *Geografía pintoresca de Colombia: La Nueva Granada vista por dos viajeros franceses del siglo XIX* (Bogotá: Litografía Arco, 1968), 55.

April 21

Now that I find myself alone, if only for a moment, I will write everything that has happened in the past few days. Woe is me! How can I speak of this, my head is heavy with such terrible anguish and my spirit is a chaos that I barely comprehend [. . .]

On Monday, at what must have been five in the morning, I was jolted awake by cannon shots in the distance, and a terrible chill ran through my body because the image that came to mind was that of *** in the most terrible danger.² Barely dressed, I ran or rather I flew, to my room, and I rushed into the balcony window to see that the shots we had heard came from cannons I could see in the plaza. A dreadfully morbid despair seized my soul! What was happening? I saw people running and the cannons kept going off, and people were talking and rushing around and asking me questions, but I couldn’t understand anything, I couldn’t hear anything, it was as if I were in a horrible dream and I couldn’t understand what was happening. The street emptied and the cannon stopped booming. General Barriga



Forced recruits in the Cauca Valley, ca. 1862. Engraving by Alphonse de Neuville, from a sketch by Charles Saffray. Describing this scene, Saffray remembered that the man who held the rope had assured him that it was only a precaution and that within a week the recruits would be “excellent soldiers, possessed of esprit de corps, and without desires to flee.” In Eduardo Acevedo Latorre, *Geografía pintoresca de Colombia: La Nueva Granada vista por dos viajeros franceses del siglo XIX* (Bogotá: Litografía Arco, 1968), 35.

appeared at the window of the Palace. We asked him if this was a revolution. He answered, “I believe it is!” What a reply for a Government Minister [*Secretario del Gobierno*] to make! Hours passed. . . . We finally learned what it was all about. General Melo, the troop commander, had revolted with all the armed forces and had proclaimed Obando Dictator, but when he refused that title, he was placed under arrest at the Palace with all his ministers and the *evil* Melo now commanded in the city, at the head of both the troops and the *Democráticos*. . . . We later learned that they had simultaneously entered the homes of all the Senators and Representatives to imprison them. . . . Woe is me! What immense pain, my God, what fear took over my heart! I finally asked if they had gone to the home of Murillo (for there lived my beloved) The answer was for me a life sentence either of reprieve or of endless despair!. . . . I was told the rebels had been there and had broken everything in the house; the doors had been torn down, the windows had been shot out, but they had found no one. . . . I breathed again. . . . But I heard too that they were searching everywhere for *** and his friend. . . .

[. . .]

Better sit

And think thee safe though far away

Than have thee near me in danger.³

[. . .]

Are you thinking of me? Yes, because you love me, yes, because you adore me. Without you everything is sorrowful, dark. Without you I live like a plant without leaves, like a bed without a stream, like a mountain without sweet birds to sing and comfort it. What is life without you, my beloved? What can I wish for, what can I think of if you are not with me, if I don't have the hope of seeing you? And now. now. My God, what dismal affliction. In the street, I hear the Sentinel's rifle rattle as he moves, and it reminds me of the horrible unease I feel. How different were my thoughts eight days ago today, my God, on Holy Friday. I saw you before me, and filled with happiness I could gaze at you here! Eight days, and how much has my life's aspect changed. The clock strikes ten-thirty. I am very tired. Sadness weakens my body and agitates my soul. I will deliver myself to sleep's embrace. My ***, my poor beloved, what can he be doing now?

September 30

All afternoon I have been embroidering ribbons with goldwork to send to La Mesa on behalf of the Ladies. They carry inscriptions such as "From the Ladies to their brave defenders," "To the young men of the Union," "Victory always protects the brave," "To our Patriot Liberators." To General López, París, Mendoza, and Julio Arboleda, I am also sending ribbons with different inscriptions, addressed to Justo. I purchased all of the materials with my own money, which I have saved in these last few months. Sofia was here and helped me. I called for María and she also came, so we will be able to send plenty if we work hard until the middle of next week. My secret hope is that *** gets one embroidered by my hand. [. . .]

November 25

Days have passed and I haven't written. my consternation and anxiety have not allowed me to write down, until now, events in Bogotá.

Everyone said that there would be a battle on the 22nd. At ten o'clock in the morning the Briceño girls arrived, and we took a spyglass to the house

we had gone to the day before to look out over the Savannah. We could make out Melo's troops on Chamisera road—they were heading to the bridge at Bosa, where the Constitutionals were. Melo had gathered all his forces to attack and hold the bridge. He had four hundred men. The cavalry was well dressed and mounted—there were so many Melistas that we were filled with alarm, and we couldn't see the Constitutionals because we couldn't see the Bosa bridge from that house. At noon we left and went to another house in Santa Barbara, very close to where the Briceños live. Although we did not know the owner, in times of war everything is allowed, and we went in to ask her for permission to look out over the plain. Our good-quality spyglass served as a passport, as she could also look through it. The poor Lady had her husband, her son, and a brother in the Constitutionals' ranks. She welcomed us in and took us to the balcony window, from which we could see the bridge and the troops perfectly. Melo continued his advance and went into battle formation to attack our men. There seemed to us to be so few of them that we were filled with fear and dread. We returned home at one-thirty in the afternoon and organized ourselves to go back to witness the combat and learn what would be our fate, as we thought this would be the decisive battle.

At two o'clock we heard the first cannon shot. On the road to Santa Barbara we came across one of the Acevedos, who was very alarmed because she said our men could not hold out and defend the bridge. When we got to the house the balcony was full of people who had come to watch. On the bridge we could not make out who was fighting, there was so much smoke and the cannons went off relentlessly. I was seized by a grief and a despair so great that I could barely hold back tears. I looked again through the spyglass, and was reassured to see more Constitutionals coming on the road from the town of Bosa, and entering into formation around the bridge. Nevertheless the cannon blasts were continuing, and the battle was hard-fought. The Melistas were almost at the bridge, and that was a terrible moment for all present. We all were in fear but nobody raised an alarm, we did not dare to *speak* our fear. I looked again. Some had binoculars. Then, a shout was heard . . . *run, run*. I saw a horse run through the middle of the fight, and then another, and another, and a whole squadron followed them up to Chamisera. *The Melistas were defeated! The Constitutionals have triumphed!*⁴ But what is this, cannon blasts are still being fired, the smoke envelops them. But our men are this side of the bridge, and the combat is happening in one of the small houses there. Those who ran came to a halt, reorganized themselves, some went into formation. But no one dared to come close. There was a ceasefire for a bit.

My God! The horror! *Who has died, who remains among the living?* was the call of my soul. The fighting began again, but this time it didn't last long. All of Melo's army began to retreat little by little, then they picked up the pace and ran. María sent for news of the battle from time to time, and I, my handwriting unsteady from my trembling hand, wrote to her what I saw. It was five o'clock when they retreated. At six o'clock, Luis Anzola escorted us home, convinced that the Constitutionals had claimed a victory, which if not decisive was at least an important one. But what did we know about what might have happened? Who had perished there? Who knows how long it will be until we will be able to know. At seven I was in the balcony window when a group of Democráticos, louts, and soldiers (I have forgotten to mention that we had seen them leave with Mercado, Posadas, Góngora, La Rosa, Chocontana, and others on the road to Bosa). These devils who came from Las Cruces started chanting *long live the Provisional Government and General Melo, down with López, Mosquera, and the Gólgotas*,⁵ and they shot off fireworks and rang the bells. Despite having witnessed the battle, despite having seen the defeat of the evildoers, I was horrified and afraid, and I let myself be overcome by pain.

On the morning of the 23rd, we were going to go to the Briceños' house when we were told that our men were at Tres Esquinas. I received a slip of paper from Praxidis, who said that the Constitutionals were at Las Cruces, and that [our troops] had gone up to her house shouting *Long live the Constitution!* The Melistas were in arms at the Plaza, on the balconies of the houses and the neighboring alleyways, patrolling the streets. Melo had sent his whole army to defend Bogotá. They said that at three o'clock there would be a battle in Egipto. [. . .]⁶

Castro left with more than two thousand men to attack López, who was in Tres Esquinas. The Democráticos insulted those that were at the Egipto Church, and from that block they fired their muskets and they shot back with their rifles. Bullets were coming down in the patios and fell on this house. They said that P. Gutiérrez, the leader of those in the hills, didn't have anything to give his soldiers and that the shopkeepers wouldn't sell him anything. The Ladies immediately sent them bread and food of all kinds. We sent the maids with provisions and tobacco. There they were told that very few of our men had died in combat at Bosa, and that most of Melo's people completely crumbled. They say that Ignacio Rovira, the only one we know, was killed there, and that Henao, José M. París, and others were wounded but not gravely.

At three o'clock we began to hear gunfire at Las Cruces. We went to the back patios, where we could hear better and see how some of our men

up on some of the hills shot at the Melistas. The rooftops were filled with people watching [. . .] the shooting continued incessantly, and from time to time cannon blasts. Cheers shouted by the Constitutionalists could be heard across the hills [. . .] I could not stand it any longer and I went to my room, where I spent the bitterest hours and felt the most terrible anguish of my life.

Very early on the morning of the 24th, I wrote to the Briceño girls to ask if they knew the results from the battle the day before. They answered back that they did not know anything, and that although the fighting had taken place so close to them they had not been able to find out anything, and felt great dismay. I then wrote to Bolivia on a piece of paper, thinking that she would know everything and be right about things. I received a letter filled with lamentations, where she wrote that many people had died, that those who were wounded had no hope, and many exaggerations that not only filled me with fear but also were totally unfounded. But at least the name of he whom I felt such interest for was not among the list of the dead or wounded, and that gave me comfort. A thousand falsehoods ran through the streets, but I had hope. Finally Mercedes sent a letter with Justo for me to read, which filled us with happiness, since even though the Melistas had suffered defeat, there had been many who had been captured as prisoners the day before, and they didn't say that anyone we knew had been killed. In the afternoon a woman brought a paper from my ***! It was then that I was joyful. The words of *** were written on a page of *his* published poetry, and it read,

“Fucha, 24—I am safe and sound. Today I might have to fight, for I command half a squadron of brave and splendid cachacos. We have had two victories: the one on the 22nd at the Bosa bridge has been of great value, and more so the one yesterday. The results yesterday were as follows: the enemy is completely defeated and demoralized. It lost one hundred and three, including leaders, officials, and troops: many more are injured, one hundred and twenty-eight have been taken hostage, including one Leader, three cannons have been seized along with many weapons, and two hundred have defected this morning at dawn. Our loss has been two llanero commanders (H. Gutiérrez and Cisneros); three soldiers dead, and there seventeen injured, none of them in any grave danger. In Bosa José M. París was injured slightly, but he is better now and doesn't need any care. Victory is certain, and the courage of our soldiers is admirable! Farewell! Fear not and trust Providence, the just cause, and our revolution. —S.”

All day long we had peace. Melo did not dare to attack López again. We sent thread and bandages for the wounded.

On the 25th we also had peace, but the Melistas can't stop. They are so despicable that they do not seem to belong to a civilized nation, and still I believe that these savages might be so horrified that they might cease committing such horrible actions. They have kept themselves busy only with trying to poison soldiers from the Constitutional camp, trading them aguardiente for tobacco, and have even sold them poisoned chocolate. We learned of this and sent word to Gutiérrez with the servants so that they would be careful. They say Góngora bought flour to poison it, making bread and biscuits to send to them! Their meals must be made from what the foodsellers bring. Never has such wickedness been seen before, and among brothers no less!

November 27

My *** wrote today. He says he is at the Quinta of Doña Teresa Rivas, and he says he can see the Coliseo Theater from there. . . . and I cannot see anything from here, not even the house where *he* is! He sent me a pansy⁷ and a sprig of honeysuckle . . . Oh why, my God, do my tears run? Oh Lord, protect him!

Translated by Ana María Gómez López and Ann Farnsworth-Alvear

Notes

1. In this selection, suspension points are in the original. Our own ellipses points, to show abridgment, are in square brackets.
2. Here and elsewhere her future fiancé, José María Samper Agudelo, is concealed as ***.
3. English in original. Carolina Alzate notes that these are lines from Thomas Moore, *Lalla Rookh: An Oriental Romance* (1817). See *Díario íntimo y otros escritos de Soledad Acosta de Samper: Edición y notas de Carolina Alzate* (Bogotá: Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá y Instituto Distrital Cultura y Turismo, 2003), 209n193.
4. Here and elsewhere, the emphasis is in the original.
5. “Gólgotas” refers in this context to the ideological Liberals, whose radical platform of top-down reforms (including free trade) was compared to the Calvary of Christ’s death.
6. Egipto is a neighborhood in central Bogotá.
7. In Colombian Spanish, a pansy is called *un pensamiento*, or “a thought.”