THE 2014 HOEFER PRIZES
FOR EXCELLENCE IN UNDERGRADUATE WRITING

IN RECOGNITION OF WRITING ACHIEVEMENT IN THE
UNDERGRADUATE FIELD OF STUDY

STANFORD UNIVERSITY
MAY 22, 2014
Fanatics or Freedom Fighters? The Tomochic Rebellion in the Porfirian Press

Keegan Boyar

History 209S
Research Seminar for Majors

Jennifer Burns
History
Fanatics or Freedom Fighters? The Tomóchic Rebellion in the Porfirian Press

Beginning with a declaration to follow only the law of God and ending with the brutal slaughter of an entire village, the Tomóchic Rebellion is one of the more dramatic events in the history of late-19th Century Mexico. Taking place in the context of political and social changes and strong religious sentiment, the revolt pitted a few dozen rebellious peasants against the full might of the Mexican government. However, the end of the shooting did not mark the conclusion to Tomóchic’s significance. After the uprising’s defeat, Tomóchic once again became contested ground, although this time not between federal troops and rebellious peasants, but between pro- and anti-government journalists and authors. An analysis of media representations of the Tomóchic Rebellion reveals subtle but significant variations in the ways different groups sought to portray the rebellion. In particular, depictions of the religious aspects of the Tomóchic Rebellion are significant less for what they reveal about the rebels themselves, but for what they reveal about the biases, preconceptions, and ideologies that underlay Mexican politics and culture during the era. The pro-government and opposition media thus used the Tomóchic Rebellion to take part in the contemporary discourse over the direction of their nation’s modernization.

Most literature on the rebellion has, as would be expected, focused on portraying the events of the rebellion and their historical context. Paul Vanderwood, the most notable English-

2 Most earlier accounts of the Tomóchic Rebellion, such as Francisco R. Almada’s *La Rebelión de Tomochi* (1938), José Carlos Chávez’s *Peleando en Tomochi* (1943), and Plácido Chávez Calderón’s *La Defensa de Tomochi* (1964), suffered from a lack of citations and the tendency to view the rebels in an uncritically heroic light (an interpretation encouraged by the post-revolutionary Mexican government, which sought to demonize the Porfirian regime in order to strengthen its own legitimacy). However, by the 1990s, increased scholarly attention led to the two most notable modern interpretations, Paul Vanderwood’s *The Power of God Against the Guns of Government* and Rúben Osorio’s *Tomóchic en llamas*, both of which are exceptionally well-researched. There has
language authority on Tomóchic, did briefly describe the varying ways in which the rebellion and its historical figures passed into the national memory. However, his analysis by and large does not deal in depth with the contemporary media’s response to the rebellion.3 This leaves something of a gap in scholarly understanding of the ways in which the rebellion was written about at the time by the Mexican media. Given that the Mexican media as a whole is too large of a subject to cover in such a comparatively short paper – there were nearly 300 periodicals in 1888, a huge number considering the country’s low literacy rate – this essay will focus on publications from Mexico City, which was the largest market for newspapers in the country.4 By analyzing the partisan media response to the rebellion in Mexico City publications from the 1890s, this paper seeks to expand upon Vanderwood’s analysis, and in doing so will further connect the events of Tomóchic to the larger context of late-19th Century Mexico.

The Tomóchic Rebellion took place during the regime of Porfirio Díaz. A liberal in the 19th-Century sense of the word and a general in the Mexican Army, Díaz rose from the military to seize the presidency in a coup after the tumultuous civil wars and political struggles of the mid-1800s. He remained in power from 1876 to 1880 and 1884 to 1911. During these decades,

---

3 Vanderwood, 317-329.
4 In 1895, the national literacy rate was 17%, while the Federal District (containing Mexico City) had a literacy rate of 49.5%. Of the 285 periodicals in existence in 1888, 120 of them were based in Mexico City. Moreover, an analysis of several such publications can illustrate the whole, because, as will be seen, it was extremely common for newspapers to reprint articles or excerpts of articles from other papers. This frequently took place with minimal citation information. Publications tended to use these quoted articles either to back up their own editorial view (if the quoted article came from a source of the same political persuasion) or to criticize an opposing paper’s account of an event. Pablo Piccato, *The Tyranny of Opinion* (Duke: 2010), 50-52.
an era known as the *Porfiriato*, he sought to strengthen the country through modernization, foreign investment, economic development, political centralization, and the military enforcement of peace. To outside observers, his presidency looked to be a transformative moment for Mexico, which had long been troubled by political and economic instability. In an interview with Díaz published in 1908, the American journalist James Creelman referred to the Mexican president as “the soldier-statesman, . . . whose iron rule has converted the warring, ignorant, superstitious and impoverished masses of Mexico, . . . into a strong, steady, peaceful, debt-paying and progressive nation.” Even critical foreign views generally saw Díaz’s regime as a necessary evil, at worst: writing in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in 1893, one American journalist described the Mexican government as “little, if at all, short of a military dictatorship,” but conceded that the “firm hand” of Díaz’s rule was overall “a blessing to his country.”

Northern Mexico, in common with other regions, was the site of vast changes under the “iron rule” of the Porfririan regime. The dramatic expansion of railroad lines opened up the previously distant and (mostly) impoverished northern states to major economic growth. The silver mining industry boomed and hundreds of thousands of migrants flocked to the region looking for work. The Mexican government also pursued large-scale agrarian expropriation, backed by military force and law, in order to open land to new development by large businesses. In the process, many peasants and agricultural workers were stripped of their livelihoods, while the Porfririan elites profited immensely. Meanwhile, the regime pursued a policy of aggressive political centralization that sought to bind local administrators, political bosses, and their

---

5 James Creelman, “President Diaz: Hero of the Americas,” *Pearson’s Magazine*, March 1908, 232; reprinted in Entrevista Díaz-Creelman (Mexico D.F.: 1963). Besides portraying Díaz’s Mexico as a stable, modern state, the Creelman interview is noted for Díaz’s declaration that he would not pursue reelection at the end of his term in 1910. Ironically, Díaz’s decision not to follow through on that promise provoked the Mexican Revolution shortly afterward, throwing the country into years of chaos.

followers to the national government instead of local communities. Laws from the 1880s and 1890s decreed that district administrators and mayors were to be appointed, rather than elected or otherwise chosen. While Mexico was officially a democracy, politics were decidedly clientelist, as intertwined networks of nepotism and bribery (with Díaz ultimately at the head) dominated the political landscape at all levels. The regime also used violence to enforce its rules. Under the commonly applied *ley fuga* (“the law of escape”), authorities were allowed to use deadly force on escaping prisoners. In practice, the *ley fuga* was frequently used by the military and police to justify killing without trial those accused of banditry or rebellion, by officially claiming that they had been shot while attempting to escape custody. With actions such as these, the regime sought to enhance state control over the previously isolated and largely independent northern region. As might be expected, the government’s actions triggered a strong response. The 1890s witnessed the outbreak and suppression of numerous revolts, of which the Tomóchic Rebellion stands out as unique due to its religious factors.7

Despite the state’s growing power, in the late 1800s it still competed with another force – religion – for power in the personal realm. While the civil wars of the mid-1800s had ended in defeat for the religious conservatives and victory for the secular liberals, Catholicism continued to play a significant role in society. Díaz’s pursuit of a détente between Church and State – for example, the government usually did not enforce secular policies against the public expression of religion – succeeded in quieting most, though not all, official religious opposition to the regime. However, especially in rural areas, religious belief often took on forms rather different than traditional Catholicism. In the absence of a strong official Church hierarchy, many people, particularly in the lower classes, followed various sects of folk Catholicism that mixed

---

Christianity with indigenous practices. Many saw signs of religious significance in everyday occurrences. Folk saints and healers, individuals who often were claimed to be in communication with god and to have a wide range of curative powers, were extremely popular and commanded widespread loyalty. For instance, Teresa Urrea was a young girl from the small town of Cabora in Sonora (the state immediately west of Chihuahua), who was believed to not only be a talented healer but also to have the power of prophecy. An estimated 200,000 people in need of guidance or healing visited her between 1889 and 1892, and (as will be discussed below) she had supporters as far away as Tomóchic in Chihuahua. Her followers venerated her as “the Saint of Cabora.”\(^8\) In contrast to the largely enthusiastic support the lower classes gave to these figures, the Catholic Church in the region considered them heretics and frequently denounced them as agents of the devil. For its part, the government viewed their large followings and occasional social criticisms with suspicion but mostly took no action; as Vanderwood notes, “if the Mexican army marched every time a Santa Teresa or a Santo del Chopeque turned up, or when the Virgin Mary appeared on a cactus or in a tree, it would constantly be on the move.”\(^9\) It would take a mass movement to capture the government’s attention, and in the early 1890s, Tomóchic provided just such an event.

Located about 60 kilometers west of Ciudad Guerrero in Chihuahua, Tomóchic was a small village of about 300 inhabitants in 1890. While the town had been founded as a Tarahumara Indian settlement based around a Jesuit mission, changing population patterns throughout the 19th Century meant that Tomóchic was largely white or mestizo by the 1890s. The town’s location on the main road midway between the important city of Guerrero and the rich Pinos Altos mines made it a profitable site for trade with mining convoys, and its valley’s


\(^9\) Vanderwood, 174-176, 177; Osorio, 102.
abundant (albeit rather rocky) land made for good agriculture and ranching, all of which combined to make the town attractive to new settlers.\(^{10}\)

However, Tomóchic was also the site of severe social tensions. In the late 1880s and early 1890s, the town was divided into two groups, a politically connected elite and a disenfranchised lower class. The former group was the smaller of the two, and contained the most wealth and political power and held the best lands. Members of this group included local political bosses Juan Ignacio Chávez and Reyes Domínguez, and Manuel Castelo, the traveling priest who tended to Tomóchic as well as many nearby towns. Both Ignacio Chávez and Domínguez had come into their positions of power through their connections with higher-ranked politicians, following the Porfirián regime’s policies of centralized government. In contrast, the second group contained most of the rest of the town. While many of them owned their own small land holdings, and one family ran a trading business, they were largely politically powerless, poor, and mostly illiterate. Many also followed of Teresa Urrea, whose cult in town was led by the brothers Cruz and Manuel Chávez (no immediate relation to Juan Ignacio). The two groups viewed each other with suspicion, in large part due to resentment over the expansion of governmental power represented by the local political bosses Domínguez and Chávez. In particular, Juan Ignacio Chávez and Cruz Chávez seem to have quarreled frequently, and the latter was known to authorities as something of a troublemaker.\(^{11}\)

Against this backdrop of class tensions, economic and environmental factors converged in the early 1890s that made rebellion almost inevitable. From the late 1880s into the 1890s, all of northern Mexico was hit by a severe drought, limiting the availability of food, raising prices, and contributing to general economic instability. The drought wasn’t the only cause of hardship,

\(^{10}\) Osorio, 86, 90-91.

\(^{11}\) Osorio, 93-99; Vanderwood 20-36; Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, 118-120.
though. As the American consul in Saltillo, Coahuila, reported on July 22, 1893, “The low price of silver has stagnated all kinds of business…, and unless the ‘white metal’ improves in value soon, it is more than probable that this country will soon suffer very severely”.\textsuperscript{12} Given the significance of mining to the region’s economy, low silver prices were devastating. In Tomóchic, these hardships soon took on a religious aspect. Cruz Chávez attempted to organize a religious procession to ask for divine intervention to end the drought. However, Juan Ignacio Chávez refused to allow Cruz to do so, citing a law against public worship beyond church grounds that was rarely enforced. Shortly afterwards, in mid-November of 1891, Cruz and many of the male followers of the cult of Santa Teresa travelled to visit two nearby minor folk saints for advice. In their absence, Juan Ignacio Chávez cancelled municipal elections for lack of voters. Tensions mounted still further when, on November 29, Manuel Castelo gave a sermon denouncing Teresa Urrea, causing Cruz and the other followers of the Teresa cult to walk out of the service. The following day, men under regional political boss Joaquín Chávez ransacked the home of one of the local followers of Teresa Urrea. This triggered two days of protest in Tomóchic, during which Cruz Chávez reportedly announced his intention to follow no law but that of God. Juan Ignacio Chávez’s inability to halt these protests led him to send a message requesting military aid.\textsuperscript{13} The stage was now set for a confrontation.

On December 7 of 1891, Tomóchic exploded into open rebellion. Fifty government troops arrived in town and became embroiled in a shootout with Cruz Chávez and his followers. Following the initial skirmish, a party of about thirty rebels fled and made their way to Cabora (ambushing and defeating a cavalry patrol on the way) over the next few weeks, hoping to meet with Teresa Urrea. After they failed to find Urrea, who seems to have purposely made herself

\textsuperscript{12} John Woessner, “Report on Cotton,” 22 July 1893, Despatches From United States Consuls In Saltillo, 1876-1906, 2-3; Vanderwood, 42.
\textsuperscript{13} Vanderwood, 44-48, 65-66; Osorio, 100-101, 104-107, 107-108.
scarce to avoid implicating herself in the rebellion, the rebels returned to Tomóchic. Finding the
town devoid of troops, the army having withdrawn, Cruz Chávez and his followers essentially
took over Tomóchic as the official political leaders renounced their positions and fled.14
Throughout the spring and summer of 1892, peace prevailed in Tomóchic as the state
government of Chihuahua sought to negotiate with the rebels; in June, the president of the state
legislature even proposed amnesty for the rebels.15

The negotiations provide insight into the exact causes of the rebellion. During their
course, the rebels gave the following complex explanation for their uprising. First, they said that
Juan Ignacio Chávez had misrepresented them when he claimed to his superiors that they had
said they would follow no law but God’s. Second, they said they were willing to follow civil
authority, but had a constitutional right to freedom of religious practice. Third, they cast their
rebellion as triggered by Joaquín Chávez’s attack on one of their members, and accused him of
misrepresenting the situation in the village to his superiors. They also argued that Joaquín
Chávez had harshly criticized their religious practices and had spread rumors about them,
claiming the villagers were responsible for an attack on a mining convoy. Fourth and last, the
rebels said they had armed themselves due to fears of forced conscription and attacks by Joaquín
Chávez.16 As the negotiator’s report makes clear, the rebellion was caused by a mixture of
interconnected political, personal, and religious causes, with the conflict between secular and
religious authority standing as particularly salient in the rebels’ minds.

However, the negotiations were in vain. Porfirio Díaz had already personally decided to
-crush the revolt as an example to other potential rebels, and was merely waiting until after his
inevitable reelection (1892 was an election year) to make his move. On the morning of

14 Katz, 21-23; Osorio, 109, 114-116, 119-120; Vanderwood, 4-6, 65-66, 131, 205-208, 211-212.
15 “Proyecto de amnistía,” El Diglo Diez y Nueve, Mexico City, 29 June 1892, 3.
16 Osorio, 120-127; Vanderwood, 212-215.
September 2, 1892, an army column of 300 troops attacked Tomóchic, which was defended by fifty to seventy-five armed rebels. In a battle that shocked the Mexican government and public, the army suffered a lopsided defeat and was forced to retreat after suffering heavy losses, leaving behind fifty-one prisoners. Despite the defeat, the military reorganized and counterattacked. In mid-October of 1892, Tomóchic was surrounded and besieged by an army of over 1,000 soldiers, supported by artillery. The resulting siege lasted ten days and was exceptionally bloody, claiming hundreds of lives on both sides before it ended on October 29, 1892, when the government troops finally overwhelmed the last few defenders. The last handful of rebels left alive, an injured Cruz Chávez among them, were executed later that day. During this final protracted battle, all of the town’s buildings save for the house of Reyes Domínguez were destroyed. All the men in town either perished in combat or were executed after being captured, while the women and children were either killed in the siege or taken prisoner.

The rebellion’s dramatic, violent climax, as well as its obvious potential as a political cause célèbre, ensured that the Tomóchic Rebellion became a major topic in contemporary Mexican newspapers. Although Tomóchic’s relative isolation and the Porfirian regime’s censorship kept the media partly in the dark for long stretches of the rebellion, news of the revolt’s bloody finale came to capture the public’s imagination in headlines across the country once reports came in. However, Mexico’s newspapers were intensely political in nature, which had an important effect on how the media depicted the rebellion. Media in the early post-independence period had largely dealt with politics, and had depended on political support to sustain itself in the absence of a large reading public. This trend continued in a form into the Porfiriato, as most newspapers relied on subsidies from the government or other political

17 Osorio, 128, 142-146; Vanderwood 235-237.
sources.\textsuperscript{19} The media’s political nature ensured that pro-government and opposition newspapers came to write about the rebellion in markedly different ways.

Although it is clear that the Tomóchic rebellion arose from myriad tensions, pro-government accounts simplified the rebellion’s causes for political reasons. The dominant pro-government press, following the government’s own lead, usually focused on the rebellion’s religious causes, and sought to portray the revolt as the work of religious fanatics. By downplaying and discrediting the rebellion’s other causes, the government and the pro-government press essentially delegitimized the rebels’ political complaints. Doing so functioned not only to deny the existence of the very real problems that had emerged in Tomóchic as a result of the Porfirian political system, but also to deter potential rebels elsewhere. This process of labeling the rebels fanatics began within the government quite early on in the rebellion: in a telegram to Díaz from December 11, 1891, the Governor of Chihuahua placed the rebellion’s cause as “pure fanaticism.” This practice continued for the duration of the rebellion. For example, in two separate telegrams from June of 1892, during the uneasy period of negotiations between rebels and government, regional administrator Silviano González repeatedly referred to the rebels as “fanatics.” The Governor of Chihuahua’s message reporting the rebels’ final defeat to Díaz in late October of 1892 did the same.\textsuperscript{20} The practice of placing the cause of the Tomóchic Rebellion as religious fanaticism began at the governmental level, and when it came to reporting on the rebellion, the pro-government press merely followed in the government’s footsteps on this matter. However, this raises the question: what did “fanaticism” mean, exactly?

\textsuperscript{19} Andrés Reséndez, Changing National Identities at the Frontier (Cambridge: 2004), 227-228; Piccato, 69.

\textsuperscript{20} Lauro Carrillo to Porfirio Díaz, 11 December 1891, reprinted in Osorio, Appendix, 249; Silviano González to Rafael Pimentel, telegram of 18 June 1892, ibid., 296; González to Pimentel, telegram of 25 June 1892, ibid., 297; Miguel Ahumada to Porfirio Díaz, telegram of 24 October 1892, ibid., 341-342; Vanderwood, 4, 136-137.
The Mexican elites’ conception of fanaticism must be explained in the context of Mexico’s dominant ideology at the time, positivism. An intensely political ideology developed by the French philosopher Auguste Comte in the mid-1800s, positivism as a doctrine held that human society developed through an ordered, scientific set of stages. The final stage was a well-ordered society that was based on the principles of science; in the end, according to Comte, religious faith would fall away, and be replaced with faith in scientific advancement. Wealth would be divided on the basis of merit: therefore, the wealthy were seen as morally and intellectually superior to the poor. Moreover, in this final positivist utopia, all members of society would recognize and accept the inherent justice and necessity of their social position.21

With its attractive promises of stability, scientific development, and the continuation of upper-class power, positivism found an audience amongst the new class of Latin American elites that came to power in the civil wars of the 1800s. These new elites, including the Mexican liberals, saw positivist ideology as a means of developing the nation and moving past the bloodshed and chaos of the previous years of instability. As the historian of Mexican positivism Leopoldo Zea puts it, “positivism was introduced into Mexico not simply as a theory, but to resolve a series of social and political problems” caused by Mexico’s years of civil war.22 Porfirio Díaz and the Mexican elites that supported his regime adopted positivism both to justify their own view of themselves as enlightened rationalists at the pinnacle of society – notably, Díaz’s elite

22 Ibid., 30-32, 22. Positivist thinking also notably took hold in Brazil, where the Canudos Rebellion of the 1890s – a backcountry revolt by a town controlled by the leader of a sect of folk Catholicism that ended in a horrific loss of life – offers an interesting comparison to the Tomóchic Rebellion. For more information, see Richard Levine’s *Vale of Tears: Revisiting the Canudos Massacre in Northeastern Brazil, 1893-1897* (Berkeley: 1992), and Euclides da Cunha’s 1902 work *Os Sertões* (known as *Rebellion in the Backlands* in its English translation).
technocratic advisers were known as científicos, meaning “scientists” – and as a means of social control.\textsuperscript{23}

In this context, fanaticism can be best understood to mean religious feelings that were seen as beyond the boundaries of normally accepted views. While most elite (and non-elite) Mexicans were Catholic, such religious practices were viewed as being well within societal norms. In contrast, “fanatical” religious sentiment was perceived as not only more extreme than the norm, but also as dangerous to society and obsolete in the newly-strengthened state. By existing beyond the constraints of normal religious belief and the control of rigid hierarchies, fanaticism was seen as a threat to the established social order and a danger to the positivist goal of a well-ordered society. Moreover, the strong religious expression associated with fanaticism carried anti-scientific connotations, which was totally antithetical to the Porfirian elites’ professed rationalism. In short, fanaticism in this context was less a word denoting strong religious belief than a term constructed by Mexican elites in order to mark “fanatics” as deranged and threatening to the general well-being of the positivist state. By calling the rebels “fanatics,” the government and the pro-government press sought to delegitimize the Tomóchic Rebellion by drawing attention away from its non-religious causes, and to cast it as the work of retrograde people who simply could not exist within the frame of positivist, Porfirian society.\textsuperscript{24}

In line with this ideological tradition, the pro-government press generally characterized the rebellion as having been caused by religious fanaticism. By the beginning of November of 1892, reports of the Tomóchic Rebellion’s bloody end began to arrive back in Mexico City, where newspapers immediately published articles detailing the events of the rebellion. One illustrative example can be found in the edition of El Siglo Diez y Nueve from November 1,

\textsuperscript{24} My analysis of the meaning of fanaticism closely follows Vanderwood. See Vanderwood, 138-139.
1892. *El Siglo Diez y Nueve* was one of Mexico’s leading newspapers of the era.\(^{25}\) While the paper had offered some opposition earlier in Díaz’s reign, notably opposing his reelection, by the 1890s it had come to be a firm supporter of the government.\(^{26}\) The article, “The Events of Tomóchic,” begins by describing Teresa Urrea as a “neuropath,” ridiculing the folk saint as suffering from mental problems. The article continues with a long extract quoted from another pro-government newspaper, *El Partido Liberal*.\(^{27}\) Throughout, the article repeatedly portrays the rebellion as due to religious zealotry; notably, the quoted section begins with the blunt sentence “The motive of the rebellion was fanaticism.” This theme is touched on repeatedly in the short article, which concludes by stating that there “has not been a political cause [of the rebellion] . . . only terrible religious fanaticism, deplorable in all respects.”\(^{28}\) The editorial intent of this article is obvious: it seeks to deny any political causes for the Tomóchic Rebellion, and to paint the rebels as religious zealots, in order to establish them as dangerous enemies of society.

Other newspaper accounts did much the same thing. On the same date, *La Patria de México*, a prominent pro-government newspaper, published two articles about the events of Tomóchic.\(^{29}\) In an editorial article titled “The Revolutions in Mexico,” the paper places the

---

\(^{25}\) As Piccato has noted, data on newspaper circulation is difficult to find and frequently inaccurate. Despite (or perhaps in part because of) the vast number of periodicals published at the time, very few papers actually sold in large numbers. Most papers of the early 1890s printed anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand copies. In this context, then, “notable” refers less to a publication’s circulation than to its reputation and to how well it was known. Piccato, 68-69, see also pg. 283, note 15.

\(^{26}\) Blanca Aguilar Plata, “La imagen de Porfirio Díaz en la prensa capitalina de su tiempo,” in *La prensa en México: Momentos y figuras relevantes, 1810-1915* (Mexico City: 1998), 145, 148, 153-154. As Aguilar Plata and Knight note, Díaz’s efforts to control the press through censorship, the financial support of pro-government publications, and the co-option of the opposition meant that many of the more moderate papers and their writers eventually came to support the government. Aguilar Plata, 143-144; Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, 39.

\(^{27}\) Authorship was frequently difficult to determine, as names were usually not given in the paper, and many that were given were pseudonyms. Piccato, 52.

\(^{28}\) “Los acontecimientos de Tomóchic,” *El Siglo Diez y Nueve*, Mexico City, 1 November 1892, 1-2.

\(^{29}\) *La Patria* seems to have followed a similar trajectory to *El Siglo Diez y Nueve* in that it gradually came to support the government during Díaz’s time in power. Aguilar Plata, 148-152.
Tomóchic Rebellion in the context of the other rebellions taking place in Mexico at the time, before roundly criticizing all of them. In particular, the article places the blame for the outbreak of violence on the “religious fanaticism” of the Tomóchic rebels. It describes the conflict as a purely religious rebellion, brought about by the rebels’ dangerous faith in the “feverish imagination” of Teresa Urrea. Furthermore, the article portrays the military’s response as necessary, to force the rebels to submit to the law. It also characterizes the Tomóchic rebels, as well as rebellion in general, as fundamentally incompatible with the modern Porfirian Mexico of progress and development:

“The recent events of Tomóchic, brought about by religious fanaticism, and their tragic outcome, demonstrate that there still exist many dreamers who hope to alter the public peace and the unshakable stability of the Supreme Government and the good sense of the people.

It is necessary to persuade oneself of this truth: the revolutions in Mexico are impossible, for today. The nation does not want more bloodshed, because it comprehends that its development depends exclusively on the conservation of the peace.”

The article argues in favor of the Porfirian government’s focus on internal stability, and tries to delegitimize any rebellion as contrary to the well-being of the entirety of the state. Meanwhile, its focus on the religious factors of the rebellion ignores its other causes. Moreover, it portrays the Tomóchic Rebellion and its violent suppression as the result of a clash between modernity and progress (represented by the Porfirian regime) on one side, and backwards, dangerous religious fanaticism on the other. The article clearly articulates a vision for Mexico as a peaceful nation, united in obedience to the state and its goal of national development and modernization. Rebellion has no place in this vision of society.

Another article from the same edition of La Patria sounds similar themes of the danger of fanaticism and its inevitable opposition to the modern state. “The Question of Tomóchic”

---

30 “Las revoluciones en México,” La Patria de México, Mexico City, 1 November 1892, 1.
describes in fairly extensive detail the last few months of the Tomóchic Rebellion, from the military’s defeat in September to the final destruction of the town. Notably, the article ends with a section praising the bravery and valor of the rebels, and states that they would have been heroes if they had been fighting against a foreign invader. However, the “if” is important. The article harshly criticizes the rebels, arguing that their “fanaticism” caused “their own death, and that of a multitude of innocent soldiers and officers.” Once again, the article contains no mention of the political or other causes of the Tomóchic Rebellion, instead putting all the focus on the religious aspects in order to depict the rebels as religious zealots. There is a bit of a morality play here, as well, with a clear lesson: the rebels’ opposition to the government and their extreme religious views sealed their own demise. Another segment also criticizes the religious practices of rural northern Mexicans, albeit in a markedly different manner. In the newspaper’s account, a pair of folk saints appeared in a town near Tomóchic during the rebellion, prophesying that the world would end shortly. This caused numerous “ignorant” locals to free their livestock, and to commit other “foolish actions that caused grave material harm,” before troops arrived to violently restore order and to prevent the spread of Tomóchic’s rebellious spirit.31 There is a fundamental tension here. On one hand, the article seeks to portray religious fanaticism as intensely dangerous – the cause not only of a violent revolt that lead to hundreds of deaths, but also of economically irrational behavior that stands against the state’s development project. On the other hand, it depicts fanaticism as an object of ridicule – something believed in only by uneducated, superstitious peasants. Through both depictions, though, the pro-government media attempts to discredit the rebels and delegitimize their rebellion, and expresses a distinctly positivist vision of Mexican society.

31 “La cuestión de Tomóchic,” ibid., 1 November 1892, 2.
Even publications that were only vaguely pro-government tended to write about the Tomóchic Rebellion in a similar manner. *El Faro* was a religious newspaper from Mexico City that catered to the small Presbyterian population. While its first edition included a brief article expressing support for Díaz, the paper more or less exclusively focused on religious issues.\(^{32}\) However, the Tomóchic Rebellion was such a popular topic in November of 1892 that even *El Faro* ran an article about it. Titled “The Scandals of Tomóchic,” the article presents the causes of the rebellion in purely religious terms, following other pro-government accounts in its descriptions of the rebels as “fanatics.” Importantly, the article ultimately blames the rebellion on priests; taking a hard-line anti-Catholic view, it argues that clerical corruption drove rural villagers into the arms of “swindler” folk saints who incited the villagers to rebellion. Finally, looking to draw a lesson from the rebellion, the article contrasts civilized centers of population like Mexico City with “distant” rural areas, where “fanaticism with all its stupid practices and great absurdities, still has not ceded an iota of terrain” to more modern views.\(^{33}\) Beyond the delegitimization of the rebels as religious fanatics, the article’s divide between the modern, cosmopolitan cities (where its readership resided) and the backward, superstitious countryside follows positivist notions of progress. Therefore, despite the differences between this account and those analyzed above, the article ultimately falls in line with the same sort of positivist ideology that informed other pro-government publications of the era.

In contrast, the opposition press in Mexico approached the Tomóchic Rebellion from an entirely different direction. As historian of the Mexican Revolution Alan Knight has noted, there was relatively little ideological opposition to Díaz in the 1890s, and that opposition was largely “sporadic and ineffectual” at best. However, despite the general lack of an effectively organized

\(^{32}\) “Al C. Presidente de la República,” *El Faro*, Mexico City, 1 January 1885, 6.

\(^{33}\) “Los escándolos de Tomóchic,” ibid., 15 November 1892, 6-7.
national opposition, such opposition did exist to an extent in the media, and largely came from two sources. The first source consisted of those referred to as “die-hard liberals” by Knight and “Jacobins” by Zea. Second, and less significant in the 1890s, there was the “perennial but passive Catholic opposition.” Consisting of those few Catholics who were not persuaded by Díaz’s détente with the Church, it accordingly offered, in contrast to the hard-line liberals, a rather more moderate opposition. Both of these groups used the media to articulate broad critiques of the Porfirian regime and to push for reform.34

The liberal opposition press mainly focused on protesting various policies and practices of the Díaz regime. It devoted itself to, in Knight’s words, “harping on the usual liberal themes,” including “the inertia of the legislature” and “the suffocation of all independent political life.”35 In 1892, for example, the liberal opposition press pushed strongly, if totally ineffectively, against Díaz’s reelection.36 It also frequently criticized the government’s repressive actions – the Tomóchic Rebellion was hardly the first uprising to be put down by the Porfirian military. At times, these themes mixed. For instance, a cartoon titled “Reelectionist Masquerade: A Procession of the Present” from the March 6, 1892 edition of the notable political satire magazine *El Hijo del Ahuizote* depicts a reelection parade as a procession of cartoonish clowns. In the middle of the pack of clowns stands a caricature of Díaz himself, brandishing an exaggeratedly oversized sword labeled “La matona,” which roughly translates to “bully.”37 The cartoon clearly not only ridicules the reelection campaign, but also criticizes the government as

---

34 Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, 39-40; Zea, 32-33. As Knight points out, organized opposition to Díaz from both secular and Catholic sources was fairly weak in the 1890s, and gained real strength only after 1900.
35 Ibid.
36 The protests that broke out in Mexico City against reelection were earnestly encouraged by the liberal opposition press, and held to be a sign that Díaz’s presidency was on the verge of defeat. Knight, 37; “Manifestación anti-reelectionista de los estudiantes,” *El Hijo del Ahuizote*, Mexico City, 10 April 1892, 7; “Ecos de la política,” cartoon, ibid., 1 May 1892, 4-5.
37 “Mascarada reelectionista,” cartoon, *El Hijo del Ahuizote*, Mexico City, 6 March 1892, 4-5.
repressive, violent, and brutal. For such criticisms, the liberal opposition paid dearly – Daniel Cabrera, the editor in chief of El Hijo del Ahuizote, spent time in prison in 1892 for his publishing activities, and he was hardly the only opposition publisher to do so. Nonetheless, the press offered the liberal opposition a space to present criticism of the government, however constrained it may have been by governmental censorship.

However, in its depictions of the Tomóchic Rebellion, the liberal opposition was also constrained by its own ideology. The liberal opposition had emerged from the same traditions as had the dominant Porfirian liberals, fighting against conservatives and monarchists in the wars of La Reforma, and had only split with the Porfirian elites over concerns about Díaz’s personal grip on power. The liberal opposition press thus tended to be harshly critical of religion. Accordingly, it faced the dilemma, when dealing with the Tomóchic Rebellion, of how to approach the rebellion’s religious aspects: while it was supportive of the rebels’ stand against the government, it could not support their religious views. Faced with this problem, the liberal opposition press tended to downplay or ignore the rebellion’s religious factors and to focus on its political causes, in order to separate the rebellion from its original context and make it a symbol more readily palatable to the liberal opposition’s ideology.

The political cartoons of El Hijo del Ahuizote serve as a clear example of this tendency to portray the rebellion as political, rather than religious, in nature. One such image, from August 27, 1893, is titled “Lost Echoes of Tomóchic and Temosáchic.” In the foreground, the winged angelic figure of “Liberty” leaps away from a lunging snake labeled “Militarism.” In the background of this scene lies the tomb of Tomóchic and Temosáchic, above which hangs a

---

38 Leopoldo Borrás, Historia del periodismo mexicano (Mexico City: 1983), 15.  
39 Zea, 32-34.  
40 Temosáchic was a town near Tomóchic noted as the site of a smaller, rather shorter rebellion in 1893 that met a similarly bloody fate. See Vanderwood, 287-289.
tattered flag labeled “Rights.” The cartoon’s direct meaning is fairly clear. It essentially states that, in the violent suppressions of the Tomóchic and Temosáchic Rebellions, the governing military regime “killed” liberty, although it is perhaps significant that liberty’s spirit seems to have lived on, dodging the serpent’s bite. It is also certainly notable that the snake strongly resembles one which, in a cartoon criticizing government censorship from May 7, 1893, was depicted as destroying the free press. Nothing in the cartoon gives any indication that Tomóchic had any religious aspect: from the tattered flag, it seems that the rebels were fighting for some abstract notion of “Rights.” The tomb’s placement in the background is also significant, as it devalues the specific rebellions in favor of the more generalized struggle of “Liberty” against militarism. Finally, the cartoon’s joining of the Tomóchic and Temosáchic Rebellions into one metaphorical tomb is clearly important, as doing so ignores the important differences between the rebellions. Doing so allows the publication to take both rebellions out of their particular circumstances in order to turn them into symbols more readily applicable to the situation of the opposition press.

Other political cartoons from El Hijo del Ahuizote follow the same pattern. “Tuxtepecan Glories” (the title refers to the Plan de Tuxtepec, which had first proclaimed Díaz president in 1876), published on January 15 of 1893, depicts a procession of military figures carrying scythes. Two of the figures carry between them a massive skull labeled “Ley Fuga,” referencing the well-known and frequently-abused law. The skull itself is wreathed in leaves labeled Silao, Papantla, Veracruz, Cuencame, Tenango, Tuto, Gruñidora, Tocuila, and Tomóchic – all of which were the locations of recent violent suppressions of unrest. The cartoon clearly portrays the

---

41 “Ecos perdidos de Tomóchic y Temosáchic,” cartoon, El Hijo del Ahuizote, Mexico City, 27 August 1893, 1.
42 “Actualidades,” ibid., 7 May 1893, 4-5.
43 “Glorias Tuxtepecanas,” ibid., 15 January 1893, 4-5.
Tomóchic Rebellion as simply part of a long string of revolts, and uses the rebellion in order to fulminate against the Porfirian regime’s use of violence. In doing so, however, it strips the rebellion of its specific context. Similarly, “Coronation in Puebla” portrays Porfirio Díaz himself, in caricature form, wearing regal dress and placing a crown labeled “Government” upon his own head. In the background of the cartoon, a cluster of buildings labeled “Tomóchic” smolders ominously. Through this cartoon, El Hijo del Ahuizote seeks to tie the Tomóchic Rebellion to the concerns of the liberal opposition – namely, that Díaz had made himself practically into a monarch – despite the fact that the rebellion itself had little to do with these issues directly.

Opposition press portrayals of the rebellion were not merely confined to El Hijo del Ahuizote, of course. El Diario del Hogar was another prominent liberal opposition newspaper, and its depictions of the rebellion largely followed the patterns laid out above. One article in particular provides an especially important window into the discourse surrounding the rebellion. Published in mid-December of 1892, “Following the Question of Tomóchic” presents a point-by-point response to an article from the Chihuahuan newspaper La Frontera that had criticized El Diario’s coverage of the rebellion. In the course of its refutations, the lengthy article makes clear El Diario’s positions on the Tomóchic Rebellion, and further demonstrates the ways in which the liberal opposition press sought to remove the rebellion from its original context. Notably, El Diario avoids describing the rebels themselves, and instead characterizes the government’s suppression of the revolt as “a crime” that harmed the nation as a whole. It goes on to tie Tomóchic into the ley fuga and forced conscription, noting that, as long as they remained, “we do not have the pride of saying that individual guarantees [e.g., individual rights]

---

44 “Coronación en Puebla,” ibid., 5 February 1893, 8.
45 Knight, 39.
Beyond the obvious connections between the rebellion and the issue of political rights, the article’s total silence on the religious aspects of the revolt seems to have been deliberate. Only the brief mention of forced conscription hints at the rebellion’s true causes, and it is overwhelmed by the rest of the article’s depiction of the uprising, which focuses on Tomóchic as a political revolt.

Perhaps the most notable depiction of the Tomóchic Rebellion in the opposition press is the novel *Tomóchic*. First published anonymously in serial form in the opposition newspaper *El Demócrata* in 1893, and later republished in several editions, *Tomóchic* was written by Heriberto Frías, a lieutenant in the Army. The novel portrays the military’s final siege of Tomóchic through the eyes of its fictional protagonist, a young lieutenant. Frías himself had taken part in the siege of Tomóchic, and was present throughout the days of bloody combat and the final destruction of the town. Shocked and horrified by the bloodshed, he wrote *Tomóchic* as an exposé of the army’s violence in crushing the revolt, despite the personal risk he ran of being sentenced to death in a court martial for his criticism. *Tomóchic*’s publication did bring about a court case, as the Porfrian regime sought to find and punish the author. However, in the ensuing trial, *El Demócrata*’s editor Joaquín Clausell refused to name Frías as the author, and was sent to prison.

Given the firestorm that it ignited, Frías’s novel is surprising for its relatively even-handed tone. In his portrayal of the rebellion, Frías focused less on rehabilitating the rebels’ image – although, as will be seen, he did that to a degree – than on using the events of the

---

47 In its various editions, the novel has also been titled *Tomóchic: Episodios de la campaña de Chihuahua, 1892*, and in its English translation, *The Battle of Tomochic: Memoirs of a Second Lieutenant*. For clarity’s sake, I will simply refer to it as *Tomóchic* in the body of the essay.
rebellion as a means of exposing what he saw to be the problems of the Porfirian regime. Frías does portray the Tomóchic rebels as motivated by their religious views. For example, in the scene where Mercado’s column first comes into contact with the rebels and is defeated, the rebels are described as shouting battle cries that condemn the soldiers as “sons of Lucifer.” Other rebel battle cries from this first encounter include “Long live Almighty God!”, “For the Holy Trinity!”, and, in a reference to Teresa Urrea, “Long live the Santa de Cabora!” Frías’s account was shaped by his own experiences on the campaign – the rebels did shout vivas to Teresa Urrea while in combat. However, Frías also portrays the motivations behind the rebellion in a more nuanced light, as well. A scene in the novel where Cruz Chávez prepares his followers for the upcoming fight emphasizes the rebellion’s religious aspects, but also notes more secular issues. As Cruz Chávez states in the imagined scene:

“[God] will destroy and send those impious sons of Satan to hell. Those who seek to govern us according to their laws deprive us of liberty! They treat us like animals. They take away our saints. They take our money and their government sends soldiers to kill us. But we are fighting for the kingdom of God…”

The passage, with its repeated invocations of God and its reference to folk saints, obviously argues that the Tomóchic rebels took their religion very seriously and considered it a major factor in their decision to rebel. However, the passage also positions the rebels as fighting for their own liberty and their own dignity. Through such complex characterization, Frías essentially argues against the portrayal of the rebels as backwards degenerates. Instead, Frías depicts them as very human, and ultimately as rather heroic in their determination. The 1906

---

50 Vanderwood, 5-6.
51 Frías, 72.
edition of the novel makes this even clearer: in a newly added chapter, Frías notes that “the fleeting instant of death had transformed Cruz [Chávez] the rogue into Cruz the hero.”

In comparison to other articles in the liberal opposition press, Tomóchic seems at most mildly critical of the Porfirian system, although it is important to remember that this same light criticism was enough to bring about the above-mentioned trial. Especially in the first edition of the novel, most of Frías’s criticisms are directed at the Mexican military. The officers, including the protagonist, are frequently portrayed as alcoholics, and are riddled with other vices as well. Somewhat hypocritically criticizing one such officer, Frías’s incompetent protagonist Miguel Mercado describes him as being “as quick with his bravado as he was to loot, proud of his vices and his ignorance, trusting in the cowardice of others more than in his own bravery.” More harshly, Frías attacks the Mexican military in general for its inefficiencies, corruption, and incompetence. As Frías writes, “[t]he small tactical errors, the pathetic vices and routines revealed the outmoded Mexican military at its worst. All of it was a symptom of an evil that resided deep within the army itself.” Given the Mexican military’s incredibly poor performance in the multiple campaigns against Tomóchic, such criticism was clearly warranted, although it was nonetheless unwanted by the government. Finally, Frías also indirectly attacked the government’s decision to kill all the rebels. With disturbing detail, Frias recounts the cremation of the dead in huge smoking piles of flesh scattered about the valley of Tomóchic; the scenes of devastation in the ruins of the town are described as being “straight out of Dante’s *Inferno*.” Through these and other scenes, Frías implicitly criticizes the Porfirian system,

---

52 Ibid., 141. For a brief discussion of the differences between the novel’s multiple editions, see Saborit, Introduction, xiv.
53 Frías, 149, 148.
54 Ibid., 139.
which had promised order and stability but sought to achieve those goals through terror and violence.

Besides the liberal opposition, the moderate Catholic opposition also molded its portrayals of the Tomóchic Rebellion to fit its own political conceptions. The evolution of portrayals of the rebellion in the publication *La Voz de México* is particularly instructive. *La Voz de México* was a notable Catholic newspaper; while its header described the publication as a “religious, political, scientific, and literary daily paper,” it is telling that “religious” comes first in the description. Indeed, the first page began with a religion section, and the edition of October 20, 1892, opened with a reprint of a papal encyclical.55 Early accounts of the Tomóchic Rebellion in *La Voz* reveal that the paper supported the government’s action. The extremely brief article “General Márquez on Campaign,” originally printed in the pro-government periodical *La Paz Pública*, was republished in *La Voz* on October 20, 1892, while the siege of Tomóchic was in progress but before much news had arrived in Mexico City. The short article states that, on October 10, General Márquez had left Chihuahua, heading in the direction of Tomóchic. It goes on to describe the rebels as “troublemakers, who will learn their lesson shortly” at the hands of the government troops.56 Here, the paper clearly takes a negative view of the rebels, and sides with the Porfirian government in viewing the revolt as harmful to the country.

Once news arrived of the rebellion’s bloody end, though, and the scope of the destruction was more evident, the newspaper changed its tone. In mid-November of 1892, *La Voz* ran an article titled “The Rebels of Tomóchic.” Quoting from the *Revista Internacional*, a newspaper from Paso del Norte (modern-day Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua), the article notes that an unnamed

---

55 *La Voz de México*, Mexico City, 20 October 1892, 1.
foreign publication claimed that the Tomóchic Rebellion had political causes, and was not the work of “pernicious fanatics” as some had claimed. The article then quotes the liberal opposition paper *El Diario del Hogar* as saying that the rebellion was provoked by the violent actions of local authorities. The multiple levels of quotation in the article, including the vague attribution to a foreign publication and the citation of a liberal opposition publication, serve as a device that allows *La Voz* to publish criticism of the government without directly implicating itself in said criticism. However, the fact that the paper ran such an article without comment suggests that it agrees with the article’s sentiments. In this manner, the moderate Catholic opposition press seized upon the Tomóchic Rebellion to denounce Porfírian politics in a roundabout way. But in doing so, it followed the liberal opposition press in ignoring the rebellion’s religious factors and making it into a political issue.

Whether they were aligned with or against the government, the Porfírian media viewed the Tomóchic Rebellion through the lens of its preconceptions and biases. The messy reality of the rebellion, with all its myriad, complex causes, was made to fit the mold of political ideology, and the uprising’s true causes were frequently obscured. Given that the rebels were largely illiterate and most were killed, the revolt entered the national memory through its portrayal by external actors, notably the media. In their portrayals, both sides not only ignored key aspects of the revolt, but also used it to take part in the national conversation (severely constricted under Díaz’s rule) over the direction of their country’s political and social development. Informed by its positivist ideology, the pro-government press depicted the rebels as little more than religious fanatics, and used the revolt as a morality tale to articulate a vision for the Mexican state as unified and obedient under the government’s programs for national modernization. In contrast, the opposition press went the other way. Turning the rebels into heroic symbols of resistance to

57 “Los sublevados de Tomóchic,” ibid., 17 November 1892, 3.
an oppressive regime, it cut the rebellion out of its original, local context, and used it to articulate national concerns, questioning the path of the nation’s development. Ultimately, the media’s discourse on the Tomóchic Rebellion sheds light on the anxieties and debate surrounding Mexico’s modernization under the Porfirian regime.
Works Cited

“Los acontecimientos de Tomóchic.” El Siglo Díez y Nueve, Mexico City, 1 November 1892.

“Actualidades.” Cartoon, El Hijo del Ahuizote, Mexico City, 7 May 1893.


“Al C. Presidente de la República.” El Faro, Mexico City, 1 January 1885.


“Coronación en Puebla.” Cartoon, El Hijo del Ahuizote, Mexico City, 5 February 1893.

“La cuestión de Tomóchic.” La Patria de México, Mexico City, 1 November 1892.

“Ecos de la política.” Cartoon, El Hijo del Ahuizote, Mexico City, 1 May 1892.

“Ecos perdidos de Tomóchic y Temosáchic.” Cartoon, El Hijo del Ahuizote, Mexico City, 27 August 1893.

“Los escándolos de Tomóchic.” El Faro, Mexico City, 15 November 1892.


“El General Márquez en campaña.” La Voz de México, Mexico City, 20 October 1892.

“Glorias Tuxtepecanas.” Cartoon, El Hijo del Ahuizote, Mexico City, 15 January 1893.


“Manifestación anti-reelectionista de los estudiantes.” *El Hijo del Ahuizote*, Mexico City, 10 April 1892.

“Mascarada reelectionista.” Cartoon, *El Hijo del Ahuizote*, Mexico City, 6 March 1892.


“Proyecto de amnistía.” *El Díglo Diez y Nueve*, Mexico City, 29 June 1892.


“Las revoluciones en México.” *La Patria de México*, Mexico City, 1 November 1892.


‘Sigue la cuestión de Tomóchic: A “La Frontera.”’ *El Diario del Hogar*, Mexico City, 21 December 1892.

“Los sublevados de Tomóchic.” *La Voz de México*, Mexico City, 17 November 1892.


*La Voz de México*, Mexico City, 20 October 1892.
