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HOMELAND CALLING: MYTHS AS MOBILIZERS OF CONFLICT IN  
THE ZAPATISTA REBELLION AND THE KOSOVO WAR

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By Catherine E. Williamson

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
completion of the Bachelor of Arts degree in International Studies  
Croft Institute for International Studies  
Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College  
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## **ABSTRACT**

How do conflict myths mobilize actors in insurgencies? This thesis aims to answer this question by exploring how insurgent leaders engage in revolutionary mythmaking in its messaging to combatants, members of the nation, and the international community, in order to incite and sustain their rebellions. I compare the Zapatista Army of National Liberation of the 1994 Zapatista rebellion and the Kosovo Liberation Army of the 1998 Kosovo war in order to examine the kinds of myths propagated in each case. This study argues that revolutionary mythmaking is not a mere feature of some insurgencies but a necessary condition for an insurgency to occur. The forces compelling fighters to take up arms, nationals to support the cause, and the international community to take interest are myths of folklore, homeland, and heroes. Unlike previous single-case studies, this thesis offers a comparative perspective that reveals commonalities in the kinds of myths propagated in insurgencies.

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## INTRODUCTION

War requires belief. For rational beings to risk life and limb in conflict, particularly in insurgencies and revolutions, they must believe in the righteousness and feasibility of their campaign. Conflict studies must pay urgent attention to the myths to which armies subscribe; these are the initial stirrings of uprising, and these sustain soldiers and supporters. In this thesis, I will examine the intersection between two distinct insurgencies and their similar deployment of myth.

In 1911, Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata rallied the peasant class of southern Mexico around a radical land reform proposal. Although the 1917 Constitution of Mexico included agrarian reform measures, they never reached the scale Zapata hoped for, nor were they ever fully implemented in the southern regions for which he fought. In 1994, an insurgent commander in the Lacandon jungle held up a gun to the light and said, “This is a weapon of peace” (Conant 2010, 25). The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) declared war against the Mexican state on New Year’s Day, 1994, to protest the relegation of the indigenous to second-class status and to advocate for regional autonomy. Their leader, Subcomandante Marcos, produced reams of writing full of historical and religious mythic significance on behalf of the insurgency.

Across the world, in 1912, the Serbian kingdom regained control of the province of Kosovo, and neighboring Albania hastily formed its own state to stave off further territorial losses; this left a Kosovar population divided between ethnic Serb and ethnic Albanian, with each group claiming the same small homeland as its own. Over time, ethnic-Albanian leaders built a parallel state in the face of increasing Serbian oppression; the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) began to form against this backdrop. A Homeland Calling fund opened in Zurich in 1993

to raise funds for the liberation of Albanian Kosovo. In the run-up to 1998, a sense of duty, a high unemployment rate, and motivating national myths led young men to join the KLA ranks. When the army held forty percent of Kosovo territory by May, resources began to pour in from the Albanian diaspora: money, weapons, recruits, and international legitimacy.

### **Research Question**

This project explores the role of myth in mobilizing conflict, particularly insurgencies against a dominant power. The study examines the types of myth insurgencies create or revive, and how they use these myths to mobilize various groups for particular aims. Specifically, I question how myths are used to rally or recruit combatants, sway the nation or nationals to the side of the insurgency, and influence the international community to confer support, legitimacy, or aid. I use two historical cases, the 1994 Zapatista rebellion in Mexico and the 1998 Kosovo war, to begin answering these questions.

In both cases, distinct ethnic, religious, and cultural identities were at play in the making of the insurgencies. How do these differing identities determine the kinds of myths created? Both conflicts saw scores of ordinary people make life-altering sacrifices in support of the war, but what made regular people fight and die for an unlikely rebellion? Both insurgencies had centuries of regional folklore from which to draw inspiration, but what myths survive and sustain troops in battle, a nation in crisis, or global observers?

These questions about revolutionary mythmaking matter now as countries in the early 2020s continue to gear up for renewed great power competition and the national security field has begun the Pivot away from terrorism toward China and Russia issues. Though the U.S. national security community has long focused on the political, economic, and military factors

shaping conflict, it has focused less analysis on the salience of founding myths and revolutionary mythoi. Despite my focus on insurgency, conflict myths matter to the most topical national security issue of today; Russia has attempted to justify its invasion of Ukraine as a reclamation of a mythical “Rus” homeland. Meanwhile, Ukraine has elevated its citizens into fighters to fend off the foreign invaders, calling upon the Ukrainian diaspora to return and fight the imperialists, outfitting each group with mythic significance tying back to Ukraine’s history and notions of independent nationhood. To fully understand today’s conflicts, we must deepen our study of conflict myths in general.

To investigate revolutionary mythmaking, this research study turns to two very different struggles from the 1990s, a period in which neoliberal globalization and liberal democracy were taking victory laps as apparent agents of permanent world change. At the same time, backyard wars and ethnic conflicts erupted as the bipolar international model fell apart. These historical cases provide insight into the importance of mythmaking to insurgencies. The Zapatista rebellion and the Kosovo conflict were clashes of competing nationalisms, homeland myths and countermyths, and new notions about the formation of polity that radicalized some actors and threatened others.

Today’s national security analysts have missed a key indicator of uprising and destabilization: competition of equally strong, equally compelling national myths. Political events in Western countries—the storming of the U.S. Capitol by far-right conspiracy theorists, the wildfire success of formerly fringe-element nationalist parties in European elections, and the increasing antipathy of left-wing youth to the capitalist nation-state—have demonstrated that more and more disillusioned citizens are willing to eschew the values that unite the nation. People are believing other myths, imagining new polities.



## **Argument**

Without the explicit propagation of nationalist myths, the moment of insurgency for the Zapatista rebellion and the Kosovo conflict could not have occurred. Although other factors influenced the preparation and execution of the insurgencies, the forces compelling fighters to take up arms, nationals to support the cause, and the international community to take note were these myths of homeland, religion, and heroes. In the Zapatista case, Subcomandante Marcos and his indigenous council relied on the myths of eternal return, animist notions of homeland, and of the noble savage in order to stage their uprising. The Kosovo Liberation Army included in its messaging, rites, and rituals the myths of martyrs, local folklore, and revenge to secure fighters and supporters, as well as Western backing. Insurgencies cannot fight without money and guns, but the inherently slim odds of success require a revolutionary mythos that can inspire ideological and material investment.

## **Methodology**

This comparative history will examine the internal and external messaging employed by the EZLN and the KLA during the run-up and course of the respective conflicts. This thesis will primarily examine the ten-year period between 1989 and 1999, with relevant evidence drawn up to six centuries prior in order to establish the durability of particular myths and grievances.

### *The Zapatistas*

My primary sources consisted of Subcomandante Marcos's communiques, addresses to the nation, and conversations with journalists. In addition, I analyzed interviews with and addresses by other Zapatista fighters and functionaries. From over 100 of Marcos's

communiques, I discarded those that did not meet at least one of the following criteria: discussed events before or during 1994, followed recurring figures such as Old Antonio, discussed the formation and planning for the insurgency, or revealed insight into the general Zapatista worldview. I excluded post-1994 communiques, Marcos's discourses on U.S. and world affairs, and many of his fables, which, though fascinating, are irrelevant to this study. These sources were analyzed and categorized by theme: historical figures, religion and animism, struggle against oppression, indigeneity, connection to homeland, and inclusivity. I included specific secondary sources based on their inclusion of these themes. For secondary sources, Jeff Conant's work on *The Poetics of Resistance* illuminated the role of poetry and symbolism in the Zapatista public relations campaign. In the sections for messaging to the nation and to the international community, *The Zapatista Reader* edited by Congressman Tom Hayden provided contemporary accounts from Mexican observers and opinion-makers.

### *The KLA*

I encountered limitations in collecting data on the KLA due to a lack of English-language material and general secrecy surrounding KLA internal operations while International Criminal Court proceedings against KLA operatives are ongoing. However, KLA programs and statements given by KLA combatants, both foot soldiers and leaders such as former President Hacim Thaci, provide insight into the workings of the KLA and how it motivated combatants. I also analyzed Albanian folklore for connections to the contemporary conflict. The analysis identified consistent themes of martyrdom, familial honor, revenge, victimization, struggle against oppression, and homeland. For secondary sources, interviews with war correspondents and other journalists were invaluable in filling information gaps, as well as academic accounts by

scholars with firsthand access to KLA leaders. These included the journalistic works of Janine di Giovanni and *PBS Frontline* correspondence, as well as the academic works of James Pettifer and Henry Perritt, among others.

### *Case selection*

The Zapatista and Kosovo cases were chosen to connect important similarities between vastly different insurgencies that occurred with a narrow time frame and were both successful to some degree. I returned to the 1990s for historical cases for a number of reasons: a postmodern time period seemingly marked by the end of history and death of meaning, during which people sought their own; the explosion of ethnic and nationalist conflict despite the supposedly unifying forces of globalization and neoliberalism; and the relative recentness of the conflicts. The inclusion of a case from Eastern Europe and a case from Latin America offer geographically distinct examples of insurgencies. The Zapatistas and the KLA come from very different political histories and ethnic, religious, and cultural identities, which their revolutionary mythoi reflect. I intended to learn what these revolutionary mythoi consisted of and if, despite their differences, there were commonalities in the way mythoi mobilized the insurgencies' success.

## CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

This project rests on several critical bodies of history and research. This literature review provides brief histories of the Chiapas and Kosovo conflicts; an overview of scholarly work on myth as it specifically relates to notions of time, history, and truth; and an overview on theories of nationalism. Drawing from these works, I define *myth* as a story or theme to which believers have ascribed symbolic importance and a quality of truth, no matter its place in reality.

### History of Zapatista Conflict

Although the 1917 Constitution of Mexico included agrarian reform measures in Article 27, the *ejido* system to expropriate commercial estates for collective cultivation never fully came to fruition in the southern regions that needed it (Schools for Chiapas).

In 1982, Mexico defaulted on its \$80 billion foreign debt, resulting from a reduction in global oil prices that hit the oil-producing regions of Mexico particularly hard, notably the southern state of Chiapas, during *la decada perdida*, the lost decade of economic turmoil (Sims and Romero 2013). In response, the International Monetary Fund approved a \$4 billion emergency loan, attaching conditions that required Mexico to eliminate its budget deficits and undertake structural economic reforms (Sims and Romero 2013). Accordingly, then-President Miguel de la Madrid implemented austerity measures and neoliberal policies that invited foreign investment and privatized national industries (Lacey 2012). Mexico joined the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) in 1986, further ensuring economic decentralization throughout the 1980s. In 1988, Carlos Salinas won the presidency, promising in vain to aid poverty-stricken states like Chiapas, where *guerrilleros* had formed small armed militia groups

during the lost decade. One of these, founded in 1983 by indigenous *campesinos* and sympathetic urban northerners, called itself the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) (Schools for Chiapas).

In 1991, the Mexican Salinas government revoked Article 27 of the Mexico Constitution, leaving indigenous *ejidos* and landholdings open to sale and privatization, confirming natives' fears (Galvez 2018, 210). American, Mexican, and Canadian trade representatives submitted the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) for ratification in their respective capitols in December 1992. In 1993, the EZLN designated a political leader, Subcomandante Marcos, and made clandestine plans to rebel against the Mexican state (Schools for Chiapas). On January 1, 1994, the morning NAFTA came into effect, the EZLN publicly declared war on the Mexican government. Approximately 3,000 armed Zapatista insurgents seized towns across Chiapas, freeing prisoners and holding city halls hostage, initiating an uprising against neoliberalism that held national and international attention long past the official January 12 ceasefire (Medhurst 2017).

### **History of Kosovo Conflict**

The Serbian empire lost control of Kosovo for the first time when the Ottoman Empire wrested control of the territory in the 1389 Battle of Kosovo Polje. Serbs believe Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović was made to choose between an earthly kingdom—Serbia—or a heavenly one (Kaser 1998). While the battle gave birth to the Serbian national myth and solidified Serbs' perception of themselves as the chosen people, the Serbian loss introduced Ottoman Muslim influence and inhabitants from modern-day Albania (di Giovanni 2003). Over the centuries, the territory gradually became more Muslim than Christian, more Albanian than Serb. The

demographic unbalance in Kosovo deepened Serbian resentment until the Serbian kingdom regained control in 1912.

In 1912, Albania hastily formed its own state to stave off further territorial losses to Serbia and Greece (di Giovanni 2003). Before, the Ottoman Empire had forbidden the teaching of the Albanian language in schools and disunified Albania by drawing borders without regard to ethnicity. As Albania became more cognizant of its own identity and national interests, the ideology of Albanian irredentism, or the creation of a “greater Albania,” took shape and grew strength (Fischer 2011). The Serbian kingdom had regained Kosovo, but the new Albanian state held reunification with the majority-Albanian province in its long-term goals. Kosovo changed hands during World War II, briefly annexed by Italy in support of Albanian irredentism, but was folded into the Yugoslav Federation along with Serbia at war’s end in 1946 (British Broadcasting Corporation 2012). The Kosovar Serb population began to control state institutions such as security services and the Communist Party, brutally repressing the ideology of Albanian irredentism and causing many Albanians to flee. (The children and grandchildren of this wave of the Albanian diaspora would eventually be among those to return to fight with the KLA.) After Serbia granted Kosovo limited autonomy in the 1960s, power shifted again—ethnic Albanians now held the majority of government jobs and the Albanian flag flew freely over the province (Petrović & Stefanović 2010). Yugoslav President Tito sharpened ethnic divides, which were occasionally devolving into violence, by redrawing the Yugoslavia Constitution in 1974, which gave Kosovo unprecedented autonomy and self-governance privileges.

Tito died in 1980, and with him the era of “Brotherhood and Unity” (di Giovanni 2003). In 1981, ethnic Albanians rioted for a better standard of living while Kosovar Serbs blamed both Belgrade and Albanian-dominated law enforcement for their second-class status (Howe 1982).

Meanwhile, Tito's death had given rise to Slobodan Milošević. During a landmark speech at Kosovo Polje, Milošević cried to a crowd of Kosovar Serbs, "No one shall ever dare beat you again!" (Milošević, 1987). The crowd reportedly shouted back, "We love you Slobodan because you hate Muslims." He rode the wave of Serbian nationalism to the Yugoslav presidency. In 1990, the Serbian parliament voted to dissolve the Kosovo government, succeeding in revoking Kosovo's autonomy and resulting in the firing of ethnic-Albanian workers (Mulaj 2008). In 1991, ethnic Albanians elected pro-independence pacifist Ibrahim Rugova to lead Kosovo, but not everyone believed nonviolence was the path forward. Quietly, in the background of Serbian oppression, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) began to form.

### **Myth and Conflict**

Joseph Campbell defines myth as metaphors of "spiritual potentiality," and identifies two types: a kind that relates a person to one's nature and the natural world, and another that is "strictly sociological" that relates a person to one's in-group or community (Campbell 1991, 28). A form of sociological myth are national and conflict myths, and these are the subject of this project.

Mircea Eliade, in his work on the myth of the eternal return, offers another definition, restricting myth to "imitation of an archetypal model" (Eliade 1949, xiv). Eliade distinguishes between the "profane," that which does not have an archetypal precedent and is not mythologized; and the "real," or those causes, events, and people that take the shape of a celebrated or odious past. This distinction invokes historical verisimilitude: the notion that there is a difference between reality, or factual accounts, and the truth, or the mythologized version. For an account to become truth, according to Tzvetan Todorov, it must be "receivable by

contemporaries” (Conant 2010, 57). Put another way, Ronald Wright defines myth as ““an arrangement of the past, real or imagined, in patterns that reinforce a culture’s deepest values”” (Conant 2010, 54). Myths help cultures “navigate through time” through *mythistory*. Robert Moss uses the term mythistory to “describe a true story of something that may or may not have happened but always is” (Moss 2009, 14). According to Eliade and Victoria Bricker, in archaic societies with oral traditions, history is divorced from linear time and “blends with myth and legend in a way that differ[s] fundamentally from the established Western view of time as an objective sequence of events that actually happened” (Conant 2010, 54). Studying mythistory, we can understand time as a cycle in which what is true matters more than what occurred.

Why does myth matter for conflict studies? Political and economic factors tip the balance in favor of conflict (weakness of the ruling party or high male youth unemployment) but myths turn discontented civilians into fighters and casualties into martyrs. The Zapatistas did not invent the noble savage, nor the KLA a martyrdom complex, but competent leadership can aggregate myths, rites, symbols, and themes to create a mythos in order to convert the range of emotions generated by pre-conflict conditions into support for their insurgency. Karl Kaser’s work demonstrates that leaders can create mythoi by co-opting or manipulating existing national myths in moments of perceived crisis or opportunity. As stated, myths exist in a liminal space, “evok[ing] a time out of time” or “a notion of time suspended” or repeated (Kaser 1998, 96). “Competing oral traditions” lead to conflict in this liminal space as communities fight for cultural dominance. Myths never exist in a neutral space, for notions of “moral and military superiority and inferiority are always implicit and usually explicit” (Kaser 1998, 97). They are reinforced through repetition, cementing the dichotomy of us versus “the other.” Repeated



“mythological remembrance reshapes the sometimes meager historical reality,” Eliade’s profane history, “and creates new, elevated reality,” our mythistory (Kaser 1998, 97).

## **Nationalism**

Umut Özkirimli offers a far-reaching critical overview in his *Theories of Nationalism*, including primordialism, modernism, and, most central to this thesis, ethnosymbolism. He first cites Ernest Renan’s poetic definition of a nation, “that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things.” Renan rejects objective characteristics—race, language, religion, geography, the like—as the defining forces of a nation; these do not create the solidarity that is the nation (Renan 2018). This solidarity is sustained through story and involves remembrance of the past’s heroic triumphs and “collective forgetting,” or even revision, of the historical events that would divide them (Renan 2018, 251).

Theories of primordialism all subscribe to the antiquity or inevitability of nations as units of organization. Nationalist primordialism contends that a sense of national belonging overrides all other belongings, and “comes with a host of temporal and spatial claims—to a unique history and destiny and a historic ‘homeland’” (Özkirimli 2020, 51). Özkirimli identifies five recurring, sequential themes throughout nationalist primordialism literature: the nation’s antiquity, its golden age, the “superiority of the national culture,” benighted periods from which the nation is destined for deliverance, and finally the arrival of the national hero who uplifts the nation (Özkirimli 2020, 52). Sociobiological primordialism associates common ethnic descent with this process; this theory defines nationalism as when “a sense of belonging to an ethnic is transformed into a demand for political autonomy or independence” (Özkirimli 2020, 55).

On the other hand, modernist theories of nationalism reject the existence of nations in antiquity and identify them as modern inventions (Özkirimli 2020, 72). Nairn's economic transformation, Hobsbawm's political transformation, and Anderson's sociocultural transformation theories provide diverging explanations for this claim. Nairn calls nationalism a cost of "the uneven development of history" since the 18<sup>th</sup> century; societies use nationalism to progress economically (seeking industrialization and wealth) by "regress[ing] culturally (drawing more deeply upon their indigenous resources, resurrecting past folk heroes and myths about themselves)" (Nairn 1975, 18). However, Hobsbawm credits the process of inventing historical traditions, using "history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion," for nationalism; he agrees that national belonging comes with more obligations than other kinds (Hobsbawm 1983, 12). However, contrary to this thesis, Hobsbawm declared that nationalism would no longer be a critical force of historical development in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century; "time and again," he wrote, nationalist movements in the 1980s and 1990s "seem to be reactions of weakness and fear, attempts to erect barricades to keep at bay the forces of the modern world" (Hobsbawm 1992, 170). Finally, Benedict Anderson credits sociocultural transformations, specifically the decline of the religious and dynastic realms, for giving rise to nations and nationalisms (Özkirimli 2020, 108). In the twilight of religious dominance, people had to reimagine—through creation, not falsification—their communities, destinies, and sense of historical time (Anderson 2006, 12). In the end of colonial empire, three institutions drove the creation of new imagined communities: the census, "representing the nature of its people;" the map, outlining the homeland; and the museum, which recorded and legitimized the nation's stories and forebears (Anderson 2006, 164).

Critiquing modernism, and most applicable to this study, is the ethnosymbolist theory of nationalism, led by scholars Anthony D. Smith and John Armstrong, which emphasizes the “role of myths, symbols, memories, values, and traditions” in the development of nationalisms (Özkirimli 2010, 143). Ethnosymbolism relies on a long span of study, reaching into antiquity to find the importance of ethnies in forming modern states. Armstrong argues that inability to communicate with other groups creates the initial recognition of a distinct ethnic belonging (Armstrong 1982). Ethnies, once formed in pre-modernity, are persistent and resilient, having formed national identities through time and “memories of golden ages, myths of origin and ethnic election, cults of heroes and ancestors,” and the claim to a homeland (Özkirimli 2020, 143).

## CHAPTER TWO: ZAPATISTA ARMY OF NATIONAL LIBERATION

### Introduction

To mobilize actors to fight, donate resources, and provide international legitimacy, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) leveraged the myths of eternal return, homeland as spiritual provider, and the noble savage in a sophisticated public relations campaign. Like its revolutionary namesake, Emiliano Zapata, the Zapatista movement found success by building a mythos around its leader's celebrity. The mythos driving the movement included elements of Mesoamerican indigenous animism, Mexican national political folklore, and Western notions of the preserved, noble savage. The animist principle that the land and its people are intimately interconnected like mother and child appears often in the Zapatista literature and reasoning. Outside that framework, the figure of Subcomandante Marcos as the second coming of Emiliano Zapata appeals to the Mexican patriot and pride. Internationally, the Zapatistas capitalized on the outsider's perspective invoking the myth of the noble savage, an out-of-time indigenous population fighting the admirable fight against neoliberalism and for the old, premodern ways. These three levels of myth each appealed to a specific kind of supporter: recruit, national, and foreigner.

Popular insurgencies rely on members' belief in the movement's potential to succeed or even to occur. Before the passionate speeches declaring imminent success comes convincing the community they have the capacity to rebel at all. The Zapatistas brought the idea of a war against the Mexican state first into the community's truth, then into its reality. Despite facing poverty and precarity, Chiapaneco respondents to a 1992 survey ranked "war" as a greater impending threat than "poverty," "disease," "deforestation," or "pollution" (Arizpe, Paz, and Velazquez 1993). A domestic worker in the state capitol "suddenly quit her job," despite having "just used

her entire Christmas bonus to buy hundreds of bandages” (Collier 2008, 1). When an interviewer asked, “You saved your own money to buy [weapons]?” EZLN fighter Ana Maria confirmed that they acquired arms “with the sacrifices of the people” (Schools for Chiapas 1994, 5). The fighters and supporters poured their personal resources into the effort because they were convinced of the movement’s feasibility. Through the mythos I will describe, the EZLN leadership made it feasible to summon the revolutionary success of Emiliano Zapata. Their mythos pronounced it possible to relive the movement, adapted for the modern day.

The EZLN enacted this mythos through the two-pronged approach Subcomandante Marcos called “the word” and “the fire,” or through the Zapatista literature and through deeds. Determining the efficacy of the Zapatista mythos involves analysis of Subcomandante Marcos’s communiques. These were delivered aloud at public gatherings, published in Mexican daily newspapers, and spread throughout the international Left, and were the principal ideological recruitment mechanism of the movement. Of the “jokes, fables, masks, dolls, songs, radio broadcasts, videos, posters, popular theater, poems, and murals” that promoted Zapatismo, Marcos’s communiques offer the roadmap to understanding the mythos (Conant 2010, 15). Taken together, “this brilliantly enacted pageant caught the hearts and imaginations of Mexican civil society and activists around the world” (Solnit 2016, 42).

In a move seen repeated throughout the insurgencies of the 1990s, the first action of the Zapatista rebellion took place on December 31, 1993: the EZLN occupation of a radio station (Conant 2010, 26). The station takeover demonstrated the awareness that the principal strength of the rebellion would be its messaging. Without the advantage of military power, insurgent movements must take control of discourse to recruit and persuade. State or hegemonic regimes wage “war against imagination” and against alternative realities; “it follows, then, that the

counteroffensive should take the form of poetry” and myth (Conant 2010, 32). Through promoting a mythos, insurgencies can take “the power to articulate one’s self, one’s community, one’s history” in the metaphorical “territory of struggle” (Conant 2010, 27). Both the Mexican state and the EZLN propagate a mythos, but the insurgency created a more successful set of stories and symbols with the complexity to shift as they “gain[ed] or los[t] moral ground and popular support or disapproval” (Conant 2010, 58).

### **Messaging to Combatants**

Activist poet John Ross wrote, “The *altos* and jungles of Chiapas have never lacked for prophets the way they have lacked for land and bread and liberty” (Ross 1995, 8). The Zapatistas protested publicly, held forums and dialogues, and distributed literature in order to recruit and rally the army. To gain land, they focused on territory; their messaging strategy relied on Mesoamerican animism, framing the denied homeland as the spiritual provider in order to revive memories of conquest and subjugation. Among other demands, the rebellion’s quest to control the land on which Chiapanecos worked, rather than face exploitation by wealthy landowners, was underscored by the animist belief that all natural objects and creatures possess a spiritual presence. Marcos mastered looping lofty political goals and religious notions back down to Earth. In the Yucatan oral tradition, the storyteller often intercedes toward the end of the tale to bring myth and reality together, to make the abstract tangible, and so listeners recognize their role in the story’s purpose (Conant 2010, 75). Marcos’s communiques reflect this tradition and create the mythistory in which his combatants feel belonging. His stories gave them a mythologized history to claim as their own, no matter the grim historical reality.

### *Cyclical time and mythical history*

The January 1 rebellion continued a long tradition of indigenous, “divinely-inspired” uprising in Chiapas (Ross 1995, 64). The first line of the EZLN’s first address to the world—“We are the product of 500 years of struggle”—has a dual meaning: Mexico’s struggle for independence against its colonial handlers, and the struggle of Mexico’s indigenous against the Mexican state for the same crimes. The non-indigenous onlooker understands the 500 years as a linear series of events, but the *campesino*-turned-EZLN combatant knows differently; time and rebellion, in the Mesoamerican tradition, are cyclical (Benjamin 2000, 423). Informed by the traditional society’s concept of time—a cyclical process, rather than a linear one—helped to radicalize Chiapas. Mexican writer and advocate Carlos Montemayor wrote that this alternative notion of time helped explain “the cultural resistance and combative capacity” of the rebels; for them, “the past is found in another dimension that continues coexisting with the present (Montemayor 2004, 115). The Mesoamerican tradition explicitly notes that the timelines of myth and history blur and converge (Benjamin 2000, 421). This convergence should not be confused with nostalgia or delusion; for the Chiapanecan indigenous, this “timelessness of myth” in conjunction with historical tradition is “woven into the rationality with which that community has to confront the world of the state and the market” (Gilly 1998, 325).

### *Homeland as spiritual provider*

Therefore, the denial of homeland brought on by Article 27’s revocation in 1992 corresponds with the theft of homeland Zapata fought against and the plunder of homeland during the Spanish Conquest; not only historically, but with the previous catastrophe’s emotional

fervor returning, strengthened. The antiquity of the land suggests the longevity of the movement.

In Marcos's telling:

“But when there is a moment of rest, which there are still, they hear another voice, not that which comes from above, but that which is carried by the wind from below and which is born in the indigenous heart of the mountains, that speaks of justice and liberty...”

In this section, Marcos illustrates how animist spirits, such as the wind, help to deliver the word of rebellion. The mountains, the homeland, itself lights the spark of dissent.

“And the oldest among the old in the community tell of a man named Zapata who rose up for his people, and his voice more than shouted, it sang, “Land and Liberty!” And these ancient men tell that Zapata never died, that he will return.”

Here, Marcos clearly indicates the myth of eternal return attached to the celebrity and leadership of Zapata. Marcos mythologizes Zapata as more than a man and makes him immortal; at the same time, he implies that Chiapas will once again return to a time of such leadership, and Zapata's spirit will return in another cycle of rebellion.

“And the oldest of the old people tell that the wind and the rain and the sun tell the *campesinos* when he must prepare the earth, when to plant and when to harvest. And they tell that hope is planted and harvested also. And the old people tell that the wind, the rain and the sun are speaking in their own way to the earth, that after so much poverty they cannot continue harvesting death, that it is time to harvest rebellion.”

The land is a living player, and readers come away feeling “that Mother Earth is seeking her revenge for centuries of abuse and crimes against” not only the land itself but the people who work it and call it home (Conant 2010, 70). Marcos's writing declares that the avenging, hopeful, rebellious spirit of their earth “will be embodied by the EZLN” (Conant 2010, 71).



## Messaging to Nationality

The Mexican state builds broad consensus through the *mestizo* Mexico myth, or promoting the idea of a racially homogeneous nation united in its blended indigenous and European origins. In marginalizing the country's ethnic diversity and its indigenous community, the *mestizo* Mexico myth aims to prevent conflicting identity-based interests from entering the national discourse. The Zapatista movement is a contrary response to this myth.

### *Zapata and Mexican history*



Preempting the government's attempt to paint the insurgents as foreign agitators, the Zapatistas established their movement as simultaneously borne of Mexican history, a struggle belonging to all Mexicans, despite being unequivocally indigenous and apart from most Mexicans' historical experience. The Zapatistas also needed to educate the Mexican citizenry about the injustices faced by the indigenous population, without undercutting their campaign to promote a shared identity. In a ceremony initiating Marcos, Comandante Tacho first presented the Subcomandante with the Mexican flag: "We are Mexicans who want to be free. This is the flag of our history" (Conant 2010, 24). Zapatismo borrowed key motifs from Mexican history in

building its mythos, selected to awaken patriotic collective memories in the mainstream Mexican consciousness. “The image of Marcos immediately invoked...that of Emiliano Zapata on horseback,” establishing Marcos as an archetypal Mexican “good revolutionary,” a memory all but obliterated by neoliberalism (Rajchenberg and Heau-Lambert 1998, 19). Casting Marcos as Zapata also served to legitimize their demands, showing that the EZLN’s aims were “nothing unheard of or extreme,” simply the same rights guaranteed to all Mexicans by the Constitution (Conant 2010, 103). A popular Zapatista slogan promoted their fight for inclusion and not special treatment: *el grito*, “*Nunca más un México sin nosotros!*” “Never again a Mexico without us!”

Ironically, the Mexican government itself proved the success of this rhetorical link to Mexico’s past: Mexico removed Zapata’s likeness from its currency later in 1994 (Conant 2010, 102). The EZLN’s propagandists held Zapata up side-by-side with the gods of Mayan antiquity, creating a syncretic national homeland myth to revise and replace a national history that had left out the indigenous.

### *Everyman hero*



The EZLN’s winning command of symbolism did not end with flags and bandoliers. The Zapatistas embodied the everyman hero myth through the symbolism of their ski masks. The ski

masks served the practical purposes of obscuring identities of actors engaged in illegal action and protecting faces from the January cold, but they were also a rhetorical weapon in the EZLN arsenal. The Zapatista movement imbued a ubiquitous object with revolutionary meaning; “suddenly, guerilla war is declared every time a ski mask appears in public in Mexico” (Conant 2010, 120). Although he joked his mask shielded him from unwanted romantic advances, Marcos hid his face to make tangible a Zapatista tenet: everyone can be Marcos. The uniform emphasized the sameness of the Zapatista fighters and lent them all the symbolic power Marcos commanded. Furthermore, anyone could show their support by donning a ski mask or wearing the symbol, a low-effort way of joining the movement. Marcos’s insistence on inclusivity, while also furthering the EZLN ideological goal of creating “a world where many worlds fit,” compounded “the illusion of seeing a historical deed live” (Paz 1994, 30). Although critics labeled them superficial stunts, “staged and with makeup,” the Zapatistas created a political theater many Mexicans wanted to watch and join, its mythos having awakened profound national memories.

### **Messaging to International Community**

Despite its policy goals, the Zapatista rebellion was not destined to become the cause célèbre of international opponents of neoliberalism. Many on the international Left believed that “Indians, like ‘backward’ peasants everywhere, had to be transformed into a subgroup of an urban industrial proletariat” (Hayden 2002, 4). On the issue of indigenous communities in all the Americas, “the Left was sorry for these Indians, but rarely in solidarity with them” (Hayden 2002, 4). The architects of the Zapatista movement, aware of this, used it to their advantage.

*The noble savage*

The EZLN, amplified by international media, revived the problematic myth of the noble savage to sway international opponents of neoliberalism to provide resources, raise awareness, and confer worldwide legitimacy and political capital. Zapatista leadership intentionally undersold the movement at times, casting themselves as simple people with simple demands, using ski masks and wooden guns as props. In its messaging, the EZLN presented an intentional caricature of Indian identity; in the communiqués, the recurring figure of Old Antonio typifies the noble savage, an oversimplified character dispensing nuanced advice. Old Antonio helps Marcos, a *ladino*, to develop an indigenous conscience. Throughout the Zapatista mythology, Marcos emphasizes dignity as one of the EZLN's chief intangible demands. The communiqués “tell stories about dignity so that we, as foreigners, can begin to grasp what it means” (Conant 2010, 99). The Indian emerges from his mysterious place in the Lacandon jungle into the light to teach benighted modernity a lesson in living well.

This old trope, despite reinforcing notions of the Indians' otherness, did ignite interest among the international Left in the Zapatista case. Chiapas provided the perfect destination for an activist vacation; the uprising drew prominent left-wing writers and cultural critics who wrote passionately in defense of the insurgents. “By using folktales, myths, [and] jokes,” the Zapatistas fulfilled “a psycho-emotional need for stories of resistance in the international left” (Conant 2010, 40). The communiqués “invite[d] the heady sympathy of the intellectual class” through Marcos's extensive allusion to the left-wing literary canon (Conant 2010, 67). The strategy was another of Marcos's balancing acts—layering in-group intellectual references over indigenous earnestness—that served to charm international onlookers into becoming Zapatista supporters.

## **Conclusion**

The Zapatista movement inspired thousands of combatants to fight and even die for the cause, and many thousands more to lend their support materially and ideologically. Even though it would fail to achieve its policy goals of land redistribution and improved conditions and autonomy in Chiapas, the two-week rebellion, with its long odds and wooden guns, cornered the Mexican government into official peace negotiations and toppled the Institutional Revolutionary Party's seventy-year political dynasty.

These results, and the January 1, 1994, moment of insurgency itself, would not have occurred without the EZLN's purposeful development and deployment of a revolutionary mythos. Zapatista leaders drew from the spiritual connection between the people and their homeland to mobilize combatants, existing national myths of Zapata and national heroism to mobilize the nation, and the notion of the noble savage to mobilize the international community. This combination ignited the insurgency.

## CHAPTER 3: KOSOVO LIBERATION ARMY

### Introduction

If the Zapatistas modeled insurgent propaganda through word, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) mastered it through deed. The Zapatistas used weapons to advance a war of political ideals; the KLA used ideals to advance a war for national sovereignty. However, both insurgencies employed a mythos startlingly similar in structure and sometimes even style. The most famous section of Gjergj Fishta's *The Highland Lute*, the Albanian nationalist epic poem that inspired KLA leaders, echoes the Zapatista's first declaration to the world:

We are the product of 500 years of struggle.	Five hundred years are now behind us,
	Since Albania the fair was taken...

The KLA also propagated a series of myths and symbols to recruit the fighter, radicalize the national, and win the support of the international community. Myths of martyrdom, an Albanian *kacak* rebel tradition, and revenge mobilized the local fighter. KLA leadership pressured Albanian and Kosovar nationals to lend their physical and monetary support through themes of exile resentment and diaspora guilt. Finally, the KLA gained international, particularly U.S., support by leveraging images of a vengeful Serbia and victimized KLA, and by framing themselves as heirs to the anti-colonialist Western freedom fighter tradition.

Studies of the KLA have to contend with “the closed inner workings of a banned underground military organization that was often dominated by myth and misinformation” even within itself (Pettifer 2012, 3). Few English translations exist of rank-and-file KLA soldier memoirs, and many KLA leaders still face international war crimes charges that prevent fuller accounts of the war from emerging. However, to uncover and clarify this mythos, I drew from dozens of journalist interviews with former KLA combatants and leaders, ex-KLA memoirs

when available in English, KLA public statements, and detailed academic accounts of KLA planning and strategy in order to identify common themes.

## **Messaging to Combatants**

### *Martyrdom*

“The Kosova Albanian campaigns of the twentieth century were built on martyrs” (Pettifer 2012, 15). Martyrdom remained the dominant myth leaders used to mobilize fighters in this Kosovo war. The death of Adem Jashari, one of the KLA’s founders, most famously catalyzed the insurgency. Active from the beginning of the Kosovo independence movement’s militarization, Jashari and his brothers evaded Serbian arrest and execution for decades until his family’s compound was surrounded, shelled for days, and destroyed in March 1998, leaving more than fifty dead, including children and other noncombatants. Rather than crippling the revolutionary cause, the spectacle of his death would move many others to action. The Jashari massacre gave local perceptions of the KLA “a sense of reality, credibility, and substance” to those who had doubted its existence (Duclos 2020, 27). Doubters now saw the linkages between the mythistorical resistance movements of the past and this new armed resistance, where before the KLA could be dismissed as incapable or irrelevant. It is important to distinguish that, instead of the typical Serb extrajudicial dissident execution, “Jashari died in battle, supposedly sacrificing himself and his family for the nation” (Duclos 2020, 27). Jashari fulfilled the Albanian resistance tradition of not allowing oneself to be taken alive in battle, also depicted in *The Highland Lute*: ““And you’ve never seen an Albanian / Blow himself up and you with him,’ / And then he set fire to the powder” (Fishta 1923, 45). Furthermore, “the conditions in which Adem Jashari died encouraged the construction of a myth of resistance situated in a national

heroic genealogy,” stretching back to Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg, the medieval martyr who led Albanian resistance against the Ottoman Turks (Duclos 2020, 27). Skanderbeg was already immortalized in Albanian oral tradition and epic, but now communities would ask folk singers, “Play us a song about Adem Jashari,” and they would; “thus the music and its dreams spread through the people” (Beqaj quoted in Perritt 2008, 21).



The KLA incorporated symbols of Jashari and Skanderbeg into its initiation rites; some fighters “took their oath to join the KLA in the Skanderbeg grave enclosure” (Pettifer 2012, 99), and new recruits at the Tirana KLA headquarters turned in their passports beneath a poster of Jashari with the words “HOMELAND IS CALLING” (di Giovanni 2003, 14). Finally, the Jashari funeral offered “an opportunity for popular mobilization and political participation that even the most tyrannical regimes find they cannot easily control,” bringing the KLA into the open in the controlled environment of public mourning, allowing the Kosovar Albanian people to



see and touch these men in uniform (Pettifer 2012, 114). Beginning with Jashari, the KLA would go on to “refer to almost every KLA casualty” as “martyrs” (Perritt 2008, 34).

### *Everyman hero*

The KLA created fighters that would become these martyrs through the myth of the everyman hero, how the KLA instilled each fighter with the confidence that their death in battle could have as much meaning as Jashari’s, no matter their position or skill. The loyalty oath, taken kneeling before the Albanian flag, declared “I will always be ready...to sacrifice even my life for the sacred interests of the Homeland” (Pettifer 2012, 64). One fighter felt “immortal for my country” (Perritt 2008, 38). Young fighters who would become casualties were made to feel “courageous and heroic, regardless of how effective they were” (Bukoshi quoted in Perritt 2008, 65).

The proliferation of personal weapons provided a tangible symbol of a fighter’s connection to the cause. “For the Albanian, the rifle was and is an ‘extension of the vertebral column’” (Pettifer 2012, 13). A fighter quipped to a journalist, “Everyone from Kosovo knows how to use a gun” (di Giovanni 2003, 17). “Obtaining a weapon” in Albanian society “is a way of asserting oneself by rejecting a posture of victimhood,” and has been since the Ottoman Turk policy of disarming Kosovar Albanians to quell political dissent (Duclos 2020, 30). The mythical symbolism of the gun also stems from the Kanun, the honor code and Albanian supplement to Sharia law that governed patriarchal clan and family relations. In more recent history, ownership of a handgun provided “an index of the relationship between Serb and Albanian in Kosova, symbolized by the money spent by Albanians on elaborately enameled and silver-embossed

guns” (Pettifer 2012, 13). The KLA fighter could transform himself from a farmer or a server or a high school student into a resistance hero of Albanian folktale by acquiring a firearm.

The KLA’s horizontal structure also reinforced the everyman hero narrative; resistance networks were “heavily fragmented into groups based primarily on acquaintances between families, colleagues, and neighbors” (Duclos 2020, 25). A high school recruit, Adnan, said: “There were no forms to fill out to join the network...You joined if you were ready, and if someone on the inside had invited you” (Duclos 2020, 25). Another fighter, named Fehmi, added, “I don’t know who our leader was, but each Thursday we would meet, give a report on the week’s work, and plan the coming week...our work was propaganda” (Duclos 2020, 25). Without a formalized hierarchy, fighters did not develop top-and-bottom rung attitudes.

#### *Kacak rebel tradition*

The kacak movement dominated Kosovar Albanian resistance from the late nineteenth century into the first decades of the twentieth: these bandits choked off supply lines, set up checkpoints, and antagonized Serbian forces as part of a larger failed uprising. Facing long odds themselves, the KLA drew inspiration from this “past of a rebellious comfort, the knowledge that however futile and unproductive their revolt, it was ‘good’ because it fell into the tradition of their predecessors, the war of a lonely man on a cold night with a handgun by the roadside” (Pettifer 2012, 20). KLA commanders mimicked the style of these earlier rebels: many “grew beards and flourished mustaches and sported a variety of local symbolic objects” (Pettifer 2012, 107). KLA strategy also largely avoided formal armed conflict, focusing on establishing checkpoints and watchtowers and conducting guerilla attacks (Bartetzko 2018). In this way, KLA declarations of Kosovo’s liberation “were a genuine symbolic coup,” intended to stir

national pride rather than describe facts on the ground (Duclos 2020, 26). Much like the kacaks, whose name derives from the Turkish for bandit or outlaw, the KLA was maligned with illicit accusations. However, “‘banditry’ to the Ottomans or to the Serbs was, of course, ‘resistance to oppression’ to the Albanians” (Perritt 2008, 39). Attempts to link the KLA with narcotrafficking only hardened local support among families whose primary interest was defending their homes and way of life. “As Hobsbawm has pointed out, the bandit flourishes in a society based on a peasantry” (Pettifer 2012, 19); subsistence farming and little to no accumulation of money persisted in the Kosovar Albanian countryside well into the late twentieth century. Resentful of the towns and cities drawing tribute and wealth from the rural areas, “local ‘Robin Hood’ traditions were ‘richly immortalized in [Kosovo] song and folklore,” and the KLA banditry strategy took inspiration from these myths fighters grew up hearing, especially in the Drenica region (Pettifer 2012, 20). Additionally, the homeland itself took on a dual strategic and mythical quality. The mountains and forests of Drenica “had provided cover to earlier rebellions, notably the kacak uprising,” and the region was harder to pacify, with its caves, winding roads, and hiding places (Boyes and Jagger 2017, 6). The mountains supported the rebels strategically and spiritually as well: “for Albanians, ‘the mountains are a refuge of liberty, democracy, and the peasant republic’” (Pettifer 2012, 16).

### *Revenge*

Closely linked to the myths surrounding martyrdom and the kacak tradition is the notion of revenge and retribution, which appears frequently in fighters’ explanations for joining the army. Families whose father figures had been killed, imprisoned, beaten, or fired by Serbian forces throughout the twentieth century held “militant capital” that encouraged them to send their sons

to fight back (Duclos 2020, 32). This militant capital, generated by a tradition of resistance to Serb oppression, collected in families and manifested as a desire for revenge.



When guerilla attacks began against police targets, potential recruits understood that “to kill a policeman was to draw blood in the revenge process, an attractive opportunity to regain honor under the dictates of the Kanun code” (Pettifer 2012, 87). Many families approved of their sons’ quest for revenge and honor and expressed pride (Kirk 2000). Journalists noted that some recruits “did not volunteer to serve, they were forced, either morally or by their families, to fight with the KLA” (di Giovanni 2003, 21). Post-war, when a PBS interviewer asked, “Do you think all this was worth it?” a former fighter responded:

“We didn’t choose the war, we didn’t want to die, but it was the only option left. Time goes by, we couldn’t afford to lose this last chance. We paid a triple price. We paid for the generation before, for us and for the generations to come...It was a difficult, unfair war, but it is worth it to die for freedom (Kirk 2000).

The mythic weight of the “triple price” led many Albanians to believe that “only rebellion and insurgency warfare were an adequate response to their repression,” other methods having failed before (Pettifer 2012, 12). Resistance became an inheritance; in particular, “the Drenica region saw itself as the Kosova Sparta where every boy was destined for war against Serb domination” (Pettifer 2012, 12). In these places, family-structured KLA recruitment was as simple as choosing to identify as belonging to the army, without necessarily receiving any KLA training or resources. One fighter who joined a clan-based KLA group claimed he “had never heard of the Jashari family before the war” (Duclos 2020, 26). However, these fighters still situated their resistance beneath the KLA banner because the KLA’s nationalist mythos matched the local mythos that motivated them. One did not need the grand national aspirations of KLA leadership to join the KLA, because the KLA propagandists constructed the national mythos around the themes of local people. The homeland “was conceived both as a space to be protected and as a nation to be preserved in the face of coercion,” making space for both motivations of KLA fighters within its ranks (Duclos 2020, 28).

### **Messaging to Nationality**

KLA leaders had to gain the critical support of the Albanian diaspora in order to procure more fighters, weapons, and funds. To win its support would require amplifying an Albanian national mythos that “coexisted with an Albanian defeatism” (Perritt 2008, 20). Failed uprisings had added to the diaspora’s numbers in the past, but the KLA cultivated the “consciousness of

potentiality,” or a belief in the capacity to rebel, through the nationalist mythos (Perritt 2008, 27). At times, the messaging to diaspora mirrored the messaging to combatants—Albanian émigré clubs were named after prominent resistance martyrs by the late 1980s (Pettifer 2012, 52)—but the need to overcome diaspora defeatism led to other themes, preying on exile resentment and a kind of survivor’s guilt. KLA leaders ramped up exile resentment, the notion that the diaspora members’ nation had been taken from them (Perritt 2008, 17). Many in the diaspora had family members that remained in Kosovo, and KLA messaging in the wake of the Jashari family massacre warned them that “one’s own family would not be safe if the status quo were allowed to continue” (Perritt 2008, 38). The poetry of Nexhat Imeraj, praising American KLA volunteers, invoked “souls burning with fire / In a foreign land” and reassured Kosovo that “heart comes to you / My beloved country” (Pettifer 2012, 79). Western fighters carried out the myth of the return of the prodigal son, having been lost in a strange and foreign land and now rightfully returning to claim their birthright nation.

The Albanian diaspora was also influenced by a kind of survivors’ guilt. Upon seeing the carnage on television or in newspapers, young Albanians’ “youthful, carefree lives” in the West stopped (Duclos 2020, 28). “I’ve got gas and electricity at home, I’ve got money and a job, but my conscience wouldn’t let me stay home and watch TV,” a fighter reported (di Giovanni 2003, 17). Kosovar fighters made direct appeals to the diaspora: when asked, “What is your message for young people everywhere?” a fighter answered, “I would tell young Albanian young people that when our country needs us we must be there, fighting for its freedom” (Kirk 2000). Diaspora guilt abroad and the resistance tradition in Kosovo created “moral dilemmas for those who chose not to fight” (Perritt 2008, 37). A diaspora Albanian recalls a conversation in which his brother said, “We cannot sit this out. Our family’s honor requires that I fight” (Perritt 2008, 42). After

reminding his brother of his lack of useful skills for the army, they found other ways to contribute to the cause. The hugely successful Homeland Calling fund relied on contributions not only from Albanian businesses and elites, but from small personal pledges derived from people's monthly income.

### **Messaging to International Community**

While the Zapatistas engaged the International Left, the KLA had its sights set on US and EU military and diplomatic intervention. In the beginning, U.S. officials declared their unwillingness to act as “the air force of the Kosovo Liberation Army” (Dobbs 1999). In 1999, US-backed NATO planes brought the end of the war through a bombing campaign on Serbian targets. In between, the KLA leadership reversed the Western perception of itself as a terrorist organization into one of freedom fighters in a just war against foreign occupation. The KLA announced its intention from the outset:

“For the sake of peace in the region, we appeal to international decision-makers and, in particular, the United States and the European Union, to exert pressure upon the [Serbian] occupants and to give their support to the just war of the Albanian people in Yugoslavia” (KLA General Staff Program, Pettifer 2012, 278).

### *Vengeful Serbia, victimized KLA*

Not only did the West reverse its position, but “NATO did not feel duped; their action didn't just loosen Milošević's grip, it also gave the alliance a mission” in the post-Cold War era and after the colossal humanitarian failure in Bosnia (Boyes and Jagger 2017, xiii). Eager not to repeat past mistakes, NATO was ready to accept the KLA narrative of a vengeful Serbia and wholly victimized KLA, a band of brothers and sisters fighting simply to defend their homeland. (In reality, evidence indicates that KLA combatants attacked Serb and Roma civilians (di

Giovanni 2003, 1). Hashim Thaci, ex-KLA political representative and former President of Kosovo, is at time of writing detained in the Hague awaiting trial for war crimes.) Proponents of intervention, ranging from the floor of the US House of Representatives to neighboring Albania, ascribed an almost holy quality to the KLA's mission. Former Albanian President Berisha called Serbian forces "barbarians" and KLA rebels "blessed." While the KLA purposefully avoided any religious affiliation, they cast themselves as the next democracy in line to shake off the chains of tyranny. "Like Churchill," Thaci "understood that the war would only be won when the Americans were drawn into the fighting by the pluck and suffering of the victim-nation" (Boyes and Jagger 2017, xiii). No doubt surrounds Serbian atrocities against Kosovar Albanian civilians. However, indictments of key KLA leaders for crimes against humanity demonstrate that the position of the KLA as purely "victim" is another myth.

### *Anticolonialism*

"The KLA belongs and will forever belong to the people. Our country must, and has a historical obligation to assist those parts of the country that have been occupied. The KLA will accept the assistance of and will cooperate closely with the international community" (KLA General Staff Program, Pettifer 2012, 278).

The KLA perpetuated the myth of Serbs as foreign occupiers through messaging emphasizing the Albanian majority, ignoring the Serbian minority that had lived in Kosovo for centuries and had once formed the majority. Inadvertently, the Milošević regime's emphasis on Serbian-ness in the province aided this perception. By changing place names and creating a parallel state for the Serb minority, the Serbian government behaved more like a new invader than the initial kingdom in the land (Perritt 2008, 30). Therefore, the KLA could frame the conflict as anticolonial, further cementing the view that the conflict would usher in democracy.



Throughout this chapter, KLA soldiers have emphasized the freedom for which they fought: freedom for their families, their denied homeland, and from general Serb repression. This attitude came from top down and bottom up, evidenced by another tenet of the KLA General Staff Program:

“The KLA struggle has a defensive and liberation character. Its goal from start to finish has not been war itself, but freedom and peace for the people. It is with this in mind that it will fight and sacrifice” (Pettifer 2012, 277).

## **Conclusion**

The KLA mobilized its combatants through myths of martyrdom, a historical rebellious tradition, and revenge. The army mobilized the wider nation and diaspora through myths of exile resentment, and finally the international community through myths of foreign occupation. Informed by local legends and Albanian folklore, inspired by old heroes and new martyrs, and sanctified with Western backing, the confluence of factors leading to the KLA’s success has been called by some observers to be as rare as “shooting stars” (Perritt 2008, 14).

Every war involves chance and luck, but the KLA’s mythic messaging to the combatants, the wider nation, and the international community revealed not only its leaders’ forethought, but local and replicable conditions that allowed myths of homeland and nationalism to take root.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I examined how myths mobilized actors in insurgencies; specifically, the ways combatants, nationals, and foreigners were influenced by conflict myths and the types of revolutionary mythoi insurgent leaders constructed. These answers are vital to understanding the development of insurgencies and provide insight into the foundations of conflict in general. I argue that the construction and deployment of a revolutionary mythos is a necessary factor in the execution of an insurgency; myths create the sense of feasibility necessary for an insurgency to occur, sustain combatants throughout their campaign, and recruit supporters at home and abroad.

The Zapatistas, through the extensive writings of Subcomandante Marcos and the movement's physical symbolism, enacted a revolutionary mythos centered around Mesoamerican animism and the homeland as a spiritual provider, the celebrity of Zapata and Marcos, and the myth of the noble savage. Four years later, the KLA, through its rites and rituals, found success in its mythos based on martyrdom and revenge, exile resentment, and foreign occupation.

Although vast differences exist between the two insurgencies, important commonalities exist as well in the kinds of myth propagated by leaders to incite and sustain conflict. The first are the outsized presence of dead heroes, their flaws forgotten and elevated to an almost godly status, in the form of Zapata and Adem Jashari. These figures, providing strategic guidance in life, offer spiritual guidance in death. Over time—just days, in Jashari's case—their symbolic capital accumulates so as to transform their memory into myth. They exist in liminal space outside of linear time; this liminality allows insurgent leaders to tap into the multigenerational emotional investment in the eternal return to the golden age.

Local folklore also played a role in both insurgencies. The Mayan and Albanian oral traditions passed down lessons that boosted morale, like the spirits of wind that carried word of the Zapatista rebellion, and shaped the battlespace, such as the Albanian folktale tenet to not allow oneself to be taken alive. In both armies, soldiers believed to some extent in the homeland not only as an object to be won, but a force fighting alongside them. Animist beliefs about the connection between the land and those who work it motivated the Zapatistas, while KLA fighters found solace as well as strategic benefit in the rough and mountainous terrain of Drenica.

Finally, the everyman hero myth mobilized both armies through both rhetoric and symbolism. Combatants in the EZLN and the KLA were mythologized as heroes, and leaders intentionally kept barriers to the status of hero low. The Zapatistas cultivated the everyman hero myth through the unifying ski mask, creating a homogeneity in which individuals embodied the symbolic power of the entire movements. The KLA connected everyman hero myth to martyrdom, emphasizing the heroism of taking the pledge, ritually or informally, a soldier took to die for the nation.

Despite distinctions in region, religion, and ethnic identity—factors that may have precluded accurate comparison of conflict in the past—these similarities demonstrate the relevance of a mythos in leading a rebel army. Revolutionary mythoi compel ordinary people turned fighters to die for their homeland.

### **Contributions of Study**

Mythmaking is understudied as a component of conflict, and this project aims to help fill this gap in scholarship. Furthermore, placing the Zapatista and KLA cases in conversation with one another offers a comparative perspective single-case studies of myth and symbol in conflict have lacked. The similarities in revolutionary mythmaking found through this comparative study

demonstrate the overarching relevance of mythmaking to insurgency at large, not as a mere feature of individual conflicts but a necessary condition for conflict to occur.

We should expect to observe future insurgencies to cultivate their symbolic resources and engage in revolutionary mythmaking. Although each rebel group has its unique identity, they will recycle elements of history and repurpose existing themes that respond to present conditions of threat, instability, and risk that motivate the early stages of insurgency.

### **Limitations of Study**

Unfortunately, I was unable to travel to Chiapas and to Kosovo in order to conduct archival research to substantiate my argument and to conduct interviews with leading figures. I was also limited by my lack of Albanian fluency, which narrowed the pool of primary sources from which to draw for the Kosovo analysis.

### **Avenues for Further Research**

Further research into myth as a mobilizing force in insurgency should take into account a wider geographic and temporal range of cases. Future studies might also inquire into the utility of studying myth in forecasting conflict; a renewed interest in revolutionary historical figures, local folklore, and other indicators of mythmaking may give an alert for potential uprising. Revolutionary mythmaking may intersect with media studies—how does the media respond to and interact with revolutionary mythoi when reporting conflict? Elevating revolutionary mythmaking in scholarship and national security analysis could lead to a deeper understanding of conflict in several fields.

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