

# Márquez's Concept of War in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

Xuan Zhao

The Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University

Zip Code: 102218

E-mail: zhaoxuanjermaine@163.com

## ABSTRACT

*One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a masterpiece by the world-class Colombian writer Marquez. The book is set against the backdrop of the history of Colombia during its first hundred years of existence, especially the War of a Thousand Days, and describes the saga of seven generations of the Buendía family and the rise and fall of the small town of Macondo over a century. Through the analysis of the section on war in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, this paper analyzes its author Márquez's concept of war and politics in the context of the real history of Columbia's hundred-year conflicts after the founding of the state. It is argued in this paper that his hatred of the early Colombian two-party politics led to a political nihilistic ideology and an aversion to war with a simple pacifist streak.

**Keywords:** *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; Márquez; the War of a Thousand Days; the concept of war.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the masterpiece of the renowned Colombian writer Marquez, is known as a magical realism novel. It introduces the legendary story of seven generations of the Buendía family against the background of the history of Colombia. Since the history of Colombia after the founding of the country was accompanied by a great deal of bipartisan struggle and civil war conflicts, the book describes the rise and fall of the small town of Macondo amid the war against the backdrop of real history, so the depiction of the war is a key part of the book. This paper analyzes the war-related parts of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and discusses the author Márquez's concept of war and politics by combining literature with history and taking into account the real history of Colombia.

## 2. ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE AND THE WAR OF A THOUSAND DAYS

### 2.1 The war in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a masterpiece of magical realism by the Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, describes the saga of seven generations of the Buendía family and the rise and fall of the small town of Macondo during the 19th and early 20th centuries in Latin

America. It presents a magnificent world of imagination with a clever blend of fantasy and reality. Political party struggles and wars run through the whole novel, which depicts at great length the impact of political party struggles and wars on the Buendía family and the town of Macondo. The war description centers around the life of Colonel Aureliano, belonging to the second generation of the Buendía family. The colonel launched the armed liberal uprising at first because he saw the tampering of votes by the Conservative Party. After numerous wars, Colonel Aureliano started to change from fighting for justice and freedom to fighting for power and dignity in the war. Later, Colonel Aureliano became a ruthless and brutal dictator, losing himself in the personal worship of the people of Macondo and the supreme power of the commander-in-chief. In the end, the colonel realized the nihilism of war and was plunged into a lost path in painful loneliness. His experience reflects the hypocrisy and corruption of politicians, the cruelty and ruthlessness of rulers, and the blind obedience and stupidity of people. The author's plotting of Aureliano reflects, to some extent, the author's personal views on war and two-party politics.

### 2.2 The War of a Thousand Days

The most important and largest war in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is the War of a Thousand Days (1899-1902). The experience of Colonel Aureliano was inextricably linked to this war. In actuality, during the

seven decades between the 1830s and the beginning of the 20th century, dozens of civil wars broke out in Colombia, resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths due to the ideological differences between the two parties. The War of a Thousand Days was the largest and most far-reaching of these wars, beginning in October 1899 and ending in November 1902, a civil war between the Colombian Conservative Party and the Liberal Party that lasted more than a thousand days and was driven by the political elite, transitioning from conventional warfare (chivalric warfare) to unconventional warfare (guerrilla warfare).

Specifically, the first war kicked off on October 17, 1889, when the Santander Liberal Party openly opposed the national government. The two most tragic battles of the War of a Thousand Days were the battles of Peralonso and Palonegro. In Peralonso, the Liberals won under the command of General Rafael Uribe Uribe. In Palonegro, the Conservatives stopped the Liberals in a war of attrition, the saddest battle of which was the siege of Cúcuta.

After the Battle of Palonegro, both the Conservatives and Liberals saw no point in continuing the battle, but the new Venezuelan president, Cipriano Castro, supported the Liberals under Rafael Uribe Uribe and deployed troops at the border, continuing the war until 1902. Ultimately, due to a mistake by the Venezuelan army, the Conservatives cut the logistical supply line from Venezuela to the Liberals. Seeing that the Liberals could not defeat the Conservatives, Rafael Uribe Uribe chose to surrender unconditionally.

On October 24, 1902, the *Neerlandia Peace Treaty* was signed at the Neerlandia Plantation. Thereafter, to protect the interests of the Panama Canal, the most brutal civil war in Colombian history ended on November 21, 1902, when the two sides signed an agreement on board the U.S. battleship Wisconsin. The war destroyed Colombia's economy, caused countless deaths and incalculable destruction everywhere, and strengthened nationalism and the desire for autonomy. It led to the victory of the government forces and the subsequent secession of Panama in 1903.

### 2.3 Literature review

There is a dividing line between literary and historical studies of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the War of a Thousand Days. Many scholars choose to study the former and analyze Márquez's writing techniques and their connotations. For instance, *The Magic Realism Interpretation of One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Wang Xin and *A Review of the Magic Realism Style of One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Zhang Xiaoqin take the magic realism writing style as a breakthrough, analyze the writing techniques such as strangeness and temporal and spatial processing modes, and summarize Márquez's significant influence on Latin American and even world literature. In addition, Chinese and foreign scholars have

also conducted historical and political studies of the historical background of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. For example, Regina Janes' *Liberals, conservatives, and bananas: Colombian politics in the fictions of Gabriel García Márquez* introduces the political background of Colombia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and analyzes the two-party Colombian politics alluded to in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. A similar study *Fiction as History: The Bananeras and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Eduardo Posada-Carbó analyzes Colombian politics by comparing the real Banana Massacre in 1928 with the description of the Banana Massacre in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to examine the veracity of historical descriptions in literature and explore the relevance of literature to historical facts. However, fewer studies have analyzed Márquez's concept of war from the perspective of the relationship between history and literary works. The truth is that the description of the War of a Thousand Days in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is both similar to and somewhat different from real history. These differences have exactly reflected the concept of war, politics, and the world of the author. Therefore, this study aims to delve into Márquez's concept of war, politics, and the world by comparing Márquez's war description with the real war.

## 3. THE DEPICTION OF WAR IN *ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE*

### 3.1 The destructive nature of war

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, war is more synonymous with disaster and chaos for residents of Macondo. As for the war, people feel confused and long for peace, thus reflecting the simple pacifist idea.

The war brought enormous direct or indirect effects on ordinary people, with many descriptions of the destructive nature of war in the book. José Arcadio is the most apparent example of persecution of people. In the name of the Liberal Party, Arcadio practiced tyranny, killing innocents and exercising totalitarianism in the town of Macondo. "He led patrols to break into houses, smashed furniture, beat women, and dragged away Don Apolinar Moscote." In the face of an attack by government troops, Jose Arcadio recklessly engaged in a hopeless physical battle with the outnumbered government troops despite the disparity in power between the two sides, resulting in the complete crushing of Macondo and heavy losses.

The book is also replete with direct descriptions of the bloody scenes. "The captain directing the attack was surprised to find only one man in shirt pants dead in the rubble, with his unloaded rifle still clutched by the arm that had been blown away from his body. His thick, woman-like hair was held at the back of his neck with a hairbrush, and a small goldfish was hanging from a scarf around his neck". This further reflects the direct physical persecution of people and the destructive nature of war.

### 3.2 People's perception of war

#### 3.2.1 The colonel's perception of war

In the early days of the War of a Thousand Days, Colonel Aureliano was always an honest, incorruptible, and humane soldier. When he was elected commander-in-chief of the Revolutionary Army of the Caribbean Coast, he refused to be promoted and promised not to change his rank until the Conservative government was overthrown. He also became close friends with Conservative General Moncada, and together they promoted a more humane war, not only by exchanging prisoners of war, but also by considering "uniting the people of both parties, eliminating the pernicious influence of the military and professional politicians, and establishing a humanitarian government that would draw on the best of the theoretical ideas of both parties."

In the middle of the war, Colonel Aureliano gradually became ruthless and turned into a machine of power. After Colonel Aureliano succeeded in occupying Macondo, he corrected the wrongs brewed by the tyranny and totalitarianism of his younger brother José Arcadio, seemingly enforcing justice, but with highly irrational behavior behind it. "The review of the land deeds was accompanied by summary trials, which were conducted by Colonel Jeri do Marques and ended with the execution of all the government army officers captured by the revolutionary forces", said Colonel Aureliano, who ordered the execution of General Moncada, who had treated the people with kindness, political integrity and dedication to his duties in Macondo. The colonel took a hard-line approach to political prisoners, executing them without distinction, regardless of neither their character and personal friendship nor whether they were Conservatives or not. In addition, the soldiers under his command saluted him as if he were a head of state, thus showing his transformation from the previous contempt for power to a seeker and enjoyer of supreme power.

Towards the end of the war, Colonel Aureliano also had difficulties trying to end the war. "He didn't realize that ending a war was much more difficult than starting it." "What was fought for victory is now fought for defeat." Colonel Aureliano spent a year negotiating terms with the government forces and another year convincing the Liberals to accept those terms, and finally even used an iron fist to suppress his former men. Facing the war, even if both the ordinary people and the political elites wanted to end it, it was far more difficult than starting the war and it had to be achieved at a bloodier and higher cost.

#### 3.2.2 Attitudes toward war among top military officials

In the late stage of the war, even many Liberal Party officials became confused about the war in the face of the distant end of the war. "Aureliano," he (Colonel Gerineldo

Márquez) sadly hit the transmitting button, "It's raining in Macondo." Colonel Gerineldo Márquez was gradually lost in solitude, which represented the same confusion among the top military officials toward the war and the same hopeless expectation of the end of the war. But Colonel Márquez received a call back from Colonel Aureliano with the desperate words "Don't be silly ... It's normal to rain in August." This showed that top military officials differed in their expectations of the end of the war. In the face of most people's longing for ending the war, war elite Colonel Aureliano continued the war ruthlessly and cruelly, regardless of their feelings.

#### 3.2.3 Perception of the war among the people of Macondo

Towards the end of the war, an increasing number of people started to change their concept of the war. From the initial support for a particular party to the final confusion, people's concept of the war changed dramatically.

One reason might be the misunderstanding of the war itself. For example, a soldier understood the meaning of war as "we are fighting this war with the clergy now so that people can even marry their own mothers", which was obviously a one-sided understanding of war. However, it was exactly such a one-sided understanding of war that supported their war behavior. Inevitably, in the later stage of the war, they would not understand why they should fight in the war because the pursuit of war was too abstract.

Another reason was the changing attitudes of the people toward those they supported.

In the beginning, the people of Macondo unconditionally supported their fellow countryman Colonel Aureliano. Visitación's last wish was even to send her inheritance to the colonel to support him in his continued fight, reflecting people's blind worship and personal admiration for the war elite. Gradually, however, the attitude of the people changed, as Úrsula, the mother of Colonel Aureliano, felt that "it was her son who was the external intruder". Faced with her son's indifference and disregard for the past, Ursula gradually realized the cruelty of the war and her war perception changed from supporting her son to expecting the war to end so that her son could return to the original state.

#### 3.2.4 Evolution of people's perception of war

In the face of the long and ongoing war, the upper and lower classes became confused about the situation of the war, and the initial enthusiasm was replaced by the simple hope for peace. In general, through the figures in his book, Márquez shows the direct and indirect persecution brought by the bloody and cruel war, and describes the blurring of people's consciousness of war and the changes in their ideology. The theme of the book, "loneliness", is

exactly one of the consequences of war. It reflects the destructive, persistent, and profound nature of war and the people's desire for peace.

### ***3.3 Comparison between the real history and One Hundred Years of Solitude***

In actuality, wars and conflicts have constantly occurred since the founding of Colombia. According to the Colombian literary scholar Holguín, 27 civil wars alone broke out during the seven decades between 1830 when Bolívar left Bogotá, and the end of the 19th century. "The War of a Thousand Days", which began in 1899, was one of the longest, cruelest, and most tragic civil wars. Nearly 100,000 people died in the war, the national economy almost collapsed, and the country's strength was severely undermined.

The town of Aracataca in Colombia, where Márquez spent his childhood, is the prototype of the town of Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and the image of Colonel Aureliano, the main character in the book, also comes from Márquez's grandfather, Colonel Nicholas Márquez. When the author was a child, his grandfather told him many anecdotes about the war, including the armed struggle launched by the Liberals against the corrupt and authoritarian Conservative government. Márquez also puts this part of history into the novel. His remarkable writing style is not achieved through an exhaustive description of a particular historical event, but mostly by shaping his understanding of reality into the richness of the characters in the book, indirectly reflecting the brutal nature of the war.

It is because of these ongoing wars and The War of a Thousand Days bringing suffering to the Colombian people that the author's ideas about the destructive nature of wars and his anti-war ideology have been strengthened. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, this is mainly reflected in the people's disgust for war and the colonel's reflection on the meaning of war.

## **4. BIPARTISAN POLITICS IN ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE**

### ***4.1 Bipartisan politics in reality***

The 1863 Constitution of Rionegro of Colombia stipulated that Colombia is a federal state. However, in the Colombian civil war of 1884, the radical liberals failed to overcome the moderate liberals (Rafael Nuñez, who was supported by the Conservative Party), which prompted the centralization faction, the extremists in the federal system, to abolish the 1863 Colombian Constitution of Rionegro and replace it with the Colombian Constitution of 1886, which kicked off the centralized political process of "regeneration". Although "regeneration" brought a brief period of peace to Colombia, it was accompanied by the formation and rise of a class of landowners who profited

from coffee exports and a conservative class of manor owners who saw control of the state administration and bureaucracy as the most natural and rapid way to preserve their position as a power elite. As a result of these internal political and economic disputes in the country, the banner of liberalism was held high everywhere and open uprisings and struggles were launched.

Unlike revolutions in other parts of Latin America and the world, Colombia's bipartisan struggle and violent conflicts resulted not from conflicting economic interests or a brutal struggle for power, but from opposing political ideals. The two-party conflict broke out for more abstract and principled reasons, but since the political ideals of both parties could not be satisfied by the flow of material wealth, this also resulted in bloodier and protracted conflicts between the two. Also, since both parties represent social and economic classes rather than a single class, this made the war more chaotic, leaving no room for compromise.

After the end of the War of a Thousand Days, the distinction of two-party politics became increasingly blurred and displayed a trend of increasing cooperation to quell social turmoil and oppose dictators. The best example can be traced back to the *Declaration of Sitges* in 1957, when the two parties reached an agreement to declare the establishment of a coalition government that would govern in turn for the next 16 years, with representatives from both parties also sharing equal seats in the cabinet, the national legislature, and provincial and municipal councils.

### ***4.2 People's perception of bipartisan politics***

#### ***4.2.1 The perception of the colonel on bi-partisan politics***

The change in Colonel Aureliano's understanding of war was a long process. During this process, his ideology shifted from clarity to confusion, and from lucidity to emptiness.

Colonel Aureliano initially chose to support the Liberals because he witnessed the Conservatives' vote tampering and led the young men of Macondo Village to take away the Conservatives' weapons, officially kicking off an armed uprising by the Liberals. Later, after Colonel Aureliano escaped from the place of execution, he launched another more than thirty armed uprisings. When he reoccupied the town of Macondo, he said that he wanted to verify the land deeds for more than 100 years, but for fear of losing the mass base by offending the landowners who supported the Liberals, he immediately stopped the verification. He also proposed that "the most important task is to expand the mass base of the war and decide what to do depending on the situation". This demonstrated that his political ideal had become corrupt and hypocritical from the ambition of pursuing freedom.

He was so absorbed in his power as commander-in-chief that he was proud and unwilling to admit defeat. On many occasions when the Liberals and Conservatives were about to reach a settlement, Colonel Aureliano would start a new war because of the unsatisfactory outcome of the negotiations. He even once thought of extending the war to the whole of Central America, going further and further down the road of armed seizure of power. He reveled in his power as commander-in-chief and was reluctant to admit defeat out of arrogance.

Since then, the purpose of the war had been transformed thoroughly. He changed from fighting for justice and freedom in the beginning to fighting for power and pride – “I just discovered that I fought for self-esteem”. Later, Colonel Aureliano was reduced to a ruthless and brutal dictator thoroughly, executing his close friend General Moncada in the name of the revolution. Those under his leadership also saluted him as if he were a head of state. Ultimately, the colonel was lost in solitude, becoming aware of the nihility and pain of war.

#### 4.2.2 Macondo People's perception of bipartisan politics

Besides the colonel, the ideology of the people in the book also tends to be a mess. For example, in the book, the Christian Conservative Party destroyed the spire of the church during the attack on the village of Macondo, but when Colonel Aureliano, a Liberal and non-Christian, returned and ordered the church to be rebuilt. The priest Nicanor sighed, “It is absurd for a defender of the Christian faith to destroy the church, while the Freemasons order it to be rebuilt.” This shows that the ideological perceptions and impressions of the people were in sharp contrast to reality. The distinction between the two parties became increasingly blurred. Eventually, “the only difference between Liberals and Conservatives was that the Liberals attended 5 p.m. Mass, while the Conservatives attended the 8 p.m. Mass.” Even quite a few people lost themselves at the end of the war and did not know why they were fighting, which was also an embodiment of the confusion of ideologies.

Beyond that, there were indeed some sober-minded people at the end of the war. When confronted with giving up Liberal principles in exchange for a broader mass base, some political advisors objected: “This is paradoxical ... If these adjustments are right, it means that the Conservative government is right. If we can expand the mass base of war through these adjustments like what you have said, that is tantamount to saying that the government has a broader mass base. Simply put, we have been fighting with all people in the country for the past nearly two decades”. However, this was dismissed by the colonel who was like being possessed by the Devil. In the war, even if some sober people tried to pull people out of the mire, they would be opposed by war elites and the majority who had been brainwashed by the war, which

reflected the helplessness of the sober people and the seriousness of ideological confusion.

#### 4.3 Comparison between two-party politics and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

In reality, the Conservative Party represented the interests of the large manor owners and was heavily authoritarian. The Liberal Party represented the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie and upheld democratic principles. Although both parties claimed to have noble political positions, they had been attacking each other for a long time out of self-interest and were not hesitant to start wars, thus bringing extremely tragic consequences to people.

Influenced by his grandfather, Márquez was at first an absolute supporter of the Liberal Party. But in the book, the author is objective, depicting the image of both General Moncada and Arcadio, who was a Liberal but killed innocent people. However, concerning the War of a Thousand Days and the Columbian Civil War, what Márquez wanted to prove was not which party was more righteous and in a better position to lead the country, but both the Liberal Party and the Conservative Party were tarred with the same brush in nature through the life of Colonel Aureliano.

The two-party politics failed to prosper the nation. On the contrary, two-party politics plunged people into dire suffering, inflicting an extremely negative impact on society.

Such a negative impact led to Marquez's antipathy toward two-party politics, generating political nihilism. In another of his works, *No One Writes to the Colonel*, the colonel, who used to be a Liberal officer, was alone, waiting for a government pension.

However, day in and day out and year in and year out, the colonel gradually turned from expectation to the tragedy of despair. This has demonstrated that everyone is a victim in two-party politics and the nature of the bipartisan struggle is nothing but a game of the political elite.

### 5. CONCLUSIONS

Through the contextual analysis, it can be known that after the founding of Columbia, with the mutual political hostility between the two parties and their level pegging strength, the ongoing wars and conflicts continuously affected the political stability and people's life in Columbia. García Márquez, the author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, incorporates his understanding of war and politics into the book based on his knowledge and analysis of this history, thereby combining reality with literary works and exactly reflecting his concept of war and politics.

Firstly, the simple pacifist concept of war. The awareness of war destruction in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the evolution of people's understanding of war have reflected the author's distaste for war and the negative impact of the Colombian civil war, especially the War of a Thousand Days on Columbia. It is exactly under such an influence that Márquez has produced a simple pacifist idea, mainly shown in his opposition to war and emphasis on peace and stability.

Secondly, the idea of political nihilism. The boring bipartisan politics, the meaningless protracted struggles and conflicts, and the significant negative impact on Colombia have aroused Márquez's aversion to political struggle, which is reflected in the book as political nihilism, such as the confusion of the colonel and the origin of solitude in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Thirdly, the relationship between politics and war. According to Márquez, the war in Colombia is the result of an essentially meaningless and nihilistic political struggle embodied only as destruction in the war. Negative effects such as killing and injury as well as the protracted political struggle have aggravated this destruction, so the essence of his concept of war is the simple pacifism from political nihilism. The love of peace, opposition to meaningless political struggles, and pursuing stability are the main ideas in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

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