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The Massacre of Corpus Thursday: A Historical Approach Through Images

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Abstract

This article examines one of the most violent episodes in Mexico's recent history—the Corpus Thursday massacre orchestrated by the Mexican government against young students on June 10, 1971. The event marked the beginning of a period known as the *guerra sucia* (dirty war), marked by the systematic repression of students and dissenting political groups by government forces. The present work advocates for “making history with photographs,” urging readers to explore the historical moment through the narratives presented by three distinct historical actors: the press, independent photographers, and the perspective of power from governmental organizations.

Keywords: history of Mexico; recent history; social history; photographs; photojournalism

Resumen

Este artículo revisa uno de los episodios más violentos en la historia reciente de México, la matanza del Jueves de Corpus orquestada por el gobierno mexicano en contra de jóvenes estudiantes el día 10 de junio de 1971. Este evento marcó el inicio del periodo conocido como guerra sucia, caracterizado por la represión sistemática ejercida hacia estudiantes y grupos políticamente disidentes por parte de las fuerzas oficiales mexicanas. Este trabajo aboga por “hacer historia con fotografías” e invita a quien lo lea a explorar este momento a través de las narrativas presentadas por tres actores históricos distintos: la prensa, los fotógrafos independientes y la perspectiva del poder desde los organismos gubernamentales.

Palabras clave: historia de México; historia reciente de México; historia social; fotografías; periodismo

In my generation, two very deep wounds were inflicted to Mexican society. One took place in 1968, on October 2. It would be absurd to say that it was society's first demand for democracy because various union organizations had called for it in previous years. But it was the first time that this struggle reached the middle class. My memories go back to 1968 and to June 10, 1971, El Halconazo. I clearly remember seeing the photographs in the newspapers. The event made a great impression on me, and, in some way, it was perhaps the first time my social conscience was rattled. On June 10, 1971, a student protest march was organized for the first time after the October 2 aggression with the object of resuming the democratic movement, and it suffered another great repression. The press demonized the students. It was at that moment

that I grew somewhat aware of the social and political situation. I was in Elementary school, and I thought: “Well, I’m a student, so I run the same risk.” On June 10th, the middle-class safety bubble in which I lived was popped.”

—Alfonso Cuarón, *Cómo se hizo Roma*, Netflix, 2019

The beginning of the twentieth century in Mexico witnessed the culmination of a sweeping armed revolution, marking the start of an extensive political transformation characterized by considerable stability. Nevertheless, this period also grew to be of substantial political cost to Mexican citizens, manifested in the establishment of a state party regime devoid of genuine political counterbalances. By the mid-twentieth century, resistance to the regime emerged through diverse struggles advocating for autonomous trade unionism and the pursuit of alternative democratic frameworks in response to the overwhelming power wielded by the national government and its corporate apparatus.

In this context, a series of profound incidents unfolded, characterized by direct state violence against citizens (Loaeza 2001, 241–259). Two notable events played a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of Mexican politics and contributing to the emergence of a more competitive party system, ultimately winding up in democratic alternation in the year 2000. These events include the infamous massacre that took place on October 2, 1968, at Tlatelolco and the ensuing repression targeting students in the San Cosme neighborhood, situated in close proximity to the city center of Mexico City during the early 1970s.¹

On June 10, 1971, a paramilitary group known as Los Halcones, organized and financed by the state and commanded by Colonel Manuel Díaz Escobar in collaboration with the police and other law enforcement agents, murdered dozens of students who were participating in a protest march organized by groups belonging to the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and the National Polytechnic Institute (IPN). The students were demanding more freedom regarding several issues in the country (Del Castillo 2021).

Students were returning to demonstrate in the streets of Mexico City for the first time after the massacre of October 2, 1968.² On this occasion they did so trusting the statement of a supposed context of “democratic opening” announced by the government of Luis Echeverría Álvarez.³

President Echeverría immediately cast himself as a victim of these events, arguing that extreme right- and left-wing groups had acted during the episode, and he called for the resignation of city’s mayor Alfonso Martínez Domínguez. He then ordered the police chief Rogelio Flores Curiel to undertake an investigation, which turned out to be superficial, collecting only a few testimonies and never reaching concrete results.⁴ However, the

¹ A solid and rigorous narrative of the political transition during the second half of the twentieth century in Mexico may be read in Meyer (2013).

² The 1968 student movement is one of the most important episodes that occurred during the second half of the twentieth century in Mexico. The founding book among the vast literature on this subject continues to be the great chronicle by Elena Poniatowska: *La noche de Tlatelolco*, published by Era in 1971.

³ The announcement of a “democratic opening” was the slogan with which the government of Luis Echeverría tried to rescue the legitimacy lost by the Mexican state after the massacre of October 2, 1968, in Tlatelolco. Externally, the regime increased its investment in higher education and maintained a progressive policy that opened the doors to exile for the citizens persecuted by the military dictatorships in Latin America. Internally, however, the government pursued political dissent and left behind a comprehensive democratic reform.

⁴ The authoritarian state that governed Mexico along the second half of the twentieth century, under the seal of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), never showed interest in conducting rigorous research on the subject. The most serious attempt was the creation of the Special Prosecutor for Social and Political Movements of the Past (FEMOSPP), which appeared in the context of the political alternation in 2001 but failed badly, producing no significant results, paralyzed by the lack of will of the Vicente Fox government, which was trapped by his commitments to the old regime.

so-called investigation fulfilled the purpose of reinforcing the official account, which cleared the government of all responsibility and gained, in the short term, the support of an important group of intellectuals, including Carlos Fuentes and Octavio Paz (Medina 1972, 45–49).

The June 10 protest has become extremely relevant in that it evidences the participation of the state in collective murder and terrorism. Moreover, governmental aggressions continued through the 1970s and 1980s, a period characterized by widespread repression supported by the Mexican government, which implemented clandestine strategies to kidnap, torture, and disappear thousands of citizens, advised by the United States and within the framework of the “cold war” and the national security doctrine (Vicente Ovalle 2019).⁵

The connection between the student repression of 1971 and the notorious dirty war is crucial for contextualizing El Halconazo in the significant period spanning the 1960s and 1970s. During those decades, the Mexican state suppressed various social movements under the pretext of anticommunism, employing political and military strategies similar to those witnessed in other Latin American countries.⁶

The official account of the June 10 aggression proclaimed that the students had been manipulated by professional agitators and that a confrontation occurred between two opposing factions whose objective was allegedly to provoke violence and sabotage the regime’s democratic opening. Despite the government’s attempts to minimize the events and control journalistic and visual information, reporters from diverse international and national media photographed the paramilitary group’s aggression. Those reporters who were within reach of the government were harassed, and many experienced government repression. The journalistic coverage was in fact strictly controlled by the traditional channels of censorship in force during those years. However, a powerful and diverse graphic record slowly became available, which questioned the official story and leaned toward other suppositions and possible explanations of the events.⁷

Given the above and the fact that critical historiography of the event has not paid due attention to visual documents, it is of utmost importance to consider the contribution of photography in studying these issues.⁸

Indeed, historiography has lately reevaluated the use of images, and especially photographs, which are considered part of a cultural code that can be read and interpreted in specific historical contexts.⁹

⁵ The concept of cold war is very important, since the repression of June 10 is totally inscribed within it. Regarding this concept, the historian Lorenzo Meyer (2013, 22) understands it as “national or regional scenarios of what was an enormous political, economic, military and cultural conflict between the two nuclear superpowers of the time: the United States and the Soviet Union and their respective political and ideological systems: capitalism and socialism.”

⁶ The so-called dirty war is a subject of great importance in recent history. This has been reviewed in Mexico by a number of authors, among which Julio Scherer and Carlos Monsiváis (2004), José Luis Sierra (2006), Carlos Montemayor (2010), Claudia Rangel and Evangelina Sánchez (2015), and Rodolfo Garmíño (2017) are worth mentioning.

⁷ The writing of this article is based on consulting several archives in Mexico City: the review of the newspapers *Excelsior*, *El Heraldo de México*, *La Prensa*, *El Día*, *El Universal* as well as the journal *¿Por qué?* at Lerdo library, and the collection of the Federal Board of Security in the General Archive of the Nation (AGN).

⁸ Regarding documentary productions, the work by Carlos Mendoza and Canal 6 de Julio entitled *Halcones: Terrorismo de Estado* (2006) stands out. It explores several archives and oral testimonies about the June 10 repression and offers a rigorous explanation, as well as expressly identifying the main commanders involved by name and the participation of the United States in the episode.

⁹ The historical reading of the photographs includes different perspectives, ranging from semiotics to art history. In this regard, we are in dialogue with a rich Latin American tradition that for more than four decades has been interpreting photographs and relating them to their respective texts. See authors such as Boris Kosoy in Brazil, Cora Gamarnik in Argentina, and Rebeca Monroy in Mexico, among others.

In this regard, the use of images, their circulation and reception at that juncture, and their resignification in the following decades is a topic of enormous importance for approaching both the understanding of the events and the analysis of the processes of constructing a collective memory that permeates the political and cultural reality of current Mexico.

A general review of the photographic materials of June 10, 1971, begins as follows. The photos are discussed in connection with the episode. In this context, following the photographs allows us to rethink our present and assess how the June 10 outrage has been mixed with Mexican society's subsequent political and social demands and has contributed to the construction of a more democratic society and a justified claim for social rights.

It is also a significant episode tied to the history of photojournalism in mid-twentieth-century Mexico, generating substantial consequences for the latter half of the century. In 1971, a group of highly skilled photographers emerged, and their technical aptitudes laid the foundation for a revitalization of this genre in Mexico in the subsequent decades. This ultimately paved the way for the emergence of a new era of photojournalism in the 1980s, characterized by works that blended aesthetic elements with high-quality news coverage.¹⁰

This article explores three crucial levels of image representation, enabling us to formulate an initial framework for reevaluating the June 10 massacre through novel sources and perspectives. These levels consist of different views generated from different sources. The first is the view of the official story published by the press, which generated a state-controlled discourse. The second is the outlook of independent photographers, who marked a certain distance from the government, building an alternative point of view of growing relevance in ensuing years in the collective memory. The third level of representation is intricately connected to power, which produces its own documentation of the events. Initially wielded against the protesters, this documentation now, after several decades, furnishes crucial elements for reconstructing the authoritarian discourse from an internal perspective. Examining each of these levels permits us to revisit the June 10 coverage from diverse vantage points. This retrospective approach, five decades later, enhances the analysis of one of the most significant events in recent Mexican history.

This case study of Mexican history enables us to develop an understanding of the recent history of Latin America, as it encapsulates elements of a state crime violating human rights through the orchestration of power and the coordination of legal and covert forces of order. The modus operandi is similar to that employed by various military dictatorships in the latter half of the twentieth century, including Guatemala, Nicaragua, Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil, among others, constituting a period commonly referred to in Mexico as the "dirty war." This comparative perspective allows us to explore the episode in Mexican political history, revealing both ruptures and continuities with other countries across Latin America.

First level: The press

In 1971, the press found itself subordinated to the state's interests, leading the state to intervene in content. This interference occurred for the mutual convenience of both entities and through a system of corruption established during the regime of Miguel Alemán (1946–1952) and refined by subsequent governments.

¹⁰ Relevant research on the history of photojournalism at the second half of twentieth century includes Mraz (1994), Del Castillo (2020), Elsie McPhail (2020), and Monroy, Gautreau, and Del Castillo (2022).

The first level of analysis is a critical review of the photographs appearing in newspapers and journals of the time. In this context, the government's aggression extended beyond students. It not only targeted citizens but also specifically focused on journalists and photojournalists who, in their response to the highest authorities in the country, unequivocally conveyed in the public sphere the existence of Los Halcones. These individuals emphasized that Los Halcones were guilty of a massacre, implicating the army, grenadiers, and police as complicit.¹¹

Unlike October 2, 1968, when governmental agents executed orders at night to confiscate most newspapers' photographic coverage, on the afternoon of June 10, 1971, the destruction of documents by the government took place simultaneous to the aggression, and in the same streets. It was perpetrated by the Halcones against reporters and provoked a generalized feeling of blatant indignation among journalists and in newspaper offices in the face of the exceeding violence (Del Castillo 2012, 57–71).

These circumstances signified that media coverage extended its influence even into official realms, such as the Association of Graphic Reporters. This association lodged complaints with the city's mayor and the president of the Republic, condemning the brutality and aggression of the paramilitary group. The association highlighted that the group had operated with the tacit approval of the police, underscoring the documentary significance of photographic images as a foundational basis for challenging official narratives (Medina 1972, 67–68). These statements were published in some newspapers and became part of the public opinion map of the situation. However, the official story insisted on an internal conflict between two student factions.

The photographs do not directly reflect the facts to which they refer, so do not by themselves constitute documentary evidence that things happened in a certain way; in fact, they require context for us to trace some clues and build a series of signs around the information we are looking for (Mraz 2018). The photojournalistic coverage that afternoon was very extensive and occupied different spaces in the media. There are several indications of the government's interest in hindering photographers' work in an attempt to reduce their influence on public opinion.

It is probable that, given this, the Halcones were particularly cruel to cameramen and photographers, threatening them and savagely attacking them. A first look at the group of journalists who were attacked underlines their ideological diversity; they were of all possible political fields, from critical and independent media to others completely aligned with the coordinates of power.¹²

Public condemnation and outrage regarding the attack on the photographers' guild occupied significant space in the newspapers, which enhanced the consequences of the episode in public opinion. It also introduced a certain dose of criticism in the version of certain reporters who had covered similar conflicts in previous years, particularly during the student protest of 1968 and knew the strategy, the *modus operandi*, and the profile of this type of aggression.¹³

¹¹ The grenadiers were a special militarized Mexican police force assigned to deal with and repress public demonstrations. This group was created by President Lázaro Cárdenas in 1938 and eliminated in 2018.

¹² Among the injured journalists are Miguel Rodríguez and Raúl Pedraza, photographers from *Novedades*; Victor Payán and Fernando Aranzábal, from *Excelsior*; Armando Mendoza and Óscar Domínguez, from *La Prensa*; Ricardo Poery Cervantes, from *El Día*; Alfonso Carrillo, from *El Nacional*; Ricardo Cámara, cameraman for *Channel 2*; Félix Arciniegas, from *The News*; Gabriel Benítez, from *El Heraldo de México*; Manuel Sevilla and Raúl Peraza, from *El Universal*; Ariel Castellero, from *TV Producciones Excelsior*; Marlyse Simmons, from the *Washington Post*; and Anthony Halik, from NBC (*Excelsior* 1971, 1–2).

¹³ Among other 1968 photographers who continued to work during the Halconazo of 1971 episode, it is worth mentioning Aarón Sánchez, Porfirio Cuautle, Francisco Picco, Enrique Metinides, Daniel Soto, Armando Lenin Salgado and Enrique Bordes Mangel, just to name a few.

This significant point distinguishes the coverage of June 10 from other confrontations that occurred in the country's recent history, such as the one on October 2, the Tlatelolco massacre. Among the many differences in this coverage related to Tlatelolco, it can be established that in 1968, the authoritarian political regime ended the citizen rebellion with a single blow, while three years later, the same regime sought to generate a certain renewal in its discourse to restore some of the legitimacy it had lost in 1968.

In this sense, if in 1968 the Tlatelolco massacre occurred in an enclosed square, ideal for allowing repression to occur, then in 1971 the massacre occurred in an open space, in the streets close to the city center. There were multiple testimonies from neighbors and residents that a team of photojournalists was a visible target of the aggression, which generated an immediate reaction among photojournalists.

In this context, it is worth mentioning two of the most representative examples of this first visual horizon. The first case includes two of the most important photos published in the popular newspaper *La Prensa* about the events of June 10.¹⁴

The first one (Figure 1) shows a long shot of the arrival of a group of forty or fifty repressors with their sticks and rods, ready to start the attack. The sharpness of the shot allows a close look at gestures and faces, which makes this photograph an important document for the study of this group and the rescue of its social and economic profile.

On the left side of the image, three members of Los Halcones are about to strike a photographer who is carrying his bag, on the left side, and manages to see one of his aggressors. In the back, a man who appears behind a car observes the scene from the front, as a simple witness of the events. Careful observation reveals that the entire upper half is occupied by a series of commercial premises and residential buildings that are characteristic of the area, as well as a traffic light on the left and the row of light poles that extend to the back, all of which indicate the urban setting.

The caption provides a broad description of the facts, giving rise to a story that defines the newspaper's version and serves as an anchor to read the image within the coordinates of the government story. The headline "Student Scuffle" contextualizes the news content of the newspaper but does not define the content of the image; rather, it distorts it: more than a "scuffle," what occurs in the photograph is the aggression of a group of armed youths against citizens.

The second photograph (Figure 2) occupies the back cover of the newspaper that same June 11 and shows three young men from the Halcones beating two students with their sticks. The caption is aligned with the official story and indicates that the confrontation is one of two groups of students. The same photograph went around the world and was published in newspapers such as *El Popular* from Uruguay, where it was reported that it shows three members of Los Halcones beating defenseless students. Australia's *Canberra Times* pointed out that the armed individuals belonged to ultra-right groups. As shown, this is a very significant example of how the same image can give rise to three different interpretations in different contexts.¹⁵

The second case refers to the government's response in the days right after the massacre and its ability to build a hegemonic discourse that achieved a collective consensus. Indeed, between June 12 and 14, the Echeverría government declared itself innocent of the facts and positioned itself in public opinion as a victim of what it described

¹⁴ *La Prensa* had among the highest circulation in those years. It represented a point of view very close to the government and built a very attractive graphic proposal aimed at the most popular sectors. It was used by President Echeverría to send messages against his opponents or to point the way forward to different social sectors. It is a media space with a fairly important political load that used photographic language as one of its most relevant propaganda strategies.

¹⁵ The publication of this photograph in the newspapers *El Popular* and the *Canberra Times* was filed in the Historical Archive Genaro Estrada of the Secretary of Foreign Relations in Mexico City. In 1971 the Mexican government located the photos of the Halconazo published around the world through the embassies.



Figure 1. Los Halcones. *La Prensa*, June 11, 1971. Lerdo Library/SHCP.

as the “extremism” of leftist and rightist groups (*El Heraldo de México* 1971, 1). On June 14, just three days after the massacre, the government organized a giant rally in support of the president in front of the National Palace, the seat of power. It convened various unions and peasant organizations that applauded and cheered Echeverría. The press massively publicized this event and positioned it in the public opinion as a true refounding of the nation (*La Prensa* 1971, 1).



Figure 2. The repression of the students. *La Prensa*, June 11, 1971. Lerdo Library/SHCP.

The strategy of most of the press focused on showing the figure of the nation's leader with the support of his people. Obviously, the only point of view chosen was that of power itself.

In the case of *El Heraldo de México*, a conservative newspaper very close to the government with an anticommunist bent, the defense of the president's positions and point of view was also published immediately.¹⁶ The main photograph that occupied the upper part of the front page of this newspaper is a large general shot taken with a wide-angle lens from one of the balconies of the National Palace, which shows us the view of the president during that episode (Figure 3). The photograph shows some of the banners and

¹⁶ *El Heraldo de México* was edited by Gabriel Alarcón, a businessman very close to power, who condemned from the journalistic tribune the critical proposals of the opposition and at the same time opened very important editorial space for photography in the pages of the newspaper.



Figure 3. "The meeting of President Luis Echeverría." *El Herald de México*, June 15, 1971. Lerdo Library/SHCP.

posters of the popular contingents that packed the Zócalo, among them peasant organizations and the workers' unions, including the powerful oil workers.

The majestic architecture of the metropolitan cathedral looms large on the right side of the photograph, lending an air of solemnity to the moment. In the upper left of the image,

a box shows the photograph of Luis Echeverría from behind, addressing the crowd from the National Palace, which is out of focus to highlight the presidential figure. The other element that contributes to this distinction is represented by a television camera that records the events just behind the president. It is notable that the editor of the newspaper could have hidden the camera in the image but chose to include it in the frame to strengthen the presence of the politician, thus showing the historical and media character of the entire episode.

In short, the press of those years was controlled by the state, and it reinforced the official narrative, according to which students themselves, manipulated by right- and left-wing organizations, had quarreled with one another, resulting in several deaths and several dozen young people injured.

Despite the testimonies of attacked journalists, the government obtained consensus among various social sectors through journalistic coverage that stayed close to the official perspective. The official narrative thus constructed the image of a group of manipulated students who used violence and that of a president who recovered his strength through popular support. This version was, on the one hand, questioned by publications of the independent photographers and, on the other hand, complemented by the perspective of the agents of the state services, as will be explained subsequently.

Second level: Independent photographers

Another significant group of images is from independent photographers, or those who did not work regularly for a media outlet. Many of them saved their negatives to later diffuse them in spaces not controlled by the state or sold their images to local journals or international agencies, among many other options.

The most outstanding case of this group is that of Armando Salgado (1938–2018), who covered the events from various angles. Salgado collaborated with a left-wing magazine called *¿Por qué?*, which had gained enormous prestige among progressive sectors for its critical posture. Salgado published in this and other international media some of his photographs that became icons of the episode.

By 1971, Salgado had built an important career in the coverage of Latin American social movements, which ranged from photographing the student movement of 1968 to covering the *guerrilla* in Colombia for the Mexican magazine *Sucesos* at the end of the 1960s. Salgado himself provides the context of his coverage of El Halconazo in his autobiographical book *Memorias*. The photographer recounts there that on June 10, 1971, he returned to Mexico City from Guerrero, where he had conducted a clandestine interview with the legendary guerrilla fighter Genaro Vázquez, of whom he took photographs in the mountains that were published in different media, immediately attracting the attention of state intelligence services.¹⁷

Under these circumstances, Salgado arrived in Mexico City's San Cosme neighborhood to cover the afternoon march of June 10. He barely had time to park his motorcycle inside the garage of a nearby building, since the first groups of students were advancing along the streets near the National Teachers' School. During this first stage, he managed to capture several scenes that clearly show the identity of the repressors.

Salgado is the author of the image that eventually became the iconic image of June 10. This image shows in the foreground one of the Halcones in a full race down the median of an avenue, holding a kendo stick with both hands and uttering a battle cry, while in the background about twenty members of the group run after him (Figure 4).

¹⁷ Genaro Vázquez and Lucio Cabañas are the two most famous guerrilla fighters of the second half of the twentieth century (Salgado 2010, 35–53).



Figure 4. Cover of the magazine *¿Por qué?*, June 10, 1971, by Armando Salgado. Personal collection of the author.

The photo was published on the back cover of the magazine *¿Por qué?*, at that time directed by Roger Menéndez, despite the recent imprisonment of his brother Mario, who had critically covered the student protest and the massacre of October 2, 1968, which turned Mario into a benchmark for future student generations (*¿Por qué?* 1968). With this context in tow, the publication of Salgado's photo in *¿Por qué?* built an important media platform for him from the beginning as the quintessential representation of the tragic episode, arising from an independent space with a certain prestige and great legitimacy among the leftist groups of those years.

A few days after the tragic events, Salgado was kidnapped by Nazar Haro's agents, who savagely tortured him for several days at the Federal Security Headquarters in Mexico City, trying to find out about the network of contacts that had allowed the photographer to locate and interview the guerrilla leader Genaro Vázquez.¹⁸

A week later, Salgado was released thanks to pressure from the local and foreign press, but he was forced to give up his job as a photojournalist because of government threats and persecution. He was blacklisted and harassed for years.

The story of Armando Salgado is a tragic case of an extreme situation and the levels of repression by the regime that governed the country at that time, the devastating effect of its practices and operations among a sector of the independent press, and the misunderstanding and indifference that critical photojournalists were subjected to in those years. His photograph was subsequently disseminated in many academic and political outlets in the following decades, which made the image one of the most important references regarding government repression against students.

If in 1971 the photo embodied a subversive document for the authoritarian regime of Luis Echeverría, which had to be censored for opposing the official account and offering evidence against the authorities, a few years later the photo became iconic role for a very broad sector of society, owing to its circulation in books and magazines and its use in different conferences, congresses, and colloquiums, until it became the quintessential representative of the events of June 10.

Another independent photographer in the coverage of the Halconazo was Enrique Bordes Mangel (1922–2008), who had critically covered the protest of teachers and railway workers in 1958 and the student movement in 1968; by 1971, he had an important trajectory and experience in street photography. Bordes arrived early to the demonstration, walked down the avenue with the students, took some images of the repression, and published them the following week in an independent magazine.¹⁹

Unfortunately, after shooting his first roll of film, he was attacked by the Halcones, who gave him a tremendous beating and destroyed his camera. Paradoxically, thanks to government agents who also were covering the massacre, one of the moments in which Bordes was doing his work that afternoon is preserved. This scene is shown in Figure 5.

Over the years, photographs taken by the students themselves have also appeared. The images allow us to recover a perspective from inside the protest, locating different aspects of the preparations for the student march and the first moments of the protest before the repression. Among all of them, it is worth rescuing two images from an independent archive.

The first one shows a student contingent at a high angle shot, moving forward with banners. The festive atmosphere stands out, with smiling young faces making eye contact with the photographer and holding up banners and posters, among which one with the word *pueblo* stands out (Figure 6). The second shows preparations for the march. A woman and a child work to create a banner. The participation of women and children in a predominantly male episode is very significant (Figure 7).

¹⁸ Miguel Nazar Haro (1924–2012) was among the most important policemen of the period of repression against political dissidence in Mexico in the 1970 and 1980s. Trained at the School of the Americas in Panama by the US government, Nazar was one of the creators of the Brigada Blanca, a paramilitary organization at the service of the Federal Headquarters of Security that carried out the kidnapping, torture, and disappearance of hundreds of citizens.

¹⁹ *Solidaridad*, 30 de junio de 1971, 34–37 (colección particular).



Figure 5. Enrique Bordes Mangel photographing the Halcones. Box 1266B, exp. 4, General Directorate Fund for Political and Social Research, AGN.



Figure 6. The march on June 10, 1971. Archivo Paco Ignacio Taibo II.



Figure 7. Woman painting a sign for the march on June 10, 1971. Archivo Paco Ignacio Taibo II.

Third level: The perspective of power

A third and last very significant level are the images contained in the files of the state intelligence services, which, among other things, confirm the participation of the government in the events. It is the monitoring and supervising of the repression carried out by Los Halcones, with the army and police forces complicit. Over the years, the state that had emerged from the Mexican Revolution designed a series of efficient intelligence services to help it in the exercise of power for several decades, supported by that fine balance that tipped from co-opting critical voices to outright repression (Aguayo 2014, 56-61).

President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940) had created the Office of Political and Social Information. Among its activities were analysis and follow-up of the political opposition, the monitoring and collection of information from the press and other media, and infiltration and espionage of various social movements. In subsequent decades, the organization became increasingly sophisticated, allowing it to account for the profile of the opponents, the organizations to which they belonged, the places they frequented, and their main allies and fellow travelers, among other information.

Regarding the perspective of power generated in the government agencies themselves, from the beginning the official account used the resource of the credibility of the photographs to document reality and reinforce their own arguments against possible adversaries: the photographs clearly show the profile of the operation carried out by Los Halcones that afternoon. The images circulated only among government offices at the time.

In this complex visual puzzle generated around the Halconazo on June 10, 1971, it is important to locate the government's evidence that was aimed at building an official story. In contrast to the meticulous oversight of headlines and captions in photojournalistic images, which refrained from explicitly naming members of Los Halcones and steered the interpretation of images toward less disconcerting meanings, the reports generated by government agents in San Cosme that afternoon took a different approach. These reports

explicitly mentioned the name of the aggressor group and provided accurate descriptions of the group's actions. The rationale behind this approach was rooted in the belief that their texts should possess a certain degree of credibility, primarily to hold value and utility for officials tasked with implementing significant measures based on contextual information. In this sense, the government reports on the events that occurred on June 10 show the government's interest in the events and their logic of organization and hierarchy.

In this logic of power, the chronicle of the events covered different places and episodes from 3:30 p.m. on Thursday, with the account of the preparations for the march around the National Teachers' School, until Friday at 1:30 p.m., with the conflict zone completely cleared and the tanks deployed around the National Palace. Utilizing a network of informants stationed in various locations, the chronicle provides a detailed account of the students' demonstration and the deployment of grenadiers, police, and antiriot tanks along the route. It covers the aggression perpetrated by the armed group *Los Halcones*, the activities of snipers positioned on certain rooftops in the vicinity, the dispersal of students by the paramilitary group with the collusion of the police, and the subsequent pursuit of the youth through the streets. Additionally, the chronicle recounts the transportation of the wounded to hospitals and the arrival of an army parachute brigade to cordon off and safeguard the National Palace from potential aggressions.²⁰

This constitutes a comprehensive narrative consistently presented from the perspective of those in power. This account is enriched by diverse photographic records, serving as a complementary layer to the reports of journalists and the testimonies of survivors. Together, the elements weave a compelling tapestry that vividly captures the events of that afternoon. Throughout these reports, it is clear that President Echeverría was very well informed about the events, with stories that mentioned the aggressor group, identifying it by its name, and with visual approaches that left no doubt about the profile and content of his speech that afternoon.

As an example, three instances of this perspective are examined, providing an opportunity for critical reflection from an angle distinct from that of the press and independent photographers. In the first image, the renowned documentary filmmaker Anthony Halik of NBC is captured at the beginning of the march, with his exposure meter and his 16 mm camera at the center of the image in full shot, walking with a soundman who wears his headphones and has a microphone ready for conducting interviews (Figure 8).

Both figures stand before the primary banner of the leading edge of the demonstration, spearheaded by the Central Committee of Struggle of the students. In the photograph, an individual not affiliated with the university sector is noticeable in an American shot.

In the upper right corner of the image, a family can be seen watching the march from the balcony of their apartment located on the second floor of a building. The richness of this photograph is enormous due to the number of microscenes it contains, such as the animated conversation of two protesters who are located in the center of the scene, behind and to the left of the cameraman.²¹

The second image has a very particular meaning. It is taken from the rear of the interior of a Ford Galaxie car. Part of the driver's face and glasses and his right arm on the steering wheel are seen at the left of the image. Through the front window of the automobile, a group of *Halcones* is shown from behind, in full action. Some of them pick up stones from the pavement, seemingly to fling them into the stream of cars turning the corner (Figure 9). The significance of this photograph resides in its function as a document revealing the connections among various branches, operatives, and armed forces of the

²⁰ Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales, caja 126B, exp. 4.

²¹ An important part of the *modus operandi* of the government agents that afternoon, documented by other photographers, consisted in registering cameramen and lens professionals to be able to locate them afterward.



Figure 8. NBC cameraman Anthony Halik walks with another colleague during the June 10 march. Box 1266B, exp. 4, General Directorate Fund for Political and Social Research, AGN.



Figure 9. "Halcones." Box 1266B, exp. 4, General Directorate Fund for Political and Social Research, AGN.

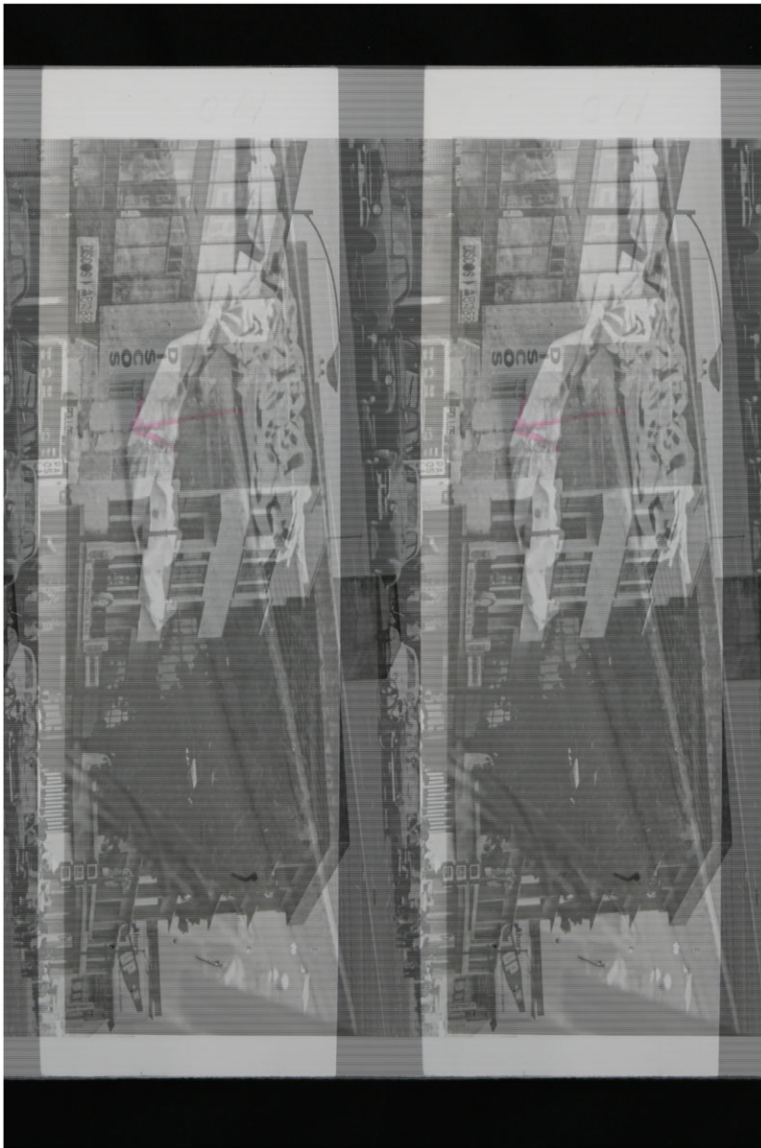


Figure 10. Avenida México Tacuba, June 10, 1971. General Directorate Fund for Political and Social Research, AGN.

government. It delineates a division between those directly involved in carrying out actions and others who document the events for the authorities. In the framework of this power dynamic, this image should be interpreted as a document that constitutes an integral component of the repressive structure wielded by the government's authoritarian power. This fundamental aspect sets the content of this image apart from perspectives closer to the journalistic sphere.

The third image serves as documentation of the deployment of snipers against the civilian population (Figure 10). Captured at ground level from one side of the avenue, the photograph depicts remnants of blankets used by students before the repression in the middle of the thoroughfare. On the opposite side, various houses and buildings are visible. Notably, an arrow marked by government agents is discernible on the roof of one

of the houses. The file containing this image notes the presence of snipers in that location who fired upon citizens. Initially, this document was exploited in order to hold students accountable for the aggression. However, five decades later, the same image stands as documentary evidence revealing that the government had deployed such snipers on rooftops to fire at the demonstration.

In summary, these images are key coordinates of one of the most crucial perspectives of power, embodied by the agents of the Ministry of the Interior. On the afternoon of June 10, agents provided information to the president of the Republic regarding the armed aggression perpetrated by the Los Halcones paramilitaries against a student demonstration. Among other things, this documentation eliminates the possibility that the highest authorities in the country were unaware of the existence of a paramilitary group financed to carry out such actions.

The written account of the reports indicates that some of the youth responded to the attack with arms. The images, however, show only the violent actions carried out by Los Halcones, the complicity of the police and the grenadiers, the presence of snipers in the area, and the peaceful passage of a student demonstration that argued their public protest with the law in hand against the demand of the authorities to cancel the protest.

As we have pointed out, the visual account presented in this section shows the repressive structure of the state, and as a result, it is necessary to understand the logic that this type of narrative.

Half a century later, this same corpus of images admits other types of readings and interpretations that expand the study of the June 10 episode as something planned, designed, and executed from the ranks of the government, thus constituting a state crime that by its nature does not prescribe.

Concluding reflections: Reconsidering June 10 through the lens of photography

The researcher John Mraz (2018) poses the dilemma of a history of photography and a history with photographs. The first belongs to the field of cultural history, and the second is typical of social history. This article proposes an approach that works both facets, seeking the documentary contribution of the images and trying to clarify their symbolic contributions.

The article analyzes an event in relatively recent Mexican history that has been shaped into collective memory by images published in spaces of public opinion (Garton 1999, 39-41). Regarding the events of June 10, history and memory have followed distinct trajectories, yet their paths consistently intertwine. While the former has proved distant from truth and objectivity, the latter has notably gained significance in recent decades, asserting its role in shaping subjectivity within social processes (Traverso 2011).

The government-ordered massacre of students on June 10, 1971, under the leadership of Luis Echeverría, along with the preceding tragedy of October 2, 1968, are pivotal moments prompting all sectors of the political class to seek legitimacy for their respective projects. The formation of an imaginary surrounding Corpus Thursday, much like any historical episode, has evolved gradually over the past fifty years. The initial narrative of a conflict between students of others of various ideologies has consistently been refuted by survivors of the attack. This denial began with the students, reporters, and photographers who directly experienced the events.

This article explores a collection of photographs and their symbolic significance to the journalistic coverage of the events surrounding June 10, 1971. It delves into the portrayal of the historical episode by the press, independent photographers, and agents of power. These perspectives contribute distinct pieces to a complex puzzle, one featuring images

that were originally published in the public sphere and those that were relegated to the archives of power once their purpose of documenting the events was fulfilled. Additionally, some images lingered in anonymity for several decades.

Undoubtedly, this constitutes a collection of “burning images,” borrowing the terminology of thinkers like Didi-Huberman (2012). These photographs encapsulate an era and can be interpreted in various contexts.²² The images contribute to a better understanding of a complex process of political transition, because by this logic, the offense of June 10 began to be read and interpreted from the perspective of a new culture around human rights and the wear and tear of the official political apparatus allowed the emergence of different coordinates and parameters for review and settling accounts with the past.²³

This article is crafted in the framework of contemporary history, deeply embedded in an ongoing and unresolved process where daily experiences are shaped by persistent tensions. These tensions are integral to the ideological struggle and the contest over the nation, with the use of images representing a crucial and symbolic battleground. The primary contributions of this article lie in recognizing that the utilization and dissemination of photographic images is paramount for understanding the construction of the political and cultural event now recognized as El Halconazo. By scrutinizing the role of the press, this article unravels the foundations that laid the groundwork for the creation of a collective memory. It furnishes essential components of a visual grammar, emphasizing the ethical imperative and the obligation to contextualize the significance of images, echoing the sentiments expressed by Andreas Huyssen (2002, 87–88): “There is no memory without images, there is no knowledge without the possibility of seeing; even if the images cannot provide full knowledge. Images have that in common with words. But if it was true that images lend themselves to abuse and deceit more easily than verbal language, it would be even more important to insist on ethics and politics of images, just as ethics of speaking and reading are taken for granted.

In this context, it becomes imperative to reassess the various views projected in photographs and the diverse readings and interpretations that arise, shaped by the ideological inclinations of each newspaper. The significance derived from an independent perspective or a vision of power further contributes to the multifaceted nature of these interpretations. Notably, the epigraph to this article, attributed to film director Alfonso Cuarón and referencing his renowned work *Roma*, emphasizes the importance of images in shaping the recollections and memories of a ten-year-old boy. Half a century later, this individual revisited those initial impressions, ultimately creating one of the most influential Mexican films of recent decades.²⁴

For all these reasons, June 10 is paradigmatic, representing the hallmark of the regime that ruled Mexico for several decades. It is a key date that allows researchers to look back and trace the remnants of the official narrative of a vertical and authoritarian Mexico that persists, despite the presence of democratic winds, which have always been insufficient in recent years.

²² “Knowing how to look at an image would be, in a certain way, being able to distinguish where the image burns, where its possible beauty reserves a place for a “secret sing”, for an unabated crisis, for a symptom. There, where the ashes have not cooled” (Didi Huberman 2012, 26).

²³ This type of history poses an open past, which admits different options that are still projected in the present. As Mariana Franco and Florencia Levin (2007, 37) pointed out, it is a past in a permanent process of “updating.”

²⁴ Alfonso Cuarón’s film *Roma* prominently features the Halcones repression on June 10 as a key element of the narrative. This fictional movie relied on meticulous photographic documentation, incorporating perspectives from the press, independent sources, and the government. It is paradoxical that the film will serve as a lens through which future generations approach El Halconazo. The thorough documentary research surrounding the photographs in the film serves as the foundational basis for constructing collective memory after half a century.

President Luis Echeverría himself sealed his fate when, regarding the events of June 10, 1971, he stated in his first government report: “We issued instructions to the Attorney General’s Office to initiate an investigation that would determine responsibilities and lead to the punishment of the guilty . . . Democratic regimes are defined, ultimately, by the cleanliness of the procedures they employ in order to safeguard the institutions” (Medina 1972, 45-49).

Fifty years later, it is clear that the investigation ordered by the Mexican president was just a delay tactic and ended up lost over time.

Ironically, the former president’s extended lifespan has permitted him to witness, as a ghostlike figure of his past, the damning verdict of history. This historical record meticulously describes his culpability in the orchestration and loss of lives during the afternoon of June 10, 1971, in San Cosme, Mexico City.

Luis Echeverría was responsible for the massacre and spent the rest of his long life in complete impunity. He was not the president of a democratic government but the head of an authoritarian regime, and he was never held accountable to the citizens. In the absence of justice, Mexican society publicly demands it every June 10.

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