

The Unconquered Mapuche

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The Mapuche call themselves the “people of the land” and this is the meaning of the word “Mapuche.” Their territory stretches across the Chile-Argentina border. The Mapuche traditionally lived in extended family groups, with neither slaves nor masters.

Crucial to their spirituality and understanding of the world are the forces of creation (Ngnechen) and destruction (Weküfe) and the necessary balance between the two. The Mapuche have always believed that the world would end if they did not resist the colonizers, and have called on the spirits of their ancestors to aid them in battle.

In 1541, only months after the Spanish conquistador Pedro De Valdivia established Santiago, the town was destroyed by attacking Mapuche warriors. Two years later, Valdivia claimed Chile for the Spanish crown, but fierce Mapuche resistance restricted the invaders to the northern regions. For more than 300 years, the Mapuche retained military control over most of their territory, engaging in guerrilla warfare against the Spanish and systematically destroying colonial settlements.

A Spanish governor of Chile once said that the war with the Mapuche “cost more than the conquest of all the rest of America.”

In 1664, the King of Spain was told that 29,000 Spaniards and more than 60,000 of their Indian and Mestizo (mixed ancestry) collaborators had been killed in battle with the Mapuche. Frustrated by the Mapuche resistance, Valdivia wrote to King Charles V, saying:

“I have warred with men of many nations, but never have I seen such fighting tenacity as is displayed by these Indians.”

In 1553, one of Valdivia’s slaves, a boy named Lautaro, escaped after three years of captivity and returned to his people, dedicating his life to the resistance. The methods of guerrilla warfare developed by Lautaro are still studied today in military academies around the world. While held captive by the Spanish, Lautaro observed the tactics of Valdivia’s army. Once free, he set about uniting dispersed Mapuche family groups in a guerrilla army, introducing the use of horses in battle to counter the Spanish cavalry and inventing new weapons and strategies.

Mapuche warriors fought only when confident that they could overpower their enemies and avoided head-on conflicts with Spanish artillery on the open battlefield. Mapuche leather armour and helmets were superior to those of the Spanish, while weapons included muskets, pikes, clubs,

slings, bow and arrow, and even canons. Tactics incorporated espionage, raiding for horses and supplies, camouflaged trenches, and the construction of fortresses with advance-warning guards and spiked pit traps.

After destroying many Spanish forts, Lautaro lured Valdivia and his company of 40 men away from their fort at Concepción and wiped them out. He then destroyed Concepción, and moved to attack Santiago, but was betrayed by a Mapuche and killed in battle.

By 1883, the Spanish were able to claim military control over the territory of Chile. The Mapuche saw this as merely a temporary defeat, calling it the “next-to-last struggle.” Still, the people were placed on about 3,000 different reserves. Between 1931 and 1971, hundreds of these reserves were divided up by the government so that the land could be sold. In the 1960s and 1970s there was a Mapuche resurgence, as communities engaged in “fence-running”, initiating large-scale land occupations and tearing down fences to increase the size of reserves.

But the 1973 fascist military coup led by Pinochet, with the aid of the United States, brought down a new reign of terror on the Mapuche people. Pinochet’s government further divided reserve lands for sale to forestry companies. Fascist laws first instituted by Pinochet are still being used today by the democratic-capitalist government to prosecute Mapuche rebels as “terrorists.” Since Pinochet’s rule, Mapuche lands have come under increased attack by a number of multinational corporations involved in forestry, hydro dams, mining and oil.

But Mapuche resistance has once again been on the rise. Throughout the 1990’s, communities launched both large and small-scale land occupations. Logging trucks, the homes of estate-owners and mono-culture tree plantations have been firebombed. Road blockades have been carried out against hydro dam projects and other industrial developments. An agricultural consortium estimated in 2004 that over the previous five years, estates and forestry companies have suffered more than 600 Mapuche attacks, resulting in more than a billion pesos in damage.

This resistance has led to conflicts with riot police, in which Mapuche warriors wear masks and use traditional sling weapons to defend themselves from incursions. Mapuches living in the cities such as Temuco have also fought to retain their language and culture. Indigenous students have squatted various buildings in the city, blockaded roads and defended themselves from riot police.

The police murder of Mapuche youth Alex Lemun in November 2002 became a focal point for anger, with rebels building barricades and clashing with police throughout Chile to commemorate his death each year. Columbus Day, the Day of the Young Combatant and the September 11 anniversary of the 1973 fascist coup are also traditionally marked by resistance in the streets.

Between the years 2000–2003, anarchists in Italy increasingly targeted the Italian-based Benetton corporation, a clothing company responsible for theft of Mapuche land in Argentina. Along with public video presentations and pickets in front of Benetton stores in solidarity with the Mapuche, numerous acts of sabotage were carried out against Benetton property, including glued locks, graffiti, broken windows, and firebombings.

In November of 2004, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit was held in Santiago, Chile, and was firmly opposed by Mapuche communities who clearly identify globalization as simply a new phase of colonization. Several days of rioting against the summit occurred in the cities of Santiago, Valparaíso, Concepción and Temuco.

The Mapuche community of Temucuicui, in Chile, was repeatedly attacked by police in October and November of 2004, resulting in several injuries to community members from rubber and lead bullets. On January 7, 2005, six Temucuicui residents were arrested and injured by police

in the city of Ercilla, and this continuous repression is undoubtedly a response to the many land occupations carried out by the community.

Meanwhile in Argentina, the Lonko Purran community has been in conflict with the multinational corporation Pioneer Natural Resources, which is stealing Mapuche land to develop oil wells. The company has already developed 400 oil wells in Mapuche territory since 1992, severely polluting the water and the land.

On December 28, 2004, police used tear gas and rubber bullets against Mapuche road blockades that residents had maintained for more than a week to prevent access by Pioneer Natural Resources. One Mapuche was injured by a lead bullet fired by the police. Three days later, Lonko Purran residents, along with supporting Mapuche communities and members of Argentina's unemployed movement, converged on the police station in nearby Cutral C6, leaving behind many graffiti messages against the repression.

Six Mapuche political prisoners initiated a hunger strike on March 7, 2005, to affect the liberation of all Mapuche prisoners, the dropping of charges against Mapuches currently living "underground", the end of police repression, and the expulsion of forest companies and estate-holders from Mapuche territory.

Solidarity demonstrations for the prisoners were immediately held in Santiago, Valparaíso, Temuco, Montreal, Brussels, and Paris.

On the night of April 1, after going 25 days without food, the prisoners ended their hunger strike upon their transfer to hospital, facing serious damage to their vital organs. The prisoners and their relatives and friends called for the continuation of the struggle.

On May 10, Zenen Diaz Necul, a Mapuche youth, was run over and killed by armed guards of the Forestal Mininco forestry company at a Mapuche road blockade in the city of Collipulli in Chile. The Mapuche community of Ranquilco Bajo raised the blockade to oppose the destruction of spiritual sites by the corporation.

On June 2, Pedro Cayuqueo Millaqueo, director of the Mapuche newspaper "Azkintuwe," was arrested as he left his home town to travel to the International Indigenous Youth Conference in Vancouver, Canada, allegedly because of his involvement in previous conflicts with Forestal Mininco.

"We don't want a Mapuche state, because we never had a state, therefore, it would be an artificial construction."

– *Alihuen Antileo, Mapuche Community Association*

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Wii'nimkiikaa (It Will Be Thundering),¹ Issue 2, 2005

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¹ Wii'nimkiikaa (It Will Be Thundering) was a short-lived but sparky Indigenous resistance magazine with an international focus (intended only for an Indigenous readership), which was started, edited and designed by an Anishinaabe woman, friend and comrade of mine in 2004, for which I wrote several articles (she also wrote for the magazine).