

To what extent did popular support affect Pablo Escobar's rise to power? [2181]

Section 1: Identification and Evaluation of Sources. [496]

**Source 1: "Amando a Pablo, Odiando a Escobar" (Loving Pablo, Hating Escobar),
autobiography by Virginia Vallejo**

This source is a biography written by the Colombian reporter and anchorwoman, Virginia Vallejo, in 2007. Vallejo met Escobar in 1983, becoming his mistress and confidant until 1987. This source's purpose is mainly reflection on Vallejo's life, specifically her integration into the narco-economic and political world. In addition, the book was sold for publicity and profit. The book describes her relationship with Escobar and goes into detail about Escobar's business. The source was an invaluable primary source, filled with details of the inner workings of the cartel that could not be found in secondary sources. This investigation capitalized on the social/cultural information she presents, like Escobar's personal life and goals, or his relationship with other Colombian elites. Another value is that this biography provides a different perspective than other reports; it discusses Escobar's supporter saw, and even rationalized, his actions. One limitation is that one of its purposes is to sell and entertain, so it may also be overdramatized for publicity, something a skilled reporter knows how to do. The source also focuses too much on Vallejo and not enough on Escobar. Even though she provides a lot of information, her story sometimes focuses on aspects that are not valuable to the investigation. Lastly, the account delivers a lot of information on social/cultural and political context, but does not detail any economic facts.

Source 2: "Political Violence in Colombia: Myth and Reality," report by Amnesty International

This source is a report of on political, military, and economic conflict in Colombia, ranging from about 1960's to 1990's. The organization that wrote and published the report is Amnesty International, a non-profit based in England that focuses on the protection of human rights across the globe. Its purpose is to examine the causes and perpetrators of the violence, as well as to bring attention to human-rights issues in hopes of foreign intervention. The report contains a lot of information on the political and military conflicts of the country, though not specifically within the drug rings. There are a lot of statistics and details provided on the government and other groups, such as gangs and guerrillas, that partake in the conflict. This report contributed the investigation with a lot of very thorough and trustworthy examinations of political, military, and economic problems in the country. It is also valuable to the investigation because it gives an outsiders view on the situation, with opinions built solely on the data provided to the reader. Additionally, the report took great care to highlight its thorough use of sources, testimonies and investigations that they used to deliver their message. Contrarily, it's limited in its discussion of social/cultural problems, only touching on them briefly as an explanation of some of the violence they examine. Secondly, it not focused on the drug deal, but the violence in the country as a whole, spending more time on guerrillas and paramilitary than on the drug traffickers. Lastly, the report pushed Amnesty International's agenda, clearly critical the events discussed, but superficially explaining the causes not related to economics and politics.

Section 2: Investigation [1302]

Throughout Colombia's history, there have been many shifts in power amongst what has seemed like a never-ending era of conflict. Amid struggles with paramilitary, guerrilla, gangs, mafias, and the government, drug trafficking flourished in the 60's, becoming a potent political and economic force in the country. At the head of this force was notorious drug lord, Pablo Escobar. An enigmatic, ambitious young man, Escobar would take control of his city and country by the 80's. His rise to power can be attributed to political, economic, and social factors; however, it can be argued that Escobar's social/cultural movement, particularly the popular support he amassed throughout his career, was the largest factor in his rise and maintenance of power.

Pablo Escobar was born and raised in Medellin, Colombia. It is safe to assume that the social and cultural situations of this city were what drove Escobar into a life of crime: "Escobar, despite the rural origin of his parents, was not originally from an excluded social group. In fact, his adolescence was spent in [...] a middle class neighborhood [...] where no one in the sector suffered significant deprivation. The rebellion that would later make Escobar one of the most famous bandits in history did not originate in appreciable material deprivation. [It was] his involvement with *Antioquia's* smuggling organizations that formed him and opened a space for him within the major leagues of Medellin's crime" (Duncan). Medellin, due to previous economic failures, political struggles, and all out wars, was a relatively destabilized city (Amnesty). Its economy power while large relied heavily on contraband, long before the rise of the drug rings (Duncan, Amnesty). The contraband market of the city was where many children like Escobar found an opportunity for wealth and prosperity. The ambitious youth, unable to

find employment elsewhere or coerced by the various street gangs, began to deal contraband. Though cocaine had not yet reached popularity in the 1970's, Escobar had already started his business and profit by the age of fifteen; selling cigarettes, stolen cars, marijuana, and other various products through the country. (Duncan, Bowley, Vallejo). By the time that the cocaine craze of the U.S hit, Escobar had built an extensive network, with the people, money, and knowledge needed to jumpstart his new business. By the early 1990's he was making an estimated \$21.1 million dollars per month in personal income, all on the cocaine export. He had become one of the richest men in the whole world (Macias).

This maintaining of economic power, however, was based not only on his cocaine deals, but on the support of his people (Vallejo). "His business grew, until he was raking in such enormous profits that he could afford literally anything that money could buy, including loyalty" (Bowley). Through bribery and donations, Escobar was able to gain the support of the lower class, from where he recruited his traffickers, dealers, and personal army: "The state found itself in a war in which they had to confront the adolescents of the popular neighborhoods, and in which it was sometimes impossible to access the territory due to the rejection of the population" (Duncan) This loyalty was brought by the various charities and humanitarian acts that Escobar ran. For example, he built neighborhoods, schools, and hospitals in the segregated slums. It was also rumored he would go around the streets of Medellin, giving out food or cash to random people around him (Vallejo). With this unyielding support, Escobar built a reputation that not only protected his business, but let him rise above his competition. His "Robin Hood" persona gave him a lot of power amongst the poor, which manifested mostly as political influences. One thing to note about this claim is that it could be

viewed through two different perspectives. Duncan, a native historian agrees with this claim; he sees the persona as a tool to get political power, that would be used to further the humanitarian cause. Bowley, an American writing decades after Escobar's death, also agrees, but proposes that this persona was only used to hide how Escobar truly kept his power; the spread of terror, and brutality of the public.

Either way, Escobar was able to pursue a political career directly through his popular support. Like Bowley stated, he had already achieved political power to an extent, bribing or killing any politician or businessman that didn't give him what he wanted. Escobar actively participated in the mass bribery of politicians; from governors, to police chiefs, military generals, justices, and even presidents (Duncan). This mass corruption of the central government did not originate with Escobar or other drug lords, but had been a major cause of the political and economical instability that allowed such markets to thrive (Amnesty, Paul). Whether it was granting special favors, looking the other way, or even providing protection from international authorities, Escobar's political influence was a major role in the success of business.

He furthered this relationship with the government through a direct campaign. His campaign claimed to be humanitarian, though there there was a high chance it was a move to consolidate the power he had. "... After amassing a colossal fortune, [he] used his money to become the most popular political leader of all time" (Vallejo). Vallejo was able to explain how Escobar ran for political office. As the most famous reporter at the time, Vallejo aided in creating his public campaign and image. These were manipulated to make into a humanitarian leader, caring father, and patriotic saint. As his popularity exploded, so did his

reach within the government. In 1978, Escobar got elected for Medellín's city council, and later congress. In terms of the cartel, these government positions allowed access to law enforcement, courts, and the media (Vallejo). His news position would also give him political immunity in other countries; used to the fullest extent by avoiding U.S authorities multiple times (Bowley).

His role in the government did go farther than simple corruption, taking an active role in the process: Escobar would create his own party, call for humanitarian bills, and pushed for national independence of the country (Bowley). These movements seemed enough to convince the country to ignore his criminal affiliations, up until his assassination of the Minister of Justice in 1984. This scandal were exposed by the media and the American government. It would force the country to accept his role as a drug lord and convince his supporters that he would not escape U.S. authorities. Later in 1984, he was asked to leave office and give up his diplomatic immunity. With the fall of his support, Escobar lost his political power. Without this, Escobar would slowly lose his grip on the trade of cocaine. The Medellin cartel would go on to struggle for survival during the 90's, but without the protection of the people, it did not last. In desperation, Escobar turned to extreme force and violence (Vallejo). He ordered heinous crimes, mass murders, and perpetuated a state of terror over the country, more drastic than what was previously attributed to him (Duncan, Vallejo). Reflecting on the matter, it possible that the scandal that destroyed his career did not reveal a criminal, only made it impossible to ignore him.

Escobars popular support was the reason that his reign lasted for so long. Not only did it provide certain political and economic benefits, but it's also prevented the unification of

forces against Escobar. With the public against him, the government, media, American influences, and even rival criminal were able to slowly destroy his cartel, eventually killing Escobar. The “king of cocaine” is without a doubt one of the most powerful and infamous criminals of the modern world. His reputation, either as a brutal criminal or a humble Robin Hood, was a key tool in the creation of the cartel. Though it was not the only or even most critical component, it is without doubt a key aspect to Escobar's rise to power.

Section 3: Reflection [383]

Pablo Escobar's legacy is one of confusion. To some, he was a murderous drug-lord, to others a Robin Hood figure. With people like Escobar, who are so polarizing and mysterious, historians must remember to try to avoid a narrow mindset due to contradictory perspectives of a single event or situation. In my investigation of Escobar, I found very contradictory information that I often didn't know how to approach it, much less analyze. Historians have always had this problem, and face it by using a multitude of sources, cross referencing information, and keeping an open mind when looking at other angles.

First, I had begun this investigation thinking that I should only rely on primary sources, because I believed that any information that could be found outside of these sources, like Amnesty's report, would have originated in some type of primary source anyway. However, I learned that secondary sources provide a sort of distance to the information, which leads to more perspectives and less bias. The downside to this is that some historians, unlike me, have access to only one type of source, which can narrow their point of view of the given situation, creating bias or misunderstandings. Conversely, some historians may have access to too many sources, and so be unable to form valid conclusions with such an overflow of information. This

was another challenge I had during the investigation. There were so many contradicting accounts that it was difficult to accurately analyze Escobar or his popular support.

Cross-referencing things like dates and statistics helped to differentiate what was true from what could have been exaggerated or misinformed.

This brings me to my next method: analyzing the sources values and limitations. A common practice amongst historians, it helped me understand which sources were lacking, and how to fix this. For example, I caught a lack of socio-cultural data in Amnesty's report, and was able to compensate with Vallejo's book. Analyzing ones sources not only urges a variety in information, but also makes historians better avoiding bias. With different types of information, cultural to economic to political, historians can get a more rounded understanding of what they are trying to study. In this investigation, I was able to overcome a making better conclusions about how things like popular support affected him and his legacy.

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