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Forces that Propelled the Civil War in El Salvador: Peasant Mobilization, the Catholic Church, and United States Intervention

Saraí Kashani

Abstract: This paper explores the domestic and foreign conditions that exacerbated the social, political, and economic inequalities in El Salvador during the early twentieth century and in turn stimulated and advanced the Salvadoran Civil War. I make clear that two geographic regions, the “domestic” El Salvador and the “foreign” United States, actively shaped the trajectory of the Salvadoran Civil War. From the Salvadoran perspective, I argue that early practices of peasant mobilization in the 1930s and political education through religious institutions in the 1970s were two driving forces in the war. From a foreign perspective, I posit that United States intervention played a sinister role in the unfolding of the war in ways that scholars and historians have not analyzed critically enough. Furthermore, I challenge the use of popular dogmas, such as Marxist and structuralist theories, that have been used as frameworks to understand the factors that led to the emergence of the Salvadoran Civil War. As a counter-argument, I suggest that local actors had more agency than previously noted in popular discourse surrounding El Salvador.

Keywords: *Latin America, Salvadoran Civil War, U.S. intervention, Salvadoran peasant mobilization, progressive Catholicism*

Introduction

One morning, on her way to her secretarial job at the Industria Metálica de El Salvador (IMSA), or the Metal Industry of El Salvador, in San Salvador—the country’s capital and most populous city—my mother was hastily detained by two National Guard soldiers on suspicion of participating in guerilla affairs. While staring down the barrel of the soldier’s gun, my mother contended with the most outstanding choice of her life: to flee San Salvador or to not live long enough to see the end of the week. My mother opted for the former and thus began her journey north to the United States of America in 1982.

This anecdote is not an isolated event. In fact, it is one of the many experiences that Salvadorans endured daily during the civil war. The violence and repression Salvadoran people encountered by paramilitary and military groups have long histories that trace back beyond the civil war. For instance, in 1932, under the command of General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, Salvadoran military and police forces massacred over 30,000 civilians, most of whom were indigenous. The cataclysmic events that unfolded over the course of three separate stages later became known as *La Matanza*, or “the Great Killing” (Harlow, 1991). Five decades later, between December 11 and 13 of 1981, the Atlacatl Battalion—a Salvadoran military group that was trained and equipped by the School of the Americas, a U.S.-funded army training division—massacred more than 1,000 people in the municipality of Meanguera (Binford, 2016). This wretched event in Salvadoran history came to be known as *El Mozote*, named after the village where it occurred. These large-scale systematic attacks perpetrated by the oligarchic-militaristic governments that have long reigned over El Salvador, including my mother’s life-or-death experience, demonstrate larger themes of power and repression that have predominated Salvadoran society.

Despite being the smallest country of the Latin American republics, El Salvador has contended with vast structural inequities. Since its conquest by Spanish colonizer Pedro de Alvarado in 1524, lasting through its independence in 1821, and into the modern day (Tilley, 2015), El Salvador has withstood social, political, and economic disparities which have often centered around land

ownership and misappropriation. These realities, coupled with the hasty attacks that Maximiliano Hernández Martínez and his succeeding oligarchic-militaristic regimes perpetrated against Salvadoran peasants, working-class individuals, and religious officials, erupted into a bloody and calamitous civil war that lasted a total of twelve years. Though a dire epoch in Salvadoran history, the collective efforts of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and its five leftist sub-factions came to symbolize great promise for Salvadoran society. Perhaps inspired by the success of alternative insurgent movements sweeping across Latin America and Central America at the time, the FMLN endeavored to create an egalitarian society in which wealth and land would be more equally distributed. Finally, on January 26, 1992, El Salvador slowly began to move away from the oligarchic-military rule for the first time in over five decades as a result of the Peace Accords between the Salvadoran government and the FMLN (Chávez, 2017; Lauria-Santiago & Binford, 2004).

Despite the FMLN being the most notable insurgent group of the twentieth century in El Salvador, it is important to note that it was not the sole carrier of radical and revolutionary views that critically challenged El Salvador's political infrastructures. In fact, the history of El Salvador reflects a legacy of intellectuals and scholars who published critical commentary about the government and its long standing inequalities despite facing punitive consequences. Individuals like the former Communist Party members of El Salvador, Augustín Farabundo Martí; *El Mozote* survivor, Miguel Mármol; the poet, Roque Dalton; and religious officials such as Archbishop Oscar Romero, openly challenged the class conflicts that existed between land-owning elites and peasants (Lauria-Santiago & Binford, 2004).

However, these "class conflicts" were not the sole determinants of the war. In fact, the years leading up to the civil war are accurately captured by their labyrinth-like features as made evident by individual actors and communities across the Salvadoran society as they played a crucial role in the development of the war. Contesting previous bodies of research that have failed to consider the contributions of small-scale interactions, Aldo Lauria-Santiago and Leigh Binford (2004) suggest paying special

attention to micro-level origins when discussing the civil war and its inceptions. It is only through recognizing “local” Salvadoran places, institutions, and experiences that modern-day scholars can reframe, explain, and understand the motives behind larger, national perspectives concerning the civil war.

I propose that previous attempts to understand the causal events of the civil war are fragmented and polarized. While some Western thinkers have argued that Salvadoran social structures and peasant agency leading up to the civil war were mutually exclusive, others have argued that they are in fact “dialectically related” (Lauria-Santiago & Binford, 2004, p. 8). The Salvadoran intellectual Roque Dalton theorized that the war was contingent on a dialectical relationship between the rich and the poor. Here, the “dialect” aligns with the conventional model of Marx’s (1867) historical materialism and suggests a “relation of reciprocal influence” (Olssen, 2004, p. 456). Nevertheless, twenty-first century thinkers must continue advancing existing bodies of knowledge if they hope to circumvent polarizing explanations of the Salvadoran Civil War; scholars must ruminate beyond the conventional parameters posed by the dialectical-relationship theory often characterized by dialectical materialism. Placing substantial weight on the role that a society’s *substructure* (the means of production) has on its *superstructure* (ideas, religions, and philosophies), Marx’s dialectical materialism relies heavily on economic determinism and in the process, homogenizes and fails to grasp the agency of individual actors and communities in the civil war.

In this paper, I examine the Salvadoran Civil War from two different perspectives, that of El Salvador and that of the United States. I argue that within El Salvador, which hereafter I refer to as the “domestic perspective,” early practices of peasant mobilization beginning in the 1930s and political education were two central influences that stimulated the Salvadoran Civil War. Finally, from the U.S. standpoint, which I refer to as the “foreign perspective,” I examine how United States intervention further fomented the Salvadoran government’s war efforts not only by providing billions of dollars in economic and military aid, but also by perpetrating human rights violations in the process

(Bermudez, 2020; Armstrong & Shenk, 1982). In this regard, I adopt a viewpoint that is not only critical of Salvadoran-based efforts, but of transnational ones as well.

Traditional Understandings in El Salvador

Historical understandings of El Salvador and its peoples have been traditionally conceived of in paradoxical ways. For one, observers argue that the nation's people, institutions, and government have only a weak and fragmented sense of their own historical memories; however, it often appears that El Salvador's past has also shaped its present (Lauria-Santiago & Binford, 2004). Lauria-Santiago and Binford (2004) posit that historical understandings of El Salvador are challenging to form because "the country's authoritarian legacy contributed to a weak historiographical tradition" (p. 2). In this section, I highlight three main reasons that explain the limited scholarship that exists on Salvadoran history and, by extension, the Salvadoran Civil War.

Historical and Empirical Research in El Salvador

To begin, the political tensions present in El Salvador during the 1980s discouraged many academics from conducting research and forced many of them to emigrate. Furthermore, it was practically impossible for researchers to conduct empirical research in the middle of the war. Even when people attempted to do so, they risked losing their lives—and some indeed did—at the hands of state-sanctioned violence. Such examples are Roque Dalton and Segundo Montes, who were assassinated for openly expressing views that conflicted with the hegemonic order (Lauria-Santiago & Binford, 2004).

Secondly, with early twentieth-century trans-isthmian efforts towards building a national identity focused on *mestizaje*, or interracial and/or intercultural mixing, indigeneity in Central America became a question of survival in the isthmus' historical memory. El Salvador's indigenous communities often experienced persistent "de-indianization" and were persecuted by both military groups and Ladinos, or individuals who were mestizo and/or had been hispanicized (Lauria-Santiago & Binford, 2004, p. 2; Ching

& Tilley, 1998). Virginia Tilley (2005), an associate professor of political science at Hobart and William Smith Colleges whose specializations include indigenous and race relations in Latin America, recounts a first-hand conversation that she had with a cab driver about the racial dynamics in El Salvador. Tilley explains that the cab driver refuted the existence of *indígenas* (indigenous peoples) in El Salvador, claiming that they had all disappeared long ago. The cab driver asserted: “In Guatemala yes, they have many *indígenas*...here everyone is *mestizo*” (Tilley, 2005, p. 8). The scholar argues that this conversation demonstrates how indigenous communities in El Salvador are commonly regarded as nonexistent.

Thirdly, systemic and institutional limitations hindered educational access as there was limited interest in investing in academic infrastructure (Lauria-Santiago & Binford, 2004). Higher education programs were a novelty; in fact, the first *licenciatura* (bachelor’s degree) was only introduced at the National University of El Salvador in 2002 (Lauria-Santiago & Binford, 2004). El Salvador’s elite further contributed to the stagnant progress of the nation’s academic infrastructure. Lauria-Santiago and Binford (2004) find that the country’s elite families often financed their children’s education in Europe and were adamant about investing in academic infrastructure that would have largely enriched the country’s historiographical records and archives.

Marxist and Structural Frameworks

Karl Marx’s theory that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,” presents a generalized view of the binary opposition that exists between oppressor and oppressed—the bourgeoisie and the proletariat (Engels & Marx, 1848). Historians have often utilized Marxist theory as a framework to contextualize the Salvadoran Civil War as a result of deeply entrenched class conflicts. For instance, Roque Dalton—an essayist, poet, and Salvadoran intellectual—heavily drew on Marxist theory. Dalton was exiled from El Salvador for widely disseminating left-leaning literature, an experience that further strengthened his Marxist position. In 1961, while living

in exile in Mexico, Dalton became increasingly inspired by both the Mexican Revolution and the Cuban Revolution, which had seismic aftershocks throughout Latin America. After putting an end to his Mexican exile, Dalton veered towards Cuba and would continue to visit over the next decade. During his initial stay in Cuba, he predicted a rising civil war and ruminated on his love-hate relationship with his country of El Salvador (Chavéz, 2017). Having evaded two death sentences in El Salvador, Dalton would return to Cuba to continue developing his Marxist leanings. For example, in *Miguel Mármol* (1972), Dalton describes the importance of working-class roots in the Salvadoran Communist Party and in the progress of Salvadoran history.

In addition to employing popular Marxist frameworks, modern-day academics have also utilized structuralist frameworks to theorize about the conceptions of the civil war. Structuralism here is consistent with Pierre Bourdieu's definition which posits "that there are objective structures [that are] independent of the agents' consciousness and will" (Flecha, Gomez, & Puigvert, 2001, p. 36). As essential as it is for people to be able to gather large-scale insights surrounding the circumstances that stimulated the civil war, overly relying on structuralist frameworks severely hinders one's ability to see social change at the individual level. As Lauria-Santiago and Binford (2004) attempted to prove, individuals who adopt the structuralist approach often fall risk to treating classes and class factions abstractly, failing to critically analyze how local and regional social relations influence larger social structures (Lauria-Santiago & Binford, 2004). Contrary to the beliefs of structuralist framework proponents, peasants and working-class folks were not "the unconscious bearers of structurally based processes" but rather active participants during the war who *consciously* realized "ends that accorded with their particular experiences and interests" (Lauria-Santiago & Binford, 2004, p. 9). In other words, peasants were tenacious peoples who actively resisted and informed macro and national-level changes through their participation in the local and regional sectors of society.

Simplifying highly complex historical affairs can detract from the social change that occurred at the local and individual

levels and can further blur the historical events that stimulated agents' predilection to countering hegemonic order. In larger representation, structuralist historical representations often reduce, oversimplify, or erase peasants' contributions to the civil war from public memory altogether.

Domestic Perspectives: the 1930s and the Legacy of Peasant Mobilization

In the previous sections I delineated the implications that solely relying on grand theories has on holistic understandings of the civil war as well as how individual actors can become dispossessed of their agency in the process. In the following section, I illustrate the legacy of peasant mobilization in response to oppressive regimes. Despite the fact that the historiography surrounding militant proceedings between the 1930s and 1970s remains nebulous (Salamanca, 2016), I demonstrate how previous generations' spirit to mobilize influenced later waves of peasant mobilizations and their reformist agendas.

The 1930s and Maximiliano Hernández Martínez's Regime

One of the important legacies of peasant insurgency during the civil war were the uprisings that occurred during Maximiliano Hernández Martínez's regime. Throughout the course of the early twentieth century, Salvadoran peasants contested the repercussions of state-sanctioned violence, the privatization of land, and increasing class disparities as a consequence of changing economic landscapes. While coffee was El Salvador's main revenue source, the privatization of land by the wealthy oligarchs not only expunged the peasants' ability to receive an equal share of the profits, but also exploited their labor. General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez (1931-1944) forcibly came into rule precisely at a time when El Salvador's coffee market had plummeted as a result of the stock market crash on Wall Street two years earlier. Consequently, class disparities between the small, land-owning elite and the peasants became exacerbated. As a way to revolt against increasing inequities, indigenous peasants engaged in an insurgency in 1932 that was led by Marxist-Leninist revolutionary leader Agustín Farabundo Martí and the

Salvadoran Communist Party (“Destiny’s Children”, 2020). In an effort to express their concerns, the peasants rose up in rebellion and overtook various municipalities, occupying six of them for various days until the military squashed the uprising (Ching, 2013). Perceiving the peasant rebellion as an intolerable act of defiance towards his authority, on January 22, 1932, General Hernández Martínez ordered mass ethnocide. On that day, which later came to be recognized as *La Matanza* (“The Great Killing”), more than 30,000 people were massacred, most of whom were indigenous. Employing Robert Taylor and Harry Vanden’s (1982) definition of political terrorism as the “use of violence for the purpose of achieving a specific set of political objectives or goals” (p. 107), I posit that General Martínez executed this blatant act of political terrorism as a means of forestalling any future peasant uprisings. But more importantly, the counterinsurgency of 1932 demonstrated the imminent threat that peasant agency and mobilization posed for Martínez, as well as the lengths that he would travel to preserve his rule.

Despite failing what it sought out to achieve at the time, the peasant insurgency of 1932 was important in terms of the outcome of the civil war because it incited a legacy of mobilizations which graduated into radical, systematic, leftist organizing, such as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). Named in honor of Agustín Farabundo Martí, the aforementioned peasant leader who led the rebellion of 1932, the FMLN was the first insurgent group to become a legally-recognized and official political party of El Salvador in 1992, sixty years after the catastrophic event of *La Matanza*. The FMLN’s genealogy, which traces back to the tragedy of *La Matanza*, sheds light on Salvadoran peasants’ resilience as well as how they have mobilized in response to political terrorism and overt human rights violations. As made apparent in the following paragraphs, the peasant mobilization of the 1930s informed the peasant mobilizations that transpired during the 1970s. The latter established the epistemological and pedagogical basis of future left-wing teachings.

Political Education and the Catholic Church

Earlier, I established how the dialectical relationship between land-owning elites and peasants, coupled with ethnic tensions in the decades prior to the civil war, established the tone for future peasant mobilizations. Increasing class conflicts and the violent attacks that the state perpetrated against peasant communities germinated into the various social movements that emerged thereafter, including the politicization of the Catholic Church. To expand on this, peasant mobilizations in the 1970s and onward were deeply tied with their connections to the Catholic Church, and more specifically, the progressive church. It is impossible to understand the evolution of insurgency movements in the twentieth century without considering the role of the progressive church. I propose that the political education that became prominent in the 1970s was, in fact, bolstered by the lasting consequences of events that had occurred earlier in the century, such as *La Matanza*. In the following section, I explore the roles of the traditional and progressive church, as well as catechists and catechism centers, as they relate to the dissemination of revolutionary and radical material. I further clarify what each organization meant to the movement.

The Movement from Traditional Catholicism to Progressive Catholicism

In Northern Morazán—one of the fourteen departments of El Salvador—the shift from traditional Catholicism to progressive Catholicism impacted not only the ways that people accessed information, but also how they made sense out of that information. To illustrate, I employ Binford’s (2004) definitions of both traditional Catholicism and progressive Catholicism. Traditional Catholicism emphasized a moral and spiritual obligation to engage in self-sacrifices in the name of Catholic saints. In this framework, enduring pain, as a result of humankind’s sinful nature, was simply an uncontestable part of faith. Conversely, progressive Catholicism shifted the “enduring pain” narrative to a more individualistic approach. Thus, progressive priests often encouraged church members to recognize their inherent responsibility to themselves and their communities.

This shift, combined with the progressive church's new pedagogical approach, called liberation theology, prompted a new collective consciousness. Here, liberation theology is defined as the teachings which emphasize that there are no "celestial rewards" for choosing to tolerate affliction (contrary to the traditional teachings of Catholicism). The pedagogy of liberation theology, at its core, made the responsibility of serving others a core tenant. However, because such teachings were illegal and certainly not condoned, dissemination of liberation theology had to be done clandestinely, thus giving rise to catechists and catechism centers (Lauria-Santiago & Binford, 2004, p.119). Simply framed, the catechists were learners of liberation theology; they were usually twenty-year-old males and possessed at least a basic ability to read and write. The catechism centers were churches where catechists convened and where progressive priests disseminated arguably radical and illicit literature, such as the *Communist Manifesto*. The structure of the catechism centers was rigid and included tight programming that was comparable to seminary training (Binford, 2004). This is important because the catechism centers were places where both the spiritual and political realms collided and instrumentally provided the working-class with a space to foster class-consciousness and collective organizing.

Background on the Conservative Church

The shift from traditional Catholicism to progressive Catholicism coupled with the *Ejercito Revolucionario Popular* (ERP), or Popular Revolutionary Army, played an instrumental role in the revolutions in El Salvador (Pearce, 1986; Montgomery, 1982; Hassett & Lacey, 1991; Binford, 2004; Chávez, 2010; Sánchez, 2015; Binford, 2016). Today, scholars agree that the popular wing of the Catholic Church massively influenced the raising of class-consciousness and organizational development among rural populations (Binford, 2004). However, this only became a distinction following the reform of the Catholic Church in the 1970s. For instance, Northern Morazán was one of the poorest regions in the nation and was home to more than thirty-five thousand inhabitants (Binford, 2004). Until 1973, Morazán only had one Catholic parish who was led by Padre Andrés

Argueta. Padre Argueta's conservative views aligned with the traditional approach of the conservative Catholic Church of the time. His liturgies centered around self-sacrifices of the saints and emphasized "subordination before the will of God" (Binford, 2004, p. 108). Padre Argueta utilized his influence in the region as a means for propagating right-wing political agendas. From the pulpit, he disseminated propaganda during elections and urged his parishioners to vote for the National Conciliation Party—the nationalist party of El Salvador that was most closely associated with the Salvadoran military (Binford, 2004). Prior to 1973, Morazanian peasants were urged to be submissive in the name of the God and the Church and were thus vulnerable to the dominant political ideologies of the epoch.

Background on the Progressive Church

In 1968, the Catholic Church began to adopt a more liberal approach after the first catechism center known as *El Castaño* (The Chestnut Center) opened. *El Castaño* prepared catechists by submerging them into different thematic courses, such as community development, health, education, and agriculture. The catechism centers were largely driven by liberation theology, a viewpoint that cemented the idea of individual holism through joint communal struggle (Binford, 2004). Training programs at centers like *El Castaño* typically lasted for one month. As Morazanian peasants participated and returned from their month-long courses, resistance towards Padre Argueta and his conservative ideologies increased. The shift from a conservative doctrine to a more liberal one became a marker in the peasants' everyday way of life. Binford (2004) shares recovered archival data that reveals how some *El Castaño* participants even began to meet clandestinely in their own homes. For example, one man named Abraham Argueta, who also participated in *El Castaño*, met with other catechists in his home on Wednesdays. This reality, coupled with the introduction of progressive Father Miguel Ventura, a new and progressive father who entered the region in 1973, disrupted the conservative "hegemonic order" that his predecessor, Father Padre Argueta, perpetuated (Binford, 2004, p. 109).

Contrary to what is frequently depicted in mainstream

media, the peasant catechists were not stoic victims; they mobilized in grandiose ways. For example, they formed Christian Base Communities (CBC) and *directivas* (local councils). These collective organizations constructed roads and schools, assisted the poor or infirm, and established loans that had below-market interest rates (Binford, 2004). These were just some of the many things they were able to do as a unified force. Because of the threat CBCs posed for the government, they formed part of the government's watch list and experienced repression, circumstances that forced many catechists into exile or underground. Government officials captured or killed various catechists and progressive priests. In other cases, catechists and progressive priests mysteriously "disappeared," likely having been abducted by officials (Binford, 2004). Despite their humble origins, the catechists were important to the unfolding of the civil war because they propagated revolutionary ideals during a time when the upper and lower classes were becoming increasingly divergent. But more importantly, the ways in which they were able to organize was largely as a result of the skills they were able to learn at catechism centers, such as *El Castaño*.

In all, I have devoted the last few sections to describing the role that the Catholic Church—both traditional and progressive—had in stimulating an entire generation of activists. The politicization of the progressive church contributed largely to the construction of the civil war. The historical shift from a conservative church to a progressive church resulted in the formation of catechism centers, which in turn served as centralizing locations where revolutionary ideologies could be disseminated. Adolescent men from both the working and middle classes congregated at catechism centers and acquired the revolutionary ideologies that served as the ideological frameworks for the civil war. Furthermore, catechism centers united workers across different municipalities, raised class-consciousness, and influenced organizational development among rural populations, a reality that would not have been possible had it not been for the transition of the conservative church to the progressive church.

Foreign Perspectives: United States Intervention

Domestic and foreign affairs also stimulated the Salvadoran Civil War. So far, this paper has looked at the various phenomena that catalyzed the Salvadoran Civil War from a domestic perspective. In this section, I explore the United States' role in the outcome of the civil war, as well as how it impacted the history and future of peasant mobilizations. During the Reagan administration and at the height of the Cold War, the United States began to funnel a vast amount of resources to El Salvador, including those of monetary and militaristic values. This was in an attempt to contain the spread of communism across El Salvador and to prevent leftist rebels, such as the FMLN, from overthrowing the current order. The now-extinct School of the Americas trained, equipped, and funded Salvadoran troops to execute countless human rights violations against Salvadoran civilians and anybody who challenged the established orders (Binford, 2016; Bermudez, 2020; McKinney, 2015). The U.S. intervened to facilitate the repression of peasant mobilization and insurgent movements because leftist groups were in opposition to the United States' political, social, and economic aims for El Salvador. The cataclysmic event I alluded to at the beginning of this paper, which occurred at *El Mozote* in 1981, is no exception.

The United States' interest in Latin America is not a novelty. The U.S. has had a long history of investing in economic interests and spreading democratic values in countries throughout Latin America. This is most evident in the various policies that the Global North, including, but not limited to, the Carter and Reagan administrations, have implemented on the Global South (Farer, 1981). Beginning in the late nineteenth century and increasing exponentially throughout the twentieth century, the United States has demonstrated significant political and economic interests in Central America. Functioning under the U.S. Cold War containment policy, the United States provided an estimated \$4.5 billion of financial aid to El Salvador. Salvadoran soldiers were trained on U.S. soil and were primed for combat (McKinney, 2015). The civil war in El Salvador was a sadistic and remorseless twelve-year tribulation. Roughly the size of the state of Massachusetts, El Salvador had a population of about five

million people prior to the civil war. After the war, the already-small country had lost more than 20% of its population (Menjívar, 2018).

Furthermore, Lauria-Santiago and Binford (2004) found that the United States invested upwards of an additional \$6 billion to prevent the revolutionary front, the FMLN, from further uprisings. In 1989, troops from the Atlacatl Battalion, who were U.S.-trained and equipped, killed six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter (Human Rights Watch ix). Despite the Salvadoran government publicly denying that it had a role in such an event, the evidence gathered against it was insurmountable. Perhaps growing weary or anxious about its indirect relationship with the brutal act, the United States Embassy “worked in collusion with the Salvadoran military to ‘cover up’ the Salvadoran military’s involvement” (McKinney, 2015, para. 14). The massive atrocities perpetrated against the Salvadoran people, including the assassinations of six Jesuit priests, increased anxious sentiments in the Global North. Through recovered U.S. memos, McKinney (2015) uncovers the United States’s action to reduce financial backing of right-leaning and formally-recognized Salvadoran government officials. However, while such intimidating remarks were made by the U.S., such aid never stopped.

The United States devised iniquitous plans to quash any possible left-wing insurgencies. Fueled by its political tensions with Nicaragua and Cuba, the United States funneled large sums of U.S. dollars into Salvadoran counterinsurgency movements that would help prevent the spread of communism in El Salvador. While so many of the economic and political factors of the Salvadoran Civil War remain unknown, it is my belief that the military and economic aid supplied to El Salvador by the U.S. allowed the war to extend for as long as it did and thus contributed to torture, incarceration, conscription, and abduction of thousands of people (Ching, 2014; Ching, 2016). The allocation of the U.S. resources allowed the relatively under-funded political infrastructure of El Salvador to engage in war. Studying and analyzing the role of U.S.-intervention in El Salvador during the latter part of the twentieth century, including the moments leading up to the war, is

of particular importance because it creates a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between the U.S. and El Salvador. Furthermore, it solidifies how external forces, through financial and military aid, actively repressed the rich history of peasant mobilization in El Salvador, but failed to thwart a considerable history of Salvadoran resistance and resilience. This is particularly significant because it demonstrates how, despite the history of political repression, the Salvadoran people have continuously emerged from different forms of state-sanctioned violence and furthered a legacy of political activism and mobilization.

Displacement, Migration, and an Emerging Diaspora

In addition to the intimidation tactics and oppression that Salvadoran paramilitary and military groups imposed on Salvadoran peoples, the United States played an equally violent, if not more violent, role in the Salvadoran Civil War. The United States contributed to the displacement of many peoples and bifurcation of many families in ways that continue in the modern day. The ramifications of the war affected the entire society: rural and urban, uneducated and educated, poor and rich. In the words of my grandmother, “Nobody was untouched.”

Growing up in a densely populated region of Los Angeles where many Salvadoran migrants resided, I was frequently surrounded by firsthand accounts of the Salvadoran Civil War and the survivors’ experiences migrating north. As social, political, and economic instability heightened as a result of the war, many Salvadorans questioned the viability of remaining in an increasingly repressive and volatile state. Many individuals emigrated from El Salvador and left behind loved ones, some who would be seen again, others who would not. Many who did not leave by their own accord faced displacement and/or forced removal from their respective regions. Consequently, the 1980s marked a momentous time in the demographics, histories, and societies of El Salvador and the United States. El Salvador lost about one-fifth of its population (more than one million individuals), not accounting for the more than seventy-five thousand individuals who were assassinated and thousand others who were tortured and/or disappeared (Menjívar & Cervantes, 2018). Thus, the

United States became a magnet for many individuals fleeing government repression, combat, and economic dislocation. Even remote villages were incorporated into migratory circuits (Binford, 2004). Social, political, and economic infrastructure patterns shifted quickly during the late twentieth century in El Salvador, which had lasting impacts on migration patterns. As a result, Los Angeles is the home of the first Salvadoran diaspora and the largest population of Salvadorans outside of El Salvador (Brightwell, 2018).

Conclusion

El Salvador's history is as complex as it is dynamic. The Salvadoran Civil War is filled with countless accounts of struggle, advocacy, collective organizing, empowerment and resistance to oppressive powers. Contrary to popular and mainstream understandings of the conditions that stimulated the civil war, El Salvador's history is not monolithic nor homogeneous. El Salvador's peoples and rich culture are telling of the many ways the nation has come together in resisting structural challenges that internal and external forces established. The Salvadoran Civil War shifted the entire social, political, and economic course of the nation and stimulated a group of intellectuals to mobilize in response to oppression. While Marxist and structuralist theories have been used to understand the conditions that led to the civil war, not much attention has been paid to the agency of individual actors. In response, I have demonstrated the ways in which local actors have contributed to the developments of the civil war, starting with peasant mobilizations in the 1930s, and moving to the revolutionary catechism centers of the Catholic Church in the 1970s, which were led by progressive priests and guided by liberation theology. Finally, I examined the role of United States intervention through the funneling of U.S. dollars that supported right-leaning government factions in El Salvador. In studying the international dynamics of the Salvadoran Civil War, it is clear how the Global North, through U.S. policies, had massive long-term implications in the Global South, including displacement, death, and the constant battle of finding a post-war identity.

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