

The Salvador Option
The United States in El Salvador,
1977-1992

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To Britta, my forever love

A Divided Nation

Military Traditions, Democratic Third Way, and Liberation Theology

[It was in the] “Third World,” that the Church would discover what it really was and what it really had to do.

– Enrique Krauze, Mexican historian¹

The rebels spared no effort to impress the American visitors, providing ample meals of steak, fresh orange juice and baked bread, as well as beds, a video television screen and trucks for transportation. A well-known revolutionary priest, Miguel Ventura, offered a mass in the bullet-pocked local church. A rebel chorus sang hymns of liberation theology. The first song began: “Christ, Christ Jesus, identify yourself with us. Have solidarity with us, not with the oppressor class, with us.”

– James LeMoyné, *New York Times* correspondent, reporting from guerrilla-controlled territory, 1985²

Once you had to be a colonel to get rich, now even the lower ranks steal.

– Joaquín Ventura, retired Salvadoran Army captain,
December 1989³

Las Catorce

The decades leading up to the civil war were a tumultuous time that up-ended El Salvador’s relatively predictable and stable political climate. To give a full sense of this harrowing story, this chapter addresses several key actors and movements that emerged on the left, right, and center of Salvadoran politics and society in the 1960s and ’70s. It seems

appropriate to begin with the power that stood the test of time in this tiny Central American country – the oligarchy.

When foreign journalists during the war years wrote about the Salvadoran oligarchy, they almost invariably used the term “las catorce” for the fourteen families that were said to rule the country. The revolutionary left also described the oligarchs in such terms. According to one guerrilla leader interviewed in Havana in 1980, “Some 14 families own most of the land in El Salvador. These families are also linked to North American capital through the interests they have in the American-controlled industries.”⁴

While the term las catorce was widely used, there were in fact around 100 clans that were the effective owners of Salvadoran industries and land. But even that number was suspect as some contended that it was in fact much larger, even if a tiny fraction compared to the country’s total population. According to Jorge Sol Castellanos, a 66-year-old businessman and minister of the economy, “It’s different from an aristocracy, which we also have. It’s an oligarchy because these families own and run almost everything that makes money in El Salvador. Coffee gave birth to the oligarchy in the late 19th century, and economic growth has revolved around them ever since.”⁵

In 1961, a civil-military junta enacted taxes and agrarian reforms in an attempt to relieve rampant inequality in El Salvador. In the view of the oligarchs, the reforms “were ‘soak-the-rich’ moves in design and intent, were badly thought out and, finally, that the people most affected were not consulted before the reforms were decreed.”⁶ With an ancestry of wealth and power, it was hard for the oligarchy to accept any interference of their socioeconomic prestige. Up until this time, they had enjoyed limitless influence under the laws of the nation, but due to these reforms “the traditionally close ties between the wealthy class and the Government [had become] strained almost to the breaking point.”⁷

Despite this threat to their sovereignty, the oligarchs continued to enjoy their wealth and power throughout the 1960s and ’70s. A 1963 *New York Times* article titled “Oligarchy Strong” analyzes the power dynamics in El Salvador with las catorce holding much of the clout. “In few Latin nations is an economic oligarchy more deeply entrenched than in El Salvador, where a small number of families control a top-heavy share of the country’s wealth and exploit most of its

2.7 million people.⁸ At this time, President Julio Rivera was in the midst of pushing for an income tax of at least 65 percent, the highest in Latin America. While some members of the oligarchy accepted the fact that times were changing, others were reluctant to relinquish the reins.

Among those fighting reform was Tomás Regalado, who criticized any attempt at amending the status quo: "I think you Americans should stop building schools under the Alliance. Our economy is not strong enough yet to support such social projects."⁹ Regalado, like others in his position, strongly believed that their power and influence was crucial for the growth of the country. The Salvadoran oligarchy considered itself the architects of El Salvador, whose industriousness allowed them to create something out of nothing in this tiny, overpopulated Central American country. "Our entrepreneurial spirit is the country's only natural resource," a wealthy matron commented. "Without us the country will sink into the grave."¹⁰

By the 1970s, the rise of a generation of younger priests in the Catholic Church transformed what was once the "staunchest defender" of the oligarchy into an organization that denounced the rightists as "exploiters and murderers." While actual numbers aren't apparent, in response some oligarchs joined Protestant churches despite their Roman Catholic upbringing.¹¹ The rift between the Catholic Church and the oligarchs was exemplified by Archbishop Óscar Romero's murder in 1980. In response to a question about his murder, one businessman stated, "How could the army tolerate a man in his position telling the soldiers not to obey orders; lay down their guns, rather than shoot?"¹²

Remarkably, after a century of "unchallenged, highly profitable" rule, by the early 1980s El Salvador's close-knit oligarchy hit hard times. This was a result of the disintegration of the "antique fabric of social relations" that had bolstered its control for such a long time. Under the pressure of the revolutionary struggle, an increasingly hostile Roman Catholic Church, and a U.S. government pushing despised economic reforms, the oligarchy began to crumble.¹³

A Salvadoran "Third Way"

During the decades of the 1960s and '70s, the Christian Democratic Party (Partido Demócrata Cristiano, PDC) rose up as a unique

integration of both leftist and rightist ideals, making it a moderate voice in El Salvador's struggle to find its political identity. The conflict was not a binary one between the rightist oligarchy and military on one side, and the Marxist revolutionaries on the other. Christian Democracy emerged as a significant and controversial "third way" in Salvadoran society. Its impact on the course of the war is undeniable, no matter how much proponents of hyper anti-communism or Marxist revolution denied its legitimacy throughout the war.

The rise of the Christian Democrats in Latin America in the 1960s began as an attempt to provide a democratic alternative to the seemingly inexorable march of armed Marxist revolutions throughout Latin America in the heady aftermath of Cuba's successful insurrection in 1959.¹⁴ The movement seemed to come out of thin air. Although the oldest parties, those in Uruguay and Chile, were of an earlier origin, most of the Christian Democratic parties were founded in the years following World War II. By 1964, the year of the first Christian Democratic election victories in El Salvador, there were similar parties in 16 of the 20 Latin American republics. Eduardo Frei's 1964 election victory in Chile made him the first modern Christian Democratic president in the region. For many supporters, Frei's victory signaled a new era in Latin America, where political power would humanely promote wide-scale social welfare and not simply preserve the prerequisites of the rich.¹⁵ Even some revolutionaries who found communism reprehensible embraced the Christian Democratic "gospel," which was readily backed by the New Frontier progressive reformers in the Kennedy administration.

Given its name and sectarian ties, many observers mistakenly concluded that Christian Democracy was a political wing of the Roman Catholic Church in these countries. While formally politically independent, Christian Democracy gained much of its philosophical structure from the church's social doctrine, especially as seen through Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. While criticizing both Marxism and laissez-faire capitalism, Leo acknowledged the overlap between socialism and the teachings of the Gospel. Nevertheless, he did not endorse the violent revolution that some Marxists in Europe and around the world were promoting in this era of heightened social divisions and labor unrest. Unlike the communists, though, Leo described private property as a natural right, although it needed to be held in a

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socially just way. He endorsed the rights of workers while also touting the preservation of such traditional social institutions as the church and family. More than 30 years later, Pope Pius XI reinforced Leo's teachings in his *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), another condemnation of unregulated capitalism and support of workers' organizations.¹⁶

Revolution

The word "revolution" often appeared in the political literature of the nascent PDC in El Salvador. In fact, in 1966 the PDC declared that revolution in the country was unavoidable. Yet, this would be a peaceful, Christian revolution marked by a drastic "structural" change of society, but categorically not the "violent, materialist" revolution espoused by the Marxists and their supporters. For many of the Christian Democratic leaders, change was essential for a better society but it could not be done hastily, as the Marxists desired. PDC leader José Napoleón Duarte likened the Christian Democrats to a "chain reaction in a nuclear reactor" – there would be great energy but it would be controlled and predictable.¹⁷ In an interview in 1981, as head of the ruling government junta, Duarte described his embrace of Christian Democracy in 1960:

I began comparing what was being said with what I believed and with what I saw around me. In this country, which then had a population of 3,000,000, fewer than 100,000 had any privileges at all. There were fewer than 2,000 teachers in the entire country. From that time I decided to form a political force to look for a solution to the country's problems. That force turned out to be the Christian Democratic party. Its model was the reformist capitalist parties of that name in Western Europe. You must realize that until then there were no political solutions, no real political parties in El Salvador, only coups d'état. The Christian Democrats represented an electoral solution. All the political intellectuals said we were crazy, but we decided to take part in the elections of 1962 against the whole machinery of government. They got 450,000 votes, we got 37,700... something like that. We didn't give up. We kept working and in 1964 tried again. We won 37 mayors' offices, including San Salvador, which I won by 500 votes.¹⁸

Later in this same interview, Duarte recalled his time as mayor of San Salvador in the 1960s and how difficult it was to pursue meaningful reform past an entrenched oligarchy. A close-up look at his country's

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financial statements revealed to Duarte that one of the richest families in the country, the Regalado Dueñas family, had failed to pay both their garbage and water taxes for the last 30 years. Duarte took it upon himself and the PDC to collect this tax money from other wealthy families like Dueñas, who had defaulted on their dues. This, of course, created a rift between Duarte and the oligarchs:

When I was running for my second term, Tomás Regalado [father of Ernesto who was kidnapped by leftist revolutionaries in 1971] invited me to his house. I had never been there before. No one I knew had. Three of four of the richest men in the city were there. They gave me a big drink, and we talked for a while. Then Don Tomás asked me to come upstairs with him. He said he wanted to show me a painting, but what he wanted to do was to talk to me about how I could serve them – the oligarchs. How much did I want to resign and take a job with them? Whatever I needed they would give me. They would ask only one thing: that I drop out of politics. I said, "Thank you for the offer, but no." ... I left the house and I never went back.¹⁹

The PDC's insistence that the old barriers to reform needed to be removed elicited fears and suspicions among the oligarchy.²⁰ What, the right asked, actually distinguished the Christian Democrats from the communists who sought total revolution? And even if the Christian Democrats were entirely peaceful and democratic, wasn't it likely that the communists at some point would simply push them out?

Rightist fears aside, the PDC espoused anti-communist rhetoric, criticizing leftist uprisings in neighboring countries. At the party's first national convention in San Salvador in 1961 the Christian Democrats condemned the Cuban revolution as a "betrayal" of the Cuban people's fight for liberation and warned of the threat of Soviet domination in the Caribbean.²¹ Not surprisingly, the radical left denounced the PDC for rejecting communism, which kept the Christian Democrats squarely in the middle of rightist and radical leftist' contempt.

While firmly anti-communist, the Salvadoran PDC also repudiated U.S. colonialism, denouncing the United States' controversial intervention in the Dominican Republic that supporters had believed necessary to prevent a potential communist victory. The PDC's middle-ground stance effectively made it the Salvadoran "third way," or as a *New York Times* article from October 1965 put it, the party that offered a "growing organizational strength and a reformist ideology that few other political groups in Latin America [could] offer as an alternative."²²

The Unofficial "War Tax"

While the Christian Democrats became a reformist response to the extreme inequality in El Salvador, other groups began to take matters into their own hands in their resistance of the oligarchy. A clandestine leftist revolutionary organization calling itself "El Grupo" kidnapped the young progressive businessman Ernesto Regalado Dueñas on February 11, 1971. The incoming U.S. Ambassador Henry Catto recalled the episode in an interview decades later:

There had been one murder before I arrived. The son of a wealthy family – a very progressive, liberal-minded young businessman, had been kidnapped, ransom demanded, ransom offered – a large amount I can't remember the amount but it was a lot – but apparently the kidnappers panicked and shot him and killed him, left his body in a bag by the side of the road. That was the first hint that there was serious trouble to come.²³

Regalado's body was found a week later with two .45mm caliber bullet shots to his head. Regalado had apparently been killed before the multi-million dollar ransom was collected, although some claimed it had been paid. El Grupo was made up of university students, some connected to the Salvadoran Communist Party. In time, El Grupo would constitute part of the guerrilla movement united in late 1980 as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (El Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, FMLN).

For his many admirers, and especially in conservative business circles, Regalado represented one of the most dynamic and dedicated advocates for Salvadoran industry and culture. In the aftermath of the Regalado murder, kidnappings for ransom and hit-and-run attacks on government buildings and other targets became increasingly common in San Salvador. Many of the groups taking credit for most of these operations were radical spinoffs of El Grupo. Over the next 10 years, roughly \$50 million was surrendered to kidnappers, almost all of whom were on the revolutionary left.²⁴

Clyde Taylor, an economic officer in the U.S. Embassy in the mid-1970s, recalled the serious threat facing these tycoons:

It was frightening to see how the devolution occurred, how fast it occurred. Two weeks after we left [in 1975] the first Salvadoran official I met, who was a little young and president of the tourist institute, was kidnapped. He came from a very wealthy commercial family. I think the ransom was \$11,000,000,

something like that. The family paid it, and they got a cadaver. Two weeks later, the Foreign Minister was kidnapped. The family put up, I believe, \$13,000,000 and they got a cadaver. So you could see you were dealing with people who didn't even take the usual approach to kidnapping. And so the sense of class conflict, the insecurity, arose very quickly, and things went downhill very quickly.²⁵

One Salvadoran oligarch described how he attempted to get his kidnapped younger brother released. "After months of negotiations, we handed over \$4 million in cash. Luckily we didn't have to mortgage any farms to raise it. Now we don't expect any more trouble. We've paid our 'taxes.'" Yet this being El Salvador, it was never apparent if "the kidnappers were guerrillas, common criminals or moonlighting military officers," who also extracted their "war tax" from the oligarchs.²⁶

Twenty years later, some demobilizing guerrilla leaders reflected on their past kidnapping ways, including the beating and summary murder of Regalado. "We did some awful things," said one. "We were very young and very ideological back then. To us, Regalado was an oligarch – an enemy of the people who deserved to die. We now recognize that was a mistake, but that's what happened."²⁷

The manner of Regalado's killing helped convince the country's hardline businessmen to support retaliatory operations that grew into the "planned massacre" of thousands of guerrillas, their supporters, and the multitudes of Salvadorans who were somewhere in between.²⁸ In short, Salvadorans saw death squads as revenge. Many conservative Salvadorans considered February 11, 1971 – the day Regalado was kidnapped – as the effective beginning of El Salvador's 20-year war. Even after the 1992 peace agreement had been signed, one businessman whose close relative was killed by guerrillas in the early 1970s was not optimistic about the future: "I doubt anyone will shake their hands when they return to the capital. They will have to be careful that someone does not shoot them."²⁹ For the Salvadoran right, the Regalado episode was equivalent to the left's reaction to the murder of Archbishop Óscar Romero in March 1980: something from which there could be no turning back.

"Preferential Option for the Poor"

In accordance with Pope John XXIII (1958–1963) and Pope Paul VI's "Vatican II" (1963–1965), the Catholic Church began to increase its

focus on human rights and social justice. Part of the impetus for this shift was the assessment that violent revolution was inevitable in some of the world's most impoverished countries if social inequities were not addressed. The church also began to identify economic development as a key element of social justice. In the view of many Catholic leaders, poverty itself was an affront to humanity and God.

The movement that emerged from this initial concern with social justice in the Vatican II became, as Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez dubbed it, "liberation theology." While the Vatican leadership later criticized liberation theology for its politically activist orientation, the movement gained currency among Latin American theologians. Essentially, it argued that God has a special preference for the marginalized and posited the Christian figure of Jesus as the liberator of humanity from injustice and oppression.

In 1968, the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops took place in Medellín, Colombia. The seminal gathering reflected the growing influence of liberation theology within the church, especially among bishops in Latin America. One of the central topics of discussion at the conference was the idea that "violence" should be classified into various types, and that some were worse than others. For many adherents, the worst form of violence was "institutional violence," which was composed of the "structural" conditions of poverty and injustice. To correct this violence the church needed to focus more aggressively on the excluded and downtrodden in society. While firmly rooted in Catholic social teachings, liberation theology was also influenced by the Marxist views of Latin America's inequalities – views that had become pervasive following the Cuban Revolution.

"The Cause of All Our Problems Is the Oligarchy"

While both Marxism and liberation theology were core philosophical undercurrents in the Latin American revolutions in the latter half of the 20th century, it would be a mistake to consider them indistinguishable. Liberation theology's subscribers were not necessarily Marxists (or Marxist guerrillas) and vice versa. A more productive way to understand the two is to see liberation theology as a set of observations and principles that overlapped with Marxism's secular diagnosis of the

same problems. The outcome, however, is that the principles of liberation theology often appeared indistinguishable from Marxist rhetoric, especially for those predisposed to make this connection.

Both liberation theology and Marxist groups contended that Latin American society was highly unjust and exploitative. And both believed that lasting justice could come only through radical social and economic change. The following description by Archbishop Romero reflects the outlook that liberation theologians and Marxists shared on the root of El Salvador's ills: "The cause of all of our problems is the oligarchy. It prevents the peasant and worker unionization since it considers it dangerous to its economic interests. So the repression against the people is transformed into a necessity in order to increase profit margins. This is the root of the structural violence in our country."³⁰

While Marxist and liberation theologians viewed El Salvador through the same lens, their approach to rectifying the country's injustices differed. Marxists tended to believe that this change required armed revolution. The liberation theologians, on the other hand, were inclined to hold that change should come from non-violent forms of protest. Yet, at least to some extent, liberation theology's interpretations and prescriptions provided religious sanction for violent revolution. And the guerrillas were certainly smart enough to realize that the church's endorsement of their view of the social order helped to bolster the legitimacy of the rebels as political actors.

As one would expect, the line between Marxist revolution and liberation theology was not always sharply drawn, if it existed at all. Some priests were sympathetic to the guerrillas, whether implicitly or explicitly. Others were avowed Marxists, though in fact, many Marxist priests refrained from advocating violence. A critical question is how much each group influenced the other. According to Humberto Belli, in his book *Christians under Fire*, "In practice the revolutionary Christians do not preach to Marxists in order to attract them to Jesus Christ, but to Christians in order to attract them to Marx. The conversion of Christians to Marxism is indeed the main evangelical thrust."³¹ As military and rightist violence increased in the 1960s, a certain proportion of liberation theology adherents concluded that the preferred, peaceful road to revolution had been ruthlessly closed. The only option left, they believed, was to join the guerrillas in the mountains and do with

solidarity and succor – and even at times the barrel of a gun – what had seemed impossible through civil protest.

“The System Caused This”

The radical transformation of the church in El Salvador inspired by liberation theology took root in the 1960s with the establishment throughout the countryside of a variety of community-level organizations, or base communities, dedicated to economic and social welfare. During the 1970s these base communities continued to grow in response to persistent socioeconomic inequalities.³² Working in the urban shantytowns and countryside, energized theologians promoted the “conscientization” of the masses – a clear notification that their hunger, underemployment, and desperation were not “God’s will or the result of their own failures.”³³ This pastoral work included the discussion of biblical passages, which were related to the daily lives of the community members and implemented in some form of social action.³⁴ Sister Joan Petrik was a North American Maryknoll nun who worked in El Salvador in the 1970s; as she recalled, “When I first arrived in Tamanique, every time a child died the family would say, ‘It’s the will of God.’ But after the people became involved in the Christian communities, that attitude began to change. . . . They began to say, ‘The system caused this.’”³⁵

And now when a worker or a “campesino” (peasant) concluded that the system had caused the misery, the options for fighting back included the still clandestine guerrilla groups and their supporters. One resident outside the town of Tierra Blanca recounted the organizing efforts in the 1970s: “I studied pastoral work for several months at the centers and went to seminars in Jiquilisco, San Marcos Lempa, El Triunfo, and Coyolito. I worked as a catechist for ten years. But the rich were killing people so I joined the BPR [radical leftist group] in 1976 as a way to fight back.”³⁶ Another activist interviewed after the war ended in 1992 described his evolution: “Here there were people working for the emergence of the Frente [FMLN]. It is correct to mention the Catholic Church and the university of the campesinos. Strategically, the [peasant training centers] taught with the Bible in hand, but in truth the purpose was to orient us to our own reality. These people moved about under the cover of the church itself; they were the beginnings

of the FMLN.”³⁷ Indeed, the FMLN relied upon “two main sources” for its guerrilla fighters and “rear guard” supporters: the Communist Party and these religious activists “radicalized” through liberation theology.³⁸ Yet, while these two campesinos and thousands more like them might well have joined an armed Marxist insurgency, most guerrilla fighters remained Catholics who “understood revolution in the language of religion.” In the end, religion in El Salvador became both an agent and a victim of what one observer called the “civil war’s corrosion.”³⁹

“Christians Are Not Afraid of Combat”

The rigged 1977 election that resulted in the victory of strongman Carlos Humberto Romero (no relation to Óscar Romero) marked the beginning of more systematic attacks on what the right (including the military) considered the church-led agitation and subversion. The right also perceived the priests as overseeing the intellectual formation of a “new generation of Communist youth” in the Jesuit-run Universidad Centroamericana José Siméon Cañas (José Simeón Cañas Central American University, UCA). Over a two-year period, all seven of the country’s bishops had signed pastoral letters denouncing human rights violations, revealing the church’s level of public opposition. Having concluded that the church had reversed its traditional role and was supporting the communists, the right began to target “subversives” that included priests, nuns, the archbishop himself, and “anyone associated with the left wing of the Church.”⁴⁰ It began with a series of arrests and expulsions of foreign priests belonging to the Jesuit, Maryknoll, and Benedictine orders.⁴¹ Over the course of the entire war, death squads killed at least 17 priests and nuns.⁴²

Around this time the White Warriors Union death squad (Union de Guerreros Blancos, UGB) issued the flyer “Be Patriotic-Kill a Priest.”⁴³ The group also presented to the press its “War Bulletin #6” in which it accused 46 Jesuits of “terrorism” and ordered them to depart the country; after that date their death would be “immediate and systematic.”⁴⁴ These sorts of blatant threats caused the new archbishop of San Salvador, Óscar Romero, and his fellow bishops to boycott the inauguration of President Romero on July 1, 1977. The violence also drew foreign attention, particularly in U.S. Catholic communities. Rattled by

the negative press reports, General Romero ordered a reduction in the anti-church operations and even placed soldiers in Jesuit residences and made an ostentatious pledge for their safety.⁴⁵ Even General Romero seemed to understand that El Salvador was becoming known for killing priests; as a contemporary writer observed, this reputation “ill became the only country in the world named after Christ.”⁴⁶

After the moderate Óscar Romero became archbishop of San Salvador in 1977, he began to speak out against rightist violence.⁴⁷ For Romero, “The fear of Marxism keeps many from confronting the oppressive reality of liberal capitalism. Before the danger of a system clearly marked by sin, they forget to denounce and combat the reality implanted by another system equally marked by sin.”⁴⁸ The Salvadoran archbishop even argued that the oppressive conditions made certain forms of violence acceptable. “Christians are not afraid of combat; they know how to fight, but they prefer the language of peace. However, when a dictatorship seriously violates human rights and attacks the common good of the nation, when it becomes unbearable and closes all channels of dialogue, when this happens, the Church speaks of the legitimate right of insurrectional violence.”⁴⁹

From Priesthood to Insurrection

Rogelio Poncel, a tall Belgian Roman Catholic priest who had been in El Salvador since 1970, had been a fierce critic in a Salvadoran Catholic church that he believed had refused to condemn social injustices. By the end of the decade Poncel had become “intimately involved with leftist movements,” including the guerrillas. The firebrand Poncel even attacked Archbishop Romero for being overly cautious in the face of government repression. Poncel was in hiding by 1980, then he joined Joaquín Villalobos’s rebel faction in mountainous Morazán. “On Christmas Day three years ago,” Poncel recalled in a 1984 interview, “after a bomb exploded in our rectory, I realized I had only one option left if I wanted to stay in El Salvador. I traveled that day to northern Morazan.”⁵⁰

Poncel described his years providing “spiritual comfort” to rebels linked to Villalobos’s People’s Revolutionary Army (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo, ERP), one of the key FMLN military factions. He revealed how he had met up with the guerrillas on Christmas Day of



FIGURE 5.1. Father Rogelio Poncel in FMLN-controlled territory, 1988. By the end of the 1970s, the Belgian priest had become “intimately involved with leftist movements” in El Salvador that included the emerging guerrilla insurgencies. Followers of liberation theology like Poncel believed that religion should both identify and resist societal inequities – a theology that overlapped with secular Marxism’s diagnosis of economic exploitation. Image and permission courtesy of Jeremy Bigwood.

1980, just a few weeks before the rebels launched their failed January 1981 final offensive. He remained with the guerrillas until the war ended a dozen years later. Here is how he justified his pastoral work within an organization committed to violent revolution: “The Bible confronts the established order. It must be seen from the point of view of the poor, and Christ was poor... A Christian, a priest, must of necessity be a revolutionary. How can we conform what we preach with a system that oppresses and exploits?”⁵¹

Although Poncel saw many reasons for taking a violent stance, he did not carry a weapon, but he admired those who did. The priest had

ministered to hundreds of people killed in the massacre in El Mozote and some surrounding villages by Salvadoran army troops. "It made me want to pick up a gun," he commented, "but the comrades told me there were lots of fighters but not very many priests." Ponce stayed with the ERP until the peace treaty was signed, and as of 2010 was based in a church in the town of Perquín, in the mountain department of Morazán, which served as the ERP's base during the war years.⁵²

Military Officers as a Caste

As El Salvador's conflict began to escalate, the role and influence of the armed forces in the country began to expand. Like many of its Latin American counterparts, the FAES was traditionally split between those geared to defend national territory and those maintaining internal order. The first group included the Navy and Air Force, each with only a couple hundred men, and the Army, which was roughly 23,000-men strong in 1983, and grew to 55,000 by the end of the war. The second group included the National Guard and National Police, both with at least 3,000 men, and the Treasury Police with half that number.

To provide readers with some necessary background on the institutions and episodes lurking under the surface of El Salvador's protracted war, foreign correspondents often wrote about the infamous graduating classes of the army's military academy.⁵³ Writing for the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine in 1983, reporter Shirley Christian described firsthand the notorious Military Academy Capitán General Gerardo Barrios (Escuela Militar Capitán General Gerardo Barrios, EM) named after a Salvadoran commander who headed the effort to defeat American filibuster William Walker in the 19th century. Christian described a "place of waxed tile floors, fresh paint, tropical flower beds, and polite cadets."⁵⁴

Another journalist on the same campus six years later wrote: "At first glance, [it] could be the athletic complex of a large Midwestern university. Instead of trophies, there are polished brass shells and the seals of Army units. Along one wall, the framed face of each academy *comandante* stares implacably from behind his pane of glass: Prussian and Chilean officers dominated during the early years, then came Americans, and finally Salvadorans." The reporter also observed a

plaque that commemorated the 50th anniversary of the school's 1936 class – the very soldiers who fought alongside Maximiliano Hernández Martínez to suppress the Farabundo Martí-led communist rebellion that left roughly 20,000–30,000 peasants dead.⁵⁵ In 1944, rival officers ousted Martínez and so started the "35-year coup-begets-coup cycle that until this decade defined Salvadoran politics." It also gave the military academy its nickname "School of the Presidents," given how many of its graduates ended up running the country.⁵⁶

The military academy was a place where the instructors "talk of rewards that come with loyal service to the nation," and the cadets learned that the "welfare of the Army and the welfare of the fatherland are indistinguishable."⁵⁷ Contrary to what was often assumed, the cadets came largely from lower middle-class families who often struggled to pay for their children's high school education in the hopes that they would pass the rigorous entrance examinations for the tuition-free "Gerardo Barrios."

Becoming an officer was the best way to rise socially for an "intelligent, earnest young man lacking family means." This ascension would never put him in the same social circles as the Salvadoran aristocracy, but it at least provided the imprimatur of respectability in a country where that was "denied to all but a few." And while many entered the academy, few finished. Cadets were forced to endure marches, beatings, and other ordeals intended to trim the class to a "hardened core" of officers. In one telling, the "soft boys from the good families" went first, followed by the "scholars" – those most able to succeed outside the military. "This left the survivors cloistered in the academy, isolated from a civilian world they are taught to view as decadent, amoral and corrupt."⁵⁸ Now around one-fourth the size of the entering class, "unbreakable alliances" had formed among the survivors.⁵⁹

As Shirley Christian wrote about the graduates, "Though their paths may cross only occasionally in the years during which they move to seniority and power, none forgets his classmates." Together they comprised what Salvadorans called a *tanda*. While literally translated as "round," a better word might be "caste," each graduating class a sub-caste of the larger caste. Having produced officers for over 30 years, the tandas were notorious for their insularity and willingness to tolerate abuses by members of their ranks.⁶⁰ Tanda officers would often serve as godparents to one another's children. For one observer, "If among



FIGURE 5.2. Graduating military academy cadets in full uniform, 1983. American military advisors believed that the Salvadoran military academy's insular culture helped perpetuate a rotten FAES leadership corps based on nepotism and fear rather than excellence and merit. This perceived dysfunction is one reason why the United States wanted to train Salvadoran soldiers away from the corrupting influences – an effort with mixed results. Photo and permission by Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos.

them [the *tanda*] there proved to be embarrassing incompetents, not to mention murderers, rapists and thieves, then those men were shielded by their classmates, and defended ferociously.⁶¹ And if a class member deviated too much from this hard-to-define line, he could wind up “drumming on a desk in a cubbyhole at a Salvadoran embassy in some country that hardly knows El Salvador exists.” The corrupt nature of the *tandas* was one reason the U.S. military was so eager to train the Salvadoran soldiers outside of this perverted system.

According to one theory behind their corruption, each *tanda* sent its most capable officers toward the brigade commands; there, relatively unobstructed, they could accumulate material wealth through routine graft. This money could then be shared with allied *tandas* in an effort to guarantee “each clique enough firepower to survive changes at the

top.”⁶² As one American diplomat recalled in 1989, “When I left in 1977, corruption was so prevalent, it was just about inconceivable that an officer would rise to a senior level without being corrupt.”⁶³

Most of the officers who wielded great power during the civil war in the 1980s graduated in classes of one to two dozen men in the late 1950s and '60s. In addition to presidents, some would become ministers of defense or heads of the armed forces. The graduates often received additional training at the army's own school of command or in the United States and other anticommunist countries like Taiwan, Argentina, and Chile. By Salvadoran law, a professional military career lasted 30 years from the day a young man entered the academy, which meant that graduates usually retired before they were 50. Throughout the 1970s, military officers not only controlled the presidency, but through the National Conciliation Party (Partido de Conciliación Nacional, PCN), had a “virtual monopoly on the country's discourse.”⁶⁴

Looking forward in our story, American involvement in the civil war increased over the 1980s; U.S. advisors encouraged a rapid expansion of the officer corps, hoping this would “dilute institutional corruption” by weakening the power of each *tanda*. In the previous decade, 600 Salvadoran officers had commanded 15,000 troops. Now more than 1,000 new officers were pulled from the enlisted ranks and trained by Americans in the United States and Panama, a large group given the small number of U.S. advisors allowed in El Salvador at the time. Graduates of these “quickie officer candidate schools,” the expectation was, would flood the army with new professional leaders and thus begin to eliminate the corrupt, incestuous patterns of the past. Yet, despite these efforts, the *tanda*-based patronage system remained alive and well. As one officer commented late in the war, “You're seeing second lieutenants with BMWs.” In fact, one reporter concluded that by the end of the 1980s, “the Tammany Hall-style rituals [had] become even more refined.”⁶⁵

The armed forces made up one component in this complex conflict. As we have seen, key actors in the 1960s and '70s emerged across the broad span of Salvadoran politics. In this jumble of ideologies, as with all political identities, the divide stemmed from each faction contending that their approach would best serve the interests of El Salvador.

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Add to this the rampant violence from the death squads, kidnappings, mass poverty, and a general hunger for power, and passions quickly swelled, making it harder for groups to meet somewhere in the middle and igniting the impetus for civil war.

Guerrillas Are Born

The aristocratic dominance was in fact a marriage between the military and the aristocracy so that the military arranged to provide the President and the aristocracy the direction and money. So you had an insurgency and a reform movement coming out of a tremendous thirst for change.

– American ambassador to El Salvador¹

We know very little about who exactly is out there in the hills... We know that they receive arms through Nicaragua. But beyond that I don't know very much.

– U.S. Diplomat official, San Salvador, 1982²

The insurgency was a many-headed thing – as most of these things [Marxist insurgencies] were. You had the hard core real communists and you had the other guys who were land reformers and maybe naïve to go along with the really tough guys but who wanted change and who felt that the only way to change that system was to do it through violence.

– Roger Fontaine, Reagan administration official³

“The Revolution Had Begun”

At the time of the fraudulent presidential election in 1972 that denied the presidency to José Napoleón Duarte, the only guerrilla organization was the Popular Forces of Liberation (Fuerzas Populares de Liberación “Farabundo Martí,” FPL), which limited their operations to kidnappings. Thus, while there were formidable Cuba-style focos next

door in Guatemala and Nicaragua, for most of the 1970s El Salvador was devoid of these insurgent forces – at least in their more formal role as armed guerrilla groups. A dozen young communists, including former seminarian Salvador Cayetano Carpio, founded the FPL in 1970 as a breakaway revolutionary faction of the Communist Party. Carpio went on to become the group’s top commander.

The doctrinaire Carpio (or Commander Marcial, his assumed name) enjoyed being referred to as the Ho Chi Minh of Central America. While other radicals were focused on an insurrection-style effort similar to the successful Cuban revolution in 1959, Carpio opted for a Ho-style “prolonged struggle” in order to win a war of attrition against the despised military. By 1980, the FPL had swelled to around 2,000 troops operating in the single mountain province of Chalatenango, a locale where they remained for the war’s duration. For Carpio, El Salvador’s revolution would have to be Marxist-Leninist and represent the “triumph of the worker-campesino alliance.” And this paradise would have to come through a “prolonged popular war” of low-intensity fighting by well-trained militia units.⁴

Deeply influenced by the 1932 massacre, Carpio’s revolt would actually stem from the lower classes as opposed to university students. Interestingly, the son of a poor shoemaker and future member of a union of bread bakers, Carpio was one of the few FMLN leaders born into poverty. The FPL’s main revolutionary activity during the 1970s was to use its clandestine cells of highly disciplined operatives to carry out selective bombings and kidnappings, and increasingly the executions of important rightist politicians and businessmen.⁵ In the summer of 1977, for example, within a span of weeks the FPL executed the military regime’s 87-year-old foreign minister, ex-military president Colonel Osmin Aguirre, the two senior military commanders in Chalatenango, and Dr. Carlos Alfaro Castillo, a large landowner and university rector.⁶

A year later, when all the guerrilla groups were combining to launch one raid per week, over two weeks the FPL killed six policemen, attacked the U.S. Embassy, blew up an electricity plant, destroyed the Bayer factory in San Miguel, and planted more than 40 bombs in San Salvador.⁷ The revolution had begun. In a sense, at least initially, these “political military fronts” that became guerrilla groups were

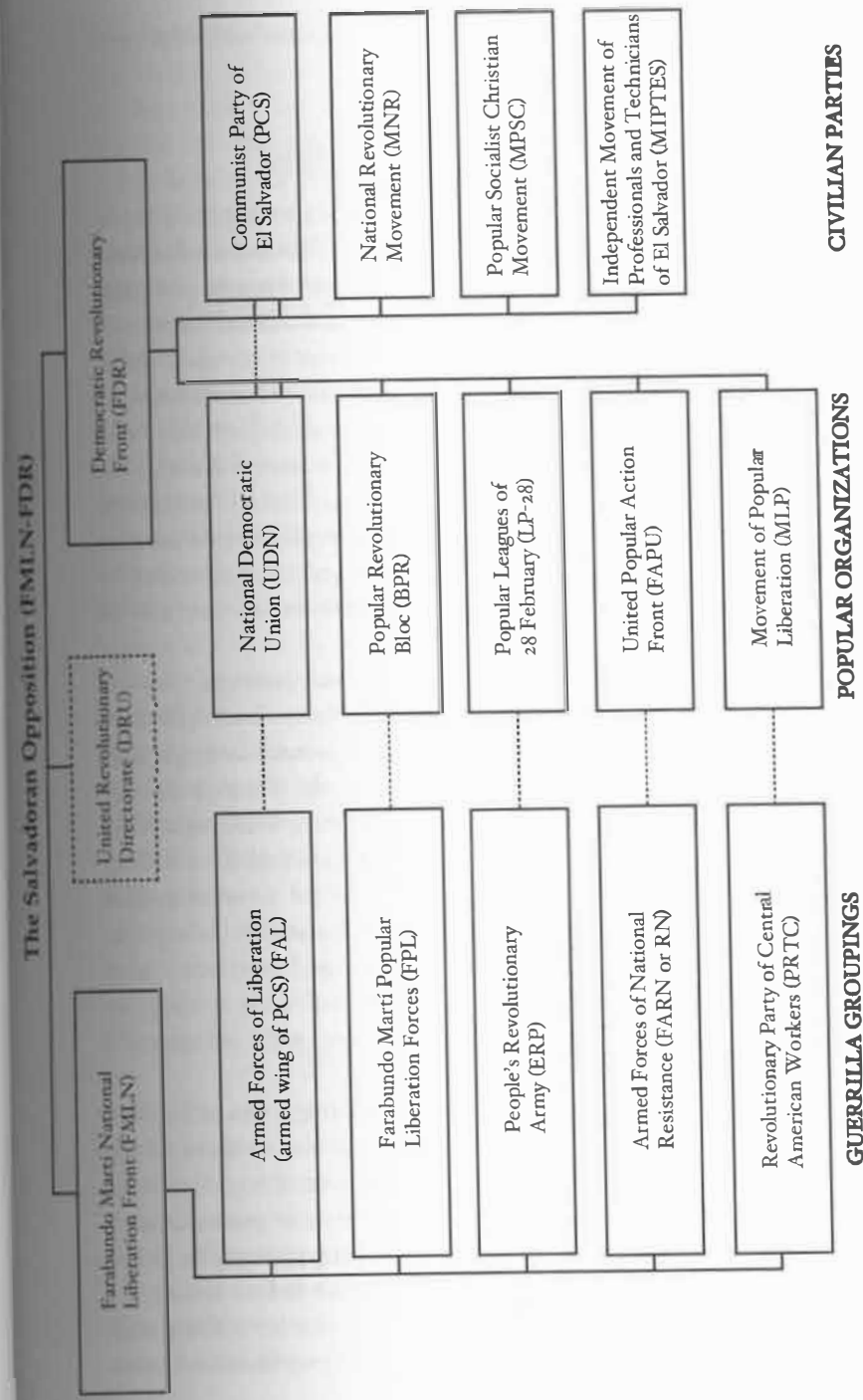


FIGURE 6.1. The Salvadoran revolutionary left. United under the FMLN umbrella in 1980, the fractious guerrilla groups were the military component of a broader revolutionary effort that included the civilian Democratic Revolutionary Front (Frente Democrático Revolucionario, FDR). The line between FMLN and FDR – and insurgency and political organizations – was difficult to decipher. Image prepared by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Cartography Lab©. Reprinted with permission.

not always fully distinguishable from mass organizations active in the same years.

“Another Arm of the Imperialist Police”

Another critical element in the emerging revolutionary left in the fateful decade of the 1970s was the PCS under Schafik Handal, a Salvadoran whose parents had emigrated from Palestine and become successful merchants.⁸ In 1980, the PCS determined that it needed to join the armed struggle or risk being left out of the Marxist revolution. Led by Handal, the communists' guerrilla group was formed in 1980 as the Armed Forces of Liberation (Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación, FAL). Handal served as a valued conduit to the Soviet Union over the course of the war. Following the peace agreement in 1992, Handal maneuvered to become one of the FMLN's top politicians, eventually running for president on the FMLN ticket in 2004.⁹ He was secretary general of the PCS from 1973 to 1994, a remarkable two decade tenure that included the entire internal war.

Government and paramilitary repression and repeated electoral fraud – especially in the 1972 presidential election – had radicalized many on the left, swelling guerrilla ranks. The second large guerrilla group to emerge that same terrible year was the People's Revolutionary Army (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo, ERP), comprised of radicalized converts from the disillusioned ranks of the relatively centrist Christian Democrats. The group inducted vaunted essayist and revolutionary poet Roque Dalton into its leadership ranks; eventually, though, the renowned communist poet and two other guerrillas were accused of working as CIA spies. Following a kangaroo trial in 1975 they were convicted of treason and were subsequently executed.

While the negative response to Dalton's summary execution from other revolutionary factions was categorically critical – Fidel Castro denounced the ERP as “another arm of the imperialist police” – the episode eased the way for Joaquín Villalobos (nom de guerre Comandante Atilio) to assume leadership of the teetering group. The son of a middle-class family who had studied economics before joining the guerrillas, the young and brilliant Villalobos opted for a Cuba-style foco strategy hatched from the isolated and under-populated mountain

province of Morazán to promote a rapid revolution through popular insurrection. In his words, “Who would have thought that, with a few attacks on some barracks, Somoza would have fallen? And the same was true in Cuba. You have to seize the moment.”¹⁰

For most of the war, the ERP remained based in Morazán, and under Villalobos's command it became the most powerful military element within the FMLN – Latin America's largest and most formidable Marxist insurgency during the Cold War. The dramatic overthrow of Nicaragua's Somoza in 1979 only served to fuel Villalobos's preference for spontaneous insurrection over the Maoist-supported protracted warfare strategy.¹¹ As early as 1980, the ERP conducted extraordinary raids that indicated to both San Salvador as well as the other FMLN components that it could achieve greater than its weight on the battlefield.

As both the FPL and ERP continued to grow in strength, several offshoot insurgent groups – such as the Armed Forces of National Resistance (Fuerzas Armadas de la Resistencia Nacional, FARN) that broke away from the ERP in 1975 after the Dalton execution – also began to organize, although they never rivaled these two organizations. The FARN was known for its political targets, such as its kidnapping in early December 1978 of Japanese, Dutch, and British businessmen – brazen and lucrative acts that provided the revenue to maintain its clandestine operations.¹² After the death of its leader Ernesto Jovel in a suspicious plane crash, the FARN made an awkward reconciliation with Villalobos's ERP. Although they shared the same enemy, the relationship between these incipient guerrilla groups was always complex.¹³

Through Managua in an Old Taxi

In October 1979, guerrilla leader Ana Guadalupe Martínez was in an old Nicaraguan taxi in Managua on her way to the Cuban Embassy. Martínez needed to speak with Cuban officials to convince them to incorporate her guerrilla group, the ERP, into the secret negotiations unfolding in Havana to unite the fractious Salvadoran rebel groups. For months the Cuban government had been mediating these discussions in which it considered the other guerrilla factions to be more formidable – and thus more deserving of Cuban training and

materiel. Following the ERP's murder of "wayward" communist poet Roque Dalton, Havana had severed ties with the fledgling Salvadoran rebel group. Yet some ERP members had fought alongside the Sandinistas to help overthrow Somoza, a move that did not hurt Martínez's pitch to the Cubans.¹⁴ The young Salvadoran revolutionary eventually arrived in Cuba where she continued to make her case; her first meeting was with Manuel Piñera – better known as Barbaroja for his red beard – the Cuban most actively involved in Havana's revolutionary efforts in Latin America.¹⁵

The roots of the Salvadoran insurgents were mostly domestic, not externally pushed by Moscow, Havana, or post-1979 Managua. The FPL and ERP were also intense rivals, which explains why they had not naturally merged into one coordinated insurgency. Within days of seizing power in Managua in 1979, Sandinista leader Tomás Borge hosted the first of a series of meetings with the Carpio-led FPL to discuss support for the revolution in El Salvador. That same year and months before the reformist coup of October 1979, Havana was brokering talks among the Salvadoran insurgent groups.¹⁶ Interestingly, the Carter administration released a classified report in July 1979 that Havana had apparently concluded by the fall of 1978 that "prospects for revolutionary upheaval in Central America over the next decade or so had markedly improved."¹⁷

Various Salvadoran guerrilla leaders supposedly met with Fidel Castro in Cuba in the following year to address the guerrillas' impasse. Castro was apparently more concerned about the Sandinistas' survival in Nicaragua than the internal jealousies of the Salvadoran revolutionaries. Eager to resolve their divisions and similar to the provisions he had established before arming the disparate Nicaraguan insurgents, Castro apparently made Cuban military and political support conditional on a united Salvadoran guerrilla front, which led to the creation in October 1980 of the FMLN.¹⁸ By the end of 1980, in addition to their 6,000–8,000 guerrilla fighters, the united FMLN claimed over 1 million sympathizers, including 100,000 militia members. The latter provided food, storage, refuge, intelligence, and rearguard support in military operations.¹⁹

A circulating rumor was that in one of the meetings in Cuba Barbaroja symbolically placed a machine gun on the negotiating table and

told the Salvadoran rebels, "It's yours if you are together."²⁰ In a 2007 interview with historian Andrea Oñate, Villalobos responded to a question about the veracity of this episode by commenting with a smirk, "We weren't idiots; it was blatantly clear that Cuba wanted us to unite and that if we did we could count on the island's full backing. There was no need for such insinuations; Cuba's stance was explicit."²¹

Over the course of the war, Havana never sent combat troops to fight alongside its Salvadoran comrades as it had in Africa in the 1970s but it did provide significant logistical, intelligence, strategic, and military assistance to the FMLN. Yet, this largess over the course of the war did not mean that the Salvadoran guerrillas were financially dependent on Havana. Instead, the FMLN's kidnappings for ransom, bank robberies, "war taxes" in territory it held, and funds from sympathetic political groups in the United States and Western Europe kept the money flowing.²² All told, the group accumulated hundreds of millions of dollars to fund the insurgency.²³

While the FMLN was not financially dependent on Havana, Cuba's influence in uniting the various groups under the FMLN, and both the ideological and weapons support from the Eastern Bloc, brings up the key question of whether the guerrilla movement originated internally or was created by foreign support and ideology. On the one hand, few dispute that domestic grievances and antipathies in El Salvador drove the conflict. But dogmatic Marxist ideology added fuel to this swelling conflagration. As the U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) summed up the rising tide of insurgencies in a 1964 report: "Backwardness is not in itself a spur to revolution, but rising consciousness of deprivation is."²⁴

Aside from Salvadoran Communist Party leaders like Handal who maintained close ties with the Russians, the "FMLN leadership dealt with Havana and not the Soviet Union."²⁵ As one FMLN commander reflected, "The USSR never understood revolutionary movements in Central America, they never understood Che Guevara and they never understood us. The initiative in Cuba's relations with the FMLN was Cuban and the Soviets... stayed out of it and let the Cubans do their thing."²⁶

In an indication of how polarized the issue of Soviet involvement was both then and now, contrast this perspective with the writings of

commentator Peter Kremp in the conservative magazine *The Spectator* in July 1982:

In Central America, as in Africa, Cuba has been acting as Russia's satellite. . . . There has been turbulence in Central America since Mayan times. It has been perpetuated by the wide gap between rich and poor and the indifference of the former, until recently, to the plight of the latter. What the Cubans have done is to exploit genuine grievances, hinder as much as possible any attempts at reform, and work to unite the various guerrilla organizations and coordinate their activities to serve Cuban, and therefore Russian, ambitions.²⁷

Proof and speculation of Soviet ties to revolutionary efforts in Central America, and more specifically to the insurgent forces in El Salvador, would become a continuous narrative throughout the decade-long conflict.

"Fidel Is a Commander, a Military Man, a Man of War"

Cuban aid in the immediate months after the FMLN's creation came in the form of training camps established on the Caribbean island nation where guerrilla soldiers received special operations training. In one instance, elite troops from Villalobos's ERP received training for 45 days in Cuba in preparation for a commando attack on the Ilopango Air Base, outside of San Salvador, in February 1982. This raid destroyed six UH-1B helicopters, three C-47 planes, and five French-built Ouragan aircraft, and damaged five other aircraft — 70 percent of the FAES Air Force.²⁸ In the preparation for this attack, the Cubans used a Vietcong military tactic and built a facsimile of the base to ensure a successful raid.

Fidel Castro was apparently most interested in the military aspects of the FMLN's operations, a preference that explained his deepening relationship with the also military-minded Villalobos. Villalobos recounted, "Fidel is a commander, a military man, a man of war. He likes war strategy much more than the political and ideological aspects of revolution."²⁹ Villalobos also claimed that Castro would make a surprise appearance to meet him on all of his trips to Cuba.

All told, the two revolutionaries met numerous times, "poring over maps of El Salvador and developing military strategies"; this continued right up to the FMLN's military offensive in late 1989. Villalobos contended that he received \$500,000 from Castro to finance the 1981

"final offensive" and almost double that for the November 1989 offensive in San Salvador. He added that every time he received Cuban funds Castro would remind him, "remember that people in Cuba don't have toothpaste," or "remember that we suffer economic limitations on the island." For Villalobos, "It was as though with every payment, he was giving me a part of his soul."³⁰

Considering how fractured these disparate groups were during the prior decade, the Havana-led creation of the FMLN was an enormously significant achievement. It is likely that the combination of the intensified operations decimating the FAES ranks, euphoria over the Marxist revolution in Nicaragua, and intense Cuban pressure combined to unite the factions.³¹ Soon the world would understand the Salvadoran guerrillas to be the "FMLN"; yet on the ground and certainly in military operations the various groups routinely fought separately. In the January 1981 "final offensive," for one, the FARN did not participate and the ERP refused to share its weapons.³² Amazingly, this factionalism would last for years following the end of the war in late 1992 when the FMLN would become a political party contesting local and national elections.

After their fateful visit to Cuba to seal the guerrilla alliance, most of the now "united" Salvadoran guerrilla leaders headed to Managua to meet with Sandinista officials who offered them a "headquarters" and "all measures of security" in Nicaragua.³³ Schafik Handal, by contrast, departed Havana for Moscow where he met with Mikhail Kudachkin, an official of the Soviet Party Central Committee. The Soviets instructed Handal to travel to Vietnam to seek arms from this anti-imperialist nation. In Vietnam, Handal met with Le Duan, the secretary general of the Vietnamese Communist Party, and other high-ranking and military officials. Hanoi offered a "first contribution" of 60 tons of arms, sufficient to arm an entire combat battalion. Overwhelmingly, the equipment was of American Vietnam War-era manufacture, including 1,620 M-16 automatic rifles and 1,500,000 rounds of ammunition.³⁴

Handal also visited the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Hungary. The East Germans promised Handal that they would divert medical supplies already en route to Nicaragua as well as train Salvadoran guerrillas. Because they did not possess suitable Western arms that would allow the FMLN to maintain

plausible deniability about the weapons' true source, East Germany and Hungary raised the possibility of exchanging Soviet-bloc for Western-manufactured arms with Ethiopia or Angola.³⁵

Solely a Political Alliance

Another key development in April 1980 was the creation of the leftist political entity, Democratic Revolutionary Front (Frente Democrático Revolucionario, FDR), which came to serve as the incipient FMLN's political wing.³⁶ The FDR consisted of an amalgamation of mass organizations like the Popular Revolutionary Block (Bloque Popular Revolucionario, BPR) as well as scores of trade unions, church persons, students, smaller leftist political parties, and the National and Catholic universities. It became the largest "political movement" in the country.³⁷ Many of the FDR's leadership had served in the Christian Democratic-led junta government, including FDR president Guillermo Ungo (who was also Duarte's running mate in 1972). The charismatic socialist Rubén Zamora was also one of its key members.³⁸

Throughout the war, the FDR played an instrumental role as the FMLN's international mouthpiece. Zamora and Ungo made numerous trips to the rest of Latin America, Europe, and the United States to advocate radical social reform in El Salvador. In fact, only a few months after their formal alliance with the FMLN, FDR delegations toured Europe and Latin America in what was considered a successful effort to secure international sympathy and political support for the group.³⁹ The FDR's main contention was that the successive democratic governments in the 1980s were in fact not representations of the people's will – an argument that played especially well with the leftist Mexican government and social democratic parties of Western Europe. In July 1981, for example, newly elected French Socialist president François Mitterrand supported the Salvadoran insurgency: "It's a question of people refusing to submit to misery and humiliation," he said. Two days later the French Socialist Party pledged to the FDR delegation "all possible support for the struggle."⁴⁰ On the other end of the ideological spectrum, conservative observers in the United States contended that the FDR was a thinly veiled "propaganda organization" whose principal function was "to throw the cloak of respectability, especially abroad, over the violent activities of the guerrillas."⁴¹

Within weeks of the FDR's official link to the FMLN in late November 1980, the FDR national leadership was holding a nighttime meeting at a Jesuit high school in the capital when the building was surrounded by armed men in civilian dress. The next day, the mutilated bodies of six FDR leaders, including dissident landowner and FDR president Enrique Álvarez, were discovered at Ilopango, right outside San Salvador.⁴² The death squad, General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez Anti-Communist Brigade, took credit for the attack, having just two weeks earlier announced its intention to eliminate "communist thieves and prostitutes."⁴³