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FARC, Shining Path, and Guerillas in Latin America

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Summary and Keywords

Armed insurrections are one of three methods that the left in Latin America has traditionally used to gain power (the other two are competing in elections, or mass uprisings often organized by labor movements as general strikes). After the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, guerrilla warfare became the preferred path to power given that electoral processes were highly corrupt and the general strikes too often led to massacres rather than a fundamental transformation of society. Based on the Cuban model, revolutionaries in other Latin American countries attempted to establish similar small guerrilla forces with mobile fighters who lived off the land with the support of a local population. The 1960s insurgencies came in two waves. Influenced by Che Guevara's *foco* model, initial insurgencies were based in the countryside. After the defeat of Guevara's guerrilla army in Bolivia in 1967, the focus shifted to urban guerrilla warfare. In the 1970s and 1980s, a new phase of guerrilla movements emerged in Peru and in Central America. While guerrilla-style warfare can provide a powerful response to a much larger and established military force, armed insurrections are rarely successful. Multiple factors including a failure to appreciate a longer history of grassroots organizing and the weakness of the incumbent government help explain those defeats and highlight just how exceptional an event successful guerrilla uprisings are.

Keywords: guerrilla warfare, Che Guevara, insurgency, FARC, ELN, FMLN, Shining Path

The triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 gave hope and inspiration to a new generation of revolutionaries.¹ That revolution was a watershed event in 20th-century Latin America, and for a moment it came to be seen as a normative method by which leftists could transform society. It was followed by a wave of guerrilla movements that attempted to replicate that accomplishment. Almost every Latin American country experienced a guerrilla insurgency in the 1960s, but none of them approached the same degree of success as the Cubans. Those failures challenged what was at one point a common assumption that a small armed force could defeat a much larger and better-established enemy.²

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The only other successful guerrilla insurgency came twenty years after the Cuban Revolution when the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN, Sandinista National Liberation Front) overthrew Anastasio Somoza Debayle on July 19, 1979, in Nicaragua.³ The Sandinistas won in no small part because Somoza's corrupt and repressive regime had alienated the conservative business community. After eleven years and under intense military and economic pressure from the United States government, the FSLN lost an election to a conservative candidate. In the meantime, in 1970 the avowedly Marxist Salvador Allende won election as president in Chile only to be removed three years later in a US-backed military coup.⁴ In both cases, revolutionary governments were determined to gain international respectability by not engaging in a wholesale elimination of the *ancien régime*, but in failing to do so they left structures in place that ultimately undermined their socialist experiments. Contending with counterinsurgent forces without falling into the trap of authoritarianism to counter that mortal danger to their very existence remained a conundrum that leftists faced difficulties in overcoming.

Resorting to guerrilla warfare often exhibited what could be seen as an attempt to short-circuit much larger political and economic processes. Karl Marx believed that socialism would emerge in highly industrialized capitalist societies, not in the underdeveloped periphery that characterized Latin America.⁵ Many of the young student radicals who led the guerrilla movements criticized the leaders of orthodox communist parties who contended that the objective economic conditions were not ready for a socialist revolution, often to their own detriment. The guerrillas may have underestimated the degree of proletarianization that rural workers in Cuba had undergone, in which case it would be a mistake to interpret their revolution as a peasant revolt. It was also a mistake to believe that a small force could overthrow an entrenched dictatorship as long as that regime retained popular support. Governments often collapse from within rather than as a result of external pressure.

Latin American guerrillas made up for what they lacked in experience with dedication, but typically that was not sufficient to triumph in their struggles. They often misunderstood the true lessons of how Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba.⁶ Guerrilla forces were often plagued with ineptness and internal disputes over leadership, tactics, and ideology. Many were poorly trained and equipped and psychologically unprepared for protracted conflicts, mistakenly assuming that victory would come rapidly. Cultural and class divisions between urban student leaders and a rural peasant base also hindered success. Rather than immediate and quick success, a successful socialist revolution requires a long and arduous process of establishing the proper political and economic conditions for eventual victory.

Achieving change through a guerrilla struggle is a very difficult undertaking, as revolutionaries in Colombia, El Salvador, and Peru discovered. In each case, activists launched powerful insurgencies, but in each instance their efforts devolved into lengthy and bloody civil wars. Peace agreements had a limited effect on solving underlying problems of exclusionary social structures. In the face of resolute United States opposition and entrenched

ruling class interests, achieving permanent and sustainable revolutionary transformations through whatever means remained an elusive goal.

Che Guevara

In 1956, a young medical doctor from Argentina named Ernesto Guevara de la Serna joined Fidel Castro and eighty other guerrillas to launch an armed struggle against the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship in Cuba. The Cuban guerrillas gave Guevara the moniker “Che” from a linguistic inflection commonly used in Argentina. Guevara fought with the Cubans for two years in the Sierra Maestra mountains, eventually rising to the rank of rebel army commander. He became the third most important leader after Fidel and his brother Raúl Castro. Most notably, Guevara led the battle at Santa Clara that led to the fall of the Batista regime and the triumphant entry of the guerrilla troops into Havana in January 1959.⁷

Based on his experiences during the war, Che Guevara wrote *Guerrilla Warfare* as a manual to guide other revolutionaries on how to overthrow their governments and implement a new and more just social order. In that book, Guevara challenged Marxist beliefs that a society needed to meet certain political and economic conditions before it could move toward socialism. Furthermore, he denounced as defeatist the assumptions that a small armed force could not defeat a much larger and better-armed military. Instead, he believed that the Cuban Revolution had demonstrated that a small insurrectionary guerrilla army (what he called the *foco*) could create the objective conditions necessary for a successful struggle. Rather than rooting his struggle in an urban working class, Guevara argued that by operating in the countryside a guerrilla force could spark a revolution that would then spread to the cities. Only a handful of revolutionaries in each country were necessary to begin a process that would transform Latin America.⁸

Guevara’s attempts to put his theories into practice in other countries met with dismal failure. A series of initial attempts in the early 1960s to launch *foco*-style insurrections against Batista-style dictatorships in Panama, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti quickly met with defeat. A subsequent series of guerrilla attempts in Peru initially realized more success but also showed the shortcomings of the *foco* theory. Hugo Blanco was a Trotskyist and a charismatic peasant organizer in La Convención Valley north of Cuzco. His attempt to lead an armed insurrection failed because he was more of a peasant organizer than guerrilla fighter.⁹ A second attempt by Luis de la Puente Uceda was also unsuccessful because of divisions on the left, poor site selection, and a misreading of the political situation. Blanco’s movement had organized peasants in desperate need of guerrilla support. They had seized land but had no guns to defend it. In contrast, de la Puente’s guerrillas failed because of a lack of support from an organized peasantry. They had guns but no peasants to defend. A third attempt by Héctor Béjar similarly collapsed due to ideological, organizational, and personalist fragmentation and a lack of organic connections with rural communities.¹⁰

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The failure of the Peruvian *focos* foreshadowed the defeat and execution of Guevara in neighboring Bolivia. In 1965, Guevara left Cuba to continue his revolutionary adventures elsewhere. He first traveled to Africa to join a guerrilla struggle in the Congo that he hoped would spark a continental revolution, but that proved to be a frustrating experience and he left without having realized his goal.¹¹ In 1966, he arrived in Bolivia to launch a new continental Latin American revolution. Unlike in Cuba, Guevara's guerrillas had difficulties gaining the support of the rural population. An agrarian reform program that a self-styled revolutionary government had implemented almost fifteen years earlier had satisfied a peasant hunger for land, and they were not much interested in another revolution. For several months, Guevara engaged in skirmishes with the Bolivian military but was always on the defensive. On October 8, 1967, an antiguerrilla military unit that the US Army Special Forces had trained captured Guevara. Fearing the potential publicity of a political show trial and Guevara's possible release or escape, Bolivian dictator René Barrientos ordered his execution.¹²

Some critics condemned Guevara for mechanically applying his lessons and theories of guerrilla warfare from Cuba to the Bolivian situation where they were not a good fit and contended that this led to his failure and death. It appeared that he was not able to learn from his defeats, nor from the shortcomings of the attempted *focos* in Peru. Others criticized Guevara for overemphasizing the role of armed struggle in a revolutionary movement and pointed out that although a relatively small guerrilla force overthrew Batista in Cuba, this came only after years of leftist political agitations and rising worker expectations. In fact, some argued that he fundamentally misinterpreted why the Cuban Revolution succeeded and as a result misunderstood the lessons of that victory. Rather than rooting his struggle in a rural population, Guevara may have realized more success had he allied with militant and highly politicized workers in Bolivia's mines.¹³ Although revolutionaries found Che Guevara's *foco* theory of guerrilla warfare very compelling in the early 1960s, by the 1970s it had become largely discredited. Activists looked elsewhere for models on which to base their transformation of society.

Urban Guerrillas

Che Guevara's death led to a shift from rural- to urban-based guerrilla movements.¹⁴ Abraham Guillén, an exiled veteran of the Spanish Civil War who lived in Uruguay and Argentina, published *Strategy of Urban Guerrilla* in 1966. Guillén argued that with demographic shifts to urban areas, it was no longer viable to launch guerrilla warfare from the countryside. He believed that Guevara's *foco* theory was a recipe for disaster and would only lead to mounting death tolls.¹⁵ These urban insurrections were largely rooted in intellectual leaders and student movements. Following this model, a variety of urban guerrilla groups emerged out of labor and student groups in Argentina. Many of them identified with the leftwing of Peronism rather than Marxist doctrines.

In Brazil, Carlos Marighella founded the *Ação Libertadora Nacional* (ALN, National Liberation Action) in 1968 to battle the military regime that had taken power in 1964. The pro-

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Soviet Partido Comunista Brasileiro (PCB, Brazilian Communist Party) had expelled Marighella because of his opposition to their policy of pursuing change through peaceful and parliamentary methods. He wrote the *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla* that, together with Guillén's work, became a key statement on urban guerrilla warfare.¹⁶ The ALN engaged in robberies and kidnappings in an attempt to advance their cause. In one of their most famous actions, in September 1969 the ALN together with a group of radical students kidnapped US Ambassador Charles Burke Elbrick. He was released four days later in a swap for fifteen imprisoned guerrillas, who flew to Mexico.¹⁷ In November 1969, the police killed Marighella. As the police became more effective at killing or capturing the group's leaders, the ALN lost its ability to function.

One of the most significant urban guerrilla movements was the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional-Tupamaros (MLN-T, National Liberation Movement-Tupamaros) in Uruguay. Raúl Sendic founded the group in 1962 and took its name from Tupac Amaru, who led a massive uprising in 1780 against Spanish abuses in the Andean mountains. In 1966, the Tupamaros began to engage in spectacular robberies and kidnappings and distributed food in poor neighborhoods, which gained them an image as Robin Hood-style fighters. In 1970, the Tupamaros kidnapped and executed United States Agency for International Development (USAID) official Daniel Mitrione who they accused of training the country's police forces in torture tactics. Critics blamed the Tupamaros' practice of kidnappings and assassinations for inciting police repression that resulted in a military dictatorship in 1973. After the return to constitutional rule in 1985, the Tupamaros resumed life as a peaceful political party. The former Tupamaro political prisoner José "Pepe" Mujica won election as president of Uruguay with the leftist coalition Frente Amplio (Broad Front) in 2010.¹⁸ Competing paths to power (armed insurrections, general strikes, and participating in elections) reflected what revolutionaries saw as the best opportunity under current conditions rather than an ideological commitment to a specific strategy. The overriding goal remained the same—to end exclusion and exploitation and usher in a more equal and participatory society.

FARC

The Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) was Latin America's oldest, largest, and longest-running guerrilla movement.¹⁹ For half a century the FARC fought a long and bloody war against the Colombian government. Some combatants spent their entire adult lives with the guerrilla force. In the face of high levels of US support for the Colombian government, the guerrillas stood little chance of a military victory. As the war dragged on, the FARC came to rely on the drug trade to fund its struggle, which led critics to condemn it for having lost its political orientation. Although at different times the FARC managed to control significant swaths of territory, its popularity declined. With prospects for eventual success dimming, in 2016 the FARC leadership signed a peace accord with the Colombian government. Several of

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the guerrilla's units, however, refused to lay down their weapons, highlighting how difficult it is to bring a long-running armed insurgency to a close.

The FARC's origins lie earlier in the 20th century when a monopoly on power between the conservatives and liberals resulted in the social, economic, and political exclusion of other organized political movements. In the midst of these tensions, on April 9, 1948, an assassin killed Colombian liberal leader and presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. His death triggered a massive riot known as the *bogotazo* that left thousands dead and injured and much of downtown Bogotá destroyed. That social explosion introduced a decade of violence (called "La Violencia") between liberals and conservatives for control of the countryside that led to the deaths of at least two hundred thousand people. That period of bloodletting culminated with a power-sharing agreement between the liberals and conservatives that shut out other political parties, in particular leftists. The exclusionary nature of Colombian society created the objective conditions for a civil conflict.²⁰

With the end of the civil war, one of the guerrilla fighters, Pedro Antonio Marin, under the nom de guerre Manuel Tirofijo ("Sureshot") Marulanda, retreated to the community of Marquetalia, Tolima, with his supporters. Their goal was to create a society that would meet the needs and concerns of Colombia's rural people. Marulanda formed a self-defense group to protect agrarian interests, which prompted the government to fear a Cuban-style guerrilla insurgency in what it dubbed the independent Republic of Marquetalia. In 1964, the Colombian army attacked the community. Marulanda escaped to the mountains along with forty-seven other guerrilla fighters. Survivors of that battle met with members of other communities and formed the Southern Bloc guerrilla group that called for land reform. Two years later, the Southern Bloc reestablished itself as the FARC. It became the military wing of the Partido Comunista Colombiano (PCC, Colombian Communist Party) and shifted to more offensive tactics. In 1982, the FARC changed its name to the FARC-EP or Ejército del Pueblo ("People's Army"), although in common parlance it was always known simply as the FARC.

The FARC kidnapped politicians and wealthy individuals for ransom to pay for the costs of its guerrilla camps and the social services it provided to communities under its control. In the 1970s, the FARC began to tax drug traffickers. The new revenue stream allowed the guerrilla group to grow rapidly, even as the association with the drug trade eroded the FARC's reputation as a politically motivated force. Some recruits joined the insurgents for financial rather than ideological reasons, particularly when the FARC paid soldiers higher wages than the Colombian military. Wealthy landowners in alliance with the Colombian military formed paramilitary groups with names such as Muerte a Secuestradores (MAS, Death to Kidnappers) and the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC, United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia) to fight back against the guerrillas. Rather than a guerrilla insurgency, the conflict began to look like a civil war, although one in which combatants targeted the civilian supporters of their opponents rather than other armed groups who could defend themselves.

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During the presidency of Belisario Betancur in the 1980s, the FARC entered into peace talks with the Colombian government. In 1984, the two parties reached an agreement for a bilateral ceasefire that lasted for three years. As part of the agreement, the FARC together with the PCC founded a political party called the Union Patriótica (UP, Patriotic Union). The UP realized initial successes, particularly with a strong showing in the 1986 elections. Right-wing paramilitary groups, drug cartels, and the Colombian military responded by killing thousands of its members and leaders, causing the party to disappear as an important political force.

The FARC returned to the battlefield and grew in size to eighteen thousand soldiers. Almost half of its members were women, and they trained and fought alongside men and assumed positions of leadership in the guerrilla army. The FARC gained high-profile foreign recruits, including the Dutch woman Tanja Nijmeijer (Alexandra Nariño) who rose through the ranks to become an assistant to a senior commander. Having children within a mobile guerrilla force is a very complicated undertaking and in fact was forbidden in the FARC. Some condemned the FARC for forcing pregnant women to undergo abortions and to work as sex slaves for guerrilla commanders. Human rights groups also criticized the FARC for recruiting child soldiers.

In 1997, the US State Department added the FARC to its list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations. In 2000, US president Bill Clinton initiated a nine-billion-dollar military aid program called Plan Colombia to combat drug trafficking but in particular targeted the guerrillas. In 2002, the conservative politician Álvaro Uribe won the presidency and launched an aggressive campaign against the guerrillas. The military successes of his defense minister Juan Manuel Santos led to the decline of the FARC as a significant threat. The Colombian military gained access to US technology that allowed it to engage in targeted assassinations of FARC commanders, which further undermined the group's coherence.

In 2012, Uribe's defense minister Santos won the presidency and restarted the peace process with the FARC. Government and guerrilla negotiators gathered in Havana, Cuba, for discussions that stretched on for years. In 2016, the belligerents finally signed a five-point peace accord and agreed to a ceasefire. The agreement committed the Colombian government to investment in rural development and allowed the FARC to transform itself into a legal political party. In order to give the accord a higher degree of legitimacy, Santos brought it to a public referendum. Santos's predecessor Uribe campaigned fiercely against the referendum, which contributed to its defeat at the polls. Santos, meanwhile, won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to bring the long conflict to an end. The government and guerrillas returned to the negotiating table and quickly hammered out a revised agreement that they hoped would be more acceptable to the broader public.

In August 2018, Uribe's protégé Iván Duque Márquez succeeded Santos in the presidency, which cast the future of the peace accord into doubt. With conservatives firmly in control of the government, it remained highly questionable whether the peace accord would solve the exclusionary nature of Colombian society and whether new guerrilla insurgencies would once again emerge.

ELN

Several other guerrilla groups emerged alongside the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) in Colombia. In 1964 students, Catholic radicals, and left-wing intellectuals formed the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN, National Liberation Army) that they modeled after Guevara's *foco* theory of guerrilla warfare. Its most famous member was the radical priest and well-known university professor Camilo Torres Restrepo. Although Torres came from the upper class, he was openly critical of the social and economic inequality in Colombia. He joined the ELN as a simple soldier rather than a commander, including joining in on kitchen and guard duty. In Torres's first combat action, he participated in an ambush of a military patrol that killed four soldiers. The army mounted a counterattack and killed Torres. The military buried the former priest in an unmarked grave. He subsequently became a highly regarded symbol of the ELN's struggle.²¹

The ELN never grew as large as the FARC and mobilized about seven thousand fighters at the height of its operations. To fund itself, the ELN engaged in what it called "war taxes" by kidnapping wealthy Colombians and extorting funds from oil companies and other business endeavors. Along with the FARC, the United States listed the ELN as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. Occasionally the FARC and ELN attempted to collaborate, but just as often they competed for the allegiance of populations under their control. The ELN entered in preliminary peace talks with the Santos administration, but unlike the FARC the negotiations unraveled without making much progress.

The Movimiento 19 de Abril (M-19, 19th of April Movement) was a more moderate Colombian guerrilla movement than either the FARC or ELN. It took its name from the allegedly fraudulent April 19, 1970, presidential elections. The M-19 employed populist and anti-imperialist discourse that gained it support from radical students and urban movements. Unlike many other guerrilla groups, its political orientation was not explicitly Marxist in orientation.²²

The M-19 gained renown for the spectacular and highly symbolic urban guerrilla actions in which it engaged. In 1974, members stole one of independence leader Simón Bolívar's swords from a museum, and in 1980 it took fourteen ambassadors hostage in a raid on a cocktail party in the embassy of the Dominican Republic. In 1985, the M-19 held hundreds of lawyers and judges captive in a siege of the Palace of Justice. This plan backfired when the Colombian army attacked the building, setting it ablaze and killing the M-19 commandos and many of their hostages, including eleven supreme court justices.²³ That failure led to the decline of the group, and it entered into peace negotiations. The demobilized guerrillas formed a political party but faced the same problem as the Union Patriótica (UP, Patriotic Union) when drug cartels and right-wing death squads killed many of its members. Those experiences convinced many revolutionaries that it was not possible to transform society through the electoral process.

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A Maoist offshoot of the Partido Comunista Colombiano (PCC, Colombian Communist Party) formed the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL, Popular Liberation Army) in 1967. It never gained the size or presence of the other guerrilla groups. The EPL demobilized in 1991 and formed the political party Esperanza, Paz y Libertad (Hope, Peace, and Freedom). As with the outcome of other peace agreements, the EPL did not gain a significant presence in the electoral realm.

In 1984, Indigenous activists formed the Movimiento Armado Quintín Lame (MAQL, Quintín Lame Armed Movement) in Cauca, a part of Colombia with a large native population that suffered from unequal land distribution. The insurgency named itself after Manuel Quintín Lame Chantre, a leader from the early 20th century who defended Indigenous rights. The MAQL fought to protect Indigenous communities from landowner and military attacks. They negotiated a demobilization agreement with the Colombian government in 1990, which included their participation in a constituent assembly the following year. The MAQL arguably achieved major concessions and the incorporation of Indigenous rights into the 1991 constitution that they might otherwise not have realized had they not resorted to armed actions.²⁴

In 1987, the five guerrilla groups (FARC, ELN, M-19, EPL, and MAQL) formed an umbrella organization known as the Coordinadora Guerrillera Simón Bolívar (CGSB, Simón Bolívar Guerrilla Coordinating Board). In part, this was in response to Fidel Castro's insistence that guerrilla groups unify their efforts in order to improve their chances for success. Similar to the M-19's theft of Bolívar's sword, the CGSB's use of the independence hero's name appealed to nationalist sentiments in an attempt to legitimize the guerrilla movement. Even so, competing political ideologies and interests meant that the diverse guerrilla groups failed to merge their organizations. A lack of unity in the face of a common enemy contributed to the failure of their revolutionary agenda.

FMLN

In 1980, five distinct guerrilla groups in El Salvador representing different ideologies and constituencies combined their efforts into a joint command called the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), named after a communist leader who had led a failed 1932 peasant uprising. A year earlier, a similarly named Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN, Sandinista National Liberation Front) in neighboring Nicaragua combined three guerrilla organizations in a successful campaign to evict Anastasio Somoza Debayle from power. Their Salvadorian counterparts thought that they could replicate their success. Instead of gaining a quick victory through an armed struggle, the conflict degenerated into a twelve-year civil war that killed tens of thousands of people. Finally, in 1992 the insurgents signed a peace accord that brought the fighting to an end but left the pre-existing structures intact.²⁵

A small oligarchy known as "the fourteen families" controlled most of the land in El Salvador, the entire banking system, and most of the country's industry. In contrast to their wealth, the majority of the country's inhabitants lived in deep poverty. This ruling class

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engaged in extreme political repression in order to retain their class privileges. In response, Christian-based communities engaged poor people in rural areas and urban barrios with a combined study of the Bible and an analysis of economic and social problems. Catholic priests emphasized social justice and the rights of the poor and oppressed. With rising social unrest, the government organized death squads that terrorized the civilian population in order to maintain their class privileges. Repression of these communities led to further politicization and radicalization along with a dramatic increase in repressive violence from their conservative opponents.²⁶

In March 1977, a death squad murdered Rutilio Grande, a Jesuit who worked in the community of Aguilares, along with a teenager and a seventy-two-year-old peasant while on their way to mass.²⁷ Grande's death deeply influenced Archbishop Monsignor Oscar Romero, who became increasingly vocal in denouncing human rights violations and calling for social justice. He appealed to US president Jimmy Carter to suspend his support for the Salvadorian government, because the military was using the aid to repress the civilian population. Instead, the United States continued to prop up the government with more than a million dollars of military funding a day. Romero slowly moved toward support of armed struggle as the only option, given the increased repression. When asked if he feared for his life, Romero declared, "If I am killed, I shall rise again in the struggle of the Salvadorian people." On March 24, 1980, under instructions from army major Roberto D'Aubuisson, a death squad assassinated Romero while he was celebrating mass. His death provided a powerful catalyst for popular struggles.²⁸

After Romero's death and with government-sanctioned violence on the rise and all peaceful paths to political changes seemingly exhausted, many members of civil society joined guerrilla armies. In 1970, communist party leader Salvador Cayetano Carpio, together with education union leader Mélida Anaya Montes and university professors Clara Elizabeth Ramírez and Felipe Peña Mendoza, had founded the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (FPL, Popular Liberation Forces) as a military and political organization. A second group, the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP, People's Revolutionary Army), emerged several years later out of disaffected youths. Under the leadership of Joaquín Villalobos, the ERP emphasized military action over political work. When internal disputes within the ERP resulted in the assassination of leading ideologue Roque Dalton in 1975, a breakaway faction formed the Fuerzas Armadas de la Resistencia Nacional (FARN, National Resistance Armed Forces). The FARN assumed a more moderate social democratic position than the previous two groups and was willing to collaborate with reformist elements in their opposition to the Salvadorian oligarchy.

Previously the Partido Comunista de El Salvador (PCS, Communist Party of El Salvador) had assumed an orthodox communist position of favoring peaceful political organizing over armed struggle, but in 1980 they agreed to join the FPL, ERP, FARN, and the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos (PRTC, Revolutionary Party of the Central American Workers) in coordinated military activities as the FMLN. The FMLN allied with a broad opposition coalition called the Frente Democrático Revolucionario (FDR, Revolutionary Democratic Front). Under the leadership of Guillermo Ungo and Rubén

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Zamora, the FDR developed a political platform together with the FMLN that called for social and economic reforms to benefit the poor. The platform also favored a mixed economy and a nonaligned foreign policy.

In January 1981, the FMLN launched a general offensive that tried but failed to overthrow the government. In response, the military increased its ferocious attacks on civilian communities. They pursued a policy of draining the sea of civilians in order to exterminate the guerrilla “fish” that remained behind. In one attack, the elite US-trained counterinsurgency Atlacatl Battalion killed almost one thousand civilians in the village of El Mozote.²⁹ As a result, many people in rural communities were forced into exile in refugee camps in neighboring Honduras.³⁰

Years of bloody warfare that caused the deaths of thousands of civilians followed the failed offensive. Government repression of those suspected of leftist sympathies destroyed existing organizational structures. Many who felt they had no alternative joined the FMLN in large numbers, and this did not only include the men who traditionally formed the base of guerrilla armies. About 40 percent of the FMLN members were women, including 30 percent of the combatants and 20 percent of the military leaders.³¹ During this entire time, the Salvadorian government continued to hold legislative and presidential elections that provided the regime with a veneer of legitimacy. Despite popular support for the FMLN, the guerrillas were never able to make the label of dictatorship stick to their opponents.

In November 1989, the FMLN launched a massive “final offensive” in another attempt to take power through armed means. The uprising failed, and the military took advantage of the fighting to engage in a new wave of repression. Most notably, soldiers shot six Jesuit priests at the Central American University whom they considered to be the FMLN’s intellectual leaders, together with their housekeeper and her daughter. At first the military blamed the guerrillas for the murders, but evidence later emerged that once again the Atlacatl Battalion was the culprit.³²

By 1992, after twelve years of war and with seventy-five thousand dead and right-wing death squads having “disappeared” an unknown number more, it became apparent that the FMLN could not win militarily. Even with endless US aid, neither could the Salvadorian government defeat the insurgents. Out of this stalemate emerged a peace accord that brought the fighting to an end. Although the FMLN failed as an armed insurgency, its most significant legacy was to create a highly politicized and aware civil society that continued to struggle against neoliberal economic policies and social exclusion through peaceful means.

With the signing of the peace accords, the FMLN transitioned from a guerrilla army to a political party and continued its struggle for social justice in the electoral realm. In 2009, the FMLN finally realized victory with the election of Mauricio Funes as president. In 2014, the vice president and previous guerrilla leader Salvador Sánchez Cerén won election and succeeded Funes in office. Even with the FMLN in power, gang warfare ravaged the country that resulted in homicide rates higher than those during the height of the civ-

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il war in the 1980s. The constraints of the electoral system limited the extent of the revolutionary transformations that the former guerrillas were able to implement once in power and led to a drop in support for the FMLN.³³ A result was that the FMLN lost the presidency in 2019 to the rightwing candidacy of Nayib Bukele who had previously served as a mayor of the capital city of San Salvador under the banner of the FMLN.

A common revolutionary slogan in the 1980s was “Nicaragua won, El Salvador is winning, and Guatemala will win.” Popular movements in Guatemala, however, faced a much more genocidal war than those in the other Central American republics. As in Nicaragua and El Salvador, rural mobilizations strengthened in Guatemala in response to exclusionary political and economic conditions and with the encouragement of religious workers, progressive political parties, and labor unions. In 1982, a coalition of four guerrilla forces joined together as the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG, National Revolutionary Guatemalan Unity). Similar to the FMLN, the URNG did not call for socialism but rather an end to government repression, equality for the Maya, agrarian reform, and implementation of social and economic policies that would meet basic human needs. The Guatemalan guerrillas attempted to replicate the success of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the war the FMLN appeared to be winning in El Salvador. The URNG, nevertheless, failed to gain the strength of those other two groups. The military launched a counterinsurgency campaign that killed as many as a quarter of a million civilians. With their backs against a wall, in 1996 the guerrillas signed an agreement with the government that was more of a surrender than a peace accord. The settlement brought an end to Central America’s deadliest and longest-running civil war, although it left exclusionary structures more entrenched than anywhere else in the region.³⁴

Shining Path

The Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) in Peru was the largest and most violent of the 20th-century guerrilla insurgencies in Latin America. In 1970, Abimael Guzmán, a philosophy professor at the University of Huamanga in the highland city of Ayacucho, broke from the mainline communist party. He announced his intent to push forward “por el sendero luminoso de José Carlos Mariátegui,” by the shining path of José Carlos Mariátegui, the founder of Latin American Marxist theory. Guzmán’s party came to be known as the Partido Comunista del Perú—Sendero Luminoso (Communist Party of Peru—Shining Path), shortened in common parlance to simply “Sendero Luminoso,” or the Shining Path, although militants resisted self-identification as such. Under the nom de guerre of Presidente Gonzalo, Guzmán developed his own “Gonzalo thought” that positioned the Shining Path as the “fourth sword” of Marxism after Marx, Lenin, and Mao.³⁵

Rather than joining leftist coalitions that participated in massive general strikes that pushed Peru toward a civilian government after twelve years of military regimes, the Shining Path decided in a 1979 Central Committee meeting to prepare for armed struggle. In 1980, as the rest of the country went to the polls to elect a new president, the Shining Path launched its “People’s War” with symbolic actions such as hanging dogs

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from lampposts and blowing up electrical towers. The canines represented the “running dogs of capitalism,” meaning people who served the interests of exploitative capitalists. The Shining Path gained popular support through their emphasis on popular justice and moral behavior, including holding “people’s trials” that led to the execution of abusive property owners, police officers, and other unpopular figures. Much of the guerrilla’s support came from rural students and schoolteachers who found that racial prejudice and economic stagnation blocked their potential for social mobility. At the height of its insurgency, the Shining Path had ten to twelve thousand people under arms and could draw on the collaboration of a civilian base perhaps ten times that size.

The Shining Path’s idealism and stance on behalf of the marginalized and impoverished rural masses initially gained it sympathy both within Peru and internationally. The Shining Path pursued a Maoist strategy of prolonged popular war that included laying siege to the cities from the countryside, which eventually brought its war to poor shantytowns on Lima’s periphery. The movement gained a special appeal to women because it provided them with a protected space in which they knew they would not face humiliation or discrimination for being poor, Indigenous, and female.³⁶

The Shining Path imposed a top-down leadership style. An authoritarian approach eliminated the divisive ideological and personal tendencies that had torn earlier guerrilla movements apart. A vertical hierarchy and carefully designed autonomous cell structure provided for efficient actions and tight security that proved very difficult for the government to penetrate. The capture of one militant could only furnish officials with very limited information rather than intelligence that would lead to the apprehension of more leaders. These strengths, however, were also its weaknesses. The Shining Path’s authoritarian nature and failure to empower people at a grassroots level alienated potential supporters and ultimately limited its effectiveness.

As the guerrilla army grew larger, its brutal tactics and dogmatic philosophy became more apparent. It made what others would see as serious tactical mistakes, including imposing control over agricultural harvests and commerce, placing young people in control of communities where elders traditionally had assumed leadership roles, and executing violators of social norms rather than using lesser and more appropriate punishments. It accepted no opposition to its policies and often treated other leftists more harshly than members of the ruling class. It accused those engaged in social reforms of sustaining a fundamentally unjust system rather than discarding it in favor of something new and better.³⁷

One of the Shining Path’s most noted victims was the Afro-Peruvian community leader María Elena Moyano in Villa El Salvador in 1992. She had organized community soup kitchens and was head of the neighborhood Vaso de Leche (“glass of milk”) program that offered breakfast to impoverished children. Moyano provided strong and independent leadership, and called for an end to both the Shining Path’s violence and government repression. The guerrillas blew up her body with dynamite in front of her family, not so

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much to eliminate a competitor as to intimidate and place fear in those who might challenge the Shining Path's dominance.³⁸

The war killed an estimated seventy thousand people, most of them civilians, with a disproportionate number of rural and Indigenous victims. What was unusual in Peru was that the Shining Path was responsible for a majority of the deaths, while in most guerrilla wars the military and right-wing paramilitary death squads committed the lion's share of the murders. The war also displaced a quarter million peasants and resulted in twenty-four billion dollars in property damage. It appeared that militarily the Shining Path could not take power and that the government was incapable of stopping the insurgency. Nevertheless, given the Shining Path's ruthless dedication to the pursuit of its ultimate goal, eventual victory—whether it took one generation or one hundred years—seemed inevitable.

On September 12, 1992, the government captured the Shining Path's leader Guzmán. The tightly centralized control that had made the party so powerful now proved to be its undoing. Anonymous military tribunals with 97 percent conviction rates and other judicial abuses not only helped collapse the Shining Path's support structures but also resulted in the imprisonment of many innocent people. From jail, Guzmán called for an end to the armed struggle and negotiated a peace agreement with the government. The deadly violence had accomplished little, and Peru seemed no closer to a socialist revolution than before the war started. Latin America's most deadly guerrilla war had come to an end, but the underlying conditions of poverty and exclusion that had originally led to the insurgency remained unresolved.

Women

Guerrilla warfare has traditionally been gendered male, which minimizes the important contributions that women have made. More broadly, historians have long understood the diverse roles that women have played in warfare. Most often those were support roles, typically in the provision of logistical or medical assistance as well as the drafting of texts in defense of a political ideology. Women participants aroused less suspicion than men in carrying out clandestine operations. Women could more easily and safely ferry weapons and messages than men and could exploit their femininity to infiltrate the opposition. Rather than breaking from these patterns, a gendered division of labor in guerrilla camps often represented an extension of sexism pervasive in the dominant culture with women commonly relegated to domestic tasks.

Haydée Tamara Bunke Bider, an Argentine-born East German communist who joined Che Guevara's guerrilla army in Bolivia, was one of the most famous women guerrillas. Under the nom de guerre Tania, she effectively penetrated the upper echelons of the Bolivian government, becoming very close to president René Barrientos. When her cover was blown, she joined Guevara as a guerrilla fighter until she was killed in a military ambush. Tania was the only woman in Guevara's insurgent force and her role highlights the gen-

dered nature of guerrilla struggles. Her exceptional status made her a hero in leftist circles.³⁹

Over time, more women began to assume the role of armed combatants. By the 1980s, women regularly comprised about a third of many guerrilla armies and played roles equal to men. Several factors contributed to their amplified involvement. In part their participation reflected economic and social changes, including migration from rural to urban areas and an increase in the number of women in the labor force. These factors broke traditional gender roles that previously limited women to the domestic sphere. A change in guerrilla tactics from small *foco* groups to mass political mobilizations also necessitated broader popular participation. Inevitably women were swept up in these movements along with others in their communities.⁴⁰

Women had to fight hard to become accepted in guerrilla movements. One Colombian guerrilla declared that women “had to shoot to be heard,” and women came to be respected only after they proved themselves in combat.⁴¹ Feminists commonly complained that guerrilla movements failed to develop a serious women’s agenda and that gender issues were always subordinated to a larger and seemingly more important class struggle.⁴² Leaders contended that sexism was something that would be addressed in the new society after the war was won, but even in the rare cases of victory in Cuba and Nicaragua issues of survival always seemed to take precedence over gender equality.⁴³

Discussion of the Literature

A sizable literature exists on guerrilla insurgencies in Latin America. Two standard handbooks are by Michael Radu and Liza Gross.⁴⁴ The best work on guerrilla movements has been ethnographic and empirical in nature. One of the earliest synthetic studies was that of journalist Richard Gott’s *Guerrilla Movements in Latin America*, which provides a sympathetic portrayal of their struggles.⁴⁵ Other journalists have published compelling accounts of specific movements. One of the best is that of Gustavo Gorriti on the founding and early years of the Shining Path in Peru.⁴⁶ Mark Everingham, Eric Selbin, and Timothy Wickham-Crowley all provide more theoretical approaches to guerrilla movements and revolutions in general.⁴⁷ In contrast, René de la Pedraja emphasizes military aspects of the guerrilla wars.⁴⁸ Matthew Rothwell’s innovative work *Transpacific Revolutionaries* examines the influence of China on Latin American guerrilla movements.⁴⁹

Scholars have published numerous biographies on Che Guevara since his death more than fifty years ago. While most of these books have specific characteristics that make them recommendable, a comprehensive and readable introduction to the world’s most famous guerrilla leader is journalist Jon Lee Anderson’s *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life*.⁵⁰ Many of Guevara’s own theoretical writings and field diaries—which make for particularly fascinating reading—are now available.⁵¹

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Each guerrilla movement has its own corresponding literature, with the size of the literature largely reflecting the strength and importance of the insurgency itself. The two successful guerrilla victories in Cuba and Nicaragua launched virtual cottage industries with hundreds if not thousands of books covering multiple aspects of the movements in each country. Few of the other guerrilla armies have been the subjects of synthetic or comprehensive study. Rather, scholars—often basing their work on doctoral field research—focus on specific aspects of a movement. A strength of many of these contributions is the oral interviews on which the studies have drawn.

Surprisingly, the longest running insurgency—the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) in Colombia—has not been the subject of one single study that stands out above all others. Journalists Garry Leech and James Brittain have written sympathetic introductions to the topic.⁵² Dirk Kruijt provides a strong introduction to guerrilla struggles in Central America, with others examining specific topics such as refugees (Molly Todd) or propaganda (Carlos Henríquez Consalvi).⁵³

Interest in the Shining Path in Peru continues to be strong, with solid work available on the topic. Historian Steve Stern led the way with an edited collection of critical scholarship on the insurgency published several years after the capture of Abimael Guzmán in 1992.⁵⁴ More recently, an English translation of essays by Carlos Iván Degregori, a leading Peruvian critic of the Shining Path, has become available.⁵⁵

Although men comprised the vast majority of guerrilla fighters, several good works are available on women in the movements. Political scientist Karen Kampwirth, who has conducted interviews with women in guerrilla movements, is a leading scholar on the topic.⁵⁶ The role of women in the Shining Path has garnered particular attention, with Carol Andreas undertaking pioneering work on the subject.⁵⁷ Among other essays on the subject, notable is Daniel Castro's "The Iron Legions" in his edited volume *Revolution and Revolutionaries*.⁵⁸ Also available are several fascinating biographies and autobiographies of women around famous male guerrilla leaders, including Fidel Castro and Che Guevara.⁵⁹

Primary Sources

Most guerrilla armies published manifestos to broadcast their aims and goals. No comprehensive archive or representative published collection of what were often ephemeral documents exists, although sometimes the most important statements are included in secondary works on specific movements. A common media complaint, particularly of the Shining Path in Peru, was that guerrilla groups did clearly articulate their ideas and goals, although a larger problem was that outsiders often did not listen or give credence to the statements that they did make. Shining Path's leader Guzmán, for example, did publish statements that were readily available to those who wished to read them.⁶⁰ The Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Final Report (Hatun Willakuy) is also available online.

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Several revolutionary leaders penned theoretical statements laying out their perspectives on how best to pursue a guerrilla war. The most famous is Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s *Guerrilla Warfare* that lays out his “*foco*” theory of rural-based insurrections that advocated surrounding cities to take power.⁶¹ Counterpoised to Guevara is the work of Abraham Guillén, an exiled veteran of the Spanish Civil War who lived in Uruguay and Argentina. In 1966 he published “Strategy of the urban guerrilla” that argued that with demographic shifts to urban areas, it was no longer viable to launch guerrilla warfare from the countryside.⁶² Also important is Carlos Marighella’s *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla*.⁶³

Few rank and file members of guerrilla armies have published their memoirs, often because they came from the working class and sometimes had minimal educational training, or the condescending attitudes of the ruling class led them to believe that what they had to say would hold little interest for the broader public. The autobiographies that have been published are often fascinating for their ground-level perspective and insights into the insurgencies. The first such autobiography from the massive Shining Path insurgency is that of Lurgio Gavilán Sánchez who joined the guerrillas as a child soldier before being captured and integrated into the Peruvian military. Later he became a priest and then studied anthropology, but even so he faced difficulties in getting his story published—which highlights why we have so few narratives from this perspective.⁶⁴ Somewhat more common are works such as that of María Eugenia Vásquez Perdomo who left her urban, middle-class lifestyle to join the M-19 (Movimiento 19 de Abril, 19th of April Movement) guerrillas in Colombia. She rose in the leadership ranks and participated in some of the movement’s most memorable actions, including the 1985 attack on the Palace of Justice.⁶⁵

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(60.) Abimael Guzmán, *El marxismo, Mariátegui y el movimiento femenino* (Lima: Editorial Pedagógica Asencios, 1975).

(61.) Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*.

(62.) Guillén, *Estrategia de la guerrilla urbana*.

(63.) Marighella, *For the Liberation of Brazil*.

(64.) Lurgio Gavilán Sánchez, *When Rains Became Floods: A Child Soldier's Story* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

(65.) Vásquez Perdomo, *My Life as a Colombian Revolutionary*.

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