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### Memory and Politics in El Salvador

Andrew Piotrowski  
*Illinois State University*

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# MEMORY AND POLITICS IN EL SALVADOR

**Andrew Piotrowski**  
July 23, 2013

**Abstract:** The Civil War in El Salvador impacted more than the economic and political structure of the tiny Central American nation. Every Salvadoran citizen who endured the conflict was affected personally by the conflict. This effect is demonstrated through memory, and is manifested in the political spectrum. Memories of the war diverge along political lines, and narratives of past events are continually reinforced by the country's two major political parties, who each played the dominating roles as opposing forces in the conflict. This study examines the manner in which memory of the Salvadoran Civil War has been reconstructed by politics, using informal communications with Salvadoran citizens in the rural community of La Cuchilla present during the war to demonstrate the political effects of memory in El Salvador.

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Memory is a collective process inseparable from the political realm. Although individuals' experiences of the past are unique, memories are recollected and interpreted in the present day by people who constitute a society. Society is polarized by politics, and such is the case with memory. Throughout history, political conflicts have erupted in violence. The historical accounts of these conflicts are often conveyed through competing narratives. These narratives are products of a political faction seeking to place blame, absolve responsibility, and garner sympathy. The formation of collective memory through these frames influences heavily the understanding of past events by those unfamiliar with the events through personal experience. Even more intriguing is the manner in which these competing historical narratives affect the memories of those who played witness to the events firsthand.

Although individuals experience events uniquely, similarities are found in how these memories are recollected and conveyed. While an elderly woman remembers the carpet bombings by military aircraft which rocked her home while she hid in fear for her own life, her neighbor remembers specifically the night in which his son was forcibly recruited by insurgents and placed into battle. The purpose for study of this phenomenon is not to discredit the authenticity of these individuals' memories, nor to correct them for factual shortcomings. Rather, the purpose is to shed light on the construction of memory by examining which experiences are most cognizant within the individual. The memories recalled by the individuals who witnessed them are understood within the socio-political context specific to the countries whose conflicts left a lasting impression on the populous.

The case of the civil war in El Salvador is no exception to the notion that memory and politics are intertwined, even in the recollections of those who survived the 12-year conflict. Any Salvadoran citizen 37 years or older who lived during the period of war has firsthand experience of specific events that took place. Although certain departments within the country experienced heavier concentrations of military or guerrilla presence, virtually every municipality in the country was victimized by the violent war that took a geographically miniscule country to levels of international attention and turned the nation's political power base on its head. From 1980 to 1992, between 75,000 and 80,000 victims died as a result of warfare, whether as soldiers or civilians (Garibay, 2007; Herrera & Nelson, 2008; Sprenkels, 2011). In a country with a small population of just over 6,100,000 and a cultural tendency to have large families, this high death toll insinuates that nearly everyone knows of friends or relatives who are no longer alive to tell their stories (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013). Narratives of the war are found in numerous encyclopedias, books, scholarly literature, documentaries, and personal testimonies.

Every Salvadoran, whether a member of the military, the guerrilla, or a neutral bystander, was a victim during those twelve years of armed conflict. Personal memories recall atrocities varying from the loss of personal property to the loss of loved ones. Such occurrences were commonplace for many people, and how individuals recall these events reveals much about the correlation between politics and the reconstruction of memory. I found in my research that the current political situation in El Salvador depends heavily on memories of the conflict. Within villages and municipalities throughout El Salvador, affiliation to one of the two dominant political parties is linked to understanding of the

civil war. In El Salvador, there are two opposing historical accounts of the war aligned with the dominant political parties and ideologies. This phenomenon illustrates the role politics plays in the memory of individuals and groups.

I have spent the past year working as a Peace Corps volunteer in the village, referred to in El Salvador as a *cantón*, of La Cuchilla, in the department of Chalatenango. The village is located in the northern region of the country. Rio Sumpul, which defines the border between El Salvador and Honduras, is a 2-hour walk from my home. La Cuchilla is a very small *cantón*, with a population of approximately 290. It is located in a mountainous region and, like other mountainous areas of the country, became a hotbed of both military and guerrilla activity during the Salvadoran Civil War. Conflicts that occurred in the immediate area in and around La Cuchilla are well remembered through personal accounts. Physical evidence of the conflict still exists, from bomb craters and caves dug into the nearby mountains by guerrilla forces to the remnants of airplanes shot down, such as engines and even entire wings. During my time in the community, memories of the civil war were frequent subjects of conversation. The fascinating, tragic, and extraordinary stories told by these people revealed competing interpretations of what took place in the village during those twelve turbulent years.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

To understand the role that politics plays in the memory of the Salvadoran Civil War, we must examine what is understood about the correlation between politics and memory. A review of the scholarly literature regarding the politics of memory, as well as the analysis of previous case studies in this field will illuminate the effect of present-day historical narratives in the memories of Salvadorans who experienced the war. An

examination of historical work regarding the war will also be included to compare with previous case studies and to highlight the effects politics has on the construction of memory in El Salvador.

## **MEMORY AND POLITICS**

The study of memory politics has witnessed a great deal of academic debate. Indeed, the term itself, “memory”, is hotly contested in its usage. Memory takes on two very different forms: collective memory and personal memory. Labanyi explains, “... that collective memory is very different from private memory in that no actual remembering, in the sense of the recall of a lived experience registered in the brain, takes place in it: not only is there is no such thing as a collective psyche, but collective memory concerns events that were not experienced by many members of the group and often are too remote to have been experienced by any of them” (Labanyi, 2008, 122). Collective memory, therefore, is not actual recollection at all. Rather, it is the social construction of history by collective identities within a given society.

Personal memories, defined by Kaplonski (2008) as “singularities”, are experiences unique to the individual who recalls them. While the overarching narrative, understood as collective memory, seeks to explain the *why* and *what* of historical events, personal memories are concerned with the *who*, meaning they interpret events which their family, personal acquaintances, or they themselves experienced (Kaplonski, 2008). Kaplonski’s individualistic approach to memory studies focuses on the personal understandings of people within society, while disregarding the collective approach to memory. “The social narrative is relevant only to the extent that it impacts the individual. It is not the politics as such that matter, but that the politics led to a particular

result” (Kaplonski, 2008, 383). Other scholars, such as Hussyen (2011) also argue that collective memory should be disregarded for its attempt to homogenize memories that conflict with one another.

Indeed, personal memories are relevant and necessary elements in the construction of collective memories. Personal testimonies were compiled by the United Nations’ Truth Commission in its report on the Salvadoran Civil War, which plays an influential role in the construction of collective memory in El Salvador. Kaplonski (2008) criticizes Truth Commissions for their assimilation of individual memories into a larger collective psyche, thereby downplaying or ignoring that which is unique to the individual memory. However, Kaplonski’s particular emphasis on “singularities” discredits the extent to which individual memories are influenced by a collective understanding of history. It is in this context that personal memories must be understood, for the individuals who possess these memories identify themselves within groups that comprise the whole of society. Within a society, a uniform collective memory will not be found, as Hussyen (2011) correctly suggests.

Hussyen (2011) also asserts that even in small groups, memories are unlikely to be collective. This assessment avoids analysis of the correlation between memory and identity. Memory and identity are inseparable from each other, and identity is experienced in the present (Loytomaki, 2012). As such, memories of the past are always understood from the vantage point of the present (Labanyi, 2008). Although personal memories are unique to those who retain them, one must also be aware of the extent to which historical narratives affect which memories are most salient to the individual, as well as how they are remembered. These narratives, constructed from people of like-



minded social and political identities, affect the way in which individuals remember their personal history. Therefore, scholars such as Labanyi, Loytomaki, and Sprenkels argue that memory must also be understood within the larger socio-political context.

Just as individuals are susceptible to biases based on cultural, societal, and political forces, so too are their memories. Individuals do not live isolated from one another. Diverse individual memories are dependent on the different social and political positions of those remembering, and on the connection between the individuals and groups or collectives that construct pluralities of historical narratives (Loytomaki, 2012). Personal memories must be understood within the context of “social frameworks”, as Halbwachs (1992) termed it, given that individuals and society are not mutually exclusive (as cited in Labanyi, 2008). Even Kaplonski admits that, “all memory, including personal, is at some level shaped by narrative” (2008, 375). In this case, collective memory must be examined to comprehend what forces are at work in the influence of individuals existing within a society.

Scholars attempting to make sense of past events will inevitably encounter narratives in their attempts to interpret history. “The study of the past can never, however scrupulous it is in its use of documentary sources, get beyond narrative constructions of the past to reach a realm of pure factuality” (Labanyi, 2008, 121). Halbwachs (1992) focused on collective memory as a political practice (as cited in Sprenkels, 2011). Indeed, political interests are the most common framers of past and present events. “In political terms, frames can be conceptualized as interpretive packages that activists develop to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, appeal to authorities, and demobilize antagonists” (Sprenkels, 2011, 17). Although Sprenkels

(2011) admits that the dichotomous view of history, pitting truth against forgetfulness and victims against their victimizers, can oversimplify the particularities of a historical event, the constructs of these competing interpretations of history constitute, as Tilly states, “marvelous vehicles for credit and blame” (as cited in Sprenkels, 2011, 17). The use of “collective memory” as “marvelous vehicles for credit and blame” is visible in the personal accounts of residents in La Cuchilla. According to Kuypers (as cited in Sprenkels, 2011), frames induce people to filter their perceptions of the world and to allocate significance by means of a selective use of information. Dualism within the political environment affects the memories of those who affiliate themselves politically with one of the two competing factions (Uldrick, 2009). Traditionally, historical interpretations serve political parties and their respective ideologies (Forlenza, 2012). Individuals who construct their understanding of history based on a singular frame are subjugated to that frame, whose interpretation of the events that took place inevitably becomes adopted as their own.

Although personal memories are unique in the events that are recollected, the political identity to which groups of individuals subscribe has a profound influence on their understanding of the past. Even individuals’ past experiences, retold from the present day, are selectively remembered and subjected to the political ideology with which they identify. Case studies that exemplify the creation of distinct identities through memory must be examined to further understand the correlation between politics and memory.

### **Case Studies in Memory and Politics**

Case studies of memory in the political sphere abound to give researchers an idea of the role memory plays in the individual mindset and the national spectrum. Refugees of post-World War II Western Germany exemplify the inability of a marginalized group to incorporate their narratives into a collective identity. The recollections of these refugees were largely overlooked by a state seeking to make sense of one of the most destructive wars in recent history (Schulze, 2006). Inclusion of individual memories into a larger narrative became a political tool. Rather than acknowledging the past suffering of refugees and expellees in West Germany, the government constructed the country's official history of WWII through the sole inclusion of memories that served to legitimize the native people of West Germany as victims of war (Schulze, 2006). The German collective memory incorporated native Germans, while those living in West Germany as a result of forced displacement from their homelands were suppressed from expressing their own recollections and thus suppressed from developing an identity alongside the natives in the memory work of WWII (Schulze, 2006).

Collective memory in West Germany became a highly politicized process, favoring the nationalist Germans in their efforts to reconcile past atrocities. As a result of denying refugees a part in the comprehensive memory of the past, their plight eventually became obsolete from the mainstream political consciousness and their individual identity excluded (Schulze, 2006). The excluded refugees identified themselves as outsiders, and never established a sense of belonging amongst the Germans. Politically, the conservative Nationalist Germans never incorporated refugees into their collective identity, and the work of remembering the flight and expulsion into West Germany

became associated with the political left (Schulze, 2006). As a result, memory and understanding of WWII, especially concerning the memory of refugees and those expelled from their homelands, has become divided along politically ideological lines.

Examples of political reconstruction of memory with the political purpose of excluding minorities from the national narrative in Germany can also be found in El Salvador. Nationalist rhetoric makes an avid attempt to avoid discussion of past human rights violations committed by the government, such as the massacres of innocent victims in the early stages of war and the political repression experienced by the rural peasantry prior to 1980. Meanwhile, leftist interpretations of the Salvadoran civil war do little to address the actions committed by the guerrilla, such as the destruction of infrastructure, disappearances, and forced enlistment of peasants into the guerrilla ranks. Both political factions create divisions among the Salvadoran population today based on memory of the civil war, similarly to the divisions experienced among Germans based on their memories of World War II.

Kaplonski (2008) examines another situation in which historical narratives have been constructed to suit the political interests of competing factions. The repression of individual memory in Mongolia, as well as its exploitation for political purposes, demonstrates the powerful role that memory plays in politics. In post-socialist Mongolia, suppression of individual memories became a state-sponsored phenomenon. Through the construction of an over-arching, collective narrative to reconcile the abuses of the state under the party known as MAHN, who ruled the country from the 1920s until the democratic revolution of 1989, Mongolians and their families who experienced political repression were excluded from the collective memory (Kaplonski, 2008). Those

interviewed by Kaplonski (2008) provided compelling stories, many of which often ran contrary to the larger contextual narrative developed by the government. In the same way which MAHN suppressed political dissidents and their families during the years of socialism, so has the political faction sought to suppress the memory of these families from defaming the party for its past.

In contrast, the opposing political party has sought to capitalize on these individuals and families who suffered. In early 1993, the newspaper of the Mongolian Democratic Party ran lists of names of those repressed by the government during the decades of socialist rule. “Less anyone miss the political intention of such a list, however, above the main title ran, in smaller type, the phrase: ‘The red party’s black sin’ (*Ulaan namyn har hugel*), a clear reference to the role of MAHN in the repressions” (Kaplonski, 2008, 380-381). Similarly, early attempts by the Mongolian Democratic Party to pass a law compensating victims of political repression were met with threats from MAHN to boycott Parliament, because the drafts of the law included language that placed blame on MAHN for the hardships endured by the victims (Kaplonski, 2008).

In the same manner in which the opposing political party in Mongolia has sought to construct its own collective memory by emphasizing the repressive past of the socialist government, so has the FMLN engaged in such practices to focus on the violations against the Salvadoran people under the right-wing government. Books by left-wing authors emphasize personal stories of victims who experienced tragedy as a result of military actions (López Vigil, 1991; Sánchez Cerén, 2007). Simply put, “one does not feel toward a statistic the same way one feels towards a more personal story” (Kaplonski, 2008, 381). Personal stories in Mongolia and El Salvador have been incorporated into

the collective memory of all those who were repressed, which assimilates these individuals into a larger collective identity in society.

In contrast, the right-wing nationalist rhetoric of the country depicts the civil war as a struggle against those attempting to impose communism on a people who wished to remain free (Sprenkels, 2011), without mentioning the abuses committed by those in alliance with the government, such as the military and the extrajudicial “death squads”. Similarities between the Salvadoran and Mongolian cases abound, and corroborate the political nature of memory and its function in the construction of competing historical narratives.

### **THE LEGACY OF THE SALVADORAN CIVIL WAR**

The war left its mark on the Salvadoran people. Nearly every Salvadoran alive during the twelve-year period of conflict was personally affected by what took place. Ralph Sprenkels (2011) refers to the civil war as “one of the bloodiest political contests in recent Latin American history” (15). The war cost nearly 80,000 lives, two-thirds of which were civilian casualties, and displaced 1 million more (Sprenkels, 2011; Garibay, 2007). After twelve years, the US-backed Salvadoran army and the FMLN supported by Nicaragua and Cuba, signed the 1992 Peace Accords in Chapultepec, México. Under the terms of the Accords, the FMLN would disarm and enter the electoral process as an organized party (Garibay, 2007; Oñate, 2011). Although the war officially ended in 1992, its legacy lives on. Salvadorans who hoped that violence and political conflict would be behind them were sorely disillusioned.

Without a doubt, El Salvador remains a country marked by violence, with some of the most destructive and threatening organized crime in the world. Statistically speaking,

the country ranks as the most violent worldwide based on fatalities per capita (Peterson & Peterson, 2008). Many social wounds still exist in the memories of many gang members and ex-gang members who, in their formative years, cultivated a culture of violence attributed to the Civil War (Zúñiga Nuñez, 2010). Martín-Baro (2000) argues that the extreme violence during the war had an especially damaging psychological effect on the children and youth who witnessed these events, inevitably desensitizing them and leading to more ambivalent and even favorable attitudes towards violence. The culture of violence created by the Civil War eventually translated into violent criminal behavior in the form of organized gangs. These gangs began with the same children who, as a result of constant psychological trauma due to their experiences in the civil war, endured lives prone to insensitivity, devoid of emotion and tending toward violence (Martín-Baro, 2000).

Legacies of social violence may be the most evident remnants of war left in El Salvador, due to their high profile nature. However, they are far from the only repercussions. Much like the social aspects of violence, political after-effects of the war have influenced the citizenry in a very intense and passionate manner.

Politically, El Salvador is divided between two factions: The political right under the *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (ARENA) and the political left known as the *Frente Farabundo Martí por la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN). While the right-left political dichotomy is quite common, the fact that both parties rose to prominence as a result of the civil war makes the situation unique. Both ARENA and FMLN continue to proclaim a continuity of their principles founded during the war, mobilizing these original references to generate support amongst the polity (Garibay, 2007). By

politicizing memory, both parties continue to polarize the citizenry. Both sides continue to promote their own recollections of events that took place during the civil war.

Contrasting accounts of the events of war, through omission or flat-out denial of past atrocities, inhibits the construction of a singular historical narrative that acknowledges the hardships endured by the Salvadoran people.

The historical narratives created by both factions are aided by a blanket amnesty law passed shortly after the Peace Accords, by which the perpetrators of human rights abuses were simply exonerated without the possibility of future indictment. Despite calls to repeal this amnesty law by various organizations, the law remains in place to this day (Amnesty International, 1993). Truth, justice, and proper closure for victims of the most tragic events in the war were denied through this highly politicized act (Herrera & Nelson, 2008; Sprenkels, 2011). “Court decisions and memory laws impose a normative judgment on the past” (Lotyomaki, 2012, 18). Judicial evidence allows past actions to be officially recognized as fact, thus creating legitimacy and objectivity in historical accounts (Lotyomaki, 2012). Without the use of law in the determination of the past, historical events are still construed through narratives constructed by collectives of political interests. One faction approves a specific interpretation of the past, while the other criticizes and discredits it. In the end, historical truth is always questioned for its political motives.

The guarantee that such decisions will never reach court opens the door for any number of historical narratives to develop regarding a specific issue, and eliminates the possibility for the events of war to be legitimately recognized as facts. Due to the fact that former members of both the guerrilla and the military have been implicated in human



rights violations, neither side has pushed for abolishment of the amnesty law. Because there is a guarantee that no acts committed during the war will be prosecuted, both political factions are free to promote their own interpretation of events without fear of being disproved by judicial evidence. The law thus promotes the political manipulation of memory through construction of competing historical narratives. These narratives direct the manner in which Salvadorans interpret the past today.

### **CONTESTED ACCOUNTS OF THE WAR**

Memory has been commandeered by politics in El Salvador. The events that took place prior to and during the conflict have been selectively included into competing historical narratives by those who seek to exploit these memories for current political interests. “Although new historical narratives and perspectives may well gain currency in the near future, El Salvador’s political memory work is likely to remain polarized and subordinated to contemporary political interests. Submitted to the rhetorical requirements of militancy, history becomes virtually inseparable from propaganda” (Sprenkels, 2011, 27). Memory of the war has been, and continues to be, a highly polarizing instrument in Salvadoran politics. Analysis of the major points of departure in the competing narratives of the Salvadoran civil war corroborates Sprenkels’ statement.

#### **Rationale for the Civil War**

The official timeline of the Salvadoran civil war consists of a twelve-year period, beginning in 1980 and ending in 1992. However, the historical events that created the spark for conflict vary distinctly between competing historical narratives. Many accounts of the war credit the origins of the war to events that occurred decades before 1980. “The insurgents traced their struggle to issues left unresolved for 50 years” (Darling, 2008,

134). The previous revolutionary cause in the country occurred in 1932: a revolt organized by the prominent socialist leader Farabundo Martí in response to unequal land distribution, punishment for public dissent, and the intensive exploitation of manual labor (Zuñiga-Nuñez, 2010). Rather than resolve the issues, the revolt ended in widespread repression, resulting in the murder and displacement of large sections of the rural peasantry (Darling, 2008; Sánchez Cerén, 2008). Following the conflict, supporters of such reform began to organize themselves again. Former guerrilla leader and current FMLN presidential candidate Salvador Sánchez Cerén also credits the socialist revolt of Martí, and the unresolved reforms sought by the revolt, as the catalyst for the 1980-1992 armed conflict that would ensue (Sánchez Cerén, 2008). The FMLN once again invoked the memory of the socialist movement initiated in the 1930s by invoking the name of Farabundo Martí.

Apart from Martí's socialist revolt in 1932, the 1959 Cuban revolution also served as a polarizing force in El Salvador. The 1959 Cuban Revolution is credited with having a tremendous influence on subsequent leftist uprisings throughout Latin America (Oñate, 2011). "The example of the Cuban revolution contributed to the surge of guerrilla organizations in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Brazil, Venezuela, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Peru, and nearly all of Latin America" (Sánchez Cerén, 2008, 103). Leftist sympathizers who sought political power through armed revolution were inspired by the examples of Fidel Castro, Ernesto "Ché" Guevara, and Schafik Handal. Handal was the secretary general of the Salvadoran Communist Party who would eventually embrace the armed revolutionary cause and join the FMLN (Salva Vision, 1994). Handal became one of the top ranking members of FMLN leadership and a prominent figure of the Salvadoran left following his death in 2006 (Sprenkels, 2011). Leftist historical narratives continue to

credit the work of figures such as Martí, Castro, and Handal for providing the necessary impulse to combat what they view as repressive governmental forces prior to the civil war.

In contrast, conservative sectors of the Salvadoran population feared the rise of Marxism as a threat to the nation and sought to associate the Cuban revolution as a destabilizing influence in Latin America. The conservative regime governing El Salvador prior to the conflict accepted support from the United States military, who feared that the breakout of civil war in El Salvador would continue the “domino effect” initiated by the Cuban revolution and exemplified by the Sandinista Rebellion of 1979 in Nicaragua (Alvarenga et al, 1994). Support of the Salvadoran government by the US was decisive in promoting the FMLN internationally as a legitimate belligerent force (Zuñiga Nuñez, 2010). The Right constructed its rationale for armed combat as a way of containing what it considered to be a “manifestation of international Communist aggression” (Allison, 2008, 134) and accepted an extravagant amount of US military aid in weaponry and combat training. The *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (ARENA) continues to implement nationalist rhetoric, asserting that the party is the “result of the great struggle of the Salvadoran people against Marxist-Leninist aggression” (Garibay, 2007, 470). While the Left exonerated itself as a populist movement against a repressive government, the government sought to incriminate the leftists as an aggressive front seeking to disrupt the peace and tear the country apart, using communism in conjunction with terrorism and citing containment of this threat as an appropriate response.

“This binary reading of Salvadoran history is not new. Since the 1932 popular uprising and its subsequent massacre, the right has emphasized political narratives regarding the containment of communism and ‘red terror’. The left has concentrated on stories

regarding the popular struggle against exploitation by the oligarchy and military repression” (Sprenkels, 2011, 24).

As part of this containment, groups of right-wing nationalists participated in extrajudicial, politically motivated murders and disappearances (Amnesty International, 1993; Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993; Ascoli, 1994). Reports from the department of Chalatenango allege that these organized groups, known colloquially as “death squads”, participated in the contamination of water sources, disposal of food supplies, and public assassinations of organization leaders (Ascoli, 1994). The UN Truth Commission on the Civil War, entitled “From Madness to Hope”, alleges that these actions were never officially condoned by the government, but were financed by wealthy Salvadorans intent on protecting their interests and given impunity by the Salvadoran justice system (Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993). The forming guerrilla groups would acknowledge the tactics of these extrajudicial groups as rationale for armed combat.

The FMLN seeks to demonize Roberto D’Aubuisson, an organizer of the “death squads” who would later go on to found the right-wing political party ARENA (Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993; Zuñiga Núñez, 1994; Herrera & Nelson, 2008; Coleman, 2011). ARENA obviously denies such accusations. In the years following the war, D’Aubuisson would be lauded as an influential Salvadoran during a tumultuous period in the country’s history. The author Malena Recinos would describe him as part of a group of “pure nationalists, willing to risk their lives to confront the irrational fanaticism of our adversaries” (as cited in Sprenkels, 2011, 21). Other conservative authors describe D’Aubuisson as the head of nationalistic young people intent on saving El Salvador from the communist threat (Sprenkels, 2011). Through the portrayal of

Marxist ideology and its militant followers as a threat to El Salvador, the Right constructs an understanding of the history behind the Salvadoran civil war in a manner directly contrasting that of the Left.

### **The Archbishop Romero Assassination**

One of the most famous Salvadorans, both nationally and internationally, is the late Catholic Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero. Although theologically conservative and averse to involvement in politics when he was named Archbishop in 1977, *Monseñor* Romero quickly became the most outspoken critic of injustice and defender of human rights in El Salvador (Duigan, 1989; Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993; Darling, 2008; Sprenkels, 2011). The FMLN guerrillas were not particularly religious, yet they understood the important role that the Church and *Monseñor* Romero played in the everyday lives of many people within the country, especially the rural poor (Darling, 2008).

However, Romero's homilies angered many within the government, who came to view his actions as favoring subversives and inciting insurrection (Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993). Accounts from the Left assert that right-wing nationalists attempted to prevent the Archbishop from broadcasting his message to the country via radio. On February 18, 1980, the *Union Guerrera Blanca* (UGB) led by the aforementioned Roberto D'Aubuisson would dynamite the transmitter used by Romero to broadcast his sermons (Lopez Vigil, 1991). On March 23, *Monseñor* Romero called upon the individual soldiers within the Salvadoran military to disobey the orders of their superiors that called for repression of the civilian population (Salva Vision, 1994; Ascoli, 1994). This homily would become one of his most popular, largely because it was also his last.

The following day, a sniper executed Romero in the chapel of the *Hospital de la Divina Providencia* while he celebrated mass (Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993; Lopez Vigil, 1991).

Due to his popularity with the overwhelmingly Catholic Salvadoran population, Romero's assassination would prove to be the spark required for the disjointed guerrilla organizations to unify and garner popular support for armed conflict. According to the Truth Commission report published by the United Nations' (1993), "This crime further polarized Salvadorian society and became a milestone, symbolizing the point at which human rights violations reached their peak and presaging the all-out war between the Government and the guerrillas that was to come" (24). In a collection of memoirs written by former guerrilla members, one of the men associated with the radio transmissions of *Monseñor* Romero's sermons would recall the events that occurred as the affirmation for armed conflict:

"I returned to El Salvador a few days after the assassination of *Monseñor* Romero. The news hit me like a brick. I could not believe nor accept it. I was a pacifist. I worked in the YSAX [the radio transmitter for the archbishop] because I was convinced that the *Monseñor* could find a way out of this country's disaster. And a lot of people had shared same hope. When they killed him, that was when I said yes to the armed conflict. The death of *Monseñor* [Romero] served to define that for me. And not only for me. I think that many felt the same way" (Lopez Vigil, 1991, 30).

The controversy surrounding *Monseñor* Romero continues in historical narratives. Many citizens and politicians assert that the persona of Romero has been usurped as a political tool of the Left. Indeed, the image of Romero is often seen painted in murals next to revolutionary figures such as Schafik Handal and Ché Guevara in rural municipalities where strong FMLN support is present. Although Romero's sermons intended to stop the violence against the Salvadoran people, leftist leaders used the opportunity of his death to ensure support for armed conflict with the military, inevitably

leading to more violence. Salvador Sánchez Cerén (2008) declares that *Monseñor* Romero's death closed what little opportunity remained for democratic discourse with the Salvadoran government. The FMLN took advantage of the public discontent over the Romero assassination to incite the civil war, which by the end of 1980 had already swept across the country (Alvarenga et al, 1994). Although the Left utilized, and continues to utilize the namesake of Archbishop Romero for political gain, it is the Right that made the events surrounding his death much more controversial.

### **Credibility of the Truth Commission Report**

Throughout the 1980s and today, Roberto D'Aubuisson stands as the accused author of the Romero murder (Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993; Sprenkels, 2011). The accusation is corroborated by substantial evidence that implicates D'Aubuisson and a group of civilians as the individuals responsible for the murder (Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993). However, D'Aubuisson has never been formally condemned of the murder due to protections granted under the amnesty law. Officially, the murder remains under investigation by the Salvadoran government (Herrera & Nelson, 2008; Sprenkels, 2011). Until the time of his death in 1992, D'Aubuisson insisted that the assassination was the work of the FMLN guerrillas (Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993). The Salvadoran military maintained this assertion prior to the Truth Commission report, and still holds this official position on the matter (Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993).

Other government figures and right-wing activists have defended D'Aubuisson in his claims. Members of the right-wing faction chastised the United Nations' Truth Commission report and denied its credibility. Geovanni Galeas, an *ex-guerrillero* turned

right-wing activist, authored an 80-page supplement to the weekend edition of *La Prensa Gráfica*, one of El Salvador's top two newspapers, dedicated to the life of Roberto D'Aubuisson. In the supplement, he claimed that there are plausible reasons to "doubt the objectivity and impartiality" of the Truth Commission (as cited in Sprenkels, 2011, 20). Galeas claims that the report was manipulated to focus solely on human rights violations committed by the military and the *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP), a left-wing organization that eventually broke from the FMLN (Sprenkels, 2011). Galeas alleges that the FMLN committed similar or even worse abuses during the war, and that the UN report gives them unwarranted favor in their assessment (Sprenkels, 2011).

In this manner, Galeas frames the Truth Commission report as politically favoring the Left, and challenges the notion that the statements found in the report can serve as evidence of acts committed during the conflict. Other government figures have denounced the report filed by the Truth Commission, as well. Former Defense Minister General Emilio Ponce described the report as "unjust, incomplete, illegal, unethical, partial and insolent" (Amnesty International, 1993, 4; Sprenkels, 2011, 20). The Salvadoran Supreme Court also issued a statement accusing the Truth Commission of acting with partiality and refused to sign the report as the commission had requested (Amnesty International, 1993). The right-wing questions the source of the charges brought against the Salvadoran government and military by the Truth Commission, while the Left claims that the report is not thorough enough in its documentation of human rights violations committed (Sánchez Cerén, 2008).

The evidence surrounding the Monseñor Romero assassination, as compiled by the UN Truth Commission and corroborated in various historical accounts, indicates that



it was a paramilitary group orchestrated by D'Aubuisson that conducted the act. However, without judicial proceedings to formally condemn those responsible, the Salvadoran government will never be forced to officially reconcile with the people for its actions. Without law that officially recognizes the case or provides an official verdict for the murder suspects, the historical narratives condemning the murder on paramilitary actors are still available to scrutiny, as law is what creates objectivity and official recognition for particular narratives concerning the past (Loytomaki, 2012). However, the protections guaranteed under the amnesty law prohibit such objectivity from ever being officially recognized by the government, and allow for contradictory narratives to maintain a certain level of credibility. According to the historical narrative constructed by the Right, even international actors such as the UN must be questioned in their political motives. Those subscribing to this notion allow their memory of the Romero assassination to be affected by politics.

### **Human Rights Abuses**

When the civil war resolved with the Peace Accords in 1992, the FMLN was forced to alter its aspirations from victory on the battlefield to victory at the ballot box. During the course of the civil war, when elections returned to El Salvador as part of US efforts at democratization, the FMLN denounced these acts as “illegitimate tools of *yanqui* imperialism” and even disrupted the process by stripping civilians of their voting IDs, refusing to cease fire on election days, and taking military actions to places close enough to polling places in an effort to threaten those participating in the vote (Allison, 2008, 110). Now facing the prospect of electoral participation, the FMLN hoped to capitalize politically on popular support garnered during the war while at the same time

diminishing the negative memories of FMLN violence which prevailed in the minds of the polity.

ARENA faced the same situation, now forced to attack the opposition with rhetoric rather than with guns. Both sides continue to memorialize those who fought on their own side, highlighting the human rights violated by the opposition while ignoring those they themselves violated. The amnesty law passed after the Peace Accords promotes different reconstructions of history. Without judicial decisions and official laws passed to impose a normative judgment on history, the past is open to interpretation and manipulation by historical narratives (Lotyomaki, 2012). In El Salvador, memory of the war continues to be interpreted in markedly different ways by competing political factions.

Although ARENA would officially be the ruling political party in the executive for the final three years of the civil war, its founding members nevertheless had strong ties to the previous ruling governments, military, and paramilitary “death squads”. This legacy would be costly to overcome. However, granted with blanket amnesty and executive political power for 17 years following the 1992 Peace Accords, ARENA would push itself forward and become the country’s premiere right-wing party. Throughout the war and continuing long after the 1992 Peace Accords, the Right would construct their own recollection of the war by denial of culpability for past events and allusion to these events as ongoing investigations. “In fact, as late as 2003, government officials testified in front of the UN that the three most publicized killings (those of Archbishop Romero of San Salvador, six Jesuits priests, and the massacre at El Mozote) were still under investigation, even though the Truth Commission had effectively established

accountability” (Herrera & Nelson, 2008, 27). Such events will never be entirely reconciled by the government as long as the amnesty law stands, thereby facilitating the political reconstruction of memory.

### **El Mozote**

The El Mozote massacre has become one of the most infamous examples of military brutality and the government’s attempt to cover up past human rights violations. The event took place under what the military deemed *Operación Rescate*, a mission designed to eliminate the guerrilla forces stationed throughout the small villages of northern Morazán, El Salvador. On December 10, 1981, Salvadoran military forces sequestered all the men, women, and children left in the *cantón* of El Mozote. The next day, everyone was summarily executed, save for a single woman who was able to escape (Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993). Despite constant denial by the Salvadoran government, the story of the El Mozote massacre gained international attention in 1982, when both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* published reports by journalists who visited the site (Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993). When these reports surfaced, both the Salvadoran and US governments denied that the massacre had taken place.

“We sent two Embassy officers to investigate last week’s reports of a massacre in the Morazán village of El Mozote,” Thomas O. Enders, assistant secretary of state for Inter-American Affairs, told a U.S. Senate subcommittee. “While it is clear that an armed confrontation between guerrillas occupying El Mozote and attacking government forces occurred last December, no evidence could be found to confirm that government forces systematically massacred civilians in the operation zone.”  
(as cited in Darling, 2008, 143).

Similar claims would be made as late as 1992, when members of the UN Truth Commission spoke with the President of the Supreme Court of El Salvador, Mauricio Gutiérrez Castro, claiming that an exhumation of the remains would prove that “only

dead guerrillas are buried” at El Mozote (Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993, 111). The results of the exhumation disproved Mr. Gutiérrez’s claims, and corroborated eyewitness testimony that men, women, and children were massacred in the *cantón*. Because the investigation by Salvadoran authorities has never been closed, the official stance on the government does not confirm these findings.

While the government has denied the massacre, the Left exaggerate the events that took place at El Mozote. The UN Truth Commission claims that over 200 victims were murdered at El Mozote, while other massacres that took place during *Operación Rescate* bring the death toll to around 500 civilians (Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993). However, a chronology of events in Salvador Sánchez Cerén’s (2008) autobiography claims that 500 people were massacred at El Mozote alone, with the victims mostly comprised of children. By highlighting the deaths of children and inflating the already high volume of victims at the El Mozote massacre, the Left attempts to frame the acts of the military as guilty of even more abuses.

Today, the accounts of the El Mozote massacre are still disputed along political lines. Other Peace Corps volunteers in the Northern Morazán area express a great deal of confusion over the issue. Based on their experiences talking with Salvadorans living in the area, it is clear that not everyone is in agreement over the events that occurred in 1981. While many claim that the tragic events were indeed a massacre of innocent victims, others subscribe to the ARENA narrative that the killings were simply a conflict between the military and the FMLN. El Mozote is one of many disputed events that took place during the civil war, yet it aptly highlights the distortions, frames, and flat out denials utilized to recreate memory of the conflict.

## **FMLN Abuses**

Abuses by the Salvadoran military are far from the only documented human rights violations that took place during the Salvadoran civil war. The FMLN is also largely to blame for a number of events that took place. While the military targeted the civilian population during the early stages of the conflict, the FMLN would respond with debilitating attacks on the country's infrastructure and economic assaults on private property and agriculture, such as crops and livestock (Alvarenga et al, 1994; Allison, 2008). Alvarenga et. al (1994) claims that the US government pressured the Salvadoran military to desist in human rights abuses to create a social base for military support, which led to the diminishing numbers of civilian deaths in the years following the initiation of conflict. UN statistics corroborate this claim. "In 1982, 5,962 people died at the hands of government forces; by 1985 the number had fallen to 1,655" (Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993, 24).

However, the guerrilla began to step up their attacks on the population between 1985-1989 with abductions and summary executions of those claimed to be in favor of the Salvadoran government and the Armed Forces (Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993). In 1985, members of the FMLN also kidnapped the daughter of Salvadoran President Napoleon Duarte, and in 1988 they attempted to thwart the country's elections through transport stoppages, kidnappings, executions, and bombings near polling places (Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993; Allison, 2008). Allison (2008) also accuses the FMLN of forced recruitment of civilians and inclusion of young children as armed combatants. Although the Salvadoran military is surely responsible for a great number of the human rights violations during the war, there is no doubt that hundreds of events

occurred which, if tried in court, would find evidence placing the FMLN as the guilty party.

### **The Civil War in Film**

Literature is far from the only access to information concerning the Salvadoran Civil War. Feature films and documentaries play an important role in the development of historical narratives. Often subtle in their sympathies for a certain political faction, the films each subscribe to particular historical narratives to recollect the events of the conflict. Film directors and documentarians provide accounts of the civil war in a manner befitting to either side of the political spectrum. The influence of such works greatly contributes to political memory work in El Salvador today.

The initial stages of conflict are narrated differently in film. A documentary entitled *La Guerra en El Salvador: 1971-1981* concentrates on the “death squads” and their killings prior to the first offensives of the war in 1981 (Salvavision, 1994). The documentary also depicts mass demonstrations of people being attacked by members of the military and the National Police (Salvavision, 1994). While the documentary also refers to bombings and assassinations that occurred at the hands of leftist militants, it also asserts that such acts were much less frequent due to the lack of international support for the leftist cause.

In contrast, a documentary mini-series entitled *El Salvador: El Precio de la Paz* focuses on the Salvadoran army from 1980 onward (Pinkas, 1985). Rather than discuss the rationale behind the conflict, the documentary seeks to educate viewers on the tragedies of war, depicting horrific images of dead civilians and wounded soldiers. The filmmaker follows soldiers in the Salvadoran military, and thus dedicates a

disproportionate amount of time to casting the soldiers in a positive light. Pinkas (1985) frames conflicts between the military and the FMLN as efforts by the government to liberate the country from the oppression of the guerrilla forces. In one particular confrontation between the military and the FMLN in the town of San Sebastian, military tanks are shown driving out small groups of *guerrilleros* along otherwise empty streets. In the following scene, civilians are seen walking the street as the narrator states that, “order has been restored to San Sebastian” (Pinkas, 1985). Pinkas claims that the documentaries were created with the intent to show Salvadorans the destruction of the war and the great cost that the country paid to return to peacetime. In reality, the mini-series intentionally frames the documentary to support the military and the right-wing government, thereby contributing to ARENA’s narrative of the civil war and politicizing the war’s memory.

The acknowledgement of such events is noticeably absent from the documentary “*La Guerra de El Salvador: 1982-1992*”, which instead focuses on the failed attempts at peace in 1984. These attempts, according to the documentary, were thwarted by what is referred to as a “government dictatorship” (Salvavision, 1994). However, such claims are not corroborated by the UN Truth Commission, which asserts that it was Salvadoran President Duarte who pressed for the convening of talks to end the war (Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993). “*La Guerra de El Salvador: 1982-1992*” portrays Duarte as complacent to the ongoing death squad murders, which conducted an average of 5 non-combatant deaths per day under his presidency, according to the documentary.

The documentary also frames the FMLN as fully supported by the Salvadoran population, especially as it enters the outskirts of San Salvador for its largest offensive in

1989. Meanwhile, attempts by the Salvadoran military to curry favor with the people are claimed to be unsuccessful, due to the fact that it is the same government that massacred people for years” (Salvavision, 1994). The documentary certainly portrays the FMLN as the underdogs, deplete of resources and lacking any ability to garner the same military aid as the Salvadoran government did with the United States (Salvavision, 1994). The documentary claims that the FMLN movement was inspired by revolutions in Cuba and Nicaragua, but does not include that these countries also provided support for the guerrilla through armaments and training (Alvarenga et. al, 1994; Oñate, 2011). However, a similar documentary that displays a leftist slant does corroborate the fact that the FMLN had the support of Fidel Castro in Cuba, portraying them instead as supported entirely by the Salvadoran people (Salvavision, 1994). Such claims frame the events of the Salvadoran civil war in a manner benefitting to the Left.

In contrast, other documentary productions supporting the Salvadoran military paint a different portrait of the events of the war. In “*El Salvador: El Precio de la Paz*” (Pinkas, 1985), the FMLN is constantly portrayed in a negative manner. While a gathering of citizens in the city of Berlín, Morazán is under the surveillance of the guerrilla, the narrator emphasizes that there were many citizens unhappy with the guerrilla takeover of Berlín, and selected footage shows many citizens deserting the city with their belongings (Pinkas, 1985). This statement contradicts the narration of “*La Guerra de El Salvador: 1982-1992*”, which shows footage of mass support for the guerrilla in areas throughout the department of Morazán (Salvavision, 1994). Pinkas’ (1985) documented footage also highlights military members wounded and killed by the guerrilla, and discusses the use of land mines by the guerrilla to destroy infrastructure



that resulted in civilian casualties. Through the lens of the documentary, viewers are only able to understand the conflict from one particular narrative. This narrative heavily favors the government by excluding information regarding the abuses suffered by the civilian population at the hands of military forces.

Feature films also have a major influence on those attempting to understand the conflict. Films such as *Voces Inocentes* and *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* both describe events of the war, but do so in very different manners. *Voces Inocentes* concentrates on the use of child soldiers by the Salvadoran military, depicted as being taken against their will by the government at public schools (Mandoki, 2004). The film creates juxtaposition between the military and the guerrilla by portraying the government troops as emotionless killers and the guerrilla as the guiltless defenders of the Salvadoran people. The film also ignores the important fact that youth were not only used by the Salvadoran government, but by the FMLN as well. Allison (2008) asserts that the guerrilla took many soldiers against their will, and “*El Salvador: El Precio de la Paz*” depict footage of youth in guerrilla gear bearing arms (Pinkas, 1985). While the documentary never claims the age of these soldiers, it is clear that they are very young and likely pre-pubescent. Overlooking these elements of war allows *Voces Inocentes* to represent the guerrilla as righteous, and the government as evil.

While *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* does not make such overt depictions of right versus wrong, it does demonize the guerrilla more than the military, albeit in a subtle manner. The story follows the lives of a *guerrillero* and a soldier in the Salvadoran military who both meet after being abandoned by the rest of their troops (Dávila, 2008). The two begin as enemies, but eventually form a bond and struggle for survival together

to escape the hardship of war. Throughout the film, the soldier's character is portrayed much more inviting and accepting, with the *guerrillero* is depicted as colder, brasher, and more prone to anger than his counterpart. The film mentions only one historical event during the conflict: the kidnapping of President Duarte's daughter by guerrilla forces. The *guerrillero* relates the event positively, and acknowledges that people he knew personally carried out such actions. While the sequestration of Duarte's daughter is a documented event that occurred during the war, it is the only historical event alluded to during the film. The film makes no mention of violations perpetrated by government forces, such as the various massacres that took place. The final scenes depict the soldier and the *guerrillero* trying to save an innocent girl from her death, inevitably at the hands of another member of the guerrilla. While the war in itself is depicted as destructive for the country as a whole, it is the guerrilla who is depicted much more negatively than the armed forces.

Contrasting narratives found in feature films such as *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* and *Voces Inocentes* play a central role in the understanding of the civil war by Salvadorans and non-Salvadorans alike. While neither political party officially sponsors or produces the films, the opposing depictions deliberately attempt to convince the viewer of a clear villain in the conflict, while allegedly exonerating the opposing faction of any wrongdoing.

Documentaries and feature films are both important contributors to the historical narratives regarding the Salvadoran civil war. The films are widely accessible to all Salvadorans, due to their availability, low price, and the fact that they are audiovisual rather than written works. Literature is less accessible to Salvadorans, especially

amongst older generations where literacy rates are much lower. The films and their portrayals of the civil war stimulate a great deal of sympathy for a particular political faction, and have a powerful influence on memory politics in El Salvador.

Memory of the Salvadoran Civil War is politicized through both literature and film. These vehicles for understanding the conflict continue to influence new generations as well as those who experienced the events of war firsthand. Similar to the aforementioned cases in Mongolia and Germany, many abuses and human rights violations inflicted upon the Salvadoran people are ignored or completely denied so as not to debilitate the historical narrative constructed by a particular side in the conflict. The effects of this politicized understanding of the civil war are more clearly visible at the individual and community level. Recollections of the war reveal the political identity to which Salvadoran citizens subscribe. In effect, their political preferences dictate the memories most pertinent to their understanding of the civil war.

### **COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN EL SALVADOR**

The competing factions in El Salvador's political system continue to polarize the citizenry. Both sides continue to promote their own recollections of events that took place during the civil war. "Militants rarely question their 'own' group's official account. On the contrary, they actively and continually rally for its certification" (Sprenkels, 2011, 24). These contrasting accounts prohibit the discovery of truth and efforts of reconciliation. As such, both sides will continue to deny the historical narratives that they find inconvenient to their political causes. While such narratives may not be able to sway those who are assured of what happened through their own

eyewitness accounts, they play a key role in developing the political interests of the new generation who did not experience the war through their own eyes and ears.

As a Peace Corps volunteer, understanding the people with whom one lives and works every day is an essential element to a successful service. Involvement in one's community cannot be limited strictly to work. Peace Corps volunteers must take the time to get to know their communities and the people who comprise them. Volunteers should learn as much as possible about the history of their community, and in El Salvador the Civil War is a major part of that history. Every story a volunteer hears may not be entirely factual; some elements may be over-exaggerated or even entirely misunderstood. To renounce these memories as unreliable is to disregard the importance that these memories play in the lives of these individuals and in their perspective on their country and its politics.

In my time as a volunteer, I have been shocked, fascinated, and completely silenced by the accounts of the Salvadoran Civil War by those who were there to experience them. There is an absolute necessity to record such accounts as evidence for the state of political polarization that the country still finds itself in. Recording these accounts also requires complete objectivity, a requisite for any Peace Corps volunteer serving in El Salvador. Indicating empathy towards a particular political ideology is a monumental mistake as a volunteer; reading these various accounts should illuminate the reasons why volunteers should distance themselves from discussing the politics of their host country from a particular side of the spectrum. Simply put, Salvadorans' political perspectives shape their memories. Memories from those who were alive during the conflict offer much more than captivating stories or valuable information. These

memories shape the people, and the communities, in which volunteers such as myself live and work.

## **THE SALVADORAN CIVIL WAR IN LA CUCHILLA**

To understand the civil war from the standpoint of those who witnessed the events firsthand, I have engaged twenty-three local residents from varying backgrounds and political viewpoints in conversation about the matter. Some of those with whom I talked fought for the Armed Forces during the conflict, while others fought for the FMLN. However, many were innocent bystanders who wanted nothing more than to continue their daily lives as they had lived them before. These people's identities are protected in my report of the conversations, using initials rather than names to identify them. The conversations did not have the purpose of questioning. I found that with a simple prompt such as "what experiences of the Civil War stick out most in your memory", people were eager to discuss what they recalled from memory. Most conversations lasted longer than an hour, and were always conducted privately within the resident's homes to avoid public arguments between people of differing viewpoints. Political affiliation of the interviewees was garnered through expressed association with a particular faction or through nonverbal evidence, such as political adornments displayed within the resident's houses or political apparel used by them.

The stories collected through conversations tell of a community rocked by the onslaught of war. Destruction of property, loss of personal freedoms, and even death became commonplace to those who survived the conflict. While not all interviewees placed clear blame upon one side for inflicting the majority of the devastation, patterns amongst the recollections accounted by residents often indicated conformity to a

particular historical narrative in which one perpetrator of the conflict was more destructive than another. Often, residents would allude to the same event that took place in the community, while telling the event through contradictory information. Divergent points of view concerning a singular event corroborate the assessment that historical accounts conflict with each other based on political attitudes. These attitudes not only shape people's understanding of the present, but also their memory of the past.

### **Background of La Cuchilla and Surrounding Areas**

The Civil War struck different areas of El Salvador in different ways. Some areas were greatly affected by the destruction of warfare, while others were left relatively unscathed. The department of Chalatenango, in which both the municipality of La Laguna and the *cantón* of La Cuchilla are found, is one of the most heavily affected departments in the country. Within the incorporated municipal area of La Laguna lies a section of *La Montañona*, or “The Great Mountain”. Two other municipalities lay claim to territory on this nationally renowned landmark, which during the war became a major base of operations for the guerrilla. *La Montañona* remains a historical reminder of the Civil War. Remnants of bomb craters, caves dug by *guerrilleros* seeking to remain out of sight from passing soldiers, and even a radio transmitter from which the FMLN broadcast its messages to the people of Chalatenango now generate a modest amount of tourism for those seeking to step back into the country's not-so-distant past. The current residents of *La Montañona* are largely comprised of former guerrilla members, who remained on the mountain following the war to form their own community. The public school features an undetonated bomb which now hangs as a reminder of the destructive history from which this community emerged.

The municipal center of La Laguna also features potent reminders of the Civil War. The current City Hall and the adjacent mayor's house are built upon a former barracks used by the Salvadoran Armed Forces during the 12 years of conflict. Photographs displayed in the town's Cultural Center depict trenches built with sandbags along the roads that residents still walk today. Adobe walls riddled with bullet holes still support the structures of several houses and stores. Military engagements between FMLN fighters descending from La Montaña and soldiers stationed in La Laguna happened frequently, providing many innocent bystanders who continue to reside in these areas with firsthand experiences of the war. However, conflict of the Civil War was not limited to these two locales, as the testimonies of La Cuchilla residents amply demonstrate.

Politically, the municipality of La Laguna exhibits more affiliation with the Right. The current Mayor, Baltazar Galdámez, is currently in his sixth mayoral term as an ARENA candidate. The mayor's chief secretary, Obdulio Guevara, confirms that while La Cuchilla does not have a large population in comparison with other *cantones*, the village is one of the party's political strongholds. Voter turnout in La Cuchilla has heavily supported the incumbent candidate in his previous elections. Anecdotal evidence of ARENA support in La Cuchilla was ample during the 2012 Municipal elections. An overwhelming number of red, white, and blue ARENA flags adorned the makeshift bamboo flag posts in homes throughout the *cantón*. On Election Day in March 2012, trucks draped in ARENA colors transported throngs of villagers to the polling stations in La Laguna, while FMLN transports were left nearly empty. Still, there are those who show strong support for the FMLN. Several FMLN canvassers from the community

walked door to door during the 2012 campaign, promoting the opposition candidate.

While such examples do not display incontrovertible proof of the community's political preferences, one can infer copious amounts of information from the civic participation of its residents.

The political preferences of La Cuchilla's residents play an integral role in how they recollect the Civil War. Evidence of the political influence on memory abounds in the accounts of the war as stated by the Salvadorans I talked to. Memories conveyed by those heavily affiliated with ARENA recounted stories damning to the FMLN, easily recollecting instances of abuse, destruction, and human rights violations on the part of the guerrilla. Although most admit that such abuses also took place at the hands of the military at times, many instead focus on FMLN abuses, thereby justifying military actions to an extent. In contrast, FMLN supporters share numerous instances in which the military carried out injustices, including the murder of many innocent victims. These selected memories narrate the civil war within a political framework, and demonstrate the connection between politics and memory.

## **ACCOUNTS OF THE WAR**

Individuals in La Cuchilla reported the following descriptions of the conflict, as they perceive them. Analysis of this collection of memories illustrates the extent to which politics influences the recollection of past events. Many of these stories have defined a lasting impression of the war within the individual's memory. However, the



individual memories also demonstrate an attachment to prevailing historical narratives that influence the individual's interpretation of the past. While the stories provide a captivating, and often heartrending, look into the history of La Cuchilla, they also provide evidence of the political manipulation of memory in El Salvador.

### **Rationale for War**

Understanding why the war began is a point of divergence for many in La Cuchilla. Most of those I conversed with on the subject insinuate that the war began due to the injustice that Salvadorans faced. However, those on the Right blame the FMLN for instigating a conflict that would kill so many of the rural poor. A.A, a former soldier in the Salvadoran military, relates that the fight was over riches more than anything else. The poor wanted to turn El Salvador into a communist country. He asserts that the FMLN leadership deceived people into thinking that the war was justified, when in reality it was not. The FMLN leaders, he says, were concerned with accumulating the power for themselves and not for the Salvadoran people. According to A.A, "While many *campesinos* died during the war, the top FMLN commanders did quite well for themselves". A.A's brothers, M.A and C.A, share their brother's perspective on the FMLN. M.A and C.A were also former military combatants wounded in combat. M.A. states that the FMLN was never really interested in helping the poor people of El Salvador. "The idea that the guerrilla was for the people is a big lie. They simply wanted to take over the power in the government, like they did in Cuba". M.A. states that the FMLN piggybacked off the support of the rural poor to propel themselves to power, stating that there exist just as many poor Salvadorans today as there were before the war. In their minds, nothing has changed.

Those supporting the military, such as A.A. and M.A insist that the Left's search for power initiated an unjust war. However, those on the Left see the beginning of the war as instigated by the government for its repression of the poor. T.L., a doctor and dentist trained by the FMLN during the war, discusses the initiation of conflict as a result of intense mistreatment of the Salvadoran people by those in power. T.L. recalls an event in San Fernando, a town in northern Chalatenango, which exemplifies this kind of mistreatment.

There was an *alcaldeza* (female mayor) of San Fernando at the time. She had begun a project to build a road to the town. The men who worked on the road were paid very little. She later decided that she would not pay them. When the workers revolted, saying they would not continue to work without pay, she had them all thrown into jail. This to me was one of the many examples of injustice that we Salvadorans faced.

For T.L, the injustices faced by the Salvadoran people offered sufficient rationale for the popular uprising which incited the Civil War. Unlike M.A. and C.A.'s assertion that the FMLN duped the rural peasantry into spilling their own blood for an unjust cause, T.L. stresses that the people felt obliged to take up arms as a result of the repression by the government. "Innocent civilians formed the guerrilla", he says, "and the more innocent civilians were killed, the larger the conflict grew".

T.L. himself joined the FMLN in the early 80s while still serving his two-year obligatory mandate as part of the Salvadoran military. He found himself convinced by a lieutenant and another private stationed in Chalatenango city to defect to the opposing side, while remaining part of the military to provide information to the guerrilla forces regarding Salvadoran military operations. He, along with his fellow soldiers, received a pittance for their work and were only given meat once a week, while the sergeant's dog received meat on a daily basis. "That dog was treated with more respect than any of the soldiers!" he states, humorously. T.L.'s case was not unique during the war; he states

that many guerrilla members had infiltrated the military ranks during the war. Many were disgusted by the tortures of civilians that took place within the military bases, and the massacres of innocent people. “The thought process for the military was such that wherever there was a *guerrillero*, it was necessary to kill even the newly born”. For T.L., such cases were reason enough to work for the guerrilla even during his two years of military service. Other members of the La Cuchilla would be convinced, just as T.L. was, that the guerrilla was fighting for a worthy cause.

M.L. joined the guerrilla when he was 16 years old, after his father expelled him from the house. Other *guerrilleros* convinced him that fighting for the guerrilla was a just cause. “The *guerrilleros* said they fought so that the people could obtain equality, manifest and organize themselves, and receive higher salaries”, he posits, “but they also persuaded us with claims of women and power”. He also substantiates T.L.’s claim that there were many guerrilla members infiltrated within the military. As a result of the injustices viewed by military actions, M.L. believes that the guerrilla justifiably formed by people who needed to fight.

The theme of injustice is commonly found as the rationale for the war in El Salvador. However, the alleged culprit of these injustices provides insight into how politics affects the memory of those in La Cuchilla. For civilians such as C.R., the military abuses caused the FMLN to necessarily protect the Salvadoran people. Others, such as C.A., blame the national police force as the human rights violators against whom the guerrilla organized in opposition. In contrast, M.L.G. stresses that the *bloque popular*, understood as the opposition movement that became the FMLN, were responsible for the vast majority of injustices, such as deaths and robberies, which took place prior to the

war. Still other community members, such as D.C. openly admit that the rationale for combat was unclear to them. Many others delved directly into discussion of combat that occurred in La Cuchilla, rather than discuss their opinions for the reasons behind the conflict. Nevertheless, T.L.'s assertion that those on the Right blame the guerrilla for starting the war, while those on the Left blame the government, correlates with the evidence of these interviews. The rationale for war became a politicized issue for those in La Cuchilla, as well as the case of the most famous victim of the conflict.

### **Monseñor Romero's image**

*Monseñor* Romero is a very important figure among the Salvadoran people, regardless of political affiliation. Framed portraits of Romero adorn the walls of both ARENA and FMLN supporters. Hundreds of faithful Catholics in La Cuchilla and the surrounding area participate annually in a mass dedicated to the former Archbishop, conducted by the parish in La Laguna. The people of La Cuchilla recognize Romero as a symbol against injustice, and believe that his martyrdom provides validation for sainthood. Deliberations in the Vatican considering Romero's inclusion as a saint are currently ongoing. Nevertheless, it is this inclusion process that sparks disagreement over his importance in the Salvadoran political arena.

A.G. is a firm Catholic as well as an ardent ARENA supporter. He laments the usage of Romero's image by the Left, saying that is misguided. He believes that by invoking the name of Romero, the FMLN attempts to exonerate its own human rights violations and injustices.

The FMLN uses the image of Monseñor Romero for its own political purposes. While Romero was denouncing the violence that was going on, the guerrilla was involved in that violence just as much as the armed forces. The FMLN now pretends that their hands are washed free of violence, but this is not the case. They were equally involved in the violence that occurred. They do not

have a reason to use Romero for their political purposes, because Romero denounced what they were doing as well.

According to M.A, an evangelical member of the community, the war was started in the Catholic Church by priests who took up arms and convinced their congregations to do the same. He talks of a priest in La Laguna named “don Bernardo” who gave mass with a rifle hidden inside the pulpit. For Catholics such as A.G., this practice was severely denounced by Romero and should not be part of his legacy. According to A.G., Romero is also quoted as denouncing those within the Catholic Church that took up arms in the conflict. “He [Romero] was asked what he thought of the Catholic priests who took up arms for the guerrilla. He said, ‘the moment they pick up a gun, they cease to be priests’ ”. His sister and fellow ARENA supporter, M.L.G., claims that it was a mistake for Romero to be executed by the death squads. “The Right killed many in the Catholic Church because they sided with the Left. For this reason, the death squads killed *Monseñor* Romero”. The fact that many in the Church associated themselves with the guerrilla movement is what caused Romero’s murder, according to her. Nevertheless, Romero spoke out against the violence going on the country, which M.L.G. states was instigated primarily by the guerrilla.

FMLN Supporters also mention Romero, yet in a slightly different manner. M.L. claims that the death squads killed Romero because he spoke out against the military and the violence of which they were guilty. “The Right killed *Monseñor* Romero because he was the largest leader in the Church”, he says. According to M.L., the Right considered Romero to be a *guerrillero*, but this was not the case. He simply spoke out against the violence that occurred at the hands of the military.

P.C. also claims that military is responsible for Romero's association with the FMLN, rather than the FMLN themselves. He remembers that early in the conflict, soldiers entered the church in La Cuchilla where he worked voluntarily as one of the main organizers. A portrait of *Monseñor* Romero hung in the church during that time. Upon spotting the image, the soldiers seized the portrait from off the wall, and smashed it to pieces on the floor. P.C. declares that the military had a deep hatred for Romero, which was displayed in this act in the church. While Romero may not have been a political symbol for the Salvadoran people, the military certainly viewed him as such.

Unlike A.G. and M.L.G., P.C. and M.L. claim that the politicization of Romero's image is due to the Right projecting him as such. For ARENA supporters, the FMLN continues to usurp his image for its own popularity. FMLN affiliates, however, claim that the association of Romero with the Left is due to the claims and actions of the Right. Although Salvadorans from both sides of the political spectrum revere *Monseñor* Romero for his bravery and his dedication to speak out against violence, both sides frame his current image as products of manipulation by their political opponents. Interestingly, the violence that Romero denounced is also interpreted very differently along political lines, as interviews with the people of La Cuchilla demonstrate.

### **Violence against Innocent Civilians**

As previously stated, La Cuchilla and its surrounding areas were a hotbed for engagements between the military and the FMLN. The vicinity of the military base in La Laguna as well as the guerrilla base on La Montañona ensured that the civilian population would experience ample amounts of conflict, whether or not they intended to. Every member of La Cuchilla who survived this twelve-year period of history recollects

instances of violent encounters in which they were intentionally or unintentionally involved. C.L. remembers the axiom of the time in La Cuchilla was, “ver, oír, y callar” or, “see, hear, and be quiet”. Today, the people are no longer afraid to talk about their experiences, yet their specific recollections contribute to constructing very distinct narratives of the war. While these accounts are indubitably memorable, the way in which each person recollects the incidents they faced indicates the extent to which politics influences their memories.

A big item of discussion among FMLN supporters, as well as some ARENA supporters, is the “death squad” which existed in La Laguna. They were made up of soldiers, led by a commanding officer described by several people as an “evil person”. The death squad carried out many murders. All that was necessary was for someone to be targeted by the squad was to have been singled out by another person as a *guerrillero* or a leftist sympathizer. According to G.G. and M.A., some people would accuse their neighbors of being *guerrilleros* for nothing more than hatred and envy. These innocent lives would be taken as a result.

A.C. asserts that the death squad killed her husband for this very reason. He had been sent to watch for the guerrilla in La Laguna, as there had been a town watch set up by the military to protect the town. On his way there, he was ambushed and killed. A.C. suspects that someone in La Laguna signaled to the death squad that he was involved in the guerrilla. According to testimonies by C.A., C.R., P.C., and P.C.’s niece X.C., the death squad killed four others in La Cuchilla: relatives of a community member named L.F. At the time of the murders, C.R. was serving his obligatory time in the town watch in La Laguna. He states that when he asked the permission of the commanding officer to

help bury the bodies in La Cuchilla, he was denied. C.R. says the denial was due to the fact that the commanding officer himself ordered the murders, and was afraid that evidence would incriminate him.

The officer himself was a drunk and was very unpredictable, according to C.R. C.R. himself was once accused of insubordination, and the officer pulled a gun on him. He insisted his innocence, but switched off the safety on his gun just to be safe. Another officer convinced the man to lower his weapon. Regardless, he was a very violent human being. X.C. states that members of his own death squad eventually killed him, after mistreating them for so long. Although the military would attribute his death to a firefight with the FMLN, X.C. claims that this was a lie.

Intriguingly, a few ARENA supporters do mention the death squads. C.A, M.A, and M.A's wife, G.G., admit that the military killed innocent people through the death squad. In contrast, neither A.A, P.M, nor P.M.'s father M.M. mention the death squads in their accounts of the war. While M.M.'s brother, D.M., mentions the death squads as a brutal force during the early stages of conflict, he also alleges that the FMLN was responsible for many deaths as well. The death of L.F.'s relatives goes unmentioned in the majority of the interviews, yet FMLN supporters such as C.R. and P.C. highlight the murders in detail. However, all ARENA supporters indicate that the guerrilla was responsible for many deaths in La Laguna, as well as La Cuchilla.

T.C. tells the story of one particular incident that occurred while she was living in La Laguna. The tragic death of her eighty-year old neighbor ensued at the hands of the FMLN. The man employed a fifteen year-old boy to work in his fields, harvesting beans and corn. During the war, the guerrilla forcibly sequestered him and took him to La



Montañona to indoctrinate and train him to fight the military. The boy escaped and quickly ran to the military base, where he immediately enlisted in the army. The desertion of the young boy sealed the fate of his elderly *patrón*.

At nearly 7am one morning, they [the FMLN] came to his [the elderly man's] house and led him out into the street in broad sight. They had previously realized that the young boy had abandoned his post after being left alone by them. On the side of the road, members of the guerrilla shot him in cold blood. Everyone heard the gunshots, but nobody would do anything about the crimes because they were all too afraid of what the consequences might be.

T.C's story corroborates the allegations of many ARENA supporters that violence against innocent people was carried out by the guerrilla, as well. C.A. mentions that as many as twenty-two people from La Laguna were taken by the guerrilla, never to be seen or heard from again. These "disappearances", he believes, served as the precursor to the violent actions of the Salvadoran gangs today. Unlike many of the accounts of the Civil War that place the majority of violence as a product of military actions, ARENA supporters in La Cuchilla find these allegations to be untrustworthy. A.G. criticizes the UN Truth Commission's report. He remembers viewing a news report asserting the claims of the report to accuse the military of the vast majority of crimes against innocent people. He believes that many were paid off by the United Nations to provide testimony against the government, but to remain silent about the crimes of the guerrilla. "In reality, the guerrilla committed more violence than is actually shown", he says. "They are just as responsible as the armed forces for what happened".

The high levels of support for ARENA in La Cuchilla support the fact that the guerrilla is so often mentioned as a belligerent force against the community and as a perpetrator of violence. While the military is often mentioned as the primary violator of human rights in the Truth Commission and a great deal of literature, the narrative reported by right-wing allies highlights the violence committed by the FMLN. If

ARENA supporters admit to violence executed by the military, they are quickly to place the FMLN as the guilty part in an equal if not superior number of violent incidents.

FMLN supporters seek to exonerate their side of such accusations by asserting that the guerrilla never killed innocent lives, and choose to focus almost entirely on the actions of the death squad. Even in cases where FMLN supporters, such as M.L., assert that innocent lives were taken by the guerrilla on account of being named as military sympathizers, he contends that the military was responsible for a great deal more suffering than the FMLN, citing the massacres that occurred at the hands of the Salvadoran Armed Forces. Although numerous cases of violence emerge through interviews with people in La Cuchilla, none is more notorious, or more polarizing, than the killing of M.M's wife, T.M, and his son, A.M.

### **The Murder of T.M. and A.M.**

While several members of La Cuchilla lost their lives during the Civil War, one of the most well-known cases involves the murder of a mother and child. The story is infamous among the people of La Cuchilla; the majority of community members I talked to remembered the disastrous events of that night. The killings took place late one night in 1985. Masked men, allegedly looking for M.M., entered his house around two o'clock in the morning. Finding only his wife and young child, A.M., the perpetrators decided instead to kill the woman and child rather than to continue searching for M.M. M.M. was also shot through the right calf muscle but survived to tell others of his family's tragic experience. Although there were no official witnesses due to the hour of the crime, many stories have emerged since the occurrence as to the culprit behind the murder. These stories provide a key example of the political construction of memory.

The community members most affected by this event were T.M.'s husband, M.M., and her children, including P.M. Both M.M. and P.M. assert that the FMLN is responsible for the deaths. Although the men were masked and the event took place under the cover of night, the M.M. is convinced it was the guerrilla. He believes that they came looking for him, although he is unsure as to why. He would be shot in the leg as he escaped out the back of his house. He ran through the heavy brush behind his house, into the fields below and hid there. When he returned, the men had killed his wife and child who were sleeping in the front room of the house.

P.M. corroborates this belief in the FMLN's culpability with an anecdote that occurred in the years following the war. He claims that he was building a home in a nearby community, and one of the men working on the project fathered two ex-*guerrilleros*. On this day, he believes he discovered the men responsible for the deaths of his mother and brother.

Years after the war, I was building a house with a man who claimed that his two sons had been on the side of the guerrilla during the war. He claimed that it was those two brothers who came and killed the people in La Cuchilla, including my mother and brother. These two *guerrilleros* are now dead. They died shortly after the war. I am sure it was them who killed my family. Whenever I think of the FMLN, it reminds me of the *guerrilleros* who have caused me this suffering over the years.

The events of that fateful night persuaded P.M. to join the armed forces that same year, when he was only twelve years old. M.M. claims he attempted to talk his son out of such a brash decision, as he was convinced it would only bring more suffering. "I told him [P.M.] that his mother's death was the tragedy of a war, but that more suffering would not bring her back". Regardless, P.M. joined the military and fought against the guerrilla, eventually being wounded in the thigh by enemy fire. To this day, he becomes

very emotional over these horrific events of the past, and unwaveringly curses the FMLN for what he believes they have done.

Other ARENA supporters in the community agree with the M.M.'s assertion regarding the murder of his wife and child. M.A. and A.A. are convinced that the guerrilla killed both victims, as are A.G and M.L.G. G.G. also agrees with her husband M.A, stating that the FMLN caused a great deal of suffering to the people of this community. Although there are several community members, such as M.A and M.L.G, who mention the death squads as an active force during the war, they unquestioningly support the notion that the guerrilla, not the military, was responsible for these deaths.

Interestingly, X.C. also support this premise, despite her assertions about the death squad killing other victims. X.C. states that A.M. recognized the *guerrilleros*, despite the fact that they wore masks. Because of his knowledge, the guerrilla decided to kill him as well. The phenomena of reports by community members that run contradictory to the prevailing political narrative occur sporadically in La Cuchilla. Despite C.A.'s claims that many in La Cuchilla would seek protection by the military in La Laguna to save them from the FMLN, he admits that he is unsure of who is responsible for the murders of T.M and A.M. He credits this lack of conviction in the guilty party to the fact that there were no actual witnesses to the murder. C.A.'s wife, C.O, also recollects memories that negatively portray the FMLN, yet she does not venture to blame them for the deaths of T.C. and A.M. Additionally, C.A. claims that the death squads unjustly murdered L.F's relatives, as previously mentioned. Undoubtedly, there remain those in La Cuchilla who recount a more balanced narrative of the Civil War, in

addition to those who overwhelmingly narrate the conflict from the perspective of a particular political faction.

The entire C family, to whom T.M. was related, shares C.A.'s belief in the uncertainty of the murderers. Both M.C. and G.C, T.M.'s brother and sister, claim that it is impossible to know who killed her due to the fact that it was too early in the morning for there to be witnesses. D.C and T.C, T.M.'s neices, support the claims of their father, M.C. However, T.C. points out that many in the community believe in the culpability of the FMLN, including P.M. and M.M. D.C. also states that many in the community today are against the FMLN for the suffering they have caused. M.C. and G.C. recount stories of engagements between the military and the guerrilla that placed their own lives in jeopardy, yet abstain from blaming a particular faction for the majority of violence. Divergences amongst families in memory of the Salvadoran Civil War happen in exceptional cases. Perhaps most surprisingly is the divergence that occurs within the M family, itself.

D.M, M.M.'s brother, claims that the death squads murdered his sister-in-law and nephew. Although he asserts that the FMLN caused him other hardships, such as the eviction from his own home during the conflict, he believes that the murders were the handiwork of members of the armed forces. "They [the death squads] came at night and forced you to do anything they asked at gunpoint. They killed people to intimidate others". D.M. recalls the violence and intimidation of the conflict as attributed primarily to the death squads, although he blames the guerrilla for forceful actions against the populous, as well.

FMLN supporters such as C.R. and P.C, blame the death squads for the murders. P.C. alleges that the FMLN did not kill a single individual in La Cuchilla during the conflict, and that the military death squads were responsible for all civilian murders. C.R. admits that the guerrilla did kill civilians, but claims that they only did so when an individual was unjustly naming other community members to the death squads as guerrilla sympathizers. “The guerrilla would kill them so that no more innocent lives would be taken”. C.R. also provides details to the story in which he believes place culpability for the murders entirely on the death squads. “The night of the death of M.M.’s wife and son, I remember hearing both of them dragged out of their house and into the street. M.M.’s wife screamed, ‘please don’t kill me, *soldaditos*’ and they shot her”. M.M. did not see the culprits, because he went running into the woods after being shot in the leg and never turned around”. Although none of the other community members interviewed corroborate this evidence, save for C.R.’s wife, T.O, de Jesús, he remains convinced in the details of the murder. These details confirm for him the culprit of the murders, and remain consistent with the leftist narrative of the war.

Although neither T.L nor M.L, former FMLN combatants, are familiar enough with the events of the murder to make an assertion on the case, both men exonerate the guerrilla from the murder of innocent civilians in their testimonies. For the FMLN supporters, civilian murders were justified, if they occurred at all. Others who support the innocence of the FMLN in the murders of T.M and A.M, such as D.M, are not quick to exonerate the guerrilla from all wrongdoing. However, the contrast in these stories provides insight into the political influence on memory in this particular case.

The case of T.M. and A.M. is undoubtedly the most polarizing example of the Civil War in La Cuchilla. Although numerous other accounts of the civil war abound in the community, none of them better exemplify the extent to which politics influences memory. Ardent party supporters blame the opposing faction for the death. Former military combatants such as P.M., M.A. and A.A. unquestionably blame the guerrilla for the deaths of T.M and A.M. In contrast, FMLN supporters defend the guerrilla from all innocent civilian deaths. Left-wing ideologues assert that the death squads must have been responsible for the tragedy that befell the M family. Still others assert that the deaths remain a mystery, and will continue to remain that way. This more neutral narrative portrayed by several community members verifies that not all those in La Cuchilla are strong party affiliates. However, those who align themselves strongly with a specific political faction recall memories that conform to the Civil War narrative espoused by that particular side. Apart from civilian murders, examples of militant actions in the community also fall into categorizations based on party affiliation, as well as neutrality regarding politics. These anecdotes related to the war provide further evidence for the politicization of memory in La Cuchilla.

### **Combat in La Cuchilla**

Apart from violent encounters, the people of La Cuchilla experienced the civil war by interactions with the militants during the course of their daily lives. M.C. reminisces, “We’d work the fields every day during war time just like we did when there was peace. We had to keep up our way of life. Now it was more dangerous”. Those who never enlisted with a specific side during the war still share incredible, and often framed, recollections on the Salvadoran Civil War as it was experienced in La Cuchilla. The

memories associated with combatant interference in the daily *campesino* life demonstrate the variety of narratives that Salvadorans construct to understand the war, and illuminate the role of politics in memory work.

Some of the most common recollections amongst people in La Cuchilla involve the military engagements that took place within the community. Confrontations between the military and the guerrilla occurred in areas where people would tend to their crops or gather firewood. G.C. remembers the horror of being caught in crossfire with her small son, M.C, as she collected the timber used to heat the family stove. She ran through the thick brush to escape the bullets, dropping the timber and wrapping her son under her arm. “Whenever you went walking in the *monte* (brush), you were at risk of being shot by a stray bullet”, she says, admitting that the event was the most frightening experience of her life. Her brother, M.C, shares a similar near-death experience that occurred while he tended his crops near La Montaña.

I remember one particular occasion, when the corn had been folded over, that some friends and I were tending our fields. There were soldiers walking on the street below us, and above us there were *guerrilleros* hiding in the bushes. Suddenly, shots began to burst out from both sides, with us caught in the middle. We immediately fell onto the ground, lying as flat as possible so as not to be shot. The folded corn stalks above us were shot several times, so we needed to stay on the ground. I lay down on top of an anthill, and even though ants on all sides were biting me I didn't dare to move.

Apart from ground troops, aircraft were also a dangerous threat during the war.

C.L, G.G, G.C, D.C, and A.L all recall the heavy carpet bombings and machine gun fires of aircraft that occurred during the final FMLN offensive in 1989. A.C. declares that her kitchen was destroyed entirely machine gun fire as a *guerrillero* took cover in her house. That day would mark the end for the plane, as it would be destroyed that afternoon by a surface-to-air missile fired by the FMLN. Many in La Cuchilla recall that incident, although C.L, P.C's husband, speaks of the occurrence more favorable than



others. To her, the plane was a devastating force that killed innocent people and livestock, and it was a blessing that the aircraft was finally destroyed. She even recalls a local folk song dedicated to the incident, in which the lyrics claim that the people gave thanks to God for the obliteration of the plane. While C.L. exhibits more appreciation for the *guerrilleros* who fought against a military responsible for the bombing of La Cuchilla, G.G. recalls the bombings from a different perspective.

Once, I remember that a plane was flying very low overhead while I was walking to deliver some vegetables to someone in La Laguna. All of the sudden, the plane began to drop bombs. Perhaps they assumed that I was a *guerrillera*, so I told myself that I could not run and hide in any houses for fear they might bomb the house because I had gone in there. The bomb exploded very close to where I was, but thanks to God I didn't get hurt. On my way back, I was ambushed by *guerrilleros*, who asked me all sorts of questions. They scared me a great deal.

G.G. asserts that the FMLN caused a great deal of suffering. She was angered with the guerrilla presence in La Cuchilla that warranted the bombings, rather than be angered by the military that was bombing them. To her, the guerrilla presence was much more harmful, and needed to be dealt with. She admits that she still experiences resentment when her daughter claims that she will vote for the FMLN in upcoming elections, “because they were the people fighting for the guerrilla”. FMLN forces allegedly destroyed the power to the hospital in Chalatenango days before G.G. went into labor with her first child, and her husband was prohibited from entering the building on the pretense that more threats against the facility were eminent. Unlike C.L. and other FMLN supporters, G.G. recollects the combative actions within a narrative that lambasts the guerrilla forces and, to an extent, exonerates the military for its actions.

C.O's memory of the civil war negatively depicts the guerrilla as having a lack of value for human life. She recalls a story in which *guerrilleros* came to a house near La Montañona looking for food, only to leave an infant discarded on the trail. The house

members took the child in and cared for it as their own. “The guerrilla often brought their children and left them along the way”. Other community members do not discuss this peculiar allegation of child neglect, but it illuminates a negative attitude toward the guerrilla expressed by Consuelo.

Similarly, M.M. construes a negative portrayal of the FMLN as common thieves with intimidating weapons. “One year, after the crops were nearly ready to be harvested, members of the guerrilla encroached on our land and would not let us pass to harvest our crops,” he alleges. “They stole them from us instead, after not having to do any of the work to grow them”. In contrast, his brother D.M. describes being confronted by the Armed Forces upon returning from the fields. “If you were returning from the *milpa* with food, the armed forces would ask you to give them the food” he states. “They were telling you to, because you couldn’t say no if you wanted to live”. C.A. remembers the events more neutrally, stating that both sides were the responsible for the killing of livestock and crops. D.M and M.M. highlight different sides in the conflict for the injustices committed against the rural population. Although both accounts are plausible, it is the ease with which each individual recalls them that underscores the political influence of memory.

Military engagements are often remembered differently. For politically neutral individuals such as G.C. and M.C, the horrors recalled were not of a specific side in the conflict, but rather as a result of combat between both factions. Other examples, such as the accounts of war recalled by G.G. and C.L, demonstrate dissimilarity in the way both individuals remember combative actions in La Cuchilla and the surrounding area. Unjust actions, such as the abandonment of children remembered by C.O, the robbery of

M.M's land, and the threats against D.M's are evoked according to political affiliation. However, there are certain aspects of the guerrilla and the armed forces that are remembered by both sides with disdain.

### **Forced Recruitment and Sequesters**

According to accounts from La Cuchilla, the guerrilla often invaded homes in the community and would occasionally expel the owners from their own residence. D.M. recalls that he was eventually evicted from his house by the guerrilla for refusing to turn over his son, J.M, who was serving in the armed forces at the time. A.G. reports that various homes were sequestered by *guerrilleros* during the war, and that the people were given no more than 24 hours' notice to pack their belongings. "The guerrilla would later use these homes as shelter and hideouts from the armed forces", he states. A.G. tells the story of an elderly man in the nearby village of San Martín who was forced from his home. He carried firewood for over a day's walk to the colonial town of Suchitoto, which was the closest site where he could find relatives to take him in. Such tragedies emphasize to A.G. the disregard for human life possessed by members of the FMLN.

Although D.M's testimony indicates more negativity towards the military than the guerrilla, he and ARENA supporters such as A.G. share this tragic memory. Even T.L, the former FMLN medic and dentist, recalls his disapproval with the sequestering of houses. "There were certain aspects of the guerrilla that I was personally against", he says. "For one, they re-possessed houses of people suspected of being military sympathizers. They would only give people 24 hours to pack up and leave their homes". Sympathizers of both factions, despite espousing divergent political ideologies, remember the forced evacuations of homes by the FMLN. This phenomena demonstrates

that while politically directed narratives influence the memory of the Civil War by party affiliates, there are exceptional events which transcend politics in the minds of Salvadorans.

In the film *Voces Inocentes*, the military is seen forcibly removing young boys from school to recruit them into the military (Mandoki, 2004). The FMLN forces are seen as protectors of these boys' youth, rather than perpetrators of the same practices as the military. However, C.R. remembers that both sides of the conflict forcibly recruited members to join their ranks. C.R. himself was sent against his will to the town of La Laguna to serve in the military detail, as was fellow FMLN supporter P.C. While M.A. and M.L.G. insist that such actions were necessary to prevent the guerrilla from destroying the town, C.R. asserts that this notion was a lie invented by military officers. Both C.R. and P.C. claim that they were inappropriately equipped, given machetes and slingshots rather than guns. C.R. contends that the guerrilla intended to save the town from military oppression, rather than destroy it. However, he also recalls that the guerrilla also forced young recruits to fight on their side in the conflict. C.A. corroborates this account, but asserts that when the guerrilla arrived to forcibly recruit young boys, the people hid them from sight to avoid their recruitment. The aforementioned story remembered by T.C. regarding the young boy and his elderly employer also began with the kidnapping of the boy to be indoctrinated by the guerrilla forces in La Montaña. Her sister, D.C., alleges that their brother, A.C., was taken by guerrilla troops while being sent to bring a horse to pasture. A.C. was found a day later, crying and in shock after what had occurred.

Members of opposite political affiliations remember forced recruitment by FMLN troops. These stories discredit the notion that only the Armed Forces was involved in the forced recruitment of child soldiers, as *Voces Inocentes* depicts in film (Mandoki, 2004). However, political preferences do emerge in the recollections, as demonstrated by the focus on forced military recruitment in C.R.'s testimony and the kidnapping of a youth in T.C. and D.C.'s memories. Despite points of convergence in the accounts of both individuals, the political narratives to which each member subscribes dictates the focus of the individual's memory of the past.

T.L. recalls that he was also against the recruitment of adolescents, although he never insinuates that such recruitment was forced. Instead, he was against their recruitment based on the youth's ineffectiveness in battle. "To be a guerrilla fighter, you had to be strong, brave, and committed, which these boys were unable to be". The guerrilla recruited M.L. at age sixteen, although he maintains that he was convinced of the FMLN's mission and its potential rewards, rather than kidnapped and forced into service as T.C.'s account contends. According to M.L., the Armed Forces required two years of obligatory service for every young man eighteen years or older. He was eventually forced into military service at eighteen, after serving the guerrilla for a year and returning home at age seventeen. M.L. argues that the guerrilla respected these two years of service, and would not seek out those who were merely carrying out their obligations. He also affirms that the guerrilla would advise the youth to leave the military base after their service ended. "If they stayed after their two years of forced service, they would be considered enemy combatants of the guerrilla".

T.L. also relates his perspective on the kidnappings conducted by the FMLN. He acknowledges that the kidnapping of President Duarte's daughter was a ploy by Schafik Handal to raise funds for the FMLN, though he recalls the event in a humorous tone, insinuating that no harm was ever meant to befall the girl. "We needed money really badly at the time", he says. While ARENA supporters such as C.A. relate that the kidnappings and disappearances carried out by the FMLN indiscriminately targeted the populous, T.L. remembers the kidnappings very differently. For T.L, the kidnappings targeted only municipal mayors as attempts to show them the struggles of the *guerrilleros* by bringing them to the camps late at night and later returning them. He relates that even the former mayor of La Laguna was brought to an FMLN camp one night. "The mayors said that the *guerrilleros* were tantamount to garbage" he recalls. Unlike the kidnapping of Duarte's daughter, the mayoral kidnapping attempts were not intended to take money, but purely for educational purposes. T.L. does not address the allegations that many mayors were assassinated, as reported in the UN Truth Commission report, nor does he allege that additional kidnappings occurred among the civilian population. C.A. remembers such actions as intimidation tactics, rather than educational exercises, and demonstrates the stark contrast between the accounts from juxtaposing political perspectives.

While the former FMLN combatants and current political supporters provide evidence for recruitment of minors in the guerrilla, T.L. and M.L. avoid the notion that such recruitment was forced. Although these accounts contrast with C.R.'s statement of forced recruitment, C.R. and P.C. still emphasize their own forced recruitment by the military rather than expound on the forced recruitment and kidnappings by the guerrilla.

In addition, T.L. alleges that the kidnapping of municipal mayors was merely an education initiative designed to garner favor for the FMLN, rather than put lives at risk. In contrast, ARENA supporters such as M.A and M.L.G. indicate that the recruitment of civilians to stand guard in La Laguna was necessary for the military to protect the town from the guerrilla. These ARENA affiliates do not perceive such recruitment as an injustice, rather as an essential element in the war against the guerrilla. However, similarities in the memories of contrasting political affiliates are found. Adherents of both political parties remember with contempt the forced eviction of civilians from their homes. While points of convergence are established between both sides, the emphasis that each side places on these events differs. While these negative aspects of guerrilla conduct are mere afterthoughts to FMLN supporters such as T.L, ARENA supporters such as A.G. highlight them as damning evidence against the Left. The emphasis on specific memories to construct narratives depends on the political affiliation of the individual who recalls them. Although political supporters may recollect segments of the war that negatively portray their side, their political ideology is visible through the greater overall focus of the narrative that they interpret.

## **CONCLUSION**

In compiling the various accounts of the Salvadoran Civil War, as perceived by community members of *cantón* La Cuchilla, competing narratives emerge to explain the events that occurred during the conflict. While the individuals who shared their stories all experienced the war in La Cuchilla and the surrounding areas, the memories that they emphasize form a narrative that indicate distinct perspectives on their shared history. The

saliency of specific memories dictates the narrative to which the individual subscribes. This saliency is mandated by politics.

### **Analysis of Civil War Narratives**

As opposed to the political dualism in historical narratives of the war at the national level, three narratives develop through discussion of the Civil War with the people of La Cuchilla. The first narrative, espoused by ARENA supporters, indicates that the injustices committed by the guerrilla forced the armed forces to defend the people. While a handful of individuals in this camp will mention human rights violations committed by the military, primarily through the death squads, they emphasize the actions of the guerrilla as the primary perpetrators of injustice. ARENA supporters perceive the FMLN troops as a terrorizing threat, disregarding the life and well-being of the civilian population through the sequestering of property, forced relocation, and death. They believe that the guerrilla was responsible for the murder of innocent lives, including those of T.M. and A.M. Those who joined the military ranks voluntarily believe they did so to protect the people from the guerrilla. For those who adhere to ARENA and its narrative, the FMLN as a political party still invokes memories of the guerrilla and its actions during the war.

The second narrative is created by left-wing ideologues to represent the FMLN as a necessary force to combat the repression of the right-wing government. The actions taken by the guerrilla, although not always pure in their motives, were done with the intention of protecting the population at large. Although certain supporters admit that the guerrilla was involved in questionable practices, such as the sequestering of houses and the recruitment of underage youth, these actions pale in comparison to the destruction



caused by the military and paramilitary death squads. For former combatants in La Cuchilla, joining the FMLN was a just cause, rather than an obligated endeavor. Many believe that only the death squads were engaged in the murder of innocent civilians, including T.M. and A.M. Those who continue to support the FMLN as a political party remember the civil war through a leftist perspective, which exonerates the guerrilla from its potential shortcomings by illuminating the need to impede the repressive military regime.

Still, a third narrative emerges among a fraction of the population. These individuals express mainly the horrors of combat that maintained the people in a state of fear. Their memories overwhelmingly concern military engagements which put innocent lives at risk, and do not attempt to blame a particular side for the outcome. Adherents to this narrative acknowledge that innocent lives were taken, including T.M. and A.M, but they contend that the perpetrators of the crime are unknown. Rather than highlight the forced removal of people from their homes, or recollect instances of repressiveness by the government and military death squads, they perceive the war as a destructive force that, indiscriminately, affected everybody's lives.

Although the third narrative does not synthesize entirely with either of the two competing narratives, the other, more politically charged, accounts of the war conform nicely to the prevailing national accounts of war. Examples of national framing on the war are found in the accounts in La Cuchilla as well, such as A.G's criticisms of the Truth Commission and T.L's insinuations that the sequestering of municipal mayors was merely an attempt to educate the politicians on the struggles of the *guerrilleros*. While those on the Right who discussed *Monseñor* Romero admitted that his death was at the

hands of the government, as is widely reported by the Catholic Church, they do pan the FMLN's attempts to align the former archbishop with the leftist cause.

While national matters were occasionally discussed, most accounts of the war focused on the events that transpired within the community. These memories are most pertinent to the individuals who remember them. Nevertheless, the recollections of the Salvadoran Civil War provide ample evidence that memory is influenced not only locally, but also nationally. While not as applicable to politically neutral members of La Cuchilla, the accounts by ardent party affiliates echo Sprenkel's notion that, "Militants rarely question their 'own' group's official account" (2011, 24). This statement is especially applicable for those who served in the military or the guerrilla, such as A.A. and M.L. While memories vary slightly amongst those affiliated with the same party, the variances generally conform to the same collective memory that sought to blame the guerrilla, rather than the military, for the chaos and destruction of those twelve fateful years. The collective memories identified in La Cuchilla are not locally constructed. Rather, the narratives are derived from the national political arena, in which competing sides lobby for approval of their particular interpretation of history within the citizenry.

Despite the political influences at work in memory among Salvadorans, there remains a universal truth apparent to all who experienced the civil war. War is tragic, destructive, and difficult to live with. Regardless of ideology, each person with whom I talked expressed the difficult period of time that ended so many lives. Although the perpetrators of this tragedy vary based on the political perspective of the individual, the victim is always the Salvadoran people. A.G. states that war is an experience he would not wish upon any man or any country, and C.A. expresses his hope that a war never

again overcomes his country. The people of La Cuchilla, as well as all of El Salvador, suffered greatly on account of the Civil War. Many continue to suffer today, and most will never fully recover from the experience. These memories are universally potent to Salvadorans, and one engaging in conversation with them about these delicate topics must be aware of the immense hurt and despair that lingers in their memory.

### **Analysis of Politics and Memory**

The political spectrum in El Salvador, as in many countries, continues to be starkly polarized. Polarization affects more than the present; it has also affected the way people remember the past. Without a definitive history of the Civil War acceptable to all Salvadorans, competing narratives will “remember” the conflict from different perspectives. Historical facts will be disputed, exaggerated, or neglected according to the manner in which they lend themselves to a particular narrative. Discussion with Salvadorans regarding the difficult past from which this country has emerged may not yield evidence for the events that occurred. Narrative and truth are not synonymous, but that does not discredit collective memory and the vital role it plays in society. In analyzing the memories of Salvadorans, one can understand how individual Salvadorans interpret their history. More importantly, one can recognize the political influences that underscore individuals and their memory.

To discredit these stories of the civil war for their contradictions or lack of veritable evidence is to disregard the significance of the stories in the individuals’ lives. The individuals who recall these memories of a tragic period in history are decided in their comprehension of that history; to them the truth of what occurred is what they interpret it to be. While the individual memories they possess may be unique, the way in

which they recall them is dependent on the narrative construction of history they find to be relevant. Narratives are constructed by collectives of individuals seeking to homogenize their memories and find commonality within the populous. Collective memories encompass individuals and allow them to make sense of the past from which they have come.

The events that occurred in El Salvador, and the way they are remembered, are not unique. Analysis of the narratives that emerge from any conflict worldwide will uncover political forces that influence the collective memories of the people who survived them. Outsiders residing in an area that has experienced conflict in recent history must comprehend these forces when discussing the matter with those who experienced the conflict for themselves. Foreigners working with groups of country nationals, whether they be anthropologists, historians, or Peace Corps volunteers, must keep mind that their own pre-conceived notions are influenced by the political bias of the narrative to which they subscribe. In lieu of these biases, one should seek to understand rather than to be understood. Factual support for the allegations of historical narratives is irrelevant to those who believe them. Relevancy is found in understanding how individuals reach conclusions on what they have seen and heard. When examining the politics of memory, one should not hope to discover the unadulterated truth of history. Rather, the objective must be to comprehend the influences by which individuals and collectives interpret their shared, and often difficult, past.

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