Gangs Born out of Civil War

Factors Leading to the Creation of MS-13 and 18th Street Gang

By Robert Casales '19

Throughout the past decade, El Salvador has often been referred to as "The Murder Capital of the World." The main contributors to the unprecedented growth rate of homicide in El Salvador are the country's two most notorious gangs, MS-13 and 18th Street Gang, both of which were formed following El Salvador's bloody civil war. In this paper, Casales explains how the violence during the Salvadoran Civil War, the social and political conditions in the United States, the failed reconstruction efforts made by the Salvadoran Government, and the influx of deported gang members all led to the establishment of these two murderous gangs. Finally, Casales concludes with the recommendation that the Salvadoran Government should address their gang violence epidemic with a social approach involving local institutions such as the church rather than the current "Iron Fist" policy.

Introduction

The word "violence" has been inextricably connected to El Salvador's identity since its inception. Gerardo Mendez, a priest who has worked for over a decade with at-risk populations in the capital of San Salvador, asserted, "[Violence] is a reality that it seems we've inherited and it would seem that we can't ... that it's difficult for us to imagine El Salvador without violence."1 This reality that Mendez describes was shaped by a history of social and economic inequality. Decades of prolonged disparity pitted El Salvador's elite against its poor, generating severe tension between both populations. Tensions continued to rise, culminating in a civil war that eventually laid the foundation for the creation of two murderous gangs, namely MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha) and the 18th Street Gang (Calle 18). Several factors facilitated the establishment of MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang in El Salvador, whose combined impact have made the country the murder capital of the world. These factors include the violence during El Salvador's civil war, social and political conditions in the United States, failed reconstruction efforts, and the influx of deported gang members.

Historical Background

Coffee was king in El Salvador beginning in the 1880s and accounted for most of its income. The wealth that was generated by the production of coffee as well as the land on which it grew was controlled by El Salvador's Coffee Oligarchy, also known as the "Fourteen Families." Even though these families accounted for only two percent of El Salvador's total population, their control over the country's wealth and land allowed them to rule for the next fifty years.² The families benefited from the production of coffee while "Indigenous peoples and mestizos, comprising 95% of the population, were reduced to virtual serfdom."³ This was the beginning of the social and economic inequal-

The disparity between El Salvador's two main social classes continued into the 1900s and led to social unrest which "the governing regimes confronted... with unmeasured repression."4 This extreme repression turned deadly in 1932 with what became known as La Matanza. Peasant workers organized a revolt against poor working conditions and lack of compensation, led by labor leader and eventual martyr, Agustin Farabundo Marti. The government quickly responded with deadly force to suppress the revolt. In a matter of days, government troops killed an estimated thirty-thousand Salvadoran peasants, most of whom were indigenous. La Matanza displayed El Salvador's extreme culture of violence at the governmental level. It became known as "the ethnocide"⁵ of indigenous people in El Salvador. The elite were already socially, economically, and politically dominant, but after La Matanza "Their dominance was enforced not by the invisible hand of the market but by the visible and bloody hands of the Salvadoran military."6 A government and elite class that once ruled with coffee beans now ruled with guns.

The tension and conflict between the two vastly different classes grew at exponential rates and resulted in even more violence. In the 1970s, left-wing fighters emerged and began to trade assassinations and coups attempts with the right-winged government. On October 15, 1979, the Revolutionary Government Junta (JRG) overthrew Carlos Romero's repressive government and established their own military dictatorship. At first, they promised to improve living standards but failed to do so. Dissatisfied with yet another repressive government, the five main guerilla groups in the country, comprised mostly of poor working class citizens, united under the left-winged Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) in 1980. The overwhelming conflict continued to worsen, culminating in a full-fledged civil war by 1980.

Violence During El Salvador's Civil War

The civil war saw extreme violence committed by belligerents on both sides of the conflict, namely the military government of El Salvador and the FMLN. By 1992, a long and bloody twelve years accounted for the deaths of over 75,000 Salvadorans. After the war, the United Nations established a truth commission and revealed that the government was responsible for eightyfive percent of the violence and deaths while the FMLN was only responsible for five percent of the atrocities.⁷ These high levels of violence caused more than a quarter of El Salvador's population to flee the country during the civil war.8

During the war, the most striking examples of the military-led government's violent acts included contracting death squads that not only targeted members of the FMLN but also any reform supporters, as well as assassinations of high ranking and influential officials who spoke out against them. A deeply rooted culture of violence elicited bloodthirsty death squads comprised of civilians and military soldiers to go on a killing spree without any type of consequences. The UN-sponsored truth commission found that these death squads had virtual impunity during the war because "El Salvador lacked the judicial, legislative or executive capacities to control the growing military domination of society."9 One of the leaders of these death squads, Robert D'Aubuisson, nicknamed "Blowtorch Bob," carried out the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the famed human rights defender who actively spoke out against the human right crimes committed by the government. D'Aubuisson would later go on

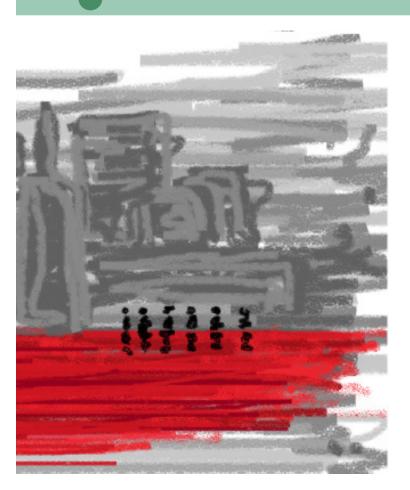
Lp. By 1992, the span of a long and bloody twelve years accounted for the deaths of over 75,000 Salvadorans.



to establish the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) in 1981, a right-winged political party formed in direct opposition against the FMLN.

Although the FMLN was not responsible for the same level of violence as the government, they still contributed to the subsequent emigration of more than a quarter of El Salvador's population. Their tactics included guerrilla warfare, targeting government officials, and destroying coffee plantations to weaken the economy.10 The FMLN became more advanced and sophisticated as the war went on, leading to more dangerous levels of violence.

With both sides growing stronger and more violent, El Salvador quickly became an unsafe place to live for civilians. Salvadorans left by the thousands, either bringing their whole family with them or traveling alone. Many parents left El Salvador and left their children be-



hind with relatives who were unfit to care for them. Often, these children would live on the streets with no family, support, or guidance, making them potential future gang recruits.

A popular destination for Salvadorans fleeing the war was the United States: "Between 1980 and 1990, the Salvadoran immigrant population in the United States increased nearly fivefold from 94,000 to 465,000."¹¹ Among the most popular cities was Los Angeles, California, the birthplace of MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang.

Social and Political Conditions in the United States

As Salvadorans arrived in the United States, they had little to no money, did not know English, were not provided with quality job opportunities, and were subjected to live in low income neighborhoods rife with drug and gang violence. Strict immigration policies made it nearly impossible for Salvadorans to get government assistance. They were not provided with green cards, working papers, or social services, leaving many immigrants to fend for themselves.

Neighborhoods in Los Angeles are stomping grounds for well-established gangs such as the Bloods, the Crips, and the Mexican Mafia. Salvadoran immigrants were extremely vulnerable as they adjusted to life in their new home. Gangs saw this vulnerability as an opportunity to take advantage of a group of people who did not yet know how to defend themselves from these new threats. When asked specifically about MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang, Reverend Gerardo Mendez said, "Above all, these gangs originated as self-defense groups, defending the Latino community, and the neighborhood, from other neighborhoods coming in to steal or inflict damage."12 He went on to say that these two gangs used a common phrase when they first originated: "Vivo por mi madre, muero por mi barrio (I live for my mother, I die for my neighborhood)."13 Jobless and influenced by other gangs in the area, these two self-defense groups quickly turned into violent, drug-dealing gangs and formally became MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang. Both gangs perfected their crafts and organized in Los Angeles while the civil war continued in El Salvador. As the years went by, both gangs developed more intricate and sophisticated methods of criminal activity, coinciding with increased levels of violence. While these gang members established their new identity in the United States, the civil war finally ended in El Salvador in 1992.

Failed Reconstruction Efforts

The civil war in El Salvador was brought to a close with the signing of The Chapultepec Peace Accords in 1992. The Peace Accords not only ended the civil war, but also dramatically changed the structure of the armed forces, specifically with the establishment of a new civilian police force: Policia Nacional Civil (PNC). Even though El Salvador was moving on from its deadly civil war, the country itself was in turmoil and struggling to recover. There was a severe lack of governmental infrastructure which led to insufficient funds to finance the PNC, the government-sponsored social reintegration programs for the orphaned children left behind during the war, and for people who were displaced from their homes but remained in El Salvador. There was also still a lack of trust in the government. All of these factors delayed the establishment of the PNC, making El Salvador vulnerable to violent crime due to their lack of fully formed police force. While El Salvador continued its slow efforts toward recovery, Salvadoran gang members in the United States were starting to receive negative attention from the United States government.

Influx of Deported Gang Members

Gang activity within MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang became increasingly more violent, leading to more arrests, convictions, jail time, and Salvadoran criminal records. Newly formed governmental organizations tasked with combating violent crime and the passage of legislation targeting gangs contributed to the eventual deportation of gang members back to El Salvador, "with the Violent Gang Task Force and reformed immigration laws in play, the [Immigration and Naturalization Service] deported an estimated seventy gang members to El Salvador in 1993. By January 1995, reports of gang member deportations soared to 780."14 For the rest of the decade, the deportation of Salvadorans increased while their " criminal activity grew at an alarming rate" according to the Department of Homeland Security.¹⁵

Thousands of gang members were deported to a broken El Salvador. As Reverend Gerardo Mendez explains, "The deportation of gang members back to El Salvador coincided with a very complicated social environment in the country, in which family life had been broken, As of 2017, "El Salvador's murder rate remains eight times greater than what the World Health Organization considers epidemic."

financially and culturally."16 In its tumultuous position after the civil war, El Salvador was ripe for recruiting new members of MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang. The lack of job opportunities, extreme poverty, thousands of orphaned children, and guns that were left over from the civil war allowed "the gang[s] to become more organized, powerful, and violent."17 Paradoxically, the 1992 Peace Accords created conditions that eventually brought about more violence and crime than ever before, "the demobilization left thousands of soldiers-ideal candidates for gang recruitmentunemployed. As an additional byproduct of the war, Salvadoran gangs, assisted by rampant government corruption, obtained access to a large number of firearms."18 Additionally, being out on the streets made the large number of orphans easy targets because the gangs could provide them with things that they never had, namely income, a "family," guidance, and an identity. The circumstances of a culture deeply rooted in violence, the teaching and spreading of the gang culture learned in the United States, a myriad of fresh recruits, the quick access to firearms, and a weak police force all contributed to MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang turning El Salvador into one of the most violent and deadly countries in the world.

Murder Capital of the World

In 2015, El Salvador, with an alarming 104 homicides committed per 100,000 residents, "was named the world's most violent country."¹⁹ As of 2017, "El Salvador's murder rate remains eight times greater than what the World Health Organization considers epidemic."²⁰ These high numbers are due to the issue of gang violence not



being addressed, as well as the lack of attention paid to the gangs by the government when they first emerged in El Salvador. Quite frankly, no one knew what to do with the massive influx of deported gang members. Not only did the Salvadoran government lack the understanding of how to tackle this problem, but gang violence was not its chief concern as the country attempted to rebuild itself after the civil war. With the government preoccupied with its own agenda and a police force that was barely formed, gang members were free to do what they did best: commit crimes. The government only began to take gang violence seriously when the crimes turned extremely violent. However, by the time this happened, the level of violence, homicide rate, and number of gang members was so overwhelming that the government took drastic measures, implementing "Mano Dura (Iron Fist)" policies that were politically motivated, and aimed to serve as a "quick fix" to the problem of gang violence.

Mano Dura: A Flawed Approach

The Mano Dura policies are a set of hardline measures that the Salvadoran Government approved in response to the gang violence problem. Put simply, the policies allow police and members of the military to arrest, use excessive force, or even kill suspected gang members for misdemeanors or based on their physical appearance (tattoos, for example). These policies represent a clear problem because "Instead of solving these crimes, the emphasis given to rising homicides and the "gang threat" by officials in [El Salvador] has been to pass legislation criminalizing tattoos and granting police broad powers to detain and imprison young people they suspect of gang involvement."21 Another problem with the Mano Dura policies is that they were created in order for ARENA to politically benefit from them: "The ARENA party used mano dura policies... to boost its support among constituencies plagued by crime."22 Instead of working towards serious efforts to combat and reduce the level of gang violence and homicide rate, ARENA only cared about getting votes.

Aside from this moral dilemma, the policies are counterintuitive practices that are not only ineffective but have also led to the strengthening of gangs. To begin, the mass incarceration of gang members puts more financial pressure on the government. For example, under ARENA,

"prisons built to hold 20,000 prisoners swelled with more than 70,000."23 These overly populated prisons have evolved into gang headquarters and serve as "schools" for gang members to learn how to become better gangsters. MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang both "had several prisons exclusively populated by their respective gangs and essentially under their control."24 While in prison, these gang members were able to better organize themselves and began figuring out ways to avoid future capture, for example "forbidding new members to tattoo themselves."25 The Mano Dura policies help gang members discover law enforcement tactics because they "[target] the visible signs of gang membership and [push] criminals underground."26

The most significant problem with the Mano Dura policies is that they give law enforcement a license to kill, perpetuating the already devastating cycle of homicide. Medardo Gomez, a bishop in the Salvadoran Lutheran Church and Nobel Peace Prize nominee, has actively spoken out against the Mano Dura policies. He has said, "If the police kill gang members, gangs also seek to get stronger. Violence generates violence."²⁷ Bishop Gomez went on to say that gangs members are from the most excluded and marginalized parts of society and specifically said, "You can't just see the gangs as criminal groups but as a social problem that needs a social approach."²⁸

Policy Prescription: A Social Approach

Keeping Bishop Gomez's advice in mind, the Salvadoran Government should take a social approach by partnering with churches in El Salvador in order start programs that help to rehabilitate and reintegrate gang members back into society. Some churches in El Salvador have noticed that young gang members are missing something and "suggest that addressing the basic needs that many young people hope to find in gang life–acceptance, belonging, stability–can be key to getting them out."²⁹ Jose Miguel Cruz, a professor at Florida International University, has researched gangs in El Salvador for twenty years. His research showed that fifty-eight percent of former and active gang members believe that the church would serve as the best institution for rehabilitation programs.³⁰ Furthermore, working with the church and learning about love, mercy, and forgiveness could transform negative identities associated with guilt to positive identities associated with the church's teachings.³¹

So far this policy prescription has only accounted for one side of the story: the church. What about the other side of the story, the gang? It has become clear that religion is the only acceptable reason for a gang member to distance himself from the gang.³² Central to this idea is the principle in El Salvador that states that once one is in a gang, he or she is in it for life. Distancing oneself only means that one is moving closer to God and being reformed, but one remains a part of the gang.³³ To be considered reformed, a gang member must show his gang leader that he has been true to God for a minimum of two years.³⁴ From there, his obligation is to maintain his ties to the gang by preaching in hopes of reforming other gang members.35 This policy-as opposed to the harsh, politically motivated Mano Dura policies-has the potential to make real change in the gang violence epidemic because not only does the church provide the constant and loving support that a rehabilitating gang member needs, but the gangs are accepting and support their fellow brothers who wish to be reformed.

Conclusion

The Salvadoran Civil War (1980-1992) catalyzed a chain of events that eventually culminated in the establishment and presence of MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang in El Salvador. The violence during the war pushed Salvadorans out of their homes and into an unfamiliar world where they were forced to fend for themselves. Creating gangs was a way for Salvadorans to provide for and protect themselves and their people. El Salvador was in shambles after the war ended, and the influx of deported gang members did not help a country that was already vulnerable. The formation of gangs in the United States, the eventual deportation of gang members, the availability of recruits who were desperate, the access to firearms, and a government with a weak police force all contributed to the advancement of the violent and deadly cultures of MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang. Mano Dura policies have shown to be unsuccessful in combating this epidemic and have caused the problem to get worse. In order to take a social approach to a problem that requires it, the Salvadoran government should create an open dialogue with the church in order set up effective rehabilitation and reintegration programs so that gang members can properly find their place in a society where they can feel more welcomed, and that would ultimately lead to their assimilation and integration into the greater Salvadoran community.

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