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1970-1990: The war of counter-insurgency and the crucifixion of El Salvador

Saturday 18 August 2018, by [CHOMSKY Noam](#) (Date first published: April 2002).

Noam Chomsky on the ultra-violent war of the right-wing regime in El Salvador against grassroots resistance of workers, peasants and liberation theologians - socialist clergymen and women.



For many years, repression, torture and murder were carried on in El Salvador by dictators installed and supported by the US government, a matter of no interest in the US. The story was virtually never covered. By the late 1970s, however, the government began to be concerned about a couple of things.

One was that Somoza, the dictator of Nicaragua, was losing control. The US was losing a major base for its exercise of force in the region. A second danger was even more threatening. In El Salvador in the 1970s, there was a growth of what were called “popular organisations” - peasant associations, cooperatives, unions, Church-based Bible study groups that evolved into self-help groups, etc. That raised the threat of democracy.

In February 1980, the Archbishop [libcom - though nominally part of the Catholic Church, they did not receive the backing of the Vatican] of El Salvador, Oscar Romero, sent a letter to President Carter in which he begged him not to send military aid to the junta that ran the country. He said such aid would be used to “sharpen injustice and repression against the people’s organisations” which were struggling “for respect for their most basic human rights” (hardly news to Washington, needless to say).

A few weeks later, Archbishop Romero was assassinated while saying a mass. The neo-Nazi Roberto d’Aubuisson is generally assumed to be responsible for this assassination (among countless other atrocities). D’Aubuisson was “leader-for-life” of the ARENA party, which now governs El Salvador; members of the party, like current Salvadoran president Alfredo Cristiani, had to take a blood oath of loyalty to him.

Thousands of peasants and urban poor took part in a commemorative mass a decade later, along with many foreign bishops, but the US was notable by its absence. The Salvadoran Church formally proposed Romero for sainthood.

All of this passed with scarcely a mention in the country that funded and trained Romero's assassins. The New York Times, the "newspaper of record," published no editorial on the assassination when it occurred or in the years that followed, and no editorial or news report on the commemoration.

On March 7, 1980, two weeks before the assassination, a state of siege had been instituted in El Salvador, and the war against the population began in force (with continued US support and involvement). The first major attack was a big massacre at the Rio Sumpul, a coordinated military operation of the Honduran and Salvadoran armies in which at least 600 people were butchered. Infants were cut to pieces with machetes, and women were tortured and drowned. Pieces of bodies were found in the river for days afterwards. There were church observers, so the information came out immediately, but the mainstream US media didn't think it was worth reporting.

Peasants were the main victims of this war, along with labour organisers, students, priests or anyone suspected of working for the interests of the people]. In Carter's last year, 1980, the death toll reached about 10,000, rising to about 13,000 for 1981 as the Reaganites took command.

In October 1980, the new archbishop condemned the "war of extermination and genocide against a defenceless civilian population" waged by the security forces. Two months later they were hailed for their "valiant service alongside the people against subversion" by the favourite US "moderate," José Napoleón Duarte, as he was appointed civilian president of the junta.

The role of the "moderate" Duarte was to provide a fig leaf for the military rulers and ensure them a continuing flow of US funding after the armed forces had raped and murdered four churchwomen from the US. That had aroused some protest here; slaughtering Salvadorans is one thing, but raping and killing American nuns is a definite PR mistake. The media evaded and downplayed the story, following the lead of the Carter Administration and its investigative commission.

The incoming Reaganites went much further, seeking to justify the atrocity, notably Secretary of State Alexander Haig and UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick. But it was still deemed worthwhile to have a show trial a few years later, while exculpating the murderous junta - and, of course, the paymaster.

The independent newspapers in El Salvador, which might have reported these atrocities, had been destroyed. Although they were mainstream and pro-business, they were still too undisciplined for the military's taste. The problem was taken care of in 1980-81, when the editor of one was murdered by the security forces; the other fled into exile. As usual, these events were considered too insignificant to merit more than a few words in US newspapers.

In November 1989, six Jesuit priests, their cook and her daughter, were murdered by the army. That same week, at least 28 other Salvadoran civilians were murdered, including the head of a major union, the leader of the organisation of university women, nine members of an Indian farming cooperative and ten university students.

The news wires carried a story by AP correspondent Douglas Grant Mine, reporting how soldiers had entered a working-class neighbourhood in the capital city of San Salvador, captured six men, added a 14-year-old boy for good measure, then lined them all up against a wall and shot them. They "were not priests or human rights campaigners," Mine wrote, "so their deaths have gone largely unnoticed" - as did his story.

The Jesuits were murdered by the Atlacatl Battalion, an elite unit created, trained and equipped by the United States. It was formed in March 1981, when fifteen specialists in counterinsurgency were sent to El Salvador from the US Army School of Special Forces. From the start, the Battalion was

engaged in mass murder. A US trainer described its soldiers as “particularly ferocious....We’ve always had a hard time getting [them] to take prisoners instead of ears.”

In December 1981, the Battalion took part in an operation in which over a thousand civilians were killed in an orgy of murder, rape and burning. Later it was involved in the bombing of villages and murder of hundreds of civilians by shooting, drowning and other methods. The vast majority of victims were women, children and the elderly.

The Atlacatl Battalion was being trained by US Special Forces shortly before murdering the Jesuits. This has been a pattern throughout the Battalion’s existence — some of its worst massacres have occurred when it was fresh from US training.

In the “fledgling democracy” that was El Salvador, teenagers as young as 13 were scooped up in sweeps of slums and refugee camps and forced to become soldiers. They were indoctrinated with rituals adopted from the Nazi SS, including brutalisation and rape, to prepare them for killings that often have sexual and satanic overtones.

The nature of Salvadoran army training was described by a deserter who received political asylum in Texas in 1990, despite the State Department’s request that he be sent back to El Salvador. (His name was withheld by the court to protect him from Salvadoran death squads.)

According to this deserter, draftees were made to kill dogs and vultures by biting their throats and twisting off their heads, and had to watch as soldiers tortured and killed suspected dissidents — tearing out their fingernails, cutting off their heads, chopping their bodies to pieces and playing with the dismembered arms for fun.

In another case, an admitted member of a Salvadoran death squad associated with the Atlacatl Battalion, César Vielman Joya Martínez, detailed the involvement of US advisers and the Salvadoran government in death-squad activity. The Bush administration has made every effort to silence him and ship him back to probable death in El Salvador, despite the pleas of human rights organisations and requests from Congress that his testimony be heard. (The treatment of the main witness to the assassination of the Jesuits was similar.)

The results of Salvadoran military training are graphically described in the Jesuit journal *America* by Daniel Santiago, a Catholic priest working in El Salvador. He tells of a peasant woman who returned home one day to find her three children, her mother and her sister sitting around a table, each with its own decapitated head placed carefully on the table in front of the body, the hands arranged on top “as if each body was stroking its own head.”

The assassins, from the Salvadoran National Guard, had found it hard to keep the head of an 18-month-old baby in place, so they nailed the hands onto it. A large plastic bowl filled with blood was tastefully displayed in the centre of the table. According to Rev. Santiago, macabre scenes of this kind aren’t uncommon.

People are not just killed by death squads in El Salvador — they are decapitated and then their heads are placed on pikes and used to dot the landscape. Men are not just disembowelled by the Salvadoran Treasury Police; their severed genitalia are stuffed into their mouths. Salvadoran women are not just raped by the National Guard; their wombs are cut from their bodies and used to cover their faces. It is not enough to kill children; they are dragged over barbed wire until the flesh falls from their bones, while parents are forced to watch.

Rev. Santiago goes on to point out that violence of this sort greatly increased when the Church began forming peasant associations and self-help groups in an attempt to organise the poor.

By and large, the US approach in El Salvador has been successful. The popular organisations have been decimated, just as Archbishop Romero predicted. Tens of thousands have been slaughtered and more than a million have become refugees. This is one of the most sordid episodes in US history - and it's got a lot of competition.

Noam Chomsky

P.S.

- <https://libcom.org/history/articles/el-salvador-counterinsurgency>

From *What Uncle Sam Really Wants*, by Noam Chomsky:

<https://www.zmag.org/chomsky/sam/sam-contents.html>

- Chomsky is of course an American citizen, and so “we” and “our” refers to the US. The article has been edited slightly by libcom-US to UK spellings and a few small details have been added for the reader new to the topic.