

## **Marti & The Salvadoran Civil War**

**To what extent did Augustin Farabundo Marti's peasant uprising of 1932 lead to the armed conflict of the Salvadoran Civil War?**

**Word Count: 3455**

The purpose of this essay is to determine the influential extent of the Salvadoran peasant uprising led by Augustin Farabundo Marti in 1932 on the Salvadoran civil war. To present a viable argument, the history of El Salvador before the uprising will be discussed. Other potential causes of the Salvadoran civil war will also be mentioned in order to provide a platform in which to historically compare the effects of each cause. However, this examination is limited by the available primary sources due to the destruction of Salvadoran archives committed by both the insurgent peasants and the Salvadoran government. Nonetheless, the evidence that is analyzed in this essay should suffice for the exploration of the Salvadoran disorder that occurred in 1932. Most of the work produced in this essay has been collected through the discoveries and documentation of other historians who have studied El Salvador's troubled past. These sources have been heavily relied on in a myriad of research. Therefore, they have been concluded as reliable due to the triangulation of shared collected data among the aforementioned research. Throughout the composition of this essay, many holistic and conflicting sources were encountered. However, it is not the position of the historian to objectively define their findings. The assumption that each historian operates under an objective manner is misleading. This deceptive supposition is highly unnecessary due to the inherent confrontations associated with the absence of information that is readily accessible. Therefore, the limitations that historians face serve two purposes: it allows a historian to focus on a specific topic, and it permits a highly argumentative atmosphere for other historians to supply their input. Without this method of investigation, unreliable and discouraging representations of history would supplant the meaning and implications of history itself.

The agrarian state of El Salvador at the end of the nineteenth century was a result of the country's heavy dependence on its agriculture exports. During the nineteenth century, El Salvador's expanding market of coffee exports led to the formation of a small, powerful oligarchy which comprised of wealthy landowners (Lindo-Fuentes 186). The wealth that the small elite group acquired from the coffee exports allowed for the manipulation and exploitation of the role of the Salvadoran government (Paige 8). The influence of the oligarchy was evident in the government's establishment of the Guardia Nacional, whose main purpose was to protect the coffee fincas and haciendas of the elite. Furthermore, many Salvadoran officials were wealthy, landowning individuals who pushed for reform to further their personal agendas (Lindo-Fuentes 64). In the process, the needs of the country and its people were warped in order to maintain the wealth of the oligarchy. For the oligarchy, maintaining their wealth meant freeing the Salvadoran markets (Paige 27). Ostensibly, the capitalist ideals of the oligarchy suppressed the Indian communities into horrible living and work conditions. As a result of the imposing threat to the communities' livelihood, the laborers revolted against the government; however, the lack of organization among the Indian communities proved ineffective and fruitless against the military power of the elites (Lindo-Fuentes 132).

The peasant Indian communities were also marginalized in the Salvadoran government, which contributed to their abuse. However, it can be argued that the lack of peasant representation in the government would lead to democratization of the Salvadoran government. During the time of underrepresentation of the peasantry, the twentieth century coffee industry was expanding rapidly (Paige 12). From 1913 to 1926, the price of coffee increased by 125%,

thus allowing middle-level coffee growers to accumulate an unprecedented amount of wealth (Haggerty). The opulent status of the growing elite inclined them to modernize El Salvador.

The desire of the Salvadoran elite to augment their investment capital ostensibly led to the establishment of public institutions, like banks and railroad systems. The centralization that took place during the administrations of Meléndez and Quiñónez also led to the consolidation of all political networks that took place across the country, on any level of government. However, not all of the Salvadoran elite favored the idea of a more coordinated political and legal national system. The integration of the local and national levels of El Salvador's government threatened the amount of influence the elites possessed over their local political empires (Ching 174).

The expansive network established during the Meléndez and Quiñónez succeeded in creating a consolidated government. Those who opposed the amalgamated shift of government became inclined to new, uprising political ideologies. These new political ideologies led to revolts and the formation of strong oppositional groups. Politicians who aspired to alter the state of the government now operated under the existing network, instead of trying to externally overthrow it (Ching 207). Consequently, the attempts against the centralized state produced the preliminary footholds for the polarization of the Salvadoran government. The established centralization of El Salvador's government, however, would prove detrimental towards the Meléndez and Quiñónez administration because it created a stable environment for subtle, but effective, political reform.

After fifteen years of the Meléndez and Quiñónez administration, Pío Romero Bosque was elected as the president. Bosque's presidency was a product of the Washington Treaties of 1923 that was established between El Salvador and the United States. The political and legal

advancements that were made by the previous administration stipulated the expected actions and decisions Bosque were to take. However, Bosque took the opportunity presented to him as a chance to democratize the political state of El Salvador (Ching 209).

Undermining the established political system that dominated El Salvador for eight decades did not transpire effortlessly. The path towards genuine democracy was riddled with strictly embedded politicians and military officials who were ensconced in the traditions of the contemporary logistics of past administrations. Bosque's intended to transform El Salvador's government from a laissez faire, capitalist-driven political standpoint, to a democratic and egalitarian stronghold. Nevertheless, Bosque was not be able to fully produce his initial democratic objective and his efforts did not come into complete realization (Ching 212). Bosque's reforms, however, promoted a platform in which a free and justified democratic election, one without the corruption of the elites and those who wished to control the government for their personal agenda. The results of the election of 1931 concomitantly resulted in a presidential leader chosen by the Salvadoran people. The reasoning behind Bosque's reform remain elusive due to lack of documentation, but the aim of his reforms ensued a tangible change (Ching 219).

During the presidential era of Bosque, a new, radical wing, Partido Comunista Salvadoreño (PCS), emerged within the Federación Regional de Trabajadores Salvadoreños (FRTS), a labor union that originated in the urban areas of El Salvador. The FRTS arose from the disputed centralization that were established by the Meléndez and Quiñónez administration. The PCS was configured in 1930, one year later after the FRTS came into fruition (Ching 212). Since Bosque and his administration were isolated in their wishes to dramatically change the

foundation of El Salvador's politics, Bosque felt the need to appeal to the PCS, supplying the communist group with a government subsidy(Ching 213). Bosque also sought the support of the military to enforce his reforms. The sustenance of Bosque's presidential stance is displayed when Meléndez and Quiñónez paired to assemble a coup against Bosque in 1927. The unsuccessful endeavor consisted of the disconcert of rebellious military officers who aligned themselves with Meléndez and Quiñónez (Ching 217). The multiplex alliance between Bosque and the Salvadoran military was exhibited when Bosque successfully obstructed Meléndez and Quiñónez aegis' attempt at his deposition.

The hallmark of Bosque's democratic efforts was the fair and honest Salvadoran presidential election of 1931. The election consisted of six candidates, but only one candidate identified himself with a section of the Salvadoran society (Ching139). This candidate, Arturo Araujo, campaigned on a platform for the working classes. Araujo represented the Partido Laborista party, and displayed himself as a "candidate of the coffee planters" (Ching 240). Araujo's focus on Salvadoran laborers was mainly due to the new, open environment of the election. If President Bosque had not set forth his democratic reforms, Araujo would not have been able to acquire the workers' votes. Araujo was the frontrunner in the election because of the promises his party, Partido Laborista, made to the voters: land redistribution (Ching 241). It was because of Araujo's lead that another candidate, General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez, yielded his place in the presidential election to become a vice president candidate for the Partido Laborista. However, this seemingly mutual beneficial alliance caused the demise of the incipient state capital of El Salvador's political and legal system (Ching 243).

Araujo had accepted General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez in order to maintain a strong interrelation between himself and military. However, the vice presidency of General Martinez did not supply President Araujo with the military protection he had garnered.

When President Araujo entered office, he was confronted with the suppressing aspects of the Great Depression. The promises made by the Partido Laborista had been unfulfilled and the workers he had represented through his pledges of land redistribution opportunities had failed. To palliate the financial crisis, President Araujo composed a fiscal budget plan that fostered the neglect of powerful interest groups. Araujo claimed one million colones to purchase land at market price in order to divide and rent it out to landless workers - below market price. Araujo also attempted to dismiss unessential military personnel, but this resulted in conflict. The plan was later discarded due to the lack of military support of the proposal. President Araujo's attempts of salvaging the Salvadoran economy during the Great Depression and his weakened relationship with the military resulted in the deterioration of his political foundation (Ching 245).

Araujo's presidency merely lasted ten months before being brutally interrupted by a military coup in December 1931. It was within this first week of December that the promising state capital of El Salvador was destroyed and abandoned. Araujo was ousted from his presidential position and his vice president, General Martinez, assumed the position as El Salvador's president. Instead of imposing and developing the democratic reforms his predecessors had circumspectly established, General Martinez transformed the government into a military regime (Ching 247).

General Martinez's presidency was unlike the military presidencies of the past, he did not separate military politics from government politics. During the five decades of General

Martinez's presidency, military officials who rose in the ranks of the Salvadoran military also held influential government positions. The intertwining of military affected the upcoming deputy and municipal elections that General Martinez was to oversee. However, General Martinez was not in a position to control each election and chose to let the internal conflicts of each election to autonomously regulate themselves. Although, General Martinez did agree to allow all political parties to participate in the upcoming elections (Ching 250). Contrarily, there was discrimination toward the laboristas, some of whom were release from their positions because of their affiliation with the Partido Laborista. Military officers were also unfair in the way they had controlled the deputy elections. The results of these elections were somewhat fixed, since the military had proffered the opening positions to a few select military candidates without any formidable competition.

From the fall of the Araujo administration to General Martinez's introduction onto the presidential stage and the elections, there was a mobilization among the peasants who coordinated under the FRTS and the PCS (Stanley 51). The peasant Indian communities aligned with the FRTS and the PCS because of their lack of representation in the strong Salvadoran government atmosphere. Their association with these leftists groups created an ambiance of belonging, a feeling they had been longing. With the support of these groups and the formation of a stable platform, the radical peasants grew upset with the failed promises that were given to them by President Araujo and were now perturbed by the the dishonest and corrupt elections. In 1932, the disrest among the peasants in El Salvador's western departments brought upon the peasant uprising in the third week of January organized and led by Augustin Farabundo Marti (Gould & Lauria-Santiago 89).



After being imprisoned and then released under the Araujo administration, Marti fought in Nicaragua alongside Augusto Cesar Sandino, a nicaraguan revolutionary, for the Sandinista National Liberation Front, a democratic socialist political party (Dalton 160). Marti participated in the war of Nicaragua as a leading member of the Socorro Rojo Internacional (SRI). After encountering differing interpretations on the communist ideology with Sandino, Marti returned to El Salvador. Thereafter, Marti and the SRI coordinated with the PCS and the FRTS to plan a revolt against the government. Marti collaborated with Miguel Marmol, the leader of the PCS, and influential communists, Alfonso Luna, and Mario Zapata, to orchestrate the peasant uprising (Gould & Lauria-Santiago 90).

The leaders planned the peasant revolt to take place on the 22nd of January, but were unable to see it unfold. However, their plan was inevitably discovered by General Martinez and the government. Marti, along with the other strong communist leaders, including Miguel Marmol, were arrested by the military. Consequently, Marti, Luna, and Zapata were executed by firing squad. Marmol survived by hiding under a dead companero who laid dead beside him (Duron & Novoa 1).

Despite General Martinez's knowledge on the planned attacks, he allowed the peasants to create an uprising and deployed a limited number of militants to emphasize to the Salvadoran public of his ability to control the situation (Keogh 12).

Unknowing of General Martinez's intel, the peasants took to action, without their communist leaders. The peasants extemporaneously went to war with their machetes and sticks against the well-equipped military in support of their communist endeavors. The peasants acted on the foretold orders of Marti to "shoot immediately or kill them some other way without delay"

(Anderson 92). Between the 22nd and the 23rd of January, the insurgent rebellion took place in the western departments of El Salvador, Ahuachapan, Sonsonate, and La Libertad. The towns of Juayua, Izalco, Nahuizalco, Sonsonate, Tacuba, and Ahuachapan were the main areas of the insurgence (Kincaid 478). There were also revolts in other Salvadoran towns, but the documentation of these are not available. The rebels ran down the streets of these towns, wreaking mayhem on the town halls, crying “Viva el Socorro Roja!”. The revolt consisted of murders, robberies, and vandalism throughout the Salvadoran departments. They also ambushed barracks, destroyed haciendas in the surrounding areas, and burned municipal buildings, destroying Salvadoran archives (Keogh 10-11).

However, the indignation was not one-sided, both the government and the communists dealt atrocious and unlawful acts against each other and against Salvadoran civilians. Under the authority of General Martinez, Jose Tomas Calderon, the commanding officer tasked with dealing with the peasant outburst, deployed military forces to the attacked towns, where the military units proceeded to open fire on the peasants (Keogh 12).

The peasants were met with unbounded gunfire and demolition from the military reinforcement. The towns that the peasant communists seized were then ‘liberated’ by the Salvadoran troops in a matter of hours. Nonetheless, the peasants continued their pandemonium, but their efforts were desiccated at the hands of the Salvadoran military units. The military units moved quickly from village to village, reclaiming the seized towns. The recapturing of towns within the Salvadoran departments did not come without shedded blood; rebels were either murdered or taken under arrest where they would eventually face for their deaths (Ching 290). There is not documentation of an exact number of deaths that occurred, but eyewitness

testimonies from Izalco claimed that “the ditches were filled with corpses, left for the feral dogs to feast upon”. The testimonies also revealed that the revolt leader of Izalco, Jose Feliciano Ama, was left hanging in public. In Juayua, it was noted that the town’s main church’s wall collapsed after it was used by the military for executions (Keogh 13).

General Martinez did not stop there, to further promote his controlling image, General Martinez authorized the military to roundup the rebellious Salvadoran Indians throughout the towns for mass execution.

The machiavellianism displayed by General Martinez and his military officials after the repression of the peasants serves to be the most horrifying. This tragic moment in Salvadoran history is known as “La Matanza”.

Salvadoran troops indiscriminately killed the Salvadoran indians, innocent or guilty. The disturbing insensitivity the Salvadoran troops possessed toward the Salvadoran Indians was displayed as the troops killed anyone who wore garments associated with the Salvadoran Indian culture (Keogh 13). The loss of self-control displayed by the troops was a projection of the culmination of underlying racist hatred and discrimination against the Salvadoran Indians.

La Matanza took place over the course of several days, lasting until the military withdrew from the impacted towns near the end of January (Ching 293) . There is no documentation of the exact number of deaths that occurred following La Matanza. The only logical figure comes from communist activist, Miguel Marmol, who estimated 30,000 deaths. This heinous number is often cited by historians because of the 80,000 communists who were estimated to have been in the impacted areas (Keogh 13).

The atrocities committed by both the government and the peasants in 1932 served as a parable for future, upcoming communist parties before the outbreak of the Salvadoran civil war of 1981. The armed conflict of the civil war was fought between the consolidated communist groups, known as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), and the Salvadoran government. The FMLN was inspired by the communist efforts of Martí and paid homage to his legacy by utilizing Martí's name as part of theirs.

During the Salvadoran civil war, FMLN leaders referred back to La Matanza, stating that the aftermath of the peasant uprising in 1932 “was the beginning of tyranny that we are still trying to overcome so that our people can have a better life” (Carpio 13).

The legacy that Martí left behind was used by the FMLN to amass public support for their communist agenda against the Salvadoran government. The FMLN communist group that reconfigured after Martí's death portrayed Martí as a martyr. The suffering that Augustin Farabundo Martí faced during his imprisonment and his leadership during the peasant uprising in 1932 exalted him as a Salvadoran hero who fought for the rights of the Salvadoran peasants.

Therefore, the extent to which Augustin Farabundo Martí's peasant uprising of 1932 led to the armed conflict of the Salvadoran civil war is great. Had Martí not presented a pathway for upcoming communist groups to emerge, the FMLN would not have found a basis on which to operate a war against the Salvadoran government.

Although the Salvadoran government was financially supported by the U.S. throughout Salvadoran history, it could not have resulted in the Salvadoran civil war to the extent of the peasant uprising in 1932. This is shown through the Washington Treaties of 1932. Any exchange

between the U.S. and the Salvadoran was a result of the actions of the communist groups that tormented El Salvador.

On the other hand, the communist parties in El Salvador were sponsored by the U.S.S.R and the Cuban communist group. However, if it had not been the workings of the leftist leaders, Marti and Marmol, the peasants would not have been equated or affiliated by the communist ideology.

The extent in which both the USSR and the US involved themselves in the domestic turmoil that El Salvador faced is not highly significant. This is because the actions of the USSR and the US were merely responses to the ongoing problems.

One could, however, relate the peasant uprising to the coffee-dominated market of El Salvador, but one would have to overlook and neglect the effects of peasant congregations under the management of Marti. It was because of Marti's political views and his followers that La Matanza was portrayed as an act of vengeance and not one of restablization and autonomous control.

As the Salvadoran history depicts, there were many peasant revolts that occurred before and after the peasant uprising in 1932. However, the uprising in 1932 was the first the revolt to have been coordinated and supervised by the FRTS, the PCS, and the SRI. Without their affiliation, the Salvadoran peasant insurgence would not have resulted in subsequent communist efforts or the Salvadoran civil war of 1981.

The peasant uprising of 1932 will foreshadow the gruesome and horrific actions of both sides during the Salvadoran civil war, in which over 75,000 Salvadorans were slaughtered - by both sides. The effects of the peasant uprising would lead to further tragic events in El

Salvador's history, ultimately leading to a radical and abrupt change in the lifestyles of the Salvadorans. Therefore, the Salvadoran uprising of 1932 lead by Augustin Farabundo Marti was the critical substrate for the Salvadoran Civil War to the greatest extent.

## Works Cited

- Anderson, Thomas P. Matanza: El Salvador's Communist Revolt of 1932. University of Nebraska Press, 1971.
- “ANTECEDENTS: THE MATANZA AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF MILITARY RULE.”  
*The Protection Racket State: Elite Politics, Military Extortion, and Civil War in El Salvador*, by William Stanley, Temple University Press, 1996, pp. 41–68. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bswgc.6](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bswgc.6).
- Cayetano Carpio, Salvador, Wheelock, Jaime, Payeras, Mario and Center for the Study of the Americas (Berkeley, Calif.) Listen, compañero : conversations with Central American revolutionary leaders, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua. Center for the Study of the Americas ; San Francisco, Calif. : Solidarity Publications, [Berkeley, Calif.], 1983.
- Ching, Erik. Authoritarian el Salvador : Politics and the Origins of the Military Regimes, 1880-1940, University of Notre Dame Press, 2014. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uncg/detail.action?docID=3441155>.
- Keogh, Dermot. “El Salvador 1932. Peasant Revolt and Massacre.” *The Crane Bag*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1982, pp. 7–14. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/30023895](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30023895).
- Kincaid, A. Douglas. “Peasants into Rebels: Community and Class in Rural El Salvador.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 29, no. 3, 1987, pp. 466–494. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/179034](http://www.jstor.org/stable/179034).
- Lindo-Fuentes, Hector. Weak Foundations: The Economy of El Salvador in the Nineteenth Century 1821-1898. Berkeley: University of California Press, c1990 1990.  
<http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft3199n7r3/>

Mármol, Miguel, and Roque Dalton. *Miguel Mármol: Los Sucesos De 1932 En El Salvador*.

Ciudad de La Habana, Cuba: Casa de las Américas, 1983. Print.

Novoa, Fidel A., and Balbino Duron. "Fueron Fusilados Esta Mañana, A Las Siete Y Cuarto, Los Cabecillas Comunistas." *La Prensa*.

Paige, Jeffery M. "Coffee and Power in El Salvador." *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1993, pp. 7–40. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/2503609](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2503609).

2008. "Fiestas of the Oppressed: The Social Geography and Culture of Mobilization", *To Rise in Darkness: Revolution, Repression, and Memory in El Salvador, 1920–1932*, Jeffrey L. Gould, Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago, Richard A. Haggarty, ed. *El Salvador: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1988.