



STRATEGY AND TACTICS OF THE SALVADORAN FMLN GUERRILLAS

Last Battle of the Cold War, Blueprint
for Future Conflicts



**José Angel Moroni Bracamonte,
David E. Spencer**



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Acronyms

ARENA	Nationalist Republican Alliance, anti-FMLN right-wing party.
ATS	See BATS.
BAH	Amilcar Hernandez Battalion of the ERP.
BAS	Alejandro Solano Battalion of the FPL (also called K-93).
BAT	Augustin Ticas Battalion of the ERP.
BATS	Anfres Torres Sanchez Battalion of the FPL (also called SS-20).
BBC	Bruno Caballero Battalion of the ERP.
BCA	Carlos Arias Battalion of the RN.
BDA	Dolores Ardin Battalion of the RN.
BEMS	Ernesto Morales Sandoval Battalion of the FPL (also called S-7).
BFPM	Felipe Peña Mendoza Brigade of the FPL.
BHCC	Heroes of Cutumay Camones Battalion.
BJC	Juan Carlos Battalion of the ERP.
BJM	Juan Mendez Battalion of the FPL (also called X-21).
BPR	Popular Revolutionary Bloc, mass umbrella organization of the FMLN.
BRAC	Rafael Aguiñada Carranza Battalion of the FAL.

BRAT	Rafael A. Torres Battalion of the FAL.
BRAZ	Rafael Arce Zablah Brigade of the ERP.
BSH	Sergio Hernandez Battalion of the RN.
BTH	Heroic Workers Battalion of the ERP.
CEMFA	Military Training Center, located in La Union.
CG	General Command, the evolution of the DRU with the same functions.
COBRAC	Commandos of the BRAC, FES group assigned to the Rafael Aguiñada Carranza Battalion of the FAL.
DGI	General Directorate of Intelligence, the Cuban Intelligence Service.
DLAD	Luis Alberto Diaz Detachment (PRTC).
DRU	Unified Revolutionary Directorate, military command of the FMLN (later changed to CG).
EMS	See BEMS.
ERP	Popular Revolutionary Army, one of the five FMLN factions.
ESAF	Salvadoran Armed Forces.
F-30	FPL Strategic FES unit under command of high command.
FAL	Armed Forces of Liberation, one of the five FMLN factions.
FALN	National Liberation Armed Forces, armed wing of the FAL.
FAPL	Armed Forces of National Liberation, armed wing of the FPL.
FDR	Democratic Revolutionary Front, FMLN umbrella organization of supporting political parties.
FES	Special Select Forces, the generic term for special forces of the FMLN.
FMLN	Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front.
FPL	Popular Liberation Front, one of the five FMLN factions.
FSLN	Sandinista National Liberation Front.
GOES	Government of El Salvador.
J-27	FES of the RN.
J-28	Tactical FES of the FPL assigned to each battalion.

K-93	Alejandro Solano Battalion (BAS) of the FPL.
MPLA	Angolan Popular Liberation Movement.
OP	Observation Post.
PCS	Salvadoran Communist Party. Political wing of the FAL.
PRAL	Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol, ESAF special forces.
PRTC	Central American Workers Party, one of the five FMLN factions.
RN	National Resistance, one of the five FMLN factions.
S-7	Ernesto Morales Sandoval Battalion (BEMS) of the FPL.
SAM	Surface to Air Missile.
SMF	Strategic Mobile Forces, FMLN guerrilla regulars.
SS-20	Anfres Torres Sanchez Battalion of the FPL (BATS).
TAP	Popular Weapons Workshop, used in 1989 urban offensive.
TECMA	Comandante Manglio Armijo Special Troops. FES battalion of the ERP.
U-24	Strategic FES of the FAL.
U-S-15	FES of the RN.
X-21	Juan Mendez Battalion (BJM) of the FPL.

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Introduction

The demise of the Cold War ended the bipolar struggle and terminated the great majority of the brushfire wars that had developed in the Third World as a consequence of the struggle between the great powers. The war in El Salvador was coincidentally one of the very last of these wars that was fought under these parameters. However, several subversive groups in Latin America still persist in the aftermath of the East-West conflict. Some examples are the movements in Peru, Colombia, and Guatemala. The recent uprising and continued fighting in Chiapas, Mexico show that insurgency warfare did not die out with the end of the Cold War. Instead, they indicate that the idea of gaining power and imposing social reforms through violence and force is still alive and well in the Latin American region.

In El Salvador, the insurgent war by the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) formally ended on January 31, 1992, when the armed forces of El Salvador gave their Report to the Nation, in which it was declared that the military campaign to defend the state against Marxist-Leninist aggression had been suspended. The mission had been successfully accomplished due to the heroism, valor, sacrifice, and professionalism of the Salvadoran soldier.

Today, as a consequence of the January 16, 1992 Peace Accords, the FMLN has been fully integrated into society and the formal institutions of the nation. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the war in El Salvador was closely watched by subversive and guerrilla organizations wishing to glean lessons for their own wars of liberation. It is not surprising, then, to see FMLN-developed concepts show up around the region, such as among the insurgent groups of Guatemala and Mexico. Guerrilla strate-

gies and tactics used in El Salvador are now appearing in new conflicts. The conflict in El Salvador had not only a regional impact, but apparently was also watched by insurgent forces around the world.

A recent event worthy of mention was a statement made in the January 30, 1994 issue of the *Washington Post* by the Somali military chief, Colonel Sharif Hassan Giumale. Giumale was the Somali commander responsible for the October 3, 1993 downing of two U.S. helicopters and the damaging of a third using only small arms. Giumale declared that he had based his operation on his study of Latin American insurgent anti-aircraft tactics. It is very important to note that the Salvadoran FMLN was the only Latin American guerrilla group to develop efficient anti-aircraft tactics, and to observe that in Somalia, like El Salvador, the helicopters were shot down by the efficient placement and use of infantry weapons alone.

The fact is that the majority of the insurgent movements share some level of solidarity among themselves, and are permanently sharing their tactics and methods with each other. In other words, they are methods without borders and are continually being updated and adapted according to each operational environment. It is necessary to emphasize that during the war in El Salvador the FMLN received heavy international assistance, and itself assimilated tactics developed in Cuba, Vietnam, Angola, Nicaragua, and elsewhere.

In addition, new, irregular warfare doctrinal concepts were implemented in El Salvador, such as concentration and deconcentration, attrition warfare, strategic dispersion, popular artillery, and so on. These concepts gave a dynamism to the subversive military guidelines under the overall guidance of an organized military structure. Because of this, it is important to analyze how these concepts fit into the strategic and tactical thinking of insurgent operations.

These facts and previously mentioned aspects are the basis of the justification for the current work, which is based on information acquired through personal combat experience. This book does not intend to describe all of the tactics used by the FMLN during the conflict, but rather to emphasize those that had the greatest impact on the evolution of the war.

It is also important to make clear, from a professional point of view, that the armed forces of El Salvador countered and neutralized each of these new strategies and tactics in turn, forcing the FMLN to seek a share of the political power through negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations, and thus put an end to the conflict.

Finally, there is no question that the FMLN did not win the war in El Salvador. This was because:

1. The armed forces of El Salvador stopped them from taking power through violence.

2. The vast majority of Salvadorans failed to support the FMLN guerrillas.
3. The Democratic process that began in 1982 was legitimized and accepted by the people of El Salvador over the revolutionary plan offered to them by the FMLN.
4. The Marxist-Leninist doctrine no longer was viable on the American continent due to the fall of the Soviet Union and the consequent impact this event had on international support.
5. The indiscriminate use of terrorism and sabotage alienated the majority of the people.

The only winners in the Salvadoran war were the people themselves, who suffered communist aggression on a daily basis during twelve years of war and who, through the mediation of the United Nations, were able to agree to embrace peace through the Peace Accords.

Today, the long-suffering people of El Salvador have given the FMLN an opportunity to share the model they fought so hard to destroy, and have also given them the opportunity to express themselves openly in the very heart of democracy.

To summarize, in this book we want to share the largely operational and tactical information, experiences, and lessons of the Salvadoran insurgents so that the professional community can better understand the dynamics and process of escalation of the Salvadoran experience, and find lessons from this experience for the future.

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1

Background to the Insurgent Movement in El Salvador

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FIVE FACTIONS

The story of the guerrilla forces of El Salvador begins in 1932, when the Communist organizer and agitator, Farabundo Marti, led an uprising of the Indian peasants of western El Salvador. The military, under Maximiliano Hernandez, crushed the revolt in a matter of days. The speed, efficiency, and ruthlessness of the counter-revolt earned this event the nickname of "La Matanza," or The Massacre. While the military is commonly accused of having indiscriminately massacred thirty thousand peasants, Thomas Anderson, the most prominent scholar on the subject, puts the number of dead at somewhere between two thousand and ten thousand.¹ Farabundo Marti and his cohorts were captured, tried, and condemned to death for treason and conspiracy. Their sentences were carried out by hanging. Farabundo Marti now became the figurehead and martyr of the Salvadoran revolutionary movement. While the Communist party continued to survive in El Salvador, it maintained a very low profile, flourishing mostly among radical university students and some radical priests.

The dynamics that led to the civil war in the decade of the 1980s began to develop in 1969. In July of that year, El Salvador and Honduras went to war over the abuse of Salvadoran immigrants in Honduras. In a hundred-hour war, the Salvadoran army soundly beat the Honduran army on the ground, while the Honduran air force gained domination of the skies. However, despite the victory, the net result of the war was that (1) El Salvador was condemned by the Organization of American States for attacking Honduras and slapped with an arms embargo; (2) the Central

American Common Market, which most favored El Salvador, was prematurely terminated, bringing economic hardship; and (3) El Salvador was forced to absorb somewhere in the order of one hundred thousand expatriate refugees from Honduras. The price of the military victory for El Salvador was a simultaneous diplomatic, economic, and social crisis of vast proportions.

In 1970, shortly after the war with Honduras, a small group of Salvadoran Communists, heavily influenced by the national crisis, broke off from the pro-Soviet Salvadoran Communist Party (PCS) and formed the Popular Liberation Front (FPL). The leader of the breakaway group went by the alias Cayetano Carpio. Carpio felt that it was time to prepare for revolution in El Salvador. He and his followers were heavily influenced by the war in Vietnam, and believed that the Communists could only come to power through a prolonged war of national liberation, in contrast to the PCS, which advocated gradually coming to power through participation in the existing political system. Two years later, another group, the Popular Revolutionary Army (ERP), broke off from the FPL. The ERP was inspired by the success of the terrorists in Uruguay (the *Tupamaros*) and the Argentine Montonero terrorists. This group broke away from the FPL, contending that instead of victory by prolonged rural war, winning power was possible through urban terrorism and insurrection. In 1976, there were acrimonious debates within the ERP over the relative importance of military action versus political action. The result of the debates was the murder of the ERP's most prominent figure, the internationally recognized poet Roque Dalton. Dalton's murder was perpetrated to suppress debate and keep the organization together; instead, however, the pro-political action members, seeing that they too could become targets for annihilation, broke away from the ERP and formed their own group, the National Resistance (RN). Their leader was Ernesto Jovel. The leaders of the remaining ERP were Joaquin Villalobos and Guadalupe Martinez.

Around this same time another group began to form. Known as the Central American Workers Party, (PRTC), it was made up of radical university students and led by a man using the alias Roberto Roca, who had visions of a pan-Central American socialist revolution, not just in El Salvador. From its inception it began to form a regionwide network of terrorist cells, but never attracted a very large following. Although in contact with the other Salvadoran terrorist groups, it always remained a law unto itself. All of these groups carried out petty terrorism between 1970 and 1979 (kidnappings, murder, extortion, bombing, bank robbery, etc.). The final group to form part of the FMLN was the Armed Forces of Liberation (FAL).² Just before the outbreak of total revolution, the Salvadoran Communist Party, under the Handal brothers, Shafik and Farid, decided to abandon Soviet guidelines and adopt violent revolution. The FAL was the

armed wing of the Communist party and, although formed later than the other factions, was the next-largest party after the FPL and the ERP. The FAL proved critical to the success of the FMLN's efforts. The influence and international contacts of the Communist party would ensure that the guerrilla forces of El Salvador would receive more international aid from the Socialist world than any other Latin American insurgent group ever received during the Cold War.

However, the spark that touched off the escalated growth of the Salvadoran guerrilla apparatus was an event in neighboring Nicaragua on July 19, 1979. This date marked the overthrow of Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). The Salvadoran guerrillas, as well as guerrilla and terrorist groups all over Latin America, provided men, training, weapons, and money to the Sandinistas. Because of this, and their ideological commitment, the Sandinistas would now allow other Latin American guerrilla groups to use Nicaragua as a base for spreading revolution throughout the hemisphere. By investing in the Nicaraguan revolution, the Salvadorans and other Latin American guerrilla organizations made investments in their own struggles for "national liberation."

Cuba would also play a prominent role. Fidel Castro's vision was not limited to El Salvador but was focused on the whole of Central America and even South America. The Cubans had played a key role in the Nicaraguan revolution by setting up an arms shipment infrastructure. Shipments to the Sandinistas had been very successful.

The Cubans soon realized that this network had the potential for far more than merely the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship. When the Somoza government suddenly collapsed in July 1979, a good number of weapons in the pipeline had not yet been delivered to the Sandinistas. The Cubans realized that other revolutions were beginning to develop in Central America, so they kept the network alive and had the undelivered weapons set aside for the next time they were needed. This turned out to be in El Salvador.

However, before Cuba or Nicaragua could play a major role, serious problems had to be solved in El Salvador. The greatest problem was that the different guerrilla factions hated each other passionately, and spent more time arguing and fighting among themselves than they did fighting the government. In early 1980, the Cuban DGI representative for El Salvador called a meeting of the Salvadoran guerrilla factions in Managua, Nicaragua. He was very blunt. The Cubans and Nicaraguans were willing to turn on the pipelines of weapons set up for the Sandinistas and provide massive military training for the Salvadorans only on the condition that they unite and form a single, coordinated opposition front as the Sandinistas had. Despite the bitter feelings among them, the different Salvadoran factions agreed to the Cuban conditions. They quickly