

LAS FUERZAS ARMADAS REVOLUCIONARIO DE COLOMBIA EJERCITO DEL PUEBLO

A BRIEF HISTORY

LAUREN D. PEARCE

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC) is an organization rooted deep in the history of Colombia. Due to its long history, the FARC has played different roles in different time periods, and consequently is viewed by different people in vastly different ways. To some, the FARC is the hero of the commoner, to others a terrorist organization, and to others still, a narco-trafficking ring. In order to understand what the FARC is today, it is necessary to understand its history. The FARC is an organization that was born out of necessity, out of fear, and out of violence and has evolved in response to the ever-changing politics in Colombia. They are an organization that tried to negotiate with the Colombian government several times, only to be slaughtered upon reentry into society. They are an organization that protected villages from the brutal Colombian military during La Violencia. In its early years, the FARC was an organization formed to protect the citizens of Colombia, yet the modern FARC attacks military targets with zero concern for civilians in their way. The FARC of today is not the FARC of 1964.

20th Century Colombia

The FARC was a product the violence and disregard for the life that characterized Colombia during and after La Violencia. La Violencia officially began in 1948 with the assassination of Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, but the conflict began much earlier than that. Gaitán arrived on the political scene of Colombia following the “Banana Massacre” of 1928. In 1928, the workers employed by the United Fruit Company organized a strike demanding, among other reforms, that the UFCO cease paying them in the form of coupons to their own company store. In response to the strike, the Colombian dispatched the military, which promptly slaughtered hundreds of strikers.¹ This massacre attracted the attention of the press and made it into mainstream newspapers read in the cities and the countryside. The event polarized the country, and attracted the attention of the young Gaitán. Gaitán quickly rose in popularity, but was rejected as a radical by both the liberal and conservative parties. During Gaitán’s time in politics, he actively warned the ruling class that the conditions in the countryside were intolerable and would inevitably lead to violence.²

1930 saw the election of the first liberal to the Colombian presidency in nearly 50 years. Rather than stabilizing politics, this reignited tensions rooted in Colombia’s previous civil war. Conservatives feared the liberal rise and began forming armed militias. A politician by the name of Laureano Gómez Castro formed an extremist wing of the conservative party and rapidly

¹ Ruiz, B. (2001). *The Colombian Civil War*. Mcfarland & Co Inc Pub. p 44.

² Ibid, p 47.

gained the support of the Colombian army. Despite the polarization of its politics, Colombia remained relatively peaceful during the '30s and early '40s. This changed rapidly following the 1946 elections. In 1946, Gaitán ran for president without the support of the liberal party, causing a split that resulted in the victory of the conservative candidate, Mariano Ospina Perez. Ospina was elected president of Colombia with only 42% of the vote.³ In September of 1947, Gaitan disclosed a secret document detailing the Ospina government's plan to import huge quantities of weapons into the country in order to handle the growing liberal unrest.⁴ The liberals assumed he was preparing to violently crush all opposition and reacted by arming themselves, setting the scene for a civil war.

The Founding of the FARC

The FARC was born out of the violence during and after La Violencia and the corresponding loss of faith in government. Referring to La Violencia, Pedro Marín, founder of the FARC, wrote, “The police and armed Conservatives would destroy the villages, kill inhabitants, burn their houses, take people prisoner and disappear them, steal livestock and rape the women. The goal of the Conservative groups was to inflict terror on the population”.⁹ In response to the violence at the hand of the military and paramilitaries, a teenager named Pedro Marín fled the Amazon and went into hiding in the Cordillera Central. There he began to form a guerrilla army of displaced Colombians. Tensions came to a head in 1964 when the Colombian Army set its sights on Marquetalia, a small town that had declared itself an independent republic during La Violencia. The Colombian army attacked the barely armed village of approximately one-thousand farmers. This attack sent the members of the community fleeing for the mountains, where a group of about fifty of them would officially unite to form the FARC. Shortly after, founder Pedro Marín adapted the nom de guerre Manuel Marulanda. Colombian historian, Arturo Alape, wrote, “With Operation Marquetalia, the directing class of the country created the FARC movement in Colombia”.¹⁰

Solidification of Power

Over the course of the politically turbulent 1970's and '80's, the villages of the Amazon came to resemble the wild west of the United States. For example, drinking and fighting became so prominent on the weekly day off, that many villages established a ritual of collecting and counting the dead on Monday mornings.¹¹ In addition to the violence, the coca plant became the main source of income for the farmers, and the cocaine base became an accepted currency. The Colombian government had essentially abandoned the countryside. In the midst of this chaos, the FARC guerrillas entered the scene and played the role of government and law enforcement. The guerrillas were welcomed in the villages as they gave a sense of order to the mayhem. As a byproduct of this acceptance, the guerrillas cemented their control of the Amazon area and gained even more support from the populous. The guerrillas quickly took advantage of their solidification of control by taxing the growth and sale of coca. This new source of funding allowed the guerrillas to buy more weapons and recruit more soldiers, and rapidly became a key source of income for the FARC. With the capture of the cartel leaders by U.S. and Colombian forces towards the end of the 1990's, the FARC became the only power in southern Colombia and the sole gover

overthrew the established government of Gomez and placed General Rojas in power. Since this point, traditional government has been slowly wrenching power from the military, but frequently the two have not been operating as one force. The paramilitary groups further complicate the relationship between military and government. In the late 1960s, the Colombian army established the paramilitary groups as legitimate special operations groups. Violence was encouraged in these groups and oversight was minimal at best. The government turned a blind eye to the methods of torture and murder used by these groups, hoping they would succeed in obliterating the guerrilla organizations and establishing peace. Eventually the government saw that these groups were doing more harm than good and that the tactics used by them were not only unsuccessful, but provided the FARC with angry recruits bent on revenge. In 1989 the government outlawed paramilitary organizations, but that did not dismantle what had been established, nor did it dismantle the relationship established between the military and the paramilitary groups. The Colombian Peace Commission found that from 1988 to 1997 there were