

# **LAS FUERZAS ARMADAS REVOLUCIONARIO DE COLOMBIA EJERCITO DEL PUEBLO**

## **A BRIEF HISTORY**

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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,

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.<sup>3</sup> In September of 1947, Gaitán 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.<sup>4</sup> The liberals assumed he was preparing to violently crush all opposition and reacted by arming themselves, setting the scene for a civil war.

With the messy political situation and the resulting violence, the people of Colombia were ready for a change. Gaitán was certain to win the 1950 election, assuming he could stay alive. Gaitán refused bodyguards, claiming the act of accepting bodyguards would transform his image from a man of the people into a corrupt politician. He believed he was immune – that no one would be stupid enough to assassinate him. Shortly before his assassination he stated, “If I am killed, not one stone will be left unturned”.<sup>5</sup> La Violencia was officially ushered in on April 9, 1948 with the assassination of Gaitán. The assassination shattered what little faith the people of Colombia had for their government and sparked the greatest riot the western hemisphere has ever seen, known as Bogotazo. Although official numbers do not exist, historians estimate that over 2,000 people were killed and 5,000 injured in that single night<sup>6</sup>. Unfortunately, Bogotazo was but the beginning of a long war within Colombia.

The assassination of Gaitán sparked a civil war that Colombia is still recovering from. The Colombian Liberal Party and Colombian Communist Party formed guerrilla units and fought against the Colombian Conservative Party, the Colombian military, and sometimes even against each other. Order rapidly disintegrated and violence escalated to appalling levels. Torturous methods of execution, such as crucifixion and dismemberment by chainsaw became commonplace, as did violence against women and children.<sup>7</sup> Over the course of La Violencia, thousands of farmers fled from the developed farming lands to the relative security of the Amazon jungle, previously only inhabited by small tribes of indigenous peoples. During the 1950s, small villages began to spring up in the Amazon, surrounded by plots of cleared land. As a result of the violence, the jungle was being rapidly colonized without the knowledge or planning of the powerless Colombian government. The Colombian military considered these villages to be communist threats, and systematically destroyed each one that it found, frequently brutally murdering the civilians. For roughly ten years, violence overtook Colombia, ultimately resulting in over 300,000 deaths in the single decade.<sup>8</sup> Although it is often cited as the end date of La Violencia, the formation and solidification of the National Front in 1958 did not magically end the violence. Violence in Colombia has fluctuated since La Violencia, with a recent spike in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

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## **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".<sup>9</sup> 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 Operatiq earquetalia, the directit class of the country created the FARC mq ement itM qmbia".<sup>10</sup>

## **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.<sup>11</sup> 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

supported by the military, had an even more brutal reputation. Children and teenagers in the countryside matured in an environment where the military was to be feared for their brutality and the guerrillas respected for their protection. In addition, the guerrilla-controlled areas historically have been areas of extreme poverty, which with the exception of military raids, received absolutely no support from the Colombian government. This combination of factors made it easy for the FARC to recruit guerrillas.

One author summarizes FARC ideology as, “The Colombian government is corrupt; the American government is imperialistic; FARC is the people’s army; the FARC and the poor are persecuted by the state”.<sup>12</sup> Beyond those simple tenants, their ideology is hard to pinpoint. They’re against drugs, yet profit off of the trade of cocaine and heroin. They’re for the protection of the citizens, yet using their guerrilla tactics, frequently kill civilians. They teach a Marxist ideology, yet consistently rebuffed approaches from Cuba a

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 wi