

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, 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, it

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 42% of the vote.³ 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.⁴ 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 to assassination; 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".⁵ 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 day.⁶ 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 to fight 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.

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 Maín, 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 Maín 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 Maín 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. 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 mid-1980s, 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 governing force.

Recruitment and Training

Recruitment was not a significant challenge for the FARC during the 1990s. The Colombian military and the paramilitary death squads always made it easy for the FARC to recruit members, providing plenty of income through their oppression and abuse of the farmers living in the Amazon region. The Colombian military had, and to a certain extent has, a reputation for brutality in the regions controlled by the FARC, and the paramilitaries, frequently

⁹ Bruce, Victoria, Karin Hayes, and Jorge Enrique Botero. *Hostage nation: Colombia's guerrilla army and the failed war on drugs*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. Kindle loc. 394.

¹⁰ Ruiz, p 110.

¹¹ Bruce, Haynes, Botero, Kindle loc 1259.

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, because of the effects of military repression.

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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 government established the paramilitary groups as legitimate special operations groups. Violence was encouraged in