

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, 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 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".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 night⁶. 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.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.

³ Ruiz, p 51.

⁴ Ruiz, p 52.

⁵ Herbert, Braun, *The Assassination of Gaitán: Public Life and Urban Violence in Colombia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 132.

⁶ Ruiz, p 56.

⁷ Ruiz, p 28, 235.

⁸ "Colombia - La Violencia." *Country Studies*. <<http://countrystudies.us/colombia/22.htm>>.

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 governing force.

Recruitment and Training

Recruitment was not a significant challenge for the FARC during the 20th century. The Colombian military and the paramilitary death squads always made it easy for the FARC to recruit members, providing plenty of incentive 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, 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”.¹² 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 and the former USSR.¹³ Despite the seeming contradictions, every guerrilla is taught FARC ideology. All FARC recruits are sent to a training camp somewhere in the Amazon region. There they are not only taught guerrilla tactics and methods of navigating the dense jungle, but also spend four hours of each day in an academic setting being taught economics, political science, and FARC ideology - all from the skewed perspective of a senior member of the FARC.¹⁴

Recruitment of Children

The FARC has recently received attention from human rights watch groups for their recruitment of children. They do not deny the allegations, with one of the guerrillas saying, “The children love the guerrillas because here there is love, warmth for them. We will not lie and say that there are no children in the organization. There are children in the organization, but they are particular cases and practically obligatory cases.”¹⁵ The children that the FARC allow into the organization are orphaned, often as a result of the violence of the Colombian Army and paramilitary groups. They have no clothes, no food, and no one to take care of them. Without the FARC, most of these children would find their way to a major city where they could then beg, become child prostitutes, and scrounge for food. The guerrillas take them in and give them clothing, food, education (albeit a skewed one), and put them to work in the kitchens of their camps. These children grow up indoctrinated with FARC ideology and frequently mature to become leaders in the FARC. The military and paramilitaries of Colombia, along with the government of Colombia, have created this situation through indiscriminate violence and nonexistent social services, and they are finally beginning to see that the old traditional methods are causing more harm than good.

Paramilitary Groups

It is important to pause here and highlight the shaky relationship between the Colombian Government, the Colombian Military, and the paramilitary groups sometimes referred to as “death squads”. Since the beginning of La Violencia, and arguably to this day, the Colombian government has not had 100% control over the Colombian military. In 1953, a military coup

¹² Ibid., Kindle loc 457.

¹³ There is recent evidence that they are developing a relationship with Venezuela. This relationship will be discussed later in the paper.

¹⁴ Ibid., Kindle loc 457

¹⁵ Ibid., Kindle loc 954.

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 over 20,000 murders committed by illegal organizations. Of those, paramilitaries and drug cartels were responsible for over 80%, while the guerrilla groups (FARC and ELN among others) were responsible for 20%.¹⁶ Paramilitaries would not only attack the guerrillas, but would protect themselves, attacking any police found investigating them, journalists reporting on them, or lawyers trying to prosecute them. In addition, paramilitary groups turned to the same sources of funding as the FARC; kidnapping, extortion, and drug trafficking. By encouraging the formation of paramilitary units in the 1960s, the Colombian government opened the door to the formation of armed groups outside their direct control. These morphed into organizations that are arguably doing more harm to Colombia than the very organization they were formed to fight.

In conclusion, the government condoned, but frequently did not control the army, and the army tacitly condoned, but ultimately did not control the paramilitary groups. The result of this complex situation was that the government was typically not in a position to successfully negotiate for peace. Any agreement for amnesty to which they came meant very little in reality, as the paramilitary, and to a limited extent the military, could not be forced to respect it.

Revenue Streams

The FARC has two main sources of income- kidnapping and drug trafficking. Hostage taking serves several purposes for the FARC. The primary purpose of kidnapping is to extract ransom money, which then funds their guerrilla activities. In the late 1990's, the FARC was kidnapping over one thousand Colombian citizens per year, with ransoms ranging from a couple hundred to a couple million dollars.¹⁷ The secondary purpose of kidnapping is the political bargaining power the FARC achieves through the practice. The FARC does not only kidnap citizens, but also members of the Colombian army and national police force, which it considers prisoners of war rather than hostages. The FARC refuses to ransom these soldiers, and instead views them only as "exchangeables" – prisoners who will only be released in exchange for FARC members imprisoned in Colombia. The practice of kidnapping is used by the FARC to raise funds, gain power for prisoner exchanges, and instill fear in the people of Colombia. The FARC's second method of financing themselves is through drug trafficking, mainly through taxing the production and sale of coca, and through the development of the product into cocaine.

¹⁶ Ibid., Kindle loc 954.

¹⁷ Ibid., Kindle loc 429.