University of Washington

“Nadie Ganaba” / “Nobody Won”

El Salvador, Argentina, and the Transnational Roots of State Terror

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On August 28, 1977, the Archdiocese of San Salvador's newspaper, *ORIENTACIÓN*, published an op-ed titled "Be careful, do not upset the authorities, or they will accuse you of being a subversive."[1] In it, the author warned El Salvador against becoming like Argentina, where "every day, so-called security forces kill *guerrilleros*" who turn out not to be *guerrilleros* at all but rather innocent families whose only crime was irritating the authorities.[2] The article caused something of a diplomatic stir, with Argentina's ambassador to El Salvador, Julio Peña, expressing his great displeasure to Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero, both in person and in writing. Romero apologized privately, saying that the article did not reflect the opinion of the Archbishopric.[3] Less than three years later, Romero would be assassinated while celebrating mass, gunned down for upsetting the authorities, just as the article had warned.

Archbishop Romero's murder in March 1980 is often considered the point of no return for El Salvador.[4] Between 1980 and 1992, the small Central American country was ravaged by a civil war between the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (*Frente Farabundo Martí de la Liberación Nacional,* FMLN), a coalition of left-wing guerrilla organizations, and the country's

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[1] In its original Spanish, "Ten cuidado, no le caigas mal a la autoridad, que te acusan de subversivo." Unless noted otherwise, all translations are my own. San Salvador is the capital of El Salvador.

[2] *Guerrillero* is a tricky term. Derived from the Spanish word for war ("guerra"), *guerrilla* refers to specific type of irregular warfare carried out by small, nimble bands of combatants against a larger, more organized enemy. Though the term often misappropriated to identify anyone who opposes the government, a *guerrillero* is*,* in the strictest sense, someone who participates in *guerrilla* warfare. When I use the term *guerrillero* in this paper, I am doing so in this sense, to refer to combatants who are actively involved in violent attempts to overthrow the government.

[3] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Informe de entrevista c/ Monseñor Romero - Nota y Anexo," September 7, 1977, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.

[4] "De La Locura a La Esperanza: La Guerra de 12 Años En El Salvador: Informe de La Comisión de La Verdad Para El Salvador." (United Nations Truth Commission for El Salvador, 1993), 20, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/183599.

right-wing government.[5] The scale of devastation wrought by this conflict is difficult to capture. During the conflict's bloodiest three years alone, more than 40,000 people, mostly unarmed civilians, were killed and another 500,000 displaced.[6] For a country of just 4.51 million people in 1980, these numbers are staggering.[7] The 1992 UN Truth Commission for El Salvador heard more than 22,000 complaints about grave acts of violence committed during the war; of those 22,000 complaints, more than 85% attributed the violence to the state and its paramilitary forces.[8] As the Truth Commission wrote in its seminal report, "From Madness to Hope" (*De la locura a la esperanza)*, "Nobody won the war. Everyone lost."[9]

Map of Latin America and the Caribbean. El Salvador and Argentina are highlighted in red.

Despite experiencing one of the most alarming conflicts of its time, El Salvador is far too often forgotten by the US public, wrongly overlooked as too small or too niche to say anything meaningful about the larger Cold War. When the armed conflict in El Salvador makes an appearance in North American

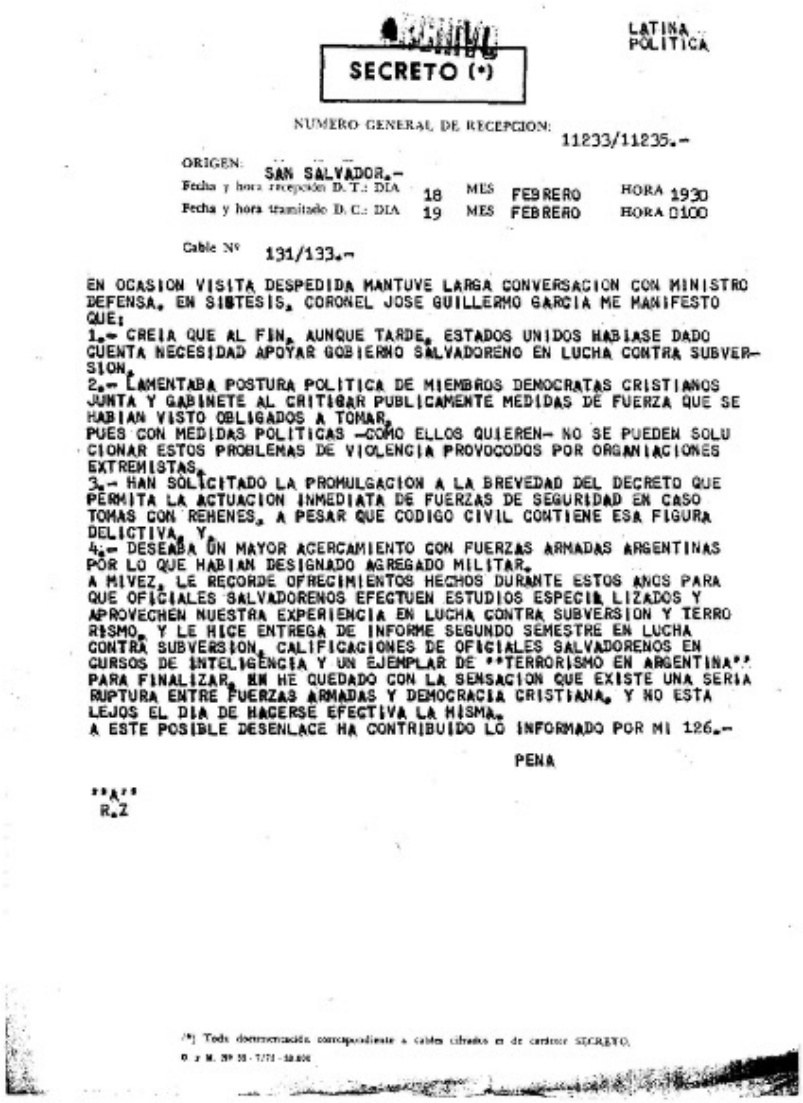
[5] James Dunkerley, "El Salvador since 1930," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, ed. Leslie Bethell, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 278, https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521245180.006; "De La Locura a La Esperanza," 21.
[6] John Coatsworth, "The Cold War in Central America," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, vol. 3 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 218.
[7] Numbers based on data from the World Bank and United Nations Population Division. For comparison, the population of New York City in 1980 was approximately 7 million people, or more than 1.5 times that of El Salvador.
[8] "De La Locura a La Esperanza," 41.
[9] "De La Locura a La Esperanza," 1. The title of this project is drawn from this quote in its original Spanish: "Nadie ganaba la guerra. Todos la perdían." Those who are familiar with the language will note that this statement is written in the imperfect past tense, suggesting that winners and losers were not decided at some finite point at the war's end but rather that this process of losing extended over the entire conflict.

historiography, it is almost always with an eye toward evaluating US policy in Central America.[10] The role that other right-wing Latin American governments played in El Salvador, in contrast, has received almost no scholarly attention. This project addresses that gap by examining just one of these transnationally repressive relationships: that between El Salvador and Argentina in the period immediately before the outbreak of war (1978-1980). I argue that the military regimes in El Salvador and Argentina took on a consultative relationship during the late 1970s in which key Salvadoran officials looked to Argentina for a "successful" model of repression. As El Salvador barreled toward war in late 1979 and early 1980, those very same officials came to occupy the highest positions of power there, paving the way for an urban war experience that looked eerily like Argentine state terror.

Here, I trace the rise of Argentine influence in El Salvador from a few well-placed offers of aid to the minds of four of El Salvador's top-ranking wartime officials, including two Defense Ministers, a Deputy Defense Minister, and a Commander-in-Chief. I begin with an overview of Argentina and El Salvador in the late 1970s so that this history may be properly situated within its larger context. I then set up 1979 as a moment of contingency for El Salvador, during which Argentine influence was starting to make inroads but there was still hope that El Salvador could resolve its crises without having to resort to the explosive violence seen elsewhere in Central America and the Southern Cone. Finally, I show how this hope collapsed over the course of 1980 as the military officers with the greatest interest in Argentina's "example" wrested control of the

[10] During the 1980s, the US government supplied massive economic and military aid to the government of El Salvador despite knowing that state security forces were responsible for egregious human rights violations. For examples of US-centered work, see William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992*, 1st ed. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Coatsworth, "The Cold War in Central America."

Revolutionary Governing Junta, silenced the last remaining reform-minded voices, and set about creating El Salvador's very own legacy of terror.



SECRETO (*)

LATINA
POLITICA

NUMERO GENERAL DE RECEPCION:
11233/11235.-

ORIGEN: SAN SALVADOR.-
Fecha y hora recepción D. T.: DIA 18 MES FEBRERO HORA 1930
Fecha y hora tramitado D. C.: DIA 19 MES FEBRERO HORA 0100

Cable Nº 131/133.-

EN OCASION VISITA DESPEDIDA MANTUVE LARGA CONVERSACION CON MINISTRO DEFENSA, EN SIBTESIS, CORONEL JOSE GUILLERMO GARCIA ME MANIFESTO QUE:
1.- CREIA QUE AL FIN, AUNQUE TARDE, ESTADOS UNIDOS HABIASE DADO CUENTA NECESIDAD APOYAR GOBIERNO SALVADORENO EN LUCHA CONTRA SUBVERSION.
2.- LAMENTABA POSTURA POLITICA DE MIEMBROS DEMOCRATAS CRISTIANOS JUNTA Y GABINETE AL CRITICAR PUBLICAMENTE MEDIDAS DE FUERZA QUE SE HABIAN VISTO OBLIGADOS A TOMAR,
PUES CON MEDIDAS POLITICAS -COMO ELLOS QUIEREN- NO SE PUEDEN SOLUCIONAR ESTOS PROBLEMAS DE VIOLENCIA PROVOCODOS POR ORGANIACIONES EXTREMISTAS.
3.- HAN SOLICITADO LA PROMULGACION A LA BREVEDAD DEL DECRETO QUE PERMITA LA ACTUACION INMEDIATA DE FUERZAS DE SEGURIDAD EN CASO TOMAS CON REHENES, A PESAR QUE CODIGO CIVIL CONTIENE ESA FIGURA DELICTIVA, Y,
4.- DESEABA UN MAYOR ACERCAMIENTO CON FUERZAS ARMADAS ARGENTINAS POR LO QUE HABIAN DESIGNADO AGREGADO MILITAR.
A MIVEZ, LE RECORDE OFRECIMIENTOS HECHOS DURANTE ESTOS ANOS PARA QUE OFICIALES SALVADORENOS EFECTUEN ESTUDIOS ESPECIALIZADOS Y APROVECHEN NUESTRA EXPERIENCIA EN LUCHA CONTRA SUBVERSION Y TERRORISMO, Y LE HICE ENTREGA DE INFORME SEGUNDO SEMESTRE EN LUCHA CONTRA SUBVERSION, CALIFICACIONES DE OFICIALES SALVADORENOS EN CURSOS DE INTELIGENCIA Y UN EJEMPLAR DE **TERRORISMO EN ARGENTINA**
PARA FINALIZAR, ME HE QUEDADO CON LA SENSACION QUE EXISTE UNA SERIA RUPTURA ENTRE FUERZAS ARMADAS Y DEMOCRACIA CRISTIANA, Y NO ESTA LEJOS EL DIA DE HACERSE EFECTIVA LA MISMA.
A ESTE POSIBLE DESENLACE HA CONTRIBUIDO LO INFORMADO POR MI 126.-

PEÑA

A
R.Z

(*) Toda determinación correspondiente a cables cifrados es de carácter SECRETO.

Secret cable from the Argentine Embassy in San Salvador. It was sent by Ambassador Julio Peña on February 18, 1980 and discusses a conversation that Peña had with El Salvador's Minister of Defense, José Guillermo García.

Cables from the Historical Archive of the Chancellery (*Archivo Histórico de la Cancillería)* in Buenos Aires form the backbone of this project. [11] By narrating events in El

[11] Somewhat akin to the Department of State in the United States, the *Cancillería,* or Chancellery, is the branch of Argentina's Ministry of Foreign Relations, International Trade and Worship (*Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto*) responsible for Argentine embassies and consulates around the world.

Salvador as they happened, these documents serve two purposes. First, they establish the nature of Argentina's relationship with El Salvador. There are cables designating military attachés, offering counterinsurgency advice, organizing military and business delegations, coordinating, loans, and arranging public relations measures, all of which demonstrate that Argentina and El Salvador enjoyed a substantive diplomatic relationship during the late 1970s. Second, these cables contain glimpses into the thinking of both Argentine and Salvadoran leadership. Argentine ambassadors sent remarkably candid reports of their conversations with Salvadoran military officers, the details of which say a lot about Argentina's interests with regards to El Salvador and Central America more broadly. More importantly given an almost complete paucity of archival records from El Salvador, such reports offer some of the best available insight into the logic driving Salvadoran military leadership as their country careened into open warfare. When read with a critical eye, they reflect the myriad and overlapping ways that Argentine and Salvadoran actors interpreted the Cold War along local, regional, and global lines.

In examining the role of Argentine influence in Central America, this project builds on Ariel Armony's 1997 book, *Argentina, the United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America, 1977-1984.* Armony was one of the first scholars to argue that Argentina exported its "dirty war" to Central America during the late 1970s and early 1980s,[12] and he did it a decade in advance of the mass declassification of documents from the Argentine military dictatorship.[13] Sociologist Julieta Rostica has expanded on Armony's work in recent years,

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[12] Ariel C. Armony, *Argentina, the United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America, 1977-1984* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1997).

[13] Most of the Argentine government documents that are now available were declassified starting in 2009. Subsequent declassification has called into question the veracity of some of Armony's sources, most notably the testimony of Héctor Francés, an alleged Argentine military operative who wound up in Sandinista custody in 1982 under questionable circumstances. Francés claimed to have been sent to Central America as a member of Argentina's infamous Battallion 601, but his name does not appear on rosters for Battalion 601 nor civilian intelligence personnel. For further commentary on Francés as a source, see footnote 3, Julieta Carla Rostica, "La colaboración y

showing that recently declassified official sources do indeed point to significant Argentine involvement in Central America. I am particularly indebted in this work to Rostica, Melisa Kovalski, Lucrecia Molinari, and Matías Oberlin Molina's article "*La massacre de El Mozote en El Salvador: una apoximación a la responsabilidad argentina,*" which demonstrates that Argentine officials may have known about and even been involved in the 1981 massacre of Salvadoran peasants around the village of El Mozote.[14] Some of the conclusions that I draw in this paper—namely that high-ranking Salvadoran military officers enjoyed close interactions with Argentine diplomatic officials—are similar to those reached by Rostica and her collaborators, but here they take on a different purpose. Whereas Rostica et al. are concerned with documenting Argentina's proximity to a specific atrocity, I am much more interested in the broad contours of Argentina's relationship with El Salvador. My intervention is to take the detailed archival research methods developed by Rostica and infuse them with a historian's penchant for narrative, emphasizing the political-cultural realm in which seemingly mundane bureaucratic details take on significance.

This project also fits into an emerging realm of scholarship on the Latin American Cold War known as "New Cold War Studies." Most closely associated with historian Gilbert Joseph, New Cold War Studies asserts that we need a more local and regional understanding of the Cold War in Latin America, one that pays greater attention to the roles of women, *campesinos,* the urban poor and middle classes, and indigenous peoples, as well as to interactions among the Latin American states themselves. I contribute scholarship in this last vein by demonstrating how

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coordinación de la represión de la disidencia política entre Argentina y Honduras: avances de investigación (1979-1983)," *Secuencia*, no. 111 (October 22, 2021): 8, https://doi.org/10.18234/secuencia.v0i111.1926.

[14] Julieta Carla Rostica et al., "La masacre de El Mozote en El Salvador: una aproximación a la responsabilidad argentina," *Revista electrónica de estudios latinoamericanos* 18, no. 71 (2020). For a moving account of the massacre at El Mozote, see Mark Danner, "The Truth of El Mozote," *The New Yorker*, December 6, 1993.

El Salvador and Argentina participated in overlapping anticommunist projects that were, at times, at odds with the United States' wishes. In contrast to more traditional Cold War Studies, which generally treats Latin America as a prism through which to view US policy, this work treats US policy as one factor among many informing states' actions. It thereby further de-centers the United States in narratives of the Latin American Cold War, restoring a degree of responsibility and autonomy to Latin American actors who are far too often painted as pawns of the Cold War.

Background

For both Argentina and El Salvador, the 1970s were characterized by repressive military rule. The military junta seized power in Argentina on March 24, 1976. By that point, Argentina, like much of Latin America in the 20th century, was no stranger to such political upheavals. Between 1943 and 1976, Argentina had experienced no fewer than five military coups, and not once in that entire period was a democratically elected leader in Argentina succeeded by another democratically elected leader.[15] The military dictatorship ushered in on March 24, 1976, however, was different. By its end, more than 30,000 people had been forcibly disappeared by the state, approximately 9,000 of whom remained disappeared to this day.[16] For Argentina, the junta that ruled from 1976 to 1983 is *the* military dictatorship, the one whose memory weighs

[15] Juan Carlos Torre and Liliana De Riz, "Argentina since 1946," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, ed. Leslie Bethell, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 191, https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521266529.003.
[16] These numbers are based on estimates from human rights groups as cited in the 2006 edition of Argentina's truth commission report, *Nunca Más.* Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, "Nunca Más" (Buenos Aires: Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, 2006), 12, Archivo de Ministerio de Cultura de Argentina, https://www.cultura.gob.ar/que-es-la-conadep-9904/.

most heavily on the national psyche. Its tactics were so vicious, and so unlike anything the country had experienced before, that they can only be described as state terror.[17]

The Argentine military dictatorship's entire system of repression was designed to demoralize, dehumanize, and terrify generations of Argentine citizens. From the 2006 edition of Argentina's truth commission report, *Nunca Más*:

> There were tens of thousands of people that passed through the jails or clandestine centers and many others who had to escape the country. It is estimated that 30,000 people disappeared, which means to say they were arrested, subjected to torture, and that their bodies were buried in unidentified graves or thrown, still alive, into the sea from Navy planes as part of the so-called "death flights" (*vuelos de la muerte).*[18]

Beyond conveying some fraction of the human horror wrought upon Argentina between 1976 and 1983, these details matter because they reveal just how systematic abuses were. The well-organized use of disappearance, torture, and execution within the context of clandestine detention centers constituted a specific *repressive technology* that could be transferred and reproduced. Argentina was hardly the first Latin American country to employ such technologies, but it does stand out in terms of scale and professionalization. Thirty times as many people disappeared in Argentina as they did in Pinochet's Chile, the Southern Cone dictatorship with the second highest total number of *desaparecidos* (disappeared people). [19] Comparing tragedies in

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[17] Many of us from the United States and elsewhere in the Global North know the violence unleashed upon Argentina from 1976 to 1983 as the "Dirty War," but I have decided not to use that term here. Calling their confrontation with guerrilla movements a "war" was how Argentine military leaders justified their disproportionally brutal use of violence, so to use the term "dirty war" uncritically is to reproduce a false narrative of justification born out the minds of the repressors themselves. To be clear, *guerrilleros* in Argentina engaged in political violence, as did *guerrilleros* in El Salvador, but unlike in El Salvador, the confrontation in Argentina never developed into a civil war. State terror is the most appropriate term because it reflects the ultimate purpose of Argentina's clandestine detention centers: to inspire such great fear among would-be revolutionaries that they dare not challenge the state's authority for generations to come. For further commentary on the term "dirty war," see "Abuelas Elogió La Decisión de Obama de Desclasificar Archivos de La Dictadura y Deslizó Algunas Críticas," *INFOnews*, March 18, 2016, Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20160329145612/http://www.infonews.com/nota/285046/abuelas-elogio-la-decision-de-obama-de. and Federico Finchelstein, *Orígenes ideológicos de la "guerra sucia"* (Buenos Aires: Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, 2016), 19.

[18] Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, "Nunca Más," 13.

[19] Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, 12.

terms of numbers is a dangerous business, but these statistics do give a sense of Argentina's dominance in repression during the late 1970s.

The terrible reality is that these tactics worked. By 1979, Argentina's guerrilla movements had been all but destroyed, its leaders either dead or in exile.[20] The Argentine military dictatorship, however, was motivated by a virulent strain of anticommunism for which "ideological frontiers" mattered far more than national borders.[21] In April 1976, none other than president of the junta, General Jorge Rafael Videla, said, "[Subversion] is a global phenomenon demanding a global strategy covering all areas: politics, economics, culture, and the military."[22] Its mission accomplished, state terror in Argentina began to wind down in 1979, giving the dictatorship the opportunity to turn its attention increasingly outward, to hotter flashpoints in the Latin American Cold War like El Salvador.[23]

El Salvador's longstanding oligarchic-military power structure, embodied by the National Conciliation Party (*Partido de Conciliación Nacional,* PCN), began to fall apart around 1972. That year, the combination of sham elections and repression that had allowed the PCN to retain absolute power over wealth and politics in the small but densely populated Central American country for the better part of forty years backfired. For one, the memory of "La Matanza," a 1932 episode in which the military killed approximately 4% of the population in retribution for a Communist-led uprising, was wearing thin.[24] The PCN had for decades used the threat of another "Matanza" to suppress agitation for even the mildest agrarian reform programs, leaving the country well behind even its Central American neighbors in terms of land and wealth

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[20] Armony, *Argentina, the United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America*, 9.
[21] Armony, 12.
[22] Jorge Rafael Videla quoted in Armony, 5.
[23] Torre and De Riz, "Argentina since 1946," 163; Rostica, "La colaboración y coordinación de la represión de la disidencia política entre Argentina y Honduras," 4–5.
[24] Committee in Solidarity with the Peoples of El Salvador, "El Salvador: A Political Chronology," in *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War*, ed. Marvin E. Gettleman et al. (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1981).

distribution.[25] By the 1970s, however, the pressure of poverty was simply too extreme. Instead of invoking fear, the memory of La Matanza began to serve as inspiration to a new generation of Salvadoran revolutionaries who had been born after 1932 and viewed those killed in the uprising as martyrs.[26]

More pointedly, 1972 was the first presidential election year in which a viable opposition candidate was permitted to run against the PCN. Three major opposition parties that had emerged during a brief period of political opening in the late 1960s formed a coalition to back to candidacy of José Napoleón Duarte, the leader of El Salvador's center-left Christian Democratic Party (*Partido Demócrata Cristiano,* PDC). When Duarte lost the election to the PCN's candidate, the whole thing reeked so badly of electoral fraud that a small group of left-leaning military officers staged an unsuccessful coup attempt. Duarte discouraged his followers from joining the melee, but the military arrested, beat, and exiled him nonetheless.[27] His defeat and humiliation made it clear to people from across Salvadoran society that political change would not come about via constitutional means.

Totally disillusioned by the country's existing political infrastructure, opposition in El Salvador began to coalesce around one idea: revolution was the only way forward. Despite agreeing on this basic principle, El Salvador's revolutionary opposition was otherwise diverse and, for the first several years after 1972, highly fragmented. Its groups ranged from militant communist factions to traditional left and center-left political parties to run-of-the-mill labor unions and disagreed on everything from their political alignment with Cuba and the Soviet bloc

[25] Dunkerley, "El Salvador since 1930," 257.
[26] Most famously, the FMLN is named after Agustín Farabundo Martí, a Salvadoran Communist and revolutionary from the 1930s.
[27] Dunkerley, 268.

to the use of violence.[28] The newly formed militant organizations were particularly prone to infighting over strategy and splintered into a constellation of *guerrilla* groups, often at the cost of inter-factional violence.[29] It was a messy situation but one that also speaks to the energy behind El Salvador's revolutionary opposition in this moment.

It would take one more round of disappointment and repression to bring these groups together, and in the late 1970s, that is exactly what happened. President Carlos Humberto Romero Mena, a military strongman who was fraudulently elected in 1977, proved to be even more repressive than his predecessors, and death squad activity increased precipitously during his administration.[30] When, in late 1979 and early 1980, even a military coup failed to dislodge patterns of repression in El Salvador, the revolutionary opposition finally came together in two major unified fronts. Civil society, including labor unions, student and professional groups, opposition parties, and popular organizations coalesced around the Democratic Revolutionary Front (*Frente Democrático Revolucionario,* FDR) while the five major guerrilla groups set up a unified command structure under the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (*Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*, FMLN).[31] The timing here could not be more suggestive. Salvadoran opposition groups, in coming together when they did, began to pose a serious threat to the oligarchic-military order in El Salvador just as the Argentine military dictatorship defeated its own revolutionary opposition. In Argentina, El Salvador's military

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[28] Vanni Pettinà, *Historia Mínima de La Guerra Fría En América Latina* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2018), 203–4.

[29] Perhaps the most famous instance of inter-factional violence was the 1975 murder of Roque Dalton. Dalton was a well-known poet and member of the Salvadoran Communist Party who was assassinated by People's Revolutionary Army (*Ejército Revolucionario del Pubelo*, ERP) after getting into a dispute with the group's leadership.

[30] President Romero is in no way related to Archbishop Romero. Henceforth, if I believe that there is risk of confusion, I will refer to Carlos Humberto Romero Mena as "President Romero" and Óscar Arnulfo Romero as "Archbishop Romero." Death squads (*esquadrones de la muerte)* were groups of assassins that targeted perceived "subversives." Though not officially part of El Salvador's military structure, the death squads were intimately and inextricably tied to state security forces and often acted on orders from military personnel.

[31] Pettinà, *Historia Mínima de La Guerra Fría En América Latina*, 208–9.

found a model for crushing one's revolutionary "enemies" and, we will see, a willing teacher. If ever there was a moment for the transfer of repressive technologies, this was it.

Origins of Argentine Aid to El Salvador, 1976–1979

Argentina was well-attuned to the revolutionary pressure taking shape in Central America during the late 1970s. On August 15, 1977, the *cancillería* in Buenos Aires sent Foreign Dissemination Directive No. 1 (*Directiva N° 1 de difusión al exterior)* to its embassies across the world, opening with the line "The Argentine Republic is the object of an intense international smear campaign, organized by terrorists that were active in our country and are, currently, operating abroad."[32] Argentina's concern with El Salvador—and, indeed, with the rest of the world—is best viewed through this lens of ideological annihilation. Reminiscent of fears that Cuba had inspired in state officials across Latin America since 1959, the Argentine military dictatorship worried that Argentine *guerrilleros* who managed to flee the country would find safe haven in revolutionary enclaves elsewhere.[33] The dictatorship may have successfully suppressed subversion in Argentina, but as long as popular revolutionary ideas remained alive in the hemisphere, they threatened to find their way back to Argentine soil and cause problems for the dictatorship all over again. El Salvador, with its growing revolutionary opposition and shared language, religion, and political tradition, was exactly the kind of hotbed of revolutionary activity that the dictatorship feared.

No figure in Salvadoran society drew quite as much ire from Argentine officials as Archbishop Romero, who in the late 1970s was still very much alive and playing a central role in

[32] Dirección general de prensa y difusión, "Directiva 1 de difusión al exterior - modos de acción p/ contrarrestar campaña de desprestigio internacional," August 15, 1977, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriories, Comercio Internacional y Culto.
[33] Armony, *Argentina, the United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America*, 16–17.

Salvadoran society. Both El Salvador and Argentina were overwhelmingly Catholic, but that did not mean that their clergies responded to the respective military regimes in the same way. Whereas the Catholic church in Argentina proved an important bulwark for the military dictatorship, even going so far as to sanction the death flights as a humane, "Christian death,"[34] the church in El Salvador proved to be one of its regime's most effective critics. Though the Salvadoran clergy's sympathies were by no means monolithic, its spirit undoubtably lived with the voice of its most prominent speaker, Archbishop Romero. His weekly homilies were broadcast across the country by the archbishopric radio,[35] and he pulled no punches when it came to condemning government repression.

Romero's August 12, 1979 homily is a good example. In it, Romero uses his moral authority as a religious figure to decry what he saw as the double violence of poverty and political repression in El Salvador. He denounces a long string of deaths and disappearances at the hands of the armed forces and death squads, starting first and foremost with that of Father Alirio Napoleón Macías, who was shot and killed earlier that week in his parish church. He condemns the "absolutization" of wealth, power, and politics in El Salvador, saying that wealth inequality is "El Salvador's great evil." He announces direct action in response to government repression, reporting that a group of 240 priests, seminarians, and laypeople had met the day prior and decided to send letters to the Pope, the Episcopal Conference, and "the American governments interested in defending human rights," asking for their help in ending repression against the church and the Salvadoran people. And, perhaps most damningly of all, he announces that the Episcopal Conference of El Salvador would withdraw its two representatives from the

[34] Horacio Verbitsky, *El Vuelo*, Espejo de La Argentina (Buenos Aires: Editorial Planeta Argentina, 1995), 26.
[35] Patrick Lacefield, "Oscar Romero: Archbishop of the Poor," in *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War*, ed. Marvin E. Gettleman et al. (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1981).

National Dialogue, a series of government-sponsored discussions with various sectors of Salvadoran society, "because those who invited them have shown no goodwill."[36]

The homily alarmed Argentina's ambassador to El Salvador, Julio Peña, and for good reason. Peña wrote to Buenos Aires on August 16th, saying that Romero's "popularity has grown [through] his distinctly demagogic homilies" and that there was an ultra-left plot to assassinate Romero in order to provoke a *"bogotazo"* (riot).[37] Peña then followed up on September 5th to send a copy of the letter that Archbishop Romero said would be sent to American governments.[38] Though Peña's claim about a leftist false flag operation was dubious at best, a comment in his second transmission about the letter not being sent to Argentina, Chile, Uruguay or Guatemala hints at the heart of the dictatorship's fear about Romero and gives a sense of the embassy's intelligence-gathering directives. For Argentina, the problem with Romero was not necessarily that he denounced repression in El Salvador but that he mobilized a specifically Latin American vision of activist Catholicism to do it. By leaving Argentina off the list of recipients for this letter, Romero was subtly drawing the country into a broader conversation about repression and Catholic resistance that had its origins in the Second and Third Episcopal Conferences of Latin America at Medellín and Puebla, respectively.[39] This was dangerous for the Argentine dictatorship, as the Church's support was central to their power. It was the Church's approbation

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[36] Óscar Arnulfo Romero, "El Divino Salvador, Carne para la Vida del Mundo" (Homily, San Salvador, August 12, 1979), Servicio Internacional Cristiano de Solidaridad con los pueblos de América Latina «Óscar Romero», https://www.sicsal.net/romero/homilias/B/790812.htm.

[37] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Retransmite comunicado pronunciado por Mons. Romero- opinion," August 21, 1979, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.

[38] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Transmite temor por probable atentado extrema izquierda a Mons. Romero - opinion," August 16, 1979, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.

[39] The conferences at Medellín and Puebla are often considered the birthplaces of liberation theology, the essence of which was that the church had an obligation to promote the social welfare of its followers. Romero, despite his conservative origins, came to embrace liberation theology and referenced its central tenet of "preferential treatment for the poor" in his work. Alan Riding, "The Cross and the Sword in Latin America," in *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War*, ed. Marvin E. Gettleman et al. (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1981); Lacefield, "Oscar Romero: Archbishop of the Poor."

that allowed many Argentine citizens to turn a blind eye to the dictatorship's atrocities, believing instead that the junta was doing what was necessary to save the country from "atheist subversion."[40] Were the Argentine clergy—or even the Argentine laity—to turn to Romero-style liberation theology instead, the dictatorship would have been in very much trouble indeed.

This is not to say that Peña's analysis of Romero was accurate or even remotely close to reflecting the nuance of his positions. Quite the opposite, Peña's cables from 1978 and 1979 contain a series of ludicrous claims about Romero, including that he was employing "Marxist expressions," using a local seminary to train *guerrilleros,* and even plotting a coup.[41] Archbishop Romero may have expressed sympathy for the civil revolutionary organizations and even come close to condoning revolutionary violence, but a Marxist he was not.[42] His public advocacy was rooted in El Salvador and the uplift of its people. What Peña's exaggerations about Romero indicate instead is the extent to which Argentine officials read local tensions into a broader Cold War framework. The Argentine military dictatorship had a very specific vision of what an imagined Latin American community should look like: conservative, Christian, and "Western." By convincingly tying one of these tenets, Christian faith, to progressive and at times subversive political platforms, Romero threatened to undermine Argentina's entire vision. And while Romero is, of course, but one person—albeit a hugely influential one—the way that he is described in Peña's cables show how the dictatorship's national strategy of branding anyone

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[40] Finchelstein, *Orígenes ideológicos*, 17.

[41] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Retransmite comunicado pronunciado por Mons. Romero- opinion"; Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Transcribe opinión Nuncio Apostólico s/ intervención Mons. Quaraccino y proposiciones," September 5, 1979, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto; Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Nota Secreta 436," October 24, 1978, Sección América Latina, Caja 16, El Salvador II, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.

[42] Romero always espoused a preference for nonviolence, but toward the end of his life, as a political solution in El Salvador looked increasingly impossible, he acknowledged the inevitability of violence, saying, "Christian ethics admits violence for a just cause." Lacefield, "Oscar Romero: Archbishop of the Poor."

contrary to the state's needs and vision as a "communist" also applied to Argentina's international endeavors. [43]

Argentina's heightened sense of alarm responded to broader political changes in the region as well. In July 1979, a coalition of left-wing guerilla groups known as the Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional,* FSLN) overthrew the repressive dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle in Nicaragua. Their success set off alarm bells for right-wing regimes across Latin America, who viewed the Sandinistas' victory as proof that popular revolution could work in Central America. They feared that the new Sandinista government—supported by Cuba and the Soviet Union—would act as a foothold for communism in the region. Neither of these fears were totally unfounded, even as they were greatly overblown. Several prominent *guerrilleros* who had been driven out of Argentina during the early days of the military dictatorship resurfaced in Nicaragua shortly after the revolution, and the Sandinistas were indeed revolutionary internationalists who later supported the FMLN.[44] Combined with rising unrest in El Salvador and Guatemala's nearly two-decade-old civil war, these developments made the right-wing governments of Central and South America feel acutely under threat.

Furthermore, the late 1970s was a low point in relations between the United States and right-wing governments in Latin America. The United States' turn to human-rights focused foreign policy following the election of President Jimmy Carter in 1976 constituted a serious

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[43] The president of Argentina's military dictatorship, General Jorge Rafael Videla, made this point abundantly clear when in April 1976 he stated that "a terrorist is not only one who carries a bomb or a pistol, but also one who spreads ideas contrary to Western Christian civilization." Torre and De Riz, "Argentina since 1946," 158.

[44] Ariel C. Armony, "Transnationalizing the Dirty War: Argentina in Central America," in *In from the Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with the Cold War*, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser, American Encounters/Global Interactions (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 147; Pettinà, *Historia Mínima de La Guerra Fría En América Latina*, 220; Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 342.

betrayal in the eyes of right-wing governments across Latin America because it meant that they would have to choose between US foreign aid and aggressively repressing "communist subversion." Feeling abandoned by the United States and facing a rising tide of revolutionary activity, many, Argentina and El Salvador included, chose the latter. In March 1977, Argentina, Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Paraguay all renounced US military aid on the grounds that the imposition of human rights standards violated their sovereignties.[45] Though the Carter administration eased up on human rights pressure in Latin America after the Nicaraguan Revolution in 1979, the bad blood remained.[46] As late as December 1980, at which point Carter had already lost reelection to Ronald Reagan, Argentina's ambassador to El Salvador complained in a cable that "Carter tries until the last moment to insist on the wrong policy toward Central America."[47] There was a sense among the right in Latin America that they were on their own and would have to create alternative anticommunist support networks to supplant the United States.

It is with these anxieties in mind that Argentina sent military aid to El Salvador, the details of which were fairly straightforward. In a cable from August 1977, Peña made the following suggestions for how to cultivate a closer relationship with El Salvador: (1) offer "advice (*asesoramiento*) based on lived experience," (2) offer military scholarships, especially to the high command, (3) explore the possibility of an "economic-industrial and commercial" visit to Argentina, and (4) concern President Romero with tensions provoked by US human rights

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[45] Molly Avery, "Promoting a 'Pinochetazo': The Chilean Dictatorship's Foreign Policy in El Salvador during the Carter Years," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 52, no. 4 (2020): 765; El Salvador's own announcement about rejecting military aid called Carter's human rights policies, "open disrespect to our sovereignty and our self determination." US Department of State, "UNCLAS San Salvador 1297," March 17, 1977, UWCHR Central America Database.

[46] Armony, *Argentina, the United States, and the Anti-Communist Crusade in Central America*, 41–42.

[47] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Informe situación en El Salvador- Bianculli repudia políticia DDHH de Carter," December 10, 1980, Colección Forti, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.

policy. Peña wrote that the first item, *asesoramiento,* had already been discussed with El Salvador's Minister of Defense and that the second and third items were excellent ideas given the military's control over politics in El Salvador and their "great interest in our [Argentine] technologies." The fourth item, while obviously a jab at the Carter administration, is more cryptic and appears to refer to the resignation of the US Ambassador to El Salvador in June 1977.[48] Whether intended this way or not, Peña's cable is effectively a blueprint for Argentine aid to El Salvador. Starting in late 1978, there is a steady stream of dry administrative cables coordinating scholarships, military attachés, and official visits.

The interesting thing about Argentine aid to El Salvador is not necessarily *how* it operated but rather *who* it influenced. In 1978 and 1979, respectively, two of the leading figures in Salvadoran military education traveled to Buenos Aires where, we can reasonably speculate, they experienced Argentine state terror's "success" first-hand and developed ideas about repression that they then brought home and taught to the very generation of Salvadoran military officials who would conduct the war. Here it becomes necessary to introduce Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova and Rafael Flores Lima. On December 1, 1978, Peña sent a cable to Buenos Aires, informing them that a delegation of 23 military officers (*jefes y oficiales graduados)* from El Salvador's Command and General Staff College (*Escuela de Comando y Estado Mayor*) led by Colonel Vides Casanova would be arriving in Buenos Aires for an unofficial visit on December 10th.[49] It is impossible to know exactly what happened during the delegation's visit as this cable is, to my knowledge, the only publicly available document about it. Nonetheless, it is difficult to

[48] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Ofrecimiento de becas militares - insinuar asesoramiento en base a experiencia vivida (terrorismo)," August 31, 1977, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.
[49] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Visita a Argentina de delegación militares de El Salvador (Vides Casanova)," December 1, 1978, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.

imagine that Vides Casanova, then Deputy Director of El Salvador's Armed Forces Studies Center, would visit Buenos Aires without discussing Argentine methods of repression in some capacity.

With Flores Lima's trip to Buenos Aires less than a year later, we actually know that he went there to discuss "antisubversive" action. As he had done with Vides Casanova before, Peña sent a cable to Buenos Aires on September 21, 1979, announcing that Flores Lima would arrive on September 30th.[50] This time, however, he sent a second, secret cable stating that Flores Lima had told Peña the previous day that "his real mission is to establish contact… in order to gain experience in all areas of the fight against subversion, especially intelligence and psychological action."[51] In military speak, "intelligence" and "psychological action" are almost certainly euphemisms for torture and terror. Simply by being in Buenos Aires, by then far calmer than San Salvador, Vides Casanova and Flores Lima would have witnessed that these tools of repression worked, not in some far away country or US-sponsored instruction manual but in another Latin American state with several key political and cultural similarities. It was a lesson that they would not forget.

Argentine Influence Rises to the Top, 1979-1980

A series of dramatic political developments in El Salvador in 1979 and 1980 brought Argentine influence into the main fold of El Salvador's high command. On October 15, 1979, with violence and civil unrest reaching a fever pitch in El Salvador, a group of young military

[50] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Informa arribo a BAires Cnel. Rafael Flores Lima," September 21, 1979, Colección Forti, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.
[51] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Cable Secreto 345," September 21, 1979, Dirección de Comunicaciones, Caja 982, El Salvador Recibidos 1 al 606 y expedidos 1 al 363, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.

officers led by colonels Adolfo Arnoldo Majano Ramos and Jaime Abdul Gutiérrez Avendaño overthrew the government of President Romero.[52] Knowing how this story ends, it can be difficult to imagine that this coup, carried out by the military against the military, was ever anything but a shallow attempt at placation. Majano was a well-known reformer within military circles,[53] and the program that he and other young officers proclaimed contained some genuinely progressive reforms. It called for human rights protections, agrarian reforms, democratic elections, and the creation of a mostly civilian, transitional Revolutionary Governing Junta (*Junta Revolucionaria de Gobierno,* JRG).[54] In fact, so many members of the traditional left and center-left opposition parties joined the new government in ministerial positions that Peña complained that "most of the members of the new cabinet are militant leftists."[55] Even Archbishop Romero threw his conditional support behind the junta, telling his followers that they should give the junta a chance to demonstrate its goodwill.[56] Put differently, the coup inspired a very brief moment of hope, however flawed and fleeting.

The problem, of course, is that the JRG proceeded to do everything but demonstrate its goodwill. Unwilling to trust that the new, still essentially military-led government signaled real change for El Salvador, the revolutionary opposition remained active. Within days of the coup, an unidentified group bombed electrical substations in San Salvador, leaving huge swathes of the

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[52] Pettinà, *Historia Mínima de La Guerra Fría En América Latina*, 206–7.
[53] Harald Jung, "Class Struggle and Civil War in El Salvador," in *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War*, ed. Marvin E. Gettleman et al. (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1981), 89.
[54] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Telegrama Ordinario Recibido 386," October 16, 1979, Dirección de Comunicaciones, Caja 982, El Salvador Recibidos 1 al 606 y expedidos 1 al 363, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.
[55] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Cable Secreto 434," October 25, 1979, Dirección de Comunicaciones, Caja 982, El Salvador Recibidos 1 al 606 y expedidos 1 al 363, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.
[56] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Telegrama Ordinario Recibido 391," October 18, 1979, Dirección de Comunicaciones, Caja 982, El Salvador Recibidos 1 al 606 y expedidos 1 al 363, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto; Riding, "The Cross and the Sword in Latin America," 196.

city in the dark, and the Popular Revolutionary Block (*Bloque Popular Revolucionario*, BPR), El Salvador's biggest civil revolutionary organization, began a highly visible and disruptive occupation of the Ministries of Economy and Work.[57] Instead of responding to these disturbances with reform and dialogue as they had promised, the JRG quickly settled into a new pattern of dysfunction: reform-minded members of the junta would propose a reform, conservative members would block its practical implementation, revolutionary organizations would get frustrated and demonstrate, and then security forces would brutally crack down on the demonstrations.[58] When days turned to weeks turned to months without any meaningful reform or end to the violence, it became clear that the first JRG would fail.

Archbishop Romero was quick to realize that something was seriously wrong with the junta. He began expressing doubts about his "wait and see" approach as early as October 21, lamenting in his homily from that day that the JRG had given a very important position to a military officer that had served in President Romero's cabinet. Peña, in reporting this back to Buenos Aires, wrote that the military officer in question was almost certainly Col. Rafael Flores Lima, who just been named Director of El Salvador's Military Academy.[59] In the very same note, Peña reported that the JRG had met with the new heads of El Salvador's law enforcement agencies (*cuerpos de seguridad*) to coordinate order and public safety, and none other than Col. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova was there in his freshly appointed role as Director of the

[57] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Atentados en Subestaciones dejan a obscuras la Capital," October 19, 1979, Sección América Latina, Caja 42, El Salvador, 1979, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto; Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Telegrama Ordinario Recibido 432," October 25, 1979, Dirección de Comunicaciones, Caja 982, El Salvador Recibidos 1 al 606 y expedidos 1 al 363, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.
[58] Jung, "Class Struggle and Civil War in El Salvador," 87.
[59] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Informar sobre reunión de jefes de Cuerpos de Seguridad con Junta," October 22, 1979, Sección América Latina, Caja 42, El Salvador, 1979, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.

National Guard.[60] Whether the JRG ever genuinely intended to implement reform or not, the presence of figures like Flores Lima and Vides Casanova did not bode well.

The issue of ongoing repression came to a head on January 3, 1980 when all civilian members of the junta and cabinet resigned in protest.[61] A second JRG was formed a few days later out of an agreement between the military and the Christian Democratic Party (PDC), but it civilian members were remarkably weak.[62] The military was, for all intents and purposes, in charge of El Salvador once again. The three men at the top of this new military structure were Col. Majano, the reformer, Col. Gutiérrez, Majano's October 15 co-conspirator, and Gen. José Guillermo García Merino, Minister of Defense since the coup. Both Gutiérrez and García were considered reliably conservative, so it is perhaps not at all surprising that they clashed with Majano. In fact, the January 3 resignations had been triggered by an attempt to remove García from his position as Defense Minister. Majano and the civilian members of the government blamed García for the unending wave of violence, so they forced a vote amongst military officials. One-hundred-and-twenty-two voted in favor of keeping García versus just 22 against.[63] The hard-right's grip on power tightened.

Argentine officials, watching from the sidelines, had good reason to be optimistic. Though Peña lamented the "demagoguery" of the JRG's calls for reform and sent the occasional panicked report that the junta had ceded control to the extreme left, his confidence in leading

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[60] In El Salvador at this time, the three law enforcement agencies—the National Guard, National Police, and Treasury Police—were part of the military.
[61] Coatsworth, "The Cold War in Central America," 208.
[62] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Entrevista c/Canciller Chávez Mena evaluación situación El Salvador. Relaciones bilaterales," June 15, 1980, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.
[63] William M. LeoGrande, "A Splendid Little War: Drawing the Line in El Salvador," in *El Salvador: Central America in the New Cold War*, ed. Marvin E. Gettleman et al. (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1981), 364; Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Informa s/situación política y sublevación ala izquierda ejército. resultado prisión sublevados," January 22, 1980, Colección Forti, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.

military officers was strong.[64] On October 29, 1979, he wrote in a cable to Buenos Aires that Vides Casanova and García were gaining increased relevance in the face of ongoing agitation by the revolutionary opposition.[65] Vides Casanova, of course, was a known quantity to Argentine officials, having led a Salvadoran military delegation to Buenos Aires in late 1978. García may not have had the same ties, but he gave the Argentine military dictatorship every reason to believe that he too was virulently anti-communist and inclined to their methods of unflinching repression.

García was, like several members of the Argentine high command, a graduate of the School of the Americas (SOA), an infamous military academy run by the United States Department of Defense.[66] Founded as the Latin American Ground School in 1946 and located in the Panama Canal Zone until 1984, the SOA is well-known for teaching repressive tactics of counterinsurgency warfare and for producing some of the hemispheres worst human rights violators.[67] For El Salvador and Argentina, not to mention most of Latin America, the School of the Americas served as yet another point of connection. Salvadoran and Argentine officials who studied there would have very likely been taught the same methods of repression. The Argentine military dictatorship's great triumph in the 1970s, and the reason that figures like García might

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[64] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Cable Secreto 395/396," October 17, 1979, Dirección de Comunicaciones, Caja 982, El Salvador Recibidos 1 al 606 y expedidos 1 al 363, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto; Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Cable Secreto 434"; Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Informa s/situación política y sublevación ala izquierda ejército. resultado prisión sublevados."

[65] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Cable Secreto 446," October 29, 1980, Dirección de Comunicaciones, Caja 982, El Salvador Recibidos 1 al 606 y expedidos 1 al 363, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.

[66] US Defense Intelligence Agency, "Biographic Sketch: General Jose Guillermo Garcia Merino," January 1983, UWCHR Central America Database.

[67] The School of the Americas is still in operation today, albeit under a different name and in a new location. Now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, it is located at Fort Moore (formerly Fort Benning) in Columbus, Georgia and continues to train young military officers from across the hemisphere. For a detailed study of the School of the Americas that brings its significance into the 21st century, see Lesley Gill, *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas*, American Encounters/Global Interactions (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

look to Argentina as an example despite having received a similar military education, was in their practical application of those techniques. Salvadoran military officials saw the Argentine military dictatorship as succeeding in a counterinsurgency situation very similar to their own, and that, more than anything, is what drove them to seek out Argentina's expertise.

García himself was eager to learn more about Argentina's experience. In February 1980, after having survived the ouster attempt, García told Peña that the problem of extremist violence could not be solved with political measures, as the JRG wanted, and that he wanted to get closer to the Argentine armed forces. Peña responded enthusiastically, reminding García of the offers that Argentina had made over the years to train Salvadoran officials so that "they can take advantage of our experience in the fight against subversion and terrorism." He gave García information about courses in counterinsurgency and intelligence, as well as a copy of a book, *El terrorismo en la Argentina,* that Argentina had been sending to government officials across Latin America.[68] The conversation left Peña with a sense of expectation, and he ended the cable reporting all of this with a prescient observation that a full-blown rupture between the military and its civilian collaborators in the PDC could not be far away.

Upon looking more closely at this conversation, it becomes evident what Argentina represented to El Salvador. On one end of the spectrum, there was the political solution favored by Majano, Archbishop Romero, and the civilian members of the junta. It posited that the violence and chaos in El Salvador was the result of local injustices—repression, wealth inequality, and political exclusion—that could be resolved by aggressive reform. On the other end, there was the Argentine solution favored by the likes of García, Gutiérrez, Vides Casanova,

[68] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Conversación con Ministro Defensa Cnel Garcia s/situaciòn política El Salvador. Entrega a este de informe lucha c/subversión en Argentina - opinión.," February 18, 1980, Colección Forti, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.

and Flores Lima. It assumed that the violence in El Salvador was the result of an international communist conspiracy and therefore could only be resolved by outright annihilation of the opposition. García makes this dichotomy clear by positioning his desire to get closer to the Argentine armed forces directly opposite his disavowal of a political solution. Argentina was, for the right-wing of the military, a vision for how to deal with unrest, a vision that was winning.

Peña was right about a rupture between the military and the PDC being imminent. In March, the second JRG collapsed after a sizable portion of the PDC decided that they too could no longer stomach complicity in ongoing human rights abuses. The third JRG that formed in its wake was even weaker and less relevant, consisting, as it did, of only military representatives and José Napoleón Duarte, the same PDC leader who had been exiled after 1972 and whose tolerance for repression would later become infamous.[69] March, however, stands out for another, infinitely more tragic development. Archbishop Romero was murdered on March 24, 1980, four years to the day after the military dictatorship seized power in Argentina.[70] The symbolic impact of his death—El Salvador's most prominent advocate of justice, her greatest symbol of hope dead from an assassin's bullet—was staggering. For the reform-minded, the revolutionary, and the regular people alike, it was an unimaginable blow.

After Romero's murder, the situation in El Salvador only deteriorated. His funeral procession turned into a massacre when smoke bombs exploded on the street outside San Salvador's Metropolitan Cathedral and men, according to several accounts, members of the security forces, open fired into the crowd. By the end of the day, some 50 people were dead and

[69] Pettinà, *Historia Mínima de La Guerra Fría En América Latina*, 207. Duarte returned to El Salvador from Venezuela very shortly after the October 15, 1979 coup.
[70] Pettinà, 208.

another 600 wounded.[71] In May, hundreds more people lost their lives at Río Sumpul in one of the country's more famous rural massacres.[72] That same month, Majano tried to have Roberto D'Aubuisson, the death squad leader almost certainly behind Romero's assassination, arrested, but it served only to set off massive protests from the far-right and weaken Majano politically.[73] People disappeared from the streets of San Salvador every day, and by June, violence in the capital city got so terrible that the new Argentine ambassador to El Salvador, Víctor José Bianculli, asked Buenos Aires for more security guards and a "small submachine gun," among other weapons.[74] In response to this atmosphere of doom, the militant and civilian revolutionary opposition coalesced around FMLN and FDR, respectively, and began preparing for war. Each side was fortifying its positions. Battlelines were being drawn.

Despite what Bianculli called the "extreme climate of violence" in El Salvador,[75] Argentine aid to the country did not change much. Argentina continued to offer military training

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[71] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Informa sobre despedida restos Mons. Romero," March 31, 1980, Colección Forti, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto; Pettinà, *Historia Mínima de La Guerra Fría En América Latina*, 208.

[72] "De La Locura a La Esperanza," 126–29. The massacre at Río Sumpul stands out because of the role of Honduran armed forces. Río Sumpul is located on the border between Honduras and El Salvador in an area that was considered a hotbed of *guerrilla* activity. In a classic "pincer" operation, Honduran forces lined up on the opposite side of Río Sumpul on the morning of the massacre, so that when Salvadoran forces pushed the civilian population up against the river, they had nowhere to escape. The coordination of violence among Central American states—particularly El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—is a pressing subject that has received far too little attention.

[73] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Prensa no oficial sobre manifestaciones Embajada EEUU," May 13, 1980, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriories, Comercio Internacional y Culto; Jung, "Class Struggle and Civil War in El Salvador," 89. Roberto D'Aubuisson was, like García, a School of the Americas graduate.

[74] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Solicita custodia embajada por violencia en El Salvador," June 17, 1980, Colección Forti, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto; Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Informa medidas seguridad ara traslado hasta casa presidencial y comentarios embjadar EEUU sobre conocimiento intentos de secuestro embajadores Argentina y Guatemala," June 20, 1980, Colección Forti, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto; Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Solic. compra de armas defensivas- sin marcas marca de entidades oficiales Argentina," July 15, 1980, Colección Forti, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.

[75] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Solicita custodia embajada por violencia en El Salvador."

in intelligence and counterinsurgency and El Salvador continued to accept.[76] If anything, Bianculli enjoyed a more intimate relationship with the Salvadoran high command than his predecessor, and his conversations offer greater insight into their motivations. Soon after assuming his post, Bianculli met with all five members of the JRG. Gutiérrez was presiding over the meeting that day and asked that Bianculli sit directly to his right. Gutiérrez then proceeded to use this opportunity to tell Bianculli all about his desire to send a military delegation to Argentina to "internalize the antisubversive fight" and his interest in military scholarships for mid-level officials. "He indicated," Bianculli wrote in a cable to Buenos Aires, "the similarity between the Argentine and Salvadoran processes, expressing that the current Argentine government had managed to overcome the violence, defeating subversion."[77] Like García, Gutiérrez saw in Argentina a successful model for defeating subversion that Salvadoran officials could learn and then implement at home.

Bianculli had a similar conversation with Vides Casanova in November. Bianculli had gone to the National Guard headquarters to give Vides Casanova a copy of *El terrorismo en la Argentina,* the same book Peña had given García some nine months earlier, and found him fuming about an alleged Communist war plan, complete with a letter addressed to Fidel Castro, that guardsmen had discovered in a raid. According to Bianculli's account of their conversation, Vides Casanova told Bianculli that, given the seriousness of this discovery, he had been petitioning the junta to "take the necessary measures of force and give him free rein to do away

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[76] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Interés Canciller y Mtro de Defensa s/ posibilidad de cursos en inteligencia y lucha antisubversiva- delegación militar a la Argentina," July 18, 1980, Colección Forti, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto; Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Mtro. de Defensa entrega nomina oficiales seleccionados a realizar cursos otorgados," October 9, 1980, Colección Forti, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.

[77] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Informa reunión con miembros junta gob. Cnel. Abdul Gutierrez. Intenciones envio mision militar a Argentina p/informarse lucha antisubversiva," June 19, 1980, Colección Forti, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.

with all these subversives and *guerrilleros* once and for all as they had done in Argentina."[78] Vides Casanova was itching to use the methods of repression that he had presumably learned in 1978, to meet unrest with terror, and to respond to the people's legitimate demands for justice with only greater cruelty.

What changed between 1978 and 1980, if not the nature of Argentine aid, was the ranks of power to which Argentine aid spoke. In 1978 and 1979, when the Argentine military dictatorship first started reaching out to El Salvador, they were in closest contact with then mid-level officials like Vides Casanova and Flores Lima. Now they had the ears and admiration of four of the most powerful members of the Salvadoran military. As if to drive this point home, the weeks between November and December 1980 were rocked by four paradigm-shifting developments. On November 27, six FDR leaders were abducted from a press conference in broad daylight, tortured, and murdered by a death squad known as the Maximiliano Hernández Martínez Brigade acting in conjunction with security forces.[79] At roughly the same time, advisors from the newly elected Reagan administration met with representatives from El Salvador to promise the regime military and economic aid.[80] Then on December 2, three American nuns and one American laywoman were detained and executed by National Guardsmen—members of the security force that Vides Casanova directed—acting on orders.[81] Shortly thereafter, Majano was expelled from the JRG in a surprise vote.[82] To Salvadorans and outside observers alike, the

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[78] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Entrevista con Vides Casanova entrega libro Terrorismo en la Argentina- lucha antisubversiva a la manera argentina," November 17, 1980, Colección Forti, Archivo Histórico de Cancillería - Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto.

[79] "De La Locura a La Esperanza," 55–59. Just as the FMLN's name paid homage to Agustín Farabundo Martí, a peasant leader from the 1930s, the Maximiliano Hernández Martínez Brigade was named after the military leader responsible for repressing the uprising in "La Matanza."

[80] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Informe situación en El Salvador- Bianculli repudia políticia DDHH de Carter."

[81] "De La Locura a La Esperanza," 60–65.

[82] Embajada Argentina en El Salvador, "Informe situación en El Salvador- Bianculli repudia políticia DDHH de Carter." Majano was later arrested and sent into exile, spending his life since between Mexico and Canada.

collective significance of these four events was obvious: freed from both internal and external pressure to respect human rights, the Salvadoran military was going to brazenly go after its enemies, and no one, not prominent opposition leaders, not even US citizens, was safe. War *a la manera argentina* had arrived in El Salvador.

Conclusion

The real story of the October 15, 1979 coup and the year that followed is that it flushed out the Salvadoran military's old guard and replaced them with new officers who were no less repressive but younger, more energetic, and more willing to consult outside powers like Argentina. William LeoGrande perhaps put it best when he wrote, "The right-wing coup… occurred slowly, by degrees, not in the streets but in the high councils of the office corps."[83] Gutiérrez served as Vice President of the JRG and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Force until May 1982;[84] García remained Minister of Defense until April 1983, when he was replaced by Vides Casanova;[85] and Flores Lima went on to be Chief of the Armed Force General Staff and Commander of the Army before joining Vides Casanova as the Deputy Minister of Defense in 1983.[86] With each cycle of chaos and collapse in the Revolutionary Governing Junta, García, Gutiérrez, Vides Casanova, and Flores Lima inched closer to the center of power until in December 1980 they *were* the center of power. As they rose so too did Argentine influence in El Salvador.

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[83] LeoGrande, "A Splendid Little War," 366.
[84] Associated Press, "Salvadoran Army Leader Resigns," *New York Times*, May 18, 1982, National edition, sec. A, New York Times Archive; US Defense Intelligence Agency, "Biographic Sketch: General Jaime Abdul Gutierrez," March 1982, UWCHR Central America Database.
[85] US Defense Intelligence Agency, "Biographic Sketch: Brigadier General Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, Army," March 1989, UWCHR Central America Database.
[86] US Defense Intelligence Agency, "Biographic Sketch: Brigadier General Rafael Flores Lima, Army," November 1987, UWCHR Central America Database.

The relationship between El Salvador and Argentina was consultative in that it was built on notions of expertise. Both El Salvador and Argentina had long histories of military repression, but within the specific historical context of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Argentine military dictatorship had a special expertise in repressive technologies that El Salvador's new right-wing military leaders were eager to consult. Carrying out more granular archival studies such as this one allows us to better understand the idiosyncratic ways that Latin American states reproduced the Cold War along more local and regional lines. The Cold War in Latin America, as elsewhere in the so-called "Third World," was born out of a tangled web of local contestations of wealth and power, conflicting regional visions of identity, and international pressure, and we see that reflected in the many nuances of El Salvador and Argentina's relationship.

Beyond reiterating Gilbert Joseph and Daniela Spenser's call for more regionally informed narratives of the Latin American Cold War, this project points to two particularly promising areas for further research. First, it serves as added proof of concept for the study of bilateral relations between Latin American countries during the Cold War. Diplomatic cables from the Argentine *Cancillería* reveal remarkable insights into not only the Argentine military dictatorship's vision for Latin America but also the Salvadoran military leadership's vision for their own country. In an uneven archival landscape, such diplomatic sources offer the opportunity to address critical gaps in the historical record and de-center the United States in discourse around the Latin American Cold War. Based on the results of this project and the work of scholars like Julieta Rostica and Molly Avery, there is reason to believe that diplomatic archives from elsewhere in the Southern Cone have more to reveal about the conflict in El Salvador and that as we go about constructing more bilateral studies, we will also construct a more complete picture of the Cold War in Latin America.

The second area touched upon in this paper that deserves greater scholarly attention are the broader regional networks that linked anticommunist actors from across Latin America. In contrast to the relatively standard *asesoramiento* described here, these kinds of networks suggest a far more integrated apparatus for the coordination of repression of which Operation Condor—an agreement through which Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, Brazil, and later Ecuador and Peru targeted dissidents in exile—is the most well-documented example. Given the number of individuals disappeared in neighboring countries and the presence of Argentine and Chilean advisors, some scholars and human rights activists suspect that an Operation Condor-like system was extended to Central America in the 1970s and 1980s.[87] The clandestine nature of such arrangements make them difficult to research via standard diplomatic sources, but the accelerating declassification of military documents from this period as well as more creative studies in oral and biographical sources may well bring new light to this especially murky corner of the Latin American Cold War.

Histories of repression and resistance in Cold War Latin America matter because they are, in many ways, still unfolding. Thousands of families in both El Salvador and Argentina continue to search for loved ones that disappeared as a result of state terror during the 1970s and 1980s. Sometimes a seemingly academic exercise in archival research brings clarity to the fate of an individual after more than 45 years of agonizing uncertainty for their family. [88] What's more,

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[87] See J. Patrice McSherry, "The Central American Connection," in *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2005). One of the key points that McSherry makes in her book is that telecommunications systems played an indispensable role in Operation Condor. With this information in mind, it is interesting to note that after resigning from the JRG, Gutiérrez went on to lead El Salvador's national communications company, ANTEL.

[88] I am immensely fortunate to have been introduced to this work as an undergraduate researcher with the University of Washington Center for Human Rights (UWCHR). The Center's *Unfinished Sentences* project uses Freedom of Information Act Requests to document human rights abuses stemming from El Salvador's armed conflict, and early on in my time with the project, one of our requests did bring clarity to the fate of several individuals 45 years after they were murdered by the National Guard. While it is always my sincerest wish that this work did not have to exist, I am overwhelmingly grateful for and humbled by the opportunity to play even the smallest part in such efforts.

official governments documents, often lost to dusty archives and dug up by historians as in this project, serve as important pieces of evidence in ongoing efforts to prosecute repressors in both countries. Concepts of closure and justice are far too neat for these circumstances, but when dealing with such pain, any effort toward healing is well worth it.

Furthermore, remembering that the regimes' crimes were not unfortunate side effects of societal upheaval, but rather calculated acts of violence and terror is a powerful rebuke to those who attempt to silence this history. The past several years have seen a resurgence of the far-right across Latin America, including in El Salvador and Argentina. In El Salvador, more than 70,000 people have been arbitrarily detained since President Nayib Bukele declared a state of emergency (*estado de excepción*) in March 2022. Though the purpose of these detentions is ostensibly to crackdown on the country's rampant gang violence, state security forces have also detained environmental activists, human rights defenders, labor leaders, and others that they consider "dissidents."[89] In Argentina, President Javier Milei, who assumed power in December 2023 after winning in a landslide election, has questioned the history of state terror in Argentina, saying that "in the 1970s there was 'a war' in which state forces committed 'excesses.'"[90] His Vice President, Victoria Villarruel, comes from a military family stretching back generations and has built her entire image around promoting what she calls "complete memory," or the idea that Argentina's public historical memory of the dictatorship's crimes is wrong and should be dismantled.[91] To figures such as these, histories of repression are threatening because they dredge up uncomfortable realizations about our present.

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[89] Zedryk Raziel, "El régimen de excepción de Bukele como instrumento para aplastar la disidencia," *El País*, October 10, 2023, https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-10-10/el-regimen-de-excepcion-de-bukele-como-instrumento-para-aplastar-las-disidencias.html.
[90] Marcia Carmo, "Quién es Victoria Villarruel, la vicepresidenta de Milei que desafía el consenso sobre la dictadura militar argentina," *BBC News Brasil*, November 20, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/cg3pr3vq98vo.
[91] Carmo.

Once again, the warning, "Be careful, do not upset the authorities, or they will accuse you of being a subversive" from the August 28, 1977 edition of *ORIENTACIÓN* rings all too true. The difference this time around is that it is Argentina looking to El Salvador for a successful model of repression. In a reversal of the trips that Vides Casanova and Flores Lima took to Buenos Aires in 1978 and 1979, Milei sent an aide to San Salvador last year to study "Bukelismo." Questioned about it in an interview, Milei simply explained, "We are studying it because it has been extremely successful."[92] History may not repeat itself, but it does build on the infrastructure of the past. Milei and Bukele are but the most recent inheritors of a relationship that extends back to the 1970s. The fundamental truths revealed by the history of this relationship between El Salvador and Argentina—about the nature of power, its abuses, and the transnational mobility of repression—are just as relevant today.

[92] Zedryk Raziel, "Nayib Bukele's Authoritarianism Infects Latin American Politics," *El País*, August 21, 2023, https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-08-21/nayib-bukeles-authoritarianism-infects-latin-american-politics.html.

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