
The Migration of Salvadoran Social Activists into the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area: A Research Proposal

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Abstract

Various factors lead to the “unprecedented” migration of millions of Central Americans, and more specifically, Salvadorans, to the United States (Lungo Uglés, 1996). One of the factors was an ongoing civil war in El Salvador throughout the 1980s and early 1990s that quickly gained U.S. support, and contributed to the deaths of at least 80,000 people and the displacement of roughly 20 percent of the total Salvadoran population (Cordova, 2005). This study looks at a specific subset of Salvadorans that migrated to the United States during and after the conclusion of the war. Through qualitative methodology, the use of case studies, and a literature review on texts highlighting social activists in Latin America, this study attempts to examine what the motives were for Salvadoran social activists to migrate to the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area after participating in a 12-year civil war. By interviewing individuals that immigrated to the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area after participating in the Salvadoran civil war as social activists, this study will reveal information about this subset of Salvadorans such as: (1) their immigration process, (2) their current living situation in the U.S., (3) their ties with El Salvador despite leaving that country, (4) their experiences within the war as social activists, and (5) their thoughts on the result of the war. Moreover, this study will also reveal information about the social movement itself in El Salvador before and during the war, along with its distinct characteristics.

Introduction

I was entering my third year in college when I, along with other curious second generation Latino students, learned and became conscious to the fact that we lived amongst the second largest community of Salvadoran-Americans in the United States. We learned this fact through our United States Latino Studies course, where we also learned about the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Chicano Movement in the 1960s, and the various migration waves of Latin Americans throughout the 1900s, among other key moments that lead up to the state of Latinos in the U.S. today. Learning about Latinos in the U.S. was a new experience for my classmates and I, as we got the opportunity to learn about our history for the first time in a classroom environment. This class pushed my inner thrive to learn more about my own Salvadoran history and understand *why* my family members decided to follow a migration wave into the United States. I soon learned that the majority of my family that left El Salvador in the 1980s did so for their safety. They fled El Salvador in the middle of what felt like a never-ending civil war, and migrated along with thousands of other Salvadorans to the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area. Finally being able to understand the reasons for thousands of Salvadorans to emigrate from their troubled country allowed me to somehow feel connected with my Salvadoran history. For the first time, I could explain why so many Salvadorans now live in the United States.

As a second-generation Salvadoran-American growing up in Prince George’s County, Maryland, I had learned very little about not only my own identity as a Latino, but also my identity as a Salvadoran-American living in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area. Coming from a family that migrated to the United States as early as 1975, and living in an area with a large Salvadoran population, I developed an interest to learn more about my identities as a Latino and as a second-generation Salvadoran-American. Unfortunately, learning about my identity could not be accomplished through K-12 school, as little to no emphasis was put into teaching about Latinos in the U.S. This study is, in a way, an opportunity for me to learn more about my identity and Salvadoran history, as well as the identities and histories other second generation Salvadoran-Americans who went through the same or similar experiences as I have.

This study is merely a continuation of my curiosity to learn more about my Salvadoran history and its complexities. While learning about the Salvadoran civil war and its makeup, I was curious to learn more about the social activists that challenged their government for political change. I knew that I had an aunt who lives in Maryland that identified herself as a social activist, but it was something that she preferred not to talk about. Once I learned about the patriotism that social activists displayed for their country through the written stories of Eugenia, a commander in the FMLN;

Omar Cabezas, a social activist from Nicaragua; and various other stories from a book titled “Sandino’s Daughters,” I knew that fighting for their beliefs was the number one priority, and they would stop at nothing to complete their goals. I wondered why, then, a social activist would decide to migrate to the U.S. after fighting for a cause that this country actively fights against. Through a qualitative methodology and the use of interviews, this study will attempt to uncover what the motives were for Salvadoran social activists to migrate to the U.S. after participating in a 12-year civil war.

A Glance at the Salvadoran Civil War

This paper will make references to the Salvadoran civil war in order to have a better understanding of how historical events in El Salvador lead up to the present context of Salvadorans living in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area. The Salvadoran civil war officially lasted 12 years, from 1980 until 1992. This war was fought between a U.S.-backed Salvadoran government and a Left-wing organization comprised largely of peasants, laborers, students, and others, called the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, or the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), that “began a military campaign against the [Salvadoran] military forces and repressive government organizations” (Cordova, 2005).

In 1980, extreme Right-wing death squads were formed, targeting “labor leaders, intellectuals, professionals, organizers, Catholic priests, lay workers, and anyone who attempted to change the social system (Cordova 2005). These individuals were responsible for the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, a vocal and nationally known activist within the Catholic Church who preached about Liberation Theology and the freedom of the oppressed. As stated by Cordova (2005), “the early 1980s were marked by an escalation of military repression, political assassinations, and large-scale violations of human rights in the civilian population.” In this classic Left versus Right war, the conclusion was dealt with by the United Nations through a peace accords signed in 1992 by the Salvadoran President Cristiani and the FMLN. The accords lead to the demobilization of both parties’ troops, and formally ended a war that left 80,000 people dead and forced a displacement of 20 percent of the total Salvadoran population (Cordova, 2005).

Salvadorans Migrate to Washington, D.C.

Throughout the 1980s and continuing onto the 21st century, Washington, D.C. has evolved into the third largest home for Central American migrants, whether documented or undocumented, in the United States of America (Repak, 1995). As stated by Repak (1995), “in recent decades, increasing numbers of Central Americans were leaving their countries because of internal wars, human rights abuses, and economic hardships... Washington, D.C. [has] become a magnet for international migrants.” Of all the Central American migrants, however, Salvadorans have established the most noticeable presence. In the mid 1990s, *The Washington Post* “estimated that 80,000 Salvadorans lived in the District and 100,000 more resided in the surrounding suburbs” (Repak, 1995). 180,000 migrants in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area alone are staggering numbers in comparison to the 15,000 Salvadorans that legally entered the United States in the 1960s (Repak, 1995). The high rate of Salvadoran migration into the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area has been an ongoing phenomenon since the 1970s, correlating with events that happened prior to, and during El Salvador’s 12-year long “popular” civil war (Cordova, 2005). Throughout the prolonged civil war, El Salvador faced a displacement of 20 percent of its total population as thousands of individuals sought to escape government repression and economic constraints in their home country. The majority of these individuals migrated to the U.S. (Cordova, 2005).

Washington, D.C. has become a centralized location for developing Salvadoran communities as “the Salvadoran population settled mostly...near the area of Adams Morgan, Park and 14th Street; and 16th street and Columbia Road, N.W.,” and then later dispersed throughout the suburbs of Maryland and Virginia (Luna, 2008). Seeking a land of better opportunities, Salvadorans who escaped the civil unrest of their country made Washington, D.C. their new home – a city that just so happens to be the face of the U.S. federal government. This is ironic because while job opportunities were booming in Washington, D.C., Salvadoran migrants ended up living in the same city where key U.S. government figures made decisions on national immigration and foreign aid policies that directly affected them and their country. Salvadoran migrants lived next door to the government officials that decided to aid the Salvadoran government during the civil war, aiding mainly through military efforts that contributed to thousands of deaths in a 12-year span. During these times, however, the new Salvadoran migrants probably cared more about their financial success rather than where their political views stood. If that meant going to the nation’s capital, then so be it.

Research Questions

The research questions that will guide this study attempt to merge the topics of social activism and migration together in order to get a better understanding of the social conditions in which FMLN supporters lived through in El Salvador and to help uncover why they decided to migrate into the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area. Past research from Repak (1995) does not mention whether the migrants interviewed for that book were actively involved in the Salvadoran civil war or not. This leaves readers to make the assumption that most, if not all, Salvadoran migrants did not play a role in the civil war. This study focuses on a particular sub-group of migrants that were involved in the Leftist movement during the Salvadoran civil war. Throughout this study, the following question and sub questions will be addressed:

1. What were the motives for Salvadoran social activists to migrate to the United States after participating in a 12-year civil war?
 - a. What has happened to the Salvadoran social activists that migrated to the United States?
 - b. What attitudinal changes do they have after the war?

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is twofold. In one hand, this study will contribute to the scholarly work of authors such as Repak (1995) and Cordova (2005) on Salvadoran migration into the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area. This will be done by studying a subset of the Salvadoran migrant group that lives in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area despite their participation in the social movements during El Salvador's civil war. The second portion of this study involves delving into the lives of social activists as they recall their experiences during the FMLN movements, and then share why they made the decision to migrate to a country that they once referred to as their "enemy" (Alegria, 1987). The purpose of doing this is so that readers could gain a better understanding as to why Salvadorans emigrated from their country and settled in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area. In this case, the Salvadorans who emigrated were not only civilians, but also individuals who played active roles throughout the war.

Significance of Research

The significance behind this research could be substantial from a historical perspective. In the literature used to help guide this study, authors have never taken into consideration the fact that there may be Salvadoran migrants living in the U.S. today who were involved in social activist movements. This could possibly be because social activists in Latin America were simply not expected to leave their country. They were sworn to do anything within their power to overthrow their country's government. This meant that emigrating from their country would be considered an act of betrayal for abandoning their people and not living up to the expectations of fighting for a revolution until their death (Alegria, 1987).

This study would be the first step into documenting a different aspect of the Salvadoran migration into the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area. Another significance and contribution of this research is that it will help reveal information about the social movement in El Salvador itself, through the eyes of social activists before, during, and after their active participation in the war. Gender issues and recruiting methods will be revealed in this study through the eyes of the individuals being interviewed, as well as how the Salvadoran social movement differs from other movements in Latin America. The individuals interviewed in this study will be asked to explain the various gender roles in the FMLN, as well as the recruiting methods that FMLN employed. This will help reinforce the idea that women played essential roles in revolutionary movements, help determine to what extent females were allowed to take part in a revolution, and help reveal how FMLN was able to recruit members into their organization.

Literature Review

In order to get a better understanding of the social conditions that the FMLN supporters lived through in El Salvador, one must first learn about the Salvadoran civil war itself. This section will provide an overview of events leading up to the civil war, including the first major peasant revolt in 1932, and the formation of FMLN through various organizations. This section will also give an overview of the influence that the U.S. had on this war by aiding the Salvadoran military in an effort to prevent the FMLN supporters from winning the war and overthrowing the current government.

Background

Throughout the mid 1800s and onto the early 1900s, El Salvador served as an agricultural supplier, producing indigo and coffee as its main crops (Schmidt, 1996). By the late 1800s, however, coffee sales surpassed that of indigo. The high demand for coffee meant better opportunities for El Salvador to increase its national income. According to Schmidt, “large estates dedicated to this crop became the basis of the wealth of the famous ‘14 families,’ a new oligarchy whose grip over Salvadoran life contributed to the development of revolutionary conditions” (1996). Exporting coffee proved to be successful for El Salvador until the great depression severely impacted coffee prices. The individuals that suffered the most from this depression were the indigenous and peasants that worked the land in El Salvador. The poor working conditions that these individuals lived through from having “no money, food, or shelter,” caused them to revolt against the oligarchy government (Cordova, 2005). This revolt, which was deemed a communist threat, was unsuccessful as the Salvadoran National Guard executed anywhere from 10,000 to 30,000 indigenous workers in a span of three weeks (Cordova, 2005). The National Guard also assassinated the rebels’ leader, Farabundo Martí, whose name would be taken up in the 1980s by the guerrilla organization, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).

Political and economic tension continued from 1932 until the start of the Salvadoran civil war, as military presidents reigned and used military force to suppress anyone that spoke out against the government. The economic state of El Salvador was also unbalanced, as it went in the favor of only the wealthiest families in the country. By the 1960s, income distribution was noticeably unequal. In 1961, 12 percent of rural families were landless, and by 1975, the percentage went up to 29 (Lungo Uclés, 1996). Lungo Uclés (1996) notes the following:

Between 1960 and 1979, Salvadoran industry expanded at an average rate of better than 6 percent per year – almost twice the pace of growth of the agricultural sector. Few of these benefits reached the Salvadoran lower classes, however, particularly those in the countryside.

If one were to simply glance at the Salvadoran industrial production and Gross Domestic Product on a national scale without knowledge of the unbalanced income distribution, El Salvador would look like an economically flourishing country. The unequal income distribution on social classes, however, is one of various reasons that lead the country of El Salvador into war. Lungo Uclés (1996) notes how unequal the income distribution was:

Income distribution was highly unequal: 63 percent of Salvadoran families earned slightly more than 28 percent of total income, averaging less than 10 dollars per month per family; the wealthiest 6.2 percent of families, on the other hand, gained the share of total income, averaging about 650 dollars each. The poorest 20 percent of Salvadorans earned one-fiftieth of the country’s income, while the most comfortable 20 percent earned two-thirds.

As the income distribution became even more unbalanced, labor unions began to form to seek better wages, better working environments, and benefits (such as health care for workers). In the 1970s and 1980s, the Catholic Church also became active in its practice of Liberation Theology, which “address the social realities of the poor in this world” (Cordova, 2005). Archbishop Óscar Romero increasingly took the side of the poor, preaching Liberation Theology not only in masses, but also in his own radio show. As a result of priests working with students and labor workers, various organizations were created such as Young Christian Students, Young Christian Workers, Young Christian Farm Workers, etc. (Cordova, 2005).

The Salvadoran government identified student-based organizations and labor unions as communist movements. By the late 1970s, death squads were formed through the military and national police force (Cordova, 2005). Members of the death squads were typically soldiers or policemen dressed in plain clothes that would target and assassinate any particular person or group that was thought to have communist intentions. Only weeks after Archbishop Romero wrote a letter to President Jimmy Carter pleading to not send military aid to El Salvador, a member of the Salvadoran death squad shot him in the heart during mass (Cordova, 2005).

The Civil War

While the Salvadoran government was putting pressure to eliminate any communist efforts, there were Leftist organizations that were seeking a revolution in the country of El Salvador. With Cuba having a successful revolution, and Nicaragua on the verge of overthrowing the Somoza dictatorship, the Leftist organizations in El Salvador felt a pressure to have a revolution as well. In 1980, five different organizations merged together to form the Frente

Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, or Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) (Lungo Uclés, 1996). This militant and well-organized group of individuals had the proper recruitment strategies to gain forces and fight against the Salvadoran military. One of the most unique features of the Salvadoran civil war is the fact that women were active participants in the movement. From nurses to commanders, women were an integral part of the Salvadoran civil war. After the demobilization that took place in El Salvador, it was determined that “approximately 40 percent of the FMLN membership, 30 percent of the combatants, and 20 percent of the military leadership were women” (Kampwirth, 2002).

Despite Archbishop Romero’s plead to President Carter about not sponsoring the civil war, the U.S. gave the Salvadoran government \$5.9 million in direct aid for the war months later. Between 1980 and 1988, the amount of aid given to El Salvador from the U.S. reached \$3.4 billion, with a peak \$196.5 million given for direct aid to the war in 1984 alone (Lungo Uclés). That money allowed the Salvadoran military to purchase weaponry, pay soldiers, and make whatever other purchases they needed to defeat the FMLN forces. FMLN on the other hand, would have to use survival strategies to gain weaponry. Tactics such as taking a soldier’s gun and ammunition were critical for social activists in order to sustain constant attacks. While the war did start in the countryside, it gradually moved to the cities and became an urban warfare (Cordova, 2005).

After 12 years of continuous battle, 80,000 deaths, 9,000 disappearances, and about 20 percent of the total Salvadoran population was displaced (Cordova, 2005). It was also determined that “more than 95 percent of...human rights abuses were carried out by the armed forces and its death squad allies” (Kampwirth, 2002). In 1992, the Salvadoran civil war came to a conclusion. The United Nations mediated a peace accords between the Salvadoran President Cristiani and the FMLN. By December 14, 1992, both FMLN and the government troops were demobilized, and the end of the war was celebrated (Cordova, 2005). A year after the conclusion of the war, an amnesty law was enacted in El Salvador that protected both the military and the FMLN from any human rights abuse accusations. This law ultimately benefited more military members as the 95 percent of human rights abuses mentioned by Kampwirth (2002) would never be taken up in court. There is a disconnect between the awkward ending of the civil war and today, as no one besides the social activists know what happened to them after the war itself. This study will attempt to mend that disconnect so that it can be understood why some social activists decided to migrate to the U.S.

Methods

This empirical study will employ qualitative methodology, the use of case studies, and will analyze texts as well as images in order to gain an understanding as to why Salvadoran social activists migrated to the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area. For this study, 25 individuals will be asked to participate in individual interviews. These individuals should be Salvadorans that currently reside in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area, and were participants of the Salvadoran activist movements during the civil war. Of the 25 individuals, either 8 or 10 individuals will be selected for the study. Due to the nature of the study, half of the participants will be Male, and the other half will be Female. This will be to ensure that there are no bias results for the questions regarding gender roles in the movement. Questions that will be asked in the interviews will reveal information about the participants such as: their immigration process, what their current living situation is like in the U.S., whether or not they have ties with El Salvador despite leaving that country, their experiences within the war as social activists, and their thoughts on the results of the war. The interview questions can be found in the appendix of this paper. Images from social activist movements will be analyzed in this study in order to confirm the gender roles and relations.

Images

Images of social activists during the Salvadoran civil war will also be analyzed in this study. They can be found in an online site from a non-profit museum named “The Museum of the Word and the Image.” This museum is based in El Salvador, and is “dedicated to investigating, rescuing, preserving and displaying to the public various elements of Salvadoran history and culture” (Museo). The website has a database with pictures, videos, and books that have relevant information to the civil war. Once I obtain the right to use and analyze these images, they will be used to help confirm any descriptions that the interviewers may share. These images serve as proof that women were very much a part of the social activist movements, just like men.

Texts

Apart from the text used for the literature review portion of this research, various texts were read to help develop interview questions for the participants. Texts such as *Guerrilla Warfare*, by Ernesto Che Guevara; *Las mil y una Historias de Radio Venceremos* (*The thousand and one stories of Radio Venceremos*), by Jose Ignacio LópezVigil; *Fire From the Mountains*, by Omar Cabezas; *They Won't Take Me Alive*, by Claribel Alegría; *Sandino's Daughters*, and *Gathering Rage* by Margaret Randall. With the exception of *Guerrilla Warfare*, these books retell the stories of various social activists from El Salvador and Nicaragua. This is critical in understanding the social conditions that these individuals underwent while they were social activists in their countries. It is through these stories that one becomes aware of the struggles and triumphs of a social activist. Much of the information covered in these books is not found in articles. Topics such as gender issues in the social movements, recruitment efforts, the sustainability of a social activist organization, and the personal struggles of individuals can only be grasped through these texts. These texts will help guide and analyze the results of this study. *Guerrilla Warfare* is helpful in understanding the militant aspect of forming an organization that will forcefully overthrow a government, like in the case of Cuba. This text has been used as a manual for guerrilla forces in their revolutionary movements. Social activists in the novels read often make references to this manual.

Interviews

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, interviews are the means by which I will be collecting my verbal data. Since this study bridges the topics of migration into the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Area and social activism in El Salvador during the 1980s, the interview questions ask participants to reveal information such as (1) their immigration process, (2) their current living situation in the U.S., (3) their ties with El Salvador despite leaving that country, (4) their experiences within the war as social activists, and (5) their thoughts on the result of the war. In order to extract all this information, the interview questions have been organized in three groups: "Immigration," "El Salvador," and "Postwar." This will allow me to easily extract information in a more organized manner.

Conclusion

Since this study has not yet been implemented, this section will describe which part of the research phase I am in, what I plan to do in the upcoming year, and when I plan to conclude the study. The interview questions have been written (see appendix) and are ready to be used pending approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). I expect to get approval from the IRB in the upcoming weeks so that I can begin to look for potential interviewees. Due to the delicate nature of this study, it is important to gain the trust of each individual that will be interviewed. For this reason, I plan on first interviewing my aunt who considers herself a social activist. From there, I will ask for her help to obtain the number of participants needed. The interviews of each applicant with their transcripts should be completed by the end of Fall 2010 semester. I will then continue this study by analyzing the interviews and images during Spring 2011, and will finalize the project by next year.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions/Preguntas de entrevista

Immigration/inmigración

How long have you been living in the United States?
¿Cuánto tiempo tiene de vivir en los Estados Unidos?

Where in the United States do you reside?
¿Dónde vive en los EE.UU.?

What influenced your decision to immigrate to the United States?
¿Cuáles factores influyeron su decisión de emigrar a los EE.UU.?

Why did you decide to live in the Washington, DC metropolitan area?
¿Por qué decidió vivir en el área metropolitana de Washington, D.C.?

What occupation do you currently have?
¿En qué trabaja?

¿How and why did you immigrate / come to the United States?
¿Cómo y por qué inmigró a los EE.UU.?

How would you describe your life in the United States today? Is it what you expected?
¿Cómo describiría su vida en los EE.UU.? ¿Es lo que usted esperaba?

Are you satisfied with your decision to immigrate? Why?
¿Cuán satisfecho/a está con su decisión de inmigrar? ¿Por qué?

El Salvador

Do you visit El Salvador? If yes, how often? Why?
¿Visita usted El Salvador? Si lo hace, ¿con cuánta frecuencia? ¿Por qué?

Did you leave any immediate family members in El Salvador? Who?
¿Tiene familia en El Salvador? ¿A quiénes?

What are your memories of El Salvador in the 1980s?
¿Qué memorias tiene de El Salvador en los años 80?

Were you involved in any social activist movements during the 1980s?
¿Estuvo usted involucrado/a en algún movimiento activista social en los 80?

How did you become involved? Why?
¿Cómo se incorporó? ¿Por qué?

How long did you participate?
¿Cuánto tiempo participó?

What or who influenced your decision to join the movement?
¿Qué o quiénes influyeron en su decisión a incorporarse al movimiento?

What contributions do you think you made to this movement?
¿Cómo contribuyó usted al movimiento?

How do you think others perceive you when they find out you were involved in the movement?
¿Cómo cree usted que otros lo/la perciben al saber que usted estuvo en el movimiento?

In your eyes, who was a part of the movement? Why did they join?
En su opinión, ¿quiénes formaron parte del movimiento? ¿Por qué participaron?

How involved were peasants in the movement (as suggested by Che Guevara)?
¿Cuán involucrados estuvieron los campesinos en el movimiento (como sugiere Che Guevara)?

What do you think was the average age for social activists in the movement?
Según usted, ¿cuál era el promedio de edad de los activistas en el movimiento?

In your opinion, how did the number of women compare to the number of men in the movement?
En su opinión, ¿cómo se comparaba el número de mujeres y hombres en el movimiento?

What were the different gender roles and relations like within the movement?
¿Cómo eran los roles de las mujeres y los hombres en el movimiento? ¿Cómo era las relaciones sociales entre ellos?

How were these social activists recruited?
¿Cómo se reclutaba activistas sociales al movimiento?

Do you think that the Catholic Church had an impact in recruitment efforts? How and why?
¿Piensa usted que la iglesia católica tuvo un impacto en el reclutamiento? ¿Cómo y por qué?

Postwar/postguerra

What are your thoughts about the result of the war?
¿Qué piensa usted ahora de la guerra y de sus resultados?

How has your involvement in the movement impacted your life today?
¿Cómo ha impactado su participación el movimiento en su vida actual?

Do you feel that your involvement in the movement affected your immigration process? Why and how?
¿Piensa usted que su participación en el movimiento ha afectado su proceso de inmigración hoy día? ¿Cómo y por qué?

Would you like to share anything else about your experience as a social activist?
¿Quisiera decir algo más sobre sus experiencias como activista social?

Thank you/Gracias
