A “LOST CASE OF GENOCIDE”: A NEW DATASET FOR MASSACRES IN EL SALVADORE DURING 1979–1991

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This article presents new data on the deliberate massacre of Salvadoran citizens targeted for their ideological beliefs during the civil war, 1979–1991. The contribution of quantitative research on violence against a specific group of civilians provides support for claims of malicious and systemic actions perpetrated by the State. This article includes estimates of civilians killed in 152 massacre events listed on the Monument to Truth and Memory in San Salvador, El Salvador and a table of 32 massacre events and estimated fatalities not listed on the memorial wall as evidence for the lost history of El Salvador. My hope is that future research and teaching in the field of genocide studies will give the El Salvador case greater attention so that additional prosecutions will occur for those responsible. And consequently, potential future perpetrators of atrocities will not view the El Salvador case as one in which the perpetrators circumvented justice.

Keywords: politicide, genocide, massacre, El Salvador

JEL Code: Y1, Z1

1. Introduction

El Salvador in the 1980’s appears to be a lost case of genocide. While the killings were not on the same scale nor did they receive the same notoriety as genocides like the Nazi Holocaust or the Rwandan genocide in 1994, the Political Instability Task Force (PITF) still classifies the period as genocide/politicide. PITF is a United States government sponsored research project devoted to building a database on major political conflicts under the direction of Monty G. Marshall, Ted Robert Gurr, and Barbara Harff at the University of Maryland Center for International Development and Conflict Management (PITF Problem Set Codebook 2014). Empirical models based on the PITF dataset have gone a long way in identifying risk factors for genocide, considering how such atrocities might be prevented, and improving forecasting of genocide. As just one example, Harff’s (2003) foundational empirical work identified six factors that predicted with 74 percent accuracy between state crises (i.e. intrastate wars and regime failures) that do and those that do not lead

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to genocide/politicide. Given the valuable and reputable source material available about genocide/politicide why then is El Salvador not one of the countries included in most recognized literature on the subject of genocide? In response to this lacuna, I introduce a new dataset of massacres to evidence the intentional and malicious killings perpetrated by the Salvadoran government and National Army against civilian members or perceived members of the left-wing political party from 1979-1991 during the civil war.

The target group of the genocide/politicide in El Salvador was the left-wing guerilla movement. Although generalized in many publications as simply “the Left,” in fact many organizations and political parties fall under this label. The civil war erupted when tensions between the guerilla movement and government rose over the inequality of social classes, poverty, and repressive military rule. Mere reformers were targeted as “the Left” as well, such as teachers, farmers, and the clergy (most notably Oscar Romero) who were asking for mild reform to improve the common good. Mark Danner notes that the “ideological overcharge” caused the deaths of many innocent victims suspected of guerilla activity because the National Army had internalized the mentality of “if you are not with me you are against me, and if you are against me then I have to destroy you” (Danner 1993, 42). The State “murder[ed] men, women, and children en masse, without trial or investigation, simply because of the political sympathies of some of their number” (Danner 1993, 53). Clearly, the many organizations and activists collected under the label “left-wing political party” were systematically targeted.

The 1948 United Nation’s Genocide Convention’s definition of genocide covers acts committed against national, ethnical, racial, or religious groups, but not political groups. In 1988, Barbara Harff and Ted Robert Gurr addressed this omission by proposing the concept of politicide. However, political groups are still not included as targets in the U.N. genocide definition. This article focuses on the case of El Salvador, in which governing authorities assisted in the deliberate and systematic elimination of members and suspected members of the left-wing political party targeted for their ideological beliefs. The case is lost to the world – overlooked by domestic and international authorities, international tribunals, and scholars alike. The story of El Salvador must be told.

One crucial component of this lost case of genocide/politicide is the lost history of El Salvador. This is clearly evident in the memorial wall erected in the capital of San Salvador, The Monument to Truth and Memory, which bears the names of just 30,011 victims etched in black stone. While it stands as a massive image symbolically illustrating the magnitude of violence, it captures only approximately one third of the estimated 75,000 victims killed in the time period (Danner 1993, 10). Sparse records of the civil war violence exist and, with the exception a few of notorious assassinations, El Salvador received little international press coverage during the war.

In addition to 30,011 victim names, the Monument to Truth and Memory also lists 183 massacre cases from 1979-1991, evidence of a sustained period of oppressive violence. However, of these 183 occurrences, only a handful of large-scale massacres are included in publications on the Salvadoran civil war. Although a majority of the massacres are small-scale, the intentional victimization of a specific political group classifies this period of systemic violence as genocide/politicide. Nevertheless, the El Salvador case does not
appear in major case reading books in the field of genocide studies such as *Centuries of Genocide* (2012), nor even in edited books on genocides in Latin America such as *State Violence and Genocide in Latin America: The Cold War Years* (2010). El Salvador is indeed a “lost case” overlooked by genocide scholars.

In this article I introduce a new dataset of massacres in El Salvador from 1979 to 1991. This dataset may help scholars understand the gravity of violence that took place during the Salvadoran civil war and provoke future studies. I located data on 152, or 83 percent, of the massacres listed on the Monument to Truth and Memory, in addition to 32 other massacre occurrences. This is an important issue of justice, memory, and prevention; the dataset contribution serves to prevent future politicides committed by a State, potentially even within El Salvador, and ultimately promote peace. The plan of the paper is as follows: in section 2 presents the data, section 3 explains the move towards peace and justice and section 4 concludes.

2. Presenting the data

*Criteria and definitions*

To my knowledge, a dataset of this size documenting this number of massacre deaths in El Salvador has never been compiled. Because the State perpetrated the violence, very few records exist. In an effort to support the PITF findings, I will use their definition of genocide/politicide in my study:

> events involve[ing] the promotion, execution, and/or implied consent of sustained policies by governing elites or their agents or in the case of civil war, either of the contending authorities that result in the deaths of a substantial portion of a communal group or politicized non communal group…In politicides, groups are defined primarily in terms of their political opposition to the regime and dominant groups. Genocide and politicide are distinguished from state repression and terror. In cases of state terror authorities arrest, persecute or execute a few members of a group in ways designed to terrorize the majority of the group into passivity or acquiescence. In the case of genocide and politicide authorities physically exterminate enough (not necessarily all) members of a target group so that it can no longer pose any conceivable threat to their rule or interests. (PITF Problem Set Code Book 2014)

Additionally, four operational criteria are used to distinguish a case of genocide/politicide. First, the authorities’ complicity in mass murder must be established. Secondly, there must be evidence of a persistent, coherent pattern of action. Only sustained episodes of six months or more are included in PITF datasets in order to indicate a coherent pattern. The Salvadoran civil war violence lasted 1979-1991 and easily evidences a persistent pattern of action. Next, the victims counted are unarmed civilians, not combatants. And lastly, while PITF records fatalities, the body count is not a defining piece of a genocidal episode because “a ‘few hundred’ killed constitutes as much a genocide or politicide as the deaths of thousands if the victim group is small in number to begin with” (PITF Problem Set
Using this criterion, PITF classifies the period of 1980-1989 as genocide/politeici in El Salvador and I follow the same guidelines in this study.

**Data collection**

Locating details of massacre events proved to be quite difficult, likely due to the limited media exposure the civil war received. Over 25 journalists were killed during the civil war in attempts to mask the state sponsored violence, which discouraged many others from asking questions (Press Reference 2015). The government covered up a majority of episodes in El Salvador; journalists did not have access to or were even unaware of some massacre events. Additionally, very few records and interviews of victims exist, a result of the scorched earth war tactic, literally leaving nothing behind. Mark Danner, for instance, details the journey of journalists Raymond Bonner from the New York Times and Alma Guillermoprieto from the Washington Post to report on the El Mozote massacre:

> They had come very close to El Mozote. In less than an hour, they could have seen for themselves the burned buildings, the ruined sacristy, and the bodies. But, with the soldiers’ refusal to go on, the Americans faced the choice of heading on across open country…without protection or turning back. (Danner 1993, 109)

Two months later four Dutch journalists included in this dataset would be killed while reporting in El Salvador. The threat of reporting the truth and the actions of the State was severe and authoritarian rule allowed for the covering up of some massacres.

In light of the lack of Salvadoran sources detailing the history of these massacres, I used the LexisNexis Academic database, composed of over 17,000 business, legal, and news sources, to locate newspaper articles and wire posts to determine the date and reported death totals for each massacre. The LexisNexis database includes more than 3,000 newspapers from across the globe (including Latin America), over 2,000 magazine and journal articles, and numerous wire services such as The Associated Press. Another similar project, the Latin American Political Project based out of Midwestern State University, also used LexisNexis as their primary source. This similar data collection project seeks to create country specific data sets covering all domestic protests in the Latin American region and includes data on El Salvador 1979–1991 (Garrison 2001). Similarly, Professor Steve Garrison found the LexisNexis database of worldwide publications to be most reliable. And, as with Garrison’s dataset, if a death total was published as a range, I documented the lowest estimate. Additionally, I employed a number of other sources to supplement news articles such as documents published by the Center for Accountability and Justice and web sources. The body counts that could not be found are further evidence for the suggestion of the “lost” and under-researched case of El Salvador.

**Patterns and trends**

Table 1 contains 152 massacres listed on The Monument to Truth and Memory in San Salvador from 1979–1991. According to my findings, a total of 7,941 Salvadoran citizens
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<td>Gedda, George (1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Las Delicias, Ciudad Delgado, San Salvador</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17-Jan-81</td>
<td>Garrison, Steve R (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Las Mesitas, Jiquilisco, Usulutan</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23-Jul-81</td>
<td>(1981) 30 More Bodies Found</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Reported Deaths</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Source</th>
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A "Lost Case of Genocide": A New Dataset for Massacres in El Salvador During 1979–1991
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Reported Deaths</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>“Guinda de Mayo”, Nueva Trinidad, Arcatao San Antonio de la Cruz,</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>May 27 - Jun 9 1982</td>
<td>Karl, Terry (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Isidro Labrador, Chalatenango</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Conacastada, Tecoluca, San Vicente</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24-Aug-82</td>
<td>Sentencia del Cuarto Tribunal International (2012) [Sentence of the 4th International Tribunal]</td>
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<tr>
<td>La Peña, Arcatao, Chalatenango</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>29-May-82</td>
<td>Dillon, Sam (1982)</td>
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<tr>
<td>La Pita, Tecoluca, San Vicente</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>25-Jan-82</td>
<td>Calderon Ruiz, Bersabe Altagracion (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Pita, Zacatecoluca, la Paz</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>26-Jan-82</td>
<td>Newhagen, John E. (1982)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Managuara, Sesori, San Miguel</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1-Sep-82</td>
<td>Calderon Ruiz, Bersabe Altagracion (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Eduvigis, Zacatecoluca, La Paz</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26-Jan-82</td>
<td>Newhagen, John E. (1982)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bermuda, Suchitoto, Cuscatlan</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15-Mar-83</td>
<td>Beltrhan, Raul (1983)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Reported Deaths</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Source</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Copapayo, Suchitoto, Cuscatlan</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>4-Nov-83</td>
<td>Beltrhan, Raul (1983)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Las Hojas, San Antonio del Monte, Sonsonate</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>22-Feb-83</td>
<td>Ross, Oakland (1984)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copapayo, Suchitoto, Cuscatlan</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>4-Apr-84</td>
<td>Beltrhan, Raul (1983)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cueva la Tigra, Tejutepeque, Cabañas</td>
<td>[Grouped]</td>
<td>18-Jul-84</td>
<td>[Grouped]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Las Piletas, Apastepeque, San Vicente</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9-Apr-84</td>
<td>[Grouped]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Río Gualsinga, Nueva Trinidad, Chalatenango</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>30-Aug-84</td>
<td>Drudge, Michael (1984)</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Felipe, San Pedro Masahuat, La Paz</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4-May-84</td>
<td>Garrison, Steve R (2001)</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Francisco Echeverria, Tejutepeque, Cabañas</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>18-Jul-84</td>
<td>Beltrhan, Raul (1984)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Los Miranda, San Antonio de la Cruz, Chalatenango</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6-Nov-85</td>
<td>[Grouped]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arcatao, Chalatenango</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8-Apr-86</td>
<td>[Grouped]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chupamiel, Arcatao, Chalatenango</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12-Jun-86</td>
<td>[Grouped]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Sebastian, San Vicente</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21-Sep-88</td>
<td>Calderon Ruiz, Bersabe Altagracia (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Cruz Paraiso, Tecoluca, San Vicente</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24-Feb-86</td>
<td>[Grouped]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veragua, San Antonio Los Ranchos, Chalatenango</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19-Jun-86</td>
<td>[Grouped]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Reported Deaths</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Calero, Dulce Nombre de Maria, Chalatenango</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8-Jun-87</td>
<td><a href="http://www.marxists.org/espanol/tematica/elsalvador/cronologia/index.htm">http://www.marxists.org/espanol/tematica/elsalvador/cronologia/index.htm</a></td>
</tr>
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<td>Laguna Seca, San Antonio del Mosco, San Miguel</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22-Jan-87</td>
<td>LeMoyne, James (1987)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Sebastian, San Vicente</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21-Sep-88</td>
<td>Mine, Douglas Grant (1988)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chupadero, Dulce Nombre de Maria, Chalatenango</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13-Feb-89</td>
<td>Chavez, Eda (1989)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
died in the 152 massacres found. 31 of the massacres listed on the Monument to Truth and Memory could not be found in LexisNexis (or on other web sources). 83 percent of the massacres listed on the memorial wall have documentation. The 17 percent of unaccounted for massacres provides an incentive for authorities to continue the pursuit of justice and truth.

Table 2. Additional massacres not listed on the Monument to Truth and Memory, 1979-1991

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Reported Deaths</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Azacualpa</td>
<td>Santa Ana</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Calderon Ruiz, Bersabe Altagracia (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chalchuapa</td>
<td>Santa Ana</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Apr-79</td>
<td>Calderon Ruiz, Bersabe Altagracia (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Vega</td>
<td>San Vicente</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Karl, Terry L (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hacienda Colina</td>
<td>Cuscatlan</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17-Mar-80</td>
<td>Karl, Terry L (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tacachico</td>
<td>La Libertad</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>18-Mar-80</td>
<td>Karl, Terry L (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Ildefonsito</td>
<td>San Vicente</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29-Mar-80</td>
<td>Karl, Terry L (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Mirador</td>
<td>Santa Ana</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Jul-80</td>
<td>Karl, Terry L (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IglesiaAzacualpa</td>
<td>Santa Ana</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Mar-81</td>
<td>Calderon Ruiz, Bersabe Altagracia (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CutumayCamones</td>
<td>Santa Ana</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>15-Jan-81</td>
<td>Calderon Ruiz, Bersabe Altagracia (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Lotes</td>
<td>San Vicente</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19-Aug-81</td>
<td>Calderon Ruiz, Bersabe Altagracia (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Las Mesas</td>
<td>Usulutan</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12-Dec-81</td>
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<td>Palo Blanco</td>
<td>Lago Ilopango</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4-Mar-82</td>
<td>Calderon Ruiz, Bersabe Altagracia (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>desvio Santa Rita</td>
<td>Chalatenango</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17-Mar-82</td>
<td>Calderon Ruiz, Bersabe Altagracia (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hacienda La Florida</td>
<td>Santa Ana</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Jul-82</td>
<td>Calderon Ruiz, Bersabe Altagracia (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Juan Buena Vista</td>
<td>San Vicente</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>26-Aug-82</td>
<td>Calderon Ruiz, Bersabe Altagracia (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Elena</td>
<td>Usulutan</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Nov-82</td>
<td>Calderon Ruiz, Bersabe Altagracia (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quillo</td>
<td>Morazan</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27-Jan-83</td>
<td>Calderon Ruiz, Bersabe Altagracia (2007)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition, Table 2 contains 32 massacres not listed on the memorial wall summing to 816 civilian deaths. This contribution assists in demonstrating that no possible collection of massacres is exclusive. The State covered up violence and human rights violations. New information about the war is still coming to light in the present day.

The two tables combine for 184 massacres and 8,757 deaths. This number falls well short of the PITF mid-point fatality estimate of 49,500, likely for a few reasons (State Failure Problem Set 1955–2010). First, as already mentioned, this list of massacres is in no way exclusive. Additionally, numerous small-scale killings occurred that may have never been recorded. As few accurate records were taken, many innocent civilians were killed in the crossfire throughout the decade. PITF does not emphasize body count and states that small-scale genocides/politicides are just as valid, especially when the victim group is small to begin with. Lastly, the PITF findings are estimates and may include disappeared persons. Neither the Political Instability Task Force nor the Uppsala Conflict Data Program offers this kind of specific (micro) data for the Salvadoran civil war; and while not a complete dataset, it is the first contribution of its kind.

This dataset is concrete evidence of a “persistent, coherent action” against unarmed civilians by an authority group. Figure 1 illustrates the death totals per year and Figure 2 illustrates the number of massacre events stretching over thirteen years. The magnitude of violence peaks early on in the war, at its highest between 1980 and 1982. Although the quantity of massacres per year decreases as the war progresses, this data indicates systemic violence extending over more than a decade.
3. Working towards peace and justice

After two years of U.N. mediation talks, the civil war ended with the signing of the Chapultepec Accords on January 16, 1992. The peace accord assembled a U.N. Truth Commission to investigate the acts of violence committed during the war. This culminated in a report, *From Madness to Hope: The 12-year War in El Salvador*, documenting testimony from over 2,000 people regarding over 7,000 victims. The Commission announced that the Salvadoran military and its death squads had committed 85 percent of the war’s worst atrocities (Cooper and Hodge 2015). Although the report called for the dismissal of persons found responsible for these human rights violations, just days later President Cristiani
denounced the document and instated the General Amnesty Law for the Consolidation of Peace, citing the need for the country to forgive, forget, and move forward. The law granted “broad, absolute, unconditional amnesty for anyone that in whatever form had participated in the commission of political crimes, common crimes connected to political crimes and common crimes in which more than twenty persons took part, before January 1, 1992” (Popkin 2003, 211). This law prohibited the prosecution of war crimes and halted the pursuit of judicial justice for thousands of victims of the civil war (Roht-Arriaza 2012). In short, such laws seemed designed to turn the El Salvador politicide into a “lost case,” but this obviously does not obligate the genocide studies community to do the same.

That said, El Salvador continues to seek justice for the violence. In 2003, the Supreme Court ruled that trial judges may decide on a case-by-case basis if the amnesty law applies. Local courts have not used this approach to prosecute yet. President Marcos Funes publicly recognized and apologized for the State’s role in some of the most atrocious crimes, for instance acknowledging the largest massacre of the war at El Mozote in 2012. Nevertheless, victims still wait for judicial justice and the El Salvador case still seems to rest on the fringe of cases that genocide studies scholars consider.

Recently, there has been some reason to hope that those responsible for the crimes committed between 1979 and 1991 will be brought to justice. In 2008, the Center for Justice and Accountability filed a case in Spain against twenty members of the Salvadoran military involved with the massacre of six Jesuits and two women at the UCA in 1989. As a result of this filing, Boston authorities found former Salvadoran Vice Minister of Public Safety Inocente Orlando Montano living in Everett, MA. Montano conspired with other high officials to murder the Jesuits. At the time, Montano was only charged and imprisoned for immigration fraud and perjury. On April 8, 2015 the U.S. government filed the request seeking his extradition and the hearing took place on August 12, 2015. Judge Kimberly Swank approved the extradition order in February 2016, citing that “the government’s evidence shows (Montano) was a decision-maker and member of a group of officers who collectively ordered the unlawful killings of Jesuit priests” (The Guardian 2016). Montano’s extradition and the Jesuit Massacre Case hearing by the Spanish National Court may be the beginning of the pursuit of judicial justice both internationally and domestically (Center for Justice and Accountability 2015). If Montano is sent to Spain to stand trial, other defendants can be tried with him in absentia.

In the midst of the current violence in El Salvador, the pursuit of justice for the crime of genocide/politicide during the civil war becomes more relevant and crucial. El Salvador is ranked the second-most murderous nation in the world. Police and members of legislature currently openly discuss creating death squads to eliminate gangs and declare a state of siege in violent crime areas. A culture of impunity has ruled for over thirty-five years in El Salvador and must come to an end. Recently Amnesty International again called for a repeal of the amnesty law:

El Salvador’s Amnesty Law is not in accordance with international law and is also an affront to the thousands of victims of human rights abuses and their families. It is time now to repeal it and to permit that all the cases of torture, rape, killings and enforced
disappearances that took place during the conflict in the 1980’s are investigated and all 
those suspected of criminal responsibility be brought to trial. (Amnesty International 2015)

El Salvador sits in a precarious situation of repeating the horrific violence that ended 
just twenty-four years ago. There can be no peace without justice. Pursuing justice 
and naming this genocide/politicide is a critical step towards peace and non-violence. 
Furthermore, future research and teaching in genocide studies can help potential future 
perpetrators of atrocities against civilians to realize that El Salvador was not forgotten and 
that their actions will not be ignored either.

4. Conclusions: Contributions of the new data

The U.N. Truth Commission consolidated testimony received on mass executions that 
took place 1980-1982 into a succinct pattern of conduct which it described as: “members 
of the armed forces, in the course of anti-guerrilla operations, executed peasants – men, 
women and children who had offered no resistance – simply because they considered them 
to be guerrilla collaborators” (U.N. Security Council 1993). As a result of the apparent 
consistency of these events, the Commission states that these were not “isolated incidents 
where soldiers or their immediate superiors went to extremes” (U.N. Security Council 
1993). Instead:

these deaths formed part of a pattern of conduct, as a deliberate strategy of 
eliminating or terrifying the peasant population in areas where the guerrillas were 
active, the purpose being to deprive the guerrilla forces of this source of supplies 
and information and of the possibility of hiding or concealing themselves among 
that population. (U.N. Security Council 1993)

Since authorities dismissed reports of massacres and investigations were clearly not 
pursued, it is also evident that senior commanders knew of the events. The U.N. Truth 
Commission document refers to the violence against the peasant population as “deliberate, 
systematic, and indiscriminate.”

The new data set presented in this article serves as further support to the U.N. Truth 
Commission’s and PITF’s findings of systemic and deliberate violence. I argue that the 
violence perpetrated by the Salvadoran state against the left-wing political party and 
those innocents only tangentially associated with their concerns in the 1980’s is clearly 
characteristic of genocide/politicide. My hope is that this new data would foster further 
studies by scholars into the violence of the civil war and the State’s role in the genocide/ 
politicide. El Salvador’s state apparatus has a history of granting itself impunity for its 
crimes, and the full story needs to be told. Without justice for these vicious crimes of the 
civil war, there can be no peace and reconciliation. As violence currently increases again 
in El Salvador, the country stands vulnerable to repeating similar human rights violations 
and state sponsored violence.

President Cristiani’s desire for the country to forgive and forget by instating the amnesty 
law in 1992 has rendered the civil war a lost case of genocide. A policy of forgetting denies 
justice to the victims and might undermine prevention if potential future perpetrators
take the political “culture of forgetting” as an implicit sanction of everlasting impunity. In striving for justice in the unlawful death of thousands of Salvadorans over 30 years ago, and for the sake of genocide prevention, we must enforce the message that unjust violence committed by the State will never again go unpunished. The dataset offered in this article contributes to the call that the El Salvador case not be lost to the genocide studies community, that peace prevail in nations at risk of civil war, and that justice, memory, and genocide prevention continue to be vigorously pursued.

References

Articles


**Dataset:**


