

El Salvador



Sonsonate, El Salvador. Tens of thousands were killed in the 1932 uprising. *Courtesy of Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen.*

In 2006, EAAF conducted a mission to El Salvador at the request of Tutela Legal, the human rights office of the Archdiocese of San Salvador, to carry out a preliminary investigation into the 1932 massacre of Izalco.



BACKGROUND

In January 1932, a peasant uprising in western El Salvador led to the killing of between 10,000 and 30,000 indigenous people in the towns of Sonsonate, Izalco,

Sonzacate, Nahuizalco, Juayua, Salcoatitán, Ahuachapán, Tacuba, Santa Ana, and La Libertad by government security forces, in an incident known as *La Matanza*. Many leaders were executed from these indigenous communities and from the Communist Party, which was also involved in the rebellion.

In a coup the year before, General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez had seized power from President Arturo Araujo, who had been elected on promises of agricultural improvements and industrialization. According to Anderson, Hernández, who had been Araujo's Vice President, took advantage of unrest caused by collapsing coffee prices and the discontent among landed and military elites to depose Araujo.¹ Public dissension continued after Hernández assumed power.² Plans for a peasant uprising were uncovered by the government, and several organizers arrested, but fighting broke out nonetheless. According to several historians, indigenous communities were rebelling because of ethnic persecution from ladinos³ and in response to the depressed economy.⁴ In municipal elections held in early January 1932, many indigenous politicians were barred from office by fraud, and this served to focus discontent in some of the communities.⁵ The Salvadorean Communist Party was active in the uprising, and though the events of 1932 were construed by officials as a Communist plot, the party's influence varies

according to sources.⁶ Support for the Salvadorean Communist Party (*Partido Comunista Salvadoreño*, PCS) was mostly among ladino union workers in San Salvador, though the Party had achieved some success recruiting within the army as well. Because of these differences, the communists and the rural indigenous peasants were not a unified organization and the rebellion was not under a single coordinated leadership. The PCS believed neither group had sufficient weaponry or preparation for a revolution.⁷ According to the historian Erik Ching, "The rebellion appears to have been a conglomeration of uprisings by distinct communities, probably in contact with one another, striking at local power. The PCS apparently used what influence it had to convince the communities to synchronize their attacks and create the illusion of a single mass revolt."⁸

Still, under indigenous and communist leaders, the rebels seized control of several western towns in the first few days of the revolt, and some soldiers attempted to mutiny near San Salvador.⁹ But arrests among the communist ringleaders quickly disrupted their urban organization, and the mutinies were put down by officers in the Salvadorean Army. Once mobilized in the western region, the military response quickly overwhelmed the indigenous insurgents and brutal reprisals continued for several weeks.¹⁰ Hernández allegedly sent the army into the western region, with the support of civilian patrols com-

posed of ladino men, with orders to decimate the indigenous population. Reportedly, the victims were made to dig their own graves before being shot dead. Others were left lying on the surface; some were buried later by their families.

This is a controversial episode in Salvadorean history: while official versions describe it as a communist revolt, most scholars consider it a popular uprising that was violently

prominent role in El Salvador's conflicts. In the 1980s, the Maximiliano Hernández Martínez Brigade was created as a death squad named after the military dictator. The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, named after one of the Communist Party leaders executed in 1932, was a coalition formed by five left wing guerrilla groups during the civil war, and it has become one of the country's major political parties since the end of that conflict.¹⁴

legal proceedings. Tutela Legal plans to request that a judge order the exhumation of the remains of those killed in the massacre for humanitarian reasons.

EAAF Participation

EAAF has conducted nine missions to El Salvador since 1991. At the request of Tutela Legal, EAAF worked extensively on the forensic investigation of the El Mozote massacre, as

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repressed by the state. Historians often characterize the massacre as genocide, since El Salvador's indigenous population felt pressured to largely abandon their language and customs after the incident.¹¹ According to Burns, in El Salvador, indigenous culture had long been characterized as barbarous by ladinos and incompatible with national progress and civilization.¹² Prior to the massacre, a series of governments had actively persecuted and attempted to undercut indigenous identity, for instance, by dispossessing communal land holdings.¹³ Indigenous identity did not feature notably in the 1980s civil war, though the political aspects of the insurrection continued to play a

On January 22, 2007, on the 75th anniversary of the Izalco massacre, representatives of eight organizations devoted to the recovery of the memory and culture of indigenous peoples (SIHUA, FAMA, Papaluat, Asdei, Atiamitac, and CRN, among others) joined together to form the "Commission to Establish the Historical Truth of the Events of 1932." Since 2005, Tutela Legal, the human rights office of the Archdiocese of San Salvador, has been working with the Feliciano Ama Foundation (FAMA), named after one of the indigenous leaders killed during the incident, and the indigenous communities of Sonsonate to assist with the investigation and related

well as the massacres of La Quesera and El Barrio—all dating from the 1980s civil war.

From August 12 to 24, 2006, EAAF team member Silvana Turner travelled to El Salvador at the request of Tutela Legal to conduct a preliminary investigation into the 1932 massacre in Izalco. During the mission, EAAF reviewed testimonies collected by three members of Tutela Legal working on the case and completed ten interviews with witnesses and victims' relatives. Despite Tutela Legal's efforts, gaining direct access and gathering testimonies from witnesses is a difficult undertaking given their advanced age. The investigators



José Feliciano Ama, pictured above at left, was an indigenous leader of the rebellion in Izalco. He was imprisoned by the National Guard shortly after the rebellion's failure, but a mob seized him from the prison and executed him. *Photo courtesy of Museo de la Palabra y Imagen.* At right, indigenous leader Francisco Sánchez before his execution for his role in the rebellion of 1932. *Courtesy of Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen.*

believe that they will be able to compile a list of several hundred victims. The current objective of the commission does not include the identification of remains, but does have a focus on historical documentation,

and on establishing the sex, age, and minimum number of remains associated with the massacre. EAAF also met with representatives of two of the organizations forming the commission, FAMA and SIHUA.

EAAF researched documents that might offer information about the incident, such as newspapers from the time, photographs, chronicles, and historical and social analyses. Some of the material is housed at the Museum



The front page of *Diario Latino* on January 28th, 1932, detailing the success of the Salvadorean army in repressing the Communist rebellion. Photo by EAAF.

of the Word and Image in San Salvador, which made a documentary, *1932: Cicatriz de la Memoria*, about the massacre.

Tutela Legal focused its search for graves in the town of Izalco, one of the communities most affected by the killings. EAAF examined four sites for possible excavation. First, the team

inspected an 80 by 10 meter outdoor area belonging to the Church of Asunción. The church site, emblematic of the massacre, is where yearly commemorations take place and a memorial plaque is located. According to testimonies, bone remains were found at the site in the 1970s and 1980s during construction work. The other three locations EAAF inspected in Izalco are

currently streets, two of which had been paved since 1932.

EAAF also visited four possible burial sites in the town of Nahuizalco. The team examined a tree in the church courtyard, near which groups of people were reportedly executed and buried. Two sites visited were in open and broadly defined areas along coun-

try roads. At the Nahuizalco cemetery, EAAF inspected alleged graves of massacre victims, which had been reused for secondary burials.

In the town of Sacuatitlán, EAAF examined the patio and surrounding streets of San Miguel Arcángel Parish as a possible burial site. There was construction work underway on a building and an adjacent street. The parish priest informed EAAF that construction workers had uncovered what appeared to be human remains. The priest allegedly reburied the bones on church grounds without reporting the finding.

It is doubtful that the paved streets in Sacuatitlán and Izalco would contain intact burials. In Nahuizalco, the cemetery site and the two large areas along country roads are more promising, but it would be advisable to collect more testimonial evidence in order to better define the boundaries. The sites located on the church

grounds in Izalco and Nahuizalco show the most potential for exhumations and may be worth surveying and testing archaeologically.

Based on the analysis of these prospective grave sites, EAAF recommended that Tutela Legal continue the preliminary investigation by collecting more testimonies and historical documents. It is also important to broaden the investigation to other affected towns where burial sites have been reported and to examine these other possible burial sites in order to determine whether remains from the massacre might be found in undisturbed contexts. Finally, EAAF recommended that Tutela Legal begin working to secure authorization from judicial officials to proceed with exhumations, and to do so with the support of local authorities. This is necessary, considering that exhumations may take place on public or ecclesiastical land, and would require technical machinery and personnel for the excavation.

ENDNOTES

1. Grieb, Kenneth J. 1971. The United States and the Rise of General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 3(2): 151-172.
2. *Ibid.*
3. The term "ladino" refers to someone of mixed Spanish and indigenous descent.
4. Anderson, Thomas. 1992. *Matanza: The 1932 'Slaughter' that Traumatized a Nation, Shaping US-Salvadoran Policy to this Day*. Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press; see also Ching, Erik. 1998. In Search of the Party: The Communist Party, the Comintern, and the Peasant Rebellion of 1932 in El Salvador. *The Americas* 55(2): 204-239.
5. Ching, Erik. 1998. In Search of the Party: The Communist Party, the Comintern, and the Peasant Rebellion of 1932 in El Salvador. *The Americas* 55(2): 204-239.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Ching, Erik. 1998. In Search of the Party: The Communist Party, the Comintern, and the Peasant Rebellion of 1932 in El Salvador. *The Americas* 55(2): 204-239.
8. *Ibid.*, pg. 228-229.
9. Anderson, Thomas. 1992. *Matanza: The 1932 'Slaughter' that Traumatized a Nation, Shaping US-Salvadoran Policy to this Day*. Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press. p. 170.
10. Kincaid, A. Douglas. 1987. Peasants into Rebels: Community and Class in Rural El Salvador. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29(3): 466-494.
11. Anderson, Thomas. 1992. *Matanza: The 1932 'Slaughter' that Traumatized a Nation, Shaping US-Salvadoran Policy to this Day*. Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press. p. 170.
12. Burns, E. Bradford. 1985. The Intellectual Infrastructure of Modernization in El Salvador, 1870-1900. *The Americas* 41(3): 57-82.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Binford, Leigh. 1996. *The El Mozote Massacre: Anthropology and Human Rights*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

EAAF had the opportunity to work closely with María Julia Hernández and Their efforts were crucial to the investigation of the severe human rights for having known them and for their constant support and trust. Their

María Julia Hernández 1939-2007



Lic. María Julia Hernández speaking at a commemorative mass for victims of El Barrio massacre on April 2003. *EAAF Archive.*

María Julia Hernández, a sociologist and the director of Tutela Legal, died on March 30, 2007. At the Archdiocese of San Salvador, María Julia gathered the most extensive record of human rights abuses committed during the 1980-1992 conflict. She conducted investigations and provided legal representation to many victims of human rights violations, including the cases for the assassination of Monsignor Romero; the killing of six Jesuits, their housekeeper, and her daughter; and the massacres of El Mozote, El Sumpul, and El Barrio, among others.

Rufina Amaya over the last 15 years and greatly admired them. violations committed during El Salvador's 12-year civil war. EAAF is grateful courage and unrelenting search for truth and justice will be deeply missed.

Rufina Amaya 1943-2007



Rufina Amaya. Photo courtesy of Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos.

On March 6, 2007, Rufina Amaya passed away. Rufina was among the few survivors of the massacre of El Mozote, in which the armed forces killed over 800 Salvadoreans in December 1981. In 1989, represented by Tutela Legal, she and other survivors sued the Atlacatl Battalion, an elite counterinsurgency unit accused of being the main force implicated in the massacre. In December 2007, the film *"I AM NOT AFRAID," Rufina Amaya's Testimony* premiered at Austin College in Texas. Rufina narrated the film shortly before her death, recounting her experiences at El Mozote and thereafter.