



GALCON 2026

*Central America at the Crossroads: Cold War Proxy Conflict
and Regional Instability (1979–1981)*



**HSC Committee
Research Report**

Definitions

Central America Crisis

It is a period of political turmoil, civil wars, and intervention in Central America, specifically in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. It is set against the backdrop of the Cold War, where both the ideologies of the United States and the Soviet bloc intersect.¹

Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN)

A revolutionary movement in Nicaragua that deposed the Somoza dictatorship in July 1979 and created a new governing authority. The FSLN embraced reforms aligned to socialism and non-alignment principles and enjoyed strong ties with Cuba and the Soviet Union.²

Somoza Dynasty

A family-regime form of authoritarian rule in Nicaragua from 1936 until 1979, marked by political repression, the control of the economy, and a close relationship with U.S. strategic goals.³

Revolutionary Government Junta

The ruling body formed in El Salvador following the October 1979 military coup. The junta represented a blending of civilian and military elements that enjoyed the support of the United States but was opposed by armed left-wing groups.⁴

Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN)

Five left-wing guerrilla groups founded a coalition in El Salvador in 1980 to counter the Revolutionary Government Junta. The FMLN began a large-scale offensive across the country in January of 1981.⁵

Salvadoran Civil War

An armed conflict between the government of El Salvador and the FMLN escalated in 1979. The conflict was characterized by high levels of violence and foreign intervention.⁶

Counterins

Strategies applied by the government in combating chiefly left wing guerrilla warfare. In the case of Central America, the campaigns of counterinsurgency involved massive military actions and gross violations of human rights.⁷

¹ <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1981-1988/central-america>

² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sandinista>

³ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Somoza-family>

⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Carlos-Humberto-Romero>

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Farabundo-Marti-National-Liberation-Front>

⁶ <https://americanarchive.org/exhibits/newshour-cold-war/el-salvador>

⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/contra-Nicaraguan-counterrevolutionary>

War by Proxy

A type of conflict where outside nations aid both sides of the conflict indirectly. There was an indirect battle between the USA and the Soviet bloc from Central America during the Central America Crisis.⁸

Background

The Central American Crisis can be described as a dramatic phase in which a series of political violence and civil wars took place in the late 1970s and 1980s in countries such as Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. During this time, these countries were experiencing persistent conflicts involving issues such as land ownership, inequalities in wealth, and political power. Therefore, these events were not shocks, but were a direct consequence of the harsh situations under which these countries were operating.⁹ A major portion of the populations in these countries lived under a brutal dictatorship for decades, in which all wealth and power were controlled by a select few people, thus bringing into reality a great deal of resentment and opposition. Politics in this region was also dominated by the Cold War, where political ideology pulled political figures and movements towards their respective global camps. This created fertile ground for proxy wars and social and violent conflicts between governments and radical movements to take hold of the region.

The main major element that set the region alight was the Nicaraguan War which began in the 1960s as an uprising against the Somoza family, who ruled the country for over four decades with support from the United States of America. Following the downfall of this dictatorship in 1979 and the victory of the left wing militias known as the Sandinistas, Nicaragua adopted socialist government reforms.¹⁰ The United States of America disapproved of this new government due to its adoption of socialist policies and due to the Sandinista's very tight ties with USSR and Cuba, who can be considered two of America's most important rivals during the Cold War. The American administration considered this government to be a major threat to their security and interests in the region. This was especially true as the revolution in Nicaragua inspired other revolutionaries in Central America, leading to a strengthening of left-wing socialist movements all over the region. The US consequently increased its support of friendly figures, who tended to be anti-communist and right wing.

The tension led to another explosion, this time in El Salvador where the repression of left-wing movements and the military coup conducted by General Carlos Humberto Romero, who took over the civilian government, resulted in an uprising led by a new political group called 'Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front' which emerged in 1980. The FMLN was a combination of five left-wing groups, with support from the USSR and the left-wing regime in Cuba. In El Salvador, added repression and serious human rights violations by the government and military forced the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front to initiate a major offensive on January 10, 1981. This marked the start of the Salvadoran Civil War. In response to this outbreak of war, increased financial and

⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/proxy-war>

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Central_American

¹⁰ <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/central-america-carter>

military aid from the United States in support of the Salvadoran government ensued despite reports of serious violence and human rights abuses.

Tensions were also rising in Guatemala, which was also suffering from a civil war that began in the 1960s between the Guatemalan government and left-wing paramilitaries. Due to the rise, the success of the Nicaraguan revolution and the civil war in El Salvador, tensions reflected as battles raged on between the two sides. In a similar manner to the other conflicts in Central America, the civil war in Guatemala was a proxy war between the two major powers of the Cold War, where ideologies clashed and where social and economic disparities, geopolitical interests and wealth played a critical role in the motivations behind those who take up arms, regardless of which side they find themselves on.

Treaties and Organizations

Organization of American States (OAS¹¹): The Organization of American States is a major platform for regionalized diplomacy. Recently, they have become more proactive in ensuring that a state upholds rules of law, human rights, and electoral standards in countries where they have domestic turmoil.

The American Convention on Human Rights also referred to as The Pact of San José, Costa Rica¹²: is a human rights instrument adopted on 22 November 1969 in San José, Costa Rica. The convention is an important tool in the Inter-American Human Rights System because it aims to promote and protect human rights in America. The convention took effect on 18 July 1978 when a sufficient number of countries ratified it.

The Inter-American Convention to Prevent and Punish Torture: is an international agreement concluded in 1985 by the Organization of American States. The core purpose of this convention is to prevent torture and other cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment in the Americas.¹³

¹¹ <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/organization-american-states>

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Convention_on_Human_Rights?

¹³ <https://www.oas.org/juridico/english/treaties/a-51.html>

Current Situation

Our simulation takes place on January 26, 1981. Central America is embroiled in a regional crisis of revolution, civil war, and growing international intervention, largely fueled by Cold War competition in Washington and the Soviet bloc.¹⁴ In Nicaragua, the Left-Wing Sandinista government, which came to power in 1979, has started massive socialist reforms and endorsed strong relations with the USSR and Cuba. The US in turn acted by supporting anti-communist militias known as the Contras, who fought against Sandinista government forces.

Meanwhile, the Salvadorian government's fight against the left wing Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) led to wide range chaos and repression. The US and the CIA provide moral and intelligence support to government forces. In March 1980, pro-government forces assassinated Oscar Romero, the leading Catholic Bishop in El Salvador, due to his calls to end government violence. Martial law was declared and the government implemented scorched earth policies in its fight against the insurgents, leading to widespread negative effects on the local population.¹⁵

Meanwhile in Guatemala, governments actions and reactions from militiamen and protestors have turned the political climate into a tinderbox in an already raging civil war. In 1980 a group of peasant protestors occupied the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala City in protest of the killing of peasants in the previous weeks by Guatemalan military forces. This event turned the capital city into a city at war, with government forces fighting left wing militiamen in the streets. While the government regained control of the city later, an atmosphere of fear reigned as killings and disappearances were still very common. Guatemala welcomed the new year with more terror attacks by left-wing militias and more reprisals by the army and right-wing paramilitaries.¹⁶

Taken together, these interrelated crises transnationalized Central America into a flashpoint of Cold War rivalry whereby struggles over governance and inequality in this region were suddenly rendered indissolvable from schemes of ideological expansion by the great powers¹⁷. The tension in this region has great effects on all countries of the Western Hemisphere and beyond due to its strategic location close to the Panama canal and it serves as the bridge between North and South America. It also served as a proxy war for two global giants, USA and USSR. Consequently, world security and peace is at stake and it is up to the delegates of the Security Council to calm the waters and ensure the stability of the international order for years to come.

¹⁴ [Central America, 1977–1980](#)

¹⁵ <http://ebSCO.com/research-starters/history/archbishop-romero-assassinated>

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/audio/play/p03ggdft>

¹⁷ <https://newleftreview.org/issues/i135/articles/george-black-central-america-c>

Critical Events & Timeline

1979¹⁸

July 19, 1979 – The Sandinista Revolution of Nicaragua

The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) overthrew the Somoza dictatorship and thus ended the reign of the Somoza dynasty that had ruled for 40+ years. The provisional revolutionary government changed the whole political atmosphere in Central America and created concern in the U.S. government over the issue of the spread of socialism in the Cold War period.

October 15, 1979 – Coup d'état in El Salvador

The country experienced a military coup led by certain members of the military, and the dethroning of the president, Carlos Humberto Romero. The Revolutionary Government Junta (JRG) was established, and there was increased politically-motivated violence.

1980¹⁹

March 24, 1980 - Assassination of Archbishop Óscar Romero

Archbishop Romero, a vocal critic of the persecution by the Salvadoran government and human rights abuses in El Salvador, was tragically killed during a celebration of the Mass. The Archbishop's death acted as a catalyst for the escalation of the domestic crisis while also highlighting the human rights situation in the international community.

In 1980, there was an Escalation of Civil War in El Salvador

Violence escalated with the beginning of left-wing guerrilla activity against government forces on a larger scale. Death squads, mass killings, and targeted killings reached record highs, a major cause of mass displacement of civilians.

December 4, 1980 – Four U.S. Churchwomen

The four American Catholic churchwomen were raped and killed by the National Guardsmen of El Salvador. This incident shocked the international world and generated a good deal of pressure on the policymakers within the United States with regards to the future levels of assistance to the Salvadoran Government.

¹⁸ [Search - Office of the Historian](#)

¹⁹ [Archbishop Romero Is Assassinated | Research Starters | EBSCO Research](#)

Dec 22, 1980 – Leadership Rotation in El Salvador

José Napoleón Duarte headed the Revolutionary Government Junta. He thereby established a position for a civilian leader while the army had significant influence. His position categorized him as a leader of change.

1981

10/11 January 1981 – “Final Offensive” La FMLN

“Final Offensive” by La The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, which consisted of five leftwing guerrilla movements, kicked off a nationwide struggle against the Salvadoran army, which marked the beginning of this round of the civil war.

13th January 1981 – “Declaration of Martial Law in El Salvador”

Due to the FMLN offensive, the government in El Salvador declared martial law, stepped up armed operations, and aggression in the fight against insurgents.

January 26, 1981 – “Committee Start Date”

At this time, El Salvador had a full-blown civil war on its hands; Nicaragua fell under control of the Sandinistas; while Guatemala remained in a round of internal conflict. This regional crisis had the potential of becoming a central event of the Cold War struggle between the United States and the USSR.²⁰

²⁰ [20. El Salvador \(1927-present\)](#)

Questions to consider

1. What strategic, ideational, or economic interests were involved in your country's policy stance in 1979 regarding the events in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala?
2. To what extent did your country's economic interests and trade contribute to shaping its policy toward Central America?
3. If your country was among those able, or encouraged, to contribute, what justified military or financial involvement, and how was this justification presented domestically?
4. In what way did your country view the intervention of other states in Central America as necessary for security rather than as a violation of national sovereignty?
5. How did your country respond to credible allegations of human rights abuses, and where were the limits drawn between strategic interests and moral concerns?
6. How did your country react to regional actors who sought to resolve the crisis without the involvement of external powers?

Relevant Media



Helpful Resources

[U.S. Department of State – Central America, 1977-1980](#)

[U.S. Department of Defense – El Salvador, 1979-1992 Report](#)

[Encyclopedia Britannica – Nicaragua: The Sandinista Government](#)

[American Archive – Newshour Cold War: Nicaragua](#)

[Black, George – “Central America: Crisis in the Backyard” \(New Left Review, Issue 135\)](#)

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