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# From Dirty War To Psychological War: The Case Of El Salvador<sup>1</sup>

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## **War and democracy in El Salvador**

In order to understand the psychosocial problems of refugees, it is essential to gain an understanding of the unforeseen circumstances that led them to flee (see Kunz, 1981; Stein, 1981). A politician exiled after the derogation of a government is not the same as the professional who leaves his/her country in search of a vital space. Nor is it the same the one that flees tired of the violence of war to the one who has to escape to save his/her life, closely persecuted by death squads.

According to the official image, basically accepted by the large international mass media, since 1984,

El Salvador entered a process of democratization, a course initiated by fairly liberal presidential elections and, characterized by the opening of political spaces and a marked improvement in the respect for the population's human rights. Consequently, El Salvador would have stopped being "the black sheep" of the western world, to become an example of a small country that, with the help of the United States, would be struggling to arise from underdevelopment, and democratically fight the ambitions of international communism, that would pretend to make it a mere base for its hegemonic pretentions.

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<sup>1</sup> From Aaron, Adrienne (Ed.). *Fuga, Exilio y Retorno. La salud mental y el refugiado (Fugue, exile and return. Mental health and the refugee)*. San Francisco, California: Committee for Health Rights in Central America (CHRICA), 1988, pp. 3-22

Unfortunately, the official image is but a distorted one of reality, which is periodically questioned by internal events. Without going any further, during May and June 1987, a series of incidents led to fear the reappearance of death squads and, a reproduction of the worst forms of state terrorism experienced during 1981-1982. Amongst these events were the kidnapping, torture and beheading of a peasant union leader, the kidnapping and disappearance of three other union leaders and the arrest and slaughter of three peasants who managed to escape alive, all carried out by men identified as members of the Armed Forces. Similarly, the blasting of the premises of a committee of mothers of political prisoners and disappeared persons, and a new black list made public by the Anticommunist Secret Army (as an example, see the account about farmers slaughtered in Chalatenango, 1987). These facts have forced both, the government and the Armed Forces to immediately deny their responsibility and to renew their public commitment to democracy and respect for human rights.

The fear of the reappearance of state terrorism is to say the least naïve. The reason being that, if not in its form, but in its objectives, the dirty war has in no way ceased to be an essential ingredient of the socio-political project that the United States is trying to accomplish in El Salvador. Beyond ideological interpretations, from either side, the

figures leave no question. It shows that in 1986, there were no fewer than 122 murders in El Salvador attributed to the death squads, that is, ten murders per month, not counting other massacres and human rights violations, the most fundamental ones attributable to governmental forces (see IDHUCA, 1987, *Central American University Human Rights Institute*).

The reason being that the North American project has as its essential goal the eradication of the revolutionary movement, and only as a secondary or derivative goal, the establishment of democracy in the country. That is why, in the first instance, the idea was to accomplish the annihilation of the insurgent groups in a fast and brutal way, combining military action and a massive repression campaign of the civilian population. Nonetheless, after the failure of such campaign, a new phase of the project has been entered which aims to achieve the same objective, but under democratic forms that justify the project itself. This produces a permanent contradiction between military needs and political demands, between the objective of eliminating any significant opposition and protest, and the need to offer or to appear respectful of a free political game. Thus, the North American project for El Salvador has been forced to look for a form of dirty war that would allow it to achieve its ends whilst avoiding political costs. And the answer is

believed to have been found in psychological warfare.

Our thesis is that the psychological war that is currently being waged by the Armed Forces in El Salvador is heir to the dirty war that took place between 1980 and 1983. While this parallel warfare mode allows the achievement of the same objectives, and produces similar psychosocial consequences in the population, it also manages to preserve the image of formal democracy, which is so necessary for the United States to safeguard public opinion support, and even backing from other democratic governments regarding its policy in the area. Here, the intention is not to say that dirty war and psychological warfare are identical, but more so, that in the current phase of the Salvadoran conflict, psychological warfare is the new modality of the dirty war.

### **The parallel war**

We will examine our thesis by comparing three essential aspects of the dirty war and psychological warfare: their objectives, their means, and the psychosocial consequences they generate.

### **Objectives**

The dirty war is not only, nor perhaps primarily directed to those who openly take up arms against an established regime. The dirty war targets all those

individuals and sectors that constitute the insurgent's support base, being it material or intellectual, real or potential. However, as there is neither political nor legal justification to direct an entire army, or the security forces of a country against the civilian population, the task is entrusted to clandestine groups, the famous "death squads". In this way, a program of systematic elimination of real and potential enemies can be carried out without publicly tarnishing the image of the forces that execute it.

This is what happened in El Salvador between 1980 and 1983: groups of "armed men dressed in plain clothes" kidnapped, tortured, murdered and disappeared thousands of Salvadorans suspected of collaborating with the revolutionary movement or sympathizing with its cause. Between 1980 and 1983, conservative estimates rise to no less than 27,000 victims of this dirty war, namely, one in every two-hundred Salvadorans (see CUDI, 1980-1983 *University Documentation and Information Center, José Simeón Cañas Central American University*). These groups operated with total impunity, which would not have been possible without the connivance, support and sponsorship of the country's military and political powers.

The dirty war achieved three important objectives (a) to dismantle popular mass organizations: the very existence of organizations that were not

sympathetic to the government became impossible, and those militants who were not eliminated had to go to the mountains, into clandestine activity, or seized by terror, abandon the struggle, (b) to eliminate many of the most significant opposition figures: for example, the leadership of the Revolutionary Democratic Front (political body that groups the main opposition organizations); Dr. Felix Ulloa, Dean of the University of San Salvador, and the Archbishop of San Salvador, Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, and (c) to weaken the bases of support for the revolutionary movement in all sectors of the population: professionals, students, workers, peasants. In this sense, there is no doubt that the dirty war was successful, certainly a macabre success, but a success nonetheless.

On the other hand, the dirty war was also drawing serious costs: despite the anonymity with which the work of the squadrons was done, it was difficult to convince the world's public opinion that this could happen without the involvement of the official forces. It was then an arduous task to justify the almost unconditional support that the United States offered to a regime that was deserving of condemnation for its systematic violation of the most fundamental human rights, and it was even more difficult to obtain new international support.

At international forums, when it came to defend the Salvadoran regime, the

Reagan government remained practically alone, perhaps only with the company of the Pinochet, or the Stroessner regimes.

For this reason, since 1984, and in the face of the unexpected military successes of the insurgents, that even threatened to overthrow the national army, the need arose for a new phase in the Salvadoran war: it was necessary to continue with the project to eliminate the revolutionary movement, which required an intensification of counter-insurgency action, in particular of aerial warfare, but the political costs of the massive repression that hindered the development of the same military war had to be avoided. Therefore, it became necessary to initiate a legitimizing process of the war, and nothing more seductive to the Western world than formal democracy.

A process of democratization was then proposed that would advance along with the process of reconciliation, thus military conquests would be transformed into political victories, and political work would then guarantee popular victory. In this new phase, the figure of Napoleon Duarte would play a crucial role, both for his image as a democratic man and, for his connections with the Christian Democrat International, very influential in European and in Latin American countries.

If the establishment of a democracy had been genuinely pursued, and the structural causes of the conflict had been addressed, perhaps the new plan would have succeeded. However, this would have meant that the war would have become subordinated to democracy, and not the other way around, and therefore, it would have made war a political instrument, and not politics another instrument of war. This vision completely overflowed the diagnosis of the American government, convinced that in El Salvador they had to wage their particular war against Soviet expansionism and therefore, that the danger to peace and democracy came from the "communist aggression" and not from internal contradictions relating to oppressive misery and structural injustice. Hence, driven by the anticommunist obsession of the Reagan Administration, the new phase of the Salvadoran war has tried to apply the "low intensity conflict" doctrine (see Barry, 1986, Castro and Vergara, 1987), producing a formalist democracy totally dependent on the war strategy, namely to serve as a political cover for the continuation of a military war against the revolutionary movements.

According to Barry (1986, pp. 23-25), the low intensity war is waged on three fronts: the battlefield itself (using tactics similar to those of the guerrillas and trying to involve all social entities in the struggle), US institutions (such as Congress), and national and

international public opinion. Still, none of these three fronts adequately address the root causes of the Salvadoran war and consequently, the roots of discontent and rebellion. Therefore, as the previous one, the new phase has required a policy of systematic eradication of all support bases to the insurgent movement. Certainly, this elimination had to adopt new forms, which would respect the framework established by the low intensity war and, in the specific case of El Salvador, the formal demands of democracy.

Along these lines, the need for psychological warfare emerged, that is, for those programs that seek the obliteration of enemies, not through their physical elimination, but in addition by their psychic conquest. It is about annihilating the enemy as such, winning "their mind and their heart". In this way, it will no longer be necessary to bury in anonymity the authors of this parallel war, they can rather be praised as national patriots and heroes.

As a result, the psychological warfare developed in El Salvador is intended to be the democratized way to achieve the same results as in the dirty war. But then again, is it really a democratic way of waging war?

### **Means**

First of all, it must be emphasized that psychological warfare is, after all, a way of making war. As in the case of

dirty war, and in a nutshell, like any war, it seeks victory over the enemy through violence. To speak of a "democratic war" does not cease to be a contradiction. According to some, psychological warfare aims to conquer the minds and hearts of the population, in such a way as to discard any other political alternative (see Aguilera, 1986). For others, psychological warfare is only intended to "corrupt the adversary's social conscience" (Volkogonov, 1986, page 39).

Then again, in the best of cases, psychological warfare does not aim to achieve the population's political adherence as an objective in itself, or as the consequence of having responded to their personal and social needs, but rather as a means to prevent them from supporting the enemy. In other words, what is sought is the population's support, not in order to satisfy their demands, but to win their hearts and minds, even when their situation and conditions do not change, and their needs remain unfulfilled. What a military war and a dirty war seek through physical elimination, psychological warfare seeks through disqualification or mental disablement. As in the case of torture, psychic methods replace physical ones, but in both cases, it is about breaking the person, ceasing their autonomy and their ability to oppose, not about providing latitude for their freedom and their opportunities.

It is important to clarify that, as one might believe, psychological warfare is not limited to the sphere of public opinion, or that its methods are limited to propaganda campaigns. Psychological war aims to influence the whole person, not only their beliefs and points of view, and employs other means besides propaganda campaigns.

From a psychosocial point of view, the main resource employed by both, the dirty war and psychological warfare to eliminate support for the war enemy is the feeling of uncertainty, a feeling that is not objective at all, but rather that it faithfully responds to a definite social environment, intentionally created by the power holders (see Lira, Weinstein and Salamovich, 1985-1986).

To create this atmosphere of insecurity, the dirty war uses *terrifying repression*, that is, the visible execution of acts of cruelty that trigger massive and uncontrollable fear in the population. Thus, while repression itself accomplishes the physical elimination of those who are direct targets, its terrorizing nature tends to paralyze others who, in one way or another, can identify themselves with some aspect of the victim. Hence, the need for state terrorism, and in particular the dirty war, that the population becomes aware of the facts, even though publicity may be counterproductive as such.

Psychological warfare, to achieve its ends, also seeks to create a climate of

insecurity. Though, instead of using terrorizing repression, it employs what we might call *manipulative repression*. The matter is no longer to completely paralyze the civilian population, but to hinder their potential rebellion, or at least to prevent their effective support of the enemy. Therefore, it is necessary that people maintain their dose of fear, and this is achieved through systematic and unpredictable dosing of threats and stimuli, rewards and punishments, acts of intimidation and expressions of conditioned support.

In this manner, psychological warfare combines acts of "civic action" (a public welfare military approach) with operations of great military violence, supportive treatment of people after their unforeseen apprehension, as well as generous offers to the various groups and social sectors after grueling harassment. The enforcers of psychological warfare, at all times, assume an arrogant posture, which clearly indicates who is the master, who gives or takes away, who defines and decides. The militarization of both, everyday life and the main social spaces contribute to the omnipresence of overbearing control and repressive threat. Occasionally, an act of terrorizing repression will reawaken in the population the sense of acute fear. In this way, an environment of insecurity is fostered, unpredictable in its consequences, which demands from the people a complete submission to the dictates of power.

During torture, one of the most commonly used mechanisms of psychological pressure is to make the person feel alone, that their family, friends and colleagues have abandoned them, that no one cares for them anymore (see Watson, 1978, Coraminas and Ferré, 1978, Petera, 1985). Equally, in psychological warfare, one of the characteristic methods used is to make groups and sectors who may represent a potential support for the revolutionary movement feel alone. In El Salvador, attempts have been made to isolate people or organizations suspected of helping, or simply who sympathize with the insurgents, through all kinds of "sanitary cordons". There are fences and roadblocks that prevent those who live in zones of conflict from freely entering or leaving their towns, transport food or medicine and, even live and work there. Members of humanitarian organizations are systematically harassed, detained, interrogated and searched, if not threatened and imprisoned, injured and beaten. They are publicly accused of serving as a facade and as an instrument for revolutionary movements, and the threat of danger to their lives is permanently held over them. Moreover, as in the case of mothers' committees, when this permanent harassment is not enough to paralyze them, their premises are detonated as a clear warning that larger actions can be carried out.

In this context of insecurity, the official propaganda becomes stronger with its insistent invitation to "join the democratic process", given that "opposition can now be expressed and publicly channeled". Through a pervasive campaign, the mass media will continuously report real or presumed desertions of militant activists, along with information on the guerrilla's military failures, and their "desperate" recourse to the most despicable terrorism, thus fueling in the sympathizer a feeling of insecurity and abandonment. Namely, a sense of helplessness and futility in the face of a struggle that apparently has no future or meaning.

Both the dirty war and psychological warfare constitute ways to deny reality. In a dirty war, anonymity, clandestine activities and impunity turn the "death squads" into ghostly movements, even frightful to be spoken about. Moreover, the disappearance of many of its victims, systematically denied by official authorities, who even imply that they have probably joined the guerrillas, turns their existence and their task more unreal, more alien to the categories of reality.

In the case of psychological warfare, as such, everyday reality is denied and redefined by the official propaganda. The continuous official reports become the "reality no matter how obvious is the distortion of the facts." From the established power, this definition of

reality, massively disseminated by all the media, creeps into and invades people's conscience, who are then unable to validate their perception and experience of events, and are always left with the uncertainty of whether they might be wrong (see Martín-Baró, 1985).

In this environment of institutionalized lying a true Orwellian newspeak is produced. Killing becomes a commendable act, while attending to the needy becomes a subversive action. The destruction of hospitals is praised as a service to the homeland, whilst providing medical care to war victims is condemned as a terrorist task. The act of ignoring and even praising the violence of war is a Christian virtue or a symbol of nationalism, but denouncing abuses or condemning human rights violations constitutes an "instrument of the Christian faith", or demonstrations typical of "bad Salvadorans".

### **Psychosocial consequences**

A complete distinction between the consequences of a military war and a parallel war is not possible, whether it is a dirty or a psychological war, as these are two complementary dimensions of the same process. Nevertheless, here we will limit ourselves to the impact of the war on the non-combatant civilian population, which is the main focus of the parallel war.

The first consequence, undoubtedly, is the extinction or physical annulment of people. In El Salvador, murder and imprisonment, disappearance and torture are still relatively common practices, and the fact that the numbers have significantly dropped in respect to the years 1981-1982, does not mean that they have disappeared, or that they have been reduced to "tolerable" quantitative and qualitative levels (see Americas Watch, 1986).

Alongside bodily injuries are the psychological indicators, the ones caused by specific traumatic events, and those generated by the permanent environment of harassment and insecurity. According to Guillermo Mártir (1986), the war has produced a significant increase of up to 20% of psychosomatic disorders among patients of the Salvadoran Social Security Institute. In a recent survey conducted by the IUDOP (1987), one hundred percent of the Salvadoran urban adult population indicated that the most frequent disorders among their family members were related to nerves: anxiety, tension, "nerves", etc. As Mártir's study seems to prove, it is more than likely for this percentage to be even greater in rural areas, especially those more directly subjected to military and psychological warfare operations.

A very serious psychosocial consequence of the parallel war, both dirty and psychological, is the hindering of the development of a type

of personal identity that assumes a revolutionary political option, or even one simply opposite to the system established as a vital perspective. Individuals are directly threatened in their capacity as political subjects (Lira, Weinstein and Salamovich, 1985-6), which, in many cases, constitutes the core of what articulates their life project. Caving in to aggression represents a source of existential frustration and self-devaluation, whilst resisting means risking their own and their family's lives. As Lira, Weinstein and Salamovich point out, psychological war promotes the intentional depoliticization of people. Therefore, it isn't the political indifference of the masses, or a presumed passive character of Latin Americans, but an enforced suppression of their socio-political options.

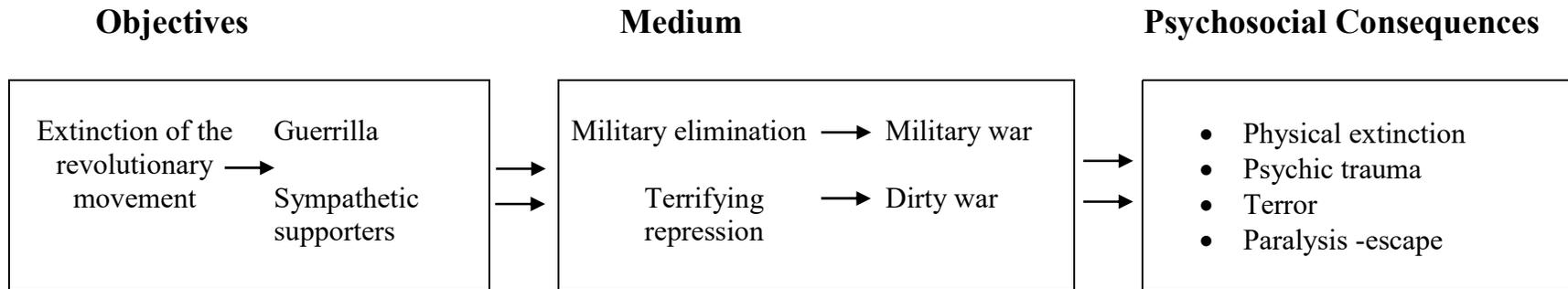
The ethical-political conflict people confront, especially when the extent of their actions involves the life of third parties (family and / or others) often ends with their escape from the country (see Aron, 1987). In some instances, in objective terms, this departure is triggered by a seemingly trivial or relatively minor event, especially when compared to other situations the same person has experienced before. In general, however, it is the "straw that breaks the camel's back" in terms of the individual's endurance, who feels that their psychological resistance is crumbling.

A very important collective effect is the undervaluing of the struggle for justice, and the moral discrediting of those who assume revolutionary causes. The institutionalized lie manages to tarnish ideals and revolutionary behaviors, linking them to sordid motives, or relating them to immoral deeds. The construction of a symbolic world with Orwellian characteristics does not cease to affect the collective consciousness and the historical perspective of the peoples.

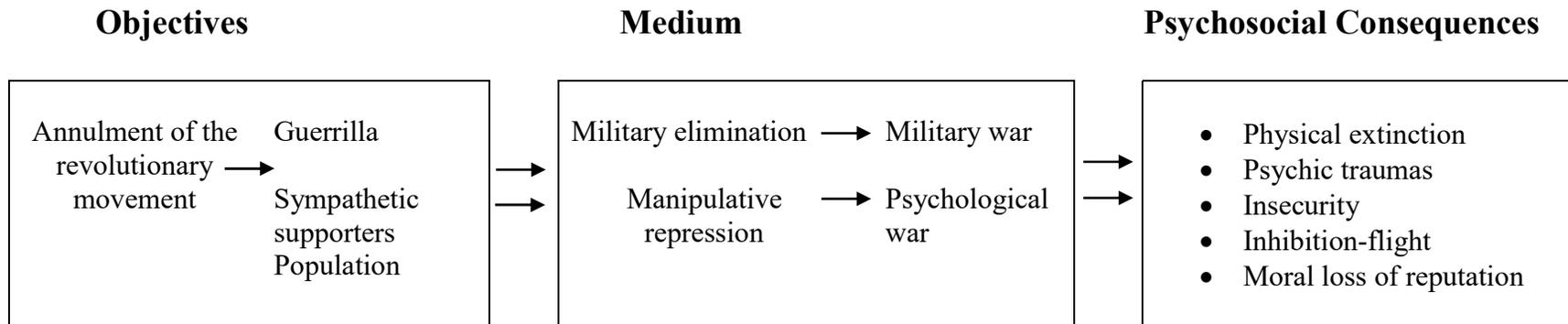
Figure 1 graphically presents the parallelism between the dirty war and psychological warfare as two modalities of the “parallel war”.

**Figure 1**  
**Two modalities of “parallel war”**

**“The dirty war”**



**“Psychological War”**



## Final thoughts

If our thesis is valid, and psychological warfare represents a form of the same dirty war adapted to the new phase of El Salvador's civil war, what follows are some important conclusions for the understanding and treatment of Salvadoran refugees' mental health problems.

1. Even though quantitatively and qualitatively human rights violations through political repression have diminished in El Salvador, it doesn't mean that there are no political conditions in the country that force many people to seek refuge abroad. In this sense, we believe that it is wrong both, to affirm that in El Salvador nothing has changed between 1981 and the present, as well as to maintain that presently only economic circumstances justify the migration of Salvadorans to another country. It is then crucial to analyze the new parallel warfare modalities, and to specify into what extent psychological warfare may be producing as detrimental psychosocial consequences as those the dirty war has, thus forcing people to flee. Furthermore, this consideration is of the essence in order to equally address the difficulties of those who flee, as of those who, voluntarily or forcibly return to the country.

2. It is imperative to emphasize the collective, and therefore political dimension of mental health (Martín-

Baró, 1984). As Eugenia Weinstein (1987, page 38) lucidly points out, a socially caused damage can only be socially repaired. Thus, it isn't possible to think that the problems refugees face can be adequately solved through either individual or group psychotherapy. Their problems require a true "sociotherapy", which Adrienne Aron (1987, pp. 17-18) describes as a social reconstruction of their lives and of their own community, torn apart by repression and war.

3. A final reflection concerns the ethical responsibility of psychologists. It is known that, with more or less awareness, some professionals cooperate to conduct psychological warfare. One wonders if the time has come, not only to clarify the ethical nature of this cooperation, but to counteract the psychological war with a massive campaign in support of legitimate peace (see Departamento-*Department*, 1986), and this as an essential part of the necessary "sociotherapy" in the country.

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