

4. El Salvador

What has been said of Soviet caution with regard to Nicaragua applies with even greater force to Soviet policy towards the war in El Salvador. In contrast to the Nicaraguan case, the United States has assumed a clear political and military commitment to the survival of the Salvadoran government; and hence the risks of direct involvement are even greater.

Again, given what Alexander Dallin referred to as the preferability of "parsimonious explanations of causality"⁶⁷ there is little point in attempting to account for revolutionary activity in El Salvador by reference to some external agency. Many of the sources of revolution listed above in reference to Nicaragua are also present here.

The great majority of the population lives very poorly. Economic growth, although comparatively rapid in the 1950s and 1960s, was barely sufficient to keep pace with very rapid population growth. In any event, the process of growth fell victim in the mid and late 1970s, to the unravelling of the Central American economic community, increases in the price of energy and the global recession. Income distribution was massively and increasingly skewed in favour of a very narrow economic élite which, since the late 1930s, had surrendered political power to the military in return for the safeguarding of its privileged position. Corruption was, and is, endemic and intense.

The political system has demonstrated little capacity to reform itself in the absence of revolutionary pressure. Political oppression of opposition groups and the social forces they represented intensified in the 1970s and by 1980 it had attained a level of ferocity extraordinary even by regional standards. Democratic processes, when they operated at all, were massively and systematically abused. New educated élites were kept from meaningful participation and bore the brunt of regime brutality.

Mass privation, élite frustration, and systematic oppression provide the basic ingredients for a revolutionary challenge to the status quo. In the mid and late 1970s, increasing numbers of young intellectuals responded to this situation by taking to the hills and providing the raw material for a growing guerrilla movement. As the regime steadily alienated ever wider sections of the political

⁶⁷ A. Dallin, "The Domestic Sources of Soviet Foreign Policy", in S. Bialer, *The Domestic Context of Soviet Foreign Policy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1981), p. 356.