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ISBN

9798277445686

Author

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Publication Date

2026-03-20

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Voices from the War:

Complicating the Founding Myth of the Second Republic of Costa Rica

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in Chicana and Chicano Studies

by

Luis Antonio Sotillo

2026

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2026

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Voices from the War:
Complicating the Founding Myth of the Second Republic of Costa Rica

by

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Master of Arts in Chicana and Chicano Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2026

Professor Robert Chao Romero, Chair

This thesis examines the 1948 Costa Rican Civil War in an effort to challenge the dominant narrative of Costa Rican exceptionalism. Drawing on archival research, oral histories, and family testimonies, it argues that Costa Rica's "Second Republic" founded by José Figueres Ferrer was built upon selective remembering, historical erasure, and unacknowledged U.S. intervention. The analysis traces the rise of the Communist Party and its unique "comunismo a la tica," which, through an unlikely alliance with the catholic church and President Calderón Guardia, enacted sweeping social reforms in the 1940s. However, this coalition was dismantled by the rising tide of anti-communism and red-baiting propaganda that framed legitimate domestic politics as a foreign threat. After the annulment of the 1948 election, Figueres launched

an armed insurrection where evidence reveals that U.S. diplomatic pressure, selective arms embargoes against the government, and tolerance of rebel supply lines from Guatemala decisively tilted the conflict in Figueres' favor. Testimonies from ordinary Costa Ricans at the time further complicate the heroic narrative of "good" revolutionaries triumphing over "evil" communists, revealing a war marked by displacement, dehumanization, and the erasure of inconvenient truths. By recovering marginalized voices and documenting U.S. involvement, this thesis demonstrates that Costa Rica's celebrated identity was not inevitable but forged through political struggle and historical omission. The abolition of the military in 1949, while remarkable, has served to obscure the violence and foreign intervention that accompanied the nation's reformation.

The thesis of Luis Antonio Sotillo is approved.

Leisy J. Abrego

Kency Cornejo

Robert Chao Romero, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2026

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Introduction

In 1975 the former three-time president and leader of the 1948 Costa Rican Revolution José Figueres Ferrer sat down for an interview with journalist Jacobo Zabludovsky on the Mexican television program *Sunday to Sunday* and disclosed he had worked for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in at least "20,000 ways" throughout the span of his political career. Over the course of the interview the famously celebrated ex-president and founder of the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) confessed to his more than thirty years of involvement with the CIA "all over Latin America" including in the U.S.'s attack on Cuba's Bay of Pigs, and with the assassination of former Dominican president Rafael Trujillo. Figueres lamented that due to his long-term involvement, even he himself had been a victim of CIA surveillance. In that same interview he would go on to defend the integrity of the CIA from its critics and express his gratitude for its continued existence and the "excellent" work the organization does. "There can never be enough payment to the United States as well as the Western world for the excellent espionage and counterespionage work of the CIA since it was founded by Allen Dulles" (Central Intelligence Agency 2005:1).

Given that Figueres occupies such an important status in the historical legacy of Costa Rica, it can be somewhat difficult to decouple the myth of the man from the last century and a half of the nation's history. The romantic story of José Figueres—who, against all odds, returned from political exile in 1948 with a revolutionary army to defeat the very communists who had driven him out—has been institutionally enshrined as Costa Rica's prevailing national narrative for the Civil War since he first took power. This has been by no accident, to this day the story of his triumphant victory still gets promoted as a point of national pride by the Costa Rican Ministry of Culture and Youth, who describe their job as one of "protecting, studying,

displaying, and educating people about the nation's natural and cultural history in addition to giving advice to local and regional museums" (National Museum of Costa Rica). In the months following the war, the Junta Fundadora de la Segunda República (Founding Junta of the Second Republic) government would usher in what Figueres described as the beginning of the country's "Second Republic", complete with a newly written constitution ordering the destruction of its military apparatus.

However, Figueres' admission about his relationship with the CIA on *Sunday to Sunday* problematizes several well-established narratives that have long existed regarding Costa Rica, its sovereignty, and its long history of peaceful non-interventionalist foreign policy. Often described as the "Switzerland of the Americas," the nation enjoys a particularly privileged reputation compared to its neighboring Central American countries. While there are multiple (even contradictory) reasons for this, one constant that gets repeatedly highlighted in media portrayals and scholarly analysis alike is its significant emphasis on being a country with a proud tradition of embracing both peace and democracy. The abolition of the army remains an unyielding point of national pride that effectively cemented Figueres' legacy as the country's de facto father figure for Costa Rica's peaceful reputation. On the global stage Costa Rica is often commended for its military abolition, "defense of human rights", and historical legacy of preserving and protecting its rich biodiversity (Feoli 2020). This sort of praise from the international community has lent credence to many of the exceptional narratives that Costa Rica has historically been associated with—peace, patriotism, and preservation, among others.

Figueres' contributions to the Costa Rican Civil War and civil society remain preserved and protected within the country's museums, post offices, health clinics, schools, and other public institutions. His face has been used on at least two forms of national currency, and the day

marking his signature achievement, the abolition of the military, has since been made into a national holiday. His importance and historical significance cannot be underappreciated or overstated when it comes to conceptualizing how Costa Rica came to be what it is today.

Therefore, Figueres' intense relationship with the CIA should be taken seriously and put under further scrutiny, as it reveals how the legacy of national mythmaking, hero creation, and institutional memory preservation reflect the events of Costa Rica through the 1940s. The personal affiliation and warm embrace of the CIA that Figueres admitted to on *Sunday to Sunday* is emblematic of not only the legacy of José Figueres Ferrer and his cooperation with the CIA, but of a much larger and more complex relationship involving the United States and questions regarding Costa Rican autonomy and self-determination in the face of foreign intervention. The mythologizing of José Figueres and (to a larger extent) the 1948 civil war itself remains riddled with unresolved contradictions and half-truths that merit further scholarly examination and critical analysis.

This thesis will closely examine the decades of the 1930s through the 1940s in an effort to reframe existing historiographies and deconstruct the complex relationship that existed between the Communist Party, the Catholic Church, the Costa Rican government, and the United States during this turbulent build up to the civil war. The overarching purpose of this study is not only intended to deconstruct what has already been institutionally accepted by the likes of the Ministry of Culture and Youth within Costa Rica, but to construct a more holistically alternative narrative from this time period that benefits from nearly 80 years of hindsight, critical scholarship, and contemporary precedent set between the two nations in the decades following the war. I argue that Costa Rica's celebrated national identity as a peaceful and exceptional democracy was not a natural inheritance, but a constructed narrative. This narrative was forged

through the selective remembering of its revolutionary origins, the strategic erasure of its racial and political complexities, and the unacknowledged influence of U.S. intervention. Taken together, these forces reveal the way national myths are built upon the foundations of what they choose to forget.

The value of examining Costa Rican exceptionalism lies not in celebrating its achievements, but in understanding how international prestige often comes with hidden costs that are rarely acknowledged. It is no secret Costa Rica benefits from the material privileges that come with its exceptional status on the world stage. This can come in the forms of specially designated United Nations appointments and leadership positions, easier access to shipping and trade routes, or even through the likes of direct foreign investment and aid (Sada 2015). However, it also benefits from immaterial privileges as well. Similar to the concept of the model minority within the U.S., in being cast by imperial powers as "the good one" of Central America, a dichotomy is then opened and exploited where other Central American countries are considered "the bad ones" and are made examples of. It is important to shed light on where Costa Rica's privileges come from and what sorts of sacrifices get made in order to acquire and maintain them. I believe in reexamining the historical legacy of the Costa Rican civil war, with the additional dimension of the United States involvement incorporated into it, a broader relational dialog can begin to open up within the growing field of Central American studies in the United States that provides for a more fully fledged assessment of Costa Rican political subjectivity and the multiple ways that exceptionality can function as a double edged sword.

Methodology and Origins of Study

Methodologically, this thesis will function as an extended literature review that features several firsthand accounts and personal testimonies from people who were either voluntarily or

involuntarily involved in the events of the Civil War. It also utilizes several secondhand sources to provide further context and exposition to the history that led up to the events of the war. This combination of sourcing is intended to provide for a more holistic and critical analysis of some of the popular narratives accepted and reproduced by the Ministry of Culture and Youth about the war and the two decades preceding it. To this end, a broad consortium of primary and secondary sources will be used as methodological strategy, serving as inputs for the arguments presented here. As a major source for this project, I spent time in the summer of 2025 within the national archives of Costa Rica gathering primary data in the form of personal accountings, newspaper clippings, and oral histories that all date back to the months of the civil war. I also visited several sights of historical and cultural preservation, including museum and university archives, in order to get a better understanding of how the country (not only) remembers its history, but how it chooses to present it. In my travels I visited the *Museo Nacional*, which today serves as the country's official museum for the Civil War and is located within the former military barracks of San José. Bullet holes from the fighting can still be seen lining the walls of the now converted museum and butterfly sanctuary. In addition to the national museum, I also visited the personal archival museums of both José Figueres Ferrer and former president Rafael Calderón Guardia to witness how each of their estates have chosen to present their legacies and share their history.

In my time spent at all of these museums, I made sure to take pictures of every placard I saw and collect every pamphlet I could get my hands on. In the archives I diligently dug into all the documents I could find about the civil war from both from the U.S. and the Costa Rican perspective. I also paid special attention to (and photographed) any kind of diplomatic correspondence between the nations involved in the conflict that I could find from this period. I

remained attentive to any overtly biased media coverage I came across that I considered as being propagandistic. I found this task necessary given that I will not only be examining the events of the war, but also the narratives that are shaped, constructed, and preserved within these official sights of historic preservation.

I am also fortunate enough to have had several family members who either fought in or directly participated in the war in one form or another. Many are dead, but a few of them are still alive today. My great grandfather Arturo Jiménez Sotillo fought in the war. He has since passed, but a picture of him and his fellow comrades hangs on a wall in the national museum of Costa Rica. I was fortunate enough to see it for the very first time upon my previous summer visit. His daughter Itza Sotillo (my great tía) was a child during the war and has miraculously left a copy of her written testimonio to the national archives depicting what life was like as a child growing up during wartime. Itza is still alive today and I was fortunate enough to visit her on my previous trip. However, at 87 years old, despite all of her dignity and strength, her memory and ability to speak have declined with age. I am eternally grateful to her and the written account of this historical period that she managed to document and preserve. I share excerpts from her written experience when and where appropriate in this thesis.

Another member of my family, Gonzalo Chanto, fought in the war and is still alive today. Gonzalo is ninety-four years old and still active around his community in Desamparados. I was fortunate enough to speak with him on my last trip as well. He not only shared stories about the war with me, but he showed me his medals, his government issued military certificates and spoke of his close relationship with José Figueres. He also showed me his personal collection of photos from the war. Gonzalo is a special case because he is one of the last remaining survivors who fought in the war. A celebration was held last year to honor him and the other remaining

survivors upon the anniversary of the country's military disarmament. Gonzalo had saved a newspaper from the event and let me photograph it for the purposes of furthering my research and understanding how the press continues to report and interpret the events of the war.

I had many family members who fought in the Costa Rican Civil War. Some I know more about than others. I have heard stories that some fled to Mexico while others were dissidents who were detained and never released. I know that some fought as members of the national army to defend the country from the military invasion being led by José Figueres. And I also know that some, like Gonzalo and my great grandfather Arturo, fought alongside *Don Pepe* (Figueres) in what they considered to be a national liberation struggle and second independence movement. I also know I had family members like my tía Itza and her siblings, who were too young to have fought or understood the political motivations for the war, but who lived through and experienced what life was like at the time in their small community where members of opposing forces would inevitably need to come in contact with one another. The stories they tell that have been passed down over the years are invaluable and provide new layers of complexity to a chapter of history that is rarely questioned.

It is these multiple competing narratives inspired by my family that initially attracted me to this project. My curiosity only further peaked when I began finding the same types of competing narratives in the literature of scholars who are studied in the same research I am conducting. The Costa Rican civil war is largely regarded as the turning point in the nation's history and set the stage for what Figueres referred to as the birth of its "Second Republic". Unfortunately, due to the prevalence and overrepresentation of narratives regarding Costa Rica's peaceful and unconflictual nature, its history of violence and U.S. intervention has largely been sidelined in place for less controversial discussions about its rich culture, biodiversity, and

economy. In the broader story of United States intervention in Central America, Costa Rica has felt surprisingly left out of the conversation despite being the first battleground of the Cold War to take place on Latin American soil. The absence of this discourse is not only limited in the United States, but seldom does it get discussed in Costa Rica as well.

The given narrative for the civil war within Costa Rica about a great liberator figure who rose up in arms against a tyrannical communist government to free the people and eventually abolish the military, feeds into the same colonial narrative that has long served to benefit the legacy of Costa Rican exceptionalism at the detriment of those who suffer from it. The United States played a role in the outcome of this war, and in supporting and legitimizing the victor of it, they also contributed to decisions made that followed it. In a broad sense, by centering this research around the Costa Rican Civil War, I intend to challenge this erasure and bring to light the ways national myth making and sights of historical preservation work to sanitize history and perpetuate colonial logics of domination and violence.

Colonial Myths of Costa Rican Exceptionalism

The association of Costa Rica with "peace" and being a "peaceful country" originally predates the abolition of its military. It stretches back beyond even the region's independence from Spain in 1821. Costa Rican topography of the 18th and 19th century was naturally dense and thick with jungle making it difficult to settle. This relegated the territory to the periphery of many of the larger and more centralized pre-Columbian indigenous empires, as well as the eventual emerging central hubs of Spanish colonization. As Gutiérrez and Granados put it, "it was the furthest away from the capital of the Kingdom of Guatemala, bordering the outskirts of the Viceroyalty of New Granada" (2020:5). While indigenous societies within Costa Rica existed at the time (and continue to exist to this day), they tended to be a lot smaller, less hierarchical,

and less centralized than their counterparts in the north and south of the continent, like the Mayan, Aztec, and Inca civilizations. This meant that during the colonial period, the overabundance of thick rainforest, a relative lack of precious metals (silver and gold), coupled with a scarcity of indigenous labor left Costa Rica a very isolated and an unappealing prospect for newly arriving Spanish colonialists to settle (Gutiérrez and Granados 2020). Difficulty in taming the biodiversity of the ironically dubbed "rich coast," forced Spanish colonialists further away from the beaches and seas towards the central highlands where farming and agricultural production became a central economic driver. "There. . . above a thousand meters, the conquistadors and their descendants became settlers, people of the land, because if there was anything in abundance...it was farmland, and if there was anything in short supply, it was indigenous people to do the work" (Gutiérrez and Granados 2020:5).

It has since been mythologized and embraced into the national ethos that the earliest settlers of Costa Rica were forced to lay down their weapons and instead take up farming tools, culminating in the valorization of the symbolically constructed resilient farmworker (setting the stage for the eventual political utility of 'the small farmer') as a symbol of national pride and Costa Rica's uniquely exceptional affinity towards peaceful coexistence and rural democracy (Meléndez 1978, 1987; Monge 1943, 1980; Rodríguez 1953). The myth rests on several interconnected assertions. It claims that colonial Costa Rica was characterized by smallholding peasants of Spanish origin who worked the land themselves. The lack of large-scale agricultural cultivation meant that early Costa Rica did not grow to depend on imported African slave labor nor the labor of indigenous exploitation, thus creating a society remarkably free of the rigid class and racial hierarchies that developed in other parts of Latin America. Therefore, whereas *other* settlers of the Americas had been historically associated with the violence and spoils of colonial

plunder, indigenous erasure, and land theft, the settlers of what would ultimately become Costa Rica were uniquely different from their counterparts on the rest of the isthmus. This narrative attributes Costa Rica's democratic traditions to the purported absence of significant social stratification. Literature historicizing this time period suggests they were poorer, humbler, nonviolent, and more in tune with the cultivation of land than the settlers to their north and south, if for no other reason, than simply because there was no alternative option (Monge 1980).

Historian Carlos Monge Alfaro has taken this particular mythologizing to its ultimate expression:

The conditions in which the farmers lived are derived from the characteristics of the colonizing process: they became accustomed to living in isolation, without close and permanent social relations, hidden in the mountains, close to water sources, in fertile valleys and plains. . . over the years of isolation and misery, they produced a special mentality, a way of being and behaving. . . Costa Rican society in the 17th and 18th centuries lacked strength, solidity, since the predominant human type was the farmer, scattered throughout the valleys. Thus, without precedent, orphaned, like no one's son, the farmer emerged, endowed with a high degree of autonomy, of wild freedom—the freedom of the man who was born in the mountains and who has lived without depending on authorities or social obligations. . . We consider the figure of the farmer to be grand, worthy of reverence and deep love, because he gave Costa Rica the fundamental foundations of what rural democracy will eventually become. A great history of democracy was brewing in the soul of that farmer. . . This, I repeat, will be the axis, the backbone of our history; The nucleus around which the Costa Rican people will be structured" (Monge 1980:159-161).

By the time Costa Rica had reached its independence from Spain and found its own statehood as a national republic in 1848, the narrative of a new and exciting country predicated on rural democracy and the exceptionally peaceful and hardworking farmer had already been established. Independence from Spain was circumstantial and did not require war, and the necessary transitions of power that arrived through the nation-state making process saw relatively little violence and undemocratic struggles over power (Gutiérrez and Granados 2020). The establishment of a nation state built around the colonial myth of an ontologically peaceful populace of hardworking farmers, free of social stratification provided a useful and

homogenizing foundation for the development of a national spirit. Further, the collective colonial imaginary of the small and peaceful farmworker, joined together through the egalitarian development of rural democracy, would provide the type of necessary social cohesion needed to unite around a set of geographically scattered localities in order to symbolically form the basis of this new and emerging Costa Rican national identity (Acuña 2002).

According to literary critic Albino Chacón Gutiérrez, Costa Rican society is "quite strange, paradoxical and one could even consider it unsettling due to the series of myths that have so effectively constructed and even now continue constructing the knots of its discourse of identity" (Mosby 2014:178). Among these "knots," the *leyenda blanca* (white legend) has proven the most enduring and consequential. The *leyenda blanca*, built alongside the myth of the exceptional rural farmer, emerged during the critical period of nation-building in the decades following Costa Rican independence in 1821. As the newly independent state sought to construct a coherent national identity, intellectuals and political elites crafted a narrative that would distinguish Costa Rica from its neighbors while establishing internal social hierarchies.

The myth relies on the racial homogeneity of its peasant class. Campesinos were not merely poor farmers, they were specifically *white* Spaniards. The logic insists that the absence of large-scale plantation agriculture meant that Costa Rica never required the massive enslaved African labor force that characterized Caribbean colonies or the extensive exploitation of Indigenous labor that marked colonial Mexico and Peru. Consequently, the nation developed as fundamentally white and European in character. What makes the *leyenda blanca* particularly insidious, as scholar Dorothy E. Mosby explains, is what it necessarily erases:

This myth leaves no room for the historical presence of black, mulatto, indigenous, or mestizo populations who were nevertheless present from the conquest to independence. This myth also leaves no room for the inclusion of the thousands of immigrants of Afro-West Indian and Chinese origin who contributed to the construction of the nation's

infrastructure and place in the global economy during the postindependence years (Mosby 2014:178).

The discursive erasure of these populations is not incidental but absolutely necessary for the logic and coherence of the myth to make sense. If one were to acknowledge the absence of their presence, the contradiction would immediately reveal the existence of the same economic, social, and racial hierarchies that the *leyenda blanca* was deliberately designed to obscure.

Contemporary racial politics in Costa Rica reflect this continued marginalization. Afro-Costa Ricans, particularly those of West Indian descent concentrated in the Limón Province, have faced systematic discrimination, restrictions on movement and settlement, and barriers to full citizenship. Meanwhile Indigenous communities continue to struggle for land rights and cultural recognition, while Nicaraguan migrants, who constitute 7-9% of the population, experience xenophobia and discrimination based on perceived racial and cultural difference (Serra 2020). These contemporary realities exist in tension with *leyenda blanca*'s insistence on Costa Rica as a white, homogeneous nation.

The myth also circulates internationally in Costa Rican tourism promotion and diplomatic messaging. The image of Costa Rica as a peaceful, ecologically conscious nation of friendly, light-skinned Ticos appeals to foreign visitors and investors while effecting the country's internal diversity and ongoing racial inequalities. The international face of the *leyenda blanca* creates economic incentives for maintaining the myth even as scholars and activists work to dismantle it. Pushback from authors like Quince Duncan and Carlos Meléndez have provided strong counter narratives to the legend that confront it head on and work to deconstruct it both in fiction and critical analysis (Meléndez and Duncan 1972).

Duncan's approach differs fundamentally from that of earlier Costa Rican writers who addressed Afro-descendant themes. His fiction explores the complexities of identity, belonging,

and cultural exile that emerge from the Afro-Costa Rican experience, while his collaborative historical work provides empirical documentation of Afro-descendant contributions to national development. While communist authors such as Carmen Lyra and Carlos Luis Fallas expressed solidarity with Afro-Costa Rican struggles, their perspectives remained those of sympathetic outsiders. Duncan, by contrast, writes from within the community he depicts, offering an insiders' point of view (Mosby 2014). This insider's perspective allows Duncan to represent not only the external conditions of Afro-Costa Rican life but also its internal cultural logics, linguistic particularities, and community dynamics that continue to exist today.

The persistence of the *leyenda blanca* into the twenty-first century, documented by filmmakers and literary authors like Gabriela Serra and Quince Duncan, and experienced daily by Nicaraguan migrants, Afro-Costa Ricans, and Indigenous communities, testifies to the myth's continued ideological relevance. Yet the myth has also faced sustained critique from scholars across multiple disciplines who have documented the multiracial reality of Costa Rican history and analyzed how racial ideologies conform into social hierarchies. By making visible what the myth rendered invisible, this work opens possibilities for a Costa Rican identity that acknowledges its full complexity. Costa Rica is a nation shaped by Indigenous, African, and European peoples. It would not be Costa Rica today without the influences of its Caribbean or Central Valley populations made up of immigrants and long-settled multigenerational families. No amount of mythologizing about the exceptionality of Costa Rican democratic aspirations can nullify the longstanding racial hierarchies that endure to this day.

Communism in Costa Rica

As the twentieth century progressed, the contradictions embedded in Costa Rica's exceptional self-image became increasingly impossible to ignore and nowhere was this more

evident than in the rise of organized labor. The *Partido Comunista de Costa Rica* (PCCR) was founded on June 16, 1931. Originally operating under the name *Bloque de Obreros y Campesinos* (BOC), its emergence came as a response to the social and economic turmoil brought on by the effects of the Great Depression. Economic crisis in Costa Rica accelerated the formation of labor unions, particularly among workers in nascent industries like shoemaking, carpentry, printing and, most importantly, among the banana workers on the Caribbean coast, whose scale and necessity constituted a genuine agricultural proletariat (Cruz 1993). This period heightened class consciousness and lent itself to establishing the necessary fertile conditions for a party that promised to champion the rights of workers. The party's formation attracted a remarkable cohort of intellectuals, organizers, and writers, including the likes of Carmen Lyra, Carlos Luis Fallas, Manuel Mora Valverde, and Joaquín Gutiérrez Mangel, to make up its ranks as founding members. The contribution of these members to the movement and Costa Rican civil society would eventually come to be embedded within the cultural fabric of the country.

Resistance to capitalist domination prior to 1931 in Costa Rica did not manifest as any kind of coordinated or formal communist movement, but rather as a fertile ground of anti-capitalist ideas, ideological debates, and spontaneous acts of defiance. Author and historian Vladimir de la Cruz wrote the comprehensive historiography of the Costa Rican labor movement prior to the formation of the Communist Party in the 1930s in his foundational text *Las Luchas Sociales en Costa Rica 1870-1930* (1971). The book covers the crucial 60-year period, from 1870 to 1930, which coincides with the consolidation of the Liberal State. During this era, Costa Rica's economy became heavily dependent on coffee and banana exports, leading to the formation of an agro-export bourgeoisie and a growing, often exploited, working class (De la Cruz 1971). The book does a great job in demonstrating that the social reforms of the 1940s (the

Social Guarantees, Labor Code, etc.) did not appear out of nowhere. They were the culmination of decades of pressure and struggle by the very movements De la Cruz documents.

Meanwhile, Costa Rica in the 1920s saw a surge in anti-imperialist sentiment, particularly in response to U.S. military interventions in Nicaragua that led to the formation and spread of popular fronts like the *Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana* (APRA) in 1924, and the *Liga Antiimperialista de las Américas* (LADLA) in 1925 (Cárcamo 2025). The arrival of these movements to Costa Rica attracted young, radicalized law students, intellectuals, and a coalition of teachers and campesinos to their ranks. Two future founders of the PCCR, Manuel Mora Valverde and Carmen Lyra, featured prominently as members of the APRA and LADLA and would apply the knowledge gained in these movement spaces to the future development of the Communist party.

For her part, Carmen Lyra first came onto the scene as a writer and schoolteacher in the rural province of Limón where her students came from families of poor working-class banana field laborers (Lyra and Horan 2000). Originally named María Isabel Carvajal Quesada at birth, she adopted the pseudonym Carmen Lyra in 1906 as she embarked on her professional career as a writer and instructor. In her early years teaching, Lyra came in contact with other radical educators like Omar Dengo and Joaquín García Monge. Together the three of them founded the *Centro de Estudios Sociales Germinal* (Germinal Center for Social Studies) (CEG) in 1912. The CEG was a pivotal intellectual and cultural organization in Costa Rica's early 20th-century history. The center played a crucial role in introducing socialist and anarchist ideas to Costa Rica and served as a training ground for many future leaders of the country's labor and communist movements (Díaz-Arias 2015).

In 1914, Lyra, Monge, and Dengo founded and established the first ever *Escuela Normal* in Costa Rica, which emphasized the use of radical pedagogy and offered classes on teaching. Dengo would end up running the school and Lyra would not formally teach there until 1921. However, it was Lyra's political involvement in 1919 that really began to set her apart from her peers. She emerged as a key leader in the popular demonstration against the dictatorship of Federico Tinoco Granados after he had cut the pay of women schoolteachers by a third, as well as threatened those who protested the decision with layoffs (Herrera Zúñiga 2013). As a radical educator herself, while teachers took to the streets to demonstrate, Lyra gave such a powerful speech that the crowd enthusiastically marched their way into the dictatorship's official news publications office, *La Información*, and set it ablaze (Lyra and Horan 2000:12). This act of defiance was a clear precursor to her revolutionary commitment and the fomenting sense of injustice and rebellion slowly building within the consciousness of the country.

Upon her return from studying abroad at the University of Paris in 1921, Lyra became a professor and author of children's literature at her beloved *Escuela Normal*. In 1926 she enlisted the help of her former student and fellow radical Luisa González, and founded Costa Rica's first Montessori pre-school, dedicated to educating the poorest children of San José (Cárcamo 2025). The school would serve the community in a variety of ways. Part of the Montessori primary school curriculum involved instructing the children on the fundamentals of proper hygiene in order to avoid sickness and disease. This proved to be more difficult than anticipated as the children's families could not always afford many basic necessities like shoes or toothbrushes. "Many of the children went to school barefoot, sick, malnourished, and maintained poor overall hygiene" (Cárcamo 2025:34). Feeling disillusioned and frustrated with the lack of material

solutions to her pre-school situation, Lyra and González additionally opened an adult "literary salon" for revolutionaries within the walls of the pre-school in 1927.

In an expression of solidarity, Lyra installed typewriters and mimeographs at their service and in the evenings gave them space to lecture on the conditions of their home countries as well as on their revolutionary causes. Lyra's salon became a haven for radical thinkers to dialogue, reflect, and write on the conditions of Latin America's wretched of the earth, which led to manifestos and political propaganda with revolutionary messages that protested US imperialism, military dictatorships, fascism, and oligarchies across the Americas. (Cárcamo 2025:37)

Lyra's salon would grow to be an emerging hub for students, communists, workers, and community members in search of pursuing some form of radical education and space for organizing. In 1930, a small group of communist law students including fellow radical Manuel Mora and Ricardo Coto Conde took note of Lyra's work and began circulating copies of their new communist magazine *La Revolución* at the salon. Upon meeting her, the young law students gave Lyra a pamphlet entitled *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. After translating and passing it around, Lyra and González got their fellow schoolteachers onboard with the idea that Marxism "provided the necessary theoretical framework they considered was missing to better understand the social, political, and economic problems confronting them in the preschool" (Cárcamo 2025:47). Together, a coalition of the schoolteachers and university students who frequented the salon, including Manuel Mora, Ricardo Coto Conde, Jaime Cerdas, Luis Carballo, Gonzalo Montero Berry, Adolfo Braña, and Carmen Lyra, would agree to join forces and officially establish the *Partido Comunista de Costa Rica* (PCCR) in 1931. By 1933 the group had already successfully organized their first ever May Day mobilization.

Lyra's contributions to the labor movement pre-PCCR cannot be overstated as her efforts helped lay the intellectual groundwork for future sites of organizing and direct confrontation

with the state. Her fighting spirit exemplified the first three decades of anti-capitalist resistance in twentieth century Costa Rica. As an educator, her passion for fighting injustice was inspired by the visible poverty and deteriorating social conditions she observed as a young schoolteacher in Limón. Her desire to combat inequality not only played out in the classroom through her pedagogical practices that included public health work, but it was also active in the streets when she violently confronted the Tinoco dictatorship. Her important contributions to the APRA and founding of the CEG, Escuela Normal, and literary salon, opened the door for radical thought to begin to blossom and apply theory to the observable conditions of Costa Rican society. Prior to the existence of the Communist party in Costa Rica, these scattered acts of resistance, intellectual forums, and ideological debates remained undervalued and uncoordinated. They were not nonexistent, but thanks to the revolutionary commitments of communists like Carmen Lyra, political thought was able to have a space to grow and foment into something larger.

Unlike the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy of its time, which saw revolutionary upheaval as a historical necessity, the newly found PCCR chose to work within the country's democratic traditions. The fiery rhetoric and denunciations of "bourgeois governments" and their "corrupted electoral systems," found in the early pages of *La Revolución*, were eventually replaced by more pragmatic evaluations of the political system in the party's new and official newspaper *Trabajo* (Herrera Zúñiga 2013). *Trabajo* emerged in 1931 as a direct successor to *La Revolución* and was an explicitly communist publication intended to serve as the official organ of the newly formed party. From 1931 to 1948, *Trabajo* successfully functioned as a permanent political tool to maintain a constant presence in the public sphere, denounce social injustices, organize workers, and expand the party's influence (Bell 1971:71).

From its initiation, the PCCR demonstrated a dual strategy of labor mobilization and electoral participation. The party pursued this strategy primarily through the Bloque de Obreros y Campesinos (BOC), which served as an electoral front group allowing Communist candidates to run for office without appearing on the ballot under the party's own name (Bell 1971). This tactic of running candidates under various front organizations gained political traction over time, and by 1942 the Communist Party had become a significant force in national politics, holding five seats in the legislative assembly (Office of the Historian 1956). This pragmatic approach of combining localized forms of activism with institutional politics, would come to define "comunismo a la tica" (Communism the Costa Rican way), a term Mora would himself use to describe the movement.

Comunismo a la tica was a unique and pragmatic variant of communist thought developed in Costa Rica that played directly into longstanding colonial myths of its own exceptionality. It represented a conscious effort to adapt communist ideology to Costa Rica's specific national reality, traditions, and values, rather than strictly following the doctrines promoted by Moscow and the Comintern (the Communist International). Unlike revolutionary paths taken elsewhere around the world, comunismo a la tica sought to achieve socialist reform through democratic elections and by working within the existing political system. In describing the economic characteristics of the ideology, Mora expressed that the party was not antagonistic towards the concept of private property, but rather of the large monopolies that, in his view, destroyed smaller ones (Mora Rodríguez 2008). He did not advocate for the immediate abolition of property, but rather for it to be regulated for the benefit of the people (Herrera Zúñiga 2013). Another unique aspect of the ideology was its respect for Costa Rican traditions, including the Catholic religion, which was a significant departure from standard communist anti-clericalism of

the time (Lehoucq 1991). This pragmatism would eventually make possible the unprecedented alliance of communists with President Calderón Guardia and Archbishop Sanabria in the 1940s to pass social reforms (Longley 1997).

The first major triumph of the PCCR came in 1934 when the party led a massive strike against the dominant United Fruit Company (UFCo) on the Caribbean coast. Communist militants like Carlos Luis Fallas organized the workers, while party leaders in the capital mobilized supplies and solidarity, ultimately forcing the company to improve labor conditions (Almeida 2014). Mora had been elected to Congress in 1934 as one of the first Communist deputies in Costa Rican history. After winning his seat he introduced a petition for banana workers that included provisions for medical supplies on farms (anti-malarial drugs), payment of wages in cash instead of company store tokens, and the legalization of labor unions (Seligson 1980). After intense lobbying pressure from the UFCo to strike down the legislation, the assembly caved and defeated the proposal (Almeida 2014). Prior to Mora's petition, PCCR operatives like Carlos Luis Fallas, Jaime Cerdas, and Arnoldo Ferreto had already been organizing banana workers in the months leading up to the strike as part of the *Sindicato de Trabajadores del Atlántico*, a union comprised mainly of Hispanics associated with the Communist party (Harpelle 2000). When the legislation was struck down, workers were prepared and ready to go on strike.

In his paper on racism and nationalism in Costa Rica's banana enclave (2000), Harpelle makes the strong case that despite successfully organizing the banana workers in Limón, this did not mean that the Communist party had the full support of the community, particularly that of the West Indian community. "Although some authors have portrayed the West Indians as active participants, the evidence suggests otherwise" (Harpelle 2000:43). Racism played a large role in

the abstention and apprehension of West Indians from joining the strike as existing ethnic tensions between workers had existed long before 1934. Many of the Hispanic workers blamed West Indians, and vice versa, for their plight because the fruit company had a strategy of "consciously divid[ing] its labor force in order to prevent unified action." Both sets of workers routinely crossed each other's picket lines, and the fallout from economic crises were usually blamed in the press on the presence of West Indian workers in the region (Harpelle 2000).

Several strike-breaking techniques were also successfully administered to intimidate West Indians from participating in the strike—fear of retaliation being the big one. Local West Indian community leaders who were vocally anti-communists in their own newspapers further instilled fear in their community regarding the residential status of anyone caught striking. "Several thousand children of West Indian immigrants had been born in Costa Rica, but the vast majority were not citizens. At best, citizenship protected only a few hundred members of the West Indian community in 1934" (Harpelle 2000:43). Besides intimidation from the local West Indian paper, *The Atlantic*, a group calling itself *The Sojourners Committee* issued public warnings to residents not to join the strike or face the wrath of UFCo and the Costa Rican government; and that the British government would not protect them for participating in the strike, or aiding any participants who were caught striking.

The Sojourners Committee was comprised of members of the executive committee of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which was the brainchild of Marcus Garvey, and the most successful West Indian organization that the Caribbean coast in Central America has ever seen. By the mid-1920s, there were reported to be twenty-three branches of UNIA in Costa Rica, and forty-seven in neighboring Panama (Harpelle 2000). Garvey spent a few months in Costa Rica between 1910 and 1911 working as a timekeeper for UFCo and documented the

poor conditions he saw before leaving for Panama in 1912. In 1914 he established UNIA and built it into a massive global movement. Marcus Garvey was so popular among West Indians that his mere return to Costa Rican soil in 1921 caused massive plantation shutdowns on the Caribbean coast, forcing United Fruit to allegedly pay his organization to keep Garvey confined to the capital of San José for three days so bananas could successfully be loaded onto waiting ships before he could visit his followers in Limón (Hill 1987:536). Harpelle suggests that by this time Garveyism had been co-opted in Costa Rica by the powers of United Fruit who, upon his return in 1921, met with Garvey and asserted that he himself was also an employer of labor and that he "understands our position," and is "using his best endeavor to get the negro race back to work" (Hill 1987:535).

With the inclusion of the incredibly popular UNIA working against the success of the strike, combined with the already existing racial hostilities between banana workers, the communist organizers were stuck between a rock and a hard place. The lack of West Indian participation in the strike annoyed the organizers but did not deter them. *Trabajo* made several appeals to the community to join the strike, but their attempts were clumsy and offered little in the way of solidarity or enticing West Indians to risk the possibility of sacrificing their residency status to join the strike. Manuel Mora went as far as to refer to West Indians as "damn negros" and decried the "servility" and "incomprehension among the Black population" while voicing his frustration at the lack of unity among the West Indian workers (*Diario de Costa Rica* 1934:7). Critics have highlighted Mora's words during this strike to draw attention to the failures of the communist party on the issue of racial solidarity. However, despite the lack of West Indian participation, the strike was still considered a resounding triumph among the labor movement due to its success in extracting material concessions from UFCo.

The strike lasted between August and September. After nearly a month of striking, the government of President Ricardo Jiménez Oreamuno and local growers accepted worker demands. The strike was temporarily suspended August 28; however, after the United Fruit Company rejected the agreement, and without corporate backing, local growers withdrew their acceptance (Chomsky 1996). What followed was a period of violent repression that forced many workers, including Fallas, to flee (Almeida 2014). But the workers did not surrender and counterattacked by burning and destroying company shipments and products (Chomsky 1996). Ultimately, the strike resulted in the UFCo agreeing to pay a minimum wage, provide adequate housing for its workers (paid for by employers), and included mandatory first-aid kits in the banana groves. More fundamentally, in addition to the minimum wage, the strike secured wage increases, provided cash payment of salaries (ending the despised token system), and led to the establishment of on-site clinics to combat malaria (Chomsky 1996).

The 1934 United Fruit Strike stands as a watershed moment in Costa Rican history as the first major challenge to the hegemony of a foreign corporate giant. Despite its legitimate trouble in mobilizing West Indian workers, it is still regarded as a defining event in the country that transformed the recently founded Communist Party from a small group of intellectuals and activists, into the beginnings of a genuine mass movement representing the working class. The strike's historical significance extends far beyond the immediate gains. It helped consolidate a growing segment of the Costa Rican labor movement, and many of its participants would later become leaders in the process of social reforms during the 1940s that culminated in the social guarantees and reformist Costa Rican state of the Calderón administration (Almeida 2014). The Communist Party, having proven its effectiveness as an organizer of working-class resistance,

gained permanent recognition as a force to be reckoned with among Costa Rican workers and the financial elite alike.

The significance of examining the roots of Costa Rican communism in the 1930s extends beyond the period itself. Here was a movement rooted in the country's own social realities and led by teachers, workers, and intellectuals who organized strikes, won elections, and demanded that the state address the conditions of the poor. Yet in the official narrative that emerged after 1948, these achievements would be reframed as evidence of foreign conspiracy. It is precisely because "Comunismo a la tica" had become a legitimate domestic political force, that it had to be recast as an evil foreign threat to justify the violence that would follow. This pattern of rendering inconvenient elements of society as being foreign so Costa Rica could remain pure in its own self-image, remains a constant throughout its national story. The communists, like the Afro-Costa Ricans and Indigenous peoples erased by the *leyenda blanca*, became casualties of a myth that could only survive by forgetting them. Understanding who and what that myth chose to forget is essential for understanding both the unfolding civil war and the intervention that would help decide it.

Calderón Guardia & The Vanguardia Popular Alliance

As the 1930s gave way to a new decade, the political landscape of Costa Rica was poised for a dramatic realignment. The Communist Party had established itself as a force to be reckoned with, but translating worker militancy into lasting structural change would require an ally from within the establishment itself. The decade of the 1940s stands as the most transformative period in Costa Rican political history, marking the definitive end of the Liberal State and the birth of the modern social welfare system. Central to this transformation was the unlikely political

alliance between President Rafael Ángel Calderón Guardia, a physician with deep roots in the Catholic faith and the traditional oligarchy, Monseñor Víctor Manuel Sanabria Martínez, the Archbishop of San José, and Manuel Mora Valverde, the leader of the Communist Party of Costa Rica. This three-way pact, often referred to as the "Caldero-Comunista" alliance, was responsible for enacting landmark Social Reforms, including the Labor Code, the Social Guarantees, and the Costa Rican Social Security Fund (CCSS). To comprehend the alliance, one must first understand the unique nature of the Communist Party in Costa Rica.

From its inception, the party demonstrated its commitment to labor rights through direct action. As previously discussed, in 1934 it organized and led a massive strike of banana workers against the powerful United Fruit Company on the Atlantic coast. This strike, led by figures like Carlos Luis Fallas, cemented the party's reputation as the voice of the organized working class and rural poor. Throughout the 1930s, the party gained electoral ground, with Mora and others winning seats in Congress. They used their platform to continuously denounce the "social question" that centered around issues of poverty, lack of healthcare, and the exploitative working conditions that the existing liberal oligarchy had long ignored. By the end of the decade, they were the most organized and disciplined political force advocating for structural change and positioning themselves as a crucial player in any future push for social justice. However, embracing the label "communist" meant they were still regarded as social pariahs by the conservative establishment and the Catholic Church (Bell 1971).

When Calderón Guardia of the National Republican Party assumed the presidency in 1940, he did so with a platform informed by the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church, which he had encountered during his medical studies at the University of Louvain in Belgium (Zamora 2019). In his inaugural year, he oversaw the creation of the Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR),

which was the first of his administration's major transformations and laid the groundwork for the more famous social and labor reforms that would follow after his alliance with the communists was solidified in 1942. The university would go on to play a vital role during his tenure, as it formed the professional staff necessary for the growth of new public institutions like the Costa Rican Social Security Fund (CCSS) and state banks (Zamora 2019).

Despite this major accomplishment under his belt, his initial years were fraught with conflict and gridlock. During World War II, at the request of the United States, his administration engaged in the persecution and confiscation of property from German and Italian residents in an effort to "accommodate the United States on the isolation of domestic and regional Fascist threats" (Longley 1997). Many of the persecuted, including Figueres who had business ties with this class, were integral to the coffee oligarchy and left him alienated from the powerful capitalists and economic elite (Castillo 2025). By 1942, Calderón Guardia found himself politically isolated, facing intense opposition from the very oligarchy that had once supported him.

It was at this critical stage that Manuel Mora Valverde saw an opportunity and sought a meeting with the embattled president in 1942 (Lindo-Fuentes 2010). Representing the Communist Party, Mora presented Calderón with a choice; he could surrender to the conservative forces seeking his ouster, or he could double down on the promise of social justice by allying with the communists to pass a sweeping package of pro-worker reforms. Mora offered the organizational strength, electoral base, and legislative discipline of the Communist Party to support Calderón's government in exchange for a genuine commitment to enact his proposed social welfare state (Castillo 2025). Calderón, facing a hostile Congress and a conspiratorial elite, accepted.

This political pact, however, required the perceived moral legitimacy that a politician working in tandem with the Communist Party simply did not have in 1942. In a deeply Catholic country, an open alliance with atheistic communists was politically radioactive. To address this, Calderón and Mora approached the newly appointed Archbishop of San José, Monseñor Víctor Manuel Sanabria Martínez for his support. Sanabria was a progressive intellectual who believed that the Church's social teachings aligned more closely with the communists' concern for the poor than with the selfishness of the capitalist oligarchy (Díaz-Arias 2009). To make the communists palatable to the Catholic faithful, the party underwent a crucial rebranding. In 1943, the Communist Party of Costa Rica was officially dissolved and re-founded as the Partido Vanguardia Popular (Popular Vanguard Party) (Aguilar Hernández 2015:22). This name change, while largely cosmetic, was a symbolic gesture of nationalization that helped to ease the concerns of the archbishop and moderate Catholics, while bringing an institutionalist veneer of mainstream legitimacy to the Communist party.

With the newly formed trinity in place, the alliance moved forward at remarkable speed in enacting Calderón's social reforms package. Between 1942 and 1943, they engineered the passage of the most progressive labor legislation in Latin America, earning Calderón the moniker "The FDR of Costa Rica" (Zamora 2019). On July 2, 1943, the Congress approved the landmark reforms to the political constitution of 1871, introducing a new section three titled "De las Garantías Sociales" (Of the Social Guarantees), comprising of Articles 51 through 65 (UCR 2024). As part of the reforms, a rewritten labor code was adopted that provided a comprehensive legal framework that detailed the employer-employee relationship, providing protections and benefits that were never before seen in the region. The new guarantees and benefits enshrined the eight-hour workday, the right to strike, minimum wage, and paid vacation into the promise of

"workers' rights" (Bell 1971). Further, the revolutionary nature of the reforms created an indispensable constitutional framework that would allow for the subsequent quick enactment of the labor code just weeks later.

The Social Guarantees were not merely a new set of laws, they were a philosophical shift, placing the state as the guarantor of social welfare and explicitly recognized the rights of the working class. In addition to labor reform, article fifty-eight of the charter established the creation of mandatory *seguros sociales* (social insurance), which would be administered by the newly formed Costa Rican Social Security Fund (CCSS) (UCR 2024). This was the mechanism that would universalize healthcare and old-age pensions, moving it from a private charity to a public right. Furthermore, the state committed itself to promoting technical education to workers and fostering the creation of cooperatives as an alternative economic mode (UCR 2024). For Manuel Mora and Vanguardia Popular, this was the culmination of a decade of struggle. They had not only achieved their primary political goals but had done so by becoming co-authors of the nation's new social contract.

Emboldened by their success, the Calderón-Vanguardia alliance formalized their partnership for the 1944 elections, forming a coalition known as the Bloque de la Victoria (Victory Bloc) (Castillo 2025). While Calderón could not run for immediate re-election, the Bloc successfully campaigned for his chosen successor, Teodoro Picado Michalski. Picado won the presidency amidst accusations of fraud and violence (Longley 1997). The accusations made by opponents of the National Republican Party of election fraud, political violence, and its association with communism would haunt the party for the next four years. Despite this, during Picado's administration (1944-1948), Vanguardia Popular wielded significant influence, holding key congressional seats and helping to solidify their reforms.

The alliance of Picado with the Vanguardia Popular coalition intensified cries of illegitimacy by the opposition. The conservative elite, allied with emerging social democratic figures like José Figueres Ferrer, viewed the "Caldero-Comunista" pact as a corrupt and an unlawful power grab (Bell 1971). The 1948 elections became the breaking point. The Bloque de la Victoria nominated Calderón to return to the presidency against conservative journalist Otilio Ulate (Bell 1971). Jon Patrick Bell provides a comprehensive accounting for just how malicious and extensive the contested results (and period between) the elections of 1944 and 1948 got with redbaiting propaganda being distributed in Costa Rican and U.S. newspapers.

El Social Demócrata and to a lesser extent *El Diario de Costa Rica* published open letters to the 'foreign colony resident in Costa Rica,' to the United States Ambassador, or the American People warning them of the serious communist threat that faced Costa Rica . . . In July 1946, *Acción Demócrata* began to employ the rhetoric of the Cold War in its columns. It utilized most distortions and oversimplifications that maintain the division of the world into two segments: The good people consisted of the United States and its allies; the bad people, the Russians and their allies, including various communist parties in the West. (Bell 1971:52)

When it appeared that Ulate had won the 1948 election, the Calderón-dominated Congress, with the support of Vanguardia Popular, annulled the results, claiming irregularities (de la Cruz 2011). This act provided the spark for the 1948 Civil War, led by Figueres's National Liberation Army. The conflict ended in defeat for the government forces, sending Calderón and the leaders of Vanguardia Popular into exile and temporarily outlawing the communist party.

Civil War

On February 8, 1948, Costa Ricans went to the polls. When the votes were counted, the independent electoral tribunal declared by a 2-1 vote that opposition candidate Otilio Ulate Blanco of the National Union Party (NUP) had defeated Rafael Calderón Guardia, who had returned in 1948 as the Republican Party candidate. The official results showed Ulate winning

with 55.3% of the vote (Olander 1996). Calderón immediately protested, claiming that the results were tainted by fraud and that the opposition had manipulated the electoral process. Calderón's protests were not without merit as part of the electoral material, including ballots, had been destroyed in a mysterious fire in Cartago at the *Colegio Superior de Señoritas*, the cause of which was never conclusively determined (Calhoun 1948:18). On March 1, the Legislative Assembly, where a governing coalition of Republican Party and Vanguardia Popular members held a significant majority, voted to annul the presidential election results.

The annulment triggered chaos. On the same day, police surrounded the home of Dr. Carlos Luis Valverde, Ulate's campaign manager, where Ulate was hiding. Shots were fired, and Valverde fell dead on his doorstep. Ulate escaped but was soon captured and imprisoned (Olander 1996). These events convinced many in the opposition that the government would never accept a peaceful transfer of power. For José Figueres Ferrer, who had been quietly preparing for armed resistance since his political exile in 1942, the annulment and Valverde's killing provided the justification he needed to make his move. On March 11, Figueres issued the call to arms, and on the following day, his National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*) exchanged gunfire with government forces, officially kickstarting the Civil War (Figueres Ferrer 1987).

Insurrection

Figueres launched the insurrection from southern Costa Rica, implementing what he called "Plan Maíz" (Plan Corn). On March 12, his forces seized San Isidro de El General, establishing a base of operations. Crucially, Figueres had secured external support: three Douglas DC-3 aircraft from the Transportes Aéreos Centroamericanos (TACA) airlines were commandeered to establish an air bridge between an airstrip in Guatemala and San Isidro,

bringing 700 rifles, light machine guns, and ammunition (Longley 1993). The rebels moved north along the Inter-American Highway, capturing strategic towns. On March 15, they took San Marcos de Tarrazú and Santa María de Dota, establishing their headquarters in the latter. From Santa María, Figueres broadcast radio addresses known as the "Two Proclamations of Santa María," explaining his reasons for war and outlining his vision for a "Second Republic" that would combat poverty and transform Costa Rican society. Both proclamations can be found inscribed on the walls in Figueres' personal museum located at his former home in the mountains of Desamparados de Alajuela at his finca *Hacienda La Lucha*. An excerpt from the first proclamation reads:

My fellow Costa Ricans: Are you doing everything you can to help freedom triumph? The army of national liberation is fighting brilliantly in the theater of war. You can do your part to aid the patriotic effort by laying sticks and stones across the roadways, cutting telegraph wires, and telephone lines, surrounding political command centers, and guard posts, and taking them by surprise, and attempting by every means to disorganize and dismember the usurpers. . . Do not cling to the excuse that you have no weapons. Even the humblest kitchen has a sugar-cane grater, even simple farmhouses have a cattle prod, every home has at least one pair of scissors, and in the heart of every man and woman of Costa Rica hides a hero. (Figueres Museum/Hacienda La Lucha)

By early April, intense combat raged around San Isidro and El Empalme. On April 9, Figueres launched the "Marcha Fantasma" (Phantom March), a major military operation moving rebel troops secretly through the mountains from the Santos region toward Cartago. They arrived on April 12 and captured Cartago, Costa Rica's second-largest city, located just 12 miles from the capital San José.

The Picado government faced significant military challenges. Costa Rica had traditionally maintained only a small professional army, and government forces relied heavily on the Communist-organized militias commanded by Manuel Mora and Fallas (Aguilar Bulgarelli 1974). These militias were largely motivated by defense of the social reforms they had helped

create and fought tenaciously to defend. As government forces weakened, President Picado sought external assistance. On April 16, he appealed to Nicaraguan president Anastasio Somoza García, a staunch anti-communist and longtime U.S. ally to lend them support. Somoza responded by dispatching units of the Nicaraguan National Guard, which crossed the border and occupied the northern towns of Los Chiles, La Cruz, and Quesada (Longley 1993).

The rebels, meanwhile, received support from an unexpected source: Guatemala. President Juan José Arévalo permitted Figueres and his international anti-communist cohort, the Caribbean Legion, to operate from Guatemalan territory and facilitate arms shipments to the rebels (Olander 1996). Members of the Caribbean Legion, including Dominican and other Central American exiles, fought alongside the Costa Rican rebels (Bell 1971; Longley 1993; Olander 1996).

Following the fall of Cartago, Picado recognized that continued resistance was futile. On April 19, representatives of the government and the rebels gathered at the Mexican Embassy in San José. There, with the mediation of diplomats from Mexico, Chile, the United States, and Panama, they signed the *Pacto de la Embajada de México* (Pact of the Mexican Embassy), ending the armed conflict (Aguilar Bulgarelli 1974). The terms of the pact provided for Picado's resignation and departure from the country, along with Calderón. On April 24, Figueres entered San José at the head of his victorious army. Picado and Calderón went into exile, finding refuge in Nicaragua. Santos León Herrera assumed interim presidency until Figueres could formally take power in the form of a provisional junta government on May 8, 1948. Otilio Ulate would not assume power until 18 months later on November 8, 1949.

The Contested Role of the United States

At the heart of this conflict lay a disputed presidential election. However, entangled in its resolution was the geopolitical anxieties of the early stages of the Cold War and the strategic calculations of U.S. policymakers in Washington. For decades, this conflict was viewed primarily as a domestic affair. However, a revisionist wave of scholarship, spurred by the end of the Cold War and the declassification of confidential archives, began to re-examine the role of external actors, specifically the United States.

To understand U.S. actions during the Costa Rican civil war, one must appreciate the broader context of early 1948. The Cold War was slowly beginning to take shape. A communist coup in Czechoslovakia occurred just months earlier in February 1948, heightening Western anxieties about Soviet expansion. Meanwhile, the Truman administration had just established the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) a year earlier in 1947. At this time the U.S. was also formulating its communist containment doctrine, leaving Latin America in a position where it began to slowly fall under the scrutiny of Cold War policymakers (Longley 1997).

Within this context, Costa Rica presented a complex challenge. The Picado government, with all of its questionable democratic deficiencies, was the constitutionally established authority. Yet it governed in coalition with a communist party that pursued reform through electoral means rather than revolution. However, it was nonetheless part of the international communist movement. For U.S. officials shaped by the emerging Cold War consensus, this was a troubling development. As Kyle Longley has documented, the opposition skillfully manipulated these anxieties. Gonzalo Facio, a Figueres associate, publicly warned that "few foresaw the Czechoslovak crisis, but now we have the same thing in our front yard," characterizing the situation as "the first instance of infiltration by those serving Soviet interests

without the support of the Russian Army" (Longley 1997:63). This sort of rhetoric resonated in Washington.

One of the most significant forms of U.S. intervention involved the control of arms sales. As the civil war intensified, both sides sought weapons. The Picado government, as the legitimate authority, had the legal right to purchase arms internationally to suppress the insurrection. Researchers like Longley (1998), Bell (1971), and Aguilar Bulgarelli (1974) have challenged conventional narratives put out by Figueres and his canon of biographers in the immediate years following the war regarding the extent of international support the rebels received during this period. They contend that U.S. officials systematically prevented Picado's agents from purchasing weapons in the United States—something the U.S. has not denied (Office of the Historian:152).

Moreover, Washington exerted diplomatic pressure throughout Latin America to block government arms purchases regionally. "They prevented Picado's agents from purchasing arms in the United States and Latin America," Longley writes, effectively crippling the government's military logistics. Simultaneously, he claims the United States turned a blind eye to Guatemalan assistance to the rebels, creating a one-sided flow of arms that favored the insurrection. "As the fighting escalated, evidence of Guatemalan assistance to the rebels mounted. Ambassador Kyle reported that. . . at least eleven military flights to aid Figueres had originated in Guatemala" (Longley 1993:168). Further, Longley points out that the military aid from Guatemala would continue uninterrupted until the conclusion of the war, despite a few "weak protestations" from the Americans to stop Arévalo's interference. "The Guatemalan assistance allowed the rebels to secure and maintain a logistical superiority, and the CIA later concluded that the Caribbean exiles and Guatemalan aid proved decisive in ensuring rebel victory" (Longley 1993:169).

Historian Marcia Olander disputes Longley's claim that the U.S. actively interfered in Costa Rican affairs by manipulating the sale of arms purchases (effectively creating an embargo) in an effort to rid the country of a communist government (Olander 1996). Her contention stems from a misinterpretation of evidence Longley cited in his article. Specifically, she claims that historian Jacobo Schifter made a "crucial error" by citing a 1947 State Department document, which merely recorded that Mexico had not sold arms to Picado, as proof of U.S. obstruction of arms sales.

She further accuses Longley and others of reading history backward, allowing the certain knowledge of later, more overt Cold War interventions (like the 1954 Guatemalan coup), to color their interpretation of the more ambiguous events in Costa Rica. For Olander, the burden of proof for a U.S.-enforced arms embargo requires direct documentary evidence, which she finds lacking. The fact that Mexico or other nations did not sell arms to Picado is not, in her view, proof that the U.S. pressured them into refusing. It was, at most, a commercial or local political decision (Olander 1996).

However, Longley's reasoning was never limited to the United States simply manipulating the sale of arms shipments from Mexico. Longley contended that all of Central America, as well as some South American countries, were deliberately instructed by the U.S. not to get involved in Costa Rica's war by supplying its government with any arms and ammunition it asked to purchase. Longley also claims that Picado was directly intimidated by intermediaries of U.S. diplomats during critical negotiations and was told if he did not surrender, U.S. soldiers stationed at the Panama Canal would enter into the war. Picado extrapolates further on these points in his memoirs:

During the fighting and his subsequent exile, Picado underscored State Department actions that contributed to Figueres's victory. They included stopping his government

from purchasing war materials in Mexico, Honduras, and Nicaragua while allowing the rebels to secure munition shipments from Guatemala. In addition, Picado criticized the U.S. [diplomatic] officials of siding with rebels including Davis, Hughes and others. Finally, during the critical stages of negotiations, Picado reportedly received information that U.S. forces in the Panama Canal Zone had been mobilized to occupy San José in the event of a Communist take-over. The president preferred to resign rather than allow his country to suffer the disgrace of foreign occupation. "I can assure you," Picado declared, "that inseparable forces are absolutely determined to have us lose this contest." To Picado, his forces battled several enemies including the rebels, Arévalo, and the United States. (Longley 1993:172; Picado M. 2001:380)

Beyond the arms embargo, U.S. diplomats played an active role in shaping the conflict's resolution (de la Cruz 1988). Ambassador Nathaniel P. Davis, the chief U.S. diplomatic representative in San José, maintained contact with both sides of the war throughout the fighting. As the war reached its climax, Davis and other embassy officers worked openly with rebel representatives during cease-fire negotiations, a fact that Longley argues "legitimized the rebel movement by openly working with it . . . giving the movement the tacit recognition of the most powerful nation in the region." More significantly, Longley contends that at a crucial juncture in the peace talks, U.S. officials intimidated Picado into resigning, guaranteeing a rebel victory. While direct documentary evidence of such intimidation remains elusive, contemporary participants described an atmosphere of pressure. Máximo Quesada, who served as Picado's Secretary of Government and Police, characterized U.S. pressure as being like "the air, which is felt, even if it cannot be seen" (Olander 1996:20).

U.S. policy toward regional actors further demonstrates its interventionist posture. As noted, Nicaraguan president Anastasio Somoza dispatched National Guard units to support Picado (Aguilar Bulgarelli 1974). Somoza, a staunch U.S. ally who had cultivated close relations with Washington, might have been expected to act in coordination with U.S. policy. However, according to Longley and Aguilar Bulgarelli, the United States "stymied Somoza's attempt to aid Picado and Calderón" (Longley 1997:63-64). This suggests that Washington communicated to

Somoza that his intervention was unwelcome, effectively neutralizing the government's most powerful regional ally. At the same time, the U.S. took no action to prevent Guatemalan aid from reaching Figueres, despite Guatemala's government being viewed with suspicion by U.S. policymakers.

This selective application of pressure reveals a clear preference for the conflict's outcome. By denying Somoza the ability to decisively support Picado while permitting Arévalo to supply Figueres, the United States tilted the regional balance of power in favor of the rebels. Whether this reflected a coherent policy decision or merely reactive improvisation remains debated in scholarship to this day, but its effect was unmistakable. The government's external support was neutralized while the rebels were permitted.

Furthermore, following the rebel victory and Figueres's assumption of power as head of the provisional Junta, the question of diplomatic recognition arose. The United States moved swiftly to stabilize relations with the new government (Ameringer 1978). The smooth normalization contrasts sharply with U.S. policy toward other Latin American governments that came to power through irregular means. In later years, the United States would prove far more reluctant to recognize other social democratic governments, regardless of their constitutional origins. The rapid acceptance of Figueres, despite his armed seizure of power, reflects Washington's satisfaction with the ultimate outcome.

The Costa Rican Civil War of 1948 presents a complex case study in U.S. intervention during the early Cold War. Unlike the overt CIA operation in Guatemala six years later, U.S. involvement in Costa Rica was characterized less by covert action than by diplomatic pressure, selective application of arms embargoes, and the implicit threat of military force. Yet these measures, while subtle, were no less consequential.

The evidence examined supports several conclusions about the nature and extent of U.S. intervention in Costa Rica's civil war. First, the United States systematically disadvantaged the Picado government in its ability to procure arms, both directly from U.S. sources and indirectly through diplomatic pressure on other Latin American nations. Contemporary diplomatic records confirm that government officials perceived this as a hostile act (Office of the Historian:152). Second, U.S. diplomats, particularly Ambassador Davis, worked closely with rebel representatives during the endgame negotiations, lending legitimacy to Figueres's movement (Longley 1997). Third, the United States neutralized potential government support from Nicaragua while permitting rebel support from Guatemala, demonstrating a clear preference for the conflict's outcome (Aguilar Bulgarelli 1974).

The broader significance of U.S. intervention in 1948 lies in its precedential character. As Kyle Longley has argued, the Costa Rican case "marked the origins of the Cold War in Latin America," preceding and foreshadowing the more dramatic interventions that would follow. The mechanisms employed in Costa Rica—like arms embargoes, diplomatic pressure, manipulation of regional allies—would become standard tools of U.S. policy throughout the hemisphere. Costa Rica's small size and pride in their democratic traditions meant that such measures sufficed. Yet Costa Rica's story also demonstrates the limits of U.S. power and the agency of smaller nations. The civil war was fundamentally a Costa Rican conflict, rooted in decades of domestic political struggle over social reform, electoral integrity, and the role of the Communist Party. U.S. intervention may have shaped the outcome of the war, but it did not determine it. Costa Ricans themselves fought and died, made choices, and bore the consequences of their decisions.

Voices From the War

The Costa Rican Civil War of 1948 remains the most significant rupture in the nation's modern political history. For decades, the official narrative, crafted by the victorious Figuerista side, portrayed the conflict as a necessary fight to defend the democratic principles of the country against an alliance of fraudulent politicians, communists, and the social reforms they ushered in. This "founding myth" of the Second Republic, however, often sanitizes the violence and simplifies the complex loyalties that divided families and communities. Beyond the speeches made by caudillos like José Figueres Ferrer and his political allies lay a more nuanced and human truth: that the war was a lived experience of fear, loss, survival, and fractured memory. In seeking to move beyond the overexposure of political binaries often found within these simplified narratives, the real-life voices and testimonies of those who experienced the 1948 Civil War—combatants, children, and rural peasants—often get sidelined and dismissed as methodologically inferior. However, in examining the oral histories, media accounts, letters written home, and other firsthand testimonies, we uncover the war's profound emotional toll, the long shadow of postwar repression, and the fragile nature of memory itself.

The testimonies of those who were children in 1948 offer some of the most powerful and heartbreaking perspectives, stripped of adult political ideology and filtered through a lens of emotional and physical displacement. In 1997-1998, the Escuela de Historia of the Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR) hosted a writing contest to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Civil War. The competition, titled "Niños y Niñas del 48 Escriben" (Children's Stories of 1948), called for people who were children between 1936 and 1958 to write about how they and their families had experienced the events of the 1940s. The contest was successful in compiling an impressive number of submissions detailing what life was like growing up during that era. Organizers

received hundreds of essays from different people all over the country, and in 2001 the University of Costa Rica Press published a two-volume set containing at least 86 of those essays (Muñoz 2001).

My great aunt *tía Itza* was one of the participants in the contest and submitted her testimonio detailing what life was like in 1947 as a 10-year-old girl. Her submission was never selected to be in the two-volume set, but her memories have remained preserved in the national archives ever since. Her story chronicles life at the beginning of the war when her father (my great grandfather), Arturo Sotillo Jiménez, went off with a group of neighbors from Desamparados (their hometown) to prepare for war under the command of Don Pepe Figueres. "Dad's absence meant my house was being watched by mariachis, especially at night, in case he returned. Because of this we had to move, with all the disruption that entailed" (Chacón Sotillo 1999). "Mariachis" was the name given to the government soldiers whose uniforms resembled that of the musical singers. It was not uncommon for community members to face displacement and disruption during these years. The war was a political conflict between an existing government and an ascending organized opposition. In many cases neighbors were pitted against neighbors and battle lines could be drawn at the dinner table depending on which side of the divide one stood on (Díaz-Arias 2019).

To get a sense of how this close-knit dynamic manifested in real time, Itza offers a memory of what it was like living in a home divided by differing factions of the war:

Another memory is that the ceiling of my grandmother's house was for a time a hiding place for the Figueres supporters, but when the Figueres supporters came in, the ceiling was for the Calderón supporters, not for long because my uncle Alfonso, who although he had not participated, due to his kinship with Calderón supporters who had participated a lot, went to Coronado, to the house of my uncles Jorge and Malié, and my uncle José María moved to the farm of Don Antonio and Aunt Cristina Musmani in San Miguel de Desamparados (today urbanización Capri). (Chacón Sotillo 1999)

According to Itza, the house she sought refuge in also served as a hiding spot for supporters of both sides of the war. Despite her father being enlisted under the rebel army of Figueres, her *tío Alfonso* (from her mother's side) was sympathetic to supporters of Calderón Guardia, and for a time let them into the house to hide in the ceiling. Meanwhile, Figueres supporters were already permitted to hide in those same ceilings when needed. Considering that Itza had to move into her grandmother's house with the rest of her family out of refuge from Calderón Guardia's national army monitoring their home (in anticipation of her father's possible return), the strong political divides of the large family were not deterred from quartering troops on both sides, even in the midst of civil war. However, despite political disagreements, the impulse to provide for those in need within a smaller community—where the people in it are already deeply familiar with one another—remained strong. "Incidentally, Don Gaetano Laurito (my uncle Jorge's father-in-law), who owned the business 'El Manzanero,' would leave food at the entrance of the house at night for people to pick up and prevent looting" (Chacón Sotillo 1999).

Itza's testimony offers a rare glimpse into what life was like through the eyes of a child brought up during the fighting. Her memories attest to the strength of the community to look out for one another during warfare, regardless of whatever side one supports. Naturally, the perspective of a child who is not in tune with the underlying causes of the war or the extreme severity of its violence is going to internalize a more positive and measured understanding of how they made sense of what they witnessed. While Itza attests to being impressed by the resilience of her community acting selflessly for one another, she was not, however, immune from the horrors and real-life dangers that followed her from one house to another. Itza shares:

The time of revolution was calm for me, since I don't remember feeling fear, anger, or anything like that because I saw everything from the point of view of a ten-year-old girl. At night there was no light and after ten o'clock at night trucks loaded with the corpses of the mariachis passed by, and so people would not see them, they shot into the air. My

sister Ginette tells me that she and my aunt Ivy would peek out to see them pass by, but my grandmother would drag them back inside the house by their ears because of the danger they posed. (Chacón Sotillo 1999)

Her memory of the passing corpses at night adds a grim layer of context to how close the war came to home for her and her family. The mention of her abuela pulling her sister and tía away from the window by the ear also lays bare the reality that their safety was not guaranteed, even in their home.

The accumulation of bodies, particularly after large battles, provided its own set of challenges and conflicting accounts of the cruelty of war in this period. Health motives and a lack of time were used as justifications by opposition rebels for engaging in the act of dousing corpses with diesel fuel and setting them on fire. In the testimonies of Figuerista soldiers, the idea of burning corpses came from an altruistic desire to prevent the spread of bacteria and the possibility of producing any sort of pandemic illness (Díaz-Arias 2019). It was also convenient for them to burn the bodies and return to fighting instead of burying them all. However, Díaz-Arias contends with this rationality. "Such justifications, however, are problematic because testimonies revealed that not only dead bodies were burnt" (Díaz-Arias 2019:17). The testimony of Dagoberto Cruz on the practice of burning corpses after a particularly violent battle at San Isidro offers valuable insights:

That day and the next one we lifted cadavers. We burnt them up into a ditch, near the square of the hospital. We doused corpses with diesel and gasoline, lit a match and let the flames do their job. Something tremendous happened: when we threw some corpses into the ditch, we heard somebody terrified crying for help; someone was still alive amidst the dead bodies but we could not do anything to help them. I keep this fact in my memory the same way I recall how corpses moved when fire touched them. We threw about 80 cadavers, maybe some more, most of them enemies and civilians. (Villegas 2001:286; Villegas 2002:141)

The burning of corpses before checking to see if there were any survivors demonstrates a severe lack of regard for their enemy's humanity. Further, it served to erase their rivals' identities, making it impossible for relatives to identify their loved ones, essentially leaving them as disappeared. The inclusion of civilians among the corpses cast into the burn pits also attests to the fact that civilians, whether deliberately targeted or not, were caught up in this war regardless of political affiliations or desire to participate. The fear that my great-great-grandmother felt to even look out the window at night in Itza's recollection was not simply done out of an exaggerated abundance of caution, but rather a defense mechanism against a very real and present danger.

Dehumanization of government soldiers was common practice among rebel fighters. For their part, Otilio Ulate and José Figueres regularly took advantage of newspapers and hosted political demonstrations to instill hatred against the threat of *Calderoncomunistas* before the war had even begun (Longley 1997; Bell 1971). Those who fought and supported Calderón or President Picado were depicted as outsiders, and in many cases, less than human (Díaz-Arias 2019). Upon the conclusion of the war, a Figuerista soldier named Oscar Cordero had the diary he kept throughout the conflict published. In it, he admonishes Calderón Guardia's "tyranny" and refers to his opponents as the "Devil's evil forces" (Cordero 1948:8). Another account from Cordero's diary names Calderón, Picado, and even Manuel Mora as "diabolical monsters" and "toads," belonging to a "dark swamp" (Cordero 1948:30). In his diary, Cordero expressed they were fighting against "non-human beings" and because of that they "did not have to treat them as human beings" (Solís 2006:291).

Racism and nationalism contributed to a different, yet equally powerful form of dehumanization that soldiers were already accustomed to. In their testimonies, former Figuerista

rebels would make claims that they were battling against Nicaraguans, or even members of Anastasio Somoza's National Guard, rather than their fellow Costa Ricans (Villegas 2001:263; Villegas 2002:91, 114, 192, 219; Villegas 2004:155). "By employing the Costa Rican national discourse towards Nicaraguans, it was easy for Figueristas to depict their challengers as monsters" (Díaz-Arias 2019:13). Rebel soldiers were easily susceptible to buying into the narrative that they were fighting a war against foreign mercenaries, rather than their fellow countrymen, due to longstanding grievances that came with the turbulent history between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. The scapegoating of Nicaraguans seemingly created a permission structure based on nationalism that afforded them the indulgence of their own racist pursuit of justice.

My great uncle *tío Gonzalo*, who fought on the side of Figueres during the war, brought this same sentiment up to me when I asked him what he made of the enemy during those years. Gonzalo told me he originally wanted to fight the communists but ended up fighting Nicaraguans instead. *"Llegaron muchos soldados de Nicaragua y a ellos no les importaba, no pelearon con el amor como lo hacíamos nosotros por defender el país. . . presentaban muchas batallas"* (Many Nicaraguan soldiers arrived and did not care, they did not fight with the same love we did fighting for our country. . . they fought in many battles). According to Gonzalo, he was engaged in a fight to defend his country from the clutches of the "evil" Calderoncomunista dictatorship that was employing Nicaraguan mercenaries and United Fruit Company security guards from the West Indies to do their contracted fighting for them. He expressed to me that he did not view his opponents as being Costa Rican and thus did not have any angst or hesitation when it came to fighting against them.

Perceptions of "good" revolutionaries facing off against "evil" Calderoncomunistas like the ones Gonzalo holds, or the ones found in Cordero's diary, were picked up and adopted by the

press in the immediate months following the war. The selected accounts lent themselves to establishing a baseline metanarrative about the war told from the perspective of its victors. For its part, the paper *El Diario de Costa Rica* published an article by Marcos Chanto, approximately one month after the war concluded, titled "Tarrazú in the Revolution" (May 16, 1948). The article was celebratory and staunchly in favor of Figueres's victory while simultaneously being vehemently anticommunist. It also praised the critical role that Tarrazúceños played in Figueres's successful revolt while framing the war as an act of saving the fatherland from "ignominy and slavery." The article ends with Chanto proclaiming that "history and future generations" would ask every Costa Rican what they did to help "found the Second Republic" (Kordick 2019:106).

On April 27, 1948, *El Diario de Costa Rica* published an article entitled "Carta a la Madre" (Letter to Mother) by Enrique Delgado Flores, a veterinarian and former political prisoner. In it, Enrique expresses his fear of death and the jubilation he felt the day his freedom was announced.

Before invoking the blessed virgin and begging God for forgiveness for all of my sins, I also felt fear of dying at the hands of the communists who declared they were going to storm this prison. I also felt fear in Desamparados when they held the drill for us. After many hours and silent days of invocation, I felt purified. This is the fourth day of being here, and like prisoners, we are resigned to the fact that our Chief Figueres would bomb us if that were to bring about the result of this great day of National Liberation. The enthusiasm of the soul when we received the news of our freedom knew no bounds: we were all so weak due to the suffering that a tear and a cry could hardly escape us. Colonel García Picado gave us the news, we raised our shoulders, and then the National Anthem was sung under an opposition flag brought in clandestinely. Long live Costa Rica. Long live Otilio Ulate. Long live José Figueres. Long live the Second Republic. Long live Our Lady of the Angels. Until next time, many kisses from your son. Cuídate. (Flores 1948)

Accounts like Enrique's were not uncommon. Throughout and after the war, *Diario de Costa Rica* published several letters written to family members that conveyed similar sentiments (Díaz-Arias 2019). The letters sent to the mothers were not simply public forms of condolence; they were carefully selected pieces of political propaganda. They served as a means to turn grief into

civic and national pride. The letters reframed the death of a son in the civil war not as a tragic loss in a political conflict, but as a heroic and noble sacrifice for the nation to see. Mothers were implicitly being told through the press that their sons were heroes who had saved Costa Rica. For a small, interconnected country like Costa Rica, seeing the names of neighbors and local boys published in the paper created a sense of shared sacrifice and collective participation in the founding of Figueres's Second Republic. In the months following the war, the pages of *Diario de Costa Rica* became an unofficial public archive for stories and testimonies that reflected how the ruling Junta wanted the public to perceive their legitimacy.

The real-life voices and testimonies of the 1948 Costa Rican Civil War dismantle the tidy narratives of heroes and villains, replacing them with a complex and often painful human tapestry. From tía Itza's forced displacement and haunted memories of gunshots and dead bodies passing through at night, to the terrified sound of screams and the sight of burning flesh imprinted in the mind of Dagoberto Cruz, or to even the pride that tío Gonzalo still carries with him today after protecting his country from "the Nicaraguan threat," these stories reveal a conflict that was anything but clean. They show us families torn apart by ideology, communities shattered by violence, and individuals left with questions that official sites of historical preservation refused to engage in. The children of the caudillos, speaking for their fathers decades later, remind us that the legacy of 1948 is not just political but deeply personal, passed down through generations as both pride and burden.

Conclusion

The 1948 Costa Rican Civil War represents far more than a brief armed conflict in a small Central American nation. It stands as a pivotal moment in the national identity of Costa Rica itself. One where the contradictions between myth and reality, between inclusion and

erasure, and between sovereignty and foreign influence came into violent confrontation with one another. This thesis has argued that the exceptionalist narrative Costa Rica crafted for itself over the course of a century did not emerge organically from the national character, but was actively constructed through political struggle, racial exclusion, and the selective remembering of history. The war that brought Figueres to power was not simply a defense of democracy against evil communist tyranny, but a contest over which version of Costa Rica would be remembered, and which would be forgotten.

The Calderón-Sanabria-Mora Vanguardia alliance of the 1940s demonstrated that profound social transformation was possible within Costa Rica's democratic framework. The Social Guarantees and Labor Code represented genuine achievements that improved countless lives and established the foundation of the modern welfare state. Yet these same achievements became liabilities in the red-baiting campaigns that preceded the civil war. The opposition's success in painting the government as illegitimate and communist-controlled reveals how Cold War anxieties could be weaponized to dismantle progressive coalitions. The 1948 election may have provided the immediate spark, but the fire had been kindled years earlier by both domestic and international forces who skillfully understood the political utility of fear.

The United States played a contested but consequential role in shaping the conflict's outcome. Whether through active embargoes or passive acquiescence, Washington's policies systematically disadvantaged the Picado government while permitting arms and legitimacy to Figueres's forces. The swift recognition of the junta government, despite its seizure of power through armed force, signaled satisfaction with a result that aligned Costa Rica with U.S. Cold War objectives. The mechanisms employed through diplomatic pressure, manipulation of arms sales, and implicit threats would become standard tools of hemispheric policy in the decades that

followed. Costa Rica was not merely a bystander to the Cold War, but an early theater in which its methods were refined.

The abolition of the military in 1949 remains a genuinely remarkable achievement, one that has shaped Costa Rican society in profound and positive ways. Yet it has also served as a handy smoke screen. It is a proud accomplishment that obscures the violence, intervention, and exclusion that accompanied the founding of the "second republic." Costa Rica's exceptional status on the world stage confers real advantages, from international appointments to foreign investment to diplomatic influence. However, these advantages come at the cost of historical honesty. A nation that cannot confront its own complexity and history of racial hierarchies, susceptibility to foreign influence, and violence embedded in its founding development remains trapped in a myth of its own making. The task of critical scholarship is not to dismantle national pride, but to insist that pride must be grounded in truth rather than forgetting. The 1948 Civil War matters not only for what it reveals about Costa Rica's past, but for what it demands of its future: a reckoning with the full weight of history, in all its contradictions and complexity.

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