



Vol. 7, No. 3, Spring 2010, 506-512

www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review / Reseña

Julie Mazzei, *Death Squads or Self-defense Forces? How Paramilitary Groups Emerge and Challenge Democracy in Latin America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

Death Squads in Colombia, El Salvador and Mexico compared

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In her book *Death Squads or Self-defense Forces? How Paramilitary Groups Emerge and Challenge Democracy*, Julie Mazzei recounts the story of a Colombian woman who moved to a town in a paramilitary zone and was welcomed by the paramilitary group. A committee of paramilitaries gave her the cellular telephone number of the local commander to use in case of an emergency and told her they would react within fifteen minutes. By offering their services the illegal paramilitaries created an informal network through which people like this woman would report anything suspicious. The story illustrates how in large parts of Colombia paramilitaries replaced the state and dominated public life.

This book on paramilitaries in Colombia, El Salvador and Mexico investigates the origins of the paramilitary groups and the mechanisms that contributed to their emergence. In the 1980s a new wave of paramilitaries emerged in Colombia, originating from both private armies of landowners and groups related to the drug cartels. In El Salvador paramilitary groups closely linked to the armed forces operated during the civil war of the 1980s. In Mexico paramilitary death squads emerged in the 1990s in the southern state of Chiapas. Central in Mazzei's approach is what she calls a triad of driving forces behind paramilitary groups. This triad is composed of factions of the economic elite, who provide finances and organizational necessities; the political elite, who offer political "cover", purpose and leadership; and factions of the military, who provide arms, training and leadership. The process by which these variables interact, as Mazzei argues, explains to a large extent the paramilitary emergence.

El Salvador, Colombia, and Chiapas do indeed share some common characteristics. In each of the cases the elite protected their economic interests by an exclusive political system, and for some time the state provided arms to civilians in order to protect the land and wealth of the elite. In addition, in all these cases the state faced growing opposition by left-wing militant groups. The two chapters on each country analyze the historical context of the conflict, and the advent and decline of the paramilitary groups. These chapters are well written and provide many interesting details, but when reading them it also becomes clear how the cases differ, both in context and in the way the paramilitary groups operate. In the conclusion of the book the author emphasizes the similarities, which suggest a common cause for the advent of paramilitary death squads, but I find it difficult to draw such a conclusion from the country studies presented in this book. My conclusion would be that the driving forces behind paramilitary death squads differ substantially, especially when comparing El Salvador or Mexico with Colombia. These differences can often be traced back to differences in the levels of autonomy the paramilitary groups had from the beginning. Whereas in El Salvador and Mexico the death squads were intimately related to the military and elite, the Colombian groups operated more independently from the start. The Colombian paramilitaries, heavily involved in the illicit drug trade, developed into a

powerful force with whom the government had to negotiate to reach an agreement for their demobilization. In El Salvador and Mexico the death squads remained under the control of the military and elite, and they ceased to exist when the government reached a peace agreement with left-wing insurgent groups.

The triad as suggested by Mazzei is most visible in the case of El Salvador where the economic and political elite and the military had a strong common interest. For a long time, military rule in El Salvador had protected the elite and their control over most of the country's land and resources. In the 1980s, however, left-wing guerrillas coupled with popular organizing challenged this power system controlled by the army and the elite. The paramilitary death squads in El Salvador were closely related to the armed forces. Not only did the army establish paramilitary groups, but the militaries were also actively involved in it. Based on material gathered during her research in El Salvador, Mazzei concludes that "the paramilitary groups may have been primarily military personnel working off duty or simply illegally, organized (...) by high-ranking military superiors, using the pretext of a paramilitary group to mask their activities." A key role was played by a Salvadoran army officer, Roberto D'Aubuisson, who founded a counterinsurgency intelligence network, ORDEN, that served as a base for several groups, including the notorious *Mano Blanca* (White Hand) death squad. The paramilitaries in El Salvador operated as an invisible branch of the armed forces that carried out the dirty work. Occasionally, army battalions were directly involved in violence against civilians, such as in the massacre of El Mozote, but elsewhere obscure paramilitaries carried out the attacks. The paramilitary violence stopped with the signing in 1992 of the Chapultepec Accords, which formally ended the Salvadoran civil war.

The emergence of paramilitaries in Chiapas is -more than in the case of Colombia- comparable to El Salvador. During the conflict in Chiapas paramilitaries were active on a regional level, but the national government has always denied their existence, enabling the paramilitaries more than in the other cases "to operate like ghosts, below the radar of Mexican law". In 1994 the guerrilla group EZLN, better known as the Zapatistas, began a military offensive against the Mexican government. Their principal demand was land reform for the

indigenous people of Chiapas. Subsequent to the uprising, at least twelve paramilitary groups emerged in Chiapas, allegedly responsible for more than 15,000 murders. Mazzei convincingly links the paramilitaries to the triad of the military and the political and economic elite. She analyzes how paramilitaries in Chiapas were organized by groups of individuals, including members of the then ruling PRI party, ranchers who had most to lose in a possible land reform, and police or military contacts. The paramilitaries thus not only protected large property holders from land redistribution, but also defended the dominance of the PRI party. Victims of paramilitary violence were EZLN activists, members of progressive political parties, as well as religious leaders and human rights workers. Mazzei details the connection with the military by citing from military documents, for instance about the “training and support of self-defense forces and other paramilitary organizations”. The military, moreover, used a *Manual of Irregular War* describing the need to establish a “native” enemy to the guerrilla, “coordinated by the military commander of the area”. Most of the paramilitary groups disappeared after the government reached a peace agreement with the EZLN in 1996.

In the case of Colombia the links between the paramilitaries on one side and the army and the elite on the other side are less clear, especially because drug traffickers played a major role in the paramilitary groups. In response to mounting guerrilla activity, the Colombian state created self-defense groups in 1965 to combat the guerrillas. These groups lost official state sanction in 1989. The de-facto paramilitary groups nevertheless continued to operate illegally and expanded into a widespread phenomenon. The wave of paramilitaries originated both from small private armies to defend land owners against guerrillas and from illicit drug trafficking groups, principally the Medellín cartel. Mazzei distinguishes three core groups that were most instrumental in building a national paramilitary organization: the groups surrounding the Castaño brothers and two paramilitary leaders in the central Magdalena area known as Rodrigo OO and Ernesto Baez. The Castaño brothers, Carlos and Fidel, were the most influential. The kidnapping and murder of their father by guerrillas of the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) turned the Castaños brothers into the most

motivated leaders of a paramilitary group, which ultimately became responsible for thousands of killings and disappearances. Mazzei describes how, under the leadership of the Castaños, paramilitaries from different places in Colombia in 1997 formed a national organization AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia or United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia). The paramilitary groups not only fought guerrillas, but also massacred villagers living in areas under the control of guerrilla groups. The most notorious massacres occurred in the period when the paramilitaries operated as illegal armed groups.

Mazzei's triad is less visible in Colombia than in El Salvador or Chiapas. For instance, the Castaños brothers, who played a key role in establishing the national organization AUC, were both trained in the army, but had left when they started their paramilitary group. So unlike El Salvador where serving militaries took actively part in paramilitary groups, paramilitaries in Colombia operated more independently, although in the first years with tacit consent and sometimes in cooperation with members of the armed forces. For the financing of the paramilitaries during the start-up the Castaño brothers relied on wealthy landowners, as Mazzei correctly points out, but the long-term support of the paramilitaries came directly from drug trafficking. Mazzei continues to treat the paramilitaries as a political organization, which was true in the beginning, but in the course of years a characterization as a criminal group would be more appropriate. Most paramilitary groups became primarily aimed at self-enrichment. Paramilitaries on a large scale seized the properties of peasants they had evicted from their land, a development Duncan (2006) has so aptly characterized as *contrarreforma agraria*. In 2003 the paramilitaries signed an agreement with the government for their disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. Many of them have successfully reintegrated in society, but others have resorted to criminal groups, mainly involved in drug trafficking.

The main shortcoming of her research is that Mazzei did not conduct fieldwork in Colombia. Although she acknowledges the importance of personal encounters, she felt that the situation was too dangerous to do interviews in the country. But since the demobilization process of the paramilitaries started in 2003, there are many opportunities to interview former paramilitaries who are in

reintegration programs, attending courses, and doing internships to prepare them for a civilian job. Researchers of universities in Colombia who study the conflict often have contacts in the field that can provide access to key persons. Moreover, Colombian academics have published many research articles in Spanish on the conflict and on the paramilitaries. I wonder why the author does not refer more to academic research in Colombia, which is often also available through the Internet. To give two examples: Mauricio Romero (2003) has written extensively on the paramilitary operations related to political reforms, and Alfredo Rangel (2005) has published on the history of the paramilitary movements and how they functioned as a group. The value of doing fieldwork in the country itself is also reflected in the writing. In the El Salvador introduction, the reader becomes part of a vivid description of city life in which you can nearly hear the cars passing by in the chaotic traffic. This kind of *couleur locale* is missing in the Colombian chapter.

An interesting discussion is whether the paramilitaries in the different countries formed a structured organization or functioned more as a loose network. In El Salvador the paramilitaries were linked to structures of the military, and in some cases they were even part of it. In Colombia, even after a national paramilitary organization was established, regional groups operated more or less independently, sometimes even waging war against each other, as was the case in the central department Antioquía. Moreover, the Colombian paramilitaries operated within a broader network that included criminal groups, among them remnants of the drug cartels. Mazzei introduces a network theory in her last, concluding paragraph, referring to the work of Arias (2006). In his research on violence and crime in Rio de Janeiro, Arias analyzes the wide criminal networks to which governmental officials, members of police and others are linked in an informal way. But instead of mentioning it in the conclusion, it would have been interesting to take a network theory as a starting point and to combine it with the triad of political, economic, and military ties. Moreover, I would extend this model to the less visible world of crime to which many paramilitary groups are closely linked.

All together, the chapters of the case studies in this book are well worth reading, they are well written, and provide interesting details

about the context and history of the paramilitary groups. It is also interesting to compare these groups and analyze some common grounds for their existence, but even then one should not underestimate the sometimes huge differences that remain.

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