

School of the Americas: Training Torturers & Secret Police for US-Backed Dictators Since 1946

Over 64,000 soldiers have been trained to oppress, smash dissent, and maintain American imperial order since the “school” first opened.

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For the past 69 years, many of the most notorious U.S.-backed South American dictators, along with their secret police and torturers, have learned their dark arts from a secretive American training facility.

Located in Fort Benning, Georgia, the facility changed its name from “School of the Americas” to “Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation” in 2001. Human rights advocates say the change was purely cosmetic, a result of the increasing pressure the facility faced from activists and other critics. In November, [thousands protested outside Fort Benning](#) in what has become an annual occurrence.

Originally founded in 1946 and based in Panama, it was expelled from the nation in 1984 under the terms of the Panama Canal Treaty. According to [SOA Watch](#), a nonprofit which seeks the closure of the torture school, hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans have been tortured, raped, murdered or “disappeared” through the work of its [64,000 graduates](#).

It first became a target for activists over three decades ago, after repeated atrocities in El Salvador were linked to graduates of the school. In December of 1980, three Catholic nuns, Dorothy Kazel, Maura Clarke, and Ita Ford, along with a Catholic lay missionary, Jean Donovan, were kidnapped by El Salvadoran soldiers who proceeded to torture, rape, and murder the four women under orders from the country’s military dictatorship in retaliation for their advocacy for the impoverished.



Protesters march to the School of the Americas/Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (SOA/WHINSEC).

Roy Bourgeois, a Vietnam veteran-turned-Catholic priest and a friend of two of the victims, discovered their killers had graduated from SOA, leading him to found SOA Watch and become a major organizer of the massive protests at the gates of Fort Benning.

In a Dec. 7 appearance on “The Empire Files,” journalist Abby Martin’s weekly news program that tackles American imperialism on Telesur, Bourgeois said his time in El Salvador was more terrifying than anything he saw in Vietnam.

“I’ve never seen such abuse of power, such brutality by the military,” he told Martin, adding:

“How could they rape and kill nuns who were working with the poor? How could they assassinate a bishop in church who’s talking about the poor?”

In March of 1980, Óscar Romero, a Catholic bishop, was shot by a sniper in the pulpit, moments after he finished a sermon in which he demanded better human rights for El Salvadorans. Soldiers attacked his funeral with sniper rifles and bombs as well, killing dozens in attendance. The deeper Bourgeois investigated the atrocities in the country, the more ties he found between the soldiers spreading chaos and death and the SOA training.

But that’s far from the only massacre linked to SOA graduates, and it’s not even the largest. On Dec. 11, 1981, the El Salvadoran army wiped out the village of El Mozote, killing 800 civilians — but only after systematically raping, torturing, and beating the men, women and children in groups. According to Martin’s report, of the 12 officers cited in the war crime by the United Nations, 10 were SOA graduates.



These photos from the U.S. backed dirty war in El Mozote, El Salvador were taken from the book “El Salvador: Work of Thirty Photographers (1983)

Freelance journalist Ramona Wadi, [writing for MintPress News in April](#), noted that the torture school has trained thousands of soldiers for countries from Chile to Guatemala in the past 20 years, and it continues to be linked to serious human rights violations. She noted a [2014 analysis](#) by the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Colombia-Europe-U.S. Human Rights Observatory, which found that “out of 25 Colombian graduates from 2001 to 2003, 12 had either been charged with ‘a serious crime or commanded units whose members had reportedly committed multiple extrajudicial killings.’”

Although the school touts an eight-hour course in human rights that’s now mandatory for students, Wadi noted that despite years of protest and “beyond the cosmetic reforms” adopted by the government, it’s still supplying the torturers and killers that support U.S. imperialism in Latin America.

Watch “The U.S. School That Trains Dictators & Death Squads” from “The Empire Files with Abby Martin”:

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Featured image: A guest instructor debriefs students from the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation and Naval Small Craft Instruction and Technical Training School after a field training exercise. (U.S. Navy photo)

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