**The Struggle for Self Identity**

The Zapatistas in Mexico, revolting against the Mexican government for signing itself into the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), declared that they “have nothing, absolutely nothing, not even a decent roof over our heads...”. Their proclamation is very deeply rooted in the struggles of the people of Latin America. They view themselves as people who want a better way of life but have no way of attaining their objective. They are part of a history of people that speak when they cannot be heard. They feel outcasted and underrepresented. And as a result, they took up arms against their oppressors to seek change for themselves. **The history of Latin America can be seen as the struggle of outcasts, poor people that seek a better life for themselves and are willing to fight for revolution against economic inequality, poverty, and the intervention of foreign powers that prevail in their country.**

The Mayan people in Chiapas declare that they have nothing, they are destitute and they want to have a better life for themselves and their children; this is a very common cause for rebellion and revolution in Latin America. For example, in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas were another group, upset over the adamant poverty that was rampant in their country. In Nicaragua before the Sandinistas, the Somoza authoritarian government owned all of the major commodities such as the airlines, banks, and schools. However, the main factor that kept the Somozas in power for so long was that they had control of the National Guard. The literacy rate of the country was about 30 percent. Repression was everywhere. The Somozas remained in power for 43 years. Once the Sandinistas came to power in 1979, they began to institute reforms. They built health clinics, schools and began to help raise poor people out of their situation. The literacy rate jumped to about 88 percent. They began working on a constitution. Then, the United States declared that Nicaragua ought to have elections. A strange request, it would seem, as the United States had just backed a dictatorship for 43 years and the dictatorship had not had any elections during that timespan. Therefore, with the assistance of some resistance in Nicaragua, Ronald Reagan and his administration crafted the “Contras” which means “The Opposition”. The Contras were created to defeat the Sandinista government and to make the Sandinista government efforts to further the betterment of their citizens futile. The Contras, backed by the CIA, received arms, and supplies to sabotage the works of the Sandinistas. President Reagan at the time called them the “Nicaraguan Democratic Force” (Holden and Zolov, Number 110)[[1]](#footnote-0). Nicaraguans suffered immensely. The Contras hired child soldiers and created death squads. They carried out over one thousand terrorist attacks. Through media propaganda, the United States twisted the citizens’ view of the contras in favor of what they were doing. However, Nicaragua sued the United States in International Court for intruding in the affairs of its government and violated human rights. The court determined that “financial support, training, supply of weapons, intelligence, and logistic support, constitutes a clear breach of non-intervention” (Holden and Zolov, Number 110)[[2]](#footnote-1) and that the United States pay for the damages caused to the Nicaraguan people. The United States refused. They continued their operations, yet it was under the guise of “humanitarian assistance” (Holden and Zolov, Number 110)[[3]](#footnote-2). The war continued; the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front-the party) was forced to make austerity measures to their welfare programs to fight the Contras, which were gaining strength. In totality, the United States completely shut off Nicaragua from the rest of the world, enforcing a trade embargo, and continued to funnel its resources until Nicaragua “returned to democracy”[[4]](#footnote-3). The revolution of Nicaragua ultimately collapsed in 1990 when the FSLN Party lost the elections. The party that had for some time assisted the peasantry had been defeated. The Zapatistas and the Sandinistas are similar in the regard that they sought a better life because they had felt the system had cheated them, they had nothing because the people at the top had everything. The Zapatistas were not contributing any new claims in terms of the right of all people to have access to a better quality of life. They were simply adding to the long history of struggle for better opportunities for poor people.

Continuing within the stream of the revolution of marginalized people, the revolution against Spain for Cuba was indeed a struggle of people who felt that they were longing for a better life for themselves. They had, quite literally, sacrificed almost everything they possessed in the 10 Years War between Spain and Cuba from 1868-1878. They had burned their plantations and destroyed their property to prevent Spain from conquering them. The sorrow of the people is apparent in the music and poetry of the Cuban people. The poet Jose Marti personified the struggle through his verses. The songs of the Cuban endeavors for freedom became popular after the Cuban won independence in 1902. The United States formally became involved in the conflict in 1898 after the USS Maine had exploded in the Havana Harbor. The writings of Jose Marti had warned the Cubans of the interference of the United States. His main concern was the fear of when the Cubans became free, the United States would begin to implement its policies since it had begun sending small military assistance to the island and that they felt an obligation to assist. He was very troubled by the racism implanted in the United States’ policies and how he hoped that Cuba would remain an anti-racist nation. He wrote that “Everything that divides men...is a sin against humanity”[[5]](#footnote-4). The Cubans eventually won their independence in 1902. Tragically, Marti never lived to see the realization of what he had fought so hard for, as he died in combat in 1895. Even more disturbingly, two major stipulations came out as Cuba achieved its independence, the Platt Amendment in 1901, and the Roosevelt Corollary in 1904. The Platt Amendment stated that “the government of Cuba consents that the United States may exercise the right to intervene for the preservation of Cuban independence” (Holden and Zolov, Number 29)[[6]](#footnote-5). The Roosevelt Corollary stipulates that the United States has a right to intervene in a country that engages in “chronic wrongdoing” (Holden and Zolov, Number 37)[[7]](#footnote-6) will face intervention from the United States. This, in effect, can create turmoil because the people might believe their current government is doing beneficial actions. Much like the Zapatistas, the Cubans felt betrayed. They felt ignored and hurt. As the adage goes, “There is nothing new under the sun”, this situation felt all too similar to the Cubans. Both peoples felt as if their struggle for freedom and liberty had been in vain. The Zapatistas declared, “We are the heirs who of those who truly forged our nationality”. The Cubans felt as if their nationality had been formed through the struggle for independence and so when they had finally attained their sovereignty, it was still being tainted by the presence of the United States. They had thrown off the power of Spain, only to claim the yoke of another growing and dominant world power-the United States. As the Zapatistas proclaim that they live “without independence from foreigners”, so the Cubans thought after they had defeated Spain in their war for independence. This proves once again that marginalized, poor, and destitute people rebel against the institutions that weaken them, but that the intervention of the United States prevails and establishes its dominance again.

The Zapatistas and their rebellion can be seen as a part of a much larger history of struggle for a better life. Latin American struggles can be interpreted as nationalized, strongly defined groups that are disgruntled with their current situation. The populist movement of the 1930s provided a strong start towards upward mobility of living standards. The Communist and leftist revolutions and uprisings in the latter half of the 20th century dramatically improved the standard of living for the poorest people of the countries. This history is often compared to a life taken too early. The people were becoming happier, healthier and were generally seeing an uptake in the improvement of their lives such as the situation in Cuba when their number of health clinics, literacy rates, and life expectancy all went up. The United States also plays a role in the lives of these peasants, oftentimes having a negative effect on the conditions that were slowly improving for the destitute. The United States sabotaged the system that was on the outside working. In Chile, the democratically-elected Allende government was proud to have provided each child with a glass of milk each day. The United States, through large payments, convinced the providers of the milk to throw it down the drain. One can see that the United States and the CIA spent about 3 million dollars in covert action in order to overthrow Allende in the Church Commission of 1973. The Chilean coup d’etat is just one case of the United States meddling in the affairs of other countries.

In conclusion, the Zapatista rebellion is one of authentic proportions. They represent a larger struggle for equality under the law and to have freedom from foreign powers. If the purpose of revolution is to create a better system so downtrodden people can live an improved life, then the Zapatistas are certainly acting in accord with the rest of Latin America and its history of struggle. They are indeed a part of a long struggle for liberty, freedom, and self-determined strength. As one can see in the case of Nicaragua and the Sandinistas, the revolution for betterment of life, and the Cubans and their revolution for the idea of self-identity; the Chiapas fit with them as well in the history books. In conclusion, the Zapatistas play a major part in defining what it means to struggle for freedom and self-identity.

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1. Holden, Robert H., and Eric Zolov. *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History*. New York (N.Y.): Oxford UP, 2011. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. "Contras." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 02 May 2017. Web. 07 May 2017. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contras>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Sierra, Jerry A. "My Race." *My Race by Jose Marti*. N.p., n.d. Web. 08 May 2017. <http://www.historyofcuba.com/history/race/MyRace.htm>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Holden, Robert H., and Eric Zolov. *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History*. New York (N.Y.): Oxford UP, 2011. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-6)