

# Samar's Killing Field: An Inquiry on the Sag-od Massacre

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## Abstract

The Marcos dictatorship has long been an object of discussion both in the halls of the Philippines' premier universities and in public spaces. Among the topics that have been a crucial subject of inquiry are the human rights abuses during the Martial Law years. However, while there has been substantial research on the abuses of the Marcos regime, some aspects beg further inquiry. In particular, there are still relatively few studies that try to understand the massacres during the period.

Given this context, this paper looks into the Sag-od Massacre in Northern Samar. Utilizing reports from major newspapers, human rights organizations, and first-hand accounts, this study aims to reconstruct the events of the Sag-od Massacre and contextualize it within the broader framework of Marcos's repressive regime. Through historical inquiry, it examines the identities of the victims and perpetrators, the manner of death of the victims, and the motivations behind the massacre. Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to Martial Law historiography by foregrounding the narratives of the massacre victims.

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**Keywords:** *Martial Law, Human Rights, Sag-od Massacre, Counterinsurgency, Samar*

## Introduction

In 2018, Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr. staged a one-on-one interview with Juan Ponce Enrile, Marcos Sr.’s defense minister and the chief implementor of Martial Law. The two-part video *Enrile: A Witness to History* framed Enrile as a credible source regarding the events during the Marcos regime. He even casually said, “I’m glad you have asked me to join this conversation so that at least we can somehow correct the distortions of history” (Marcos Jr., 2018, 2:07). However, Enrile’s claim that no one was killed during the Marcos regime has already been disproven in the Hawaii Class Suite (Mendoza, 2013) and through the passage of Republic Act no. 10368 (Davidson, 2020). Moreover, his assertion that “during Martial Law, there were no massacres...” begs critical analysis (Marcos Jr., 2018, 7:14).

Time and again, credible news sources have long highlighted incidents of massacres throughout the Marcos regime. A *Rappler* report (2021) documented massacres in Mindanao, the Palimbang massacre and the Bingcul Village massacre, which other foreign media outlets have also reported. Another report from *CNN Philippines* (2018) highlighted two other occurrences of massacres: the Tong Umapuy massacre that claimed the lives of 57 civilians, and the Escalante massacre where at least 20 individuals were killed. Similarly, multiple human rights organizations, including Amnesty International (AI), Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP), and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), documented numerous massacres during the Marcos regime. AI (1982, p. 9) recorded ten instances of mass killings they labeled as “massacres” within just eleven months of 1981. TFDP (1986) reported fourteen massacre cases between 1981 and mid-1982. And the ICJ’s (1984, p. 12) report cited 126 victims of “group massacres.”

The return of the Marcoses in Malacañang has prompted scholars and activists to pursue a renewed interest in studying the Martial Law years. Although stories of massacres during the Marcos regime are now coming to light, details about them remain insufficient. One particular challenge when studying massacres during the Martial Law years is the relative scarcity of available accounts on them compared to the other aspects of the period. This is not to say that no narratives exist, but it does draw attention to the media censorship policy during that period. It created an environment where most members of the press shied away from covering events that could harm the image of the regime for fear of persecution. As a result, narratives of brutalities and excesses of the regime failed to penetrate the national consciousness, and, therefore, brutal episodes such as massacres have been dismissed as a non-events. As such, massacres, due to the lack of clear details and extensive studies about them, can be dismissed as hearsay, as was the

case with Enrile's interview.

Given these circumstances, the subject of human rights violations during the Marcos regime, killings and massacres in particular, still begs further clarification and inquiry. In this context, I try to contribute to the field of historical research focused on massacres during the Marcos regime. However, recognizing that it is impossible to inquire about all the massacres that happened during the period of study, I decided to focus on the 1981 Sag-od Massacre in Las Navas, Northern Samar.

There have been three considerations for choosing this as the subject of the present research. First, there is the matter of access to sources. Of the several incidents of massacres during the Marcos regime, the Sag-od Massacre is among the better documented cases. As a matter of fact, the massacre was even featured in the British Broadcasting Company's documentary (Diokno, 1983) on the Marcos regime, titled *To Sing our Own Song*, and was also published in the United States-based newspaper, the *Los Angeles Times* (Ellsworth, 1982). Yet, while this may be the case, critical details on the incident, including the victims, the manner of their death, and the perpetrators, have yet to be analyzed. Second, the massacre's relevance to a broader historical context is significant. With the island of Samar being one of the insurgent hotspots in the Marcos regime, the Sag-od Massacre offers an illustrative case from which the interplay between counterinsurgency policies and the recurrence of human rights abuses can be investigated. And lastly, the massacre was considered for its possible contribution in the discourse regarding human rights and the Marcos regime. The presence of crony interest in the area, particularly a logging concession, offers a vista from which human rights abuses could be understood not only as a consequence of counterinsurgency but also as a legacy of the regime's exploitative economic policy.

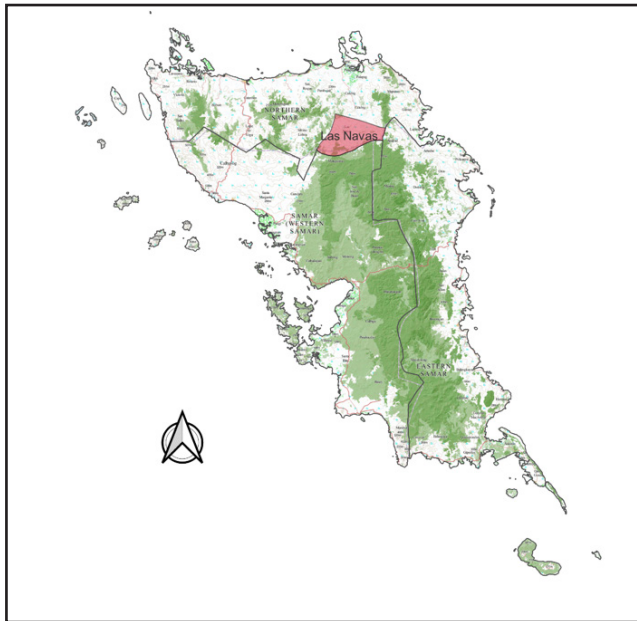
Overall, the Sag-od Massacre will be analyzed and discussed from a historical perspective. As part of the process, I surveyed various reports on the massacre published in the major newspapers in the Philippines and by human rights organizations. From these reports, I attempt to reconstruct the events of the massacre by answering these fundamental questions: Who were the victims? How did they die? Who were the perpetrators? Furthermore, I also aim to clarify an important analytical question focusing on how and why this violent episode occurred. In a related manner, I extend the inquiry by attempting to locate the Sag-od Massacre in the larger context of the Marcos regime. Here, I historicize the emergence of the structure of repression and exploitation under Martial Law and relate it with the perpetuation of abuses by the regime. In so doing, I hope to offer a historically nuanced inquiry that provides clarity on the victims, perpetrators, and the factors

that led to the massacre.

## The Sag-od Massacre: A Forensic Assessment

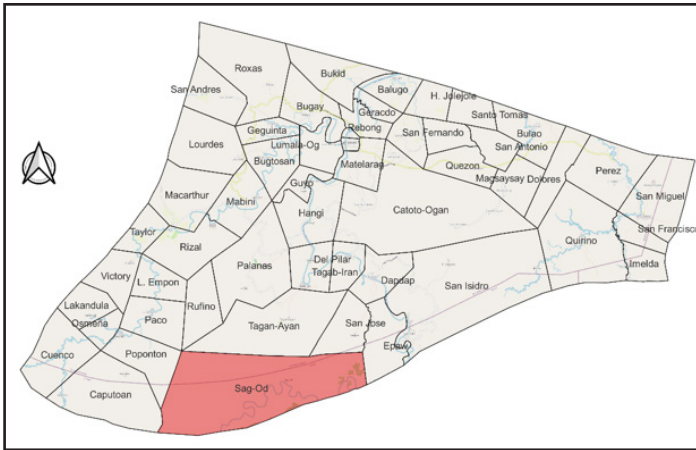
### *Samar and Las Navas during Martial Law*

The declaration of Martial Law in 1972, coupled with the worsening social conditions by 1977 and the implementation of a foreign-aided rural development project in 1979, profoundly affected the island of Samar. It was during these years that the island faced the most brutal episode in its history, marked by the significant growth of the New People's Army (NPA) and increased militarization. Starting in 1971, Samar had become a vital base for the NPA as a result of sustained organizing efforts. By 1974, the insurgents had enough strength to conduct operations against several military detachments on the island (Lagos et al., 2004). In one instance, for example, about 100 members of the NPA successfully raided the town of Silvina Lobos in Northern Samar and took its mayor as hostage (Ocampo, 1982). Subsequently, while the NPA lost its mass bases in Northern Luzon, Samar emerged as one of their strongest guerilla fronts (Pobre, 2000). This characterization of Samar as a focal point of the communist revolutionary struggle was further attested by a report from the Central Intelligence Agency (1985) mentioning the robustness of NPA activities on the island.



**Figure 1. Location Map of Las Navas, Northern Samar**

*Note.* The map depicts the geographic location of the town of Las Navas in Northern Samar. It was prepared by the author.



**Figure 2. Location Map of Sag-od, Las Navas**

*Note.* The map shows the location of the Sag-od and its adjacent barangays in Las Navas. It was prepared by the author.

These developments placed Samar in the regime's crosshairs and became a prime target of the military's counterinsurgency campaigns. The increased militarization of the island saw a massive deployment of military units originally stationed in Northern Luzon and Mindanao to Samar. Bello (1987) noted that ten battalions consisting of 9,000 members of the Philippine Constabulary (PC) and Philippine Army (PA) were sent to the island to counter the NPA. Both the TFDP in 1980 and Makabayang Kilusan para Isulong ang Katarungan (MAKIISA KA) in 1981 documented similar findings, while also specifically highlighting the presence of the 60th PC Battalion, known as "the butcher battalion" in Samar.

By late 1977, the counterinsurgency campaign against the various elements of the NPA intensified. In this brutal repression of Samar, the military made no distinction between the civilians and the NPA. The search and destroy operations against the NPA often targeted innocent civilians who were hardly involved with the insurgents (U.S Committee on Foreign Relations, 1984). More so, the apparent lack of situational awareness amongst the military was often the cause of abuses perpetrated against the civilian population. This translated to field operations where military units conducting counterinsurgency campaigns often bludgeoned suspected subversive communities into submission. Scores of towns and villages were also invariably caught in the crossfire, which left most of them burned and uninhabitable with their inhabitants forcibly uprooted (MAKIISA KA, 1981a).

The growing number of human rights abuses in Samar from the

mid-1970s to the 1980s was well-documented by the TFDP. Between 1974 and 1977, two notorious military task forces implemented extensive counterinsurgency operations on the island at the high cost of civilian life. In the municipality of Calbiga in Western Samar, Task Force Bulig was accused of massacring seven individuals, including a five-month-old baby (TFDP, 1979). Similarly, Task Force Leysam became increasingly feared, as it had been involved in military operations that resulted in two separate incidents of massacres (TFDP, 1979). Arbitrary arrests also ran rampant in the three provinces of Samar. Across the Visayas, the four detention centers on the island housed the highest number of political detainees (TFDP, 1979). The detention centers became infamous, as many of those brought in were tortured and interrogated, while those who were not as lucky were forcibly disappeared. Military checkpoints erected on the island's passable roads were often sites of abuse. Soldiers who operated the checkpoints engaged in extortion activities and were accused of physical abuse. Furthermore, the intensifying repression against the people of the entire island was worsened by the continuing economic hardships. Ultimately, the Marcos regime's violent repression of the insurgency did not remedy the already gaping wound in Samar's society. Its counterinsurgency program served only to alienate Samar's population, and, at worst, the wanton abuses committed by the military exacerbated the insurgency on the island.

Moreover, government programs and the arrival of logging and mining companies created further antagonization, thus drawing more citizens to the NPA cause (Coronel, 2022; MAKIISA KA, 1981a). The implementation of the Marcos regime's Integrated Area Development (IAD) program in Samar could have also contributed to the spate of killings and human rights abuses on the island. Significantly enough, Walden Bello (1982, p. 92) exposed the IAD as a "thinly disguised military counterinsurgency scheme to contain the explosive expansion of the revolutionary" NPA. In the case of Samar, three separate projects that were funded by Australia, Japan, and the World Bank were implemented in 1979. While the projects appeared good on paper, as it promised better economic prospects for the residents of the three provinces of the island of Samar, it only enjoyed a small degree of success (Bello et al., 1982). The projects envisioned to bring significant economic growth for Northern Samar appeared to benefit only the interest of the few. The report of *The Asia Record*, which was republished by *Ichthys* (Bello et al., 1981), mentioned that large commercial operators were reaping most benefits from the investments.

According to some observations, the IAD program was used to rationalize intensified military operations in areas where the project's components were supposed to be implemented. Lt. Col. Manuel

Braun of the 60<sup>th</sup> PC Battalion explained that one of the reasons for their presence in Samar was to protect the foreign aid programs being implemented in the area (Ocampo, 1982). Tied to the IAD program is the alarming increase of logging concessions on the island, as the road-building component of the project opened up large portions of Samar's forest to exploitation. An interesting case is the granting of a Timber License Agreement for 95,770 hectares of forest land to San Jose Timber in Northern Samar. Ricardo Manapat (2020, p. 150) pointed out that San Jose Timber's activity in Northern Samar is tied to "the extraordinary interest the military showed in suppressing dissent in Samar since 1979." And caught between these developments is Sag-od, where arguably one of the Marcos regime's most brutal killings happened. Bodies of men, women, and children lay lifeless in Sag-od, allegedly killed by the security forces hired by the San Jose Timber Corporation (SJTC) (Ellsworth, 1982).

The brutal killing of the people of Sag-od unraveled on the early morning of September 15, 1981. As the residents were preparing for their day in their fields, armed men arrived in the search of an alleged NPA commander. The residents were then rounded up. Women and children were separated from the men and led into a clearing several distance away from the barangay. Gunshots rang in the air as the armed men mercilessly shot the defenseless residents. By noon, over thirty lifeless bodies of men, women, and children lay scattered in Sag-od.

### *Mapping the Narratives of the Sag-od Massacre*

News of the tragic incident in Sag-od only reached Manila's major dailies nine days later. In particular, *Times Journal* and *Bulletin Today* had the news printed on their front pages. The initial reports on the massacre mentioned that 35 residents of Sag-od were killed, including the barangay captain, Vivencio Yanay. The reports also pointed out that the armed men who committed the massacre also looted and ransacked some of the houses of the victims ("35 Massacred," 1981; "35 Barangay Residents," 1981). However, it was only the report from *Bulletin Today* ("35 Barangay Residents," 1981) that mentioned the possible involvement of army troops in the massacre at Sag-od. Furthermore, it underscored the gravity of the incident by quoting its news source from the AFP Headquarters in Camp Aguinaldo. The source commented that, "There were reports of massacres of an entire family, yes, but not several families or a big number of residents in one place" ("35 Barangay Residents," p. 5).

Related news on the incident also appeared in both dailies on September 25, 1981. The dailies reported that Enrile, who was serving as the Minister of Defense at that time, ordered an inquiry on the massacre. It appears from the reports that Enrile was particularly concerned with

the possible involvement of members of the PA in the incident ("Samar Massacre," 1981; "Enrile Orders," 1981). *Times Journal*, unfortunately, stopped reporting regarding the incident after this. *Bulletin Today*, however, continued their coverage of the massacre until October 2, 1981. In the succeeding reports published by *Bulletin Today*, we see clear details of what transpired on that fateful day of September 15, 1981.

Notably, the report published on September 29, 1981 offered essential information on who the alleged perpetrators were. *Bulletin Today* (Sinfuego, 1981) reported:

Authorities here identified today the armed group responsible for the massacre of 35 people in sitio Sagud[sic], Las Navas town, this province[sic], as the security forces of a big logging company. The commander of the group, said to number 80 men armed with Armalite rifles, M-203 grenade launchers, and other high-powered guns, was identified as a "lieutenant colonel" known in some areas as "Tatang" (p. 1).

Additionally, a telling description of the group's leader was mentioned in the report. Tatang, as he was identified, was said to be "between 50 and 55 years old and sporting a long beard and mustache" (Sinfuego, p.11). The report also added that he was "a very well-informed man" (Sinfuego, p. 11). Furthermore, the report also appears to pursue an angle that the group involved in the massacre did not act on its own, but rather was under the employment of a logging company in the area.

The same report also underscored the brutality and violence of the armed group involved in the killing of the residents of Sag-od. The report quoted one source describing the group as "vicious and had shown no mercy to people who had antagonized them in the past" (Sinfuego, p. 1). Additionally, cases of unsolved killings were reported to be attributed to the armed group in question. Sinfuego (1981) pointed out in his news article that:

Informed sources said the same group has been plundering interior towns in Northern Samar, particularly the municipalities of Las Navas, Catubig, and Lao-ang[sic], where several mysterious killings have been reported. The sources said the group committed the killings (p. 11).

Succeeding coverage of *Bulletin Today* ("Enrile Orders Samar Manhunt," 1981; Sinfuego, 1981b) focused on the manhunt operation ordered by Enrile for the group that was suspected of committing the massacre in Sag-od. Furthermore, the Ministry of National Defense formally organized an investigation panel headed by Brig. Gen.

Salvador Mison, who was the commanding officer of the Eastern Command. Along with Mison were other officers of the AFP, including Col. Romeo Tarayo of the 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion, Col. Bayani Fabric of the PC, and Col. Vicente Garcia of the Integrated National Police (INP). Soldiers from the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalions of the PA were dispatched to assist in several of Northern Samar's interior towns to help track down the armed group (Sinfuego, 1981b, p. 5). In a similar report, the members of the armed group were said to belong to the Lost Command based in Mindanao. Members of the group were described as mostly "dismissed and AWOL military officers."

To further understand the massacre, we turn to a new set of sources that investigated the events of that day. Human rights advocates took particular interest in the incident and sent several fact-finding missions to determine what happened. Soon, the gruesome details of the massacre were unraveled. *Philippine Detainees Update* and *WHO Magazine* produced the most detailed accounts of the massacre based on the testimonies of the survivors.

The accounts of the incident, as narrated by *Philippine Detainees Update* (TFDP, 1981) and *WHO Magazine* (Coloma, 1981), indicate the arrival of an armed group in Barangay Sag-od on the morning of September 15, 1981. As with the earlier reports in *Times Journal* and *Bulletin Today*, the perpetrators were identified as the Lost Command. However, *WHO Magazine* also identified the Lost Command as the Special Forces of Integrated Civilian Home Defense Force (SF-ICHDF), which was described as a paramilitary group of the armed forces. This considerably corroborates the earlier reports of the involvement of army units in the incident.

Noteworthy, too, was that the reports identified the leader of the 18 SF-ICHDF that descended to Sag-od as a person going by the name of "Commander Brown." This is a considerable departure from the initial reports who referred to the leader of the group as "Lieutenant Colonel" and "Tatang." *WHO Magazine* went a bit further by identifying this "Commander Brown" as none other than the "infamous Col. Lademora of the so-called Lost Command" (Coloma, 1981, p. 12). *Philippine Detainees Update* (TFDP, 1981) indicated that the SF-ICHDF was also accompanied by two guides from the SJTC, the logging company with a concession in the area.

The arrival of the SF-ICHDF in the barangay was unexpected and caused panic among the residents. People were dragged out of their houses and were made to assemble in front of the residence of the barangay captain. They were then requested to form two lines, one for the men and the other for the women and children. Two of the armed

men led the women and children across a stream. Though no one bore witness to the killing of the male residents of the Sag-od, *Philippine Detainees Update* and *WHO Magazine* mentioned that the women who survived the massacre heard gunshots from the direction of the barangay. The incident was detailed by *WHO Magazine* (TFDP, 1981):

When women were already some distance from the barrio, they suddenly heard automatic gunfire coming from the barrio. These, it turned out, were the shots that killed the barrio men. The women were then told to stop and wait (p. 1).

Several minutes after the final sound of gunfire, the two SF-ICHDF men who had initially kept the women and children in company were now joined by the 16 men that had just committed the massacre of the men of Sag-od. A commotion ensued and several of the women from the group were able to escape. Those who were unlucky to escape were again forced to march several more meters until they reached a forested area. Then, the brutal killing of the women and children took place. *Philippine Detainees Update* (TFDP, 1981) described what happened in gruesome detail:

They were then ordered to separate from their children. Some of the children refused and started to cry while the others were literally dragged away. Immediately thereafter, the SF-ICHDF force began firing at the women. A 41-year old woman named Rita pretended she was hit. She fell flat on the ground near her mother who was already wounded. When the second round of shots were fired, Rita's mother was again hit, this time, on the head. Blood and bits of human flesh splattered on Rita while bullets grazed her back. A bullet hit her on the right arm breaking two of her fingers (p. 1).

Many children were also among the casualties in the massacre. The reports attested to the sheer brutality of the incident as children, some still infants and toddlers, were mercilessly killed. *Philippine Detainees Update* (TFDP, 1981, p. 1) pointed out that a number of them were killed "simply because they could not stifle their cries of fear and terror" as they were being forcibly marched. The report (TFDP, 1981) also underscored that among those killed were an 11-month-old infant and a four-month-old baby who died in the mother's arms. *WHO Magazine* recounted the events from the testimony of one of the surviving children. It detailed the brutality as follows:

[name redacted] also discovered that her brother... [name redacted] body had almost been halved by Armalite bullets

that ripped a hole across his belly... [name redacted] looked around and saw an infant who had been grabbed by an SF man and then flung to the ground. She tried to nurse the crying baby, whose elder sister [name redacted] came and told [name redacted] to put the baby down for it was already dying (Coloma, 1981, p. 14).

Details of the aftermath of the massacre were also presented in *Philippine Detainees Update* and *WHO Magazine*. The report of *WHO Magazine* (Coloma, 1981) stated that the residents who were able to escape the massacre discovered the bodies of the victims piled on top of each other in front of the barangay captain's house. Most of the men in the barangay also appeared to be summarily executed since they bore gunshot wounds in the head (MAKIISA KA, 1981). Furthermore, the entire barangay was turned into a no-man's land days after the massacre, with members of the SF continuing to roam in the area (TFDP, 1981). In the aftermath of the massacre, 45 people lay dead, each a stark reminder of the indiscriminate violence perpetrated by the Marcos regime.

### Understanding the Massacre: The Postmortem

The Sag-od massacre caught the attention of the press and advocacy groups to varying degrees. It is worth noting that few major dailies in Manila took notice of the incident, and only allotted a rather small space on their front pages. In contrast, human rights organizations have underscored the gravity of the massacre in their coverage of the incident. Yet, despite the lack of inherent contradiction between the content of the reports, two separate conclusions emerged.

While reports from *Philippine Detainees Update* and *WHO Magazine* pinned the massacre on the SF-ICHDF employed by the SJTC, the government-sponsored investigation led by Brig. Gen. Mison acquitted the SF-ICHDF and ruled out any possible involvement of the other AFP units in the killings at Sag-od (Ocampo, 1981). Amnesty International (1982, p. 49) also reported that Brig. Gen. Mison had concluded the government investigation on the incident and "determined that it was the members of the NPA who were responsible for the massacre." The onus of proof, however, rests upon Brig. Gen. Mison and the members of the investigative panel concerning the massacre, as the contents of their report were deliberately withheld from public disclosure. In the absence of access to pertinent documentation, the sole reliable accounts of the incident are those derived from the sources discussed in the preceding section of this paper. But what do these sources tell us?

From the reports of *Times Journal* and *Bulletin Today*, three essential points that help explain the massacre can be established. First,

Barangay Sag-od had been a hotspot of NPA activity. *Times Journal* ("35 Massacred," 1981; "Samar Massacre Inquiry," 1981) described the area as "rebel-infested" and "heavily infiltrated by the New People's Army." *Bulletin Today* (Sinfuego, 1981a) also pointed out that "communist dissidents" were "active in the place," referring to Sag-od and other adjacent barangays. Another report ("Enrile Orders Samar Manhunt," 1981) underscored several encounters with dissidents within the proximity of Sag-od after the massacre. The second point is on the identity of the perpetrators. While *Times Journal* and *Bulletin Today* failed to identify the actual identity of the armed group involved, they nonetheless provided crucial leads. The reports ("Samar Massacre Inquiry," 1981; "Enrile Orders Massacre Probe", 1981) linked the said armed group to members of the army. These assumptions were further clarified in subsequent *Bulletin Today* reports (Sinfuego, 1981a; 1981b), which associated the perpetrators of the massacre with the Lost Command, who had already been linked with other atrocities in Northern Samar. More so, the reports indicated that the group, led by a certain individual who went by the titles "lieutenant colonel" and "Tatang," had been well-provisioned and well-equipped. The last point is the presence of a logging concession in the area near Barangay Sag-od. *Bulletin Today's* reports (Sinfuego, 1981a; 1981b) tried to create a correlation between the massacre in Sag-od and the presence of the logging company. It is worth noting, however, that *Bulletin Today* did not mention which logging company was involved. Nonetheless, *Philippine Detainees Update* (TFDP, 1982) and *WHO Magazine* (Coloma, 1981) identified the company as the SJTC, which was licensed to operate in the area since 1972.

But why are the aforementioned points significant? In providing the context of the massacre, the coverage of *Times Journal* and *Bulletin Today* appears to justify that the incident in Sag-od is linked to the counterinsurgency operations against the NPA and the presence of a logging concession in the area. The logging concession's constant threat from members of the NPA, coupled with its employment of an armed group known for its brutality, links it with the massacre in Sag-od (Sinfuego, 1981a; 1981b). Unfortunately, nothing conclusive could initially be gained from the reports, as the coverage of the events relating to the Sag-od massacre ceased by October 2, 1981.

Crucial details on the massacre also came to light with the reports from *Philippine Detainees Update* and *WHO Magazine*. In particular, key information on the events of the massacre and the identities of the perpetrators were included in the reports. Of specific importance is the involvement of what was identified by the survivors as the SF-ICHDF. Prior to the killings, the SF-ICHDF were reportedly searching for an NPA leader known as "Kumander Racel," as documented in *Philippine*

*Detainees Update* (TFDP, 1981) and *WHO Magazine* (Coloma, 1981). The employment of the SF-ICHDF by the logging company SJTC may explain the aforementioned circumstances. The report published in *WHO Magazine* (Coloma, 1981) mentioned that around 70 members of the SF-ICHDF were brought to Samar by the SJTC "to enforce order" in the vicinity of its logging concession. As documented in the reports of *Times Journal* and *Bulletin Today*, the strong presence of the NPA in Sag-od and other nearby barangays may have been the motivation of the SJTC in employing the SF-ICHDF as a security force. Thus, it is unsurprising that the operations and massacre in Sag-od are attributable to the SF-ICHDF's counterinsurgency campaign. This circumstance is further attested in the report of *Far Eastern Economic Review*. According to the report (Ocampo, 1982, p. 22), members of the Lost Command, posing as security forces for a logging company, were ferried to Samar for a "special counter-insurgency[sic] mission."

### *Sag-od in Retrospect: The Lost Command and the San Jose Timber Corporation*

How did the massacre unfold? From analyzing available reports and testimonies pertinent to the tragedy in Sag-od, I found different explanations for how it happened. The least likely of these was that the massacre was perpetrated by the members of the NPA who were active in the area. Brig. Gen. Mison's findings on the incident have sparked further inquiries rather than providing a resolution to the massacre. The only explanation that Mison offered was that no witnesses could identify the perpetrators (Amnesty International, 1982). This is where the irony in Mison's explanation lies. Despite the lack of witnesses, as he claimed, how did he conclude that the NPA was responsible for the massacre? As a matter of fact, Samar's historical experience during Martial Law, coupled with observations from independent fact-finding bodies and contemporary reports on the massacre, points to a different explanation.

Given that the explanation provided by Mison remains lacking, I turn to other perspectives for answers. First, I look into Samar's historical experience during Martial Law. The growing NPA guerilla front in Samar was met with an expansive militarization of the island. The AFP's employment of "battlefield tactics that imposed heavy collateral damage on the civilian population" only alienated the people from their government, while human rights abuses exacerbated this situation (Bello, 1987). It is unsurprising that many residents of the island were drawn towards supporting the NPA. Bello (1982) even underscored that the NPA in Samar had a solid mass base of about 200,000 farmers or a little more than fifteen percent of the island's entire population. This brings Mison's assertion that the NPA was responsible

for the massacre under further scrutiny. There is no logical reason for the NPA to commit such an atrocity, as this would only weaken their mass base. More so, considering Samar's historical experience and the extensive narratives of military abuses during the Martial Law years, the AFP's involvement in the massacre is much more plausible than the assertion of Mison.

Second, and building upon the previous point, I go back to the reports that were presented earlier in this paper. Several publications, notably *Bulletin Today*, *Times Journal*, *Philippine Daily Update*, and *WHO Magazine* implicated an army unit in the massacre. However, there was a discrepancy in the group's identification. *Bulletin Today* and *Times Journal* referred to them as the Lost Command, while *Philippine Daily Update* and *WHO Magazine* named them the SF-ICHDF. Through careful comparison and corroboration of information from all the available sources, I looked into the possible connection between the Lost Command and the SF-ICHDF.

The strongest connection that validates the link between the Lost Command and the SF-ICHDF is the identity of its commander. This brings us to the report of *Bulletin Today* and *WHO Magazine*. *Bulletin Today* (Sinfuego, 1981) identified the armed group as the Lost Command, which was corroborated in the report of *WHO Magazine* (Coloma, 1981). Yet, crucial information was also revealed by the latter, as it named the commander of the armed group as none other than Lt. Col. Carlos Lademora. As it appears in the other sources, Lademora may have also gone by a different alias, including "lieutenant colonel," "Tatang," and "Commander Brown" (Sinfuego, 1981; Coloma, 1981).

In addition to this, AI (1982) and Sheila Ocampo (1982) explained how the Lost Command of Lademora also became known as the SF-ICHDF. Ocampo's special feature on Lademora and his armed group explained that they received the infamous moniker as the Lost Command in 1974, after it successfully defended the area of Lebac in Lanao despite orders to retreat. A year after their heroic stand, Lademora was made provincial commander of Agusan del Sur, while his men became implicated in cases of extortion, robbery, and rape. Slowly, the initially daunted fighting force descended into a rabid hoard of gun-toting soldiers.

Because of these circumstances, Lademora sought to rehabilitate his group's image. AI (1982) reported that one of the commander's efforts was the request to have his group acknowledged as a Special Unit of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (SUAFP). While its recognition as SUAFP does not conclusively make the Lost Command the SF-ICHDF, the possibility that the residents of Sag-od and the survivors of the

massacre failed to distinguish one from the other must be considered. The key point here is that, regardless of whether the Lost Command was known as the SUAFP or SF-ICHDF, a special unit of the army under the command of Carlos Lademora was indeed present in Sag-od at the time of the massacre. As a matter of fact, AI's (1982) report further supports the narrative of Lademora's group taking part in the counterinsurgency in Samar. The report stated that as early as June and July of 1980, some of Lademora's men were already bound for Samar to bolster the AFP's initiative against the NPA.

But why did the Lost Command commit such an atrocious act? Here, I see several explanations. One angle that can be looked into is that the massacre was driven by the members' desire for revenge. A week before the massacre happened, two members of the Lost Command were killed in an ambush (Ocampo, 1982). AI (1982, p. 49) reported a circulating theory that "the Sag-od villagers had been massacred to avenge the killings of these two members of the Lost Command." This comes as no surprise, as the Lost Command has been known for exacting revenge on anyone who crossed their path. Another angle to look at is the group's propensity towards violence, in which the profile of its members largely plays a part. The reports from AI (1982), Ocampo (1982), *Philippine Detainees Update* (1981, p.1), and *Bulletin Today* (Sinfuego 1981) underscored that a number of the Lost Command's members were "criminal elements with pending cases in the military." Kim Rogal and Richard Vokey (1982) also mentioned that Lademora's group had been filled with soldiers who deserted their units. Lademora even nicknamed his ragtag band Charlie's Angels to which he provided an interesting explanation (Ocampo, 1982). According to Lademora, his members "were social outcasts" and "real bastards," and through his unique training regimen, he was able to transform them into angels. (Ocampo, 1982, p. 21). But Lademora's training regimen was not founded on habit formation or the formation of internal self-control, but on fear and punishment. In one instance, he had six of his men killed after failing to follow his orders (Ocampo, 1982). In addition to considerations of personal vendettas and lapses in military discipline, the Lost Command's deployment as a counterinsurgency unit may have also significantly played a part in motivating the massacre. Various reports claim that the Lost Command was employed by the SJTC to safeguard the company's logging concessions in the vicinity of Las Navas.

This now leads us to an investigation into how SJTC comes into the picture. Reports from *Bulletin Today* (Sinfuego, 1981) pointed out that a logging company with a concession in the area hired members of the armed group that killed the residents of Sag-od. While the company was not named in the report, there are leads that it is the SJTC. On

what grounds can this be said? First, *Philippine Detainees Update* (1981) and *WHO Magazine* (1981) pointed out that the Lost Command was accompanied by local guides who worked for the SJTC. A testimony (MAKIISA KA, 1981a) of a survivor identified the two men mentioned in the other reports as the guides of the Lost Command, who were also residents of Sag-od working for the SJTC. The men have been known to the residents of the barangay as "Udok" and "Mansing." This detail indicates that the SJTC and members of the Lost Command were in contact at the time of the massacre, underscoring the logging company's involvement in the tragedy.

Second, I also discovered in the Senate Resolution No. 375 of the 13th Congress that the SJTC was given a timber license agreement (TLA) that encompasses an area of 45,615 hectares in Las Navas in Northern Samar and Maslog in Eastern Samar. This information establishes that the company had a particular motivation of securing its concessions from unwanted NPA presence. Thus, seeing the Lost Command in Sag-od does not come as a surprise. Reported to be particularly effective in counterinsurgency missions, the Lost Command was employed by the SJTC to protect its interests from constant harassment by dissidents, while simultaneously being utilized by the AFP to bolster its combat capabilities against the NPA. It appears, then, that the massacre in Sag-od had been a consequence of an AFP-sanctioned operation. This operation involved a paramilitary force privately employed by a logging company against the NPA. The special unit's employment as a security force was further attested in the special report of MAKIISA KA. It was mentioned in the report that the payments for the SF-ICHDF were "sent to the security agency at the" SJTC "through the Philippine National Bank" (MAKIISA KA, 1981b, p. 13).

So, how can the Lost Command's involvement with the SJTC be explained? The answer can be found in the ownership of the SJTC and its connections with influential individuals, as reported by *Bulletin Today* (Sinfuego, 1981). Before Enrile acquired the logging company in 1982, it was originally managed by the Swedish Match Company (Enrile, 2012). In an exchange on social media between Enrile and Ruben Carranza, the former shared that the Swedish Match Company was actually represented by the Angara, Abello, Concepcion, Regalan & Cruz (ACCRA) law office (Abogado, 2022). This perhaps explains why the SJTC had the privilege of being protected by the AFP. During the Marcos regime, ACCRA had made a name for itself as a legal representative of a number of cronies, including Enrile, Eduardo Cojuangco, and Hermino Disini (Manapat, 2020). Senior partners of the law firm also had substantial shares in Enrile's family-holding company, JAKA Investment Corporation, and in the Cojuangco-held San Miguel Corporation (Manapat, 2020). One of ACCRA's senior

partners, Edgardo Angara, also had a friendly relationship with Marcos, who was instrumental in Angara's appointment as the president of the Integrated Bar of the Philippines and the University of the Philippines (Manapat, 2020). ACCRA's representation of the SJTC, together with its close ties to the Marcos regime and its cronies, could help explain why the AFP sanctioned the presence of the Lost Command to suppress the insurgent activities in Samar.

Drawing from those reports, three significant points on the context and perpetrators of the massacre can be established. First, Sag-od and the island of Samar developed into an insurgent hotspot by the late 1970s, which led to steady militarization. Second, as the AFP cracked down on the dissidents, paramilitary organizations, including the Lost Command, were employed to aid in the counterinsurgency operations. And third, the SJTC employed members of the Lost Command to secure its logging concession in Las Navas.

Considering all circumstances, I argue that what happened in Sag-od was not mere happenstance. Sag-od was at the confluence of the raging currents of Martial Law repression and exploitation. The massacre resulted not only from the regime's counterinsurgency campaign against the NPA, but also from the desire to secure the specific economic interests of companies and cronies in close association with the dictatorship. The incident in Sag-od is just one example, with similar patterns seen wherever individuals close to the dictator held significant economic stakes. The subsequent section will further explore this perspective as it contextualizes the Sag-od Massacre within the political and economic landscape of Martial Law.

### *The Making of the Killing Field: Repression and Exploitation under the Marcos Regime*

On September 23, 1972, Ferdinand Marcos Sr. made his infamous announcement of placing the entire Philippines under Martial Law. Years of careful planning allowed Marcos to swiftly concentrate power on the executive. As a matter of fact, in the months leading to the declaration of Martial Law, Marcos successfully created an atmosphere of paranoia under the pretense of a communist takeover and Muslim secession (Mijares, 1976). A series of terror bombings in Manila and the staged ambush against the then Defense Minister, Enrile, were the final triggers that heralded the dawn of authoritarian rule in the Philippines. Law and order became the rallying call of Marcos's regime that he "christened as the New Society" (McCoy, 2011, p. 397). By extensively employing the military in disbanding private armies, confiscating loose firearms, and suppressing the illegal drug trade, Marcos was able to mobilize public support and legitimize the New Society (McCoy, 2011).

However, as much as the military was used as a legitimizing force, it was also developed into an instrument of repression that cracked down on dissent and potential threats to Marcos (Tiglaio, 1988). The AFP willingly allowed itself to be used against the political opponents of the regime. Nearly sixty thousand individuals were arrested months after martial law was declared (Kessler, 1989). Significantly, those who were incarcerated by the regime were "prosecuted by military lawyers and judged by military commissions" (Bello, 1987, p. 34). More so, the military was very much involved in the regime's counterinsurgency operations against the NPA. As McCoy (1999; 2011) puts it, by being used as the instrument of repression, the military became "brutal and brutalized."

To accommodate the expanded role of the AFP, Marcos significantly bolstered its rank. By 1975, the size of the military had nearly doubled compared to its pre-martial law level and continued to increase to about 158,000 by 1985 (Bello, 1987; Kessler, 1989; McCoy, 1999). Its budget also grew to nearly 500 percent of what it was before 1972, while U.S. military aid reached around \$45 million in 1973 or more than double than the previous year's. (Bello, 1987; Tiglaio, 1988; McCoy, 1999). Consequently, as Hernandez (1985, p. 911) describes, the "military enjoys a very powerful position in contemporary Philippine society."

Nonetheless, it should be worth noting that Marcos was not entirely trustful of the repressive machine he expanded and empowered. The regime employed a two-pronged approach to maintain control. On one hand, it overlooked military transgressions, and on the other, it implemented reforms to solidify the loyalty of the AFP to Marcos. Particularly, the reform in the military's organizational structure did not necessarily improve operational efficiency but instead enabled Marcos to maintain full control over the AFP (Bello, 1987). As a result, instead of becoming a capable counterinsurgency force, the AFP degenerated into an abusive and corrupt institution. Without checks and balances, the military ran amok and became incessantly involved in the perpetuation of the most brutal human rights violations. Being at the spear's tip of the regime's counterinsurgency campaign, soldiers wantonly engaged in the torture, enforced disappearance, and killing of suspected cadres and supporters of the NPA.

The transformation of the AFP under the regime should not come as a surprise. Marcos's desire to concentrate power around himself came at a price, and his decision to expand the AFP and extend almost unlimited patronage to military officers was his devil's bargain. It was a price that Marcos was willing to pay, since the control of the military was essential for his regime in two significant ways - as a source of

legitimacy and as an instrument of repression.

Ironically, and despite the AFP's astronomical ascent to power, Marcos's Martial Law failed to contain the communist insurgency. With the regime preoccupied in safeguarding itself from threats, crucial resources were siphoned away from military operations where they were most needed. Similarly, army battalions were tied down in Manila to protect and secure Marcos, leaving the effort of keeping the communist insurgents at bay to the poorly-trained and ill-equipped Integrated Civilian Home Defense Forces (ICHDF) and other paramilitary groups.

Marcos's very dependence on the ICHDF and paramilitary groups to spearhead the counterinsurgency campaign, as exemplified by the presence of the Lost Command on the island of Samar, is a testament to the regime's corruption. Due to budget constraints resulting from corruption within military ranks, the regime strategically used the ICHDF for counterinsurgency—a cheaper but less effective alternative to a standard army battalion (Kessler, 1989). Soon, the ICHDF was developed to complement regular military units in counterinsurgency operations before leading the operations themselves. As a matter of fact, the ICHDF steadily grew in size from 65,000 to 73,000 members between 1976 to 1985 (Bello, 1987; Kessler, 1989).

With the regime turning to the ICHDF to lead the counterinsurgency efforts, human rights abuses reached a record high. Largely due to its incompetence, the ICHDF had been particularly brutal with its counterinsurgency tactics (van der Kroef, 1986). Moreover, since the recruits were not screened thoroughly, local town thugs, petty criminals, and military officers with criminal records filled the ranks of the organization. It becomes clear then how the ICHDF turned into a brutal and violent force that is inextricably linked to human rights violations (Amnesty International, 1982; Central Intelligence Agency, 1986; Kessler, 1989; Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1988; May, 1992; Tiglao, 1988). Wherever they were, abuse and death stalked the land.

By the 1980s, the "atmosphere of violence and lawlessness" transformed the ICHDF into criminal elements, engaging in gang warfare and mercenary work while maintaining a facade of legality (van der Kroef, 1986, p. 9). With minimal oversight from the PC, some ICHDF units transformed into semi-independent, profit-driven groups of raiders while simultaneously operating as counterinsurgency forces. Reports (AI, 1982; Ocampo, 1982; Ocampo et al., 1982) of the Lost Command's activities in Agusan del Sur further attest to this. Other units pretended to be NPA fighters, giving them unchecked access

to rural communities where they committed widespread abuse and plundered the local population (van der Kroef, 1986).

While Marcos maintained the AFP as his personal security force, his local political allies exploited the ICHDF to enforce their power, creating a system of repression that mirrored the military's. Under the guise of responding to a heightened threat of NPA assassinations, regional kingpins such as Jose Durano, Ali Dimaporo, and Cojuangco amassed their own private forces (Bello, 1987; van der Kroef, 1986). The ICHDF, though poorly equipped by the military, had no trouble obtaining firearms as private security forces. Notably, Cojuangco had his own force trained by Israeli mercenaries and armed with light tanks and several high-powered firearms (Kessler, 1989; Manapat, 2020).

The centralization of political and police power coincided with the rise of a new economic elite during the regime. Instead of democratizing wealth, Marcos merely replaced the old elite with a new one who rose rapidly due to their close ties with the first family (Manapat, 2020). Under Marcos's martial rule, crony capitalism became the name of the game. With expansive control of the state and its apparatuses, the first family and their cronies made no distinction between public and private interests (Bello, 1987; Manapat, 2020). Political positions and influence were used to methodically plunder the nation of its resources and distribute spoils among those who could prove loyalty to the regime. Among those who particularly benefited from this arrangement were Marcos's most-favored associates, including Roberto Benedicto, Antonio Floirendo, Manuel Elizalde, Enrile, Cojuangco, and Disini (Bello, 1987; Tiglao, 1988; Manapat, 2000).

Furthermore, the cronies also resorted to using military force to safeguard their interests. In one instance, the PC and private security were employed by Benedicto and Floirendo to terrorize those who protested against their business concessions. Ricardo Manapat (2020, p. 128) even pointed out how "Floirendo used a variety of methods," including "outright coercion and terrorism with the help of the military" to dislodge small farmers in nearby landholdings.

It is also particularly worth noting, especially in relation to the Sag-od massacre, that logging concessions under crony control became the largest employers of both regular military units and the ICHDF. But this is to be reasonably expected. From a counterinsurgency standpoint, logging companies and the military developed a symbiotic relationship. The military and ICHDF provided security for logging companies, who, in turn, aided in counterinsurgency operations by opening up heavily forested areas for easier mobilization against the NPA (Vitug, 2023). Sometimes, the security forces of logging companies would even

directly participate in counterinsurgency efforts against the NPA. The employment of the Lost Command by SJTC is a case in point. At the peak of the insurgency, formal arrangements between the military and logging concessions were agreed upon by the PC and the Bureau of Forest Development (BFD). In a signed memorandum, the PC would train an ICHDF unit, mostly composed of ex-military draftees, while the logging company would shoulder the salary and equip the unit (Vitug, 2023).

In historicizing the role of the military during the Martial Law years and juxtaposing it with the rise of Marcos's cronies, we learn how collusion between these pillars of power helped prop up the dictatorship through the sustained repression and exploitation of the nation. On one hand, I looked into the transformation of the AFP into a legitimizing force and an instrument of repression for the regime. And on the other hand, I examined the institutionalization of crony capitalism which paved the way for the accumulation of wealth of the regime's allies and the exploitation of the nation's resources. Considered together, I demonstrate the brutality of the Marcos regime and its reliance on violence to consolidate power and wealth.

## Summary and Conclusion

When MAKIISA KA (1981a) published their report on the Sag-od massacre, they underscored the intense brutality that the residents of the barangay suffered at the hands of the Lost Command. The massacre caused significant and enduring trauma to the survivors who witnessed the brutal killings of their loved ones. More than four decades later, the massacre has been set aside in the fringes of national history. Closure is still far out of reach, justice has yet to be achieved, and impunity rages on.

The ultimate hope for this paper is to contribute to the historiography on Martial Law and the discourse on human rights. Cognizant of this, I tried to foreground the narrative of those who have long been silent, and understand their story in such a way that captures its complexities and nuances. More significantly, I hope the paper also brings to light new perspectives that would help clarify the circumstances surrounding the Sag-od massacre. To conclude this paper, I revisit the fundamental and analytical historical questions I initially posed. More specifically, I examine the identities of the perpetrators and victims, the pattern of the victims' deaths, and the underlying motivations for the massacre.

I started by discussing the geographical and historical conditions in Las Navas during the Martial Law years. This allowed us to properly locate the tragedy in Sag-od within the context of the exponential

growth of the NPA on the island of Samar and its consequent rapid militarization. Taking off from this, I reconstructed the details of the tragedy through the corroboration of details coming from the various reports of *Bulletin Today*, *Times Journal*, *Philippine Detainees Update*, and *WHO Magazine*. The details of these reports were further substantiated by the observations provided by AI and MAKIISA KA. Here, I uncovered the brutality to which the residents of Sag-od were subjected to. The men were summarily executed, and the women and children were mercilessly gunned down. However, significant details on the massacre remain inconclusive, owing largely to the difficulty of establishing the truth in conflict-ridden areas. A significant case in point is the dispute regarding the perpetrators of the massacre. On one hand, survivors of the massacre claimed that the Lost Command and the SJTC were complicit in the deliberate and indiscriminate killings of the defenseless. On the other hand, the government investigation panel blamed the NPA for the tragedy.

Remaining conscious that conclusions drawn from official government narratives and independent reports may vary, I established some facts on the massacre by drawing evidence from the sources. In doing so, I argued against the claim that the massacre was perpetrated by the NPA, as evidence largely pointed to the Lost Command as the group behind the killings. The apparent ambiguity in the initial reports concerning the perpetrators' identity is resolved through the corroboration of additional materials, revealing that the Lost Command and the SF-ICHDF are the same. This is further proven by the fact that the reports identified Lt. Col. Carlos Lademora as the leader of the groups. In a related manner, I explored possible angles that attempt to explain the massacre, focusing on the collusion between the SJTC and the Lost Command. I argued that the presence of the Lost Command and the SJTC in Sag-od highlights the confluence and interplay of factors, mainly military and economic, leading to the massacre.

I then turned our attention to the larger context of the nation in explaining the Sag-od massacre. In an attempt to understand what factors helped create the conditions surrounding the tragedy, I highlighted two particular points. First, under the Marcos regime, the AFP was turned into a personal instrument of control and repression. Second, the economic interests of the Marcos cronies were expanded and preserved through the use of unrestrained exploitation of resources and coercive force. The confluence of these elements effectively sustained a regime dedicated to suppressing dissent and safeguarding the interests of its cronies. In light of these factors, the Sag-od massacre underscores the systemic brutality employed by the regime in its obsessive pursuit of power and wealth.

All things considered, this research does not purport itself as the definitive text on the study of massacres during the Marcos regime. I am well aware that, while the inquiry this paper has undertaken has helped bring to light significant details about one massacre during the regime, much still remains to be done. While the present study may provide a template for research on the other massacres during the regime, it is in the best interest of historical scholarship and the reading public if future research could expand and investigate the individual motivations of the perpetrators and the psycho-social factors that led to the killings. It would also be worthwhile to dedicate particular attention to examining how victims and survivors resisted, coped, and moved on in the aftermath of the massacres. Furthermore, much has to be done regarding a comparative approach on the massacres during the Marcos regime. This could further deepen the understanding of these particularly brutal episodes in history by uncovering patterns and understanding particularities of such incidents. Hopefully, with the increasing access to materials on the subject, pursuing these research agenda becomes all the more feasible.

## Bionote

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