



2025 History Essay Contest

School 7/8th Grade Winner

Gabriela Silang: The Joan of Arc of Ilocandia

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Joan of Arc is a prominent, well-known figure in history—and for good reason. But many overlook her lesser-known yet equally powerful counterpart. While Joan of Arc was battling in France, this warrior was waging her own fight for freedom on the other side of the world. She still stands immortalized in stone in the heart of the city of Makati in her home country, the Philippines. Her name is Gabriela Silang, the “Joan of Arc of Ilocandia.”

Maria Josefa Gabriela Cariño Silang was born in 1731 in Santa, Ilocos Sur in the Philippines. Her father, Anselmo Cariño, was a Christian Ilocano trader, while her mother, Isabel de los Santos, was of both native Ilocano and Spanish heritage. Gabriela received elementary education from her parish priest, Father Tomas Milan, but her father already had a goal for her: marry a rich man. When her parents passed, Father Milan arranged her marriage to a wealthy businessman, fulfilling her parents’ wishes, but her new husband died after only three years. Then she met Diego Silang, and Gabriela took her first step on the path that would secure her place in history.

Gabriela and Diego Silang fell in love and married in 1757. A few years later, the Seven Years’ War broke out in Europe. During the war, the Philippines was subject to British attack because of its status as a

Spanish colony. To pacify the population, the British promised reforms, but took care to instill the beginnings of rebellion in them. These whispers clung to the corners of the people's minds like burrs. Spain had exploited the country through forced labor and excessive taxes for years, and the nagging thoughts the British had provoked soon burst into a passionate cause. After Manila was taken by the British, the Silangs too viewed the arrival of the British as an opportunity to free their nation from subjection and emerge as an independent republic. They preached a slogan, "Wrest power from the *principales* and restore it to the people." *Principales* were the upper social class, many of whom worked for the Spanish "as administrators and tax collectors, wielding tremendous political and economic power, able to exploit the people by collecting taxes over and above those decreed by the Spaniards" (Encyclopedia.com). The Silangs rallied a force, first of only village people, then expanding to include more inland natives. Their movement grew into the Ilocano Revolt, with husband and wife as leaders. The newly formed troops marched to Cabugao, where they earned a victory over the Spanish. After their success, the British appointed Diego as captain-general and governor of Ilocos. He wasted no time implementing radical changes; he humbled the elite, favored the common people, and brought native-born leaders into power. Gabriela continued to stand by his side as a trusted advisor. "Her involvement in combat and strategic planning earned her respect and admiration, establishing her as a key figure in the resistance" (Sanyo).

But Diego Silang's one-year stint as governor soon came to an abrupt end. Diego was assassinated by his former allies Miguel Vicos and Pedro Becbec on May 28, 1763. Gabriela fled to her uncle Nicolas Cariño's home for safety. Afraid but resolute, Gabriela swore to continue her late husband's mission. She gathered forces and successfully ambushed the army of Becbec, one of the turncoats who was involved in her husband's murder. The people watched in wonder as Gabriela led her forces, charging ahead on the back of her horse, brandishing her *bolo*, a traditional Filipino knife. From these battlesprung her iconic image: a fierce warrior on horseback, her sword aimed at the neck of oppression. She seemed to transcend the limits of fear. "La Henerala," they called her. *The Woman General*.

Gabriela reorganized her forces once again in Cabugao, merging with her uncle's army and taking shelter in the fortress established in the town. Then, Gabriela's most daring idea came to fruition. She led 2,000 soldiers in an attack on Vigan, the heavily fortified center of Spanish command in the region, in an

attempt to recapture the city and strike a critical blow against the Spanish powers. But the Spanish fought back, ambushing Gabriela and forcing her and her army to retreat to the Province of Abra. Gabriela tried to regroup her scattered troops, but the Spanish tirelessly pursued her into the mountains, offering rewards for her capture to the warrior tribes who resided there. After weeks of hunting, the Spanish finally took Gabriela and 90 of her supporters captive. She went with her head held high to her execution on September 20, 1763.

Gabriela was a crucial leader in the Ilocano Revolt and the first Filipina to ever lead a revolt against colonial rule. Her various skills made her an excellent advisor during her husband Diego Silang's leadership. As a *mestiza*, or person of mixed Filipino and Spanish descent, she could communicate with both the high-ranking Spanish officials and the Ilocano natives. After Gabriela took up Diego's mantle, she became the foremost commander of the Ilocano Revolt. The victories she won inspired other communities to answer her call and join the cause. Her leadership spurred the fires in the hearts of the people and the passion in their souls that led them to fight with all their might. Even her execution could not taint her reputation or dignity, but allowed her to rise in the eyes of the revolutionaries as a martyr. Unfortunately, the Spanish gained the upper hand after her death, and the Ilocano Revolt ultimately did not achieve its goal of evicting the Spanish. However, it is seen as a pivotal step toward the future Philippine Revolution, which did lead to the declaration of Philippine independence and later the establishment of the Philippines as an independent nation.

Gabriela Silang's legacy lives on. She continues to be a monumental figure of strength and one of the respected faces of the Philippine rebellion. Her dream of freedom was eventually realized, and the Philippines remains an independent nation to this day. She severed the gender norms imposed by colonial rule and surged ahead as a fiery female leader. Gabriela has also paved the way for many more strong Filipina figures, including the first female president of the Philippines, Corazon Aquino. "Gabriela Silang's passion for justice drove her to continue the armed struggle begun by her husband. She infused the struggle with the brilliance and serenity of a woman warrior," declared Filipina poet Lilia Quindoza Santiago (qtd. in Encyclopedia.com). She is renowned as "the embodiment of courage, patriotism, and Filipino nationalism" and is honored each year in the Philippines by a non-working day on March 19 (Manila Bulletin; Senate of the Philippines). An alliance of organizations fighting for equality for all

Filipina women has been named in her honor (About–Gabriela USA). Generations stand at the foot of her statue and aspire to attain the level of honor and bravery that she symbolized. Gabriela Silang is an unforgettable figure in Philippine history, and she inspires generations still today.

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