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Vivian A. Phillips

Bridgewater State University

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Indigenous Women Defying All Odds: An Analysis of the Use of Gender Violence During the
Civil War of Guatemala, 1960-1996

Vivian A. Phillips

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
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Bridgewater State University

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Dr. Erin O'Connor, Thesis Advisor

Dr. Brian Payne, Committee Member

Dr. Leonid Heretz, Committee Member

ABSTRACT

Guatemala has been torn by class, race, gender, and politics throughout its history. During the late nineteenth-century coffee boom, elites expanded their landholdings at the expense of peasant communities. The new landowners exerted their power over the Indigenous and poor *ladino* (non-Indigenous) population, forcing them to labor in the plantations with little to no compensation. In 1954, the United States aided in a coup that overthrew president Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán, whose social reforms provided hope to the subjugated. The continued exploitation and discrimination that the natives and poor *ladinos* bore ultimately led to the Guatemalan Civil war of 1960. The civil war was a 36-year battle between left-wing guerrillas and the Guatemalan government, however, government officials increasingly targeted non-combatant, civilian populations. In the military's attempt to end the rebellions they implemented a systematic use of terror, annihilating over 200,000 people, of which 80 percent were Indigenous, while capturing over 45,000 people who were then forcibly “disappeared.” Women also became targeted victims of mass rape and sexual violence. These realities lead to some essential questions. In what ways was gender essential to counterinsurgency tactics? How did the impact of this war affect Indigenous women and men differently? What impact did this war have on Indigenous women and cultures? Were women able to resist and rise above the oppressive state?

Race and class intersected with gender, and all three were essential component in Guatemala's Civil war as women, the poor, and Indigenous people bore the brunt of the violence. Yet, Indigenous women and men overcame the brutalities they encountered by galvanizing Mayans in order to unite and resist the state's inflicted oppression. Through aggressive guerrilla insurgency women's empowerment and actions, and pressures from pan-Mayan mobilization the Guatemalan government was forced to cease battle.

Introduction

*“We have been beaten and humiliated, but the race was never defeated.”*¹
Words inscribed on the tomb of Thelma Beatriz Argueta, a K'iche beauty queen

The history of Guatemala's rural Indigenous communities unearths a traumatic and sinister story of government-enforced coercion, racism, gender-based violence, and genocide juxtaposed with Mayans' resistance, resilience, and uncompromising stance against dehumanization. It was a clash between the Guatemalan government and leftist guerrilla groups that ignited a 36-year Civil War. A battle in which the state's military targeted non-combatant,

¹Argueta, a K'iche beauty queen died at the start of her reign in 1970. See Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* (London: Duke, 2000), p4.

civilian populations, slaughtering over 200,000 people, of which 83 percent were Indigenous, and over 45,000 were kidnapped and then forcibly “disappeared.” The organization of oppositional guerrilla groups, that were largely comprised of Mayans and the ladino poor, was the consequence of long-standing tensions that dated back to the 1870s. According to historian Greg Grandin, when the nation’s expansion in coffee cultivation produced a new liberal agro-export state it also created “Guatemala’s agrarian proletariat that took place along clearly defined ethnic lines.”² The wealthy elite minority benefited from the expropriation of Indigenous land and labor exploitation. A budding export economy deepened the ethnic and class divide, as coffee production depended more on the subjugation of all *campesinos Indígenas*.³ The dominating elite wielded their power over Indigenous communities, leaving them with few resources to sustain their families. Often, the military aggressively suppressed petitions for reform or peaceful protests, as the government saw these acts as challenging state authority. In the early 1980s the escalation of violence had reached its peak in state-orchestrated attacks against Mayans and their highland communities for suspicions of supporting guerrilla forces. During this heightened period of violence Indigenous men and women suffered the most egregious acts of cruelty as military forces wiped out entire Mayan villages, calling the early part of this decade the bloodiest period of the civil war.

As Mayan mobilization intensified and anti-communist sentiment spread, the Guatemalan government labeled Indigenous groups as subversive communists that needed to be eliminated. However, not all Mayans were subversive or communist, yet their ethnic identity alone determined their guilt in the eyes of the state. The government implemented severe

² Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* (London: Duke, 2000), p 15-16.

³ *Campesinos Indígenas* are Indigenous farmers, many illiterates, who express themselves in their mother tongue. However, the term when used alone *campesino* refers to the rural poor.

counterinsurgency tactics against the guerrillas; however, it was not enough to suppress the uprisings. *Kaibiles*,⁴ a special operations unit of the Guatemala military forces, took on a new strategy, state terror. Kaibiles performed calculated acts of violence on communities accused of being insubordinate, and women, in particular, were targeted. Mass rape and femicide became a part of common practice during military incursions. The government ordered a scorched-earth policy, burning Indigenous villages across Guatemala because they perceived them to be the support bases for guerrilla forces. The scorched-earth policy resulted in thousands of orphaned children, massive displacement, and the destruction of homes and *milpas* (cornfields), which most Mayans relied on for survival.⁵

Over three decades of internal conflict came to a final halt when peace negotiations were finalized, and the Peace Accords were signed in December of 1996. Part of the peace agreement was to investigate and document the thousands of human rights violations and atrocities that transpired during the 36-year war. This was accomplished through the United Nations-sponsored Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), a team that would conclude the Guatemalan Civil War a genocide and provide the recommendations for peace and reconciliation processes. The calculated scorched-earth attacks on communities, the deliberate torture of women and children, and the public execution of Mayans are a small fraction of the vicious acts carried out on the Mayan population. The Civil War in Guatemala was a difficult yet important part of history, because it provides us with the ability to understand a period of conflict and state violence through race, gender, and class.

⁴ Kaibil is a Mayan term loosely translated as “warrior” or “strategist.” Kaibiles are a special forces unit from the Jungle of Training school in El Petén. Jennifer G. Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project: A Violence Called Democracy* (Philadelphia: Univ of Penn Press, 1998), p 304.

⁵ Rachel Nolan, “*Children for Export*”: *A History of International Adoption from Guatemala* (New York University: PhD diss., 2018) p 252.

This thesis examines how Indigenous identity and gender intersected and transformed throughout this period, how ethnic conflict resulted in the killing of a people, and how sexual violence was used as a tool in this systematically imposed state terror during the civil war. Premeditated murder of Indigenous peoples was not initially gender oriented; however, Mayan women became targeted victims of mass rape, torture, and femicide. Children often received the same fate as their mothers and later burned or buried in clandestine cemeteries. However, women's suffering did not preclude their agency. In fact, some Maya women drew strength from their tragedies. The more they witnessed the incessant deterioration of their people, the more vigor it gave them to rise against the state's tyranny. Through testimonial accounts, hundreds of Mayan women attested to empowering themselves through collective action, freeing themselves from the patriarchal system that entangled them. No longer were they victims, they became angry, and their anger transformed into mass mobilization. Firsthand accounts have shown that their participation was never solely for the individual pursuit of triumph rather than for the collective victory of all Mayans.

Sources

Primary Sources

In order to obtain the voices of Indigenous women, I turned to testimonies that have been filtered through various interviewers, as most government-produced documents excluded the Indigenous perspectives that my research required. For this reason, I centered my research around testimonies provided by Mayans who witnessed or endured the brutalities imposed by the state. I have also examined accounts from ex-guerrillas who related their experiences throughout the war. Most of the testimonies I selected are drawn from Indigenous women who offer an

exclusive lens into the lived-experiences of Mayans, a perspective often omitted from other types of documents. These documents, like other firsthand accounts, are never without flaws. The process in retelling what transpired can never be taken as entirely accurate, especially because these testimonies have been put together through scholarly projects, government-funded organizations, and religious institutions that filter already imperfect narratives to fit within their agendas. Imperfection in recounting experiences can emerge, in some cases, owing to the lapse of time, and, in other cases, the interviewee's goal in conveying the sense of life and death urgency of the period.

The most famous testimony I used was *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indigenous Woman in Guatemala*, collected and edited by anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray when Menchú was only 23 years old and had fled Guatemala after most of her family was killed. Menchú's testimony brought international awareness to the brutalities that plagued Mayans during the height of the civil war. Menchú related her testimony in Spanish to interviewer/editor Burgos-Debray who then filtered and organized her words in a way that was fitting for the Western audience that Burgos-Debray was aiming to attract with the book. Menchú told her life in a way that highlighted the violence against Guatemalan Indigenous peoples, with particular detail given to her own family members' deaths. She also discussed Indigenous culture and resilience, including Indigenous women's strength. In the late 1990s, anthropologist David Stoll published a monograph that criticized Menchú's testimony, arguing that her rendering of specific "events and circumstances could not withstand being subjected to the magnifying glass of social inquiry," and therefore making it "possible for the entire narrative to be dismissed as a mere

fabrication or perhaps even lies, especially at the hand of the narrator's advisories."⁶ In particular, Stoll questioned Menchú's description of her brother Petrocinio's execution, claiming that she was not present to bear witness when he was killed. Other scholars took issue with Stoll's analysis, such as Mary Louise Pratt, who believes that "however significant the discrepancies between Menchú's narrated testimony and the reconstructable facts of her life, it remains incongruous to equate these ethically with the monstrosities of the army, [and] the enormity of Indigenous suffering and loss."⁷ Carol A. Smith addresses his rejection of racism as a factor in influencing Guatemalan violence stating, "[r]acism accounts for the nature of the final solution in the 1980s the huge massacres of Indigenous people."⁸ Despite the imperfect testimony Menchú gave of her family there has been a substantial amount of firsthand accounts that reflect the same monstrosities Menchú illustrates.

Burgos-Debray's publication of Menchú's primary source was a useful tool when combined with others, corroborating primary source testimony about how the state systematically organized attacks on the Mayan population. One of these resulted from Guatemala's Truth Commission reports, the United Nation-sponsored Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH). Following the Peace Accord agreement in 1996 the CEH was officially established and went on for two years after which its final report was printed in 1999, titled *Guatemala: Memory of Silence (Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio)*. I obtained the final report of the CEH in English and Spanish from separate government websites. The Spanish CEH report offers a complete report of 4,383 human rights violations and acts of violence connected with the

⁶ W. George Lovell and Christopher H. Lutz, "The Primacy of Larger Truths," in Arturo Arias, ed., *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* (Minneapolis :University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p 172.

⁷ Mary Louise Pratt, "I, Rigoberta Menchú and the 'Culture Wars,'" in Arturo Arias, ed., *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* (Minneapolis :University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p 45.

⁸ Carol A. Smith, "Why Write Expose of Rigoberta Menchú?" in Arturo Arias, ed., *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, p 145.

armed conflict as opposed to the 82-page English volume, which was limited to the conclusion and recommendations of their findings. I used these documents for firsthand accounts of Indigenous civilians to find information on violence against women, detailed evidence of insurgents and counterinsurgents, the state's role and strategies, and statistical data to support the impact Mayans as a whole encountered, but specifically regarding violence towards women. I was also able to extract pieces of the CEH's findings from two of my secondary sources, which were organized by summarizing scenes and attaching testimonies.⁹ The narrowing down of topics within these sources, such as gender, torture and murders, state power and military formation that were then linked with primary documents, allowed me to maneuver more readily through information and grasp the context in which these CEH records support.

The Roman Catholic archdiocese's project for the Recovery of Historical Memory (REMHI) was developed for the purpose of "reconstructing the history of pain and death, understanding the reasons for it, the why and the how."¹⁰ This project was coordinated by Guatemalan Archdiocesan Human Rights Office (ODHAG) under the leadership of Bishop Juan Gerardi Conedera and printed in 1998. It is made up of 5,465 testimonies including 52,427 documented victims of human rights and humanitarian violation, for which the church wanted to seek peace, justice and reconciliation.¹¹ The testimonies I used gave me the ability to convey the horrific carnage that was encompassed by the civil war. I used the English abridged book

⁹ A significant amount of CEH documents were found in two of my secondary sources: Greg Grandin, *Who is Rigoberta Menchú?* (New York: Verso, 2011), and Etelle Higonnet, *Quiet Genocide: Guatemala 1981-1983* (London: Transaction, 2009).

¹⁰ REMHI, Recovery of Historical Memory Project; The official report of the Human Rights Office, Archdiocese of Guatemala, *Guatemala: Never Again!* Maryknoll, (London: Orbis Books, 1999), p xxii.

¹¹ REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, p 289.

Guatemala: Never Again!, for information about violence against Indigenous women and children, as well as Indigenous women's resistance and empowerment.¹²

Contrary to my other primary sources, *Memorias Rebeldes Contra el Olvido* is a book composed of collected testimonies of ex-combatant women. It was published by a group of women from the feminist publication *La Cuerda*; *Plataforma Agraria*, a political alliance committed to building a social movement, and the research center *La Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales* (AVANCSO).¹³ All these women were part of the rebel guerrilla group Army of the Poor (EGP) a group that by 1982 had merged along with three other guerrilla groups to form a united front under Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). These women asked compañeras from AVANCSO and Plataforma Agraria about putting a narrative together concerning Indigenous women's struggle and what the war represented for them. Some interviewees faced a language barrier, as some interviews were given in Spanish and others in their native tongue. I must point out again that these interviews were filtered two to three times over after being funneled through interpreters, interviewers, and editors. Nonetheless, the

¹² Further material was found on women, children, and the disintegration of Indigenous family in Rachel Nolan's "*Children for Export*": *A History of International Adoption from Guatemala*, (New York University: PhD diss., 2018). Nolan's research aided me further in analyzing the state's use of psychological violence on Indigenous mothers as a form of torture in their ploy to remove children from families and place them up for adoption. Nolan exposes the state's racist angle for adopting Indigenous children out of Guatemala....

¹³ Rosalinda Hernández Alarcón, *Memorias Rebeldes Contra el Olvido* (Guatemala: Cuerda, 2008), p 12. Detailed description of those groups who took part in compiling this book of testimonies of ex-combatants Maya women was in the rear inner fold of this book. *La Cuerda* is a Guatemalan association of diverse women who adhere to feminism, understood as a philosophical and political theory of analysis, a political practice in favor of social transformation and a lifestyle and being that in general seek to eliminate discrimination and raise equality between women and brothers, between ethnicities and diverse social groups. *Plataforma Agraria* is a political, diverse and multisectoral alliance committed to building a social movement that fights for structural agrarian changes and rural development, that is capable of linking specific demands with national agendas, as well as interweaving local dynamics with international ones. maintains a critical stance against government agendas and promotes political initiatives to achieve progress in favor of the excluded majority. AVANCSO is private non-profit institution, whose mission is to contribute, through its research institute, to the understanding of the most significant problems of the Guatemalan social process.

testimonies I used supported my questions concerning gender-based violence, guerrilla life for Indigenous women, intersecting roles of men and women, and women's agency.

While these aforementioned sources have gone through a variety of filters, Victor Montejo's *Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village* is the one primary source that was composed and published by the person testifying. Montejo was a ladino schoolteacher, and though he sympathized with Mayan people, his perspective of the events that unfolded in the remote village of Tzalala in northwest Huehuetenango was not the voice I most needed for my research. It was, nonetheless, a useful instrument in providing me with detailed accounts of the unjust military executions, unsubstantiated accusations of innocent villagers labeled "internal enemy," brutal public execution, and civil patrol (Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil or PAC Spanish acronym) compliance in the murdering and torturing of their Indigenous counterparts under the orders of the military agents. Montejo's experience of being taken by the military also gave documentation about his experience in the barracks, the state control over him after his release, and different treatment he received for being a ladino from the city.

Secondary Sources

The secondary sources I used cover a range of periods within Guatemalan history, which allowed me to better understand the baseline of what drove this war into the direction of gender violence, geared towards women and ultimately genocide. While much has been written about the Indigenous history of Guatemala, I selected a few sources from the premier historian of modern Guatemalan history, Greg Grandin. Grandin's *Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* focuses on two centuries of Indigenous and ladino relations starting from the mid-

eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, which concentrates on the Maya-K'iche'¹⁴ of Quetzaltenango, a city in Guatemala's western highlands. Grandin goes through critical points of Guatemala's past that aided me in analyzing the ethnic division, class struggle, as well as the "social and political restructuring that heavily contested the authority of landed elite in 1944 and the fall of president Jacobo Árbenz in 1954."¹⁵ Though Grandin's book was useful in his discussion about gender roles with the K'iche' community as well as Indigenous women and national identity, it lacked the in-depth analysis of Indigenous women's lives that I needed.

Whereas Grandin lacked Indigenous women, David Carey Jr.'s, *Engendering Mayan History: Kaqchikel Women as Agents and Conduits of the Past, 1875-1970*, captured the "marginal histories and hidden forces" of Kaqchikel¹⁶ women.¹⁷ Carey's desire to bring attention to the often omitted contributions of Maya women to national histories from their perspectives, in their own voices was important to my work because it provided a more complete picture of Indigenous life, specifically women's contribution within Mayan communities. The 250 oral histories collected by Carey and his Kaqchikel research assistants displayed women's tendency to defy gender codes, taking on male characteristics and roles spearheaded their mobility within their communities and even into ladino life. This book gave me the history of how Indigenous women contributed to the shaping Guatemala's past.

In her book *The Guatemalan Military Project: A Violence Called Democracy*, Jennifer Schirmer states that an examination of the Guatemalan military "serves as a window onto the

¹⁴ Maya-K'iche' people are one of the 22 different Mayan ethnic groups from the Western Highlands of Guatemala. Indigenous groups in Guatemala are not only separated by different Indigenous languages and cultures.

¹⁵ Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala*, p7.

¹⁶ Kaqchikel people were Mayans from the midwestern highlands of Guatemala whose native language was the third most common language in Guatemala.

¹⁷ David Carey Jr, *Engendering Mayan History: Kaqchikel Women as Agents and Conduits of the Past, 1875-1970* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p2.

internal workings and thinking of the most powerful, least researched, and least understood institution in Guatemala.”¹⁸ Schirmer’s research provides the military’s perspective of the war, based on the interviews that she conducted with individuals ranging from former heads of state, defense ministers, military officers, congressional deputies, lawyers, and journalists from 1986 to 1996. Schirmer’s work gave me the detailed background into the Guatemalan military and its intellectual evolution and strategic transition. This monograph was an important part in my analysis of the state’s counterinsurgency tactics from first-hand accounts of the state’s most powerful and influential forces starting from the October Revolution of 1944 through the late 1980s.

Betsy Konefal’s *For Every Indio Who Falls: A History of Maya Activism In Guatemala, 1960- 1990*, examined Mayan participation in the development of oppositional political activism and offers a look into Maya mass mobilization as well as their role in civil war. She provides an understanding Indigenous identity, the discriminatory social relations between the ladinos and Mayans. Konefal’s discussion concerning the Catholic church’s role in spearheading pan-Mayan mobilization was key to grasping how impactful the church along with their new teachings of Liberation Theology¹⁹ was in rural Mayan communities and in the war throughout the 1960s-70s.²⁰ Konefal also discussed the Panzós massacre of 1978, which not only intensified resistance, but raised issues of national identity, which she explored via Indigenous beauty queens.

¹⁸ Jennifer G. Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project: A Violence Called Democracy* (Philadelphia: Univ of Penn Press, 1998), p 1.

¹⁹ Liberation Theology was a new Catholic religious movement, based on the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the Episcopal Conference of Medellín (1968), in which priests and nuns aligned themselves with the poor and oppressed in pursuit of social justice through social action and rural community empowerment.

²⁰ Betsy Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls: A History of Maya Activism in Guatemala 1960-1990* (Albuquerque: Univ of New Mexico Press, 2010), p 34.

Both Cindy Forster's articles "Violent and Violated Women: Justice and Gender in Rural Guatemala, 1936-1956" and "Me di Cuenta de Que Sí Podemos: Mujeres Indígenas y Campesinas en La Revolución Guatemalteca, 1970-2000" expose the violent nature of the state towards Indigenous women while also illustrating how women resisted oppression, patriarchal norms, and empowered themselves through the most traumatic condition. "Violent and Violated Women" gave me an insight into violence that had already been around long before the civil war began in 1960, and how inalienable rights were denied to women, who had no right to physical privacy.²¹ The article "Me di Cuenta" provided evidence of Indigenous women's empowerment. Former women combatants shared their experiences and how they transformed pain into power. They no longer adhered to the patriarchal idea of women's submissive position, men and women became one in the struggle against the ladino state.

Some works combined secondary and primary sources. Greg Grandin's *Who is Rigoberta Menchú?* was composed in defense Menchú's testimony in contradiction of "the intellectual apologist of the world's most powerful nation," and directly criticized American anthropologist David Stoll, who saw her as merely "an Indian with an agenda."²² In addition, this book's second half focused on "Clarifying History" and "Judging Genocide" through a host of document excerpts from Commission for Historical Clarification's (CEH). In all, Grandin's work contributed in understanding and analyzing Stoll's controversy while the CEH documents provided more primary-source evidence with a different voice. *The Guatemala Reader*, contains a wealth of information from scholars that allowed me to fill in any gaps from my other sources. For example, McCreery's essay "Land, Labor, and Community," in combination with Cindy

²¹ Cindy Foster, "Violent and Violated Women: Justice and Gender in Rural Guatemala, 1936-1956," *Journal of Women's History* 11, no. 3 (1999), p 75.

²² Greg Grandin, *Who is Rigoberta Menchú?* (New York: Verso, 2011), p 3

Forster's monograph allowed me to explain the history of coffee exports, Indigenous labor, and land reform.

Synopsis of the Civil War, Terror, and Genocide

“Let the history we lived be taught in the schools, so that it is never forgotten, so our children may know it.” – A CEH Witness²³

Historian Betsy Konefal indicates that 80 percent of those who were massacred and disappeared in the armed conflict that began in 1960 were Mayan, and approximately 93 percent of these victims were killed at the hands of the state.²⁴ A death toll not at all surprising to the Guatemalan government who created the institutional structures [the military] that, according to Jennifer Schirmer, “allowed them to undertake the dual objectives of repression and consolidation, of warmaking and statecrafting, and of strengthening internal repressive capacities...while self-consciously speaking about autonomy from the oligarchy and lack of responsibility for human rights violations.”²⁵ But what created such revulsion for a race that constituted a majority of Guatemala's population? It must be understood that during the Spanish conquest and subsequent colonization, Spanish colonizers fostered an environment of exclusion, antagonism, and conflict towards Indigenous peoples. These conditions and sentiments carried over into its independence. It was the ambition and greed of Guatemala's liberal oligarchs of the mid to late nineteenth century that exacerbated the racist precepts that Spanish conquerors used to rationalize the containment of Mayans.²⁶ The liberal elite class focused less on political liberty and more on economic progress.²⁷ The progress manifested through coffee cultivation and

²³ This quote was taken from a testimony given to the CEH (author unknown). CEH, p 10.

²⁴ Betsy Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls: A History of Maya Activism in Guatemala 1960-1990* (Albuquerque: Univ of New Mexico Press, 2010), p 13.

²⁵ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 2.

²⁶ Grandin, *Who is Rigoberta Menchú?*, p 102.

²⁷ Cindy Forster, *The Time of Freedom: Campesino Workers in Guatemala's October Revolution* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2002), p14.

export, which objectified an entire race. In essence, coffee was ultimately the catalyst that led to one of the bloodiest civil wars in Latin America that ravaged a people. As Grandin points out “[w]ithout an export crop, Guatemala’s pre-coffee economy did not integrate Indians, in however exploitive a fashion, into colonial society.”²⁸ In part, Mayans were given the space to subsist as Mayans. However, as coffee *fincas* began springing up and the demand for exports rose, Liberal elites became increasingly frustrated with Carrera's conservative regime impeding on their economic wealth. Cultivation required intense labor and land to create a “profitable enterprise.”²⁹ Yet, Conservatives were geared toward protecting Mayans. In 1865, the *Gaceta de Guatemala* informed the public that the government's job “was to protect Indians and to improve their spiritual and material situation; they should be 'moralized' with 'kindness' and prudence.”³⁰ By 1871, as historian Cindy Forster explains, alliance between “consummate politician and merchant Miguel Garcia Granados and San Marcos [planter] Justo Rufino Barrios, along with Guatemala city’s merchant class, solidified Liberals support to take down the conservative regime.”³¹

Many historians have noted the important connection between the economics of coffee and the politics of nineteenth-century liberalism. Following the Liberal takeover, Granados, a gradual reformist, took office for a short term before the more rigid Liberal dictator Justo Rufino Barrios seized power in 1873. Cindy Forster notes that under Barrios’ reign “coffee became Guatemala’s chief export and the state’s main source of income.”³² Likewise, David McCreery

²⁸ Grandin, *Who is Rigoberta Menchú?*, p 127.

²⁹ David McCreery, *Land, Labor, and Community* in Grandin, Greg, Deborah Levenson-Estrada, and Elizabeth Oglesby, eds., *The Guatemala Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011), p 118.

³⁰ David McCreery, *Land, Labor, and Community*, p 118.

³¹ Forster, *The Time of Freedom*, p 14.

³² Forster, *The Time of Freedom*, p 15.

noted that the coffee boom led to a series of laws that were directed “at breaking the autonomy of Indigenous communities.”³³ *Mandamientos* (forced labor laws) were implemented as plantation owners and wealthy elites believed Mayans “ha[d] to be made to work, and work hard,” and the expropriation of land was needed to continue spreading coffee cultivation as the demand for export increased. “Coffee provided,” as McCreery states, “the motive and the means for Guatemala state to penetrate the Indigenous community to an unprecedented degree, and it destroyed much of what remained of values shared between the elite and mass population.”³⁴ Mayans were essential in making coffee a success, and thus the prosperity of the elites. McCreery further explains that for Liberal elites, “what Indians thought mattered far less, if it mattered at all, than that they should be readily and cheaply available for work in the coffee groves; the growers wanted their bodies not their minds.”³⁵

Another labor-intensive business was established 1901 when, under President Manuel Estrada Cabrera’s reign (1898 to 1920), Guatemala and the United Fruit Company (UFCO), a US-based business, signed a pact for banana production. Cabrera granted the UFCO substantial concessions, which included 110,355 acres of land and an export tax exemption for 35 years for the construction of the Guatemalan City railway.³⁶ By 1920, REMHI notes that “the United States provided 70 percent of Guatemalan imports and controlled 80 percent of its exports dubbing the company *El Pulpo*³⁷ (The Octopus).³⁸ Tensions intensified between the Indigenous population and the landowners following the end of Barrios’s rule and through Cabrera’s time in

³³ McCreery, *Land, Labor, and Community*, p 117.

³⁴ McCreery, *Land, Labor, and Community*, p119.

³⁵ McCreery, *Land, Labor, and Community*, p 120.

³⁶ REMHI, Recovery of Historical Memory Project; The official report of the Human Rights Office, Archdiocese of Guatemala, *Guatemala: Never Again!* Maryknoll, (London: Orbis Books, 1999), p 182.

³⁷ *El Pulpo* (The Octopus) was a nickname given because by the late 1920s UFCO had its tentacle in nearly every economic and political development causing major unrest due to the harsh exploitation of Indigenous and poor as well as those who suffered expropriation of land for their benefit.

³⁸ REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!* p 182.

office. Historians have thus concluded that Cabrera's aim was parallel to Barrios's pursuit in wealth inequality.³⁹

Rule under Dictator Jorge Ubico Castañeda (1931 to 1944) did not alleviate the pressure Mayans endured. Like Barrios and Cabrera, Ubico led an autocratic administration. Although he did away with debt peonage, he imposed vagrancy laws. In 1934, new vagrancy laws forced men to work for 100 to 150 days out of the year based on their land holdings.⁴⁰ Cards were issued for all men to carry on their persons to prove that they had completed their assigned duties. Men had to work on state projects, such as constructing roads without machinery, with no pay or provisions.⁴¹ Women were not recruited by the state, yet the state was dependent on them. Amid having to shift their roles as wives and mothers to be the sole providers for their families while their husbands were away, Indigenous women were now responsible for making tortillas and tamales for the workers without pay. As David Carey points out, the most marginalized group was to "provide the very sustenance that energized the workforce, female food production fueled Guatemala's infrastructure development."⁴² Resistance of Indigenous women becomes more evident during this period. This order was an unspoken recognition of what an indispensable role women played in the success of public work projects.⁴³ Even as they held the status of the most relegated groups (Maya women), by challenging the state's order they agitated the state in such a way that it was obliged to acknowledge them, if not value their compulsory labor.⁴⁴

³⁹ Forster, *The Time of Freedom*, p 15.

⁴⁰ David Carey Jr, *Engendering Mayan History: Kaqchikel Women as Agents and Conduits of the Past, 1875-1970* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p 65.

⁴¹ Carey Jr, *Engendering Mayan History*, p 91.

⁴² Carey Jr, *Engendering Mayan History*, p119.

⁴³ Carey Jr, *Engendering Mayan History*, p 120.

⁴⁴ Carey Jr, *Engendering Mayan History*, p 120.

The October Revolution of 1944, a pro-democracy movement of teachers, students, military reformers, and emerging middle classes, brought down the 13-year dictatorship of Jorge Ubico and his brief successor, Fredrico Ponce.⁴⁵ Throughout this revolutionary period, also known as the Ten Years of Spring, democratically elected presidents Juan José Arévalo (1944-1951) and Jacobo Árbenz (1951-1954) provided a sense of freedom and hope for the Indigenous and poor ladino population through a series of reforms.⁴⁶ This period saw an increase in the number of organizations for workers and entrepreneurs, increased salaries, and well-paid leadership positions throughout the state. According to anthropologist Jennifer Schirmer, it was also during this period that the consolidation of political and military powers first began, impeding on any legislature that encroached in any way on the army's political territory.⁴⁷ Schirmer also points out that the Constitution 1945 transformed the Guatemalan army into a powerhouse organization allowing them to install a *Consejo Superior de Defensa Nacional* (Superior Council of National Defense) which lawfully divided the army and government in turn consenting to the army's sovereignty in both its command and mission.⁴⁸ As quoted in Schirmer, the Council was a "consulting organization charged with resolving issues related to the functioning of the army and [that would] act as the Superior Tribunal of the army ... to judge and know matters convocated by the President, Defense Minister or Chief of the Armed Forces."⁴⁹ In addition, the Constitution noted that dealings pertaining to the "functioning of the army" also meant protecting "the rights and freedom of the nation," "guaranteeing democracy," and protecting "laws and social and political institutions of the country."⁵⁰ Schirmer identifies these

⁴⁵ Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* (London: Duke, 2000), p 199.

⁴⁶ Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala*, p 199.

⁴⁷ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 10.

⁴⁸ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 10.

⁴⁹ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p10-11.

⁵⁰ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 13.

provisions as “abstract” and “nonelaborated,” “allow[ing] arbitrary and even contradictory application.”⁵¹

However, the reform that created the most change and would consequently end this period of transformation was the enactment of Árbenz’s Decree 900. Decree 900 was an agrarian reform law intended to expropriate and redistribute uncultivated land from the largest landholders while also eliminating forced labor. By 1944 the UFCO was the largest landowner in Guatemala, with over 180,000 acres of land. Hence, these new agrarian reforms placed US businessmen at a great disadvantage, as they not only depended heavily on the cheap labor, but under Arbenz they now were subject to losing large plots of land. For Guatemalan elites, rising conflict threatened established economic, social, and political interests. As Cindy Forster mentions, “Challenging the ‘Octopus’ set off a chain reaction among North Americans whose connections led to the highest halls of power in Washington D.C.”⁵² Amidst the Cold War’s heightened anticommunist sentiment, the United States made preserving hemispheric stability a high priority. United States government officials viewed these reforms “as Soviet-inspired” that needed to be eradicated, however the protection of their investments in the UFCO also played a factor in aiding Guatemala’s elites to remove the “internal enemy.”⁵³

The revolutionary period came to an end, reversing the agrarian reforms and leaving the poor “with only a memory of earlier gains.”⁵⁴ Political agitation, propaganda, and rumors were tactics used to destabilize and demoralize Arbenz supporters and create discord within his military, a form of “psychological warfare” taught by the US Central Intelligence Agency

⁵¹ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 13.

⁵² Forster, *The Time of Freedom*, p 218.

⁵³ Grandin, *Who is Rigoberta Menchú?*, p 109.

⁵⁴ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 14.

(CIA).⁵⁵ Arbenz was forced into exile causing his cadets and young officers to unsuccessfully attack *liberacionistas*. Arbenz's army agreed to surrender in order to avoid punishment. The state's "formal 'countersubversion' bodies" conducted post-Arbenz purges that resulted in the detention of 9,000 people and forced into exile another 10,000, while countless civilians were arrested, tortured, and killed.⁵⁶ Radio stations were used to broadcast warnings commonly containing anticommunist rhetoric. This form of intimidation was used to keep any opposition at bay. Following the Arbenz coup, Greg Grandin points out, the United States "promised that it would turn Guatemala into a 'showcase for democracy.' Instead, it created a laboratory of repression."⁵⁷ The atmosphere in Guatemala no longer resembled that of other nations during this period, such as Mexico,⁵⁸ who continued to act on the economic and political requests of their citizens, in turn creating a strong national allegiance, Guatemala relinquished nothing.⁵⁹ By the 1960s the motto of the military was "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem," there were no more negotiations between the state and dissatisfied Mayans.⁶⁰

Historian Kirsten Weld notes that a new special unit within the national police titled Special Investigation Bureau, created by US advisors in 1960, was to be given the authority to "apprehend anyone suspected of 'crimes threatening constitutional government,' in addition a central records bureau would collect, file, and examine fingerprints, arrest records, photographs,

⁵⁵ Nick Cullather, "Operation PBSUCCESS" in Greg Grandin, Deborah Levenson-Estrada, and Elizabeth Oglesby, *The Guatemala Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) p 230-231.

⁵⁶ The formal countersubversion organizations that were a part of the post-Arbenz purge were "the Civil Police, the Secret Police, the Treasury Police, the Government Investigative Police, the Investigative Squad of the Civil Police, the Presidential Police, a Unit Called ' Coronado Liras's Investigative Group,' the Immigration Investigative Service, the Army G-2, and the National Committee for Defense against Communism." Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala*, (Durham: Duke, 2014) p 96.

⁵⁷ Grandin, *Who is Rigoberta Menchú?* p 4.

⁵⁸ Though Mexico and Guatemala had similar goals in their fight against landed class Mexican elites eventually gave in to the reforms they had promised. Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala*, p 202.

⁵⁹ Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala*, p 219.

⁶⁰ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 113.

personnel description etc. that help track those accused of criminal activity.”⁶¹ Though, Weld states, “what sounded like routine policing—keeping track of lawbreakers—took a sinister cast when designed primarily to apply to those with ‘political interest contrary to the interests of the country,’ which was returning Guatemala’s status-quo.”⁶² The existing state of affairs put Guatemala in a position of uncertainty as the wealthy elites depended on obedience of the other classes (Mayans, poor/middle class ladinos, students, and clergy) in order to maintain the country’s political and economic stability, thus any contrasting view to that of the states was to be crushed. In 1967, when these Special Investigation Bureau fused a Master File Registry was devised for the purpose of providing a more detailed category of searches such as “Communist Agitators,” “Subversives,” “University Campus,” “Demonstration,” and “Cadavers,” a urban counterinsurgency approach ⁶³ Once Carlos Castillo Armas took office the shift of powers was drastically felt throughout the rural communities as, yet again, Mayans and ladino poor were placed back at the bottom of society as oppression intensified. This turn of events, however, was what provoked Mayans to begin organizing and resisting the oppressive state’s methods of control. In turn, the US government increasingly provided the Guatemalan state with military aid and training to withstand any enemy of the state, simply labelled as “subversives.”⁶⁴ The Escuela Politécnica was once again taken under the wing of US officers, as it was during Ubicio’s rule, training Guatemalan officers in counterinsurgency tactics.⁶⁵

The 13 November revolt of 1960 marked the beginning of the guerrilla-state struggle in Guatemala. This was an uprising of more than 30 percent of army units that was comprised of

⁶¹ Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala* (Durham: Duke, 2014) p 98-99.

⁶² Weld, *Paper Cadavers*, p 99.

⁶³ Weld, *Paper Cadavers*, p 99.

⁶⁴ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 15.

⁶⁵ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 14.

120 left-leaning junior officers attempting to stage a takeover in the fight for constitutional equality for all and against the meddling of US imperialist (*los gringos imperialistas*).⁶⁶ As the army openly made a way for Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes to take office in 1958, internal strife among the officers escalated. Though, according to the CEH, divergent interests were expressed within the Army since 1954. REMHI describes, the Company of Children of Jesus was among one of the largest groups of military men who debated political and economic conditions in Guatemala.⁶⁷ A clandestine group whose officers opposed Ydígoras decision to permit the CIA's covert commissioning of Guatemalan officers to train the “*antifidelista* Brigade 2506 on Guatemala soil...for the ill-fated Bay of Pigs.”⁶⁸

The government successfully suppressed the planned coup to take down Ydígoras one week after rebel forces assembled at Puerto Barrios military base. As a result, 21 percent of all rebel officers were court marshalled; however, many officers escaped. ⁶⁹ Lieutenants Luis Agosto Turcios Lima and Marco Antonio Yon Sosa, who had recently completed counterinsurgency training, escaped and in turn formed the guerrilla movements were.⁷⁰ It would be Yon Sosa in August of 1961 who would declare the MR-13⁷¹ guerrilla movement. Soon after the joining of Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes (FAR), the Guatemalan Labor (communist) Party of the military wing (PGT), and students from the Frente Revolucionarios 12 de abril with MR-13 became the first insurgents who were taken in by poor ladinos who formed ties with Kechi Indians.⁷² As mass mobilization gained strength throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the new

⁶⁶ CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, vol I, p122., Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 15.

⁶⁷ REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, p 190.

⁶⁸ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 15.

⁶⁹ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 15.

⁷⁰ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 15.

⁷¹ MR-13 stands for Movimiento Revolucionario 13 de noviembre

⁷² Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 16.

militarized state needed to introduce the United States' "new repressive technologies to nationalize violence," as they lacked the skills and strength to withstand resistance.⁷³ The state, largely dominated by the Guatemalan army, became increasingly violent toward "reformist politicians, the radicalized Catholic Church, Indigenous activist, and a revived labor and present movement [that] swelled the ranks of [the] left-wing insurgency that, by the end of the decade, was operating in eighteen of Guatemala's twenty-two departments."⁷⁴

In 1965, application of *Operacion Limpieza* (Operation Cleansing) by US security advisor John Logan provided training in, as Grandin notes, a "mastermind campaign against terrorists which would have access to all information from law enforcement agencies."⁷⁵ The ruthless Colonel Rafael Arriaga Bosque, who was put in charge of this operation, carried out widespread raids two months into the operation. Grandin notes that in February of 1966 "eight operations and a number of extrajudicial executions had taken place," and by early March Bosque conducted the "largest catch: over thirty leftists captured, interrogated, tortured, and executed." Grandin adds, "their bodies placed in sacks and dropped into the Pacific from the U.S.-supplied helicopters."⁷⁶ Campaigns like *Operacion Limpieza* were a clear indication of the Guatemalan government's willingness to use excessive measures in order to subdue those identified as "internal enemy."⁷⁷ Shortly after Bosque's campaign he carried out the first scorched-earth operation in March of 1966 as counterinsurgency escalated.⁷⁸ The General Policy

⁷³ Greg Grandin "Politics by Other Means" in Etelle Higonnet, *Quiet Genocide: Guatemala 1981-1983* (London: Transaction, 2009) p 5.

⁷⁴ Grandin, *Who is Rigoberta Menchú?*, p 4.

⁷⁵ Grandin "Politics by Other Means" in Etelle Higonnet, *Quiet Genocide*, p 6.

⁷⁶ Grandin "Politics by Other Means" in Etelle Higonnet, *Quiet Genocide*, p 6.

⁷⁷ REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, p 22.

⁷⁸ Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers*, p 105. REMHI also states that other squads took shape during this period, for example Consejo Anticomunista de Guatemala (CADEG, Anticommunist Council of Guatemala), and Nueva Organización Anitcomunista (NOA, New Anticommunist organization) which were both contracted by the military with no civilian participation. REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, p 111.

within the CEH documents notes that the counterinsurgent war manual identified two groups as the internal enemy: “1) Those who challenged the established order by means of illegal actions and represented ‘revolutionary communists,’” and “2) those who, while not being communists, still challenged the established order.”⁷⁹ Going against the unjust system of government was a necessary action Mayans needed to take as the systematic terror began ravaging their homes and murdering their families at an increasing rate. Peaceful protest was met with excessive military violence, therefore, Mayan men and women along with ladino supporters were forced to form armed revolts against the oppressive Guatemalan state. In compliance with the Doctrine of National Security, the army “defined the ‘annihilation of the internal enemy’ as a strategic objective of the counterinsurgency war.”⁸⁰ By the late 1960s the army had shifted from being a unit that operated under the state to contain civilians to an entity that assumed control of the entire state.⁸¹

1966 also brought on the emergence of death squads, an operational branch of intelligence, whose purpose was to infiltrate communities suspected of guerrilla involvement or support, and spread psychological terror through threats, torturers, and executions. *La Mano Blanca*⁸² (White Hand) was the first death squad to justify its brutal action with the aim of eradicating communism.⁸³ The CEH analysis of a declassified US document indicated that death squads were not autonomous structures of the army; more accurately they were “clandestine structures of Intelligence.”⁸⁴ Furthermore, CEH testimony explains that these cover up names

⁷⁹ CEH in Etelle Higonnet, *Quiet Genocide*, p 23.

⁸⁰ CEH in Etelle Higonnet, *Quiet Genocide*, p 23.

⁸¹ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 17.

⁸² La Mano Blanca’s symbol of a hand represented the five civilian commanders.

⁸³ REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, p111.

⁸⁴ CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, vol. 1 p 67.

were to protect government structures or state agents from being blamed for the massive human rights violations that played out. One ex-soldier testified:

Nunca se ha movido la hoja de un roble sin orden del Ejército. La Mano Blanca, Jaguar Justiciero, Nueva Organización Anticomunista, eran inventos del Ejército.

Tienen muchos nombres ... Todo esto es una construcción de la cúpula militar. Ellos dan diferentes nombres, como quien dice, son muchas personas civiles que están apoyando a los militares, pero es mentira. Son los mismos militares que se hacen pasar por otros grupos para hacer o cometer las fechorías que han hecho en Guatemala.

Mano Blanca, que es lo mismo que el escuadrón de la muerte. Son ejecutores del Ejército. Estos pertenecen a la Sección de Inteligencia G-2 y S-2, que es lo mismo.

The leaf of an oak has never been moved without an order from the Army. The Mano Blanca, Jaguar Justiciero, New Anti-Communist Organization, were inventions of the Army.⁸⁵

They have many names ... This is all a construction of the military dome. They give different names, as to say, there are many civilians who are supporting the military, but it is a lie. They are the same soldiers who pose as other groups to do or commit the misdeeds they have made in Guatemala.⁸⁶

Mano Blanca, which is the same as the death squad. They are executors of the Army. These belong to the G-2 and Intelligence Section, which is the same.⁸⁷

In 1970, Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio was appointed president by the Institute Democratic party (PID), a party dominated by the military, that provided the state with a “façade of democratic politics, marked by periodic elections.”⁸⁸ Military domination of the government

⁸⁵ CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, testimony

⁸⁶ Cited in CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, as “Testimonio de un ex refugiado, ex soldado y ex miembro de la G-2”, en Víctor Montejo, *Brevísima relación testimonial de la continua destrucción del Mayab’*, Guatemala, p. 46-47. 282

⁸⁷ Cited in CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, as “Testimonio de un ex refugiado, ex soldado y ex miembro de la G-2”, en Víctor Montejo, *Brevísima relación testimonial de la continua destrucción del Mayab’*, Guatemala, p. 49.

⁸⁸ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 18.

during this period allowed counterinsurgency operations to gain hegemonic status of state and civilian institutions, while bolstering their unrelenting presence throughout the western highlands.⁸⁹ By 1978, under President-General Romeo Lucas Garcia, as the organization of rural communities grew and guerrilla activity swelled, the military repression deepened, which in turn led to massive bloodshed. Two years prior, following a massive earthquake that killed 20,000 people and left one million homeless of which a majority were Mayan, Indigenous activists had already been exchanging their views on identity and rights of their people. This new thinking had created an awakening following the tremor that propelled Maya organizations and churches into examining the linkage between Indigenous population, poverty, and injustice. The Catholic Church began earnestly agitating for social justice for the marginalized poor and “pueblo Indígena.”⁹⁰ Ricardo Cajas Mejía, one of Konefal’s interviewees from Quetzaltenango, stated “we didn’t know at the time that the earthquake, a national tragedy, could bring the unification of so many Indígenas.”⁹¹ In essence this tragedy integrated a Maya movement that spread a heightened awareness of the issues threatening the Indigenous communities.

One of the first significant counterinsurgency attacks on Mayans took place in May 1978 in the community of Panzós, Alta Verapaz when a massive group of Q’eqchi’ campesinos presented documents to the mayor regarding land that had been taken from them and protested for their land to be returned. The state fired into a crowd of not just the unarmed Q’eqchi’ men but women and children that were among the festival goers. Konefal describes chaos as campesinos attempted to escape into the hills and rivers as they were being chased and gunned down by army helicopters.⁹² She goes on to state, “It was a massacre on a scale not yet seen in

⁸⁹ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 18.

⁹⁰ “Pueblo Indígena” are Indigenous communities across Guatemala. Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls*, p 68.

⁹¹ Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls*, p 68.

⁹² Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls*, p 83.

Guatemala's civil war," though this type of violence would soon become the new normal form of combat between the state and Mayans.⁹³ Indigenous resistance transformed into a more armed resistance as systemic repression began wiping out Mayans with an unwavering force. Lucas' regime murdered 35,000 civilians in the highlands and Guatemala City of which a majority were unarmed.⁹⁴ The military demand for new leadership led to his removal by means of a coup operated by young CEM officers and special forces-trained intelligence officers in March of 1982.⁹⁵

"I was called to put everything in order," General Rios Montt stated in 1982 when he took his place as head of a triumvirate military junta.⁹⁶ Montt's objective was to continue the counterinsurgency fight with a more methodical and effective approach than former president Lucas García. Shortly thereafter, Rios Montt would drop the junta and appoint himself president of Guatemala. His leadership guided the nation into the grimmest, most vicious period of the civil war. Rios Montt's aim, as he stated in his weekly televised addresses to the nation, was to carry out a campaign that would separate insurgents from rural civilians in order to "surgically excise evil from Guatemala, and 'dry up the human sea in which the guerrilla fish swim.'" This would be realized under the Pacification campaign (initially called Operation Ashes, later dubbed *la pacificación*).⁹⁷ The separation of rural civilians from the "enemy" would not play out as planned, as these communities were perceived to be guerrilla bases who supported rebel activity, and for that reason, the land was to be scorched and its inhabitants exterminated. An

⁹³ Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls*, p 83.

⁹⁴ CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, vol 1, p 285.

⁹⁵ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 44.

⁹⁶ Colonel Francisco Luis Gordillo who was part of the three-man junta recounts (along with General Horacio Egberto Maldonado Schaad) to Schirmer more Efraim Rios Montt's hubris Jennifer G. Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p21.

⁹⁷ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 45.

officer interviewed by Schirmer explained how, at the general staff headquarters, there were drawing boards to distinguish each rural village with a color. For example, the interviewee describes, “‘red zones’ were in enemy territory: no distinction was made between *guerrilleros* and their peasant supporters... The ‘pink zones’ were attacked but left standing, and those ‘white zones’... ‘safe villages’ to be left alone.”⁹⁸ The red zones were called *matazonas* (kill zones). The military strategy was to disappear entire communities while instilling terror among surrounding communities.

The senseless acts of violence during the peak of the war (1981-1983) delivered a blow to the Mayan population. By December of 1982 the heavy hand of Rios Montt’s “Pacification” of the highlands reconfigured the social, economic, and physical structure of Mayan existence.⁹⁹ As a result, the campaign left an estimated 250,000 to 1 million displaced.¹⁰⁰ In 1983, Rios Montt was removed from office by a coup that brought in Oscar Humberto Mejía Víctores (1983- 1986). Despite this change of leadership, President Mejia continued to carry out the “Pacification” campaign that further devastated rural Mayan communities.

Gender, Masculinity, and War

Gender-based violence has been used throughout history as a terror tactic of war, a method to intimidate and control a people. REMHI explains that acts of rape, torture, and bodily mutilation carried out by government forces were used as ways to “degrade women through their sexuality, to show the highest contempt for their dignity as a people, and to use the intimate aspects of womanhood to add measures of exemplary terror.”¹⁰¹ The public spectacles of mass

⁹⁸ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 48.

⁹⁹ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 64.

¹⁰⁰ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 64.

¹⁰¹ Memoria, Verdad y Esperanza: versión Popularizada Del Informe REMHI, Guatemala, Nunca más. Guatemala: Proyecto Interdiocesano de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica, Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala, 2003. p79.

rape “reinforced a spirit of *machista* complicity and extol power and authority as ‘masculine’ traits.”¹⁰² Rape and other modes of sexual violence were “weapons of war,” by which perpetrators, who epitomized dominant masculinity, exercised their power to maintain the subordination of Indigenous women, and in some cases Indigenous men. Cindy Forster highlights a testimony given by Estela (pseudonym), a Maya woman who remembered the violence that Indigenous women and men both faced.

El terror dejó traumada una población entera, también feminizó a todos los individuos denominados subversivos. Eran vistos como recipientes de todo mal como la Eva bíblica y sus hijas. Tal es el caso de los capturados, ya que por toda Latinoamérica los presos políticos inspiraban un profundo odio y hasta el temor en sus victimarios, que no tiene explicación sin recurrir a lo simbólico. Los prisioneros masculinos fueron tratados como mujeres y las mujeres tratadas como putas, ambos torturados en sus partes sexuales y sus identidades de género. Tanto los hombres como las mujeres sufrieron repetidas violaciones en las llamadas cárceles clandestinas¹⁰³

The terror left an entire population traumatized, and it also feminized all individuals labeled subversive. They were seen as recipients of all evil, like Eve and her daughters in the Bible. Such is the case, throughout all of Latin America, with those captured, because political prisoners inspired a deep hatred and even fear in their oppressors, who had no explanation [for their actions] without resorting to symbols. Male prisoners were treated like women and women were treated like whores, tortured both on their sexual organs and [with regard to their] gender identities. Men as well as women suffered repeated rapes in the so-called clandestine jails.

Sexual attacks on men were performed with the intent to emasculate and feminize, causing them to experience the devaluation, contempt, and humiliation that women suffered. Though state social structures maintained hierarchical and patriarchal control, and race and class separated Maya men from ladinos, Indigenous men held a higher rank than women

¹⁰² REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, p 77.

¹⁰³ Cindy Forster, "Me Di Cuenta De Que Sí Podemos". *Mujeres Indígenas Y Campesinas En La Revolución Guatemalteca, 1970-2000*, "Diálogos: Revista Electrónica De Historia 5, no. 1 (2005): Diálogos: Revista Electrónica De Historia, 2005, vol.5(1), p 8.

within their communities. Acts of rape or sexual torture were meant to eliminate Indigenous men's honor while positioning them alongside the ranks of women. These methods of violence, for men, were largely done for the purpose of extracting knowledge about insurgents' whereabouts or to pinpoint allies of rebel forces. Secret houses served as clandestine prisons operated by the army and used to interrogate and torture men and women for weeks or even months, which nearly always resulted in death.¹⁰⁴ REMHI gathered testimony that revealed protracted detentions within clandestine prisons, including torture and interrogations of the worst kind.¹⁰⁵ Orders to execute these acts of violence were handed down by the "highest authorities of the State" who put into effect "institutional policy" that would "ensur[e] impenetrable impunity."¹⁰⁶

An occurrence in the community of San Andres illustrates the callous nature of the military as they carried out an attack on innocent villagers for the purpose of discouraging support for guerrillas in the area. Following the sound of an explosion nearby, military men entered the village making accusations of guerrilla support. Without warrant or reluctance, they shot and killed a 60-year-old woman. Shortly thereafter, the campesinos made the following discovery:

... después descubrieron que en la vecindad habían matado ya a once personas, previamente torturadas, colocaron estacas en el piso donde sentaron a los hombres hasta que las mismas les salían por la boca, les cortaron la lengua, las partes nobles y parte de la cabeza a modo de huacal... - *C 361. Enero, 1982. San Andrés Itzapa, Chimaltenango*¹⁰⁷

...later they discovered eleven people in the vicinity who had been first tortured then murdered, they put stakes into the ground and sat the men on them until [the stakes] came out of their mouths, they cut off their tongues, their noble parts, and part of their

¹⁰⁴ REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again*, p 170.

¹⁰⁵ REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again*, p 170.

¹⁰⁶ Greg Grandin, Deborah Levenson-Estrada, and Elizabeth Oglesby, *The Guatemala Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) p 39. Institutional responsibility

¹⁰⁷ CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, vol 2, p 32.

heads cut open like a *huacal*...¹⁰⁸ -Case 361. January, 1982. *San Andrés Itzapa, Chimaltenango*

Grandin tells of a similar case in 1982 in the village of Sechaj, a department of Alta Verapaz, where a PAC member detained, assaulted, and tortured a PGT¹⁰⁹ activist, Francisco Xi, before handing him over to a soldier who “amputated his tongue and testicles and put them on public display,” wounds that led to his eventual death.¹¹⁰ This sent a clear message, “rendering [him] impotent of voice and virility,” a direct attack of his manhood and a threat to those who sided with insurgents.¹¹¹ It was military practice to make examples out of whole villages. There was no innocent or guilty, all poor Mayas were blameworthy.

Notably, Chimaltenango, north and south Quiché, and northern Huehuetenango experienced massive destruction as the military followed the trail of the EPG. These villages were tagged as “red zones” therefore whoever and whatever was in the path of the military upon arrival “were massacred by being tortured, raped, garroted, killed with machete, hacked or bashed to death, shot or burned alive.”¹¹²

Militarization of the countryside in 1981 became a new ploy to penetrate the social fabric of Mayan communities while suppressing insurgent alliances through forced membership in the *Patrulla de Autodefensa Civil* or PAC (Civil Defense Patrol). Konefal states PAC members were assigned to Mayan communities to be the eyes and ears of the military while also forced to “participat[e] in rural terror.”¹¹³ Alison Crosby and M. Brinton

¹⁰⁸ A *huacal* is a small container that made from a round woody pericarp fruits that is produced from a Tree (Bignoniáceas family). It is typically cut in half, pulp is extracted, and used as a vessel.

¹⁰⁹ PGT stands for Guatemalan Labor Party, which was a communist party.

¹¹⁰ Greg Grandin, “Introduction” in Etelle Higonnet, *Quiet Genocide* (United States: Transaction Publishers, 2011), p 10.

¹¹¹ Grandin, “Introduction” in Etelle Higonnet, *Quiet Genocide*, p 10.

¹¹² Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p55.

¹¹³ Konefal, *For Every Indio*, p 152.

Lykes further elaborate by explaining how PAC members were “expected to betray and inflict harm on their own community members,...many were tortured and beaten, and some were forced to witness the rapes of their wives and other women.”¹¹⁴ Many of the men expressed “losing their masculine and indigenous authority as community leaders,” “[evidence] of the intersection of victim and perpetrator indigenous men [experienced] during war.”¹¹⁵ Villages were ravaged and men were kidnapped and forced into serving the state as civil PAC or were “disappeared.” A prime example of this can be seen in Crosby and Lykes’s investigation into the lives of fifteen Mayan women who were taken to the military outpost of Sepur Zarco in northeastern Guatemala in 1982. An army patrol removed their husbands from their village over land disputes, leaving women alone and unprotected. Zarco’s military outpost was one of the “model villages” built for the military, and patrolmen used it as a place to relax while having all their needs taken care before returning to their duties. Twelve out of the fifteen women interviewed said they were ordered to “serve” at Sepur Zarco’s outpost.¹¹⁶ As reported by Konefal, “by the end of 1983 1.3 million Maya men took part in patrol [PAC] nearly 17 percent of Guatemala’s population,” and women were made into sexual and domestic slaves at these “special” outpost from 1982 to 1986.¹¹⁷

These attacks began strategically targeting women, elders, and children during raids. Kaibiles would often dress as guerrillas and infiltrate communities asking for food, and when it was delivered the communities would be accused of being guerrilla supporters. Dos Erres was a remote village in Petén that experienced the army’s blatant disregard for Mayan life in December

¹¹⁴ Alison Crosby and M. Brinton Lykes, *Beyond Repair?: Mayan Women’s Protagonism in the Aftermath of Genocidal Harm* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ Press, 2019), p 120.

¹¹⁵ Crosby and Lykes, *Beyond Repair?*, p 120.

¹¹⁶ Crosby and Lykes, *Beyond Repair?*, p 120.

¹¹⁷ Konefal, *For Every Indio*, p 152.

of 1982 when they had been accused by another community of being guerrilla sympathizers and the ones who fostered the rebels who had previously ambushed and killed 21 soldiers and stealing 19 of their rifles.¹¹⁸ Kaibiles invaded the Dos Erres village massacring all. The women and children were taken to the church while the men were locked away in the schools. The Kaibiles search for their rifles and guerrilla propaganda, but their search was unsuccessful. Nonetheless, their orders to “vaccinate”¹¹⁹ the Mayans were carried out. According to CEH, all children were killed with a sledgehammer to the head and tossed into a dry well, while babies were grabbed by their feet and swung against trees or walls before also being tossed in. Testimony given to the CEH stated that some specialists began to rape underage girls, resulting in the death of many.¹²⁰ Men, women, and elders were all pushed into the well one by one, and when no more could fit, many still alive screaming for help and trying to claw their way out, the patrol ravaged them with bullets. The killing, rape, and torture went on for days; one former Kaibil testified to the CEH that soldiers would go back and repeatedly rape the women even as they fought to resist their abuses.¹²¹ The CEH located in the court records the testimony of a direct witness that also expressed the ferocious nature of the Kaibiles detailing how they would cause pregnant women to have abortions by beating their stomachs incessantly, he states, “[y]ou could see how they beat them in the belly with weapons, or put them to bed and the soldiers jumped at them over and over again until the boy was bummed out.”¹²² The CEH concluded that

¹¹⁸ CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio* vol VI, p. 398.

¹¹⁹ Vaccinate – code used with in the military meaning “to kill”. CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, vol VI, p 400.

¹²⁰ “comenzaron algunos especialistas a violar a las niñas menores de edad” Testigo directo (ex kaibil) FAMDEGUA. 14 de noviembre de 1996. CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria of Silence*, p 401.

¹²¹ Testigo directo (ex kaibil) FAMDEGUA. 14 de noviembre de 1996. CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria of Silence*, p 401

¹²² “Se podía ver cómo las golpeaban en el vientre con las armas, o las acostaban y los soldados les brincaban encima una y otra vez hasta que el niño salía malogrado,” Testigo directo Ministerio Público. Expediente judicial

350 inhabitants were annihilated, resulting in the total extermination of the Dos Erres community.

Many Indigenous men, like PAC members, were traumatized from carrying out attacks on their own people. However, Konefal notes that their compliance was a form of self-defense. Schirmer further explains how PAC members feared that if they did not obey military orders, their families would be punished and their villages would be sacked. PACs were made up of thousands of civilians forcibly conscripted into platoons, rarely trained, and typically only equipped with machetes and clubs, as they patrolled villages, attacked guerrillas, and played the role of secret informers to the army.¹²³

Victor Montejo, a ladino schoolteacher in the remote pueblo of Tzalalá, gave a telling testimony of his experience with the collision between the army and a PAC. Both the army and the civil patrol mistakenly thought the other was a guerrilla force on attack. Montejo was subjected to extreme scrutiny by armed forces and taken back to the city barracks for further interrogation. Fearful of what his fate might be, he sat silently forced to listen to the howls of a man being tortured until sounds grew faint. In a moment of reflection, he could not grasp just how these soldiers could so callously carry out such orders. “Why was it...that the soldiers harbor so much hatred in their hearts and behave so drastically towards their own people?” Montejo questioned.¹²⁴ Montejo recalled a conversation he had with an old friend, an ex-soldier, and he explained to him how soldiers performed:

“[T]hey brainwash and indoctrinated them in such a way that [they] could torture [their] own parents, if they were ordered to,” he continues, “I spent three years in the barracks, and what did I learn? Fucking zero! The only

¹²³ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan Military Project*, p 83.

¹²⁴ Victor Montejo and Victor Perera, *Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village* (New York: Curbstone Press, 1987), p 36.

thing they taught is to kill and kill, again and again...you soon want to start making bullets fly, as if to say, it makes you feel real *macho* and no one can stand in your way.”¹²⁵

Impunity had always played a role in the power that government-trained counterinsurgents exerted during the intrusion and extermination of Mayan communities. Elizabeth Oglesby points out that in sociologist Matilde González Izás’ analysis of oral history collected in a province of El Quiché “shows how local authority figures such as military commissioners and civil-patrol commanders were granted arbitrary power over life and death,” she explains, “[p]art of the way this power was exercised was through the conquest of women’s bodies.”¹²⁶ The army and PAC commanders used rape as a way to disparage their womanhood by breaking them down physically and mentally, and to keep them from one day speaking about what they had done.¹²⁷

War and Violence against Women and Children

Research has shown that the sexual and psychological abuse of Maya women has been constant throughout Guatemala’s history. Cindy Forster explains in her work that men used rape as a way to “enforce domination and maintain submission.”¹²⁸ Between 1936 and 1956, the majority of rape claims went undocumented and unpunished, essentially permitting offenders to abuse again.¹²⁹ Male privilege, regardless of class or race, made it difficult for women to bring criminal charges against their abusers. Nonetheless, Mayan women found ways to resist the ethnic and national patriarchal structures imposed on them. According to

¹²⁵ Montejo and Perera, *Testimony*, p 85-86.

¹²⁶ Matilde González Izás, “Arbitrary Power and Sexual Violence,” trans. Elizabeth Oglesby In Grandin, Greg, Deborah Levenson-Estrada, and Elizabeth Oglesby, *The Guatemala Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011), p 405.

¹²⁷ Matilde González Izás, “Arbitrary Power and Sexual Violence,” p 405-406.

¹²⁸ Cindy Forster, “Violent and Violated Women: Justice and Gender in Rural Guatemala, 1936-1956,” *Journal of Women's History* 11, no. 3 (1999), p 58.

¹²⁹ Forster, “Violent and Violated Women,” p 58.

Forster, “rape b[ore] accurate witness to the limitations Guatemalan society placed upon women and the points at which it denied women the rights and personal dignity considered the birthright of males.”¹³⁰

From 1962-1996, rape was an extensive counterinsurgency policy and systematic practice in which 99 percent of the victims were women, an estimated 89 percent of whom were Mayan women.¹³¹ A majority of these rapes happened during the heightened conflict of the early 1980s. Found in Rigoberta Menchú’s testimony is a detailed description of the kidnapping, extensive torture, and murder of her mother, Juana Tum. Menchú uses her story as an example of the countless inhumane acts of violence that not just her mother endured but all Mayan women during this period. In 1979, Menchú’s family had dispersed into different villages because they were being hunted by the government, for being “communist” and a “bad influence” that needed to be “weed[ed] out.”¹³² In the end nearly all of Menchú’s family had been killed at the hands of the state. As agonizing and traumatic as it was for Menchú to experience so much loss, each tragedy regenerated in her the urgency to not just mobilize but to make the other Mayans aware of the importance of their participation in the fight against the state. Though Anthropologist David Stoll believed, through his analysis of Menchú’s account, that her mother’s rape and killing was dramatized and questioned Menchú’s authenticity, the reality was that her mother was among 89 percent of Mayan women who were raped and often killed. Rape constituted a systematic practice that reached an unprecedented level of barbarity during the 1980s. Her oral account was not just a narrative

¹³⁰ Forster, “Violent and Violated Women” p 59.

¹³¹ “C 361. Enero, 1982. San Andrés Itzapa, Chimaltenango” this case number assigned, date and location of event. REMHI, *Guatemala: Nunca Más!*, p 23-24.

¹³² Rigoberta Menchú Tum, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, Ed. Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, trans. Ann Wright (London: Verso, 2009), p 202.

of her lived experiences but one of Mayans collectively. Menchú, in her testimony, *I,*

Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala, opens by stating;

I'd like to stress that it's not only my life, it's also the testimony of my people... The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: my story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people.¹³³

In his book, *Who Is Rigoberta Menchú?*, Grandin notes the important political role Menchú's book played; "the political success of the book, its unexpectedly wild popularity in Europe and the US, actually strengthened the non-militarist wing of the insurgents, which was able to use the attention of the book focused on Guatemala to create a political space that allowed for negotiated end to the countries prolonged civil war."¹³⁴ Despite any omissions or exaggerations in Menchú's narrative, REMHI confirms that "torture sessions frequently were held in public, in front of relatives and neighbors, as a form of exemplary terror. Many torture victims were subsequently killed."¹³⁵ Scenes like what Menchú described was common throughout armed conflict, it was a part of the state's "methodology of horror."

The systemic assaults of the 1980s were unleashed on Mayan communities where deliberate attacks on Indigenous women became a common practice. The senseless acts of violence during the peak of the war (1981-1983) delivered a blow to the Mayan population. By December of 1982 the heavy hand of Rios Montt's military "Pacification" of the highlands reconfigured the social, economic, and physical organization of Mayan existence in the.¹³⁶ The campaign left an estimated 250,000 to 1 million displaced in the highlands.¹³⁷ In 1983, Rios

¹³³ Rigoberta Menchú Tum, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, p 01.

¹³⁴ Greg Grandin, *Who is Rigoberta Menchú?* p viii

¹³⁵ REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, p

¹³⁶ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 64.

¹³⁷ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 64.

Montt was removed from office by a coup that brought in Oscar Humberto Mejía Víctores (1983-1986) a Guatemalan Christian Democracy.

REMHI gathered accounts from witnesses of sexual assaults, “a form of violence against women that was employed in a variety of situations during abductions and detentions, massacres, military operations, and so on.”¹³⁸ REMHI concluded that one of every six massacre cases they investigated, “the rape of women was part of soldiers and civil patrols’ modus operandi...female bodies were just seen as just one more possession.”¹³⁹ Raping of Maya women represented a continued systematic denial of female rights. In many cases women were raped by multiple men and left crippled from how savagely they were handled, and their children made to bear witness. Alison Crosby, who interviewed 54 Maya women from different zones of Guatemala, reveals that each one was subjected to rape, some multiple times, in front of their children “or when they themselves were still children and their mothers were forced to watch.”¹⁴⁰ Forced separations left women to suffer psychological and physical traumas. The CEH collected evidence regarding ex-military men, who served in areas of heightened conflict during the war, explaining what they would do with the children whose lives they spared. The following testimony was of an ex-military man describing the scene after an encounter with guerrilla forces that left civilians dead and their children now orphaned.

“quedan niños vivos, ¿qué se hace con un niño de esos?, ¿qué haría usted? ¡Recogerlo! ... el Ejército sí los jaló”¹⁴¹

“A los dos niños los llevaron al pueblo y los regalaron a la gente ... cuando capturaban a niños y no los mataban de una vez, así hacían

¹³⁸ REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, p 76.

¹³⁹ REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, p76, 79.

¹⁴⁰ Crosby and Lykes, *Beyond Repair?*, p 40.

¹⁴¹ Ex military Witness confirmed that they would “transfer surviving children from their communities to others that did not belong to them, denying them the right to their own cultural life and their own language”. CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, vol III, p 75.

con ellos, regalarlos a la gente en los pueblos.”¹⁴² C 3559. Octubre, 1983. San Juan Cotzal, Quiche

“children are left alive, what do you do with one of those children? What would you do? Take him! ... The Army indeed took them all.”

“They took the two children to town and gave them to the people ... when they captured children and didn't kill them all at once, that's what they did with them, give them away to the people in the villages.” C 3559. October, 1983. San Juan Cotzal, Quiche

Death squads like *Kaibiles*, were especially brutal to women and children as their objective was to eliminate every source of life.¹⁴³ One instance in the village Barilla, Huehuetenago an eight-month pregnant woman was cut open, her unborn child removed and subsequently tossed around.¹⁴⁴ It was their way of destroying the seed that would cultivate more of, as the military saw it, the enemy. As Etelle Higonnet explains her analysis of the genocide portion of the Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) report in *Quiet Genocide*, “women were not simply [considered] biological reproducers, but transmitters of a cultural values to a new generation. If the women are affected, then the community as a whole is deeply shaken.”¹⁴⁵ Rachel Nolan’s research on adoption in Guatemala during the war shows that the Guatemalan state set out to “terminate the seed of future guerrilla fighters” through kidnapping and disappearing children.¹⁴⁶ The state took advantage of parents in rural communities in which mothers were lied to, tricked, intimidated, or threatened with violence so they would surrender their children to social workers. Violence against mothers was, in effect, violence against their children given that their survival was dependent on them. Nolan points out that a “majority of disappeared children were indigenous, which coincided with the first objective [of the state]. The

¹⁴² Case 3559. CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, vol III, p 75.

¹⁴³ REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, p74.

¹⁴⁴ REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, p 74.

¹⁴⁵ Etelle Higonnet, *Quiet Genocide* (United States: Transaction Publishers, 2011), p 54.

¹⁴⁶ Nolan, “Children for Export,” p 262.

result of removing Indigenous children from their families was to ‘create general terror’ and to ‘make a profit from the sale of children,’” and again to “stamp out a ‘bad seed’ through the appropriation of children.”¹⁴⁷ Mayan children were seen “as racially mutable through placement with families in Guatemala and abroad,” essentially “children, unlike adults, could be redeemed if they were replanted in the right soil with proper couples” who were non-Communist.¹⁴⁸

Operations were ordered by the government through the efforts of social workers to cleanse the Guatemalan race by killing or destroying the women who progenerate the future of Mayans and extract children who were young enough to mold. Campaigns like these were a more direct part of genocide—a way to permanently remove Indian culture.

Agency

“It wasn’t that it couldn’t be done, it was that we dared to do it.” - Stated by a Mayan woman in an interview documented in REMHI¹⁴⁹

In the face of incessant violence, Mayan women found ways of resisting the triple yoke of oppression imposed by the state. Class and race were intertwined with gender oppression that resulted in women not only being demoralized for being women, but for existing as poor Mayan women. Indigenous women were born into a culture and a nation deeply rooted in a patriarchal power system that bolstered male authority and preserved women’s subordinate position. As historian David Carey points out, Indigenous women “were neither autonomous nor powerless; they made history, but not under the circumstances of their choosing.”¹⁵⁰ The intensity in which the state had begun moving through rural Guatemala massacring villages, raping women, torturing, and disappearing hundreds of innocent people, women began realizing they could not

¹⁴⁷ Nolan, “Children for Export”, p 251, 20.

¹⁴⁸ Nolan, “Children for Export”, p 293.

¹⁴⁹ Quote found under “Women’s Activism.” It was stated in an interview by an unnamed Maya woman (interview 0151). REMHI, Guatemala: Never Again!, p 85.

¹⁵⁰ David Carey Jr, *Engendering Mayan History*, p16.

solely depend on the men within their communities to organize and fight, but they too needed to participate in their struggle. It was necessary for women to prevail over their pain and the deaths they had witnessed. As Menchú shares in her testimony, the sorrow she felt after losing her brother and parents was difficult to bear, but that grief was not only hers to carry, it was also the grief of all Mayans who had experienced loss or were subjected to violence. In a conversation with her little sister, she recalled her saying that the death of their parents (and all *compañeros*) was the reason for their fight, her sister asserts, “we must be like revolutionary women [and] a revolutionary isn’t born out of something good, he is born out of wretchedness and bitterness,” she continues, but “[their loss] gives us one more reason...to fight without measuring our suffering, or what we experience, or thinking about the monstrous things we must bear in life.”¹⁵¹

The state’s attempt to intimidate, drive away or wipe away a people had failed. By the 1980s, nearly a quarter of *combatientes* were women who left their children to go to the mountains (*a subirse a la montaña*) in order to train with the guerrillas. Menchú expresses the role women played in the war was extraordinary from fighting, secretly transposing documents, constructing barricades, or planting propaganda bombs and it was not for power but rather, as Menchú states, “so that something will be left for human beings. And this gives us the courage to be steadfast in the struggle, in spite of the danger.”¹⁵²

At the core of Indigenous cultural identity stood Mayan women as invaluable bearers of future generations as well as the pillars that sustained unity in the midst of conflict. REMHI’s documents corroborate the importance of women in the success of society stating, “women were the ones to repair broken social ties, preserving family cohesion even under the most adverse

¹⁵¹ Rigoberta Menchú Tum, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, Ed. Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, Trans Ann Wright (London: Verso, 2009), p 279.

¹⁵² Menchú Tum, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, p 274-275.

conditions. They were the ones who preserved the essential ingredients for reestablishing life among groups of survivors.”¹⁵³ For this reason, the extermination campaigns of women and children were a central component in the quest to destroy Indigenous identity. The state understood that without women, Mayans cease to exist, a strategy they imposed to obliterate a race. However, the state’s ploy to fracture Indigenous participation in the war was an effort rendered unsuccessful. As Menchú explains, “[b]efore everyone used to think that a leader had to be someone who knew how to read, write and prepare documents...saying ‘I am a leader, it’s my job to lead and yours to fight,’” but that was not the order of things within their organizations.¹⁵⁴ What Indigenous people knew was enough, because along the way they learned from others what was necessary to fight against the state. Menchú’s mother expressed to her that women “too had to participate, so that when the repression comes and with it a lot of suffering, it’s not only men who suffer. Women must join the struggle [but] in their own way.”¹⁵⁵ Forster reveals that women who worked in recruiting civilian women had to assure them it was in the best interest of their people to rise up against the tyranny of the state. Like in ex-combatant Adela’s testimony to Forster, in which she explained how guerrillas from the very beginning had an important task to perform, they all had to become organizers who from time to time would make their way to the coastal areas giving political talks in an attempt to convince Mayans the importance in unifying for the betterment of their families and all Mayans.¹⁵⁶ Another ex-combatant’s testimony, (pseudonym Patricia) was taken during the last phase of the war, which demonstrated how women had been persistent throughout the decades of kidnappings, massacres and torturing of their people. Patricia states:

¹⁵³ REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, p 80.

¹⁵⁴ Menchú Tum, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, p 262.

¹⁵⁵ Menchú Tum, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, p 230.

¹⁵⁶ Forster, “Me Di Cuenta”, p 25.

Bajábamos así en las fincas. ...Juntábamos a la gente. Algunos tenían miedo y los finqueros no lo gustaban. Vigilábamos también. Hay gente que sí apoyaba, y preguntaba. Primero ellos tenían miedo si uno es igual a los soldados. Nosotros aclaramos que no hacíamos daño a nadie. Hay señores que apoyaron. Iban a avisar así a donde estaban los soldados. Los finqueros tenían miedo, porque ellos no pagaban bien a los trabajadores, los discriminaron. También hablamos con los dueños. Ahora tiene que unirse, decíamos a los trabajadores, organizarse, porque si no se organice, no va a hacer nada. Los trabajadores tienen miedo porque si se organicen para formar su sindicato o para que respeten sus derechos, les corren. Yo digo que sólo con organizándose hay solución. Tiene que proponer propuestas y hacer manifestaciones para reclamar sus derechos. Si no hay unidad, no se puede lograr algo.

We used to go down to the farms. ... We brought people together. Some were afraid and the farmers did not like it. We kept watch too. There are people who did support, and asked. First they were afraid if one is equal to the soldiers. We clarified that we did not harm anyone. There are gentlemen who supported. They were going to tell where the soldiers were. The farmers were afraid, because they did not pay the workers well, they discriminated against them. We also spoke with the owners. Now is the time you all need to unite, we said to the workers, organize, because if you do not organize, nothing will change. The workers are afraid because if they organize to form their union or to respect their rights, they will be fired. I would say that there is solution through organizing. You have to propose proposals and make demonstrations to claim your rights. If there is no unity, nothing can be achieved.

Many Indigenous women sacrificed a great deal by taking up arms and fighting alongside their compañeros. Forster documents an interview with Yolanda Colóm an Indigenous woman who describes their position among men stating, “It was a tradition that women were almost always collaborators. A kind of rearguard for parents, siblings, boyfriends, husbands, children.”¹⁵⁷ In the mountain where the guerrillas trained gender did not matter. Forster points out how Elena’s testimony shows that women were treated as equals. Elena continues to elaborate about her position and respect given to women fighters:

Tenía mi grado como teniente. Yo tengo que dar orden a ellos, algunas 30 personas. A mí me emocionó mucho porque no todos tienen grado. A mí, sí, subí rápido, me alegré mucho. ¿Y por qué? [Los dirigentes] me dijeron que es por mi esfuerzo... [A su juicio como oficial], ...la capacidad que tenemos es todo igual con el hombre. No hay uno menos ni más, todo igual. Por ejemplo en la comida,

¹⁵⁷ Cindy Forster, “Me Di Cuenta”, p 26.

todos tuvimos igual. La única diferencia es que tiene más fuerza el hombre, pero cargamos igual, trabajamos igual, combatimos igual. Por la misma política los hombres tienen que tratarnos bien, cambiar su mentalidad.¹⁵⁸

I had the rank of lieutenant. I have to give orders to them, some 30 people. I was very moved because not everyone has a rank. To me, yes, I went up fast, I was very happy. And why? [The leaders] told me that it is because of my effort ... [In his opinion as an officer], ... the capacity we have is all the same with men. There is no one less or more, everything the same. For example with food, we all had the same. The only difference is that men are stronger, but we carry the same load, we work the same, we fight the same. By the same policy, men have to treat us well, change their mentality.

This interviewee expressed the idea that men valued women equally. Elena goes further as to describe men taking on roles that were traditionally reserved for women. She explains, “the men learned how to wash their clothes, how to cook, how to do everything. Sweep, mop, change diapers. Everything changed.”¹⁵⁹ Forester notes that even with all the hardships they encountered in the mountains, it was the one place poor women found their self-worth in brotherhood with men.¹⁶⁰

The civil war worsened the status of women in Guatemala to the point where they took matters into their own hands. They had reached a stage in which approval or permission by males was something of the past. Mayan women took hold of their agency by not only taking up arms in the mountains, but they investigated, demonstrated, and organized against the accumulating human rights violations. Groups, spearheaded by women, like Mutual Support Group¹⁶¹ (GAM), served to locate the thousands of disappeared. According to REMHI, it was the “Mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters of the disappeared...who dared to defy the [military’s]

¹⁵⁸ Forster, “Me Di Cuenta,” p 27.

¹⁵⁹ “...y los hombres aprendieron como lavar su ropa, como cocinar, como hacer todo. Barrer, trapear, cambiar pañales. Todo se cambió...” Forester, “Me Di Cuenta,” p 27.

¹⁶⁰ Forster, “Me Di Cuenta,” p 27.

¹⁶¹ Mutual Support Group or GAM was established in 1984 during President Óscar Humberto Mejía Víctores time in office.

raging violence. Never before had they been considered protagonists in the political life of the country, yet they displayed courage, resolve, and hope on countless occasions.”¹⁶² GAM became the nucleus of many other social movements that protested and demonstrated against the injustices of the state. Women took on a trailblazing role of activism contributing to the greater social awareness of their demands. In an interview obtained by REMHI the tenacity and strength of women in the face of military forces is illustrated as followed:

When we women began to call for our disappeared relatives, for life, for freedom from military dictatorship that totally dominated the country, then women's activism began to be more apparent. Even the army was surprised. It was unbelievable that these little women, these little girls, frail as they are, faced up to an army that has always been feared, do you understand me? That's when I think they began to realize that the participation of women is effective, that women are courageous. Because no one could believe that we women could face, harass, and chase away the army. At least that's how it was, it literally was like that: women chased the army away. It wasn't that it couldn't be done it was that we dared to do it.¹⁶³

The emergence of the Association of Families of the Disappeared and Detained of Guatemala (FAMDEGUA) in 1992 took their movement further by pushing for the investigations of massacres, accompaniment during exhumation, and demands for restitution.¹⁶⁴ It was the pressure from FAMDEGUA that allowed for the exhumation of the Dos Erres village that was massacred in December of 1982.¹⁶⁵ From 1994 to 1995 162 remains were rescued allowing these individuals' lives to be acknowledged and allowing families to properly bury their loved ones with dignity and honor.

These indigenous organizations emerged to take back their communities, repress military control, and to put pressure on the state to acknowledge the human rights violations committed.

¹⁶² REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, p 83.

¹⁶³ REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, p 85.

¹⁶⁴ REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, p 85.

¹⁶⁵ CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, vol IV, p 239.

The leadership roles that women took within these organizations in fighting and vocalizing their plight was instrumental in bringing international awareness to the gruesome conditions within Guatemala and their struggle against impunity. Leaders like Rigoberta Menchú, Helen Mack,¹⁶⁶ and Rosalina Tuyuc,¹⁶⁷ just to name a few, are attributed to using their voice on behalf of Mayans in search of social justice while remaining steadfast in their cause. Among these women were many more who throughout the civil war who demonstrated an enormous capacity to avoid becoming discouraged, to pull themselves together, and undertake new strategies for the survival and success of all Mayans.

Conclusion

“We are avengers of death. Our race will never be extinguished while there is light in the morning star.” -written in Popol Vuh (Council book) by anonymous K’iche scribes in the mid-1500s.¹⁶⁸

Peace talks had been proposed by the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) as early as 1986 but were denied by President Vinicio Cerezo. The UNRG had propositioned the removal and restructuring of security forces, however, Cerezo made clear there would be no dialog unless the URNG agreed to government amnesty.¹⁶⁹ Since no agreement was made, the

¹⁶⁶ Helen Mack became a human rights activist following the death of her sister, anthropologist Myrna Mack, for publishing a report of the orchestrated displacements of rural Mayans. Helen Mack created a foundation in her sisters which became Guatemala’s “leading voice...on issues of human rights, justice, and accountability.” Elizabeth Oglesby, Introduction to “What is Reconciliation?” in *The Guatemala Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) p 450.

¹⁶⁷ Rosalina Tuyuc was cofounder of Guatemala’s widow organization CONAVIGU (Comité Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala) in 1988. She was a chief spokesperson for the reemerging left for women in search of their family who had been kidnapped or disappeared. This organization became crucial in “addressing critical problems of subsistence for women whose husbands had been killed, soon after transforming into a large human rights organization denouncing all types of rights violations.” Konefal, *For Every Indio*, p168.

¹⁶⁸ Quote obtained in Grandin, *Who is Rigoberta Menchú?*, p 284. Popol Vuh, translated as the Council book but often referred to as the ‘K’iche’ Bible’, was written by anonyms K’iche scribes in mid-1500s and was translated to Spanish by a Spanish Dominican priest Francisco Ximénez in 1702. The writings contained in Popol Vuh are the oldest, most invaluable documentation of Mayan mythology and culture. Unknown K’iche’ authors, *Popol Vuh* in Greg Grandin, Deborah Levenson-Estrada, and Elizabeth Oglesby, *The Guatemala Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) p 13.

¹⁶⁹ REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, p 249.

government-sponsored policy of repression continued and intensified. A number of intimidation ploys against grassroots organizations were carried out in an attempt to deter the spread of international attention. Again in 1988, the URNG petitioned for a cessation of hostilities and yet once more their request for dialogue had been dismissed. It would take ten years before peace discussions would close, and armed confrontation between the Guatemalan Government and the left-wing guerrillas would end. In the early 1990s, the United Nations, with support from the international community, began mediating the long formal process of peace negotiation between the government and UNRG.¹⁷⁰ These negotiations ultimately led to the signing of the Peace Accords on December 29, 1996 under President Alvaro Arzú Irigoyen that would halt the violence that had been ongoing for 36 years. Yet, as Jennifer Schirmer described, the signing of the Accords would not be the final obstacle, but rather the enactment and fulfilment of the Peace Accords presented the most challenges.¹⁷¹ Schirmer states in concluding her analysis of the military, “[the military’s] repressive habits of mind, and hegemonic power within at State of their own crafting will continue to haunt Guatemala into the twenty-first century, managing a violence that is a democracy only in name.”¹⁷² Interviews of former officers corroborated her closing analysis of the military’s mindset explaining their concern regarding the adverse factors of integrating Mayans into Guatemala’s political life. For example a lieutenant colonel in the Defense Ministry spoke of the advancement of the Pan-Maya organization stating, “for the next five to six years will only be run by Mayan intellectuals and academics, but in the medium term of twenty to twenty-five years, if it succeeds in homogenizing the differences within the Mayan

¹⁷⁰ CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, vol I, p 226, 227. REMHI also notes the international communities, also referred to as the “Group of Friends,” referenced were key countries Spain, United States, Mexico, and Norway. REMHI, *Guatemala: Never Again!*, p 283.

¹⁷¹ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 274.

¹⁷² Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 274.

community and creates conditions for leadership, could become a political movement that forms the basis of a new political party in the twenty-first century.”¹⁷³ Preventing former guerrilla members infiltration of the state’s political realm continued to form parts of the military’s new arsenal of subjugation into the twenty-first century.¹⁷⁴

Guatemala continued to experience conflict well beyond the 1996 Accords agreement. The agreement put forth a national reconciliation law for the disarmament of the guerrillas, however, this law reflected the interest of military amnesty. Military amnesty would allow for those who committed crimes during the war to be absolved from any future persecution.¹⁷⁵ In addition, the concept of “reconciliation” was broadly addressed in this agreement through mentions of national unity, harmony, and solidarity, as the people still in power (elites of Guatemala) were not prepared for the extensive social, political, an institutional transformation necessary to achieve true reconciliation.¹⁷⁶ What reconciliation meant to those power brokers was starting over without seeking revenge, in essence discounting the 36 years of bloodshed, tortures, rapes, kidnappings, and femicide that were largely experienced by Mayans. Yet, the trauma endured during the civil war demanded a deeper acknowledgment of what had transpired as well as extensive work in rebuilding the social fabric that was dismantled within their Mayan communities. Moving forward was especially difficult for women, particularly rural Maya women, who became targeted victims of a war that was not only about race and class but gender as well. Women continued to experience violence and poverty as many were ostracized from their communities for being the victims of military rape. The truth-telling process that was incorporated into the Peace Accords was intended to unveil, through the thousands of testimonies

¹⁷³ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 273.

¹⁷⁴ Schirmer, *The Guatemalan military project*, p 273.

¹⁷⁵ Helen Mack, “What is Reconciliation?,” trans. Elizabeth Oglesby in *The Guatemala Reader* p 450.

¹⁷⁶ Mack, “What is Reconciliation?,” trans. Elizabeth Oglesby in *The Guatemala Reader*, p 450.

collected, the egregious human rights violations Mayans faced. Additionally, this process was created to help victims, turned protagonist, seek justice for all Mayans and heal from the dramatic consequences of their racialized gendered experiences.¹⁷⁷

The gross violations of human rights in genocidal proportions was concluded by the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC). Both TRC reports, the Recovery of Historical Memory Project (REMHI) *Guatemala: Never Again* (1998) and the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) *A Memory of Silence* (1999), authenticated the constructional and systematic nature of armed conflict. The CEH documented that 626 massacres were committed predominantly by the army, and reinforced by special groups like the Kaibiles.¹⁷⁸ Attacks on Mayan communities were responsible for the displacement of anywhere between 500,000 and 1.5 million people in Guatemala or beyond its borders.¹⁷⁹ In the end the Guatemalan Civil War left more than 200,000 people dead of which 83 percent were Mayan. A deliberate attack on a race of people who had, since the states independence, only searched for equality from the minority of elite ladino population.

The CEH states in it's opening paragraph states,

Guatemala is a country of contrasts and contradictions...[filled with pages that have been] written of shame and infamy, disgrace and terror, pain and grief, all as a product of the armed confrontation among brothers and sisters. For more than 34 years, Guatemalans lived under the shadow of fear, death and disappearance as daily threats in the lives of ordinary citizens.¹⁸⁰

Yet, Mayans unified and fought to reestablish a country that once reflected a thriving “multiethnic, pluricultural and multilingual nation, in a State which emerged from the triumph of

¹⁷⁷ Mack, “What is Reconciliation?,” trans. Elizabeth Oglesby in *The Guatemala Reader* p450.

¹⁷⁸ CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, vol III, p 252.

¹⁷⁹ Crosby and Lykes, *Beyond Repair*, p 4.

¹⁸⁰ Christian Tomuschat, Otilia Lux de Cotí, and Alfredo Baisells Tojo, Prolog in *Guatemala: Memory of Silence*, Prolog, p 11.

liberal forces in Central America,” that had made strides towards equal distribution of wealth and rights.¹⁸¹ However, the fighting has not ceased as Mayan women and men continue to push the barriers that still restrict their freedoms in a predominately elite patriarchal society.

¹⁸¹ Tomuschat, Lux de Cotí, and Baisells Tojo, Prolog in *Guatemala: Memory of Silence*, Prolog, p 11.

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