

Teaching the Human Story of the Guatemalan Genocide

La Violencia- Genocide in Guatemala

Background

Known by many Guatemalans as *La Violencia* (or “The Violence”), mass atrocities emerged in Guatemala during a decades-long civil war, which is one of the primary risk factors of genocide. Amidst broader geopolitical competition during the Cold War and in defense of the interests of the United Fruit Company (UFCo), the United States supported a coup that ousted Guatemala’s president in 1954. The newly installed government was extremely hostile to Guatemalans’ organized efforts to attain land reforms and social change and utilized repressive policies and even violence to combat its political opponents. As a result, numerous left-leaning insurgent groups formed with the hopes of revolution, eventually uniting under the *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca* (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity, URNG) in 1982. Within the context of this prolonged war, civilians caught in-between the struggles of the Guatemalan armed forces and the guerilla insurgents faced extreme atrocities. In particular, indigenous Mayan civilians were deliberately targeted by the Guatemalan state as “internal enemies,” who were suspected of supporting the political and economic agenda of insurgents. The armed forces eventually enacted a genocidal policy of extermination, which was implemented systematically against over 600 Mayan villages and claimed thousands of lives.

Statistics uncovered in the aftermath of the war provide stark evidence of the genocidal nature and patterning of government-led violence in Guatemala. It is estimated that over 200,000 civilians, mostly indigenous Mayan civilians, were killed during the war, and between 500,000 to 1.5 million Guatemalans were forcibly displaced. Further, 93 percent of human rights violations— including rapes, disappearances, and murders— were committed by government forces. Many of the victims had no substantial affiliation with insurgent groups; they were innocent people, whom the Guatemalan government falsely claimed posed a threat to their rule. Today, efforts at pursuing justice and accountability in Guatemala are ongoing, pursued with determination by numerous civil society and activist groups.



Perpetration of Atrocities

Characterized by brutal repression and secret intelligence activities which Guatemalan political elites irrationally justified as “national security,” state-sponsored violence unfolded in waves starting in the 1960s and persisted throughout numerous regime changes. The United States provided the Guatemalan government with overt and covert aid that enhanced the capacities of the armed forces to fight against leftist insurgents, who were viewed as a threat to American influence in the region. As part of an officially-sanctioned counterinsurgency doctrine, Guatemalan state forces were ordered and equipped to commit acts of atrocious violence against civilians who they perceived as potential supporters of insurgents, including conducting intimidations, assassinations, massacres, and the whole-scale destruction of villages. During this time, the verb *desaparecer* (“to disappear”) came to refer to a common practice by the state police to illegally detain and execute innocent people and leave their bodies in unmarked graves (or clandestine cemeteries), so that their families could not find them or know of their fate. Between 1978-1983, under the successive leadership of Generals Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia and Efraín Ríos Montt, the Guatemalan government drastically escalated its violence against civilians, including a genocide. Utilizing the armed forces, as well as civilians who were forced to serve in *Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil* (“Civil Defense Patrols” or PACs), they perpetrated scorched earth massacres that targeted indigenous Mayan communities, leaving villages in ruins and displacing massive numbers of traumatized civilians. The intent of these massacres was to spread terror and control the population through intimidation and fear, as well as to stamp out any support for both non-violent activism and the insurgency. Before many of these massacres, the Guatemalan armed forces expanded their presence within rural areas by organizing bases and engaged in selective violence against local leaders. Armed forces would typically surround villages and assemble men, and sometimes women, who were selected for murder. Following initial killings, civilians – including surviving men, women, and children – often fled, only to be pursued by armed forces, who burned homes, infrastructure, and farmland to deny resources to the population. Sometimes civilians were aided by guerillas in their flight, but others were further victimized by insurgents.

“The army came with their guns. The people they found, they killed. The crops they came upon, they destroyed. Our clothes, our dishes, our tools, they broke them or stole them. And all our animals, our cows, goats, chickens and turkeys, they killed them too. They destroyed and ate everything on the path of their persecutions against the people.” – Alejandro, Ixil massacre survivor, interviewed by Victoria Sanford, quoted in Buried Secrets


As part of a campaign called *Fusiles y Frijoles* (“Rifles and Beans”), the Guatemalan government compelled civilians who had fled to surrender by offering them much needed food rations in exchange for labor that benefitted the army. In this way, many Mayan civilians were sent to “model villages,” where they were subjected to constant surveillance and intimidation by the army and were forced to work to obtain vital resources. Civilians were often required to participate in civil patrols under duress and were thereby forced to assist the army in repressing and controlling their communities. Despite these extremely repressive conditions that lasted for many years, social activists – including religious groups and labor organizers – continued to bravely seek to help individuals and communities.

Pursuing Truth and Justice

A peace deal was ultimately negotiated between the URNG (representing the insurgents) and the government in 1996. After the war ended, the Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (Commission for Historical Clarification or CEH) was created to investigate the scope of atrocities in Guatemala and determine accountability for them. Operating from 1997-1999, the CEH collected evidence, including survivor testimonies, from which to draw its conclusions. The final report highlighted Guatemala's long history of structural economic inequality and poverty, especially affecting marginalized groups like indigenous populations, dating back to colonialism. It described how the Guatemalan state's repressive policies ultimately escalated to the use of systematic violence and concluded that state armed forces were primarily responsible for human rights violations.

Other civil society groups and activists have mobilized to seek justice and truth. For example, the Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (Mutual Support Group for Family Members of the Disappeared or GAM) began organizing demonstrations in 1984 and filing writs of habeas corpus, demanding to know the whereabouts of missing persons disappeared during the war. The Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Team began exhuming mass graves and compiling evidence around the country in 1992. In 1994, the Catholic Church of Guatemala established a project on the recovery of historical memory, which conducted interviews with some 2,000 survivors in predominantly rural areas and published a report of the human rights abuses it uncovered called "Guatemala Never Again." However, the assassination of the Bishop in charge of the commission days after the final report's release was a stark reminder of ongoing impunity and the risks of speaking the truth in Guatemala.

Human rights advocates have also worked toward the prosecution of international crimes committed in Guatemala. This has been an ongoing challenge within Guatemala's domestic courts, due to pervasive impunity and a lack of high-level political support. Yet, human rights lawyers have been able to bypass the Guatemalan government's lackluster efforts to pursue domestic criminal accountability by raising cases in regional and international courts. For example, in 2004, the Inter-American Court for Human Rights made the first ruling on the Guatemalan genocide. The case pertained to the Plan de Sanchez massacre, during which army forces killed at least 188 Achi-Maya people in 1982. The court confirmed that the Guatemalan government committed genocide as part of its counterinsurgency campaign under the Montt regime and ordered the government to pay nearly \$8 million in reparations and issue a formal apology. In another case, Spanish prosecutors, using evidence gathered by the Centre for Legal Action in Guatemala (CALDH) and invoking universal jurisdiction, filed a case against General Montt for the crime of genocide. In 2006, a Spanish court issued an arrest warrant for Montt; while Guatemala refused to extradite him, the case served to mobilize civil society groups and pressure the government to pursue domestic prosecutions.



The domestic trial of General Montt was a significant milestone in the pursuit of prosecutorial justice for the genocide in Guatemala. After Montt lost his congressional immunity, the Guatemalan Public Prosecutor filed his case in a special “high-risk” court created by Supreme Court Decree No.21-2009 to try crimes related to torture, crimes against humanity, and genocide. Montt stood trial in 2013 and was convicted for genocide against the Maya Ixil population, but the ruling was annulled ten days later by the Constitutional Court of Guatemala, citing “procedural errors.” The annulment appears to have been orchestrated by powerful elites who feared future prosecutions. After a series of delays, Montt died without being re-tried in 2018. More recently, in 2024, a trial began for former Guatemalan army head Manuel Benedicto Lucas García (brother of Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia) for his involvement in genocide and related crimes.

Despite enduring political obstacles, public support for the pursuit of justice remains high. One recent survey found that about 75 percent of Guatemalans support efforts to prosecute human rights violations committed during the war and 93 percent recognize that impunity remains a problem in the country. The work of dedicated individuals and communities continues to further the cause of justice and peacebuilding.

“I dream of the day when the relationship between the indigenous peoples and other peoples is strengthened; when they can combine their potentialities and their capabilities and contribute to make life on this planet less unequal, a better distribution of the scientific and cultural treasures accumulated by Humanity, flourishing in peace and justice.” – Rigoberta Menchu, Nobel Prize Speech 1992

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