

Teaching the Human Story of the Guatemalan Genocide

The Role of Land and Resources in Guatemala's Conflicts

| Time: 60 minutes | Audience: 10-12th grade |

Overview

To understand the significance of Guatemala's natural resources and the role it played in the civil war and genocide, it is beneficial to first examine the role of resources during colonialism and the early years of independence. We will then look at the case study of United Fruit Company and its role in Guatemala's violent history.

Learning Objectives

1. Students will understand the role of land and resources in Guatemala before the Civil War and Genocide.
2. Students will analyze the case study of United Fruit Company and the role of outside corporations and interests on Guatemala's history.
3. Students will compare primary source materials, including art and propaganda posters, and its place in Guatemalan history.

Content Standards

HSS-10.10, 1, 2, and 3	HSS-11.9
HSS-10.4, 1,2, and 3	HSS-11.9.1
HSS-10.9.3	HSS-PoAD.12.9.5
HSS-10.9.8	HSS-PoAD.12.9.8

History of Exploitation

Guatemala is in the heart of Central America and was once home to the Mayan civilization. The Mayan civilization is known for its advanced architecture and massive cities, as well its vital impacts on calendar, astronomy, and writing. Different Mayan city states battled for dominance, and agriculture played a determining role in the civilization's success. Hundreds of years later, Spain conquered the region of Guatemala and controlled it for nearly 300 years, from 1524 to 1821. Prior to colonization by Spain, approximately 90 percent of Guatemala was Mayan, but many Mayans died from diseases brought by the Spaniards. The Spaniards enslaved and marginalized Mayans, establishing systems like *encomienda* that allowed Spaniards to tax indigenous people and use them for labor. Some Mayans converted to Christianity and abandoned the Mayan Cosmovision belief system and practice to avoid these discriminatory practices. Throughout this almost 300-year period, the Spaniards plundered Guatemala and abused its rich natural resources, land, and people.



In 1821, Guatemala gained its independence, but discriminatory programs designed to assimilate and exploit Mayan communities continued, including the creation of reduccionies, settlements where Mayan people were forcibly relocated, assimilated into Spanish culture, and converted to Christianity. Over time, other countries, including the United States, became involved in trying to exploit Guatemala's resources.

What is the United Fruit Company?

The United Fruit Company (UFC) is a U.S.-owned international company that was established in 1899 and imported bananas from many parts of Central and South America. Before the Civil War (1960-1996), the United Fruit Company became deeply involved in Guatemala and eventually became the single largest landowner in the country, often taking land from Mayan communities. As a result, UFC had a lot of power in Guatemala and could pressure the government to adjust their policies to favor the company. Presidents Cabrera (1898-1920) and Ubico (1931-1944) were especially linked with the company and made many concessions to the company. As a result, much of the land controlled by United Fruit Company was taken from Mayan communities without any consequences.

When the "Guatemalan Revolution," a pro-democracy movement led by university students that eventually resulted in elections, began in 1944, United Fruit Company became concerned that democratic reform could result in loss of its ill-gotten land and power. When President Juan Jacobo Arbenz was democratically elected in 1951, he implemented a large land reform program – this included buying back and reallocating unused UFC land to Guatemalans who did not own land. This land reform effort, known as "Decree 900," was passed in 1952, much to the dismay of the UFC.

The UFC tried to rally support against Arbenz and eventually turned to the United States government. UFC argued that Guatemala was turning into a Communist state like other countries in the region. This was during the height of the Cold War and tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union were high, with both superpowers seeking footholds all over the globe.

President Eisenhower eventually authorized "Operation PBSuccess," in which the CIA backed a coup that overthrew President Arbenz. The Operation not only entailed training rebels and supplying them with weapons, but it also included a psychological campaign with leaflets, radio, and other methods to turn the Guatemalan people against the President. The Guatemalan government appealed to the United Nations to assist them, but the UN determined the coup to be an internal matter and declined to intervene. President Arbenz was overthrown and fled the country. and Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas was installed as a pro-business military dictator.

Instructions

Watch the TED-Ed lesson “The Dark History of Bananas” narrated by Dr. John Soluri

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=esvycD1O3cM>



See - Think - Wonder



Examine the image of “land in liberty with the agrarian reform” and discuss the following questions:

1. What do you see in the “land and liberty with the agrarian” reform image? Who is depicted?
What do you think the poster is trying to communicate?
2. What do you see in Diego Rivera’s “Gloriosa Victoria” mural? Without knowing exactly who the people are in the painting, what do you think is being depicted? What jumps out at you?
What do you think the artist is trying to communicate?
3. Compare and contrast these two images and the story they tell of Guatemala in 1952 and then in 1954.

Additional Content

National Geographic “Ancient Maya 101”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6eBJdca14>



Interpreting Gloriosa Victoria History Lesson

https://www2.umbc.edu/che/tahlessons/pdf/historylabs/Guatemalan_Coup_student:RS11.pdf

Educational materials developed through the Baltimore County History Labs Program, a partnership between Baltimore County Public Schools and the UMB Center for History Education.

RS11 Assessment Option 1

Interpreting Gloriosa Victoria

Directions: Using your acquired knowledge from the History Lab, answer the following questions about Diego Rivera's painting, *Gloriosa Victoria*. Reference the numbered boxes to help guide your answers, and be sure to read the context box below.

Context: The painting, *Gloriosa Victoria* (Glorious Victory), was created by the prominent Mexican artist, Diego Rivera, in 1954, shortly after overthrow of President Jacobo Arbenz. Rivera was an active member of the Communist party in Mexico.

1. United Fruit Company worker

2. U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles shaking the hand of Castillo Armas

3. U.S. ambassador to Guatemala, John Peurifoy, standing with Guatemalan military officers and handing them money

4. Guatemalan people protesting

5. Allen Dulles, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, is whispering in the ear of his brother, U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Allen Dulles is also holding onto a chair with a bundle of bananas.

6. The smiling face of President Dwight D. Eisenhower appears on a bomb being held by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles.

7. Mariano Russell Arellano, the Catholic Archbishop of Guatemala, is blessing the officials, while the Guatemalan people protest. At the request of the American government, an unnamed American archbishop sent warnings on the evils of Communism to his counterpart in Guatemala.

Glossary: The Role of Land and Resources in Guatemala's Conflicts

Agrarian Reform:

A set of laws or actions aimed at redistributing land, often from large landowners to landless people or farmers. In Guatemala, Decree 900 was a major reform effort.

Carlos Castillo Armas:

The military leader installed after the U.S.-backed coup in 1954. He reversed many of Arbenz's reforms and ruled as a dictator.

Cold War:

A period of tension between the U.S. and Soviet Union after World War II. Many U.S. interventions in Latin America, including Guatemala, were motivated by fears of communism.

Colonialism:

The control or governing influence of a nation over a dependent country, territory, or people. Spain colonized Guatemala from 1524 to 1821.

Cosmovision:

A Mayan worldview that includes spiritual beliefs, the relationship between humans and nature, and traditional practices. Many Mayans were forced to abandon this under Spanish rule.

Decree 900:

A 1952 Guatemalan law passed by President Arbenz to redistribute unused land owned by large companies like United Fruit Company to poor farmers.

Encomienda System:

A Spanish colonial practice where indigenous people were forced to work for colonists, who in return were supposed to offer protection and Christian teaching.

Exploitation:

Taking unfair advantage of people or resources, often for economic gain. Both colonial and corporate powers exploited Guatemala's land and people.

Guatemalan Revolution (1944):

A popular uprising led by students and workers that ended military dictatorship and led to a brief democratic period in Guatemala.

Indigenous Peoples (Mayan):

The original inhabitants of Guatemala, descended from the Mayan civilization, many of whom were marginalized and exploited over centuries.

Operation PBSuccess:

A 1954 CIA-led operation that overthrew President Arbenz of Guatemala, supporting a coup to protect U.S. interests during the Cold War.

Reducciones:

Settlements created by the Spanish to relocate and assimilate Mayan people, converting them to Christianity and Spanish culture.

United Fruit Company (UFC):

A U.S.-based corporation that controlled large areas of land in Guatemala and influenced its politics to protect its economic interests.

Ubico, Jorge:

President of Guatemala (1931–1944) who aligned closely with the United Fruit Company and supported policies that benefited the elite and foreign businesses.