

Teaching the Human Story of the Guatemalan Genocide

The Guatemalan Civil War and Genocide

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

Overview

Known by many Guatemalans as La Violencia (or “The Violence”), mass atrocities emerged in Guatemala during a decades-long civil war that began in 1960 and ended with the signing of Peace Accords in 1996.

Learning Objectives

1. Students will analyze the history of the Guatemalan Civil War and when instances of genocide occurred.
2. Students will explore the context of civil war as a primary risk factor of genocide.
3. Students will synthesize historical information with primary resource testimony from survivors of the Guatemalan Genocide.

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

Growing Tensions

The military dictatorship led by Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas was established by the United States government in 1954 to ensure a pro-business, anti-Communist government ruled Guatemala. Quickly, the newly installed government established a reputation for violent repression of Guatemalans who were attempting to advocate for land reforms and social change. The government also targeted political rivals to stifle any opposition. In 1957, Castillo Armas was assassinated by a left-leaning member of his Presidential Guard and the ensuing battle for power led to further instability and fear of an insurgency. A growing number of left-leaning insurgent groups formed and began battling the government, and the government created paramilitary groups and PACs (in English: Civil Defense Patrols) to fight the rebels.

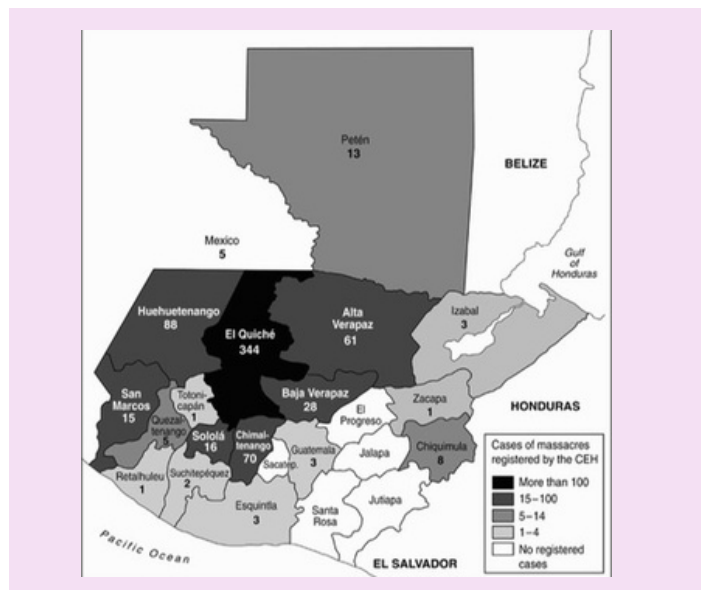


Civil War

The ensuing civil war began with a failed attempted coup in 1960 and was violent and repressive. Four major rebel groups emerged and grew in numbers, later joining under the umbrella forces URNG (in English: Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity). These parties were known for holding Marxist, Communist, and Socialist leanings and often hid in the mountains to evade government forces. 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. Indigenous Mayan civilians, who mostly lived in the mountains, were deliberately targeted by the Guatemalan state as “internal enemies,” who were suspected of supporting the political and economic agenda of insurgents. Framed as sympathizers, the armed forces eventually enacted a genocidal policy of extermination, which was implemented systematically against over 600 Mayan villages and claimed thousands of lives.

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. Massacres, torture, and rape were widespread, and the armed forces and their collaborators (including civilians who were forced to serve the PACs, mentioned above) employed “scorched earth tactics,” meaning they also deliberately and systematically destroyed villages, crops, and livestock. It was during this time that disappearing people became a common tactic employed by the state police. They would illegally detain, torture, and execute innocent people and leave their bodies in unmarked graves.

It is estimated that over 200,000 civilians, mostly indigenous Mayan civilians and 83% from indigenous groups in Guatemala, were killed during the war and genocide. Between 500,000 to 1.5 million Guatemalans were forcibly displaced. An estimated 40,000 were disappeared. Commissions (including the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) and the Recovery of Historical Memory Project (REMHI)) have found that upwards of 93% of human rights violations were committed by government forces and their collaborators. 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.



Negotiations for peace began in 1994, but the violence did not end until December 29, 1996, when the government and the URNG signed “The Accord for a Firm and Lasting Peace.” Today, efforts at pursuing justice and accountability in Guatemala are ongoing, pursued with determination by civil society and activist groups.

Compare and Contrast

Listen to three of the four selections of testimony listed below:

Listen to Rosalina Tuyuc Velasquez, survivor of the Guatemalan Genocide, describe how the persecution began, the missing people, and how fear changed the life of her community.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/18OIGz7jRX6DemVwqebkUob7QQvBbiLwl/view?usp=sharing>



<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PJHQB0jnnRiKPRqMAZcwSZFkJEQs2V1/view?usp=sharing>

Listen to Jesús Tecú Osorio, survivor of the Guatemalan Genocide, describe the first forms of persecution of the people in his village. When the Military Police (PM) detained them in the town chapel, he was able to see the bodies of the dead the next day.



https://drive.google.com/file/d/1h_xge3p0M2PJL0QghLpNKpC0gevP7Uof/view?usp=sharing

Listen to Diego Rivera Santiago, survivor of the Guatemalan Genocide, explain how when the bombings began in his village, he decided to leave his home and hide in the mountains, losing everything.



<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rGKXNZwultL2ou1RBjlZw9raHN0vvSZ/view?usp=sharing>

Listen to Juliana Tun Xalin, survivor of the Guatemalan Genocide, tell how the children were very afraid to go out into open areas when they lived hidden in the mountains.



¹ Rosalina Tuyuc Velasquez, Interview Code: 54363 Collection: Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala. Accessed online at IWitness.

² Jesús Tecú Osorio, Interview Code: 54359 Collection: Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala. Accessed online at IWitness.

³ Diego Rivera Santiago, Interview Code: 54367 Collection: Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala. Accessed online at IWitness.

⁴ Juliana Tun Xalin, Interview Code: 54329 Collection: Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala. Accessed online at IWitness

Review Questions

In small groups or as a class, answer the following questions:

1. Compare and contrast the testimonies of Rosalina, Jesús, Diego, and Juliana. What is similar about their experiences? What is unique to their experience?
2. What did you learn about the Guatemalan Civil War and the Guatemalan Genocide from the testimonies you watched? What is something you wish you knew (or a question you now have) after watching these testimonies?
3. How did each testimony make you feel? Was there one that stood out to you more than the others?

Glossary

Civil War

A prolonged conflict (1960–1996) between the Guatemalan government and various leftist rebel groups, resulting in mass violence and genocide.

Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas

A military dictator installed by the U.S. in 1954 who led a violent, repressive regime in Guatemala.

Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH)

A truth commission established to investigate human rights abuses during the war.

Coup

A sudden overthrow of a government, often by a small group or military force.

Disappeared

A term used for individuals who were secretly abducted or imprisoned and killed, with their bodies hidden.

Genocide

Actions taken with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.

Indigenous Mayans

The original inhabitants of Guatemala, many of whom were targeted during the genocide.

Insurgents

Rebel fighters or groups that opposed the government, often with Marxist or socialist ideologies.

La Violencia

A term meaning "The Violence," referring to the period of extreme civil unrest and atrocities during the Guatemalan Civil War.

PACs (Civil Defense Patrols)

Civilian groups forced by the government to fight guerrilla forces and sometimes assist in atrocities.

Paramilitary

Armed groups that are not part of the official military but often act in concert with it.

Peace Accords

The 1996 agreement that officially ended the Guatemalan Civil War between the government and URNG.

Psychological Warfare

Use of propaganda and psychological tactics to influence people and weaken morale.

REMHI (Recovery of Historical Memory Project)

A Catholic Church-led project collecting testimonies from survivors of the genocide.

Scorched Earth Tactics

A military strategy where everything useful to the enemy, including villages, crops, and livestock, is destroyed.

Testimony

A formal statement given by a survivor or witness about their experiences, often used to document historical truth.

URNG (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity)

An umbrella group of leftist rebel organizations formed during the civil war.