

Teaching the Human Story of the Guatemalan Genocide

A Visit to Comalapa Memorial

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

Overview

For much of history, when episodes of mass violence occurred, they were left to be forgotten. No formal processes or efforts were made to help survivors, hold perpetrators accountable, or document the atrocities. This shifted significantly after the Holocaust, and since then, many communities that have experienced violence will seek **transitional justice**. Today, the term transitional justice refers to a wide range of tools used to help people reconcile with violent or repressive pasts. While courts often play a key role in these efforts, holding those responsible for genocide and other human rights abuses accountable, there are other forms of transitional justice. These may include truth commissions, community-based dialogues, and memorialization. In Guatemala, the Comalapa Memorial is an example of memorialization.

Learning Objectives

1. Students will understand the concept of transitional justice.
2. Students will analyze the Comalapa Memorial as a form of transitional justice in Guatemala.
3. Students will explore primary source imagery and testimony about Comalapa.

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

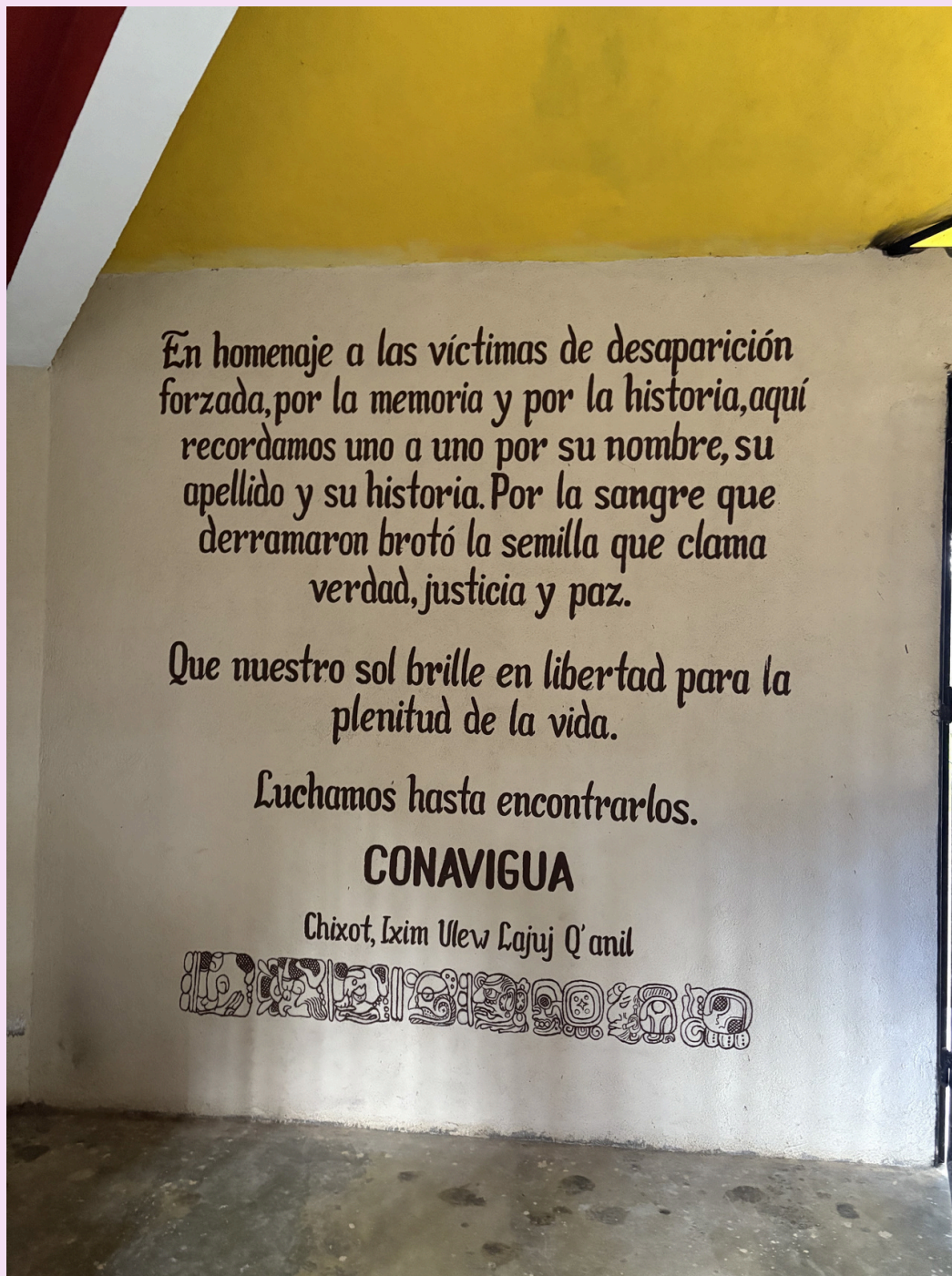
What is Memorialization?

Memorialization initiatives, such as the construction of memorials, museums, and commemorative events, play a crucial role in preserving the memory of past atrocities and ensuring that future generations remember the lessons learned. Memorials serve to construct a collective memory of the genocidal event, provide a grieving space for loved ones and survivors, and often support education for prevention of future atrocities.

Transitional justice can be driven by national or international leadership, which would make it a top-down initiative. It can also be a bottom-up process driven by community members and survivor groups. Comalapa Memorial is an example of bottom-up transitional justice, as the creation of the memorial was undertaken entirely by civil society groups, most prominently CONAVIGUA (in English: National Coordinator of Widows of Guatemala) and FAFG (Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala).



A Visit to Comalapa Memorial



Paisajes de la Memoria. Memorial de las víctimas de desaparición forzada.
Landscapes of Memory. Memorial to the victims of forced disappearance.

About Comalapa Memorial

The *Paisajes de la Memoria*: Memorial de las victimas de desaparición forzada (in English: Landscapes of Memory: Memorial to the victims of forced disappearance), often referred to as the Comalapa Memorial, is located on the outskirts of a town called San Juan Comalapa. San Juan Comalapa is located in the mountains in the Chameltenango Department of Guatemala, about 2 hours' drive west of the capital city of Guatemala City.

After the Peace Accords, families across Guatemala began to organize and search for their missing loved ones. One organization, CONAGIVUA, founded and led by Rosalina Tuyuc Velasquez, worked with FAFG to purchase the land that once contained a military base in the 1980s. During the civil war and genocide, this land was the site of numerous atrocities perpetrated by the military against Guatemalan civilians, including kidnapping, torture, and murder. After purchasing the land, FAFG and CONAVIGUA undertook multiple exhumations of mass graves found on and near the former base. In total, 220 skeletons were recovered in a 2-kilometer area, and efforts to identify the remains are ongoing. So far, of the 220 skeletons, 88 remains have been identified, at least half of whom came from the San Juan Comalapa region.

Once the exhumations were complete, the community began the process of turning the site into a memorial space. Today, when you arrive at Comalapa Memorial, you pass through gates into a lightly forested and well-maintained area. You drive up a small hill and from the parking area, you can see a brightly painted structure up the hill along with stacked tombs and a long, winding low wall, and beautiful hills peeking through the trees. The community chose to leave several open trenches untouched to show the process of the exhumations.



Sites of Mass Grave at Comalapa



Coffins and Tombstones at Comalapa

A brightly-colored structure stands at the center of the memorial space, decorated with detailed murals that describe Mayan Cosmovision and the experiences of the Mayan people during the Guatemalan Civil War and Genocide. Inside the structure, visitors see the names of the victims from San Juan Comalapa inscribed on the walls, and a small altar with flowers, a candle, and a glass of water are displayed for loved ones. In between the structure and the wall are small tombs, some with names on them, others with case numbers assigned to remains that have not yet been identified. Families are given a choice whether to take the remains of identified loved ones to another site for burial, or to keep them entombed at Comalapa Memorial. Along the back wall are the photos of disappeared people, and a long, winding perimeter wall hosts the names of all 6,041 disappeared people from the region.

The rest of the memorial grounds were deliberately designed to offer a space for families to gather in peace and comfort. Playgrounds have been installed just below the memorial site, and barbecue stations were constructed so that families can come for a day and enjoy a picnic. Multiple sites and altars are also set aside for religious prayers, commemorative practices, and Mayan Cosmovision ceremonies.



Perimeter Wall with Pictures of Disappeared at Comalapa

Civil Society and Comalapa

Comalapa Memorial is run entirely by civil society organizations. The state did not play a role in its creation, and it does not assist with its maintenance. Still, the Comalapa Memorial has become a central location for Guatemalan families, public schools, university students, the people of the Comalapa region, along with tourists, diplomats, and representatives from international organizations.

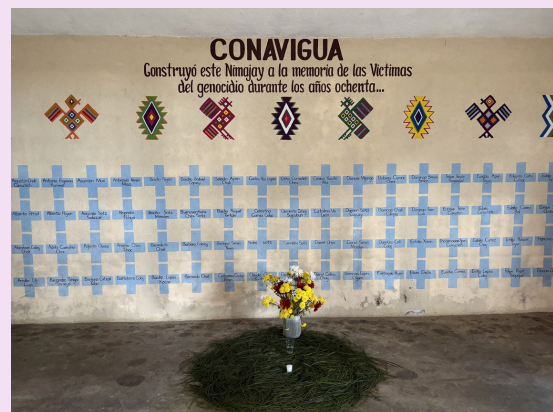
Comalapa Video

Watch a video of Comalapa as it was constructed. In this video, you will see the excavation of remains efforts, and creation of a memorial space, tombs, the wall of names, and other components of the space:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRqyVG0WSYE>



Mural of Guatemalan Civil War
and Genocide at Comalapa



Inside the Memorial Structure
at Comalapa

The English translation for the wall of explanation is: In tribute to the victims of forced disappearance, for memory and history, here we remember one by one by their name, their surname and their history. Through the blood they shed, the seed that cries out for truth, justice, and peace sprouted. May our sun shine in freedom for the fullness of life. We fight until we find them. CONAVIGUA.

Watch and Listen

Rosalina Tyuc Velasquez, a Guatemalan Genocide Survivor and founder of CONAVIGUA, reflects on the power of genocide survivors to spread messages of peace.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1pJtrl1VxYkEvPG3fQZmvyOAvDo8Til4r/view?usp=sharing>



Turn and Talk

Discuss the questions below in small groups or as a class:

1. What does it mean to remember?
2. What is the purpose of a memorial site like Comalapa? Who is it for? What does it achieve?
3. In your opinion, does the Comalapa Memorial contribute to transitional justice? If yes, how?
4. What memorial sites do you know of in your community?
5. Does your family or community have certain ways that they remember events in history? If you have examples, please share them.

Additional Sources

[Learn more about the murals at Comalapa](#)

[Learn more about CONAVIGUA](#)

[Learn more about FAFG](#)

Glossary: Comalapa Memorial and Transitional Justice

Altars

Structures or spaces used for religious or spiritual practices, often serving as places to offer prayers or pay tribute to the deceased.

Bottom-Up Transitional Justice

Justice initiatives led by communities or civil society groups, rather than governments. Comalapa Memorial was created entirely by grassroots organizations.

CONAVIGUA

National Coordinator of Widows of Guatemala, a civil society group led by genocide survivor Rosalina Tuyuc Velasquez, dedicated to justice for victims and support for survivors.

Civil Society

Organizations and individuals outside of government who work together to advocate for shared interests, such as human rights or memorialization.

Collective Memory

The shared pool of information and ideas about the past that a group of people (like a nation or community) remembers and uses to shape its identity.

Comalapa Memorial

A memorial space created by civil society to honor victims of forced disappearance during the Guatemalan Civil War. Built on a former military base, it includes murals, tombs, and walls of names.

FAFG

The Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala. This group conducts scientific exhumations of mass graves to help identify victims and support justice efforts.

Forced Disappearance

When individuals are secretly abducted or imprisoned by a state or political organization, followed by a refusal to acknowledge their fate or whereabouts.

Mayan Cosmovision

The worldview and spiritual beliefs of the Maya peoples, often reflected in ceremonies and artistic representations at memorial sites like Comalapa.

Memorialization

The act of creating structures, ceremonies, or practices that preserve the memory of historical events, especially tragedies or injustices.

Murals

Large paintings on walls that convey stories, history, and symbolism. At Comalapa Memorial, murals depict Mayan culture and the suffering of Indigenous peoples during the genocide.

Playgrounds

Recreational spaces created at the memorial to support the community and make the site welcoming for families and children.

San Juan Comalapa

A town in Guatemala where the Comalapa Memorial is located. It was significantly affected by violence during the civil war.

Tombs

Structures that contain the remains of the deceased. At Comalapa Memorial, some tombs are marked with names, while others carry case numbers of unidentified remains.

Top-Down Transitional Justice

Justice efforts led by the government or international bodies, such as courts or truth commissions.

Transitional Justice

A set of approaches used by countries or communities to address past human rights abuses and promote healing, accountability, and reconciliation.

Truth Commissions

Official groups established to investigate and document past injustices and promote healing. These commissions often gather testimony from survivors.