Tierra Rota (Broken Land)

Cultural Identity and Indigenous Resistance during the Guatemalan Civil War

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Archive of the Fourth Russell Tribunal on the Rights of the Indians in the Americas. Rutgers University Microfiche Collection.


*North American Congress on Latin America* archive of Latin America, Guatemala. Rutgers University Microfilm Collection.


Chapter One

Introduction

The Guatemalan Civil War began with a coup against reformist President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman in June 1954. It was a four-decade long struggle between a U.S.-supported military dictatorship and the occasionally armed activists who wanted an end to the resulting military government. In the mountainous countryside, guerrilla organizations sought protection and support from the Mayan people living in the Quiché and Ixil regions, prompting the Guatemalan army to attack Mayan villages as a way to weaken the guerrillas’ power. However, not all of Guatemala’s diverse indigenous people participated in the conflict, sparking an international discussion in the media and among academics regarding their true intentions and experiences, a debate which continues today.

Although the war, one of the longest in the hemisphere, officially ended in 1996, this thesis focuses on an eleven year period between 1972 (the year when several of the most prominent guerrilla organizations began recruiting indigenous people) and August 1983, when the presidency of José Efraín Ríos Montt ended. Because of their specific policies targeting the indigenous population, the presidencies of Ríos Montt and his predecessor, Fernando Romeo Lucas García, have been most important in my work. During the years of these two presidencies especially, the Guatemalan military crossed the line of fighting indigenous people as part of any kind of conventional counterinsurgency strategy and began attacking them as “indios,” using their culture against them and destroying land, food, and clothing which were so closely associated with traditional Mayan identity. I do not seek to prove that indigenous people resisted state oppression, as this has already been established through testimonies and is well documented. The exact number of indigenous collaborators in resistance movements is unclear,
but some estimates place the total at approximately 250,000.\(^1\) What I hope to demonstrate is that despite statements from Guatemalan government representatives, right-leaning North American scholars, and even certain indigenous allies such as the Catholic Church (who often take credit for indigenous involvement in political movements), the Mayan people who participated in resistance efforts did so in order to represent their own interests, not simply to follow the lead of one group or another. They were persecuted as *indígenas*, and fought back as *indígenas*.

The Commission for Historical Clarification (or CEH, the Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico), Guatemala’s independent Truth Commission, with Christian Tomuschat as its head coordinator, received independent funding and U.N. supervision to carry out its investigation from 1997 to 1999.\(^2\) The CEH compiled testimonies on human rights abuses and acts of violence that occurred during Guatemala’s forty year Civil War. According to this report, there were an estimated 200,000 total deaths and disappearances, 83% of whom were people of Mayan descent and 93% of which is attributable to the Guatemalan military and its associated counterinsurgent groups.\(^3\) During the years of heightened violence (1978-1985), “military operations were concentrated in Quiché, Huehuetenango, Chimaltenango, Alta and Baja Verapaz, the south coast and the capital.”\(^4\) Beyond actual death tolls, the war had a massive affect on population change due to the estimated 500,000 to 1.5 million refugees and internally displaced people.\(^5\)

There were four prominent guerrilla organizations operating in Guatemala at this time – the EGP (Guerrilla Army of the Poor), the ORPA (Revolutionary Organization of People in

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4. CEH, *Guatemala, Memory of Silence*, 22.
5. CEH, *Guatemala, Memory of Silence*, 30.
Arms), the FAR (Rebel Armed Forces) and the PGT (Guatemalan Workers’ Party) – along with a non-militant indigenous-based organization called the CUC (Committee for Peasant Unity) which eventually joined forces with the EGP.\(^6\) However, the CUC, ORPA, and EGP developed the strongest ties to indigenous communities and therefore are the organizations on which I will focus. Chapter two will explain the origins of each of these groups. The guerrillas of ORPA claimed to want to bring health care, education, and employment to the Mayans based on the principle of rule by the people.\(^7\) The EGP, while also appealing to the indigenous population in the early 1970’s, maintained a more Marxist vision.\(^8\) These goals were not necessarily shared by most of the indigenous people, although the guerrillas were more valued allies than the army had been because the guerrillas spoke about ending discriminatory violence against indigenous communities, while the army only perpetuated it. Due to the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua in 1979, the success of the revolutionary Left would have seemed like a strong possibility, as many of the testimonies in chapter four reflect. The overthrow of Somoza may have inspired the Guatemalan revolutionaries to believe that their aims were possible, while it certainly would have sparked the government’s fears.

Even before guerrillas made contact in Mayan highland villages, around 1972 and 1973, indigenous people had begun to organize themselves. As early as 1965, a branch of Acción Católica, the political religious organization for the indigenous population, started the Liga Campesina “which would have as its general goal the defense of Indian rights.”\(^9\) In 1971, indigenous people formed the Asociación Indígena Pro Cultura Maya-Quiché to promote and

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\(^7\) “Organización del Pueblo en Armas: Siembra, Hablando con el Campesino,” in Rutgers University Microfiche collection, *Archive of the Fourth Russell Tribunal on the Rights of the Indians in the Americas*. All translations of documents written in Spanish are my own unless otherwise noted.


\(^9\) Arias, in Smith, 234.
preserve indigenous culture. Therefore, nonviolent resistance movements were every bit as significant in measuring indigenous reactions as armed resistance, especially because these organizations of peaceful resistance were more likely to have indigenous founders and leadership than the guerrillas.

There was wide variation among indigenous groups in regard to their level of political participation. For example, “while strongly Indian in self-identification and famous in Guatemala for confrontational political tactics and a history of serious rebellions against the state… Totonicapán played little active role in the most recent revolutionary struggle.” In Momostenango, where several social categories of indigenous people lived together in the same town, ideas about the guerrillas were, not surprisingly, not unified. While “acculturated Indians at the time [1960s] expressed no sympathy whatsoever for the guerrillas, as might be expected in view of their unflagging support for politically conservative parties and strong military regimes,” the other “rural Indians of Momostenango for the most part were ignorant about the guerrillas.” However, “when the Indians finally did join the guerrilla organizations in significant numbers in the late 1970s, they did so largely because of the severe repression directed against them by the army and its paramilitary forces.” While other Quiché Mayans were bearing the brunt of military violence, the Quiché of Quetzaltenango, who had experienced generations of financial success, “turned inward and attended to their trades,” rather than becoming involved in the conflict on either side. That being said, the approximately 250,000 Mayans who passively or

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10 Arias, in Smith, 239.
13 Carmack, Rebels of Highland Guatemala, 369.
actively aided or joined the guerrillas were mainly from the Quiché and Sololá departments, of Quiché, Ixil, Kaqchikel, Q’eqchi’ and Tz’utujil origin.

Ten years ago, the New York Times published an article on its front page by Larry Rohter entitled “Tarnished Laureate,” which would have been little more than a book review except that the book in question pointed out every flaw in the life story of an indigenous woman from war-torn Guatemala who had won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. The book, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* by anthropologist David Stoll, along with Rohter’s corresponding article, were the catalysts for an international debate between journalists, anthropologists, literary critics, historians, students and activists, over the legitimacy of Stoll’s claims and the legitimacy of Menchú’s fame. One of Stoll’s main arguments in *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* is that “the army committed most of the killing, [so] activists and scholars have been tempted to heap all the blame on it, demurely averting their gaze from what the other side might have been doing.”15 He makes a legitimate point, as the Commission for Historical Clarification found that the guerrillas were responsible for 3 percent of violence-related deaths during the Civil War.16 He is, so far, the only anthropologist who has looked into the flaws of the resistance movement in such depth, but the evidence he used to support his arguments leaves much to be desired.

In his book, Stoll argued that the Maya people who participated in resistance against the government were not doing so of their own volition, but rather that they were “pressured into cooperating with the guerrillas, after being swept up in a process of provocation, retaliation, and polarization that forces them to choose sides,” suggesting that the resistance movement did not

reflect the will of any significant sector of the people Menchú claimed to have represented.\textsuperscript{17} As evidence for this perspective, a Quiché “informant” tells him, “Our people don’t know what an embassy is… don’t know what a demonstration is… don’t lend themselves to that kind of thing.”\textsuperscript{18} This statement is one which most likely framed his entire argument. In contrast, Rigoberta Menchú wrote, “We began to understand that the root of all our problems was… that the rich exploited the poor,” expressing that her fellow community organizers did have an understanding of social injustice and used it to mobilize themselves.\textsuperscript{19} As significant as Stoll’s informant’s experience was, Stoll misuses this evidence to portray the majority of Mayan people as politically ignorant, while dismissing Rigoberta Menchú’s experience as a fabrication because it does not match what he has heard.

Stoll’s goal was to expose the “use to which Rigoberta’s story was put, to prop up at the international level a guerrilla movement that had lost its credibility at home.”\textsuperscript{20} Stoll means to say that a few indigenous people’s experiences of resistance against the government put into jeopardy the peace agreement between the Guatemalan government and the insurgents by fanning the flames of the conflict. In an attempt to defend himself against his critics, he explained in an interview in the Guatemalan newspaper \textit{Prensa Libre}, “I wanted to challenge preconceived and romantic ideas about indigenous peoples and guerrilla warfare.”\textsuperscript{21} Unfortunately, in the process, he gave credibility to the misconception that indigenous people are supposedly politically ignorant by repeating the military’s statements that the Mayans did not

\textsuperscript{17} Stoll, \textit{Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans}, 63.
\textsuperscript{18} Stoll, \textit{Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans}, 118.
\textsuperscript{20} Stoll, \textit{Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans}, 278.
really want to collaborate with the insurgents but were being manipulated into doing so. This propaganda tactic of the military will be discussed in the next chapter.

Despite the temporal proximity of the release dates of Stoll’s book and the Truth Commission reports – December 1998 and February 1999, respectively -- he neglected to utilize this wealth of information in the form of broadly collected testimonies and statistics about the causes and effects of the war. Greg Grandin, who has also studied Guatemala’s Mayan population, feels that Stoll’s argument falls flat as a result of Stoll’s lack of attention to the CEH’s findings:

In his book, Stoll discredits Menchú in order to advance an argument that he could not sustain through a more comprehensive empirical investigation. Stoll contends that before the E.G.P. -- the rebel organization that Menchú and her father belonged to -- began organizing in the highlands, life for the majority of Mayan Indians was in fact improving, that the rebels were responsible for provoking the military and that the only reason the military responded with such brutality was to defeat the rebels -- not, as other analysts have maintained, to uphold an unjust and racist social system. On every one of these points, the truth commission’s chilling report contradicts Stoll’s contentions.22

The last chapter of this thesis will use indigenous statements from the Truth Commission’s report in order to determine what this neutral body found to be the reasons for indigenous participation in resistance.

Scholars who study Guatemala still try to find the motivating factors behind indigenous resistance, and rightly so, as the issue is too complex for any one answer. David Stoll’s opinion is that most of the indigenous people collaborated out of manipulation and fear. In Richard Wilson’s work with the Q’eqchi’ Mayans, he has found that “During the early years of guerrilla organizing [with the Mayans], the main reason for joining the ranks were related to the land… the guerrillas promised that after the revolution there would be enough land for all.”23 However, “relationship to the land was not a wholly determining factor, since both landless hacienda
labourers and independent smallholders rebelled alike,” so he then determined that “repression itself was the most significant factor of all that led to Q’eqchi’s joining the guerrillas.” Both of these are true, but neither explanation gives the complete story. Because land, religion, family, and death are all interrelated in most Guatemalan indigenous cultures, destruction of land and destruction of life are inherently connected to each other and to the Mayan religious traditions. In chapter four, testimonies collected from many different villages and sources will highlight that there is no one particular reason for joining or forming a resistance movement because all decisions are tied to the identities of the people who make them.

Any analysis of indigenous activism needs to discuss the complexities of indigeneity in Guatemala. Because this thesis makes statements about Guatemala’s indigenous population, I must explain what I mean by “indigenous.” Anthropologist Brent Metz, who has worked with Ch’ortí’ Maya on the eastern border, asserts: “Almost all definitions, institutionally and popularly, apply ‘indigenous’ generally to the original inhabitants (and descendents) of a territory whose unique cultures are so threatened by more technologically powerful, colonizing societies.” By this definition, indigenous people are, first of all, those whose ancestors originated from a country, who have a culture specific to those origins, and who were eventually conquered by a foreign power. But Metz understands the difficulty in applying a rigid definition to indigeneity in Guatemala. He wonders, “What counts as culturally distinctive and suffering from a legacy of colonialism? Must one continue to practice the exact traditions of one’s precontact ancestors to be considered culturally unique and culturally dominated?” For the area of Metz’s expertise, few indigenous people in the Ch’ortí’ region still speak their native language, and all over Guatemala there are Mayan descendents who no longer wear traditional

25 Metz, Ch’ortí’-Maya Survival in Eastern Guatemala, 5.
26 Metz, Ch’ortí’-Maya Survival in Eastern Guatemala, 6.
clothing or live in indigenous communities, yet it would be unfair for scholars to deny them their heritage. For example, in the Western half of the country, “San Pedranos have shed most of their Mayan dress, speech, livelihood, and customs, yet they still retain a strong, at times militant, sense of local identity.” On the other hand, if one can be called indigenous based on heritage alone, then a far greater percentage of Guatemala’s population may be considered indigenous than those who identify as such. So, how can I avoid the haziness of these distinctions in my writing?

Diane Nelson, in her study of the indigenous community of Joyabaj, found that “when [she] asked the indigenous mayor (alcalde indígena) of Joyabaj if there were ‘Maya’ in the area he looked puzzled, then asked if [she] were looking for a museum,” because there was no real pan-Maya identification until the 1990’s. This expresses the further division between Guatemalans who identify as indigenous based on their specific communities, compared with the only very recent identification with the all-encompassing term “Maya,” which has been used for purposes of solidarity among indigenous rights groups. In the following chapters, I will interchangeably use the words “indigenous,” “Mayan” (meaning descended from the ancient Maya, rather than the aforementioned “Maya” which assumes unity with other indigenous ethnicities), and indígena, which is one of the politically acceptable terms used in Guatemala. For the sake of clarity, when I use these words throughout my thesis, they will refer to a specific type of indigenous people who are not only genetically indigenous, but also identify themselves this way and still live in traditional communities and maintain traditional customs, not because I

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feel that one has to exhibit these characteristics in order to be a “real” indígena, but because these are the cultural elements which they were forced to defend throughout the war.

Unfortunately, the world only receives the stories of those who have the resources to make themselves heard. Therefore, there are relatively few primary sources available purely from the indigenous perspective. With the exception of one source that was written, translated and published by an indigenous organization, the evidence which I have found for this study has come from testimonies and personal interviews with indígenas who either speak Spanish (rather than one of the Mayan languages) or had access to translators, along with pamphlets and unofficial reports executed by the largely ladino church officials and guerrilla leaders. So, admittedly, my understanding of the indigenous experience of the Guatemalan Civil War may not do justice to the memories of those who were most oppressed, and those who need to be remembered the most. Enough information is available, however, to piece together the story of those Maya who had participated in this conflict.

I am not trying to make a generalized statement about how all indigenous Guatemalans must have felt about the guerrillas based on my relative handful of interviews and reports. As stated in this introduction, specific indigenous populations, such as Quetzaltenango, Totonicapán and Momostenango, had a significant portion of the indigenous population who either implicitly sympathized with or explicitly supported the military throughout the civil war. In fact, that different Mayan groups and even different Mayan villages within the same ethnic group (or different people within the same village) made different decisions about how to respond to political violence reinforces the argument that indigenous people made choices during the war based on their individual beliefs and interests. How could the indigenous experiences of the civil war vary so greatly if they were simply coerced into participating? However, the
aforementioned arguments by David Stoll and proceeding statements from Guatemalan military representatives in the next chapter do generalize about the indigenous population as a whole and ignore the thousands of Mayans who chose to work with the Left in varying degrees. The remainder of this thesis will try to challenge the popular opinion about indigenous people which portrays them as politically ignorant.
Chapter Two

Storms Brewing: Foundations of the Left in the Highlands

Indigenous organizing for cultural and labor rights occurred quite frequently long before the guerrillas entered their communities. In Alta Verapaz, the *campesino* José Angel Icó organized 122 Q’eqchi’ Maya as early as 1920 into an indigenous labor organization, and wrote a petition to the Manuel Estrada Cabrera government asking for recognition of the “indisputable rights of the Indian… which are: liberty, equality, and security of persons, honor, and property.”

This same petition also requested labor laws limiting the amount of control an employer has over his workers and improving working conditions. Because indigenous people were clearly making demands for their rights early in the century, even prior to the “ten years of spring” between 1944 and 1954, the participants in resistance movements of the 1970’s and 1980’s did have a precedent to look back to when making their own decisions.

On the other hand, when explicitly left-leaning guerrilla groups first emerged, they were middle class, urban, and did not focus their efforts on incorporating the peasantry. The first revolutionary groups to develop were the PGT (the Guatemalan Communist Party) and the FAR, or the Rebel Armed Forces. The FAR came into being when “Opposition to a CIA operation on Guatemalan soil together with anger at the extent of official corruption provoked a coup attempt on 13 November 1960 by troops stationed at Fort Matamoros, Guatemala City, and the garrison of Zacapa.”

The instigators of the coup included Luis Turcios Lima and Marco Antonio Yon Sosa, who “subsequently returned from exile [in April 1961] to deploy their professional skills in a guerrilla campaign that soon acquired a political character very distinct from that of the abortive *golpe* in its radicalism and opposition to not just the government of the day but to the

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entire counter-revolutionary system,” which became the MR-13.\(^3\) In December 1962, the consolidation of MR-13 and the PGT became the FAR.\(^4\) Throughout that decade, the FAR separated into its various factions and the PGT eventually broke off on its own, until only the PGT and FAR remained.\(^5\) Due to these guerrillas’ lack of involvement in the rural area, this first wave of revolutionary activity “began and ended with a focus on urban operations.”\(^6\)

In the interim period between the first and second waves of guerrillas, cooperatives developed in the rural areas and became the main outlet for political and social organization. Throughout the 1960’s, “government legislation, the Catholic Church, USAID, and the Christian Democrats had all contributed to the creation of 145 cooperatives with a total membership of 27,000 – most of whom were indigenous campesinos… in the Ixcán region.”\(^7\) Although at first the state allowed cooperatives to grow and operate, by 1975 the military and its associated death squads considered these cooperatives to be fronts for communist organizing.\(^8\) Cooperatives performed such functions as incorporating innovations in the agricultural process and helping communities obtain better supplies and equipment.\(^9\) Also in the interim period, the labor organization CNUS (Consejo Nacional de Unidad Sindical) started in March 1976 “on the basis of… some of the most important independent unions (teachers, municipal and state employees, transport workers, journalists and the students’ AEU).”\(^10\) While the 1970’s fostered the growth of community and labor organizations, the spike in repression at the very end of the 1970’s and early 1980’s contrasted starkly with that relative freedom, contributing to the frustrations with the government that would lead people to resist.

\(^3\) Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus*, 442.
\(^7\) May, *Terror in the Countryside*, 95.
\(^9\) May, *Terror in the Countryside*, 100.
While not originally a part of indigenous culture, Catholicism was the predominant religion in Mayan communities by the time the guerrillas (and the army) arrived. Mayan community organizing from within the Catholic Church started, in fact, with the anti-Communist efforts of Acción Católica. Just after the overthrow of President Jacobo Arbenz Guzman in 1954, the Catholic Church’s “job was to defend the population from communism.”  

11 A conference called “Vatican II” from 1962 to 1965 and the Episcopal Conference of Medellín in 1968 were the turning points when the Catholic Church decided to focus their work on liberating the underprivileged. 12 Over time, Acción Católica evolved into a source of liberation for the Maya people. The Catholic faith provided a context in which the Mayans could make the decision to mobilize because Catholic teachings themselves could easily be applied to the poverty and discrimination that the highland Maya were experiencing. Father Celso, a ladino catechist of the Catholic Church in Guatemala, explains, “We began to speak of a liberating gospel … of a Jesus who said in his gospel, ‘Blessed are the poor, blessed are those who suffer.’” 13 This type of interpretation of the Bible, called liberation theology, was one of the most powerful outlets for indigenous resistance. Father Celso felt that “They [the military] are persecuting the Church because it has helped these people. It has raised their consciousness and promoted their interests. We’ve moved them to think, to analyze, to become aware and to organize themselves.” 14 His statement implies that the indigenous people did not know how to do these things before the Church came to them. Although I have not found any testimonies which reflect a feeling of being patronized by the Church, his choice of words, like David

14 Sigel and Yates, When the Mountains Tremble, Skylight Pictures, 1986.
Stoll’s, gave more fuel to the fire in the army’s assumption that the Mayans were vulnerable to manipulation.

The second wave of revolutionary activity brought three new organizations, the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP), the Committee for Peasant Unity (CUC) and the Revolutionary Organization of People in Arms (ORPA). The EGP started as “a dissident group of FAR survivors led by Mario Payeras (Comandante Benedicto) which re-entered Guatemala in 1972 to initiate a campaign in the Ixcán region of El Quiché…that succeeded in applying the strategy of prolonged popular war in the heartland of Indian society.”¹⁵ Clearly influenced by Marxism in its combat style and ideals, “the EGP organized into three distinct fronts: the Ho Chi Minh Front (centered in El Quiché), the Ernesto Che Guevara Front (centered in Huehuetenango), and the Augusto César Sandino Front (also in El Quiché).”¹⁶ Because most of their base was in the Quiché region, which has such a highly concentrated indigenous population, indigenous involvement was obviously going to be a major factor in the success or failure of the EGP.

The CUC developed in the late 1970’s when “a groundswell of discontent had been accumulating in the countryside since at least the [1976] earthquake. Only three weeks before the massacre [at Panzós] it took organized shape in the Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC), formally established on May Day 1978,” and categorizing itself as a pan-industry labor union which sought to incorporate all indigenous ethnicities as well as ladinos.¹⁷ The CUC formed from a base of followers from the Association for Maya-Quiché Culture (Asociación pro Cultura Maya-Quiché) which was founded in 1971, and the Association of Initiators of Quiché Idea which emerged in 1973, along with religious organizations like Catholic Action (Acción

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¹⁶ Rachel May, *Terror in the Countryside*, 126.
The CUC helped lead a plantation strike in February and March of 1980 with 2,000 workers (both ladino and indigenous) demanding a wage increase from Q1.14 to Q5.00 per day, which drew in 50,000 additional workers. The strikers stopped work at the height of the harvest season and occupied plantation buildings, forcing “the government [to make] a partial concession by increasing the rural wage to Q3.20 whilst providing no means of enforcement and refusing to improve transport.”

This kind of activity, however, put the CUC on the government’s radar, and “after 1982, because of the large death toll within the rank and file, CUC went underground.”

ORPA came into being when “another splinter group of the FAR which was also critical of the racist and paternalistic tendencies of the guerrilla movement of the 1960s began operating clandestinely in the area around Lake Atitlán and on the southern coastal plain in 1971. This organization called itself FAR/Western Regional (Regional de Occidente) in the early 1970s,” but changed its name to ORPA when it officially announced its existence in 1979. ORPA was “smaller but more resourceful in military terms, it shared the EGP’s strong indigenista orientation and established particularly strong roots in the western Indian departments.” They characterized themselves as “influenced by Marxism, but… officially stood for ‘an end to racism’ and ‘the development of indigenous culture.’” ORPA represented these interests through its membership, which was 90% indigenous, but “its national leadership was still predominantly ladino.” By 1982, these four guerrilla organizations were “active in all but eight of the country’s departments, numbered perhaps 6,000 fighters, possessed a strong social base in

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18 May, _Terror in the Countryside_, 131.
19 Dunkerley, _Power in the Isthmus_, 488.
20 May, _Terror in the Countryside_, 141.
21 May, _Terror in the Countryside_, 126.
22 Dunkerley, _Power in the Isthmus_, 483.
23 May, _Terror in the Countryside_, 128.
24 May, _Terror in the Countryside_, 130.
the highlands, and had launched a strategic offensive that even the army high command admitted posed an exceptionally serious threat to the existing political order.”

These four groups joined together to officially form the URNG (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity) in 1982 with the goal of forcefully overturning the national government.

On May 29, 1978, between sixty and 100 Kekchí peasants were killed in the Panzós region of Alta Verapaz. A few days after the event, a Latin American Bureau report stated that “hundreds of Indian peasants from the villages of Cahaboncito and Chichipate had marched on the town of Panzós to protest to the mayor at moves by large landowners to oust them from land which they had worked and lived on for the past 40 to 100 years.” The government’s official version was that “the military garrison of the aforementioned town was actually attacked by a crowd of peasants who had been mobilized by subversive elements. For some time, the latter have been inciting them to occupy land illegally in this region.” This official statement, however, differs greatly from the indigenous eyewitness testimonies. “We were only going to hand a letter to the mayor when they began to shoot,” said a witness to the publication Impacto on May 31, 1978. Violence between the local elite and the peasants of Panzós had been occurring with increasing frequency for several years before the massacre took place. After a wave of several violent encounters between private security forces hired by the landowners and the campesinos who wished to claim their land, “the peasants were called by the army to a meeting at Panzós to resolve the issue only to be shot down upon their arrival in the town square by troops already in firing positions.” This event in 1978 marked the beginning of the worst

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25 Dunkerley, Power in the Isthmus, 483.
26 May, Terror in the Countryside, 129.
29 IWGIA, Guatemala 1978, 17.
30 IWGIA, Guatemala 1978, 27.
31 Dunkerley, Power in the Isthmus, 477.
period of violence during the war, which contributed to the support of the masses for the guerrillas during this time.

The Spanish Embassy fire in Guatemala City on January 31, 1980 was another such devastating blow to the indigenous population. Officially, what is known about the events are that “four hours after a group of peasants had taken over the Spanish Embassy and after the police intervened, 39 persons burned to death in one of the smaller rooms of that embassy.”

Wanting to protest the violence that they had been experiencing in their villages over the previous few years in a way that would draw massive attention to their cause, an organization of Quiché peasants from Chajul, Nebaj, Cotzal, and Uspantán started planning on January 24, 1980 “for the peaceful takeover of an Embassy, which would include participation by leaders of the various sectors that were supporting the peasants.” On the day of the fire, January 31, twenty-one indigenous people and student and labor supporters entered the Spanish Embassy at 11:00 am. Several hours later, the Guatemalan military entered the area of the Spanish Embassy and refused to leave the technically foreign territory despite being asked to do so several times by the Ambassador. From that point, there are two different versions of the events. The organization of Village Communities of Chajul, Nebaj, Cotzal and San Miguel Uspantán, which represents the protesters at the embassy, stated in their report that “at 15.00 hours the special task forces… threw the first [chemical] incendiary bomb and started shooting at the occupants (the corpses showed bullet holes).” That night, the government released a press report that the embassy had been occupied by terrorists who threw a Molotov cocktail which started the fire. There were

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only two survivors – the Spanish Ambassador Máximo Cajal y López and one of the campesinos, Gregorio Yuja. Yuja was murdered the night after the event, and Cajal left the country soon after. David Stoll has argued that Cajal corroborates the military’s version of events, hoping to prove that the peasant activists had destructive intentions. Although Cajal actually repeatedly says in his interview with Stoll, “I insist that I don’t know who started the fire. I didn’t see anyone behind me [start the fire], nor anyone in front of the door,” even if one of the protesters had started the fire from within the building, the police and the army did nothing to help evacuate the people from inside or to put the fire out, and in fact “impeded the departure of all or some of those who found themselves trapped. The incident somewhat increased awareness of the repressive climate in Guatemala, as “four Northamerican [sic] members of congress (Senate) sent a petition to President Carter, requesting him to call back the US ambassador from Guatemala as long as human rights were not respected,” and also “evoked the justified indignation of the people, which was proved by the massive participation in the funeral of the murdered.”

Other examples of typical military violence in the countryside are necessary to understand the tension of everyday life that would drive someone to leave home or work with the guerrillas. In an interview with the Guatemalan Church in Exile (I.G.E.), an indigenous woman from Acatenango recalled, “A friend named Gilbertino, they [the military] took him from his house, they cut his ears, they cut off his nose, while he was alive, and they cut out his tongue and later they castrated him alive… and afterward they cut off his fingers.” While her story is just

36 Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, 82.
38 “Edición Especial: Refugiados (1982),” *Church Materials from Guatemala II, 1913-2001*, Princeton University Microfilm Collection. All translations of documents written in Spanish are my own unless otherwise noted.
one woman’s account, the same type of violent execution and torture is described in countless other testimonies from various regions. The Truth Commission report has listed over a hundred pages of arbitrary executions on the part of the military in El Quiché from 1980 until 1983 alone. In Uspantán on August 19, 1979, for example, the army executed Petrocinio Menchú Tum, one of Rigoberta Menchú’s brothers who was accused of being a guerrilla, two other family members, and 30 unidentified victims.\(^{39}\) This is exactly the kind of repression against which the indigenous people were fighting when they joined resistance movements.

Communities of Popular Resistance, or CPRs, were another form of resistance that grew out of the violence of the early 1980’s. As massacres of indigenous communities became more widespread, “beginning in late 1982, some of those displaced in the wilderness began to organize new communities, which, by 1984, had become the CPRs of the Ixcán and the Ixil (or Sierra), and later the Petén. The inaccessibility of those areas, and the guerrilla presence, enabled them to sustain a community situation despite severe persecution.”\(^{40}\) The CPRs, while it would be incorrect to categorize them simply as guerrilla outposts, did initially have a positive relationship with the guerrillas, as “during the early years, the guerrillas supported the CPR, with courses on organizing health care, education, and self-defense.”\(^{41}\) Chapter Four will deal more thoroughly with the CPR of the Sierra in particular, as the women from that region still have strong feelings about the guerrillas and how the women came to be involved with them.

The Civil Self-defense Patrols, or PACs, were yet another tool which the army used to fight the revolutionary Left in the countryside. As part of the Civil Affairs sector of the military under President Efraín Ríos Montt, “[forced recruitment of 30,000 peasants for Civil Patrols] began in April 1982, particularly in the eight ‘zones of conflict’ where guerrilla activity was

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\(^{39}\) CEH, Guatemala, Memoria del Silencio: Anexo II, 812.

\(^{40}\) Recovery of Historical Memory Project of the Archdiocese of Guatemala, Guatemala, Never Again!, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 65.

\(^{41}\) REMHI, Guatemala, Never Again!, 66.
most prevalent.”\textsuperscript{42} The PACs had 1.3 million men in their ranks by 1985, which ultimately accounts for the inability of the guerrillas to compete with the army’s sheer numbers.\textsuperscript{43} The massive participation in the PACs was not voluntary, however, as they were forced to participate in 24-hour patrol shifts and were subjected to “‘forced voluntary’ complicity in killing villagers in their own or neighboring village, either based on a list prepared by orejas (spies) of the army or by surprise, when coming upon refugees in the mountains on patrol with the army – or be killed themselves.”\textsuperscript{44} Therefore, the choice to live clandestinely in CPRs or remain at home and be coerced into a PAC, for many men, was a matter of life or death for themselves and their families.

Hence, the socio-political atmosphere in the second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century was marked by agitation on all sides of the political spectrum. In the following chapters, I will analyze how the jump happened from the formation of the new guerrillas to the incorporation of thousands of indigenous people into those mobilization efforts. It seems that with the announcement of CUC and ORPA’s existence, heightened violence in the countryside soon followed, which, as I will demonstrate, led to deterioration of the indigenous social system and cultural practices.

\textsuperscript{43} Schirmer, \textit{The Guatemalan Military Project}, 91.
\textsuperscript{44} Schirmer, \textit{The Guatemalan Military Project}, 91.
Chapter Three

The So-Called “Two Armies”: What They Offered, and Their Uses of Mayan Identity

What did David Stoll mean by his assertion that the Mayans were caught between two armies? There were several opposing sides of ladinos who vied for indigenous support throughout the war, namely the military and the several guerrilla organizations. Both sides also took an ethnic approach to their dealings with the Mayan communities, but were the indígenas, as Stoll – and, as we will soon see, the military – argued, manipulated into joining one side or another? This chapter discusses the many examples of both the military’s and guerrillas’ (or other resistance movements’) uses of indigenous cultural practices and identity, highlighting the ways in which indigenous people would have experienced and interpreted the war in cultural terms.

During the civil war, the government had a two-handed approach toward the indigenous population. With one hand, they claimed to offer social welfare programs, while with the other hand they instructed the military to eliminate whole Mayan villages. President Lucas García (1978-1982) publicized his achievements in helping the rural sector. A CIA report noted especially his Social Action Plan, “aimed primarily at the rural poor… to generate jobs and provide basic services.” Lucas did not have any land reform policies, per se, but instead focused mainly on “resettlement of Indians from the Western Highlands,” the area where the most military violence and guerrilla activity was taking place. Interestingly, a large portion of this document has been blacked out under the heading “Repression and Reform” so that only the “Reform” part remains.

During his own presidency, Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983) established several programs supposedly geared toward providing the indigenous people with certain public services and government jobs. In June 1982 he started the Shelter, Work, and Food strategy in which “sometimes for food and always for intelligence on the whereabouts of the guerrilla, the refugee would be told ‘If you join us, we will feed you. If not, we will kill you.”

In a shallow attempt to appear to be making an effort to end the war, “Ríos Montt announced an amnesty on 24 May for all guerrillas and collaborators who turned themselves in by July 1; after that, he said, ‘a merciless struggle’ would begin.” General Hector Gramajo, who served as Army Chief of Staff under Ríos Montt and as Minister of Defense from 1987 to 1990, admitted, “The plan… was first to exterminate thousands upon thousands of indigenous noncombatants in waves of terror and then recoup any refugee-prisoners left over in order to ensure the permanent destruction of the combatants’ infrastructure,” (author’s emphasis).

Montt also set up Civil Patrols during his presidency which gave indigenous people the opportunity to either work for the military or be arrested as a guerrilla.

An army document in 1982 decreed to its soldiers that “a Plan of Disinformation must be in effect at all times,” to confuse and mislead the enemy into submission. This propaganda campaign included denouncing the guerrillas to indigenous communities as well as publicizing the leftists’ alleged manipulation of indigenous groups. Throughout the civil war, Guatemalan military and government officials described indigenous people as pawns in a conflict that did not genuinely concern them, in order to encourage support for their counterinsurgency efforts. In a

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Guatemalan televised interview, General Horacio Maldonado, part of the military junta which put President Ríos Montt in power in 1982, said, “many Indians… believe anything the priest says and follow them,” accusing Catholic missionaries who had been living in indigenous communities of “taking advantage of their ignorance.” Such a statement served two purposes. First, it allowed the military to persecute Catholics in the highlands for feeding leftist provocations to their local communities. Second, Maldonado assumed indigenous ignorance in the matter, or at least dismissed them as ignorant in a public forum, which reinforced racist stereotypes about Guatemalan campesinos. Ideas like Maldonado’s about indigenous motivations for joining the guerrillas gave the army the justification it needed to respond with violence. Even the conservative David Stoll admits that “the mere fact that an indigenous youth was getting an education could attract government killers.” This was the case because if, as the government supposed, the indígenas were easily influenced toward revolutionary thinking, then the people who teach them must be potential insurgents.

Even in the generally pro-military town of Momostenango, just after a 1979 demonstration (which had indigenous leaders) against the National Cartographic Institute over land boundaries, the government had to distribute this message of caution: “Do not allow yourselves to be surprised by unscrupulous persons [read guerrillas] who seek to create a climate of unrest and violence, taking advantage of the good faith of the inhabitants.” If the military needed to warn the indigenous people against the guerrillas, they must have feared that guerrilla political ideology would be attractive to the indigenous population. Yet General Hector Gramajo told human rights advocate Daniel Wilkinson in an interview, “the population doesn’t care about

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the – to use the key word – ‘paradigm’ of the subversives… so I imagine the population is ambivalent because when you’re present, you have power.‖¹¹ He added, “the population is between two fires.”¹² This concept that indigenous people were equally torn between two powers which were able to control them in one direction or another is precisely the argument that anthropologist David Stoll proposed in his major works.

In 1979, while working as deputy commander of the Jutiapa army base, General Gramajo noticed the ways in which the war was becoming more about the indigenous people themselves rather than only about preserving a specific form of government. He recalled, “I saw an ethnic strategy of the EGP [Guerrilla Army of the Poor], and I said, this is very dangerous because it is becoming an ethnic conflict.”¹³ Specifically during the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, the army expanded on the realization that the war was becoming more about race than class politics and focused on the ethnic identity of the country’s indigenous people as a way to further strip them of power, so as to keep the guerrillas from receiving indigenous aid. This policy appeared in the form of persecution based on cultural practices, attempting to separate the people from their cultural identity, and mocking or negatively imitating indigenous customs as a form of psychological abuse.

The Commission for Historical Clarification determined from its thousands of interviews with indigenous people that “because of the terror and persecution, Mayans were obliged to conceal their ethnic identity, manifested externally in their language and dress.”¹⁴ The government sent mixed messages to the indigenous population because it simultaneously praised

¹² Wilkinson, Silence on the Mountain, 311.
and discriminated against Mayan culture. For example, President Lucas used the high number of indigenous soldiers as a way to counter claims of human rights abuses against the Mayan people “and exalt[ed] as a patriotic rallying point the Maya Indian heritage,” noting that he himself spoke Kekčí, the native language from his hometown.\textsuperscript{15} Meanwhile, his administration contributed to difficulties in passing down indigenous language from one generation to the next because “people who were displaced to different areas had to learn another language, usually Spanish… this has proved an obstacle to teaching children their native language as part of their socialization process.”\textsuperscript{16} Later, the military persecuted the very use of Mayan languages. By the mid-1980’s in San Andrés, simply holding a community meeting in which people were speaking their native language was a potentially subversive act for the military to watch carefully. A catechist from this village recalled, “a hand appeared in the window of the auditorium with a tape recorder, recording what he said… and he immediately switched to Spanish so that everyone would know. Shortly afterwards the men left.”\textsuperscript{17} These types of military actions sent the message that Mayan languages were dangerous to use, while Spanish was safe.

Clothing was also an aspect of Mayan culture which the military used in its attacks on indigenous villages. In a witness’s description of Rigoberta Menchú’s mother’s kidnapping, traditional clothing was all that the military left as a warning to her village. The informant said, “they found her clothes in the street; she’d just been dragged away.”\textsuperscript{18} Destruction of property itself was also strongly associated with discrimination against ethnic identity. One person from the Quiché region told David Stoll that in the violence of the 1980’s, “All the houses the army

\textsuperscript{15} CIA National Foreign Assessment Center, “Guatemala,” 12.
\textsuperscript{18} Stoll, \textit{Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans}, 127.
burned; all the clothes they burned… we were left without our identity documents.”\textsuperscript{19} The Recovery of Historical Memory Project from the Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala concluded from its extensive interviews and investigations that “it was also dangerous for women to wear traditional clothing, because its association with their communities of origin was an obvious form of identification.”\textsuperscript{20} As I will discuss later, persecution against people who wear traditional Mayan clothing meant both that to continue to wear the \textit{traje} was a form of rebellion, and that when joining an official resistance movement, most \textit{indígenas} had to give up their traditional dress.

The military specifically targeted indigenous customs and lifestyle in their attacks on Mayan villages. For instance, “reports by survivors of massacres who have related how troops and officers took especial care to kill the \textit{costumbristas} and other local transmitters of indigenous tradition with their strong ties to the local habit” show the army’s tactics to detach the Mayan people from their communities.\textsuperscript{21} When the army burnt community crop fields, “part of the seed supply that communities had inherited and preserved for generations was also lost… and genetic inputs contained in seeds that had been selected and tended for generations.”\textsuperscript{22} The military might have thought that they were simply destroying a village’s food supply, but clearly indigenous agriculture has much more cultural meaning than just as a means of feeding themselves. The military also desecrated sites that were sacred to the local community. Due to forced displacement, an anonymous indigenous interviewee from Alta Verapaz lamented that in 1981 they “had to leave behind the ancestors and the dead.”\textsuperscript{23} In Huehuetenango, an informant recalled the death of the son of a woman in his community: “There is a pile of stones where they

\textsuperscript{19} Stoll, \textit{Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans}, 132.  
\textsuperscript{20} REHMI, \textit{Guatemala, Never Again!}, 49.  
\textsuperscript{21} Schirmer, \textit{The Guatemalan Military Project}, 59.  
\textsuperscript{22} REHMI, \textit{Guatemala, Never Again!}, 41.  
\textsuperscript{23} REHMI, \textit{Guatemala, Never Again!}, 46.
pray to the ancestors; she went there to pray and that was exactly where [he] was tied among the trees… and set aflame.”

Purposefully or not, the army’s disrespect for ancestral burial grounds and community shrines damaged indigenous morale and hindered retention of cultural practices. The REHMI found that, “during massacres, with the prospect of certain death awaiting them, practices such as obliging women to serve food, cook, dance and parade were a form of psychological torture.” Based on these military tactics, it can be inferred that the army not only fought against the indigenous people as possible guerrillas, but also fought them as Mayans.

In Chimaltenango in 1981, the military launched “Operación Xibalbá” to go undercover in the Sandino Front of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP). In this and other military operations, they co-opted names from Mayan mythology which further emphasized ethnic dominance. Although the names of army operations and fronts were not necessarily made public during the war, they were offensive enough that the Commission for Historical Clarification recommended in 1999 that the military ban its use of Mayan words from the titles of all future activities.

So, the military seems to have had some knowledge of indigenous traditions and culture in that they were able to persecute or destroy the places, objects and social power structures that were most vital to local histories of indigenous communities – namely land, clothing, ancestral veneration, and language. Aside from racial discrimination, by keeping the indigenous people from carrying out their cultural practices and living within the traditional communities, the military could weaken the Mayan’s ability to organize as well as causing psychological distress, so that they would be less able to fight back against the government. However, as I will point

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24 REHMI, Guatemala, Never Again!, 47.
25 REHMI, Guatemala, Never Again!, 74.
26 Schirmer, The Guatemalan Military Project, 43.
27 CEH, Guatemala, Memory of Silence, 63.
out in the next chapter, this excessive repression, often against communities which had no ties to the guerrillas at the time of a massacre or execution, only gave indigenous people more reason to want to take action against the government.

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Just as the army targeted indigenous culture in their counter-insurgent attacks on Mayan villages, resistance movements – armed and otherwise – utilized aspects of indigenous culture in order to draw in supporters. Their references to the language, religion, clothing and food which were familiar to the Mayan villages they visited promised respect for and preservation of Mayan culture, although once joining a guerrilla faction, most indigenous people had to temporarily leave their culture behind for safety or conformity reasons. Whether or not the guerrillas and other resistance groups genuinely cared about the cultures of the people they wished to incorporate into their organizations, their need to focus on Maya culture as a selling point for their cause demonstrated their recognition of the level of importance that community culture had on indigenous decision-making.

When guerrillas first began to seek followers in the Mayan highlands in 1972, cultural differences complicated the recruitment efforts. An early member of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) who called herself María Lupe stated that indigenous marriage practices initially shocked her and caused conflict between a Quiché Maya village and her guerrilla unit. She explained, “Some Indian people who lived close by came and offered to buy my twelve-year-old daughter,” and when she refused, “they remained hostile towards us.”28 The family also “accused [the guerrillas] of discriminating against them because they were Indians.”29 This statement not only highlights the cultural differences between the guerrillas and their indigenous

recruits, but also shows that the concepts of inequality and racism were already a part of the Quiché mindset before any resistance organizations supposedly raised their consciousness of such political ideas. She also described how the indigenous women hid from the guerrillas at first: “Since the compañeros do not speak their dialect, they cannot communicate with them.”

Perhaps difficulties over language and customs were what initially influenced guerrilla organizations to try to adopt respect for Mayan culture into their recruitment methods.

Language was probably the most important barrier between resistance movements and indigenous people because of the more than twenty indigenous languages are across Guatemala. At some point, the guerrillas or other organizations had to make the choice to learn to speak several Mayan languages, or to find a way to teach the people to speak Spanish, and at least the EGP and ORPA did both. By 1983, when visiting indigenous villages, some guerrilla leaders often spoke to the people in their native language, or a Maya-Spanish hybrid. An indígena from a village on Lago Atitlán, an area where ORPA (Revolutionary Organization of People in Arms) was active, remembered that the guerrillas “were great orators, speaking in Maya.” This means that either enough indigenous people had already joined the guerrillas and now were acting as spokespeople, or that the guerrillas had an improved enough relationship with certain indigenous groups to learn to speak their languages, or that both were true. On the other hand, ORPA pamphlets geared toward a Mayan audience were written only in Spanish. However, they also used simple cartoons to go along with the words to help convey what the pamphlets said. The CUC (Committee for Peasant Unity), a specifically indigenous-focused but originally

32 Warren, Indigenous Movements and their Critics, 94.
33 “Organización del Pueblo en Armas: Siembra, Hablando con los Campesinos,” Rutgers University Microfiche Collection, Archive of the Fourth Russell Tribunal on the Rights of the Indians in the Americas. All translations of documents written in Spanish are my own unless otherwise noted.
non-militant group, “broadcast announcements on the regional radio stations in the Quiché, Cakchiquel, and Kekché languages.” This organization already had a Mayan leadership and until the 1980s had an all-Mayan membership, so the use of indigenous languages is not unusual, but speaking those languages as part of a publicity stunt or propaganda action would send a strong message to other indigenous people, as if to say “we are one of you.”

The guerrillas also executed the other option to teach their recruits Spanish as a unifying language. One girl who lived with the guerrillas for seven years explained, “I learned to read and write in the mountains and to speak Spanish… the compas there taught me when I first arrived,” but she later noted that the guerrillas taught her two other indigenous languages as well. Through a subset of Catholic Action called Liga Campesina, “a literacy campaign was begun in 1972 that… encompassed not only learning to read and write but also the teaching of Spanish… by focusing on the necessities and problems that Indian people were facing.” The problem of teaching indigenous people to speak Spanish was that the guerrillas expected Mayan people to use the language of their oppressors while simultaneously fighting against such attacks on their culture. Resistance groups seem to have softened that blow by teaching indigenous languages alongside Spanish, or putting Spanish into a context that would be useful for expressing the injustices against them.

As I have said in the previous chapters, not all resistance is armed, or even explicitly political. The popular Catholic Church, until several of its dioceses closed due to repression, was one such non-militant group. In Santiago Atitlán, the Catholic Church helped the Maya villagers organize apolitical programs “for health promotion and literacy and child nutrition… to raise

themselves out of their poverty and suffering.” Under the assumption that achieving rights and services for Maya villages was based on Communist ideals, the Catholic Church suffered repression under the regime of President Ríos Montt alongside their indigenous followers. In Uspantán, for example, the Catholic Church “clearly sympathized with indígenas and… were also one of the few aboveground institutions that was available to be blamed.” Therefore, the government tended to assign responsibility for indigenous actions to the priests and bishops who worked in “at-risk” villages.

Catholicism was not the only religion associated with indigenous resistance against the government. The CUC in particular referred to traditional religion of the ancient Maya by holding a pan-Mayan conference on February 14, 1980 at the ruins of Iximché, the capitol of the Kakchiquel kingdom. Almost every Mayan ethnicity had a representative at this meeting through four national indigenous rights groups other than the CUC. Using the ruins was a political statement reclaiming Mayan culture and history for the indigenous people themselves. While Catholicism, the religion imposed on the Maya in the sixteenth century, formed stronger relationships with indigenous people, the CUC tried to bring the focus of Mayan resistance back to a more inherently indigenous place.

Like language, clothing separated guerrillas from indígenas. Perhaps in order to incorporate this element of indigenous culture, ORPA pamphlets depicted groups of people in traditional traje, or Mayan clothing, holding machetes and joining with people wearing European-style clothing for guerrilla activities. Illustrations of people wearing Mayan clothing

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38 David Stoll, Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans, 143.
40 CEH, Guatemala, Memory of Silence, 190.
41 “Organización del Pueblo en Armas: Siembra, Hablando con los Campesinos,” Rutgers University Microfiche Collection, Archive of the Fourth Russell Tribunal on the Rights of the Indians of the Americas.
could simply have been a way of identifying which people were indigenous in the pictures, but even this showed some understanding of Mayan culture in that the indigenous people themselves used their clothing or hairstyle as a way of identifying themselves. For example, on later pages, this same pamphlet shows a woman wearing European clothing cutting the hair of a woman wearing indigenous clothing, with the caption “the women who come to work in the city live also with the humiliation, exploitation, and the scorn of their employers.” This image, combined with the caption, sends the message that if one forcefully takes away an indigenous person’s style of dress, one also takes away their dignity. The ORPA’s assessment of the emotional associations with clothing and appearance in general is fairly accurate, as the Arch Diocese of Guatemala found that “testimonies reflect the women’s shame at having to wear nontraditional clothing.” However, joining a guerrilla faction also usually meant ceasing to wear one’s indigenous clothing.

Guerrillas told recruits that abandoning traditional Mayan traje and wearing the guerrilla uniform was an emotional but necessary occurrence. Sara, an indigenous girl who had lived with the guerrillas from the age of 15, recalled her experience with clothing. She explained how “they told me what a good target for bullets I was, all dressed in red and purple like that.” Although the switch to a generic uniform was for her own safety, the loss of Sara’s clothing made her cry at first, emphasizing the importance of clothing to indigenous identity. So, it appears that the guerrillas could not promise to preserve all aspects of the culture they claimed to be protecting.

Food was an equally important part of Mayan identity, which the guerrillas as well as non-violent resistance movements used as a way of connecting themselves with indigenous

42 “Organización del Pueblo en Armas: Siembra, Hablando con los Campesinos,” Rutgers University Microfiche Collection, Archive of the Fourth Russell Tribunal on the Rights of the Indians of the Americas.
43 REHMI, Guatemala, Never Again!, 49.
44 “Sara,” in Harbury, 55.
communities. In speeches given to Mayan villages, leaders of the CUC enticed would-be supporters by noting food and land discrepancies, especially referencing the types of less nutritious food that the rural indigenous communities ate. One CUC official asked his crowd, “If we are God’s children why do we not eat like the rich eat?” Being indigenous themselves, the CUC would have known that speaking about political ideas of inequality in terms of food and land made their cause more relevant to everyday Mayan life. Guerrillas also applied food to their recruitment efforts, but focused more on using typical indigenous roles as ways for the Mayan people to aid the guerrillas. ORPA documents include cartoons of Mayan men growing corn and women making tortillas over a caption indicating that this is what the indigenous people can do to help the organization. As simple as it seems, sharing food with the guerrillas became a controversial act. In the following chapter, I will discuss the ways in which sharing food was a political act for the indigenous people as well, because it tended to bring on the ire of the military.

During the CUC May Day march in 1978, one indigenous person described, “Everyone would go out to the highway: ‘To give them atol de plátano, atol de maíz, chuchitos, tamales, to give them sodas, aguas.’” This perspective reveals a type of excitement in sharing traditional foods (as well as some nontraditional products that become a common part of the diet of poverty, like soda) with the resistance organization. Sharing tortillas and beans with guerrillas, church officials, or other community organizations would have been a unifying act. Rigoberta Menchú explained to the editor of her biography, “We only trust people who eat what we eat.” When a

45 Grandin, “To End with All These Evils,” 17.
46 “Organización del Pueblo en Armas: Siembra, Hablando con los Campesinos,” Rutgers University Microfiche Collection, Archive of the Fourth Russell Tribunal on the Rights of the Indians of the Americas.
guerrilla scoops up a mouthful of beans with a tortilla, it is a politically charged act. He or she is making the statement on behalf of his or her organization that they are also poor and understand one of the most basic elements of the indigenous lifestyle. In contrast, some indigenous people felt that the guerrillas demanded food not as an act of communion with the Mayan villages that they visited, but as an act of authority. For example, one informant told David Stoll, “A couple of people arrived and the guerrillas asked them, ‘Do us a favor and go find food’ – just to be given.”49 I should note, however, that Stoll depicts the guerrillas in this way more than any of my other sources, and therefore it appears to be a less common view. The Recovery of Historical Memory Project (REHMI) also found some instances in which indigenous people regret having shared food with the guerrillas, but only after the army attacked their village for doing so.50

The guerrillas’ use of elements of Mayan culture to attract indigenous supporters does not necessarily show that they cared for or appreciated indigenous culture. However, it does show that they saw that retention of their culture was possibly a higher priority among their potential recruits than were issues of class or politics, and so decided to communicate with them in cultural terms. Whether or not the Mayan groups responded positively to this method in particular, thousands of them joined armed resistance efforts, so culturally-conscious propaganda and methods must have appealed to some. All of these examples thus far are told from the perspective of ladinos who were interacting with and responding to Mayan identity. We still need to hear these stories in the Mayans’ own words to understand whether or not they bought into either of the offerings from these two opposing forces, which is the subject of the next chapter.

49 Stoll, Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans, 110.
50 REHMI, Guatemala, Never Again!, 25.
Chapter Four

In Their Own Words: Indigenous Perspectives on Resistance

There is an extensive body of literature from human rights groups, leftist political organizations and individual activists, as well as from the Mayan movement itself, which uses indigenous testimonies to demonstrate the repression which the indigenous people suffered and the ways in which they responded to that violence. These books and articles which are full of indigenous experiences were written and/or edited by people who already sympathized with the revolutionary left, and the witnesses often portrayed the guerrillas as heroes, which is not always an accurate depiction. However, the fact that so many of these same types of testimonies exist shows the breadth of the support for resistance movements in Guatemala and offers unique insight into their reasons behind joining the guerrillas, for those who did.

Each of these testimonies shows a different thought process behind indigenous mobilization, but with a closer look, the most common reasons for joining – i.e. land, food, death of family members, and preservation of one’s heritage – are all related to each other. For the Q’eqchi’, for example, “during the early years of guerilla organizing, the main reasons for joining the ranks were related to the land.”\(^1\) The Q’eqchi’ of Alta Verapaz were early victims of a military massacre at Panzós when they approached a group of soldiers on their way to demand their land titles, so land was already a major issue for the Q’eqchi’ even before the worst of the violence took place.\(^2\) By 1982, the reported reasons for joining the guerrillas changed to a reaction to military violence.\(^3\) However, because of Q’eqchi’ cultural traditions, part of the violence was experienced in terms of disconnection with their land. A witness stated, “The army

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\(^3\) Wilson, Machine Guns and Mountain Spirits,” 40.
began to pass by every day and we heard they were killing people in the communities… We decided as a community to go into the mountains.”⁴ As the army forced them to leave their homes and crops, this repression also affected their religious practices. The Q’eqchi’ worship a mountain god, called a Tzuultaq’a, and “people would not petition the old Tzuultaq’a they had formerly known if they no longer lived in their ambit of influence,” so, “it would take many years of dreaming [the means of establishing contact with the land deity] to initiate new relations with a Tzuultaq’a.”⁵ Although not all Mayan groups share the same cultural practices, the Q’eqchi’ represent one clear example of how violence, land, and religion are inextricably linked when determining the motivations for indigenous resistance. Therefore, there are always going to be multiple reasons behind a person’s decision to organize, and holding up one response as the definitive answer to the question of why people rebel neglects the relationship between several different decision-making processes.

Due to direct and indirect censorship of the mainstream Guatemalan press⁶, many valuable sources of information about the war came from Mexico, which harbored thousands of indigenous refugees. A 1981 article from one such Mexican newspaper, *El Universal*, referenced poverty issues in the indigenous population, such as the 80% illiteracy rate, semi-forced labor on cotton fincas, and unfair wages, as possible reasons for the guerrillas’ success in recruiting indigenous people.⁷ The article goes on to say, “Many Indians around Lake Atitlán… have abandoned centuries of passivity and now openly oppose the government. The natives say

⁴ Wilson, “Machine Guns and Mountain Spirits,” 42.
⁵ Wilson, “Machine Guns and Mountain Spirits,” 44.
⁷ Tom Tiede, 1981, “El descontento de los indios guatemaltecos,” *El Universal*, July 16, 6. All translations of documents written in Spanish are my own unless otherwise noted.
that many of the youth have left with the guerrillas and are preparing themselves for the war.”

According to this journalist’s findings, the indigenous people in the Lake Atitlán region, mostly Tzutujil and Quiché, were collaborating with the guerrillas in order to protest the systematic discrimination against them, which contributes to their poverty and lack of fair labor treatment.

The article continues:

A resident of San Lucas Tolimán says that his son, of 15 years, has participated in two assaults against military positions. This man who, with pride, dresses in the traditional Indian style, says that he totally approves of his son’s activities... ‘If my son dies, my only regret will be that I did not unite with him, we should free ourselves from the government.’

So, clearly at this point in the war there was strong indigenous support for the guerrillas, who in the Lake Atitlán region were ORPA (the Organization of People in Arms) and had a particularly indigenous-focused strategy. The man from San Lucas Tolimán may have adopted the political language, then, from guerrillas who had already campaigned in his village, but the point here is that he agreed with the revolutionary ideal of liberation from the military dictatorship.

Esperanza, a Q’anjob’al survivor from Huehuetenango who joined the EGP, decided to become a guerrilla because, as she described it, “I had seen the horrible things they did to people in my village, to unarmed people. I told him I wanted to go into combat. I told him it wasn’t fair to die defenseless. That it was better to be armed and prepared to die in combat.” Therefore, violence caused Esperanza to seek out the guerrillas for defense, but this reason by itself is not sufficient. Esperanza added, “This is one of the things we learn—that everyone has equal value, men and women, indigenous and ladino, that no one is behind anyone else.” Therefore, it is

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12 Sanford, Buried Secrets, 200.
not fair to say that she only joined the guerrillas to escape repression from the army, because she also was inspired by the message of equality that the EGP offered.

Again, not all indigenous resistance was with the guerrillas. Alejandro, an Ixil survivor of the Salquil massacre, stated:

> When the repression began I abandoned my house and my family to lead people against the repression. I have spent the last sixteen or seventeen years working for my people, working so they don’t die. In the mountains, I was a CPR [Community of Popular Resistance] leader… I left the CPR in 1992 and went to the capital because alone as a CPR, we are like a little thorn, nothing more. Our people need a presence at the national level. We need to have strength and courage to confront the politics of the government.\(^{13}\)

Alejandro also began to lead his community in order to protect them from repression, but even here there are cultural factors at play. When people left their homes to hide in the mountains, they had to leave behind their crops as well. Being away from one’s crops changes the perception of time because the “time-fixing events of the religious calendar” are based on the agricultural cycle of planting and harvesting.\(^{14}\) Therefore, Alejandro’s decision to organize simultaneously preserved his culture and disrupted it.

The women of the Community of Popular Resistance from the village of Santa Clara in the Quiché department participated in an educational program for Mayan youth called Foundations for Education, in which the women made embroideries of scenes of their memories from the war, and the students translated the stories and published them. Of the 30 women who shared their stories, most of them indicated that they either joined or collaborated with the guerrillas in order to defend themselves and their families. Inocenta Cuyuch Báten, a 28 year old Quiché woman from Santa Clara is one of these women, whose embroidery project was captioned: “To defend our lives we carried arms with the guerrillas, because of the fear and death

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\(^{13}\) Sanford, *Buried Secrets*, 194.
on the part of the army.” However, self-defense and fear were not the only factors contributing to their decisions to help the guerrillas. Santos Lucía Pérez Mendoza, a 36 year old Quiché-Maya from Huehuetenango told her interviewer, “We can fight for our rights as women. I participated in the armed war with the guerrillas of the Guerrila Army of the Poor (EGP) in Guatemala. There is exploitation, inequality and discrimination.” These women may have been fighting out of a sense of protection over their families, but they also believed in the causes of equality and women’s rights. Additionally, Tomasa Mérida Hernández, 27 years old and an Ixil from Nebaj remembered: “The army massacred my mother and father so I decided to take up arms and defend my rights as a woman.” Her explanation is even more complicated because she presents the defense of rights alongside vengeance for her parents. This may be because of the specific cultural connections between violence and spirituality in the Quiché region. For example, “defacing and mutilating corpses transforms victims into condemned spirits (condenados) who cannot complete the transition to the other world.” There are always multiple issues working together to cause someone to risk their lives for any cause, and for the women of the CPR Sierra, culture and physical defense go hand in hand.

Protecting one’s cultural values, while not as common as protection from government-sanctioned violence, appears in many indigenous testimonies as justification for becoming involved in community organizations at a time when such activities were carefully watched by the army. Victoria Alvarez, a Quiché-Maya woman, suffered teasing and bullying from both her ladino fellow students and her teachers when she went to school as a young girl. That unfair

17 Gonzales, *Threads Breaking the Silence*, 120.
treatment motivated her to work within her community. In her testimony, she explained, “When I was 16 years old I started to participate in an indigenous association in which we met principally with cultural aims, but as time passed I started to see that we have a lot of suffering and that we should unite with the ladinos and do something to end the injustice.” After the army massacred her village, her family clandestinely moved to Guatemala City, where she experienced more discrimination when she had to abandon her indigenous clothing and language in order to get a job. After this experience, she said, “my decision to fight had been made more firm… I organized myself in the Comité Pro Justicia y Paz working with internal refugees, later I went on to form part of the Christian Revolutionaries of Vicente Menchú, which has as its objective ‘raise consciousness, organize, and participate actively as Christians.’” Because the experience of losing her indigenous clothing and native language was the final straw for Victoria Alvarez, even these simple elements of one’s identity play a major role in indigenous resistance.

Carmelita Santos, an indigenous member of FEDEFAM (Federation of Relatives of the Disappeared), spoke at the organization’s conference in Mexico City in November of 1983. In her speech, she recalled her experiences as a community organizer for educational programs:

I had the joy of going to many communities, teaching the peasants, as we don’t even have a small school. We teach the people, showing them the importance of learning to read and write, and of learning Spanish too. Many people take advantage of us, if we don’t speak Spanish, and that is why we have been discriminated against. They say we are worthless Indians, that we’re forever stupid, that our fate is to suffer. We have heard this from the mouths of many people who have oppressed us, who have exploited us. So that’s why we were teaching the indigenous communities many things.

Carmelita Santos’ speech also points to preservation of culture and fighting discrimination as her reasons for becoming active in mobilization efforts. Although literacy and youth empowerment

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22 “Speech Made by Carmelita Santos at the FEDEFAM (Federation of Relatives of the ‘Disappeared’) Conference,” North American Congress on Latin America archive of Latin America, Guatemala, Rutgers University Microfilm Collection.
programs are not anti-establishment in nature, the government authorities still saw such organizations as subversive. Despite the risk, however, she continued:

We were detected and accused of being ‘Indian guerrillas,’ subversive Cuban Indians, and working for the Russians. And they began with mass abductions of our people, making our countryside leaders ‘disappear,’ and our old people too.” “The soldiers have told us that no matter how, they are going to make all Indians disappear! But our ancestors have great trust in us: our grandparents have told us that our customs should never disappear in Central America. And that’s why we have the courage to denounce these things, in order to defend our culture, our customs from centuries back, which we continue to practice. And perhaps that is why the soldiers do what they do to us.”

In this case, her organization drew on inspiration from her culture’s traditions and veneration of their ancestors as reasons to participate in activities which were in explicit defiance of the government – only because it was any kind of organizing at all. In her experience, honoring her elders and defending her culture coincide with fighting discrimination and providing education to her community.

In an interview on University Radio in Mexico City in November 1980, three female members of the CUC (Committee for Peasant Unity) explained to Alaide Foppa why they joined the CUC and what they hoped to achieve as a way of informing the international community of what was happening in Guatemala at the time. One of the girls, who was only fifteen years old at the time, spoke in Quiché while her friend translated into Spanish: “She says that she is proud to participate at this age, because the assassin Lucas has killed so many people, mainly in the Quiché province, so they feel the necessity to participate in the popular struggle… they have a vision of growing up as free people.” The older girl explained the goals of the CUC as mainly based in fighting poverty among rural workers. She explained that, “Now and since the struggle began, the most pressing problem is getting fair wages, as well as equality and good treatment on

23 “Speech Made by Carmelita Santos at the FEDEFAM (Federation of Relatives of the ‘Disappeared’) Conference,” North American Congress on Latin America archive of Latin America, Guatemala, Rutgers University Microfilm Collection.
the job. Now the CUC has gained a wage of three quetzals and 20 cents. For the CUC especially, politics are linked to culture in that the girls want to “free” and protect their fellow indigenous people through fair labor.

Nicolas Balaam, a young Cakchiquel man gave his testimony about the army’s massacre of his village. He pointed out that the army steals their working tools: “machetes, picks, shovels, etc.” This is the least of what the army does to his village, but he mentioned it in the same breath as bombings and the burning of houses because the working tools have special significance to his community. He said, “We want to work our lands, we want freedom and bread for our children.” To Nicolas, having land to work and food to harvest are equated with freedom.

In the mid-1980s, an indigenous female guerrilla told filmmakers Thomas Sigel and Pamela Yates – in her native language – how she came to work with the guerrillas: “When Commander Castillo held a training session in the mountains, I went to be trained… I went home and told my father, it’s good to be there. Everyone is equal and we are fighting for our people.” Most importantly, she hoped that the outcome of the guerrilla’s efforts would allow her to continue to practice her culture’s traditions. She said: “In the future, when we win, we are going to develop a new society very slowly, since we still drag a lot of the present system with us. But we guerrillas will be able to adapt more quickly to the new life which is coming. We’ll be able to go into the villages and nourish the best parts of our old culture, our folkways.”

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26 “Testimony of Nicolas Balaam,” North American Congress on Latin America archive of Latin America, Guatemala, Rutgers University Microfilm Collection.
27 “Testimony of Nicolas Balaam,” North American Congress on Latin America archive of Latin America, Guatemala, Rutgers University Microfilm Collection.
29 Sigel and Yates, When the Mountains Tremble, Skylight Pictures, 1986.
organization was provided, most likely in order to protect the witness, as the war was still very active at this point. Still, it emphasizes once again that although she may have had to leave her community and trade her *traje* for a uniform, ultimately the preservation and protection of her culture motivated her to fight against the military. Also, her optimism (“when we win”) shows the extent to which the revolutionary Left genuinely believed that they would be successful; these were not radical idealist fringe groups.

Jennifer Harbury is an American woman from Connecticut who became involved with the guerrillas through her indigenous Guatemalan husband, Everardo, who was captured and most likely killed by the army in 1992. In order to memorialize her husband and their friends in the URNG (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity, which was the combination of all four guerrilla groups), she created the book, *Bridge of Courage: Life Stories of the Guatemalan Compañeros and Compañeras*, a collection of interviews with people in the organization. She did not add commentary to the testimonies and only included first-hand accounts, but these were also all people she knew personally and who she knew already shared her views. Jorge (a pseudonym) told Jennifer that:

> Guatemala is one of the few places where our people have survived, how we survived because we never stopped struggling against the invaders. And so I began to wait for the real guerrillas to reach our village. And when they finally did, I knew I could trust them. They were villagers like us, the same eyes, the same hair. They spoke our language. They wanted the same things we wanted.

Jorge’s statement is somewhat of a composite view of common Mayan reasons to resist government repression in the 1970’s and 80’s, such as original right to the land, cultural acceptance, preservation of community, and political beliefs.

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Chapter Five

Truth Commission Findings on Indigenous Resistance

Two months after David Stoll’s book about Rigoberta Menchú was published, the United Nations Truth Commission for Guatemala, Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (Commission for Historical Clarification), compiled its findings into a several thousand page report and released them to the public in 1999 in the form of an eighty six page summary called “Conclusions and Recommendations.” The full report includes hundreds of interviews with indigenous witnesses and a comprehensive list of human rights violations. The Commission was not looking for any one type of testimony that could be held up as the general civil war experience, and of course the interviews portray a range of opinions about the army and the guerrillas, but one view that appears over and over again is that the indigenous people already understood the ideas that the guerrillas preached to them, and that they had felt that way for some time. Among the testimonies that the CEH was able to collect from ex-combatants, experiences range from pride to remorse, but they give specific, personal reasons for working with the guerrillas or performing some other act of resistance and most witnesses do not say that they were forced or tricked into doing so.

The CEH Truth Commission was allowed to operate with 272 staff members in Guatemala over an eighteen month period, starting in 1997. One of the most profound conclusions drawn from the report was that it “specifically named military intelligence as the organizer of illegal detentions, torture, disappearances and executions, but it stopped short of identifying individuals responsible,” because the Commission felt that this was beyond the scope of their responsibilities.¹ Their decisive attribution of most of the human rights violations to the military finally made it impossible for the army to pass blame onto vigilante groups. The

announcement alone was not enough for some victims, however, as “workers, relatives of victims and others among the 2,000 people [present at the public reading of the report] broke into standing ovations, sobs, shouts and chants of ‘Justice! Justice!’” while President Alvaro Arzú Irigoyen solemnly watched, giving no response. This report clearly meant a lot to the people who suffered losses during the war, and now I will draw more attention to the experiences of those who provided testimonies to the CEH.

Before the guerrillas had a strong presence in the highlands, other organizations were already inspiring indigenous communities to put their frustration over discrimination and poverty into action. For example,

In 1960 it was popular to be in Acción Católica here in Santa Cruz, I came from the mountain in Zacualpa, from there to Santa Cruz, to find out... they told us a little bit about injustice, they taught us the catechism, the songs and the prayers. Almost everyone was Mayan, only two ladinos were there. We had always known about poverty, we the Mayan people had suffered it always, little by little the Acción Católica told the community about injustices, little by little we woke up, understanding how things were.

The most important part to understand in this testimony is that the indigenous people already knew what inequality meant before any outside organizations approached them. At least for the community in Santa Cruz, it was refreshing to hear other people talk about what the indígenas had always known.

In the Archdiocese of Guatemala’s own inquest into casualties and experiences of the war, based on six thousand interviews, “defending the land seems to have been people’s primary motivation for choosing a life of resistance.” Many of the testimonies in the CEH’s report reflect this same observation. In August of 1979 in Chicamán in the Quiché department, a man

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3 Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, Guatemala, Memoria del Silencio: Capítulo 1, (Guatemala City: Oficina de Servicios para Proyectos de las Naciones Unidas, 1999), 168. All translations of documents written in Spanish are my own unless otherwise noted.
who participated in the land reform organization INTA (National Institute for Agrarian Transformation) had this to say about his community’s connection to their land:

In 1963 the national police arrived on behalf of the departmental government and they took us from our homes… they took everything, the corn, the tools, they left the doors with nails. Vicente Menchú said to the people: ‘We know that the land belongs to the country, we won’t leave [the community], if we leave here, we’ll be leaving dead… we are not plantation owners, we are campesinos [landless, rural workers] and this is our land’… and the people were in agreement…”\(^5\)

Vicente Menchú, Rigoberta’s father, was an indigenous community organizer. Therefore, in this case, a Mayan person was trying to lead other Mayans into action even before the guerrillas arrived, rather than a guerrilla or Catholic priest delivering the message. As the witness said, the community appreciated the statement that Menchú was making, we know that at least in the town of Chicamán, the indigenous people already had the desire for land reform and better treatment in their minds.

One anonymous indigenous informant provided the CEH with a written testimony entitled “Historical Relation during Sixteen Years of My Personal Delivery in the Armed Struggle in the Ho-Chi-Min Guerrilla Front (sic).” The Ho-Chi-Minh Front belonged to the EGP (Guerrilla Army of the Poor), so this informant was most likely from the Quiché region, although he did not specify.\(^6\) In this document, the informant also expresses his reasons for joining the guerrilla movement as a result of his relationship to the land, in that he was not land-owning and felt that he received unfair treatment as a migrant laborer. He wrote:

I am a poor peasant… my father and my mother were purely poor peasants who travelled to the coasts [for work]. I was seven years old when I started to travel as a team leader with my father on the coast. I had a lot of time on the coast because we didn’t have land to cultivate… When I was 19 years old… I participated in wage labor on the Pantaleón de Escuintla plantation… they dismissed most of us who were cutting cane and other workers from the Ingenio Pantaleón. It was then for the last time that I worked with landlords on the coast… on the 12\(^{th}\) of December in the year 1980 I found myself with the guerrilla.\(^7\)

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\(^5\) CEH, *Guatemala, Memoria del Silencio*, 163.


\(^7\) CEH, *Guatemala, Memoria del Silencio*, 181-2.
He did not say how he found the guerrillas, whether he sought them out or if they came to him, but this exemplifies again that land and fair labor were important enough to indigenous people that they would fight for their right to it.

Internally displaced families and communities living in the mountains started finding ways to organize and defend themselves against military aggression in 1982, forming groups called Communities of Popular Resistance (CPR). 

A CPR member from Ixcán explained, “People who defend, who remain to defend their land… These groups did feel the support, the presence, the company of the guerrillas. And it did have an effect, because the army couldn’t act with the same degree of impunity against communities where the guerrillas had weapons in their hands.”

This testimony emphasizes the defense of land as a major motivation to resist the military’s attacks, while also displaying cooperation between self-formed indigenous resistance groups and the guerrillas (who, in this region, were probably the EGP).

The CEH received testimonies from witnesses which indicated that the guerrilla forces had a strong indigenous support base. An ex-ORPA (Revolutionary Organization of People in Arms) leader explained, “The great majority of the combatants were indigenous. In the year 1980 they incorporated indígenas from Quetzaltenango and Huehuetenango. In the mountains, the majority of the guerrillas were peasants and indigenous. The presence of white people or urban ladinos was very small.”

An EGP (Guerrilla Army of the Poor) leader made the same assessment: “the great majority of the political organizing squads were indigenous.” Therefore, the CEH’s findings confirm the testimonies and examples in the previous chapter.

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8 REMHI, Guatemala, 65.
9 REMHI, Guatemala, 66.
10 CEH, Guatemala, Memoria del Silencio, 258.
11 CEH, Guatemala, Memoria del Silencio, 274.
In the Truth Commission report, there are more examples than anything else of indigenous people who formed their own local political organizations to promote their interests or who passively resisted separately from the revolutionary Left. In Zacualpa, a Quiché Mayan leader remembered that “before ’79 the repression started against various indigenous leaders who were not part of the guerrilla, but part of a generation of indígenas who started to overcome and started to carry out a life in politics… everything about the promotion of literacy,” like Pro-Cultura Maya-Quiché and Liga Campesina, but because of military arrests and executions, “these were the first left without a leader, and the leaders of Acción Católica also… it is not against the guerrilla, so I say it is a lie, it is to inhibit the growth of the indigenous race.”\textsuperscript{12} The fact that the military persecuted indigenous leaders of organizations which were not inherently anti-government, or even (technically speaking) political aside from speaking against racism and trying to reform education, without any involvement from the guerrillas, means several things. First, obviously, the military was not only attacking their clear enemies, but perfectly legal resistance and other forms of organization were just as dangerous. More importantly, the indigenous people were organizing on their own, to support their own causes.

In Nebaj in April of 1982, a witness recalled that the night before a community festival, “a woman was preparing the soup for the following day, and she was preparing the corn for the following day, when the Military arrived to Cocob. She said: ‘I will not leave because I don’t owe you anything.’”\textsuperscript{13} Unfortunately, even this simple act of preparing food for a traditional celebration resulted in the execution of the woman and her family. Of course, one woman refusing to follow orders does not equal a revolution. However, her story does prove the willingness of indigenous campesinos to put themselves at risk rather than abandon their values.

\textsuperscript{12} CEH, Guatemala, Memoria del Silencio, 170.
\textsuperscript{13} CEH, Guatemala, Memoria del Silencio, 184.
Sometimes, communities were successful in their small, local rebellions. In 1988, the government tried to impose a new tax on the Kaqchikel Mayans who lived in that municipality. A local leader helped gather the people together to protest the tax. Here is his description of the event:

All of the people said, ‘you are not only killing, you are taking our children, you are controlling us and we have to pay a new tax’… and so it was when we agreed, we said… right now we will go see if the alcaldes want to pay this, we formed an indigenous community assembly, then we organized a rebellion… not with the mayors but with the people and here was when we made the first struggle in the indigenous community, well then with the people we asked, ‘what will you do with this problem… do you agree that we should pay?’ All of the people said no… and later the community elected a new provisional committee because the previous one was in the hands of a person tied to the military.\(^{14}\)

The complexity of Guatemalan politics at the time was such that indigenous people could simultaneously be killed for refusing to leave their homes at the army’s request, and yet in some towns they were able to change the local government through popular demonstrations.

CONAVIGUA, the National Coordination of Guatemalan Widows, was founded by Rosalina Tuyuc, a Kaqchikel woman, between 1985 and 1987. Women in the organization felt that it was one of the great advances of indigenous organizing during the war, especially because it brought together Mayan and ladina women for the same purpose. A Kaqchikel CONAVIGUA member testified: “The source of pride for us is that for the first time in these five centuries we have a solid organization of indigenous women and peasants, and that we run the organization ourselves, to design our own structure, because almost always it was the men who spoke for the women, about the pain, the discrimination and on this occasion we started to make this struggle.”\(^{15}\) CONAVIGUA was a particularly successful instance of non-violent resistance during the war.

\(^{14}\) CEH, Guatemala, Memoria del Selencio, 190.
\(^{15}\) CEH, Guatemala, Memoria del Silencio: Capítulo 3, 242-3.
In other cases, working within the system was not effective. An informant who did not wish to provide his or her location found that there were certain roadblocks when indigenous people participated in the political system before the guerrillas arrived. The witness told the CEH that they had campaigned for the Christian Democratic party to help elect an indigenous mayor to the municipality. After their first victory, the other political party began to watch the Mayan participants in the Christian Democratic party more carefully. The informant said, “those from the National Liberation Movement were ladino people, they treated me badly, ‘you are in with those guys from the DC (Christian Democrats), and you are putting your Indian mayors in power,’ like that, with those words … ‘And you are installing your mayors that come here from the mountains’… so I was finding out more that it is discrimination.”

When people feel that they are kept from taking legitimate political actions in order to get what they want from a certain system, they may begin to take extralegal measures to make themselves heard.

Many of the testimonies indicate that the guerrillas and other resistance movements appealed to the indigenous people specifically because they agreed with the message that the resistance was offering. For example, one said, “They, the community leaders, they were promoting the revolution to reclaim the lands… a good education, that they respected our dignity.” Once more, the land issue appealed strongly to potential indigenous supporters, but so did the prospect of education and simply being respected. A young community leader from Quiché reflected:

I feel that the historical memory of the poor indígenas is very strong, but everything is about a memory with a historic vindication, political vindication, that understands that this is not your system, this is not your state and finds in this moment… the historic possibility of liberation, of a change of the system. Of course, the guerrilla announced the possibility of overthrowing Lucas and the installation of a revolutionary government. That caught the [attention of] the people.

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16 CEH, Guatemala, Memoria del Silencio: Capítulo 1, 171.
17 CEH, Guatemala, Memoria del Silencio, 180.
18 CEH, Guatemala, Memoria del Silencio, 181.
This person’s statement more explicitly defined real revolution as what attracted his people to the movement, which, as we saw from the great number of various ways that indigenous people organized in resistance groups, was not as commonly the case, but it did happen. A second testimony reflects the same sentiment: “they offered us many things, they said that they were going to overthrow the rich people, they offered lands on the coast and to improve our condition of life.”

Therefore, indigenous people experienced a variety of feelings toward mobilization, but at least some communities were genuinely interested in the revolutionary aspect, which David Stoll would deny.

As can be expected, not everyone felt that the guerrillas brought anything positive to their communities. A CEH informant warned, “To mix the struggle to defend the unions, the peasants, the struggle of the students openly with the guerrilla fight, was very dangerous. It could end in a bloody repression of those organizations… one had to maintain and respect the division [between] the legal fight to maintain our rights and the clandestine, armed one.”

Similarly, a woman from Cotzal, in the department of Quiché lost her brother to the military in 1980, and remembered: “That’s how I knew that it [his kidnapping] was for giving food to the guerrillas. Yes, he gave them food, according to my mother… they later transferred him to Nebaj.” However, instead of the mother directing her anger at the army for taking him, she blamed the guerrillas for coming to their village: “My mother told the guerrillas that [the army] had taken him, and they responded that the family of the victim had to go to the mountains. And my mother said to them: ‘How can that be, since it was your fault this happened.’” In both of these cases, the military’s violent response to the guerrillas’ visit to indigenous communities

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19 CEH, Guatemala, Memoria del Silencio, 182.
20 CEH, Guatemala, Memoria del Silencio, 180.
21 REMHI, Guatemala, 25.
22 REMHI, Guatemala, 25.
makes them part of the problem. However, in the reports that included these testimonies, only two people felt negatively about the guerrillas out of hundreds of witnesses whose reflections were published in the reports.

Sometimes, joining the guerrillas had nothing to do with politics, but being on the side of the opposition offered a better option to indigenous communities than facing the military alone. In an undated interview from Alta Verapaz, a witness said, “We believed [the guerrillas] were our arms to resist, because the truth was that we had no one to stand up for us. The situation, as we saw it, was the same one in which the guerrillas walked, talked, and fought. And based on this we joined them, because our struggle was the same as their struggle.” This person’s community made the conscious decision to ally themselves with the guerrillas rather than the military because the indigenous people believed that the guerrillas would be better equipped to help them survive, but also because they felt that the guerrillas better understood their situation.

In December of 1990 in Santiago Atitlán, in the municipality of Sololá, a massacre occurred in which the military attacked the community, but the indigenous population was actually able to expel them, resulting in thirteen casualties, all Tz’utujil Mayan. A witness described the day after the massacre as such:

Here it was that on the second of December we awoke. We had been dreaming that there would be a great festival and we made offerings of food and for a change they left us a space of land. We awoke to the sound of the bells that there was going to be a festival, because we knew the significance of the bells was when there was something special and many people arrived that day, many people who never spoke to each other, who were enemies... they gave each other their hands; they started moving and decided to confront the situation. Many already started to tell their dreams, we had faith in our work, we started to record the names of those who left us, exactly how the massacre happened, but it didn’t matter because the voice had been heard, the blood had been seen by the world and because of that we called attention and gave force and sadness, but at the same time we were not content. Many people came, men, women, GAM [Mutual Support Group for the families of disappeared persons]... everyone in solidarity with Santiago Atitlán. Here is where we felt the weight and the pride.24

23 REMHI, Guatemala, 8.
24 CEH, Guatemala, Memoria del Silencio, 241.
The Santiago Atitlán massacre is several years beyond the time period of my study, but it needs to be included because it is an exemplary event. Neither the guerrillas nor any other political organization were involved in this conflict, therefore making it a purely indigenous armed defense against the government.

In the stories from the Committee for Historical Clarification and the Recovery for Historical Memory Project (the human rights report from the Archdiocese of Guatemala), one can see that even when not specifically looking for such testimonies, the indigenous people wanted to make their experiences of mobilization and solidarity known. While not all experiences were the same, the vast majority of the witnesses expressed pride in their efforts to resist repression. As is especially true for the CEH, however, one should not equate indigenous organizing with insurgent efforts. Although organizations such as CONAVIGUA, Acción Católica, GAM, and the other indigenous-based groups were not subversive in their intent or their actions, the military persecuted them as if they were the guerrillas, and the fact that they continued to operate despite this repression made them symbols of resistance.
Chapter Six

Conclusion

The Guatemalan Civil War between a military dictatorship and anti-government guerrilla insurgents lasted for forty-two years with the result of hundreds of thousands of deaths and forced displacements. Because over ninety percent of those killed were indigenous Mayan descendants, questions of how Mayans fought back against the government, how they related to the revolutionary Left, and what motivated them to do so are central to understanding the war. Although previous literature argued back and forth over whether the Mayans genuinely believed in the socialist political ideals of the guerrillas, or if they were manipulated into joining a cause that was beyond their comprehension, I wanted to find a solution that gave indigenous people more control over their own actions. By reading through hundreds of testimonies in the United Nations-funded truth commission report on Guatemala, as well as independently produced testimonies and interviews with Mayans who had joined guerrilla movements, I found that indigenous people who participated in resistance against the government did so for their own interests, either for preservation of one's culture or land, or to protest poverty and racism that they experienced as indigenous people. Previously held paternalistic stereotypes about Guatemala's rural indigenous people, as well as romanticized views of revolutionaries, have distorted the more nuanced view of what it means to revolt.

When David Stoll argued that Mayans could not have genuinely supported the guerrillas, he echoed the propaganda of the Guatemalan military and took agency away from those who did participate. Both the military and resistance movements utilized what they perceived as Mayan identity to push certain agendas, but one used racism as a weapon and the other claimed to want to eliminate racism. When the indigenous people themselves discussed their participation in
guerrilla organizations or other resistance movements, they indicated individual interests, meaning that they were not only driven to participate on one side or another because of values forced on them by outsiders, but instead they decided to resist due to their own experiences of the war as Mayans.

Non-indigenous Guatemalans tended to share Stoll’s belief that the guerrillas had little popular support. Daniel Wilkinson, in his travels around Guatemala, discussed the issue of Mayan insurgency with a wealthy woman from Guatemala City who remained unaware of indigenous involvement into the early 1990’s. She told him, “As far as I know, everyone who gave the guerrillas anything did so because they were forced to by the guerrillas. I don’t know who was really supporting them.”

Today, educational projects regarding the war grapple with the same issues of how to represent insurgents in relation to rural populations. After the CEH (Committee for Historical Clarification) released their Truth Commission report, USAID created a textbook for use in Guatemalan schools which included “a drawing of a soldier torturing a victim, while, next to it, a second drawing depicts a guerrilla fighter torturing another victim,” and “declares that the population was ‘caught between two armies.’” The resemblance of this U.S.-produced textbook’s version of events to those of David Stoll is undeniable, indicating the damaging nature of these kinds of statements. If children in Guatemala are learning this view about the second most important event in their country’s history (the Spanish conquest being the first), then the arguments of American scholars and military spokespeople certainly have a significant impact on the future of the treatment of indigenous people in Guatemala.

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James Dunkerley’s book *Power in the Isthmus* emphasizes why these questions are important to draw attention to the Guatemalan crisis:

If, as Carlos Fuentes says, ‘Western amnesia is selective,’ it proves highly resilient with respect to the victims of what passes for ‘western civilization’ when these are not, so to speak, of the west. Perhaps for this reason the extraordinary scope of political violence in Guatemala never attracted the international attention devoted to Argentina or Chile. For in Guatemala the great majority of those killed were not caucasian, middle-class and European in culture; they were ‘Indian,’ indigenous Americans who if they speak Spanish at all do so only as a second or third language, adhere resolutely to their autochthonous culture and appear both physically and in their tangible ‘otherness’ to be oriental… One does not have to go so far to register that the Indians of Guatemala, like the Blacks and ‘Coloureds’ of South Africa, are persecuted by a regime that is not the product of some alien culture but draws precisely on white, western and ‘Christian’ traditions to sanction its iniquities. Today this can no longer be forgotten or ignored; perhaps the only relief to hand lies in the continuing anonymity of the victims.³

There is not nearly as much public memory of political conflict in Guatemala as in Argentina or Chile, yet Guatemala produced more victims. When talking about the body count in Guatemala, there is a stronger sense of “the other,” so indigenous identity is significant not only in the context of the violence itself, but also in how we memorialize those losses. If we put a name and a face to these victims, and remember them as individuals who wished to protect cultures and values of their own, we can do away with the North American misconception that such violence is an unfortunately inevitable by-product of Latin American political struggles between varying factions.