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Guatemala (1966 - 1996)

Guatemala's thirty years of state violence and civil war came to an end in 1996. An estimated 200,000 people died in the conflict, more than 80% of whom were indigenous Mayans. Hundreds of thousands more were displaced. Both the government and the leftist rebels perpetrated abuses, but according to the official commission that investigated the conflict, state forces committed more than 90% of all human rights violations. Peace talks began in 1987, two years after the military government transitioned to civilian rule, culminating in a series of peace accords the last of which was signed in December 1996.

Dramatic economic inequalities, racism, and repression of political dissent were at the core of the conflict in Guatemala. In 1944, Guatemala's first democratic elections heralded populist reforms and raised the expectations of Guatemala's indigenous people, who by official measures comprise more than two-fifths of the country's population. A decade later, the United States sponsored a military coup to halt land reform policies that threatened the interests of multinational corporations such as the United Fruit Company. The new regime brought back old laws and repressed dissent. Poor communities, politically awakened in the 1940s and 1950s, and further inspired by liberation theology in the 1960s, countered increasing militarization with social organization, including support for labor unions, student groups, and several armed opposition groups that emerged in the 1960s.

Although guerrilla war began in the 1960s, the violence peaked in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when trade unions and indigenous movements challenged traditional ladino (mixed race) control of the country's economic and civic institutions. The military responded by destroying indigenous villages and massacring their inhabitants. In 1981, the government introduced the civil defense patrols, community based counter-insurgency organizations in which all village men between the ages of 18 and 60 were required to serve.

In 1985, the government began a transition to civilian rule - a shift that was backed by international pressure as well as the belief that the guerrillas no longer posed a significant threat to the state. The military retained much power, however, and state violence and repression continued. In 1987, the government began talks with the guerrillas, who by that point were unified in the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (URNG). United Nations mediators facilitated the negotiations, which produced a series of accords to protect indigenous rights, investigate human rights abuses, resettle displaced people, address socioeconomic and agrarian issues, and finally to create a lasting peace with the demobilization of guerrillas and reconfiguration of the military. A United Nations verification body, MINUGUA, was established to oversee implementation of the accords.

Print Resources

Schirmer, Jennifer (1998) *The Guatemalan Military Project: A Violence Called Democracy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 1998.

Jonas, Susanne (1991) *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Jonas, Susanne (2000) *Of Centaurs and Doves: Guatemala's Peace Process*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Stoll, David (1993) *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Online Resources

Commission for Historical Clarification. *Guatemala: Memory of Silence*.

A Human Rights History of Guatemala.

PeaceWomen: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom:

BBC News. *Country Profile: Guatemala*.

Timeline

1954 - United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) backs coup in Guatemala

1962 - first guerrilla group, Rebel Armed Forces (FAR), founded

1965 - first military massacre of civilians

1967 - military begins using death squads

1979 - Organization of People in Arms (ORPA) founded

1981 - increase in guerilla activities; military creates civil defense patrols

1982 - URNG unites ORPA, FAR, Guerilla Army of the Poor (EGP), and Guatemala Workers Party (PGT); military steps up massacres, scorched earth tactics

1985 - Guatemala returns to constitutional rule; continued repression of students, labor

1987 - URNG and government hold talks; repeated coup attempts

1992 - refugees negotiate the right of return from Mexico

1994 - first peace accords on human rights and historical clarification

1995 - socio-economic accord signed

1996 - final peace accords signed

1999 - UN-backed historical clarification commission issues report