



**State Violence
in Guatemala,
1960-1996:
A Quantitative
Reflection**

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AMERICAN
ASSOCIATION FOR THE
ADVANCEMENT OF
SCIENCE



HURIDOCs Cataloguing in Publication Data

TITLE: State violence in Guatemala, 1960-1996: a quantitative reflection

PERSONAL AUTHORS: Ball, Patrick ; Kobrak, Paul ; Spierer, Herbert

CORPORATE AUTHOR: American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Science and Human Rights Program ; International Center for Human Rights Research

PLACE OF PUBLICATION: Washington, DC

PUBLISHER: AAAS

ADDRESS: 1200 New York Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20005, United States

TELECOMMUNICATIONS: tel: 1.202.3266790 fax: 1.202.289.4950
eml: shrp@aaas.org

DATE OF PUBLICATION: 19991000

PAGES: xii, 156

ISBN: 0-87168-630-9

LANGUAGE: ENG / SPA

STATISTICAL INFORMATION: Y

INDEX: Human rights / Human rights violations / Extrajudicial executions / Disappearances

GEOGRAPHICAL TERMS: GUATEMALA

GEOGRAPHICAL CODES: 6236

FREE TEXT: This report uses statistics, together with historical analysis, to tell the story of state violence in Guatemala. Numbers and graphs help establish who the victims were, how they were killed, when they were killed, and who killed them.

ISBN 0-87168-630-9

Cover photo: Daniel Chauche

Printed in the United State of America.

Printed on recycled paper.

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1200 New York Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20005

For the victims of state violence in
Guatemala, the dead and the survivors

Preface

The following report uses quantitative analysis of data collected by the International Center for Human Rights Investigations (CIIDH) to present a history of the deliberate and sustained violence committed by state forces during Guatemala's recently concluded armed conflict.

Both the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and the CIIDH thank the interviewers, interview recruiters, data analysts and data entry staff who did the difficult work necessary to build this database. Over the last four years, the CIIDH research team in Guatemala collected, processed and analyzed over 19,000 case reports of human rights violations from various sources. In addition to those still at the CIIDH, the authors and the CIIDH wish to recognize the contribution of Paul Yamauchi who helped bring the project together and did much of the early data collection.

For this report, Patrick Ball designed the statistical analysis and extracted the data. Paul Kobrak researched and wrote the accompanying text. Herbert Spirer conducted the analysis and generated the graphs. The authors are solely responsible for the accuracy and analysis in this report.

Maria Consuelo Sánchez assisted with the documentary research. Matt Zimmerman designed the book, and Gretchen Richter assisted with the layout.

Louise Spirer and Deborah Billings provided detailed comments on early drafts, George Lovell and Ricardo Miranda each made useful suggestions.

The AAAS is grateful to the donors that have made this work possible, including the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the General Service Foundation, and an anonymous foundation.

CIIDH thanks their donors, including Centro Canadiense de Estudios y Cooperación Internacional (CECI), NCOS-Belgium, and an anonymous donor. In addition to the member organizations of the Guatemalan National Human Rights Coordinating Committee (CONADEHGUA), the CIIDH thanks the Association of Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared in Guatemala (FAMDEGUA) and the Center for Human Rights Legal Action (CHRLA) for their assistance to the project during certain phases.

**The data used in the analyses in this report
are available on the Internet at**

`http://hrdata.aaas.org/ciidh`

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

A single person killed is a tragedy, but a million people killed are a statistic.

~Josef Stalin

During Guatemala's 36-year armed conflict, the State killed hundreds of thousands of citizens and displaced a million more. The enormity of the numbers involved creates the danger that the terror in Guatemala, as in Stalin's Russia, will be remembered as statistics and not as human lives cut short. But inverting Stalin's quote, statistics can also establish the patterns of what is both a tragedy and a crime, in this case a deliberate and drawn-out policy of extra-judicial murder by the Guatemalan government.

The following report uses statistics, together with historical analysis, to tell the story of state violence in Guatemala. Numbers and graphs help establish who the victims were, how they were killed, when they were killed, and who killed them.

The report has three goals. First, to publish findings from the CIIDH database project, begun in 1994. Second, to recognize the efforts of the many human rights groups to make the Guatemalan public and the international community aware of the atrocities as they happened. And third, to establish the State's responsibility for the overwhelming majority of Guatemala's recent political violence.

The report verifies that extra-judicial killing occurred during every presidential regime since 1960, when Guatemala's modern period of insurgency and counterinsurgency began. In the late 1970s, state repression increased dramatically under General Fernando Romeo Lucas García. It reached even higher levels after a 1982 coup, when the destruction of entire rural villages became common practice during the rule of General José Efraín Ríos Montt. Just as the violence turned massive and indiscriminate, an analysis of the database finds that press coverage of political violence in Guatemala almost completely ceased, allowing the State to commit its terror in silence.

Over time, the State expanded the scope of its victims, from selective killings of militants in the armed insurgency in the 1960s, to an ever-widening attack on members of the political opposition the following decade. By the early 1980s, most of the dead were Maya villagers living in western Guatemala, killed in large groups that often included high percentages of women and small children, all victims of a government plan to stop the insurgency by terrorizing the civilian population.

The report finds that as the killings moved from the city to rural areas, the size of the groups in which people were killed and disappeared became larger, and as a consequence of the massivity, fewer individual victims were identified. However, those who committed the killing were more likely to be identified in the rural attacks. The urban pattern was characterized by clandestine death squads that committed selective murder in Guatemala City, allowing the government to deny its responsibility for the death squads' actions. But in the country's isolated Indian communities, uniformed soldiers openly committed mass extra-judicial killings. The army was frequently accompanied by civil patrollers, villagers obligated to serve the army, to help carry out rural massacres.

Another characteristic of state violence in Guatemala was how long it lasted. Even after security forces "pacified" most of the country in the early 1980s, they carried out extra-judicial political killings through 1996, when the conflict officially came to a close. Many of the victims in later years were activists trying to reestablish a political opposition movement in the wake of mass terror, and included a number of people, both in the city and the countryside, working for the defense of human rights in militarized Guatemala.

Human Rights Defense in Guatemala

For over thirty years, Guatemalan organizations challenged state violence through legal procedures and human rights reporting. As this report documents, the government's response has often been to turn its repressive force on these activists.

In 1966 at the University of San Carlos, the University Student Association (AEU) presented writs of *habeas corpus* seeking release of detained members of the political opposition. The government never produced the prisoners, but it did attack the AEU leadership, which suffered a series of killings over the next few years. In the early 1970s, the AEU formed the Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared. After years of providing a lone voice in criticizing the practices of the government of Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio, the group was forced to disband after non-uniformed men walked into its office on March 10, 1974, and murdered its director, Edmundo Guerra Theilheimer. In the late 1970s the level of violence increased anew and activists formed the National Human Rights Commission. This group also ceased operations due to government threats against its leadership and the forced disappearance of its founder, Irma Flaquer (Cáceres 1980: 201; Americas Watch 1989a: 44).

When state terror peaked in the early 1980s, no effective human rights groups functioned within Guatemala. Then, after the height of the violence, popular organizations slowly reestablished the country's human rights movement. As this report makes clear, they too faced repression for their efforts to hold the State accountable.

The CIIDH Project

For the last twenty years, much of the civilian, unarmed opposition in Guatemala has identified itself as the "popular movement." Especially since the peak of state terror, it has made human rights defense one of its principal concerns. In the 1990s, the popular movement includes organizations that survived the repression of early decades, such as the AEU and the Peasant Unity Committee (CUC). It also includes human rights groups formed in exile during the worst of the repression, such as the Guatemalan Human Rights Commission (CDHG). In recent years various new popular movement groups formed in Guatemala to represent the victims of state violence, from the Mutual Support Group (GAM) and the National Widows' Coordinating Committee (CONAVIGUA), to the Council of Ethnic Communities "Runujel Junám" (CERJ) and the Communities of Population in Resistance (CPRs).

In October 1993, some of the above organizations joined with other human rights groups to form the National Human Rights Coordinating Committee (CONADEHGUA). In 1996, the member groups agreed to pool their information on rights violations in Guatemala. Given the CIIDH's experience and technical skills, the structuring, analysis, and publication of the data was entrusted to it. The work was undertaken using the concepts and definitions CONADEHGUA established for all the work destined for the UN-organized Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH).

The CIIDH database consists of cases culled from direct testimonies and documentary and press sources. CIIDH members collected over 10,000 cases in a review of Guatemalan newspapers in the national archives for each date during the entire 36-year period of armed conflict. Another 4,000 cases came from documentary sources, including the archives of the CDHG and GAM and the publications of the Justice and Peace Committee and the Guatemalan Church in Exile. The heart of the database consists of over 5,000 testimonies, some from the archives of participating organizations, but most of which were collected directly by the CIIDH team.

The first interview phase took place in 1994 and 1995, among survivors of state violence living in the Communities of Population

in Resistance in northern Quiché, internal exiles who had never accepted army rule. As the military's control of the rest of the country slowly abated, the CIIDH formed regional teams to take testimonies throughout the country: on the southern coast, in the Petén jungle, in the Verapaces, and in the country's western highlands (in El Quiché, Sololá, Quetzaltenango, San Marcos, and Chimaltenango). Trained by the CIIDH in interview techniques, team members used a standardized and semi-structured interview protocol. The teams worked full-time for two years, throughout 1995 and 1996. Two-thirds of the interviews were conducted in witnesses' own Maya languages.¹

The CIIDH collected the interview forms, press reports, and documentary data in its Guatemala City office. In the first years, this was the only project of its kind in Guatemala, and so to protect the security of the staff and the interview participants, the project was developed without public fanfare. For the same reasons, beginning in 1994 all of the information stored in electronic form was encrypted using PGP software. CIIDH analysts checked the data for accuracy and repetitions before they calculated statistics.

Previous CIIDH reports have used the database to analyze three regions of rural Guatemala during the height of state violence (1996), the government practice of forced disappearance (1998), and popular organizing and state repression in the University of San Carlos (1999).

The Data

The CIIDH database follows human rights database design standards. A "case" is defined as the information given by a single source (a press report, or an interview) concerning violations that happened at a particular time and place. "Violations" are instances of violence, including killings, disappearances, torture, kidnapping, and injury. "Victims" are people who suffer violations. A human rights "case" may be very simple (with one victim who suffered one violation) or it may be very complex (with many victims each of whom suffered many different violations). In almost all of the statistics in this report, the unit being counted is the violation.²

¹ Most of the people working in the regional teams, both interviewers and those who recruited interview subjects (*jaladores*), belonged to the various popular movement organizations, including AEU, GAM, CERJ, CUC, CONAVIGUA, CONIC (Coordinadora Nacional Indígena y Campesina), CCDA (Comité Campesino del Altiplano), CPR-Sierra (Comunidades de Población en Resistencia de la Sierra), UCP (Unión Campesina del Petén), UCOSOP (Unión Campesina del Sur Occidente), and UNICAN (Unión Campesina del Norte).

² For discussions of large scale human rights database design and information management, see Ball et al. 1994 and Ball 1996.