Guatemala: A Brief History

The Mayans of Guatemala and the surrounding regions had one of the most advanced civilizations of the ancient world. Their cities flourished across Central America, complete with remarkable pyramids, temples, observatories and libraries, and their scholars produced works of literature, philosophy, art and architecture. Particularly skilled in mathematics and astronomy, Mayan scientists developed a calendar more precise than that used by NASA even today.

With the invasion of the Spanish Conquistadors in the early 1500s, the world of the Mayans, like all of the other Indigenous societies in the western hemisphere, came to a fiery and brutal end. Although medieval Europe was in many ways far less developed, the Conquistadors arrived with enormous military advantages: specifically, gun powder, steel swords, and horses. The Mayans fought valiantly on foot, with their obsidian spears and leather shields, but they suffered devastating losses. Within a few years, they had become slaves in their own homeland, deprived of their lands, their rights, and any political or social representation of any kind. Their libraries and cities were burned and sacked, and their religion and culture were banned. Throughout the hemisphere war, disease and slavery wiped out nearly 90% of the Indigenous population within a century.

Despite the odds, the Mayans of Guatemala survived and maintained their heritage, religion and languages intact, although often virtually clandestine. Today the socio-economic structure in Guatemala is reminiscent of the old South Africa, with the Mayans constituting the majority of the population--some 80%--yet subjected to extreme racial discrimination and repression. Stripped of both their lands and political representation, they remain a virtual serf population. The villagers suffer an 80% malnutrition level, 80% functional illiteracy level, and the highest infant mortality rate in the hemisphere, second only to people of Haiti. Meanwhile, the lighter skinned descendants of the Conquistadors and other colonists live on large plantations and enjoy great wealth and social prestige. Nevertheless, the Mayans cling fiercely to their own cultural identity, wearing their own hand-woven clothing, complete with mythical symbols, celebrating their own cultural and religious ceremonies, and speaking their own languages. Some 23 Mayan languages are still spoken in Guatemala today, and the people continue to secretly worship their own Gods at ancient temple sites in the mountains.

The Mayans have not accepted their fate lightly. A study of their history shows that in every generation since the invasion of the Spaniards, the Mayans have risen up in rebellion, armed only with rocks and machetes. Every generation, these slave revolts have been quickly crushed by the well armed forces of the oligarchy.

From 1944-1954, Guatemalan society enjoyed what is now referred to as the "Ten Years of Spring" with two popularly elected and reformist Presidents.
President Arbenz, himself a former military officer, permitted free expression, legalized unions and diverse political parties, and initiated basic socio-economic reforms. One key program was a moderate land reform effort aimed at alleviating the suffering of the rural poor. Pursuant to this plan, only plantations of very high acreage were affected; and only in cases where a certain percentage of such acreage was in fact lying unused. In these extreme cases, the unused portions of the land were not expropriated, but simply purchased by the Guatemalan government at the same value declared on the owner's tax forms. The property was then resold at low rates to peasant cooperatives. To set an example, President Arbenz started with his own lands.

Unfortunately for the people of Guatemala, the United Fruit Company was, at that time, one of the largest landowners in the country. Moreover, the "Frutera" had greatly undervalued the value of its holdings on its tax returns to the Guatemalan government. The executives were thus highly displeased when their fallow lands were forcibly bought back by the government at the price they themselves had declared. In 1954, at the height of the McCarthy era, the Company leaders hurried to Washington and cried "Communism." The results were swift and predictable. The CIA promptly organized a group of Guatemalan military dissidents, trained, armed and funded them, and helped them to plan and carry out a violent coup d'etat against the legally and popularly elected Arbenz. Arbenz himself was driven out of Guatemala and died heartbroken in exile. A blood bath ensued, peasant cooperatives were destroyed, unions and political parties crushed, and dissidents hunted down. Thousands were killed and many more fled the country. Recently released CIA documents include a CIA hit list prepared before the coup, identifying political and intellectual leaders as military targets. A military dictatorship was installed in the presidency and remained there until the 1986 election of civilian President Venizio Cerezo. A horrified young physician known as Che fled the country with the others, and moved to Cuba to help Fidel fight what he had seen for himself of "yankee imperialism."

Although the "Ten Years of Spring" attempt lay in ruins, the experience had whetted the popular appetite for reforms. Church leaders began to lead landless peasants to the swamplands of the Ixcan, helping them to establish cooperative villages and start a new life. Rural literacy campaigns flourished, and health promoter teams set to work in the aldeas. Cautious efforts to unionize in the cities began anew, and social commentary and criticism emanated from the University circles. A Mayan civil rights movement began, with demands for equality and an end to the repression. Simultaneously, a fledgling armed resistance movement laid roots in countryside. The FAR organized in the northeastern jungles of the Peten, while the EGP and ORPA organized in the western Mayan regions. All three groups later merged with the PGT of the capital, forming a united front called the U.R.N.G. in 1981.

By the late 1970s, the powers that be were alarmed by the growing popular demands for reforms. As had happened so many times in the past, they responded with great cruelty and force. The Guatemalan military set about to wipe out all such "subversive" activities for once and for all. Father William Woods, a U.S. citizen and a Maryknoll priest who had lead the cooperative
movement in the Ixcan region, received numerous death threats. In 1978 he was flying his small plane out of the region with three other Americans on board, including a young volunteer, a physician, and a journalist for a Church publication. The plane was shot down and all four were killed. In 1981 small group of Mayan leaders marched to the capital and peacefully occupied the Spanish Embassy to protest the repression against their people. Despite the calls of the Spanish Ambassador to leave them in peace, the authorities burned the building to the ground, killing all of the protesters as well as all of the Embassy staff. The Ambassador, badly injured, was the only survivor.

These horrifying events have become symbolic of the wave of repression carried out by the Guatemalan military against the civilian population throughout the 1980s. Often referred to as the "Silent Holocaust", the campaign left 200,000 civilians dead at the hands of the military death squads, and 440 Mayan villages wiped from the map. Extreme torture became commonplace as a method of coercion and intimidation. The union movement in the capital was crushed, and the literacy and rural health movements were destroyed as well. Repression against leaders of the Catholic Church was so intense that nuns and priests were finally evacuated from the Mayan highlands, their abandoned Churches used as barracks and often torture centers by the military. Thousands of catechistas were "disappeared". Hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans either fled the country or fled inwards into the jungles, forming the CPRs, or civilian resistance populations. Many others chose to pick up weapons and leave for the mountains to join the U.R.N.G. forces.

The United States' role throughout this time period was hardly illustrious. Despite the extreme and obvious repression, the U.S. continued to send massive military aid throughout most of the war. Even when such aid was temporarily suspended, arms and equipment supplies continued. The School of the Americas continued to train and graduate Guatemalan officers who became notorious for their human rights violations. Training manuals used clearly indicate practices which would violate human rights. Meanwhile, CIA officials worked closely with Guatemalan intelligence officers linked to death squad activities. Many such officers were on CIA payroll as "assets" or paid informants, despite their well known record for serious human rights violations. The CIA, moreover, knowingly paid "assets" for information obtained through the use of kidnapping, torture and extrajudicial execution. Worse yet, it was not unusual for North Americans to enter areas where prisoners were being secretly detained and tortured, ask some questions, then leave the victims to their fates. The Red Cross, United Nations, police and family members were never notified.

The civil war continued for more than thirty five years, the final peace accords being signed in December 1996. The United Nations sponsored Truth Commission, or Commission for Historical Clarification, ("CEH"), presented its findings in March 1999. The Commission found that the Guatemalan army had committed some 93% of the total war crimes, and had carried out over 600 massacres. Moreover, the army's counterinsurgency campaign had
legally-constituted genocide against the Mayan people. The U.R.N.G. forces were charged with 3% of the violations.

A key finding of the report was the conclusion that the United States government had directly contributed to this thirty year genocidal campaign. This included not only the 1954 CIA coup against President Arbenz, but also included the training of known human rights violators at the School of the Americas and other military centers, the continued financing of such human rights violators, and the close collaboration with military intelligence units which carried out death squad activities.