

TERROR IN THE LAND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT



Guatemala under
General Efraín Ríos Montt
1982–1983

VIRGINIA GARRARD-BURNETT

Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit

RELIGION AND GLOBAL POLITICS SERIES

SERIES EDITOR

John L. Esposito

University Professor and Director

Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding

Georgetown University

ISLAMIC LEVIATHAN

Islam and the Making of State Power

Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr

RACHID GHANNOUCHI

A Democrat within Islamism

Azzam S. Tamimi

BALKAN IDOLS

Religion and Nationalism in Yugoslav States

Vjekoslav Perica

ISLAMIC POLITICAL IDENTITY IN TURKEY

M. Hakan Yavuz

RELIGION AND POLITICS IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA

Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu

PIETY AND POLITICS

Islamism in Contemporary Malaysia

Joseph Chinyong Liow

TERROR IN THE LAND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Guatemala under General Efraín Ríos Montt, 1982–1983

Virginia Garrard-Burnett

Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit

*Guatemala under General Efraín Ríos
Montt, 1982–1983*

VIRGINIA GARRARD-BURNETT

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2010

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further
Oxford University's objective of excellence
in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Copyright © 2010 by Oxford University Press, Inc.

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press.
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Garrard-Burnett, Virginia, 1957–
Terror in the land of the Holy Spirit : Guatemala under General Efraín
Ríos Montt, 1982–1983 / by Virginia Garrard-Burnett.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-537964-8

1. Ríos Montt, Efraín—Political and social views. 2. Ríos Montt, Efraín—Religion. 3. Guatemala—
Politics and government—1945–1985. 4. State-sponsored terrorism—Guatemala—History—
20th century. 5. Political violence—Guatemala—History— 20th century. 6. Mayas—Crimes
against—Guatemala—History—20th century. 7. Human rights—Guatemala—History—
20th century. 8. Guatemala—Politics and government—1945–1985. 9. Christianity and
politics—Guatemala—History—20th century. 10. Presidents—Guatemala—Biography. I. Title.
F1466.5.R56G37 2009
303.6'409728109048—dc22 2009010681

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

To John, who has been right alongside me through it all.

This page intentionally left blank

Preface: Some Notes on Appropriateness in the Writing of History

I am not a particular fan of postmodern disclosures of personal subjectivity, but it seems unavoidable here, because the writing of this book is in part my effort to sort through a period of Guatemala's history that intersected with and in many ways has helped to shape my own life. In making this disclosure, I hasten to add that I do not wish in any way to privilege myself in the writing of this history; this is a story about Guatemala and Guatemalans, and not about the beholder and her own myopic gaze. As Colombian historian Marta Zambrano reminds us, however, there is always a double hermeneutic: "historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, ethnohistorians . . . are subjects of history as much as they are constructors of history, as much as the subjects that they investigate."¹ There is, then, no way to get around the how and the why of my writing a book that for many years I refused to touch because of my long-held conviction that this story was best told by Guatemalans, not North Americans. I embrace it today only because I have come to believe that this dark period in Guatemala's history needs as much light cast on it as possible, and that light can come from many directions.

There is today within Guatemala and outside of it a vigorous and evolving historiographical debate about the nature and meaning of the thirty-six-year struggle. At the time, both the Right and the Left framed the motives behind the war within the construct of revolution and counterinsurgency—that is to say, as part of the ongoing narrative of the Cold War. More recent historiography of the period offers a

more nuanced view. Much of this work derives from and reflects the analysis of the truth commissions that published their findings in late 1998 and which I explore in more detail in chapter 1. The (2004) two-volume companion study produced by the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamerica (CIRMA) and edited by Arturo Taracena Arriola, Santiago Bastos, and others set the standard for framing our basic understanding of the armed struggle and the counterinsurgency in both geopolitical and ethnic terms.² The armed struggle, under an ambitious Marxist leadership, sought to overthrow the corrupt and brutal military government. This government represented only the interests of itself, the United States, and the entrenched and rapacious ladino planter class that had governed Guatemala since 1954, when the CIA and local elites had engineered the overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz. The government's response to this threat—which represented not only a political challenge, but also a racial one, was to defeat the popular movements at any cost. The war of counterinsurgency against a communist threat, fueled by racism, disdain, and violence, would eventually escalate into genocide against the Mayan people.

Several strands of debate follow from Taracena and Bastos's basic framework. Greg Grandin and Daniel Wilkinson directly link the roots of rebellion in the 1970s and 1980s to the unfulfilled promises and aspirations of the 1940s and 1950s. In *The Last Colonial Massacre* (2004), Grandin traces the leadership of the milestone 1978 Panzós uprising (in which the Guatemalan military gunned down a group of Q'eqchi' campesino organizers during a protest to reclaim their land) directly back to the campesino unions that formed, with government support, during the reform of the 1940s. In his 2002 book *Silence on the Mountain*,³ Wilkinson tracks a similar trajectory in the department of San Marcos, identifying former labor organizers and peasant leaders from the Ten Years of Spring who reemerged from the shadows three decades later to support the armed struggle. These works were among the first to draw a direct line from the aborted hopes and expectations of one revolution to those of the next.

A second current of debate is driven largely by the work of social scientists and has a largely presentist orientation. This literature emphasizes the role played by racism and ethnic identity in both the war and the construction of the peace. The emergence of the (political) Mayan movement in the late 1980s, the quincentenary of Columbus's arrival, and the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Rigoberta Menchú in 1992 are richly explicated in Diane Nelson's *A Finger in the Wound* (1999), which explores the nexus of ethnicity, violence, and the construction of contemporary Guatemalan society in the early 1990s.⁴ Finally, works by Mayan intellectuals and activists such as Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil and Enrique Sam Colop, along with Mayan novelist Gaspar Pedro Gonzáles,

emphasize the pernicious roles that racism and ladino policies of assimilation played not only in the army's conduct of counterinsurgency but throughout the "nation's"—a term that Cojtí, among others, might reject—history.⁵

Within this ethnic debate lies another branch of contestation over the agency of the Maya themselves during the war: were they active participants—informed cadres—in the armed struggle, or were they simply innocent victims caught up in a wave of genocidal nationalism? This heated debate has played out in several different venues, but the most passionate discussion emerges from the work of, and reaction to, American anthropologist David Stoll. In two books, *Between Two Armies* and *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, Stoll argues that the Maya were, by and large, caught "between two armies," victims of both the Guatemalan army and the guerrillas who took advantage of them. Nevertheless, Stoll's work, especially his work on Menchú, who he argues falsely portrayed herself as a political naïf and fabulist in her popular autobiography, was a catalyst for raising again the controversy over agency, of Maya in the war, and also over the role that foreign academics should or should not play in the creation of other people's national histories and symbols. The fierce criticism that other scholars levied against Stoll for both the tone and the content of his work, much of which is collected in a volume edited by Guatemalan literary theorist Arturo Arias, titled *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* (2001), makes it clear that the historiography for this period is still very much under construction.⁶

It is one of the purposes of this work to pull the focus back from these contentious and presentist arguments for a wider shot of what happened in Guatemala during the Ríos Montt period. This is not to suggest that these debates are unimportant; to the contrary, they inform this work at every level. But I am seeking to develop a fuller context to understand why the events that took place in Guatemala in the early 1980s unfolded as they did. I wish to reveal competitive narratives of historical memory and the social metaphors that make extreme violence possible. I am interested in the ways that fear, acquiescence, and self-interest contribute to popular support for bad government. I am concerned with how competing moral discourses can result in what are, subjectively speaking, immoral consequences. Finally, borrowing from James Joyce's observation that "in the particular is contained the universal," I want to explore what lessons we can draw from Guatemala's recent history to better understand what happens when race, class, nationalism, politics, and religion, utopianism, cynicism, messianism, and fear all come together in violent collision.⁷

I first went to Guatemala as a young and very naive graduate student in 1980. It was only a few months after the Spanish Embassy fire, an event I knew of

only by having stumbled across something about it in *Time* magazine. I asked an advisor at Tulane if it was a safe time to go to Guatemala, and he replied, “If you wait for a safe time to go to Guatemala, you’ll never go there,” a reply that was both generally true but also specifically wrong, in that Guatemala in 1980 was in the upswing of an unprecedented and catastrophic cycle of political violence. Having spent a long summer in Lucas-era Guatemala—where I was warned not to go to Guatemala City, out of fear of being shot at a stoplight by armed men on motorcycles (a threat I now recognize as more metaphoric than real)—I returned to New Orleans. Shortly thereafter, the director of the Guatemalan institute where I had taken classes was dramatically forced into exile, along with a history professor who had befriended me; my friend Julio had left by dark of night after the security forces had mistaken another family for his and had killed them—including the young children—in their home. Like many intellectuals, he ended up holding up his end of the revolution from Europe. Back in New Orleans, over the course of the next two years, we would hear rumors of horror and try to piece together what news we could from Guatemala—the 1982 Amnesty International report, the visits from scholars, health workers, teachers, journalists, and activists who had escaped into exile, news of friends and *conocidos* who had vanished or, worse still, died violently; but in an era predating e-mail and the Internet, reliable information was not easy to obtain. What little we did hear left us both disbelieving and despairing.

I returned to Guatemala again in 1983 and continued to live there most of the time through 1984. When I first came back in May 1983, things had changed dramatically. General Efraín Ríos Montt had taken power and was still in office (at least for a few months more); the worst of the violence had already passed and an enforced calm was evident everywhere. On the road between Guatemala City and Antigua, slogans were inscribed in large, white, emphatic letters: “La Nueva Guatemala es Paz y Desarrollo” (the New Guatemala Is Peace and Development); “Otra Obra Más Del Gobierno” (Another Government Work); “La Nueva Guatemala es desarrollo y progreso” (The New Guatemala is development and progress). Ríos Montt’s blue and white anti-corruption posters, portraying a blue hand against a field of white, below which was written: “No robo, no miento, no abuso” (I don’t steal, I don’t lie, I don’t abuse), were ubiquitous in the public places where the government was in control. It was difficult and sometimes impossible to travel to many parts of the highlands, especially those the government still called the “zones of conflict.” Even outside those areas, evidence of what had happened was everywhere, from burned-out buildings, fields, and buses—even along the main tourist artery, the Pan American Highway—to the civil patrols doing drills in every

municipio, wearing new straw hats supplied by the government and carrying “weapons” (often just machetes or even wood roughly carved to look like a rifle) and spanking-new Guatemalan flags. New evangelical church storefronts competed with the flapping yellow and white banners left over from the March visit of Pope John Paul II.

On one ill-advised trip with friends to Panajachel in August 1983, we passed a civil patrol that had just killed a man; they had impaled his body on their flagpole and hung him out on display, right on the edge of the Pan American Highway. We arrived in Panajachel, the tourist mecca, to find that we were the only visitors in town save for a family of Salvadorans who had unwisely thought that Guatemala might provide a temporary respite from their own war. At the end of Calle Santander, the street still lined with shops and booths chock full of faded, unpurchased *típica*, a camouflaged soldier was stationed in a machine-gun nest surrounded by sandbags. A few blocks away, the Hotel del Lago, once the town's most elegant inn, stood in ruins, a large blackened crater marking the place where the guerrillas had reportedly planted a large bomb. Not even the Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo's most picturesque and theme park-like village had escaped, and this was not the worst of it by far.

Most striking during this period were the people we met—thin and haunted women; a few men; dirty, runny-nosed, and sickly children; women trying to nurse famished babies at desiccated breasts. Many bore the look of bewilderment, shock, and disbelief that I recognized from a time in my childhood when a tornado had touched down close enough to our house to suck some of our possessions out of the doors and windows, but then capriciously jumped away to kill our neighbors a few blocks away. Numbed into silence by fear and trauma, people were attempting to reconstruct their lives, but their own muteness was overshadowed by the larger official silences. Information was scanty, erratic, and astonishingly contradictory: The communist insurgents had forced the government's hand. A scorched-earth campaign had taken place to root out subversion. The government had reclaimed an active presence in the highlands, and was doing good works and public action to help people recover from the horrendous acts of violence that had recently been perpetrated by . . . well, whom?

This official discourse—gleaned from media coverage, official pronouncements, and general *chisme* (rumor)—ran something like this: The subversion itself was really quite small and ineffective, made up largely of foreigners, especially Cubans, who had no idea of Guatemala's reality and who were widely distrusted by the “Indians.” Or the guerrillas had gained so much support among the Indians that they threatened to overthrow the government

and put a Cuban-style communist government in its place; only a counterinsurgency as brutal and effective as the one in 1982–1983 could defeat them once and for all. Or the people's victory was just within reach. Or the Indians were so locally oriented, insular, and hostile to outsiders that they would never succumb to the guerrillas' promises. Or the guerrillas controlled no territory; the guerrillas controlled most of the highlands. Or the Indians supported the guerrillas, but only due to coercion and duress. Or the indigenous were true revolutionaries, and their full incorporation into the popular movement represented an overwhelming threat to the Guatemalan army and to the national security state. Or most of the guerrillas were actually Cubans, Nicaraguans, Indians, ladinos, Coca-Cola workers; compared to El Salvador, actually there really weren't very many guerrillas at all and they didn't represent a real threat, but they were going to take over the country if something drastic wasn't done.

And what of the counterinsurgency? Here too were many versions, some mirror inversions of others: The military campaign's brutality caused the deaths of many innocent people, especially indigenous people, who had the misfortune to be "caught between two fires," the army and the guerrillas. Or the military strategy "drained the sea in which the fish swam" so effectively that the ocean of subversion in Guatemala was at last run dry, to the benefit of all—the *solución guatemalteca*. Or there were no massacres of civilians, only the killing of guerrillas. The sign painted on the mountainside read "OTRA OBRA MÁS DEL GOBIERNO." Promise or threat? Or the Guatemalan army was incapable of violating human rights, although the Special Forces—Kaibiles—took such great pride in being trained killers that they dismembered live chickens on television. Or most of the human rights violations took place under Lucas, not Ríos Montt. Painted on a billboard: "La nueva Guatemala es paz y desarrollo." A variation on this theme: charges of human rights violations were the product of solidarity groups and other leftists who wanted to *desprestigiar* (take prestige from) Guatemala in order to bring about a Marxist victory.

And who was this General Ríos Montt? Ríos Montt was a righteous man of God who stood for honesty and morality. Or Ríos Montt was a wild-eyed religious fanatic who didn't have any idea what was going on in the countryside. Or Ríos Montt was a skilled military commander who brought order and an end to violence in the highlands. Ríos Montt was a mass murderer. Ríos Montt was a pawn of the United States. At least he was better than Lucas. And so on.

Still louder than the rumors were the silences, holes in time and space. In the early 1980s, people rarely spoke openly of what they had seen and heard; the term *la violencia* was never uttered, though people would sometimes speak quietly of *la situación*. I at first attributed the great silences to people's

understandable unwillingness to confide in a stranger, or to an inability to communicate dangerous and intimate information in a language—Spanish—that was not native, often to either of us. I also thought at first that silence might be a matter of misplaced deference, a long-established habit of distance and filtering that has served generations of subaltern people. All this, probably, was true: silence can also be a form of communication.

I still believe that silence, to a great extent, is a tactic of survival: as Linda Green has noted in her study of Mayan widows, “apparent Maya obsequiousness has served as a shield to provide distance and has also been a powerful shaper of Maya practice.” But Green also makes a careful distinction between silence and silencing, the transitive form of making-silent. She writes, “Silence can operate as a survival strategy; yet silencing is a powerful mechanism of control through fear.” Borrowing from Marcelo Suarez-Orozco’s work on Argentina, she adds a cautionary note that has special resonance for the historian: “Silence imposed through terror [became] the idiom of social consensus in the *altiplano*.”⁸

The shifting sands of rumors, disinformation, misinformation, wishful thinking, self-delusion, and lies make the production of history for this period unusually difficult; when our colleagues caution against “positivist” linear narratives, one wonders if such a thing could even be possible. Nevertheless, Guatemalans have, over the past decade, found it important to try to come to grips with this history. The “recuperation of the historic memory,” a phrase used by the Catholic Church’s truth report from the Recovery of Historical Memory Project, describes the process by which activists, politicians, scholars, and, especially, public intellectuals from both the Mayan and non-Mayan community have attempted to construct an acceptable framework through which they can capture and contextualize the past and use that to construct a better future⁹—to consciously construct the kind of “imagined community” that Benedict Anderson famously described.¹⁰ But they, along with all Guatemalans, and in fact all who deal with history, must also come to grips with what Freud called *Nachträglichkeit* (afterwardness)—a consciousness that memory, as it functions in the present, must inevitably also incorporate some sense of “what we didn’t know at the time” and the guilt that goes along with that knowledge.¹¹

Thanks to the work of two separate truth commissions and to the rich scholarly gaze that has been cast upon it, at this moment in Guatemala there is currently something resembling a consensus on a historic memory of the early 1980s. In the public intellectual forum, this consensus centers on racism and genocide as the point of departure for understanding the nature of state violence and for establishing a common base on which to (re)build civil society.

Since the end of the civil war in December 1996 and the repatriation of many leading intellectuals, perhaps because of the high visibility of the Mayan movement in the 1990s, Guatemala has been surprisingly open to entertaining the kinds of “tertiary discourses” that subaltern theoretician Ranajit Guha describes as a “[leftist and subaltern] literature [that is] distinguished by its efforts to break away from the code of counterinsurgency.”¹² In this reading, the voice of the subaltern (here the Mayan voice) takes precedence over elite historicist readings that emphasize basic economic and political factors.¹³ As time goes on, proximate memory recedes, and different political agendas arise, however, this view may eventually give way to another; in fact, it may be changing even now.

Drawing from the work of Walter Benjamin, Sergio Tischler Visquerra writes of history as a “critical constellation,” in which antagonists construct history, producing a “negative” or “against the grain” (*contrapelo*) history based on each one’s perceptions of oppression by another.¹⁴ Because the political violence in Guatemala was so prolonged and so virulent (and so enduring, as political violence has given way to even more pervasive “common” violence), the polysemic strands of historic memory of the years of armed struggle remain tendentious and strained: it is not merely a binary contest between the narratives of antagonists, but the multiple historic memories of people—powerful and powerless alike—whose lives touched the violence.

In postconflict Guatemala as elsewhere, social actors seek to rationalize and make logical the events that make up their own lives and those of their communities. In so doing, they work within a milieu of memory that the theorist Pierre Nora has defined as “subjective, often emotionally charged or flawed, [with an] awareness of a still-present past that emerges within a community, of an environment of identity and experience.”¹⁵ It is little wonder, then, that varied and even conflicting narratives emerge.

Steve J. Stern, in his trilogy *Chile under Pinochet* (a setting not completely unlike Guatemala under the rule of the generals), elaborates on this process: “The point of . . . historical research becomes not only to establish the factual truth or falsehood of events . . . but also to understand what social truths or processes led people to tell their stories the way they do, in recognizable patterns.”¹⁶ Given that it is the historian’s task to try to derive some order from these diverse patterns, Stern suggests the image of a “memory box” as a way in which selective and competing memories and historical narratives can give meaning to and eventually find legitimacy within a traumatic community past. Stern describes this metaphorically as a “giant, collectively-built memory chest . . . that is foundational to the community, not marginal; it sits in the living room, not the attic.” He writes: “It contains several competing

scripted albums, each of them works in progress that seek to define and give shape to a crucial turning point in life. . . . The memory chest is a precious box to which people are drawn, to which they add or rearrange pictures and scripts, and about which they quarrel or even scuffle.”¹⁷

The metaphor of the memory box helpfully points us away from the binary and antagonistic readings that often cloud recent history; it also offers a way to deal with the epistemological detritus that Stern calls “loose memories”—factual tidbits, rumors, personal animosities, scandals—that do not fit into tidy historical narratives. However, the complexity of historic memory—comprising not only the kinds of “artifacts” that fill a memory box but also the dark matter of silence, *olvidio* (forgetting), and oblivion (the opposite of remembering, but also part of it)—suggests many other metaphors as well. A better image, at least in this case, might be Indra’s net—the image in Buddhist philosophy of a celestial net with a jewel at each vortex, each of which reflects every other jewel in the net. History can be thought of as made up of disaggregated “jewels” that exist separately but which are also radically interconnected, since the whole is implied or contained in each part.¹⁸ This is not to suggest that every memory or interpretation carries, or even deserves, equal value or consideration—they do not—but simply that each interpretation is affected by and reflected in the others. This work, then, promises to be neither positivist nor definitive, but it attempts to cast history’s net over the 1982–1983 period.

An insufficient note of acknowledgment and thanks to all those who helped guide me through the early 1980s and in the writing of this book. I have received financial and moral support for this project from several organizations, especially the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of Texas, which has provided me with Mellon, Title VI, and Houston fellowship funds to support my research, and to the University of Texas Department of History for the gift of time to work on this. At Oxford University Press, special thanks to Cynthia Read, and also to Andrew Chesnut for pointing me in her direction. My heartfelt thanks go to all the people who asked that their names not be used but who were willing to talk to me even when their voices were shaking. In no particular order but with great gratitude I would like to thank Chris Lutz, Julio Castellanos Cambranes, Ralph Lee Woodward Jr., Francisco Goldman, Jean-Marie Simon, Dennis Smith, Antonio Otzoy, Matt Sampson, John Watanabe, Arturo Arias, Charlie Hale, María Elena Martin, Arturo Taracena, María Rosenda Camey, Irma Otzoy, Rick and Betty Adams, Albertina Pop, Bruce Calder, Bill Malone, Greg Grandin, Paul Kobrak, Peter Hubble, Kate Doyle, Anne Dibble, Adriana Dingman, Ann Twinam, Raúl Madrid, Nicolas Shumway, Alan Tully, Mark Lawrence, and my anonymous

readers. Above all, I would like to thank David Stoll, who graciously shared his rich trove of Ríos Montt files with me. To those who are no longer with us to read this note of thanks: Anson Ng, Bob Rosenhouse, Bill Swezy, and Barbara Ford. Special thanks to my former and current students who have helped in a variety of ways with this project: Alejandra Batres Granados, Patrick Timmons, Bonar Hernández, Susana Kaiser, Guy Lawson, Paula Winch, Garry Sparks, David Lauderback, Mauricio Pajón, Sam Frazier, Creighton Chandler, Cheasty Miller, and María Velásquez-Aguilar. Special love and thanks also go to my parents, James W. and Mary Ida (Mib) Garrard, who trusted me enough to let me to go to a dangerous place even though I was very young. A penultimate word of thanks to my children, Willie, Grant, and Helen, for being the lights of my life as I have been writing about a very dark time. Last but decidedly not least, my love and thanks to John, who has been close by my side, at least in spirit, through it all. The responsibility for this book, for better or worse, is, of course, entirely my own.

Contents

1. Ríos Montt Earns His Place in the History Books:
Debates about *la Violencia*, 3
2. Guatemala's Descent into Violence, 23
3. Ríos Montt and the New Guatemala, 53
4. Terror, 85
5. "Los Que Matan en el Nombre de Dios": Ríos Montt
and the Religious Question, 113
6. Blind Eyes and Willful Ignorance: U.S. Foreign
Policy, Media, and Foreign Evangelicals, 145
- Epilogue, 167
- Notes, 179
- Bibliography, 233
- Index, 255

This page intentionally left blank

Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit

This page intentionally left blank

I

Ríos Montt Earns His Place in the History Books

Debates about la Violencia

El Silencio

Guardaré silencio

Para escucharte . . .

Pero

No hablés

Para callarme.

—Humberto Ak'abal, *Raqonchi'aj, Grito*

General José Efraín Ríos Montt was Guatemala's first Pentecostal chief of state, an enigmatic and paradoxical figure who simultaneously spoke of bringing both God's love and scorched earth to the countryside without apparent contradiction. Ríos Montt served as Guatemala's head of state for seventeen tumultuous months in 1982–1983, a period now known in Guatemalan history as *la violencia*, although it was spoken of at the time, if at all, in hushed tones, simply as *la situación*. This sobriquet places Ríos Montt's administration at the core, the violent and bloody nadir, of the nation's thirty-six-year struggle between a leftist armed insurgency and the Guatemalan military government, which lasted from 1960 to 1996. The violence of the early 1980s places Guatemala squarely in the company of nations that in the twentieth century purposefully did great harm to their own citizens in order to "save" the state and its interests from a hostile ideology that seemed to, or in fact did, threaten its demise. Historians of the future may well come to define the twentieth

century by the number and scope of its genocides—a neologism coined, appropriately, in midcentury to describe a government's killing of its own people on a massive scale. If so, the Ríos Montt administration by all rights has, as the cliché goes, earned its place in the history books.

Recovering the Historic Memory

The signing of peace accords in December 1996 finally brought an end to Guatemala's civil war, an asymmetrical struggle that stands out even by the sanguinary standards of the late twentieth century for its efficient use of state terror and its disproportionate deployment of violence against noncombatants. Since that time, Guatemala, confronted by the findings of two separate truth commissions and the demands of a variety of political and social movements, has been forced to begin to come to grips with—even to reconceptualize—its own contemporary history, a process that the Catholic Church's truth commission called the "recuperation of the historic memory." This process places history at the center of the (re)construction of civil society, and is mindful of the theologian Jon Sobrino's indictment that "there are millions who do not utter a word, and we know nothing of how they live or how they die. We do not know their names or even their exact number."¹ By recovering names and events and placing them within a new historical narrative, Guatemala is engaging in what historian Robert Moeller has called (in reference to Germany) a "search for a usable past," by which the nation can wrest some kind of meaning out of its national trauma and move forward into a better and more just future.² The construction of nationality through the writing of history has been a key task of historians since at least the nineteenth century, but the creation of a new national narrative is especially crucial in a country seeking to make a clean break with a recent and deeply traumatic past.³

There is no mistaking that the process of recuperating history is as much political as it is academic or juridical, as it assigns guilt and innocence and tries to recover and resignify names, places, and events that earlier regimes had attempted to erase from the public record and personal memory. As Martha Minow notes, the process of reconstructing traumatic history, especially through truth commissions is important for "confirming what some had suspected and what others had refused to believe."⁴ William Beezley and David Lorey, writing about truth commissions in general, point out that as society moves from war to peace, a truth commission functions on three levels: (1) personal catharsis, (2) moral reconstruction, and (3) political action to placate trauma.⁵ The purpose of truth commissions is, precisely, not to exact vengeance

to punish perpetrators and wrongdoers, but rather to build a new narrative based on national reconciliation. As Greg Grandin and Thomas Klubock note in their recent work, “The imperative to build forgiveness and reconciliation translated individual modes of working through trauma to the national social and political sphere in the name of building social and political consensus. In the end, the focus on specific cases, individual victims, and individual perpetrators abets the slippery move from individual experiences of trauma and healing to social structure and political process.”⁶

In the words of the report from the Catholic Church’s Recovery of Historical Memory Project (REMHI), “Historical memory has an important role to play in dismantling the mechanism that made state terrorism possible and in exposing the role terrorism plays in an exclusive political and economic system. . . . The distortion of events and of accountability for them elevates the risk that ways will be found to legitimize the instigators of the war, placing Guatemala’s future in grave jeopardy.”⁷ One must bear in mind that in this process there is no such thing as “neutral” knowledge, although actual facts do exist (dates, events, and persons—though even these sorts of data are not always hard and indisputable). It is the interpretation of these facts as we understand them that makes the creation of a common history a consummately political task; it requires that activists, historians, and other national myth-makers privilege certain types of knowledge and interpretations and downplay or even exclude others outright. It is within this framework that truth projects create a new official memory (history) for the decades of war, the new *imaginaire* (imaginary)—a common, collective, but also self-consciously constructed vision—for postconflict Guatemala.

The Truth Commission Reports

One of the immediate tasks that faced Guatemala after the signing of the peace accords was the development of a truth commission to sort out the facts of the long armed struggle. In 1998, the nation received extensive reports from two truth commissions, one known as the Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), and the other, created by the Catholic Archdiocese of Guatemala, known as the Proyecto Interdiocesano de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (REMHI).⁸ The two truth reports differ slightly in tone, in interpretation, and in their statistics: REMHI, for example, records that 422 massacres took place during the armed conflict, while CEH counts 626 massacres, a significant difference that one may attribute to differing methodologies and confusion in place names that may have resulted in either the overcounting or

undercounting of massacre reports.⁹ While the two reports vary somewhat in focus and analysis, the conclusions of both are firm: the military committed the vast majority of the human rights violations that took place over the course of the thirty-six-year conflict.

There is also clear, documented evidence of guerrilla-directed violence, particularly in the matter of targeted assassinations, but the violence that occurred during the armed conflict was overwhelmingly lopsided: REMHI found the state responsible for 83 percent of the killings, while CEH charged the state with slightly more than 90 percent of the killings that occurred over the three and a half decades of armed conflict. A preponderance of these violations took place in the early 1980s, reaching a pinnacle in 1982.¹⁰ Both projects unequivocally lay responsibility at the feet of Ríos Montt and his military planners. These are the ones, the commissions charge, who executed the scorched-earth campaign (*tierra arrasada*) that left hundreds of thousands of Guatemalan citizens dead, exiled, or emotionally maimed, and came close to destroying one of the world's great native cultures.

Building a History for Civil Society

Within this new historical narrative—which demands villains as well as heroes—lies the question of the role of Ríos Montt and his culpability in the brutal counterinsurgency campaign against the Marxist guerrilla groups that took place on his watch. There is little question that the most extensive state-sponsored political violence occurred during his presidency from 1982 to 1983. Some estimates suggest that within the seventeen-month period of Ríos Montt's rule, the military launched actions against some 4,000 villages and drove 1,200,000 people into either internal or external exile.¹¹ According to the two truth commissions, more than 200,000 people died in political violence over the course of the thirty-six-year war, the vast majority, upward of 90 percent, by all accounts at the hands of the security forces—the army, special forces, and civil patrols; of this grim total, according to CEH, 43 percent died during Ríos Montt's seventeen months in office.¹²

Despite the foregoing recitation of statistics, it is important not to lionize the precise numbers that come out of the truth commission reports. The figure of 200,000 is an estimate,¹³ based on an extrapolation of clearly and definitively documented specific cases of human rights abuses which, when used alone, may (or may not) understate the number of people “disappeared” and massacred in unreported or underreported, or even unremembered

events.¹⁴ If the figure 200,000 is correct, this would mean that somewhere close to 86,000 people died during Ríos Montt's tenure, an astonishing total not (yet?) borne out by forensic excavations of mass burial sites but which, at least, lends symbolic ballast to the charge that large, perhaps incalculable, numbers died at the hands of the regime.¹⁵

The Mayan Holocaust

Of those killed in the early 1980s, the majority—the truth commissions estimate upward of 80 percent—were Mayan, a fact that sharply distinguishes this period from earlier phases of the armed conflict, when the war's victims tended to be *ladino* (nonindigenous): *campesinos*, trade unionists, students, reformist politicians, and the military's conscripted foot soldiers.¹⁶ The sharp focus of violence on Mayan people during the early 1980s has given rise to the phrase “the Mayan holocaust.” This refers not only to the loss of Mayan lives, but also the loss of culture that resulted from the political violence, as rural Maya exchanged their indigenous identity for that of poor *ladinos* in order to live in relative anonymity in Guatemala's cities. Tens of thousands fled to refuge in Mexico, elsewhere in Central America, and to the United States, where they assumed new conflated and hybridized identities as Guatemalans (a self-identification that many indigenous people only embraced in exile) or, more broadly, Latinos, Hispanics, or even, in U.S. immigration courts, OTMs—Other Than Mexicans. The counterinsurgency campaign of the early 1980s was the worst calamity to befall Mayan life and culture in Guatemala since the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest. So invasive was the assault on Mayan lives and culture during this period that one elderly Mayan woman referred to it as *desencarnación*, the loss of flesh, or loss of being—an antonym of “incarnation.”¹⁷

Data on human rights violations are more difficult to collect than one might expect: in addition to official efforts to repress information and people's understandable fear and reticence about offering witness and survivor's testimony about traumatic events, even reports on specific cases can be redundant, inaccurate, and incomplete. The International Center for Human Rights Investigations (CIIDH), a group that supports investigations into genocide and human rights violations in many parts of the world, has compiled a third set of data on human rights violations during the armed conflict and contributed to the CEH report. CIIDH collected 10,000 cases for review from newspapers, 4,000 from additional documentary sources, and 5,000 oral testimonies.

Noting the difficulty of collecting accurate accounts of human rights violations, CIIDH reports that sometimes “the same violation . . . appears in different sources,” while “different mass killing might be mentioned by various witnesses in a human rights denunciation, all of which give differing information about the names and numbers of victims or about the violations committed on those victims.” With additional layers of analysis built in to compensate for these weaknesses, the CIIDH determined that its database was “unlikely to exceed” a 2–3 percent margin of error for any given count of human rights violations that it collected for the entire duration of the armed conflict, although data were more abundant and perhaps more reliable for information gathered about the war’s most recent decades.¹⁸ The CIIDH found data for targeted killings and disappearances to be most trustworthy, particularly for high-profile victims whose disappearances or deaths tended to be well-chronicled and easily verified in the public record.¹⁹

The collection of data was further complicated by the classification of acts of violence, but even more so by the problematic distinction between victims and perpetrators. REMHI framed this dilemma in a series of questions posed by its own informants: “In what category does being forced to kill one’s own brother fall?” (Chiche, 1983). “What concept should be applied to public ceremonies where everyone is obligated to beat the victim over the head with a stick until he dies?” (Chichupac, 1982).²⁰ Such questions lay bare the many ambiguities of information obtained from testimonials, as self-justification, shame, guilt, trauma, and self-interest reconfigure individual and community memory.

Despite the inherent difficulty in collecting such freighted data, the REMHI and CEH reports offer an almost incomprehensible litany of horrors. Because so much of Guatemala’s large-scale political violence—that is, the systematic destruction of lives and property—took place during the Ríos Montt regime, many, although certainly not all, of the testimonies of eyewitnesses come from that period of the early 1980s. Together, the two major truth commissions offer up data and survivor testimony for more than 37,000 witnesses to the political violence—victims and “victimizers” (*victimários*) alike offer their recollections of unthinkable events with an immediacy that only eyewitnesses can provide.

Voices, Memory, and Silence

In an article on the politics of memory, anthropologist Charles R. Hale underscores the admonitions of subaltern studies theorists,²¹ as he strongly urges us

to listen to indigenous voices, while literary theorist Arturo Arias cautions against “First World scholars speaking in the name of the subaltern subject.”²² These are important concerns, but I have decided against trying to reproduce the testimonies of the truth commissions. The retelling of violent acts can quickly degenerate into a type of pornography, as sympathetic readers are unwittingly transformed into voyeurs. For the most part, I do not attempt to record such acts here, except by way of illustration—a young mother’s realization that the warm sensation down her back is the life’s blood of her infant, shot dead in its blanket; a seven-year-old girl, watching her parents die as she herself is raped by soldiers; the screams of an entire congregation as they are burned alive in their church; the husbands, sons, and brothers taken away by the army, only to reappear decades later in unmarked mass graves, identifiable only by rubber work boots and other modest personal effects; a widow’s plaintive remark, “I was left like a bird on dry branches.”²³ Such stories, multiplied by the hundreds, constitute a haunting litany of calamity, summoning fundamental questions, questions that have also emerged in the aftermath of other historic tragedies in which governments have killed, or allowed the killing of, large numbers of their own citizens: Nazi Germany, Cambodia, Rwanda—How could these things happen, and to what end?

In the Guatemalan context these kinds of questions are relatively new, the product of the people’s efforts to “recuperate history” and to make accountable those who brought such grief and suffering to their country. As we have noted, such a process is political, but it is also psychological; it is one way in which a society attempts to recover from its historical pathology. The process, while painful, is also catharsis; as Frederick Crews notes, “the very idea of repression and its unraveling is an embryonic romance about a hidden mystery, an arduous journal, and a gratifying neat denouement that can ascribe our . . . pains to deep necessity.”²⁴

Ríos Montt as Popular Hero

In Guatemala, the process is all the more difficult because until quite recently Ríos Montt was a popular political figure for many who considered him the embodiment of honesty, law and order, and national integrity²⁵—a formula that political scientist Edelberto Torres-Rivas has described as “una visión liberal pervertida” (a perversion of the liberal vision) but also, perhaps, a consummate expression of that vision.²⁶ Ríos Montt’s support came not only from predictable sectors—the conservative urban middle and upper classes—but also from many rural indigenous people, including, astoundingly, many

who lived in areas most affected by the scorched-earth campaigns of 1982–1983. This support is clear in the public opinion polls taken by credible international pollsters (such as Gallup) around the presidential contests of the late 1980s and later.

In a country like Guatemala where freedom of expression has been absent for decades, public opinion polls are probably not as reliable as they would be in places where people are not afraid to speak their minds. Even so, such polls reveal a remarkable level of support for the General in the years following his rule. Though the 1985 Guatemalan Constitution specifically prohibited former leaders who had taken power in a coup d'état from running for office (a stipulation that the 1984–1985 Constitutional Assembly drafted with Ríos Montt specifically in mind), the General handily led in popularity polls during presidential campaigning throughout the 1980s and 1990s. A 1989 survey—taken just before the second presidential election to follow military rule—posed the question, “For whom would you vote if the elections were held today?” Ríos Montt won handily, even though he was not even a candidate for president.²⁷ The explanation, perhaps, lay in the “presidential ideals” that Guatemalans seem to have believed he embodied. Another survey around the same election identified in descending order of preference the most desirable characteristics that Guatemalans at that time sought in a freely elected president: “honorable, honest,” “responsible,” “lives up to promises,” and “a hard worker.”²⁸ As we shall see, these are the very characteristics with which Ríos Montt branded himself throughout his presidency in 1982–1983.

He also ensured that his political surrogates won the presidency at regular intervals. *Ríosmonttistas* of one stripe or another claimed the nation's highest office in 1990, 1995, and 1999. In the 1995 election, the Frente Republicano Guatemalteco, the political party formed by the General, claimed a majority of votes in nearly every single department where the violence during his administration had been the worst: Alta and Baja Verapaz, Huehuetenango, San Marcos, and, especially, El Quiché, where the party won over 21,000 of the 37,000 valid votes cast in the election.²⁹ In the 1999 race, just before the election, polls showed that Ríos Montt, still not a legal candidate for office, enjoyed the support of at least 50 percent of the voters in the zones of conflict where presumably among his supporters were both witnesses to and even survivors of the massacres that had taken place under his administration.³⁰ One observer has referred to this as Ríos Montt's “amazing ability to pluck the strings of moral economy,” but it is also an illustration of the highly selective nature of memory.³¹

It is a testament either to the enduring power of fear or the power of alternative discourses of reality that during the late 1980s and the early 1990s