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German  Institute of Global and Area Studies
Leibniz-Institut für Globale und Regionale Studien

GIGA Research Program:
Violence and Security Cooperation

**Guatemala in the 1980s:
A Genocide Turned into Ethnocide?**

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N° 19

March 2006

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GIGA research unit responsible for this issue: Research Program "Violence and Security Cooperation".

Editor of the GIGA Working Paper Series: Bert Hoffmann <hoffmann@giga-hamburg.de>

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Guatemala in the 1980s: A Genocide Turned into Ethnocide?

Abstract

While the Guatemalan Truth Commission came to the conclusion that agents of the state had committed acts of genocide in the early 1980s, fundamental questions remain. Should we indeed speak of the massacres committed between 1981 and 1983 in Guatemala as “genocide”, or would “ethnocide” be the more appropriate term? In addressing these questions, this paper focuses on the intentions of the perpetrators. Why did the Guatemalan military chose mass murder as the means to “solve the problem of subversion”? In Guatemala, the discourses of communist threat, racism and Pentecostal millenarism merged into the intent to destroy the Mayan population. This paper demonstrates that the initial policy of physical annihilation (genocidal option) was transformed into a policy of restructuring the socio-cultural patterns of the Guatemalan highlands (ethnocidal option).

Key words: genocide studies, Guatemala, human rights violations, massacres

This Paper was prepared for the workshop “Opting for Genocide: To What End?” in Hamburg (organized by Hamburg Institute for Social Research), March 23-25, 2006.

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Zusammenfassung

Genozidale und ethnozidale Terrorstrategien in Guatemala

Auch wenn die guatemalteckische „Wahrheitskommission“ festgestellt hat, dass die Massaker in den frühen 1980er Jahren genozidale Ausmaße hatten, bleiben fundamentale Fragen umstritten: Ist der adäquate Begriff für die zwischen 1981 und 1983 begangenen Massaker tatsächlich „Genozid“ oder lassen sie sich eher als „Ethnozid“ begreifen? Um diese Fragen zu beantworten, konzentriert sich dieser Beitrag auf die Intentionen der Täter. Warum griff das guatemalteckische Militär auf Massenmord zurück, um das „Problem der Subversion“ zu lösen? In Guatemala verschmolzen antikommunistische, rassistische und millenaristische Diskurse zu einer Politik, die auf die Vernichtung der Maya-Bevölkerung zu abzielte. Im vorliegenden Beitrag wird beschrieben, wie eine genozidale Option, die auf die physische Vernichtung der Maya-Bevölkerung abzielte, zu einer ethnozidalen Option wurde: Ziel der Terrorstrategie war nunmehr die indirekte Vernichtung durch die soziokulturelle Neuordnung des guatemalteckischen Hochlandes.

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1. Introduction

Since 1948, the debate on genocide has grown in breadth and depth, but still there is no common definition. While many groups started to use the term in order to mobilize international support, scholarly reactions to persistent patterns of mass killings have been contradictory. For Steven T. Katz (1994), the Holocaust had been the only genocide in history. On the other hand, various scholars suggested alternative criteria for defining genocide and, thus, resolving the problem of exclusive classifications of potential victim groups. Outlining key issues in the field of genocide research, Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn proposed the following definition:

“Genocide is a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrator” (1990: 23).

The notion of the construction of the “other” has been instructive for scholars examining the process of group differentiation and stigmatization linked to genocidal acts. In her attempt to overcome the exclusiveness of victim classifications, sociologist Helen Fein noted that genocide is

“sustained purposeful action by a perpetrator to physically destroy a collectivity directly or indirectly, through interdiction of the biological and social reproduction of group members, sustained regardless of the surrender or lack of threat offered by the victim” (Fein 1993: 24).

Within genocide studies, some scholars now place particular emphasis on the concept of ethnocide understood as “cultural genocide”. According to Jean-Michel Chaumont, “Ethnocide does not primarily target individuals, but the constitutive elements of group identity” (Chaumont 2001: 183). While Helen Fein makes no distinction between direct or indirect destruction (or: between biological and social reproduction of group members, this distinction is central to Chaumont’s definition.

“Ethnocide means the intentional destruction of a group which does not necessarily imply murder or bodily harm. But an ethnocide can be genocidal, if the perpetrators believe that killing a significant part of the group’s members, e.g. the elite, is a more effective form of destruction.” (Chaumont 2001: 186)

Thus, the intention is not the physical destruction of a group but the destruction of the cultural values that ensure cohesion, collective identity and collective action of a group. And, as “civilization” or nationalistic re-education are often encouraged, an ethnocidal policy implies the possibility of individual change (Chaumont 2001: 181).

Separating genocide and ethnocide by definition seems to be of key significance for our understanding of certain dynamics of genocide. If we focus on the perspective of the perpetrators, it is important to recognize that “massacres are the product of a joint construction of will and context, with the evolution of the latter being able to modify the former” (Semélin 2003: 202). The Guatemalan case, which received little scholarly attention, demonstrates the importance of this line of interpretation. In general, it is said

“that agents of the State of Guatemala, within the framework of counterinsurgency operations carried out, between 1981 and 1983, acts of genocide against groups of Mayan people who lived in the four regions analysed” (Commission for Historical Clarification, § 122).

In this paper, I will focus on the moment in which a policy of genocide became, from the point of view of the perpetrators, the “best solution” for the problem of insurgency. Moreover, I will discuss the transformation of the policy of physical annihilation (genocidal option) into a policy of restructuring the socio-cultural patterns of the Guatemalan highlands

(ethnocidal option). Due to a change of the national and international context, the initiators of the Guatemalan genocide varied their initial policy of annihilation.

2. Military Responses to Guerrilla Challenge in Guatemala

The so-called armed confrontation in Guatemala, fought between several guerrilla groups and the State, lasted for 35 years. In the early 1960s, a movement called Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR) – founded by young nationalist military officers – came to pose the first armed challenge to the political order. After the military defeat of the FAR in the eastern parts of the country in the late 1960s, a nucleus group of survivors retreated to Mexico and the capital to regroup. In the early 1970s, new guerrilla groups emerged and moved their operations to the indigenous regions of the country. The Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) began to operate in the lowland jungles of northern El Quiché, and the Organization of the People in Arms (ORPA) began to organize in the isolated mountains in the south-western coastal part of Guatemala. While the regrouped FAR concentrated its operations in the jungle area of El Petén, the military wing of the communist party PGT pose an armed threat to state institutions in the capital. In 1982, the four guerrilla groups merged into the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (URNG). It is important to note that the insurgent groups never had the “military potential necessary to pose an imminent threat to the State” (CEH, conclusions, § 24).

Table 1: Ethnic boundaries in Guatemala

Guatemala’s population of 12 million is considered to be divided into two principle groups: Indians and ladinos. Around 60% of the population is indigenous. There are more than 20 separate Mayan languages spoken, being K’iche’, Mam, Q’eqchi’ and Kaqchiquel the biggest Mayan language groups. Moreover, there are small populations of Xinca and garífuna. The ladinos are defined as the non-indigenous population. The social category “ladino” does not refer to color, but to cultural identities. The ethnic dichotomy is perceived by most Guatemalans as the main ethnic boundary. Nevertheless, there is an underlying pigmentocratic system, which dominates social stratification: The ideology of blanqueamiento (“whitening”) plays an important role in social life. People recognize themselves as ladinos, Indians, Maya, whites, ladinos blancos, ladinos pardos, Europeans, mestizos, or chapines. Moreover, many Guatemalans distinguish themselves as members of specific communities or municipios.

During the first stage of the armed confrontation (1962 to 1977), insurgent and counterinsurgent practices were concentrated in the eastern hinterland, the capital and the south coast. Repression was selective and directed towards members of *campesino* and trade unions, university and school teachers, peasants and guerilla sympathizers. Nevertheless, the military began to target civilians and to implement a policy of massacres. Between 1966 and 1968, the army bombed villages in the eastern region of the country, resulting in thousands of deaths and disappearances (Ball 1999).

As the social movement got stronger and extended over the remote parts of the country, in the 1970s, repression became geographically disperse. Between 1978 and 1985, the military operations were carried out with extreme brutality, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths and over 626 massacres. Identifying indigenous communities with the insurgency, the military concentrated its operations in the western highlands (departments of El Quiché, Huehuetenango, Chimaltenango, Alta and Baja Verapaz), the south coast and Guatemala City. During this period, the guerilla support base and the area of insurgency expanded over the western highlands. Especially ORPA and EGP sought to gain support in indigenous communities. The military used this insurgent strategy to justify its repressive response. As a key part of the counterinsurgency strategy of the 1980s, the State forced large sectors of the male population to commit atrocities. It is estimated that 80% of the male population in the western highlands were organized into local paramilitary groups (Civil Defense Patrols)¹. They had to keep their neighbors under surveillance, and were forced to participate in crimes such as torture, rape and massacres. „An uncontrolled armed power was created, which was able to act arbitrarily in villages, pursuing private and abusive ends.“ (CEH, conclusions, § 51). Following the scorched earth operations, the military started to resettle the displaced population in model villages (*aldeas modelos*) and highly militarized villages. The military intended to integrate the indigenous population into both the fight against subversion and the “new Guatemalan nation”. During the peak of violence, the victims were principally indígenas and to a lesser extent ladino (non-indigenous). After 1986, the armed confrontation continued at a lower level and repressive operations were again selective and geographically disperse. After ten years of peace negotiations, the Guatemalan government and the URNG signed the so-called Firm and Lasting Peace in December, 1996.

¹ In 1996, the PACs were disbanded and their remaining 271,000 members disarmed. “On September 13, 1996, we were demobilized because of the peace accords, and they took our weapons. Some patrulleros started to cry, because they did not want to give away their weapons.” (CEH, Vol. II: 234, § 1402, testimony).

3. Structures of Violence

The CEH came to the conclusion that

“The magnitude of the State’s repressive response, totally disproportionate to the military force of the insurgency, can only be understood within the framework of the country’s profound social, economic and cultural conflicts. [...] Faced with widespread political, socio-economic and cultural opposition, the State resorted to military operations directed towards the physical annihilation or absolute intimidation of this opposition, through a plan of repression carried out mainly by the Army and national security forces.” (CEH, Vol. V, § 24-25).

In the following paragraph I will briefly outline the structural causes, which determined the outbreak of the so-called civil war. The underlying cause of political violence is a dynamic of multiple economic, cultural and social exclusions, resulting in racist and authoritarian practices. After independence in 1821, an authoritarian State evolved, serving the interests of a small – powerful and wealthy – minority (white, later ladino). Social relations in Guatemala are characterized by a long history of struggle for social inclusion and against denial of civil and political rights.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Guatemalan State had developed a pattern of coercive mechanisms integrating large sectors of the indigenous population into the plantation economy (Smith 1990). While violent uprisings had characterized the relations between indigenous communities and the state throughout the nineteenth century, indigenous resistance was transmuted into more evasive channels in the 20th century. In general, community relations in the western highlands remained strong

Since independence, the Guatemalan State had resorted to repression in order to maintain social control. In the western highlands, local elites built up a system of paramilitary security, fostered by impunity. In the capital, the elite maintained power structures through fraudulent elections and an extensive repressive apparatus. The creation of an anti-communist counterinsurgency state dates back to the 1950s. Following the CIA-led coup d’état in 1954, which led to the overthrow of the first democratic government in the history of the country, political spaces were closed. The framework of Cold War provided the clarity of purpose needed to restrict political participation by legal and repressive means. The U.S. promoted repressive counterinsurgency policy within the framework of the National Security Doctrine (DSN), which defined all opponents as “internal enemies”. Thus, the militarization of the state began even before the first generation of the guerrilla movement emerged in the 1960s. The Catholic Church, which had supported the overthrow of president Arbenz in 1954, strongly promoted anti-communism. So did some fundamentalist protestant sects,

which felt threatened by the expansion of atheistic communism in the backyard of the United States.

It is important to note that the Catholic Church experienced fundamental doctrinal and pastoral changes in the second half of the 20th century. The Catholic Action, that was initially started in order to “re-conquer Indian souls” (Le Bot 1995: 36), created a new generation of foreign priests, promoting social change and civil rights. Ideologically, this new generation was strongly influenced by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the Episcopal Conference of Medellin (1968). Thousands of catechists and lay activists began to work with the excluded (Falla 2001).

During the late-1970s, social, political and cultural opposition to the established order spread throughout the country. The CEH concluded:

“In the years when the confrontation deepened (1978-1983), as the guerrilla support base and area of action expanded, Mayans as a group in several different parts of the country were identified by the Army as guerrilla allies. Occasionally this was the result of the effective existence of support for the insurgent groups and of pre-insurrectional conditions in the country’s interior. However, the CEH has ascertained that, in the majority of cases, the identification of Mayan communities with the insurgency was intentionally exaggerated by the State, which, based on traditional racist prejudices, used this identification to eliminate any present or future possibilities of the people providing help for, or joining, an insurgent project.” (CEH V, § 31)

The notion of intentional exaggeration is fundamental to the proof of genocide. But are there any statements on intentional exaggeration which can be made with fair certainty? With which intention was the threat exaggerated?

By the late-1970s, the EGP controlled significant parts of the Ixil triangle. The May 1 demonstration in 1978 was widely perceived as a symptom of pre-insurrectional conditions. For the first time in national history, indigenous campesinos formed a contingent several blocks long. Few weeks later, the military killed 150 K’eqchi’ in response to a peaceful demonstration in Panzós, Alta Verapaz. As the army’s presence was growing throughout the highlands, large sectors of the indigenous population became radicalized and started to join the guerilla movement. A significant number of CUC members and catechists joined the Guerilla Army of the Poor (EGP), and fewer the other guerilla organizations, ORPA, FAR and PGT. It was estimated that 250,000 to 500,000 indígenas “participated in the war in one form or another” (Arias 1990: 255). In February, 1980, two weeks after the military massacred an indigenous delegation of CUC in the Spanish Embassy, indigenous leaders produced the “Declaration of Iximché”, which was perceived as a declaration of war. Acts of protest, resistance and even insurrection took place in the entire country.

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