GUATEMALA: INDIAN TESTIMONY TO A GENOCIDAL WAR

THE CONFLICT

Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú sued Guatemala's former leaders in Spanish court for human rights abuses, including murder and torture. The charges stem from a time of brutal dictatorship in Guatemala.

Political

- The military repressed the people and rebel groups were formed to fight the military. To combat both government and rebel violence, paramilitary groups were formed. Military death squads emerged.
- Fear of the rise of communism in the western hemisphere and the wish to protect U.S. corporate interests encouraged the United States to support the military rulers.

Economic

- Coffee plantation owners (an oligarchy) and the United States wanted to keep control of the profits and land. Indians were moved off the land to make and expand the plantations.
- Rebels wanted to redistribute land and profits to the Indians.

On December 2, 1999, the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú Tum filed a lawsuit in Spain's Supreme Court against eight Guatemalans—three former presidents, three military officers, and two civilians—for their role in the repression launched by the state against Guatemalan citizens, primarily Mayan Indians, in that country's thirty-six-year civil war. Although the civil war that triggered the lawsuit has its contemporary roots in the Cold War, its beginning can be traced to the original conflict that emerged as a result of the Spanish conquest of the Americas five centuries ago. Spanish colonialism created an inequitable society divided along racial and ethnic lines in Guatemala. After the nation's independence from Spain, colonial political, social, and economic patterns survived into the modern national period.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Colonial and Independence Period

The conquest of Guatemala by the Spanish created an initial division between the colonizers (the Spanish) and the colonized (the Indians) during the early contact period. Through three centuries of colonial rule the process of biological and cultural *mestizaje* (miscegenation, or the mixing of different races) produced three distinct social and ethnic groups that would dominate the nation's political and economic life: *criollos* (Creoles, or whites born in the New World), *ladinos* (term used in Guatemala for a person of biologically mixed European and Indian blood or a culturally Hispanicized Indian; in other Spanish-speaking nations the term *mestizo* is used) and Indians. After independence in 1821, the *criollos* came to dominate the

economic system while the ladino [illegible] eventually increased its influence in these [illegible]. The Mayan Indians continued to hold a [illegible] political, social, and economic position. Economically, the Indians provided the labor and produced the land demanded by the *criollos* and ladinos for their *haciendas* and plantations for the production of agricultural products for profit. The Indians, living in corporate communities, used their land for the production of subsistence crops (crops that provided food to feed the community). During the Spanish colonial period, Indian communities were legally recognized by Spanish law and could own land as a community, not as individuals. They sought to distance themselves from the national society that encroached on their traditional community life.

Rise of the Coffee Oligarchy

During the first fifty years of independence, provincial rivalries, internal struggles between liberals and conservatives, civil wars, boom/bust economic cycles, and foreign invasion and involvement rocked the nation and contributed to chronic instability. Until the 1850s, Guatemala's primary export was cochineal, a natural red dye. During the 1850s, coffee came to dominate as the primary export product in high demand on the world market. This demand contributed not only to the slow encroachment of *criollos* and ladinos on Indian lands for the creation and expansion of coffee plantations but also to the struggle for control of Indian labor. Indians were forcibly introduced to the rising market economy as their land was taken from them. After 1870, with the rise of the liberal coffee oligarchy (rulers), the loss of the Indians' land accelerated. Legislation was passed that facilitated the acquisition of land by the coffee oligarchy, provided labor through obligatory labor systems such as debt peonage (a system whereby debt is used to keep workers bound to the land) and the *mandamientos* (a forced labor draft that required Indians to work for planters), and created an infrastructure that benefited the export economy and not internal development. This assault on Indian lands contributed to periodic rebellions in the countryside as the Indians sought to defend their lands and way of life. Although the plantation owners had private armies, a professional military—composed largely of *ladinos* in its officer ranks—emerged during this period to ensure the continued domination of the *criollos* in the countryside. The expansion of the export economy contributed to urbanization and modernization that increased the separation of a "modern" urban sector and a "traditional" rural sector—largely populated by Indians. Economic and political inequality increased during this period, as the Indians—the majority of the population—were marginalized from national life.

Chronology

1821 Guatemala wins independence from Spanish colonial rule.

1850 Coffee begins to dominate the Guatemalan economy and a coffee oligarchy begins to dictate policy in Guatemala.

1898 Spain loses the Spanish-American War, increasing U.S. influences in Central America.

1900s U.S.-based United Fruit Company begins to dominate Guatemala's economy with banana exports.

1944–54 The Guatemalan democratic revolution introduces reform measures to Guatemala, including some measures that the U.S. labels "Communist."

1954 A U.S.-backed and CIA-facilitated coup d'état topples the government leading to military rule.

1960–96 A series of rebellions are suppressed by the military (and paramilitary groups), resulting in thousands of deaths.

1968 Zacapa campaign occurrs, where an estimated ten thousand civilians are massacred by the military.

1996 Peace accords are signed.

1999 Rigoberta Menchú files a lawsuit in Spanish court to hold Guatemala's leaders responsible for their alleged crimes against the Mayan Indians.

The Rise of the United Fruit Company and U.S. Influence

In the period from 1870 to 1920 economic development based on the use of the repressive apparatus of the state reached its zenith under the administration of Manuel Estrada Cabrera, who ruled the country from 1898 to 1920. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the U.S.-based United Fruit Company (UFCO) entered the country's economic life and it would come to dominate Guatemala's economy as one of the primary banana exporters. The government provided generous concessions of land for the creation of the company's banana plantations. Coffee and bananas became the leading export crops that dominated

the nation's political and economic life. U.S. influence grew when it became the primary market for banana exports, which gave the United States' political and economic interests considerable leverage within Guatemala. U.S. supremacy in the Central American region increased overall as a result of Spain's defeat in the 1898 Spanish-American War. The United States developed its political and economic power in the country through investments, loans, and the U.S. embassy.

In 1920 with the overthrow of Cabrera, democracy interrupted Guatemala's authoritarian and repressive history. The dependence on two primary exports—coffee and bananas—made Guatemala vulnerable to the world market with its boom/bust cycles. From 1913 to 1938 these two products grew to represent seventy percent of Central America's exports and the trend continued until the 1960s. Guatemala's economy, however, could not withstand the drastic decline in demand for these products as a result of the Great Depression of 1929. The resulting economic crisis affected the internal social, political, and economic life of the nation as unemployment, bankruptcies, decline in wages, and other adverse economic consequences of the depression wracked Guatemala's fragile social and economic fabric. Strikes and labor mobilizations increased, with much of this activity directed against UFCO since the banana plantation workers were one of the most organized and radical sectors of the labor movement. A small Communist party participated in these actions. This instability and threat to national and foreign economic interests contributed to the rise of another dictatorial regime, that of General Jorge Ubico, a member of the coffee oligarchy. From 1931 to 1944 he ruled the nation with an iron grip as he went against those that he considered the enemies of the nation, especially those he considered Communists. He branded anyone who diverged from his particular ideological stance as "Communist," fearing that radical (Communist) elements would destabilize the country. His political power rested on three pillars: the military, the landowners, and foreign companies. Ubico found favor with the United States as he cooperated with it and its strategic, political, and economic interests.

The coming of World War II cut off European markets from Guatemala's primary exports. This situation contributed to a closer political and economic relationship with the United States since the U.S. market became the exclusive market for Guatemala's coffee exports. Other coffee producing nations also depended on the U.S. market, which could not absorb all of the surplus. Guatemala suffered continuing economic crises as unemployment increased and the state reduced social spending. Opposition to Ubico's regime emerged among the small middle class located in the cities. As a result of Ubico's economic development policies (that had created a modernized infrastructure for the export economy) a nationalistic middle class developed that challenged his administration. (Nationalism is a desire for national unity and independence, including meaningful control over your country and its resources.) This middle class emerged from the *ladinos* and was comprised of students, teachers, professionals, junior army officers, small shopkeepers, and others not allied with the politically and economically powerful upper class. The middle class sought to transform the political, social, and economic institutions that had characterized the nation since independence and establish a modern liberal capitalist system. Influenced by the Allied war against fascism—when the Allies, led by the United States, England, France, and the Soviet Union fought fascist Germany, Italy, and Japan—university students and military officers were the two primary groups that sought an alternative to Ubico's dictatorship and the creation of a democracy in Guatemala.

The Guatemalan National Democratic Revolution (1944–54)

Student demonstrations contributed to the overthrow of Ubico as other middle class sectors joined them in their struggle. The military refused to obey Ubico, ushering in the Guatemalan democratic revolution of 1944, which lasted until 1954. This move by the military would have lasting implications, since this was the first time that it acted as an organized group during a political crisis. During the next decades, the military would play an important role as a political and economic institution as it increasingly influenced national events. After Ubico's ouster, political parties were organized that participated in the first truly free elections, held in December 1944. Juan José Arévalo, a university professor and candidate of the National Renovation Party (Renovación Nacional, or RN), won the election. During his presidential administration (1945–51) the government quickly moved to transform the nation and put it on the road of capitalist modernity.

The reforms Arévalo's government enacted affected all sectors of Guatemalan society, especially those previously neglected groups, such as the workers, peasants, and Indians. Labor, a supporter of the revolution, benefited from the government as it abolished the onerous obligatory labor systems. The 1947 Labor Code provided other ben-

RIGOBERTA MENCHU TAM

1959– Rigoberta Menchú, recipient of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, was born into an impoverished Quiche Indian family in 1959. Her family, like most of the indigenous population of Guatemala, worked in virtual enslavement on plantations. Because citizenship was restricted to people of Spanish decent, indigenous Guatemalans had no protection under the law.

As a child, Rigoberta watched her brother die of pesticide poisoning, and other native people die of malnutrition, disease, and agricultural accidents. Her father, Vincente, became an activist for indigenous people's rights, and founded the United Peasant Committee. He and dozens of other people died in a fire at the Spanish embassy during a protest.

After her brother and mother were kidnapped, tortured and killed by the Guatemalan military, Menchú, wanted by the government at age twenty-one, fled to Mexico. There, she dictated her autobiography *I, Rigoberta Menchú,* which brought international attention to the conflict between the military government of Guatemala and the native population. (Some of the specific information in her autobiography has been questioned.)

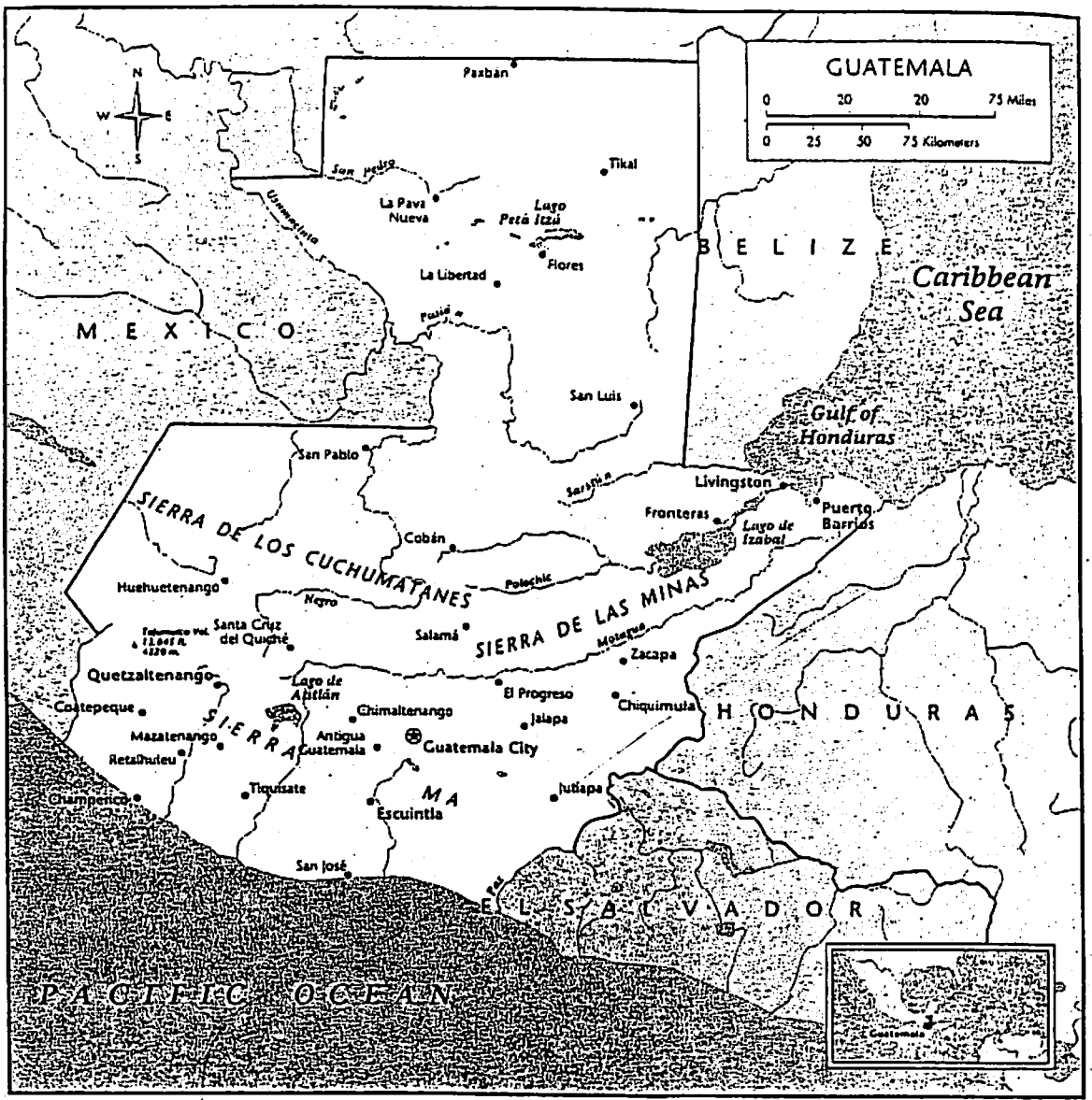
Menchú continued her family's campaign, traveling and speaking about the plight of her people. She won the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize for her work, and used the monetary award to establish a foundation to continue the struggle for human rights for indigenous people. In 1999 she sued leaders of the Guatemalan government in Spanish court for human rights abuses, including the death of her family.

RIGOBERTA MANCHU. *(AP/Wide World Photos. Reproduced by permission.)*

efits, such as guaranteeing decent working conditions, equitable wages, social security benefits, and the right to unionize. Utilizing their newfound freedom, urban and rural workers organized to better their daily lives. UFCO became a target of labor struggles as it represented what the workers saw to be the exploitation of the country by foreign interests. Arévalo, a nationalist, supported these efforts since his government, as well as the revolution, were characterized by their extreme nationalism.

With popular support, the RN's presidential candidate, Colonel Jacobo Arbenz, won the next free and fair elections held in 1950. He continued and intensified the progressive direction of the country by concentrating his attention on the nation's semifeudal agricultural structure. He implemented a sweeping land reform that alienated the large landowners and foreign corporations with landed holdings—especially the UFCO with its large tracts of uncultivated land. The Constitution of 1945 declared *latifundios* (large-landed estates) illegal and had provisions for expropriating large-landed estates and redistributing the land to the landless. The aim of the land reform was the creation of a small farmer class that would have sufficient purchasing power for the expansion of the internal market. Through the creation of this internal market, national industry would find it profitable to engage in manufacturing consumer goods. The agrarian reform was an important step toward creating an economically independent capitalist nation.

During this period, two percent of the population owned seventy-four percent of the productive land. The democratic movement led to the



MAP OF GUATEMALA. *(© Maryland Cartographics. Reprinted with permission.)*

growth of the peasant movement and increased demands for land. The government acted by promulgating the Agrarian Reform Law of 1952, which provided for the expropriation of uncultivated lands in excess of 223 acres that would be distributed to landless peasants. The government compensated the owners by issuing them twenty-five-year government bonds. The state also provided credit and technical assistance to the new peasant owners in order to increase agricultural production. The Agrarian Reform Law brought the government into conflict with the UFCO, one of the largest landowners possessing 550,000 acres. With only fifteen percent of this land under cultivation, it was subject to the provisions of the law. In 1953 the government expropriated 233,973 acres of this unused land, which was subsequently increased to 413,573 acres. The government also expropriated the unused lands of native Guatemalan large landowners. By 1954, one hundred thousand peasant families had benefited from this law. The national and foreign landowning elite labeled these actions as "Communistic" and the U.S. government in Washington, DC, soon agreed.

The Truncated Revolution: the CIA and U.S. Intervention

After World War II, the Cold War mentality reigned in Washington, DC, and the U.S. government viewed the events in Guatemala within the context of what Western officials saw as the Communist threat of expansion. Conflict emerged between the Guatemalan government and Washington as U.S. policymakers regarded these actions as "Communist." The weak middle class needed allies in its struggle against the traditional rulers and U.S. interests. The workers, an ally of the government in this struggle, increased their numbers in trade unions and demanded higher wages and other benefits. Pressure from the peasants and workers pressed the Arbenz government to the left, which alienated the government's supporters in sectors of the middle class frightened by the revolution's radicalization.

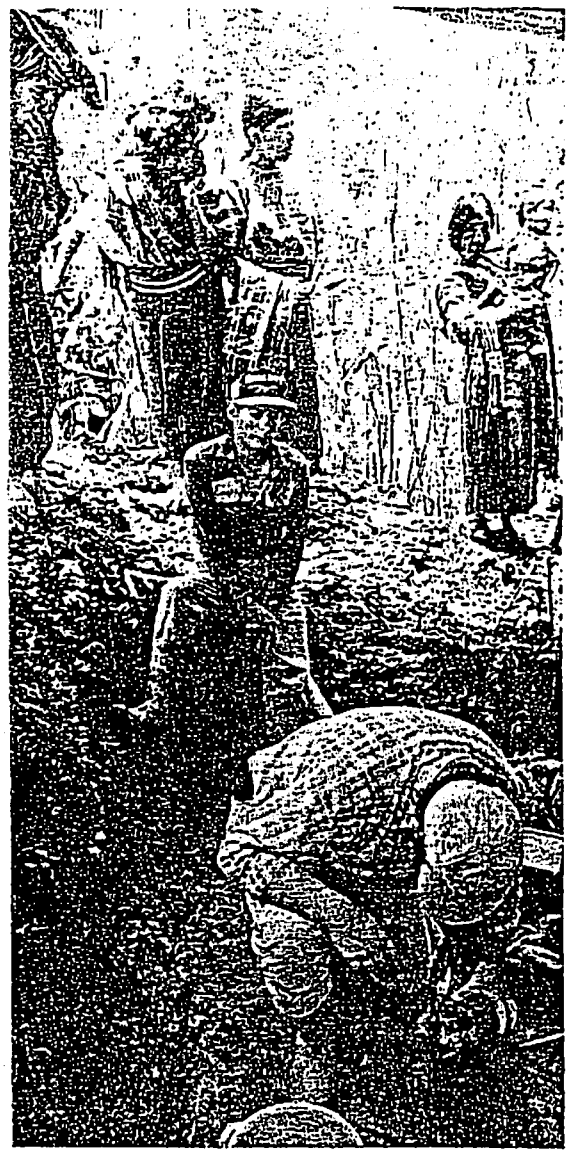
In the United States, the UFCO had allies in the U.S. State Department as Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had worked with the law offices that had drafted the UFCO's agreements with the Guatemalan government during Ubico's administration. Allen Dulles, John Foster Dulles's brother and the director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), served as president of the UFCO. Other prominent U.S. government insiders, such as United Nations Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, owned stock in the UFCO. Also, the UFCO had lobbied Lodge when he was senator of Massachusetts, the home base of the UFCO. As opposition in the United States to Guatemala's actions increased, the stage was set for U.S. intervention in Guatemala. The U.S. government gave the CIA a green light to begin the destabilization of the country—seeking to create a situation that would force Arbenz to resign. Fearing an intervention from neighboring countries, the Arbenz government sought to acquire arms to protect the democratic revolution. When the U.S. prevented arms sales to Guatemala by creating an embargo (a restriction on trade), Arbenz turned to Poland, a Soviet ally, which complied with the request for arms. The U.S. State Department used this action as conclusive proof that Guatemala was in the Communist camp. Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, a Guatemalan army officer chosen by the CIA and supplied with arms by the United States, used Honduras as a staging area for an invasion. Castillo Armas—with an army of 150 men—invaded Guatemala as planes supplied by the CIA and flown by U.S. pilots bombarded the capital city with propaganda fliers and incendiary bombs. The propaganda efforts were designed to make the invasion appear to have wider support than it did have and caused the army to abandon the government. The government, refusing to arm the workers, quickly fell as Arbenz fled into exile and Castillo Armas was installed as president with Washington's approval. This event unleashed unprecedented repression and a series of military governments that dominated in Guatemala until 1996.

The many progressive reforms undertaken in the years from 1944 to 1954 were rolled back as the Castillo Armas government, ruling from 1954 until his assassination in 1957, attempted to reestablish the old order. One of the first actions by the government was the return of the UFCO properties that had been expropriated. Repression soon followed as those who had supported the previous government—workers, peasants, politicians, and others—were arrested as "subversives"; some were even executed. Castillo Armas repealed the 1945 constitution, centralized political power in his and the military's hands, refused the right to vote to more than two-thirds of the population and overturned the 1947 Labor Code and other legislation beneficial to workers, peasants, and Indians. After Castillo Armas's assassination, another military officer, General Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes, governed the country with the same ruthlessness from 1958 to 1963.

Military Governments and Civil War (1960–96)

In 1959 the Cuban Revolution gave hope to many in Latin America and contributed to the rise of guerrilla movements in the region. The Guatemalan Left had come to the realization that there could not be a political solution to the crisis in the country since it had been excluded from the political process by the military government. In 1960 a group of reformist army officers attempted a coup against Ydígoras that failed; many of the rebels were captured or killed in the fighting. Those officers who escaped organized the first of several guerrilla groups that operated in the country for the next thirty-six years, the Revolutionary Armed Forces (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias* or FAR) and the 13th of November Revolutionary Movement (*Movimiento Revolucionario de 13 de Noviembre* or MR-13). The groups attempted to follow the path of the Cuban Revolution by adopting a guerrilla war strategy. The United States, fearing a repeat of Cuba, supported the subsequent Guatemalan military governments by increasing U.S. military aid, which widened the conflict.

The continued repression of the populace by successive military governments contributed to the growing polarization of Guatemalan society be-



VILLAGERS WATCH FORENSIC ANTHROPOLOGIST FRANCISCO DE LEON EXHUME SKELETAL REMAINS AS PART OF AN ANALYSIS OF A MASSACRE PERPETRATED BY REBEL FORCES IN THE 36-YEAR GUATEMALAN CIVIL WAR. *(AP/Wide World Photos. Reproduced by permission.)*

tween an extreme left faction and right faction with no political center. This polarization contributed to the rise of right-wing death squads, such as the White Hand (*Mano Blanca*) that operated in the country, especially in the urban areas, against both reformists and leftists. In the countryside, the counter-insurgency campaign was especially brutal as the army, aided by police forces and irregular paramilitary groups (groups not officially affiliated with the military), waged a war against the indigenous population. This war has been called genocidal—representing the planned and systematic killing of a group based on ethnicity—because of actions such as the 1968 Zacapa campaign where an estimated ten thousand civilians were massacred in order to defeat the FAR. The repression from this period proved effective as the armed guerrilla movement was almost wiped out because it lost its rural base. From 1966 to 1970 a brief civilian interim, with the military still in effective control, reigned until Colonel Carlos Manuel Arana Osorio, known as "the Butcher of Zacapa," became president from 1970 to 1974.

In the 1970s, as the military ruled openly again, the guerrilla movement regrouped and new organizations emerged: the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (*Ejército Guerillero de los Pobres* or EGP) and the Organization of People in Arms (*Organización Revolucionaria del Pueblo en Armas* or ORPA). During the 1970s the United States continued to provide economic and military aid to successive military governments. The massacre of Mayan Indian villagers continued in the countryside. Amidst this terror, the Guatemalan economy grew under military supervision as it launched developmental programs that provided the military independent financial resources. Arana appointed General Eugenio Kjell Laugerud García as his successor, and he ruled from 1974 to 1978. Some of the repression lessened during this administration, but subsequently increased as the guerrilla movement gained in strength in the late 1970s. Heightened military repression and genocide against Mayan Indian villages characterized the administrations of General Fernando Romeo Lucas García (1978–82), General Efraín Ríos Montt (1982–83) and General Óscar Humberto Mejía Víctores (1983–86).

The Lucas government dealt brutally with all whom dared oppose its rule. Death squad activities increased against union leaders, university professors, students, and others considered a threat to the government. Many of these individuals were either assassinated or "disappeared" (a term used throughout Central and South America for people who were taken by the military or paramilitary and never seen again). The FAR, which had staged a comeback since the repression of the late 1960s, and ORPA enjoyed considerable popular support in the countryside among the peasants and Indians. In response, the military stepped up its counterinsurgency activities in the countryside. The Peasant Unity Committee (*Comité de Unidad Campesina* or CUC) organized in the countryside. To protest the forced abduction of Indian boys and men into the army and the genocide occurring in the country, thirty CUC members and university students

[illegible] stormed the Spanish embassy in Guatemala City on January 31, 1980. The army and the police massacred all of the occupants except for the Spanish ambassador and a CUC survivor, a Mayan Indian. Thirty-seven people died in the attack, including three Spanish nationals. As the ambassador left the country, the lone survivor was dragged from his hospital bed by the secret police, tortured, and his body dumped on the university campus.

The 1980s economic crisis exacerbated the political crisis in Guatemala as the military rulers' handling of the economy came under increasing attacks by the business community. A military coup by young officers brought Rios Montt to power with the promise that he would pave the way for democracy and a return to civilian rule. Repression by death squads in the city lessened under Rios Montt, a fundamentalist Protestant, but it increased sharply in the countryside as entire Indian communities were relocated or destroyed through extreme violence as part of the military's counterinsurgency strategy. These actions forced the Indian villagers off their land and many were forced into exile in Mexico and the United States as refugees. The director Gregory Nava captured this period in his feature film *El Norte* (1983), which presented the plight of a brother and sister seeking refuge in the United States as a result of a military massacre of their village. Increasingly isolated from the international community as a result of the extreme brutality of the regime, reformist military officers ousted Rios Montt, who had failed to keep his promises, and replaced him with Mejía Victores. The transition to democracy began under his administration although the political repression and counterinsurgency campaign continued. In 1984 a constituent assembly was elected and the constitution rewritten in order to pave the way for elections. In 1985 national elections were held and the Christian Democrat candidate Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo won the election—the first civilian president elected in genuine elections after thirty years of military rule. Cerezo's administration (1986–91) did not bring an end to the civil war, which continued under the administrations of Jorge Serrano Elías (1991–93) and Ramiro de León Carpio (1993–96).

Recent History and the Future

The guerrilla forces, united as the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union (*Unión Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca* or URNG), realized that an armed victory was impossible, so it began to negotiate with the government for a settlement of the civil war. As long as the Cold War and conflicts in Central America continued, however, this negotiated settlement was impossible. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the Central American conflict by 1992 contributed to talks with the civilian government that led to the signing of peace accords in 1996 under the administration of Álvaro Arzú Irigoyen (1996–2000), bringing an end to Guatemala's thirty-six-year civil war and initiating a new period of respect for human rights. The 1999 report by the Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) estimated that two hundred thousand people, mostly Indians, were killed or disappeared during the conflict. Government forces were responsible for ninety-three percent of the atrocities while the URNG was blamed for three percent, leaving four percent of the case unresolved. The report laid the blame squarely on the United States for prolonging the war by supporting the Guatemalan military. In March 1999, U.S. president Bill Clinton apologized for United States complicity in these genocidal crimes.

Born in 1959, five years after the CIA coup, Rigoberta Menchú, a Quiché Indian woman, represented the human face of the Mayan Indian population that had been brutally repressed during the civil war. The genocide against the Indians touched her personally as she witnessed the slaughter of family members, including her brother, mother, and her father, Vicente Menchú, who lost his life during the Spanish embassy massacre. Leaving the country in 1980, she worked to expose the crimes of the successive military governments against the Mayan people. Her autobiography, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, became a popular account of her life and how it intertwined with the brutal dictatorships and repression that her people suffered. Translated into numerous languages, it came under question in 1999 by U.S. anthropologist David Stoll in his book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, who questioned specifics contained in her account. Despite this, for her efforts on behalf of social justice and the search for peace in Guatemala, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992.

Influenced by the earlier case against Chile's ex-dictator Augusto Pinochet—when in 1998 a Spanish magistrate decided to put him on trial for murder, torture, and genocide—Menchú also decided to use the Spanish courts since she did not believe she could get justice in Guatemalan courts. Her 1999 lawsuit against eight Guatemalans—three former presidents (Lucas García, Ríos Montt

and Mejía Victores), three military officers (General Angel Aníbal Guevara Rodríguez, ex-Minister of Defense; General Benedicto Lucas García, ex-army Chief of Staff; Colonel German Chupina Barahona, ex-chief of the National Police), and two civilians (Donaldo Alvarez Ruiz, governance minister during the Lucas García administration; Pedro García Arredondo, ex-chief of the National Police's 6th Command under Lucas García)—was for alleged crimes of genocide, state terrorism, and torture. In particular, she based her charges on three specific cases: the Spanish embassy massacre, the murder of four Spanish priests—Faustino Villanueva, José María Gran Cirera, Juan Fernandez and Carlos Pérez Alonzo, and the torture and murder of other members of Menchú's family, including her mother. For her efforts she has been branded a traitor and has received death threats.

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