

To what extent was
guatemala's civil war
caused by us policy



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Spanning decades from the late 1950s to the 1990s, the Civil War in Guatemala represented one of the longest conflicts in Latin America. During this time; over tens of thousands of refugees fled the country; over a million were made homeless as over four hundred indigenous villages were destroyed; and ultimately over two hundred thousand people were killed or have disappeared.[1]The root of this conflict lay in the ridiculously imbalanced distribution of wealth that had existed within Guatemala for centuries. This misdistribution was born out the combination of a revolutionary international atmosphere, alongside years of economic hardship caused by the governing elites. To what extent each of these factors caused the Civil War will be assessed throughout this essay.

Predeceasing the Civil War, the Elites possessed the vast majority of the land in Guatemala. As a result, they exercised a significant amount of power and control over the society. To further the abuses in wealth distribution, the U. S. owned substantial amounts of land in Guatemala, and viewed the country as pure potential profit[2]. What is so fascinating in my opinion; are the diverse opinions regarding the roots of the issues. Two major narratives emerged as a result from the conflict. The first master narrative tells the tale of the indigenous Mayan population being brutally oppressed over centuries by European and American powers. The continuums of colonial tradition lead to mass abuses of human rights which lead the oppressed population to look towards supporting insurgent groups. This narrative brings to light the voices of the people and state and can be viewed through the vast literature which creates its own ' *Testimonio* ' genre. The second and opposite narrative regards the more recent role that the United States has played in

Guatemala. In particular, with regards to the involvement that the CIA had in <https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-was-guatemalas-civil-war-caused-by-us-policy/>

supporting the Guatemalan government in order to eradicate the leftist forces within the country. Ultimately, the argument stands that the United States was a significant factor in causing the Guatemalan Civil war. It stands as one of the reasons why Guatemala had such a poor economic infrastructure. Moreover, this infrastructure provided the dissent that led to the creation of insurgent groups which so threatened U. S. political ideology. This threat enabled the U. S. to intervene and turn a civil war into an international conflict.

In the context of Latin America, the '*testimonio*' was a crucially important form of literature that represented the first master narrative mentioned. John Beverley in the book '*The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*' describes *testimonio* as: "a novel...told in the first person by a narrative who is also a real protagonist or witness of the event he or she recounts"[3]. *Testimonios* are accounts in which the author uses their experience as an agent of collective memory or identity. Through these first-hand accounts, readers can ascertain a certain truth derived from a situation of oppression that can challenge and even correct so called '*official history*'. Beatriz Manz is an example of a *testimonio* author. Alongside Manz, other famous works of *Testimonio* surrounding Guatemala exist; the most notable being '*Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*'. Menchú's story narrates the tortures faced by a poor Quiché peasant family, who had to migrate every year to large coffee plantations in order to survive. The story tells how her family were mistreated; she herself did not attend school, and her brothers died of malnutrition. The main argument Menchú has is that the economic hardships within the country lead to her gross mistreatment.

Following the accusation that her family was involved in the guerrilla movement, one of her brothers was arrested, tortured and killed in 1979; her father was killed by security forces and her mother died after being tortured and raped. Menchú tells a heart wrenching story that brought the Guatemalan struggle to the forefront of international interests, however it is not without its flaws. One of the central issues with regards to testimonio is the authenticity and veracity of the voice. Sklodowska cautions “ it would be naive to assume a direct homology between text and history. The discourse of a witness cannot be a reflection of his or her experience, but rather a refraction determined by the vicissitudes of memory, intention, ideology.”[4]This is something that American anthropologist David Stoll assesses in his book, ‘ *Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* ‘. Stoll makes the bold statement that the events described in Menchú’s testament are exaggerated in an effort to amass support for the guerrilla movement. *Testimonios* represent the fine balance between fiction and history; emotion and fact. In the eyes of Menchú, the U. S. played a crucial role in promulgating the civil war. Stoll’s criticisms could be undermined by the fact that his stance is from a Western point of view, which disregards the nature in which history has been testimonial in Mayan culture for centuries .[5]In this sense, Menchú wasn’t attempting to tell a completely accurate story of her family, if not relay the struggles of her people. Her story has since contributed to the greater good by bringing to light the vast abuses of human rights that the Guatemalans faced for decades.[6]

This economic hardship that Menchú describes can be traced back centuries to initial American involvement. Chairman Henry Kissinger oversaw the

creation of ' *The Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America* ' in a hope to establish a consensus for Central American administration. Described as " well-informed laymen" who took a six-month " odyssey" into the " terra incognita"[7]of Central America; the commission members intricately analyzed the political, economic and social problems of Guatemala. The conclusion was reached that inevitable U. S. intervention was favorable. However, like a Gordian knot, the report never successfully resolved the tension between U. S. security interests in the area and the admitted need for radical change in many Central American societies. I take issue with regards to the vernacular used throughout the report, as the U. S. seems to absolve itself of any responsibility for causing the very problems that the report encompasses, and implies it has moral responsibility to fix these issues. For instance, the report accounts the negative long-lasting Spanish colonial legacy in Central America, yet only briefly describes the significant influence of the United States in the centuries predeceasing the Guatemalan crisis. The semi-feudal system established by Spain over three centuries ago set a precedent for an inability of indigenous peoples to self-govern and integrate into the colonial political system. Whilst this is a valid point for assessing the development of the turmoil within Guatemala, the U. S certainly did not take as much of a back seat as the report would have us believe implementing a passive " Good Neighbor Policy" which sought " to see all neighboring countries stable, orderly and prosperous"[8]. Focusing on two instances in the early 20th Century; Colombia and Nicaragua for instance, it becomes evident that America did not take as passive an approach to Latin America as the report would have us believe. Active

American involvement in Central America can span back to The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 in which America planned to protect Latin American states from European expansionism. Substantiated by the Roosevelt Corollary in 1904, the doctrine created a precedent for the justification of intervention on account of political ideology.[9]The commission report serves as an example of this policy being enacted as it claims that U. S. intervention during the early 20th Century was focused on promoting the “ stability and solvency of local governments so as to keep other nations out.”[10]Intervention in Guatemala, for instance can be seen as pre-emptive interventionism hoping to fix the wrongdoings in Latin America. In Roosevelt’s State of Union Address, the use of “ international police power” was therefore excused as a justification for involvement in Latin America.[11]Moreover, Guatemala was of utmost economic importance to the U. S., which historically had wanted to create an economic hegemony in Latin America in order to diminish European Imperial expansion.[12]This pseudo American Imperialism makes it evident that U. S. expansionism was deeply rooted in a sense of *Manifest Destiny* . The ‘ Banana Wars’ that shaped U. S. Foreign Policy towards Latin America and American military involvement across the continent as a whole, stand as symbols of this economic relationship that the U. S hoped to establish. Joseph Freeman and Scott Nearing place American financial imperialism within a Marxist context. The Colombian uprisings against U. S. canal rights in the Panama Canal resulted in American military involvement[13]. This perfectly exemplifies the argument in which military force was used to broker economic expansion. The Panama Canal sets a

sinister precedent which would then see future U. S. military involvement in Guatemala decades later.

The report was written with a post-Vietnam/post Iraq cynicism, which could result in why rhetoric of a civilising mission was used to justify aggressive exploitative expansionism. The rebellions in Nicaragua stood as inspiration for Guatemalans during the 60s and 70s as they hoped they could utilize similar tactics in order to regain control of their country. Insurgent groups formed in Guatemala as a result, as described by Manz; “ The growth of social movements in Guatemala took place in the turbulent context of Central America in the late 1970s and early 1980s; Social upheavals and indiscriminate repression both were escalating throughout the region.”[14]These “ mounting social problems combined with shrinking political options proved to be a volatile combination that finally erupted into armed confrontation.”[15]From the standpoint of the Guatemalans; the Sandinista guerilla movement had proven successful in the catalysis of the Nicaraguan Revolution in 1979. Manz describes the revolutionary atmosphere that surrounded Guatemala, and notes that “ the Guatemalan insurgents and many supporters thought that if victory had already taken place in Nicaragua and seemed possible in El Salvador, why not in Guatemala?”[16]As mentioned, the peak of the Guatemalan civil war occurred at a very similar time to the peak of the Cold War. This meant that the U. S. turned its focus on to its southern neighbors as they turned to communism. The consequences of this meant that ordinary local conflict would soon have an international audience as Guatemala would become another battle ground in the Cold War. Arguably motivated out of fear; the U.

S. provided immense military and economic aid to Guatemala; “ much of the fighting took place at the height of the Cold War and the combatants were well aware of U. S. support for the Guatemalan military.”[17]As stated by Kissinger, the U. S. was concerned of the intrusion into Central America by “ aggressive external powers”[18]. The fear that Cuban or Soviet backing would support the insurgent groups, led to the U. S. providing tacit support to the Guatemalan Government. This U. S. support gave the Guatemalan government both a military and political upper hand, whilst intrinsically tying the corrupt ruling elite to external American influence. This cascade of events that followed U. S. intervention in to Guatemala placed the country firmly within a Cold War context; where ideology played a substantial role in rallying support by even the indigenous peoples; who believed they too, were fighting for justice. However, was this intervention completely necessary, and did it exacerbate and prolong the civil war? The report briefly touches on this notion, which a disagreement with regards to the ‘ conditionality’ of U. S. intervention. Should there be a link between U. S. support and improvements in Latin Americas execrable human rights record. Such a notion implies awareness for the deterioration of the human rights that America was causing, however, they feared “ a Marxist-Leninist victory in El Salvador”, and therefore this notion was consequently ignored. The report believes that in order to fight an expanding army of communist guerrillas, U. S. must continue to provide support to the armed forces.

A peace agreement is long overdue in Guatemala. Following almost three decades of armed conflict and brutal injustice; Guatemala is owed a transformed society with democratic leadership, increased rights for the

abused Mayan people, end to the U. S. military backing, constitutional reform, and an improvement of the socio-economic and socio-political issues. Whilst in my opinion, the main forces behind the war in Guatemala were the economic oppression and daily violence which led to the creation of the insurgent groups that so threatened the American political status quo. The economic oppression was inflicted primarily by the governing elite, however, as a sole factor this could not have led to a war of such gross magnitude. America played a significant role. The years of colonial oppression implemented by America into their southern neighbours had an underrated lasting economic consequence. By default, the U. S. had a much larger responsibility in causing the Guatemalan Civil war than is initially apparent. Such destructive and protracted conflict could not have amassed had it not been for the influence of the international community. Guatemala today has still not recovered. The lives of millions have been shattered, and America should be owed a much larger blame than any other country.

Bibliography

Berryman, P. *The Religious Roots of Rebellion* , (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1984)

Beverly, J., *The Real Thing (Our Rigoberta)* , (Modern Language Quarterly 57: 2: 1986)

CIA - The World Factbook , 20 Nov. 2008, Central Intelligence Agency, 1 Dec. 2008

<https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-was-guatemalas-civil-war-caused-by-us-policy/>

Grandin, G. *The Last Colonial Massacre* (The University of Chicago Press, 2004)

Kissinger, H. *The Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America*, (Macmillan, 1984)

LeoGrande, W. M, *Our own Backyard, The United State in Central America 1977-1992*(The University of North Carolina Press, 1998)

Levenson-Estrada, D. *Trade Unionists Against Terror* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1994)

Manz, B. and N. Aryeh, *Paradise in Ashes - A Guatemalan Journey of Courage, Terror, and Hope*, (New York: University of California P, 2004)

McClintock, M.

Roosevelt, T. *Theodore Roosevelt's Annual Address to Congress* (December 6th 1904) accessed via <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=56&page=transcript>

Smith, R. *The United States and the Latin American Sphere of Influence*, (Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1981)

[1]" CIA - The World Factbook - Guatemala," *CIA - The World Factbook*, 20 Nov. 2008, Central Intelligence Agency, 1 Dec. 2008

[2]B. Manz; A. Neier, *Paradise in Ashes - A Guatemalan Journey of Courage, Terror, and Hope*, (New York: University of California P, 2004), 16-17.

<https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-was-guatemalas-civil-war-caused-by-us-policy/>

[3], G. M. Gugelberger, *The Real Thing : Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, (Duke University Press, 1996), p. 34

[4], G. M. Gugelberger, *The Real Thing : Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, (Duke University Press, 1996), p. 34

[5]. Beverley, *The Real Thing (Our Rigoberta)* , (Modern Language Quarterly 57: 2: 1986), p. 129-235

[7]H. A. Kissinger , *The Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America*, (Macmillan, 1984), p. 1

[8]H. A Kissinger , *The Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America*, (Macmillan, 1984), p. 34

[9]. Monroe, *The Monroe Doctrine*, December U. S. Department of State. Retrieved November 2, 2011.

[10]H. A Kissinger , *The Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America*, (Macmillan, 1984), p. 34

[11]T. Roosevelt , *Theodore Roosevelt's Annual Address to Congress* (December 6th 1904) accessed via <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=56&page=transcript>

[12]R. F. Smith, *The United States and the Latin American Sphere of Influence* , (Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1981), p. 10

[13]R. F. Smith, *The United States and the Latin American Sphere of Influence* , (Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1981), p. 10

<https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-was-guatemalas-civil-war-caused-by-us-policy/>

[14]B. Manz; A. Neier, *Paradise in Ashes - A Guatemalan Journey of Courage, Terror, and Hope* , (New York: University of California P, 2004) p. 96

[15]B. Manz; A. Neier, *Paradise in Ashes - A Guatemalan Journey of Courage, Terror, and Hope* , (New York: University of California P, 2004) p. 46

[16]B. Manz,; A. Neier, , *Paradise in Ashes - A Guatemalan Journey of Courage, Terror, and Hope*, (New York: University of California P, 2004) p. 96

[17]B. Manz; A. Neier, , *Paradise in Ashes - A Guatemalan Journey of Courage, Terror, and Hope* , (New York: University of California P, 2004) p. 224

[18]H. A. Kissinger , *The Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America*, (Macmillan, 1984), p. 36