

Slaughter in Guatemala

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Reviewed:

Crucifixion by Power: Essays on Guatemalan National Social Structure, 1944-1966
by Richard Newbold Adams
University of Texas, 533 pp., \$10.00

One of the most gruesome slaughters of this century in Latin America has been taking place in Guatemala during the past four years, and it has increased radically in recent months. This nation of ancient Mayan highland culture and rain-soaked hills and savannas is suffering a reign of terror that has claimed several hundred lives in the past few months alone, and thousands since it began in 1967, with US support, as a counterinsurgency operation to destroy a rapidly expanding guerrilla movement. Only rarely have the victims been members of the guerrilla bands, which are based primarily in the capital and in the dry, hungry hillbilly country of the Guatemalan Oriente. More often the victims have been peasants, students, university professors, journalists, union leaders, and congressional deputies, who have been killed for vaguely leftist political associations or because of personal grudges.

The case of Guatemala is only the most lurid example of the kind of paramilitary violence that emerged in Latin America during the late 1960s as a recurrent method of managing intractable social and political problems. It is also prevalent in Brazil and Santo Domingo, for example. In Guatemala only a part of the killing of dissidents has been done by the government's official forces. In 1967 more than twenty right-wing paramilitary terrorist groups went into action with weapons supplied to the Guatemalan army under the US military aid program. The groups used names like the White Hand, the Purple Rose, the New Anti-Communist Organization, etc. They first circulated leaflets carrying the names and sometimes the photographs of their announced victims, whose corpses—and those of many others—were later found grotesquely mutilated: dead men with their eyes gouged out, their testicles in their mouths, without hands or tongues, and female cadavers with their breasts cut off.

In early 1967 a Guatemalan army source gave me an estimate of some 2,000 persons killed by vigilante groups in the Oriente, while other estimates for the 1967-68 period have run between 3,000 and 6,000. In May, 1967, Guatemala's Catholic bishops declared: "We cannot remain indifferent while entire towns are decimated, while each day leaves new widows and orphans who are victims of mysterious

struggles and vendettas, while men are seized in their houses by unknown kidnappers and detained in unknown places or are vilely murdered, their bodies appearing later horribly disfigured and profaned.” But the killing continues.

Since last July the President of Guatemala has been Col. Carlos Arana Osorio, the slow thinking, slow speaking former commander of the Zacapa army base in the guerrilla zone and executor of the counterinsurgency operations during the terror of 1967. “If you want to have a real understanding of the international communist conspiracy,” Arana told me at that time, “you should read two books: *The View from the Fourth Floor* by Earl Smith (former US Ambassador to Cuba) and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.”¹ In a subsequent interview the US military attaché in Guatemala City called Arana “the best officer they’ve got in this man’s army. Indeed, he would be a credit to any army.”

Arana has been advised by US army officers returned from Vietnam who spent much of 1966 and 1967 in the Guatemalan Oriente ostensibly organizing “civic action” projects of social assistance to *campesinos*. During the terror Arana undertook a highly successful campaign of making secret contact with guerrilla collaborators, offering them amnesty in exchange for information and active participation in the vigilante groups. Soon former guerrillas donned black hoods and boarded trains and busses with army patrols to point out other members of the guerrilla organization. The most famous guerrilla collaborator who switched sides was a young Zacapa landowner, Oliverio Casteñeda, who, with support from Arana, became the leader of the White Hand and of a private army of between 200 and 400 men who used Casteñeda’s farm as their headquarters.

Arana remained in command of the counterinsurgency operations in the Oriente until two spectacular crimes were committed by the vigilante groups. In January, 1968, the naked and severely mutilated corpse of Miss Guatemala of 1963, a student named Rogelia Cruz Martinez who was a known guerrilla sympathizer, was found on a bridge near the town of Esquintla. She had been raped by several men. Two months later the White Hand shocked the country by kidnapping the Archbishop of Guatemala. These crimes led to the ouster, under pressure from the US Embassy, of the defense minister and the national police chief. Arana was appointed ambassador to Nicaragua, where Dictator Anastasio Somoza, Jr., had been protecting and supporting the operations of Guatemalan right-wing organizations.

The terror in Guatemala, while barbaric in some of its manifestations, is the product of a sophisticated political strategy. At the height of the 1967 terror I spoke with Mario Sandoval Alarcón, one of the organizers of the CIA sponsored invasion of Guatemala in 1954, later private secretary to President Carlos Castillo Armas until

Castillo's assassination in 1957, and since then secretary-general of the extreme right-wing *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional* (MLN). In 1966 and 1967 Sandoval had raised large sums from wealthy planters and merchants to combat the guerrillas.

"We of the *Liberación* were the vanguard group that got this started," he told me in an almost inaudible whisper; he has a throat tumor that has increasingly impaired his speech in recent years. "The army was demoralized by the guerrillas last year until we organized the White Hand. When our actions began in the guerrilla zone the army found itself with peasants willing to serve as guides, militiamen, and *comisionados militares* [military constables]. In the systematic elimination of the guerrillas a series of injustices apparently have been committed. Several hundred persons have been killed, but between January and March [1967] the guerrillas have almost been completely eliminated from the Guatemalan Oriente. The terrorism of the guerrillas, which has resulted in the death of many of our [MLN] people, has forced the government to adopt a plan of complete illegality, but this has brought results."² Today Sandoval is president of the Guatemalan Congress, where his party has a two-thirds majority.

Arana returned to Guatemala as the MLN presidential candidate in the March, 1970, elections. What was striking about those elections, apart from the killing and terror in rural areas which accompanied them, was that districts which had voted heavily for leftist candidates four years before this time voted even more heavily for the extreme right. The *comisionados militares*—the army's civilian agents in each town and village who provided intelligence and recruited for the right-wing vigilante organizations—threatened to burn down villages that did not vote overwhelmingly for MLN candidates.

A month after Arana's election, in which he gained 42 percent of the popular vote, the guerrillas kidnapped the West German ambassador, Count Karl von Spreti, in a desperate move to exchange him for some forty guerrilla prisoners before Arana was to take office; they feared, with good reason, that when Arana took power, these prisoners would be killed. Before the German ambassador was assassinated by the guerrillas, Arana pressured the outgoing president, Julio Cesar Mendez Montenegro (1966-70), who had become a puppet of the military, not to give in to the guerrillas' demands because it would set a bad precedent for Arana's own government. Besides, several of the imprisoned guerrillas had already been killed.

The guerrillas; worst fears were fully justified. Today Oliverio Casteñeda, Arana's chief lieutenant in the Oriente, is an MLN congressional deputy. Casteñeda still commands his followers in the White Hand and in other vigilante groups, who have been put on the government payroll as bodyguards and policemen. They have continued to act as death squads under a state of siege decree, which

was declared November 13, 1970. In the following two months these squads, a high government source privately admitted, committed 700 “executions.”

Richard Adams’s valuable book, *Crucifixion by Power*, a history of Guatemala in the two decades following the 1944 revolution which overthrew the thirteen-year dictatorship of Jorge Ubico, gives us a coherent setting for understanding the violence and degradation of the past few years. The trappings of this study—the legion of graduate students with their questionnaires, the pageant of institutional sponsors,³ the inevitable power-flow charts in the opening theoretical chapter—tend to disguise what is in fact a personal and authoritative analysis by an anthropologist who has spent two decades studying Guatemalan society, and who attempts to expand the scope of anthropological study from that of the small community to that of a complex and strife-ridden nation of four million people.

Most of the book is about the politics of revolution and counterrevolution and the unsuccessful struggle of insurgent social classes for more power and wealth. It is better in many ways than any other general work on contemporary Guatemala I know of in English or Spanish. But it would have been an even better book if it had given more attention to highland Indian culture, which provides the ethnic base of Guatemalan society. In his earlier work Adams strikingly contrasted the patriarchal Indian family with the matriarchal *ladinos*, the Spanish-speaking people of the cities and lowlands.⁴ It is unfortunate that he did not go on to show how the family instability and fragmentation in *ladino* areas such as the Oriente, along with nomadic, slash-and-burn agricultural methods, seem to rob people of the social allegiances and self-restraint that might have curtailed or prevented the hideous slaughter of recent years.

Of the revolutionary governments of the 1944-54 period Adams writes:

President Juan Jose Arevalo (1944-50) began a broad series of social reforms that included a social security program, a government office to foment production, the encouragement of syndicalism, the strengthening of the position of the military, the expansion of rural education, agricultural extension and public health, and the attempt to promote cooperatives. Of cardinal importance was the reintroduction of open elections, but with the difference that there were serious contenders. The university was granted autonomy, an industrial development law was passed, as well as a law...that prohibited share-cropping and profiteering on the rental of agricultural lands to peasants....

Under President Jacobo Arbenz (1950-54) further measures were taken, but unquestionably the most important was the agrarian reform decree and the dismissal of supreme court judges who contested its constitutionality. Others of relevance were the efforts to build a highway to the Atlantic and the utilization of the communists as political support.

These last two measures had a direct impact on the operations of the United Fruit Company in Guatemala. The work on the Atlantic highway was begun in order to break the stranglehold of the narrow-gauge railroad owned by United Fruit—the only transportation route between Guatemala City and the country’s main port. The communists in the agrarian reform organization encouraged strikes and invasions of the United Fruit plantations, which provoked a sharp reaction from Washington and weakened the Arbenz regime’s military support. “Realizing this,” Adams writes, “elements in the Arbenz government hoped to arm the [peasant] agrarian committees in order to neutralize the military, just as the work of the agrarian committees had been weakening the local landholders and upper class. Had this been successful, the agrarian committees would have taken over the major position of power in the revolution.”

It is fair to ask what would have happened if this process had been allowed to continue. These agrarian committees were similar to the peasant *sindicatos* which were armed and organized in the Bolivian Revolution of 1952, and which have remained more or less intact since. Although the Bolivian peasants, newly freed from serfdom, were often exploited by their own *sindicato* leaders, their new organizations have proved to be effective instruments of grassroots pressure on the national government. Peasants tend to vote with their bodies and take great risks when life-and-death questions of land are involved, as shown by the Indian land invasions that have taken place in the Peruvian sierra in recent years.

In Guatemala, however, in May, 1954, a shipment of weapons from Poland intended to arm the peasant militias was seized by the army after being unloaded at the United Fruit Company dock in Puerto Barrios, the country’s only port facility for large ships. A month later Castillo Armas’s “Liberation Army,” backed by the CIA, crossed over from Honduras. It was stopped after a series of skirmishes near the town of Chiquemula in the Oriente. However, the regular army commanders refused to arm the peasant militias to defend the regime and the military command asked Arbenz to resign. They were prompted to do this by John Peurifoy, the US ambassador to Guatemala who was also working for the CIA and who had been sent to Guatemala to organize the 1954 coup. Arbenz was an army colonel himself. He exasperated his civilian followers by agreeing to resign, and a decade of social revolution in Guatemala thus came to an end.

One major consequence of the counterrevolution was the return to the old landowners of 1.5 million acres of land that in less than eighteen months of agrarian reform had been distributed to between 80,000 and 100,000 peasants. To my knowledge, this is the only occasion in Latin American history in which a major land redistribution was reversed. This fact is a key to the hatreds that have since poisoned Guatemalan society.

One can almost speak now of a condition of “structural violence” between irreconcilable elements of the right and left in which the United States has been implicated by supporting a backward landlord class that long ago would have been swept away by social revolution were it not for repeated US intervention. In 1954 the CIA plotted the overthrow of Arbenz, and in 1960 Cuban exile units training for the Bay of Pigs invasion intervened to help put down a barracks revolt against President Miguel Ydigoras by junior army officers. From this group the leaders of the guerrilla movement of the past decade emerged.

Respected members of the democratic opposition now charge that the death lists of “communists” published by right-wing terrorist groups carried names originally given to Guatemalan army intelligence by US Embassy sources, and that the apparatus of repression has been strengthened greatly under the AID public safety program. (Both procedures are normally part of US government operations in Latin America; it is not unusual for AID public safety officers to serve five years in a post, as compared with the normal diplomatic tour of two or three years. The AID men maintain offices in the national police headquarters and enjoy considerable influence because of the equipment, foreign travel, training, and technical advice offered by their agency, whose programs are similar to those of the US military aid missions.) The US ambassador to Guatemala, John Gordon Mein, and two US military advisers were assassinated by guerrillas in 1968 in response to the right-wing terror.

According to Adams, who is cautious in expressing his own political views:

...the changes that were actually accomplished during the revolutionary decade...include the learning that had taken place in the entire population, the “sociological awakening” that could not be forgotten within the generation, the fact that organizing had been learned, and the awareness that the United States had intervened at the international level to stop the organization process. This last could not be easily accepted even by nationalistic Guatemalans antagonistic to Arbenz, and it signaled the operation of legitimate cold war activities at the international level.

Would it have been less costly, in the long run, for the US to have allowed these social movements to run their course?

Recently the terror against opponents of the regime has been appalling. The Guatemalan press reported 103 political assassinations in the three months immediately following President Arana’s inauguration last July 1. These killings coincided with the appearance of a new right-wing vigilante group, *Ojo por Ojo* (“An Eye for an Eye”), to which were attributed twenty-seven killings between Ambassador von Spreiti’s assassination and Arana’s presidential inauguration, and which has since become the most prominent

vigilante group in Guatemala. Arana had barely completed his first hundred days in office when he delivered a surprise radio-television address declaring a state of siege, and paternally scolded the Guatemalan people as follows:

How difficult you are! How demanding and how intolerant of others! Each one has the solution, and wants his own way of thinking or acting to be followed by everyone. Otherwise, there is implacable criticism. You sacrificed a little money and one day to give your vote, and you elected Arana and Caceres Lenhoff [the vice-president], giving them a mandate: pacify the country and terminate the wave of criminality. You didn't set conditions or say how.... The government that you elected made a promise which it will fulfill at all costs, even if it means resorting to drastic measures to save the country....⁵

The state of seige imposed a nightly curfew from 9 PM to 5 AM, during which time all traffic of vehicles and pedestrians—including ambulances, fire engines, and physicians—was forbidden throughout the national territory. Later, the MLN majority in Congress artificially declared a “state of civil war” in order to give unlimited powers to the government for an unlimited time. Newspapers and radio stations were prohibited from publishing news of crime and violence, except for the texts of bulletins issued by the public relations office of the army. Three journalists who violated this ban—Enrique Salazar Solorzano, Luis Perez Diaz, and Lorenzo Montufar Navas—were kidnapped some time between November 24 and 26, and have not been heard from since. According to a report from Guatemala published last February in the Venezuelan Jesuit magazine *SIC*:

These drastic measures have created a system of institutional terror.... The specific *zone of terror* embraces all opposition groups, democratic or not. There is a directorate composed of three cabinet ministers and the President of Congress (Sandoval Alarcón) who plan, initiate, control, define and justify the terror.

On an intermediate level are the “agents of violence,” two Congressional deputies who had directed the White Hand in 1967-68 and a military officer with a black personal record in past right-wing regimes who today is chief of immigration.

Finally, there are the “knives of the king,” the execution squads, drawn from various police forces, especially the secret police, and specially-trained groups recruited as politicians' bodyguards, and from military police units in the interior.⁶

The list of the accomplishments of these terror forces is a dreadful one. Some examples:

—At 3:30 PM on November 26, 1970, a Communist law professor at the University of San Carlos, Julio Camey Herrera, was driving through a residential neighborhood of Guatemala City. While he

waited for a red light to change, a small blue car drew up alongside and a young man got out and shot Camey through the windshield. The newspaper *El Imparcial* reported that “the attacker returned to his car, where other men waited, and escaped, taking advantage of the fact that the light had turned green.” The next day the public relations office of the army issued a communiqué saying, “The Government of the Republic laments the murder of Julio Camey Herrera. It informs the people that this shameful deed is another maneuver of the extremes to create problems for State institutions, sowing confusion and doubt.”⁷

—On November 29 Humberto Gonzalez Juarez, a leftist radio station owner who at one time was said to have given funds to the guerrillas, disappeared while driving to the Pacific coast with an architect friend, Armando Braun Valle, and Braun’s secretary. On December 8 their corpses were found at the bottom of a 300-foot-deep sewage canal, when the waters had receded. The army’s public relations office announced that “according to the medical examiner’s report, these persons died as a result of bullet holes in various parts of the body.... The Government of the Republic laments what has happened and presents its condolences to their survivors and to the guild of radio announcers and owners to which señor Gonzalez Juarez belonged.”⁸

—At 8 PM on November 30 Alfonso Bauer Paiz, a well-known leftist writer, politician, and law professor, was shot four times and left for dead after leaving a cocktail party in downtown Guatemala City. Bauer was able to recognize one of his attackers as a congressional bodyguard; he is expected to be paralyzed for life.

—On the night of April 6 a young reporter for “Radio Guatemala Flash,” Ricardo Castro, was kidnapped while on his way home from work, shot in the neck, and left for dead on a road outside the capital. “I recovered consciousness,” he said, “and was taken back to town in a milk truck.” Both Bauer and Castro had been attacked by terrorists before.

—At the end of April, an execution squad came to the house of Diego Leon Pu, an Indian and a Christian Democrat who lived in the department of Quiché and had been organizing cooperatives among the Indians there. He was not at home. The terrorists kidnapped his wife, who was later found dead.

On November 25 the army’s chief of public relations, Col. Virgilio Villagrán Bracamonte, announced that in the two weeks since the state of siege and the all-night curfew were decreed roughly a thousand persons had been arrested. He dismissed higher published estimates as obviously based on conjecture.⁹ The terror is rationalized as a social as well as a political prophylaxis: the claim is that recidivist criminal offenders are hunted down and killed. In some cases prisoners were taken from jail and shot, their names appearing later

on army bulletins as the casualties of clashes with guerrilla bands. As happened during the 1967-68 terror, peasants in the Oriente observed military planes at night flying out to sea to dump corpses. Within a three-day period in early March, sixteen corpses were discovered by workmen dredging the Río Montagua.

During the state of siege, in the hours in which Guatemalans were permitted to walk the streets, hundreds of persons desperately roamed among the jails and hospitals and courthouses and police stations in the capital in search of missing relatives. Each day, mutilated, unidentified corpses were displayed in the amphitheater of the General Hospital of Guatemala City before a gallery of people seeking members of their families.

Three weeks after the journalist Enrique Salazar Solorzano was kidnapped, his father went to the hospital amphitheater to see if his son was among the three bullet-ridden corpses just brought in. "My son is not there," he said. "What should I do? Who should I talk to if the President says my son is not a prisoner? I would like to remain here and wait for the arrival of more cadavers."¹⁰ A few days later thirteen corpses were discovered near the crater of the Pacaya volcano in the municipality of San Vicente Pacaya, near where the government ran a prison camp. When asked by journalists at the press conference if Salazar Solorzano's was among them, Col. Villagrán Bracamonte, the chief of army public relations, answered curtly: "If it was, so what?"

On December 18, a week after the MLN-controlled Congress extended the thirty-day state of siege for an indefinite period as a consequence of the president's decree of a state of "civil war," the MLN deputy and labor leader, Arnaldo Otten Prado, was machine-gunned to death as he drove away from his house in the early morning.¹¹ Five days later another veteran union official, Jaime Monge Donis, was killed in his car while delivering Christmas cards.¹² Both labor leaders had incurred the hostility of right-wing extremists for their attempts to influence President Arana by organizing a pro-government labor confederation.

When the state of siege came up for extension by Congress on December 11, the only opposition to the government's policy came from the Christian Democratic bloc of four deputies. By far the most vehement and persuasive of these was a short, paralytic lawyer and university professor, Dr. Adolfo Mijangos López, who argued on the floor of Congress:

...the majority of anti-communist sectors applaud the use of murder as a political weapon and as a system of repression, and their applause is published in the daily press. If their congratulations to the murderers is publishable, this is most serious. These congratulations are most alarming because they appear next to the Government's expressions of condolences when these corpses are discovered....

We are slipping into the realm of arbitrary acts where there is no control at all. Only they can define what is subversion of public order, and from that point there is just a millimeter of distance to the dissolution of the city council or the university or the *sindicatos*. One thing is to enthusiastically support a program of pacification, and another thing is to approve hastily and without study [state of siege] decrees without even having copies distributed to members of Congress to read.¹³

At 7 PM on January 13, the night before congressional debate was to resume on the government's emergency decrees, Adolfo Mijangos López was machine-gunned to death in his wheel chair as he left his law office after work. The government said in a communiqué: "The Public Relations Department of the army laments this cowardly deed that casts the family of Guatemalans into mourning."¹⁴

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1. Some readers may not remember that the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is an anti-Semitic tract from Czarist Russia in the form of a fake document prescribing alleged Jewish blood rituals such as the sacrifice of Christian children in order to use their blood to make matzohs and a plot to take over the world hatched by Jewish financiers. ↵
2. See my "Guatemala: Death in the Hills," *The Economist*, June 10, 1967, and "Guatemala Guerrillas Slaughtered: Church Objects to Bloodbath," in *The National Catholic Reporter*, June 7, 1967, and the exchange of letters, June 28, 1967. This anti-guerrilla strategy was more formally elaborated in a fourteen-page mimeographed MLN tract, "*La Guerrilla y Anti-guerrilla en Guatemala*," which was given to me by one of Sandoval's aides. ↵
3. The Ford Foundation, AID, the Institute of Latin American Studies of the University of Texas, the Guatemalan Government's Economic Planning Council, and the *Seminario de Integración Social Guatemalteca*. Separate essays on *campesino* organizations and the urban poor were written by two of Adams's younger colleagues, Brian Murphy and Brian Roberts respectively. ↵

4. See his *Encuesta sobre los Ladinos de Guatemala* (Guatemala, 1956) and his “An Inquiry into the Nature of the Family,” in *Essays in the Science of Culture in Honor of Leslie A. White*, edited by Gertrude E. Dole and Robert L. Carneiro (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1960). ↵
5. From “*Mensaje del Presidente Arana a su pueblo*,” in *La Nación*, Guatemala City, November 21, 1970. ↵
6. See “*El Terror Institucionalizado en Guatemala*,” in *SIC*, No. 332. Caracas, February, 1971, p. 57. ↵
7. *El Imparcial*, Guatemala City, November 27, 1970. ↵
8. *Ibid.*, December 8, 1970. ↵
9. *La Nación*, Guatemala City, November 25, 1970. ↵
10. *El Grafico*, December 18, 1970. In the first three months of the state of siege, habeas corpus petitions had been filed on behalf of 483 persons who had disappeared (*El Imparcial*, January 16, 1971). A month later, leaders of the University Students Association handed President Arana a list of eighteen persons who were arrested and twenty-three others who had disappeared (*El Grafico*, February 28, 1971, p. 2). ↵
11. *Prensa Libre*, Guatemala City, December 18, 1970. ↵
12. *El Imparcial*, December 23, 1970. ↵
13. *Diario de las Sesiones del Congreso de la Republica de Guatemala*, December 11, 1970, p. 47. ↵
14. *El Grafico*, January 14, 1971. ↵