

# Between Rigoberta Menchú and La Violencia

## Deconstructing David Stoll's History of Guatemala

by  
Victoria Sanford

In *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1998), David Stoll discounts lived experiences of state terror in general and Rigoberta's experiences in particular by presenting conjecture and hearsay as fact to attack details of Rigoberta's testimony. The reason he gives for scrutinizing the Nobel laureate, however, although somewhat buried in the work, is not to quibble about details but to contest her entire representation of the guerrilla movement and La Violencia of the late 1970s and 1980s. Although he does obliquely acknowledge the army's violence against Maya civilians in the final chapters of his book, his take on La Violencia is that the guerrillas bear the responsibility for the army's atrocities. If Rigoberta's representation of these events is accurate, he tells us, then his own previous work "was wrong about Ixil country." If, however, his construction is correct, he expresses hope that it will "help the Latin American left and its foreign supporters escape from the captivity of Guevarismo" (1998: 12, 282).

With these purposes in mind, let us look at Stoll's evidence. One of the most egregious errors in *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* is Stoll's representation of the massacre at the Spanish embassy in Guatemala in 1980 as a self-immolation coordinated by student and indigenous leaders of the peasant protesters occupying the embassy (1998: 71-88)—a fallacy recently repeated in the *Times Literary Supplement* by Ilan Stavans in his review of Stoll's book (April 23, 1999). Both Spanish military

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investigators in their 1981 report on the massacre and the Comisión para El Esclarecimiento Histórico (Commission for Historical Clarification—CEH) in its recently published findings conclude that the army carried out a premeditated firebombing of the embassy. Indeed, all accounts of the event except for the army's and Stoll's charge the army with responsibility for this massacre, in which Vicente Menchú, Rigoberta's father, was killed. In addition to blaming Vicente Menchú and the other victims of the massacre for their own deaths, at different points in his narrative Stoll labels Menchú "a thief," "an illegitimate child," "not supplicatory," "bitter," and a "myth" (1998: 25, 32, 104). Stoll's narrative strategy appears to be to distract attention from the army's culpability for its atrocities—a difficult task given that these range from selective assassinations to such public acts as the firebombing of the Spanish embassy and massacres of 626 villages, acts which finally claimed the lives of more than 200,000 Guatemalans. At the same time, he tries to make suspect any sympathy one might feel for the victims and survivors of what the CEH has characterized in legal terms as genocidal acts committed against the Maya. In the words of the CEH, "agents of the State of Guatemala . . . committed acts of genocide against groups of Maya people . . . all these acts were committed 'with intent to destroy [them] in whole or in part.' [These] massacres . . . obeyed a higher, strategically planned policy, manifested in actions which had a logical and coherent sequence" (CEH, 1999a: 40-41). Of the Spanish embassy massacre in particular, it determined that "agents of the state" were responsible for "the arbitrary execution of those inside the Spanish Embassy" and that "the very highest levels of authority of the government of Guatemala are the intellectual authors of this extremely grave violation of human rights." Moreover, the CEH specifically noted that "the hypothesis that victims self-immolated has no foundation" (CEH, 1999b: 14).

While Stoll challenges the details of Rigoberta Menchú's testimonial epic and casts suspicion on the character of Rigoberta and Vicente Menchú, he is quite generous in his descriptions of generals who held the presidency and were in command of the Guatemalan army at the height of state terror. Despite extensive documentation of army abuses under the presidency of General Kjell Laugerud (1974-1978), for instance, including the May 29, 1978, Panzós massacre, Stoll claims that under Laugerud "the army scaled back terror" (1998: 50). Laugerud's successor, General Romeo Lucas García (1978-1982), in turn, ushered in the epoch that would come to be known as *La Violencia*, which began with selective assassinations and later radiated into massacres in Maya villages throughout the country. An October 5, 1981, Department of State Memorandum (No. 6366) classified as secret

acknowledged that Lucas García believed that “the policy of repression” was “working,” a conclusion that the State Department official writing the memo went on to explain was based on a definition of a “successful” policy of repression as one that led to the “extermination of the guerrillas, their supporters and sympathizers.” This would be the same Lucas García whom Stoll describes as “doddering” (1998: 51). During General Romeo Lucas García’s regime, his brother Benedicto served as army chief of staff. Credited with the design of the scorched-earth campaign, Benedicto had received combat intelligence and high military command training at the U.S. Army’s School of the Americas.<sup>1</sup>

Although Stoll claims that General Efraín Ríos Montt, who became president following a military coup, was able to “rein in the death squads around the capital” (1998: 147), all evidence is to the contrary. Under Ríos Montt (1982-1983), massacres as a key tool of military policy continued and intensified in rural Guatemala and urban repression became extreme. In May 1982 the army illegally detained and tortured 11 adolescents in Guatemala City; after two weeks of torture in a clandestine jail, 8 survived (see Sanford, 1997: 1-5). During Ríos Montt’s regime, along with teachers, students, labor organizers, health workers, priests, nuns, and catechists, even children were considered subversive.

Critical to understanding why massacres in Maya communities constitute genocide is the fact that massacres were not a singular tactic of one military regime. Rather, the army combined the institutionalization of massacres with the destruction of villages and their surrounding fields and the relentless hunt for survivors, with army helicopters dropping bombs upon displaced civilians in the mountains and ground troops encircling and firing upon those fleeing aerial attacks. Such tactics were used throughout the regimes of Laugerud, Lucas García, and Ríos Montt. With a highly sophisticated national strategy under tight order of army command from Guatemala City and with military bases spanning the country but concentrated in the predominantly indigenous highlands and lowlands, ground troops and aerial forces carried out orders to massacre Maya communities and then saturate the mountain with firepower in an attempt to exterminate the unarmed Maya men, women, children, and elderly who had fled the destruction.

For massacre survivors who fled the mountains and later surrendered and rebuilt their villages and lives under army control, surviving state terror has meant the militarization of daily life for up to 15 years. Even when the overt expressions of militarization are withdrawn, internalization of encounters with terror continues to shape relationships within families and communities, as well as community relationships with the nation-state. Survivor testimonies viewed in the context of the discourse and practice of the various phases

of state terror can help us to understand that while the torture victim's missing tooth may be interpreted as a sign of survival and the empty army base as a victory for peace, each also represents a living memory of terror that continues to influence daily life. Under these circumstances, discrepancies encountered in testimonies taken in the field should not be taken to indicate faulty memory, invention, or deception. Rather these contradictions should "lead us through and beyond facts to their meaning" as experienced by survivors and witnesses (Portelli, 1991: 2; see also LaCapra, 1998; Langer, 1991).

Moreover, whatever the contradictions the researcher in the field may come across, we now have access to a broad range of primary and secondary resources, including declassified Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and State Department documents, municipal archival records, far-reaching investigations carried out by the Archbishop's Office and the CEH, and the forensic reports from the exhumation of nearly 50 clandestine cemeteries. These documents offer factual and evidentiary corroboration of the context of the terror provided by the testimonies.

A declassified CIA document from late February 1982 states that in mid-February 1982 the Guatemalan army had reinforced its existing forces and launched a "sweep operation in the Ixil Triangle. The commanding officers of the units involved have been instructed to destroy all towns and villages which are cooperating with the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) [Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres] and eliminate all sources of resistance" (CIA, 1982: 1). Point 1 of the memo claims that civilians "who agree to collaborate with the army . . . will be well treated." Yet, in point 3, the CIA acknowledges that "a large number of guerrillas and collaborators have been killed" and comments, "When an army patrol meets resistance and takes fire from a town or village it is assumed that the entire town is hostile and it is subsequently destroyed. . . . An empty village is assumed to have been supporting the EGP, and it is destroyed." Therefore, those who had heard of army massacres in neighboring villages and abandoned their villages to save their lives had their villages destroyed. Point 4 of the CIA memo concludes that the army high command is "highly pleased with the initial results of the sweep operation and believes it will be successful." Significantly, it clarifies that "the army has yet to encounter any guerrilla force in the area" and goes on to conclude that the army's "successes to date appear to be limited to the destruction of several 'EGP-controlled-towns'" and "the killing of Indian collaborators and sympathizers." It must be noted that forensic evidence (Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation, 1994-1999) confirms the absence of army/guerrilla combat and verifies massacre survivor testimonies that the massacres were not the outcome of an exchange of fire between the army and guerrillas with civilians caught in crossfire but the work of the Guatemalan army.

Finally, point 4 justifies the massacres of Ixil civilians and destruction of their villages: "The well documented belief by the army that the entire Ixil Indian population is pro-EGP has created a situation in which the army can be expected to give no quarter to combatants and non-combatants alike" (1982: 2-3).

In January 1982, prior to the internal circulation of these CIA documents, at least 399 civilians were killed in army massacres and operations in 24 Maya communities in seven departments. In two reported massacres, the number of victims was unknown. All of this was before the army began the "sweep operation" so cynically but aptly described in the CIA documents. In February at least 327 civilian men, women, children, and elderly were killed in army massacres in 22 Maya communities. The number of victims in four of these massacres remains unknown.<sup>2</sup> If anything, the CIA documents, despite their convoluted language and censored presentation, acknowledge Guatemalan army massacres of civilians. Furthermore, these documents concur with the Guatemalan army that all Ixiles are pro-EGP. This concurrence between the CIA and the Guatemalan army that all Ixiles are pro-EGP represents the official conflation of political affiliation and ethnicity. Thus, the U.S. embassy and its officers in Guatemala, the U.S. State Department, and the CIA justify the Guatemalan army's destruction of the social, political, and material culture of the Maya in general and the Ixiles in particular.

While denying the reality of the state violence documented by the CIA earlier that year, a November 1982 internal U.S. State Department document analyzing international human rights organizations reflected the CIA's February 1982 view that the Guatemalan army could be expected to "give no quarter to combatants and non-combatants alike" based on the idea that anyone who did not support the army must support the guerrillas. This now infamous document claimed that respected international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International (AI) and the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) had "successfully carried out a campaign of Communist-backed disinformation." Significantly, the State Department concluded that human rights reports documenting Guatemalan army massacres of unarmed civilians were "a concerted disinformation campaign waged in the United States against the Guatemalan government by groups supporting the left-wing insurgency in Guatemala."

The veracity of the human rights reports of AI, WOLA, and others can no longer be credibly contested, and, in fact, recent comprehensive investigations conducted by the Archbishop's Office and the CEH now confirm that victims of the violence far exceed the commonly cited 440 villages burned off the map by the Guatemalan army, 1.5 million people displaced, 150,000 driven into refuge, and 100,000 to 150,000 killed or disappeared. Indeed, in

its recently published report, the CEH concluded that 626 villages had been destroyed, more than 200,000 people were killed or disappeared, 1.5 million were displaced by the violence, and more than 150,000 were driven to seek refuge in Mexico. Furthermore, the CEH found the state responsible for 93 percent of the acts of violence and the guerrillas for 3 percent. All told, 83 percent of the victims were Maya and 17 percent were ladino (see Carmack, 1988; Falla, 1992; Manz, 1988; Smith, 1990; CEH, 1999a, 1999b).

Nonetheless, there are those who continue to conflate human rights workers with the guerrillas. One high-ranking officer told me that when he thought of human rights workers he envisioned someone "wearing a Che Guevara beret with a star and carrying a machine gun." Unfortunately, this view is not limited to the Guatemalan military and their advisers. In his book on Rigoberta Menchú as well as in an article on human rights activism, Stoll (1996) reflects the Guatemalan army's rhetoric and practice of blurring the distinctions among guerrilla combatants, land-rights activists, religious workers, and anyone else challenging the military regime or the local non-Maya landholding elite and reducing them to a single category. The same kind of language and identification were used by the army to justify killing off all local leaders, including Maya priests, literacy promoters, teachers, health workers, and land-rights activists such as Rigoberta's father, Vicente Menchú. As does the 1982 State Department analysis of human rights organizations, Stoll groups solidarity activists with anti-intervention activists, human rights workers, and academics carrying out research (1998: 10-11; 1997: 187-188). Within this political schema, anyone who disagrees with Stoll is treated as a supporter of the guerrillas. Interestingly, although Stoll both constructs and deconstructs Rigoberta Menchú, his own book about Rigoberta cannot withstand the same scrutiny. And, significantly, in the places where this U.S.-trained academic's research falls apart concrete primary documents are in fact available.

One such example is Stoll's claim that there was a lack of relationship between the U.S. government and the Guatemalan military regime in the 1960s (1998: 48). This is a curious summary of an era that saw a continuation and expansion of the counterinsurgency and intelligence training for Guatemalan military officers at the School of the Americas that had begun as early as 1947. In addition, meetings of Central American ministers of the interior (who have jurisdiction over police and internal intelligence) organized and led by the U.S. State Department, with assistance from the CIA, AID, the Customs Bureau, the Immigration Service, and the Justice Department, in the 1960s were "designed to develop ways of dealing with subversion," according to William Bowdler, who represented the State Department at the gatherings (Nairn, 1984).<sup>3</sup> And these meetings led to the parallel development of

paramilitary organizations throughout Central America, with death squads known as the Mano Blanco (White Hand) in El Salvador and the Mano (Hand) in Guatemala. The extreme terror waged against civil society in Guatemala in the 1960s killed thousands of peasants and distinguished Guatemala as the first country where the term “disappeared” came to be used to describe the political condition of being kidnapped by government death squads, tortured to death, and buried in a clandestine grave.

Finally, Stoll must be held accountable for his choice of the persons upon whom he relied to contest Rigoberta’s story. Although he does not generally refer to his key informants by name, he gave a list of them to the journalist Larry Rohter for his report in the *New York Times* (December 5, 1998). One such informant is Alfonso Rivera, whom Rohter introduces “as the clerk for the municipal government for 30 years [who] kept all official records.” In the *Times* article, Rivera is critical of Rigoberta Menchú, and his criticism is presented as having special authority because of his responsibility in the local government of Uspantán. What isn’t mentioned in Rohter’s story or Stoll’s book is that Rivera was removed from office and jailed in 1994 on charges of corruption and misuse of public funds. Nor does either mention the collusive relationship that local functionaries had to maintain with the military in order not only to keep their jobs but simply to stay alive during La Violencia. This probably explains why former military commissioners in Uspantán identify Rivera as a trusted friend while Uspantecos from surrounding villages are suspicious of his ties with the army and many who live in town simply describe him as corrupt.

It is ironic that Stoll undermines testimony as a resource for history when his own reconstructions of history lack credible sources. Testimony has been and continues to be the principal avenue by which semiliterate and illiterate people can communicate with those who wish to understand their struggles. Like her father, Rigoberta Menchú never claimed to be apolitical. Testimony is itself inherently political, and Stoll attacks the very essence of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, which is the right of the Maya in general and Maya women in particular to political consciousness, self-representation, and political action.

## NOTES

1. See School of the Americas yearly lists, 1947-1991, of Guatemalan military officers trained at SOA, released by the U.S. Department of State.

2. Numbers of massacre victims are based on Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala (1998), Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (1994-1999), and reports filed with Defensoria Maya and the Consejo de Comunidades Etnias Runujel Junam

(Council of Ethnic Communities—We Are All Equal—CERJ) through September 1997. See also Davis and Hodson (1982), Amnesty International (1982; 1984), and Americas Watch (1982; 1983; 1984).

3. Naim's analysis of the U.S. role in developing paramilitary organizations throughout Central America is further confirmed by the following declassified CIA and State Department documents: United States Embassy in Guatemala Memoranda to the Secretary of State on September 15, 1962; March 13, 1963; and January 23, 1964. See also Memorandum of the Special Group September 25, 1963; Telegram from U.S. Embassy in Guatemala to the State Department January 5, 1966; Public Safety Division USAID/Guatemala, "Operational Rescue of Terrorist Kidnapping and Guatemala Police Activity to Counter," December 1965; CIA Memoranda dated March and April 1966. All declassified documents cited in this article are now available from the National Security Archive in Washington, DC.

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