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**Breaking the Silence:
The Hidden Stories of the Guatemalan Genocide**

Sebastian Miranda¹

To avoid the catastrophic effects of nuclear war, the United States and the Soviet Union plunged the world into a Cold War. The superpower titans fought an ideological war that triggered proxy conflicts worldwide, permanently transforming the dynamics of global affairs. This dynamic can be seen in the Cold War in Latin America, where there were numerous ferocious clashes between right-wing pro-U.S. Latin American governments and communist insurgencies, making Latin America a war zone. The Cold War in Latin America contains some of the most notorious acts of genocide in modern world history. General Efraín Ríos Montt's 17-month reign presided over violence against the indigenous Maya people that many scholars and survivors have described as genocidal. The ethnic cleansing of the Maya people acted as a terrible consequence of the Cold War in Latin America, when Efraín Ríos Montt took up the mantle to fight communism, with a campaign of mass violence that his supporters have portrayed as an ideological fight and not one of ethnic cleansing. Historians have debated these claims, as survivors of Ríos Montt's genocide have recorded their testimonies, which document the atrocities committed against the Maya people. Some scholars emphasize the role of Cold War counterinsurgency and argue that violence was directed at suspected guerrilla regions, while others contend that the scale and racialized targeting of Indigenous communities justify the classification of genocide.² Even though these testimonies reveal the horrors committed in the Guatemalan genocide, historians must understand and center the perspective of survivors rather than the actions of one man. This multifaceted perspective on the genocide in its entirety aims to make sure that the voices of neglected survivors are heard. The victors often write history, but in the case of the Guatemalan genocide, its survivors also tell it, and their stories are more powerful than those of a military ruler.

The methodology of my research heavily emphasizes the testimonies of Maya survivors of the Guatemalan genocide. Part of my thesis is to avoid glorifying the suffering of these individuals or to simply narrate them, but instead to reveal untold perspectives of survivors and not just focus on broader patterns of state violence. It also needs to be noted that the Ladino ethnic group, generally referring to non-indigenous or Spanish assimilated populations, was also targeted during the genocide,

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² Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 12.

but roughly 80% of the killings between 1982 and 1983 involved ethnic Maya.³ Although many Indigenous communities in Guatemala historically identified with local languages and regions rather than a unified national identity, the term “Maya” is used here in accordance with contemporary scholarship. It is also important to elaborate on why survivors chose to speak and share their stories during the 17 months of violence. Refugees who fled massacres in the early 1980s began sharing their experiences with journalists, church networks, and human rights organizations. Later groups, such as the Catholic Church's Recovery of Historical Memory project (REMHI) and the United Nations-backed Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), not only preserved memories of the violence but also created public spaces for survivors to discuss the atrocities that the Guatemalan state had long denied, helping to preserve historical memory.⁴ These pioneering efforts later influenced the USC Shoah Foundation Visual Archive, where Guatemalan survivor testimonies began to be collected in the mid-2010s, greatly helping my study. My research represents a collection of stories that connect with the broader context of the Guatemalan Civil War and the stages of genocide under Efraín Ríos Montt. All testimonies consulted in this study were examined in their original Spanish language recordings and transcripts.

Guatemala's role in the Cold War must be understood within the longer trajectory of its internal conflict. While the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) dates the beginning of the Guatemalan Civil War to 1960, the conflict intensified during the mid-1960s as the military expanded its operations and consolidated power.⁵ As a victim of U.S. intervention, the political crisis in Guatemala had been building for decades due to its developed characteristics, often described as a banana republic. The idea of being a banana republic was discouraging for Guatemala's agrarian population, as most of the land was owned by U.S. Fruit Companies, which became insatiably rich at the expense of the land and its people.⁶ This situation was tolerated by the Guatemalan government, which was meticulously pro-U.S., and any opposition within the government was quickly dismantled. The pro-U.S. government gave rise to dictators, mostly former generals, creating a tradition in which Guatemala's rulers were often military men, and their control over the military held the government hostage.

Hope for political change emerged in the 1940s with the rise of Jacobo Árbenz, a reform-minded military officer shaped by the October Revolution of 1944. Influenced by Guatemala's

³ Virginia Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit: Guatemala under General Efraín Ríos Montt, 1982–1983* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 7.

⁴ Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala (ODHAG), *Guatemala: Nunca Más* (Guatemala City, 1998).

⁵ Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), *Guatemala: Memory of Silence* (Guatemala City, 1999).

⁶ Jones and Bucheli, “*The Octopus and the Generals: The United Fruit Company in Guatemala*,” p.167.

stark inequalities and inspired by calls for social justice, Árbenz supported democratization and land reform aimed at breaking the domination of foreign-owned plantations.⁷ His 1950 presidential campaign centered on redistributing idle land to landless peasants and promoting national economic sovereignty.⁸ These proposals gained strong support among rural Mayas and Ladinos, who saw in them the promise of greater autonomy over their labor and livelihoods. Yet Árbenz's reforms directly challenged U.S. corporations, especially United Fruit, and quickly became framed as a communist threat in the early Cold War climate.⁹ In 1954, the Eisenhower administration authorized a CIA-backed coup that forced Árbenz from power.¹⁰ The overthrow crushed hopes for agrarian reform and signaled to many Guatemalans that foreign interests would determine the nation's future. The loss of sovereignty fueled resentment and helped radicalize segments of the military and student activists, contributing to the emergence of insurgent groups such as MR-13 and the Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes (FAR).¹¹ By 1965, Guatemala had entered a protracted civil conflict, and the military consolidated control under successive generals.¹² These developments laid the structural foundations for the counterinsurgency campaigns that would later culminate in genocide under Efraín Ríos Montt.

Besides the political turmoil that began in Guatemala in the 1960s, fighting between the government and guerrilla groups remained small-scale, with skirmishes occurring in rural, remote areas. Due to the low intensity of the early stages of the Guatemalan civil war, life for rural Mayans remained fairly stable, as some surviving land reforms after Arbenz's coup allowed them to farm their own land.¹³ Maya populations were concentrated in high altitude regions of northern Guatemala, and some of the departments with the highest percentage of Mayas were Alta Verapaz, El Quiché, and Chimaltenango.¹⁴ It was not a life of luxury, since agrarian work involved intense labor that the Maya population had to perform to maintain their livelihoods. Crops like coffee and sugarcane, key to Maya

⁷ Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation*, p. 74.

⁸ Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944–1954* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 120.

⁹ Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944–1954*, p. 254.

¹⁰ Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*, p. 256.

¹¹ Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit: Guatemala under General Efraín Ríos Montt, 1982–1983*, p. 27 as agrarian work required intense labor.

¹² Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, p. 28.

¹³ Diego Rivera Santiago. Interview 55367. Interview by Yeni Marisol de León. Visual History Archive, Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala, November 10, 2015. <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/55367>, 5:02-6:33.

¹⁴ Instituto Nacional de Estadística (Guatemala), “*Portal de Resultados del Censo 2018: Mapas.*” Archived at Web Archive. <https://web.archive.org/web/20200416.../https://www.censopoblacion.gt/mapas>.

staples, were vital for their survival and culture.¹⁵ In Maya households, fathers and sons handled the laborious tasks of farming and harvesting, and when the season came, they used their profits either for personal needs or to sell in the local market.¹⁶ Mothers and daughters managed domestic duties, caring for the home, cooking, and looking after infants.¹⁷ Arranged marriages were common among women, with fathers deciding on their daughters' grooms based on monetary worth. Genocide survivor Inga Chen Valey was forced into an arranged marriage at 16, but she was grateful her husband was not abusive, as patriarchal customs among Maya tolerated domestic violence.¹⁸ The traditional agrarian lifestyle of the Maya did not foster much social mobility, as families inherited land and continued farming across generations. Due to the hereditary land succession process in families, most families would build homes next to their cultivated land, essentially creating a communal society in rural Maya communities, as most of the communities consisted of land-owning households.¹⁹ Genocide survivor Santiago Mo Yat built his home, as it was customary for men to construct their own houses from scratch, to be suitable for courting and starting families.²⁰ These agrarian lifestyle practices are essential for understanding life for rural Maya before the genocide, as they were a core part of their culture.

Education was limited for rural Maya, as their focus on agriculture and the need to learn skills applicable to their craft often discouraged children from attending school. Most Maya only went to school until the 2nd grade and learned only elementary-level reading and writing.²¹ Further education was frowned upon, and one genocide survivor, Diego Rivera Santiago, mentioned that his grandfather, who raised him from a young age, believed that school would make him slothful and unfit for field work.²² Access to education was not entirely rare, as teachers from outside communities would come to

¹⁵ Juana Sánchez Toma, Interview 57034. Interview by Yeni Marisol de León. Visual History Archive, Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala, May 10, 2017.

<https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/57034> 15:24-16:28.

¹⁶ María Tzoy Alvarado, Interview 57094. Interview by Diane Manuela Xiloj. Visual History Archive, Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala, September 13, 2017.

<https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/57094> 13:01-14:54.

¹⁷ Iginia Chen Valey, Interview 55657. Interview by Diane Manuela Xiloj. Visual History Archive, Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala, April 20, 2016. 8:35-9:07.

¹⁸ Chen Valey, Interview 55657, 13:40-14:05.

¹⁹ Santiago, Mo Yat, Interview 55302. Interview by Yeni Marisol de León. Visual History Archive, Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala, May 14, 2015.

<https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/55302> 6:15-7:04.

²⁰ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 16:18-16:30.

²¹ Rivera Santiago, Interview 55367, 7:07-7:35.

²² Rivera Santiago, Interview 55367, 9:00-9:42.

rural Maya areas to teach children of elementary to middle school age.²³ These teachers not only taught traditional subjects like math and language arts but also sometimes integrated carpentry skills into their curriculum.²⁴ Genocide survivor Jose Tay Morales recalls that one particular teacher helped students develop carpentry skills and assisted them with personal projects even after school hours.²⁵ The implementation of blue-collar skills was appealing to community school-aged kids, and those who could continue their education beyond 2nd grade greatly valued it. Since outside teachers provided most education, when the political climate worsened during the mid to late 1970s, teachers stopped coming to Maya communities due to the growing military presence.²⁶ This interrupted children's education and marked the beginning stages of mass killings.

There is a popular belief among individuals that Genocide and mass killings take place spontaneously, which could not be further from the truth. As the Guatemalan Civil War continued into the mid-1970s, the targeting of Maya became more evident and did not start with Efraín Ríos Montt. The systematic targeting of Maya can be traced to the presidency of Kjell Eugenio Laugerud García, who, like his future successor, was a former general.²⁷ When discussing the early stages of genocide in Guatemala, historians often overlook Laugerud García's involvement, especially since, during his presidency, on 4 February 1976, a 7.5 magnitude earthquake caused widespread devastation, resulting in a death toll of 23,000 and 70,000 wounded.²⁸ It is reasonable to assume that Laugerud García focused his presidential efforts on helping the country recover from the earthquake, but the civil war was not entirely off his radar. Genocide survivor Juana Sánchez Toma from the village of San Juan Cotzal, El Quiché, recalls that in 1976, mass kidnappings were happening in her village, and she started noticing multiple military house seizures, and some people she had known were never heard of again.²⁹ In 1977, a series of killings instilled deep fear in her and the entire village as they found corpses in their streets.³⁰ The random disappearances caused widespread terror among the Maya people, creating a sense of dread and limbo for families who never learned the fate of their loved ones.

²³ José Tay Morales, Interview 57028. Interview by Diane Manuela Xiloj. Visual History Archive, Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala, April 21, 2017.

<https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/57028>, 48:52-50:39.

²⁴ Tay Morales, Interview 57028. 55:31-57:28.

²⁵ Tay Morales, Interview 57028, 56:23-57:02.

²⁶ Tzoy Alvarado, Interview 57094. 4:24-4:55.

²⁷ University of Central Arkansas, *DADM Project: Guatemala (1903–Present)*, Department of Political Science, University of Central Arkansas. Accessed 19 September 2025, <https://uca.edu/politicalscience/home/research-projects/dadm-project/western-hemisphere-region/guatemala-1903-present/>, p. 6.

²⁸ Garrard-Burnet, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, p. 43.

²⁹ Sánchez Toma, Interview 57034, 30:34-32:40.

³⁰ Sánchez Toma, Interview 57034, 32:40-33:06.

Laugerud Garcia's role has been overlooked, but the stages of genocide would continue to unfold with his successors.

In the 1978 election, General Romeo Lucas Garcia was elected as President through a congressional vote. His presidential legacy is stained by more bloodshed than his predecessor's, as his aggression toward the guerrillas was more ruthless. Lucas Garcia's systematic killing of Maya people is seen as reckless and random, with no clear structure to the operations carried out by the military.³¹ Military death squads could freely operate in rural Maya areas of Guatemala, and the lack of a clear chain of command led them to enact their carnage without any repercussions.³² Maya villagers were terrified of the military invading their community. The villagers were aware that they would use the scapegoat of terminating guerrilla bases, even if the entire community had no links to the guerrillas. Juana Sanchez Toma, in 1980, states that her own father died from fear weeks after the military had arrived in her village to intimidate locals.³³ Lucas Garcia laid out the systematic paranoia that instilled fear into the Maya population. That same fear caused despair as they found no apparent logic to the suffering their government was causing them.

Although there were notorious massacres under the leadership of Lucas Garcia, that of Efraín Ríos Montt overshadows the scale of those massacres. There has been proper documentation, and testimonies revealed to historians, which have broadened the context and allowed analysis of people's attitudes before Ríos Montt took power. Knowledge of massacres was not limited to a particular area, as other villages would discover the murderous intentions of the military. Jose Tay Morales recalls that during February 1982, there was a massacre in a village called Paco that was close to his community of Choatalum in Chimaltenango.³⁴ Jose Tay Morales's community would then later find out that other villages have shared the same fate as Paco, being slaughtered and plundered.³⁵ Fear grew, and Maya villagers were afraid of turning to the guerrillas, as some believed that guerrilla presence could also bring danger to their communities. Still, many realized that the military was the notorious perpetrator. There was a growing sense of dread as Maya communities never knew if they would be next. Lucas Garcia's blindfolded, systematic killing campaign caused uncertainty and fear among the Maya population, which was different from his successor's model, as his successor would cause the deaths of about 80,000 Maya, amounting to 40-42% of the 200,000 casualties in the entire Guatemala Civil War.³⁶

³¹ Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, p. 11.

³² Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, p. 30.

³³ Sánchez Toma, Interview 57034, 10:12-10:35.

³⁴ Tay Morales, Interview 57028, 1:11:25-1:11:49.

³⁵ Tay Morales, Interview 57028, 1:11:25-1:11:49.

³⁶ Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, p. 6.

Historians have debated whether Maya communities during the Guatemalan Civil War were simply trapped “between two fires” of military and guerrilla violence.³⁷ Some interpretations emphasize the fear rural Maya communities felt toward both forces, while critics of that framework argue that it can obscure the political agency, local organizing, and survival strategies of Indigenous Maya communities before and during the genocide.³⁸ This study does not attempt to provide a full history of Maya organizing, but it does recognize that rural communities were not passive actors. Survivor testimonies reveal that Maya villagers responded to military and guerrilla pressures in different ways, shaped by local conditions, fear, and the need to survive.

The rise of General Efraín Ríos Montt was widely welcomed by government officials and the public following Lucas García’s inconsistent military operations. Ríos Montt’s charismatic authority made him a promising leader and popular with the majority of the military. The problem in Guatemala is that when a military junta rules alone, coups can occur at any time if a government official feels ambitious or dissatisfied with the current leadership. General Efraín Ríos Montt met the criteria of being dissatisfied with Lucas García’s military performance and having a personal ambition to become Guatemala’s next president. His military background as a general gave him firsthand experience fighting guerrilla groups in 1974, garnering him a reputation among his troops for his brutality against both guerrillas and Maya populations; he was labeled as having a *Mano Dura* (Tough Hand).³⁹ His religious awakening as a Pentecostal was integral to his philosophy and goals for Guatemala. After the 1976 earthquake, as Pentecostalism grew rapidly in Guatemala, many, including Ríos Montt, believed it was a divine sign, and he felt it was his mission to change the country’s political and cultural landscape.⁴⁰ On 23 March 1982, Ríos Montt finally launched his coup, which was widely accepted and accompanied by promises of a national transformation to end the Guatemalan Civil War and reshape the nation’s identity.⁴¹

Ríos Montt was quick to implement his Pentecostal beliefs upon taking power, and his political ideas were often expressed in his Sunday radio sermons, where he discussed Guatemala’s issues

³⁷ Elizabeth Oglesby and Diane M. Nelson, 2016, “Guatemala’s Genocide Trial and the Nexus of Racism and Counterinsurgency,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 18 (2–3): pp. 133–42. doi:10.1080/14623528.2016.1186436.

³⁸ Greg Grandin, “The Instruction of Great Catastrophe: Truth Commissions, National History, and State Formation in Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala,” *American Historical Review* 110, no. 1 (2005): pp. 46–67.

³⁹ Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, p. 55.

⁴⁰ Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, p. 56.

⁴¹ Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, p. 57.

and offered solutions.⁴² He primarily believed in a single national identity, thinking that diverse indigenous cultures and the use of native languages undermined the unity he envisioned for Guatemala.⁴³ His view targeted the Maya people, with the belief that their identity contributed to the country's disunity, and he strongly associated them with the insurgency movement. Essentially, his policies sought to combine political purging with what many scholars interpret as ethnic cleansing. Despite this, he also positioned himself as a father figure for Guatemalans, labeling the guerrilla movement and the diverse Maya population as unruly children who refused to listen.⁴⁴ This reveals a dark side of Ríos Montt's zealotry, as he saw himself as a vessel of God's will for Guatemala and also infantilized the Maya population, which deeply reflected colonial practices by Spanish missionaries.

To implement his vision for Guatemala, Ríos Montt drew on his military experience to develop the counterinsurgency plan called *Victoria 82* in late June 1982.⁴⁵ *Victoria 82* was a counterinsurgency strategy designed to eliminate guerrilla influence in rural communities by increasing military presence and employing harsh tactics.⁴⁶ The first phase of *Victoria 82*, *Fusiles y Frijoles* (Weapons and Beans), offered rural communities a stark choice between military compliance and violent punishment. However, *Fusiles y Frijoles* went beyond these simple principles, as this phase is notorious for its precise and deadly scorched-earth campaign targeting villages in northern Guatemala. Ríos Montt's effective execution of *Fusiles y Frijoles* involved the creation and classification of villages into military-designated zones, which Latin American historian Virginia Garrard-Burnett describes as a "Venn diagram of tragedy where anti-communism met racism in overlapping circles of death."⁴⁷ These labels served as eerie target signs, and many Maya understood the terrifying significance and possible fate of their villages. Juana Sanchez Toma recalls soldiers placing either a red or pink flag, which came with a strict curfew that ran from 6:00 PM to 6:00 AM and prevented people from working late without being seen as suspicious.⁴⁸ If people were caught breaking the curfew, soldiers would accuse them of supporting the guerrillas and would suffer severe punishment.⁴⁹ When the military moved into villages and regions designated by the military as insurgent zones, it made the liquidation of Maya people more deadly than Lucas Garcia's inconsistent strategies, as the detailed planning led to more precise, systematic killings on a larger scale.

⁴² Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional de Guatemala (AHPN), *Case 146522*, University of Texas Libraries, <https://ahpn.lib.utexas.edu/case/146522/>, p.53.

⁴³ *Case 146522*, p. 79.

⁴⁴ *Case 146522*, p. 87.

⁴⁵ Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, p. 58.

⁴⁶ Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, p. 60.

⁴⁷ Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, p. 15.

⁴⁸ Sánchez Toma, Interview 57034, 40:25-40:55.

⁴⁹ Sánchez Toma, Interview 57034, 41:20-41:40.

The systematic approach Efraín Ríos Montt implemented in military command in northern Guatemala created a sense of terrifying certainty. While Efraín Ríos Montt made his intentions clear and people knew what they needed to do to stay alive, even if they remained docile and complied with the military, they still faced severe abuses before the military began to carry out massacres and destroy entire Maya villages. When put on trial, Efraín Ríos Montt claimed that many of the abuses and massacres carried out by the military were not directly from his orders.⁵⁰ Ríos Montt argued that this was due to the military having too much autonomy in their actions, which is a doubtful statement, as it either revealed his incompetence as a leader or, given his reputation as a skilled general, indicated that military abuse was not accidental.

The temperament and character of Ríos Montt's soldiers can be further illustrated by their interactions with Maya villagers. Their animosity against them was based on their anti-communist beliefs that all villagers were staunch communists with close ties to guerrillas. Many house searches conducted in Maya homes were routine inspections to see if residents were harboring weapons for the guerrillas. These seizures often turned violent, as soldiers became irritated by crying children or grew aggressive when they could not find any concrete evidence. Iginia Chen Valey recalls soldiers entering her home to search for weapons, during which they recklessly dismantled her newborn's crib, causing it to fall and suffer physical trauma that led to its death.⁵¹ Maria Tzoy Alvarado, as a child, recalls a house seizure in her home, and her fear of the soldiers made her start to cry, which enraged one soldier who tied her up and told her mother that if she didn't stop crying, they would kill her.⁵² The soldiers' ruthlessness is what survivors Maria Tzoy Alvarado and Iginia Chen Valey remember. They still wonder how they were brought up to be so cruel, especially considering that some of the soldiers were Maya themselves. A Guatemalan soldier's final verdict might be that they were simply trying to find weapons to protect themselves and other villagers. Still, survivors say it was unjustified violence that was encouraged by commanders.

Now, what soldiers saw as a weapon was based on their intent to cause harm to families and whether they found a rifle or a blade useful for agricultural work. Juana Sanchez Toma remembers the first time soldiers conducted a house search, during which soldiers did not find any clear proof linking her or her husband to the guerrilla.⁵³ This led the soldiers to accuse her, claiming that the stone she used in her molcajete to grind flour was the deadly weapon they believed she was hiding, which

⁵⁰ Inter-American Court of Human Rights, *Case of the Río Negro Massacres v. Guatemala: Judgment of September 4, 2012 (Preliminary Objection, Merits, Reparations, and Costs)*. Series C No. 250. San José: Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 2012, p. 305.

⁵¹ Chen Valey, Interview 55657, 21:35-21:54.

⁵² Tzoy Alvarado, Interview 57094, 55:14-56:12.

⁵³ Sánchez Toma, Interview 57034, 1:01:57-1:02:56.

intensified their interrogation and beatings.⁵⁴ The smallest act of defiance was met with hostility from the soldiers, and household items such as a molcajete, common in Maya communities, were seen as signs of treason, suggesting that even material possessions in their culture represented resistance to Ríos Montt's vision of a "New Guatemala."

Ríos Montt's infantilization of the Maya people was also evident in how the soldiers interacted with and interrogated them. During one such interrogation, Juana Sanchez Toma recalls that the brigade commander, Otto "Motto" Sierra, who conducted house seizures, began beating her with a rifle and shot a bullet near her head to terrify her.⁵⁵ He then held out his gun and said, "This is your father, this is what you're going to know, your father is here because you're not telling us the truth."⁵⁶ The metaphor of Otto Motto's gun representing the father reflects the *mano dura* Efraín Ríos Montt promoted, influencing the rhetoric used by commanders to interrogate and terrorize Maya populations. It can be argued that the case of Commander Otto Motto Sierra was unique, and each commander carried out their own form of judgment on Maya villages, but this further demonstrates that genocide survivors like Juana Sanchez Toma witnessed the practice of Efraín Ríos Montt's vision as they believed they were carrying out god's work.

The military presence in the Maya village was not solely about house seizures and eventual liquidation, as they also found ways to exploit the locals of their goods and livelihoods. If a village were to be temporarily spared, soldiers would often gather most of the men and send them to nearby prison camps, where they endured weeks of torture to extract any information they could potentially find about the guerrilla groups.⁵⁷ Some men were released after a few days, while others who remained were executed.⁵⁸ It was not only the absence of Maya men that was alarming; the military also committed gruesome sexual acts against Maya women, acts that were largely ignored by the Guatemalan military upper command. These acts of sexual violence did not happen randomly: brigades of soldiers would actively try to force themselves on women whenever they could. During the house seizure that resulted in the death of her newborn, Iginia Chen Valey was sexually assaulted by one of the soldiers since her husband was absent from the house.⁵⁹

Juana Sanchez Toma states that in April 1982, she and dozens of women aged 15 to 50 were forcibly taken into their local parish, which had been turned into a military-run brothel.⁶⁰ The women endured

⁵⁴ Sánchez Toma, Interview 57034, 1:02:33-1:02:55.

⁵⁵ Sánchez Toma, Interview 57034, 1:03-1:04:07.

⁵⁶ Sánchez Toma, Interview 57034, 1:03-1:04:07.

⁵⁷ Sánchez Toma, Interview 57034, 1:15:48-1:16:45.

⁵⁸ Sánchez Toma, Interview 57034, 1:18:20-1:18:33.

⁵⁹ Chen Valey, Interview 55657, 22:12-22:43.

⁶⁰ Sánchez Toma, Interview 57034, 1:09:15-1:10:00.

days of sexual abuse, being passed between soldiers throughout the day.⁶¹ Juana Sanchez Toma was released after ten days. However, due to the patriarchal nature of Maya society, she was afraid to tell her husband what had happened.⁶² The experiences of Maya women are sadly not well documented because many survivors choose not to speak out due to societal constraints. Despite this, these brave women share their painful memories to ensure their stories are preserved, and their descendants and scholars must listen to and understand them so they are not forgotten.

The analysis of the massacres reveals parallels that are evident in understanding the scale of the damage and relocation they had on the Maya people. From an objective perspective, the series of massacres was not strictly overseen by Ríos Montt, as the most significant chain of killings was a convergence of events that formed the Rio Negro Massacres from 1980 to 1982.⁶³ The Rio Negro massacres began under Lucas Garcia's leadership and concluded as Ríos Montt took power in early 1982.⁶⁴ However, some historians have not directly blamed Lucas Garcia or Ríos Montt, but rather have directly blamed military units, highlighting their autonomy in decision-making to conduct mass killings. Later records show that soldiers were simply following orders to completely liquidate the deemed red villages and wipe out any infrastructure and goods.⁶⁵ The methods used in the massacres described by former Guatemalan soldiers, along with testimonies from genocide survivors, document how the military would initiate a massacre. For instance, if soldiers had been present in a village for some time, they would instruct villagers through a megaphone to gather in the town's plaza, pretending they were hosting a party.⁶⁶ Out of fear of disobeying the soldiers, villagers would come to the plaza, only to be gunned down. The horrifying aftermath involved soldiers creating mass graves to dump the bodies, making it difficult for families to recover their loved ones' remains after the conflict.⁶⁷

The second tactic the military used to carry out massacres involved relying on surprise attacks on villages during the early hours of the morning, when most people were sleeping.⁶⁸ Soldiers would go from house to house, killing the inhabitants, and after finishing, they would burn down the entire

⁶¹ Sánchez Toma, Interview 57034, 1:14:09-1:14:35.

⁶² Sánchez Toma, Interview 57034, 1:14:38- 1:15:31.

⁶³ Robert Waterman McChesney, "In Guatemala, a Time to Mourn." *America* 172 (6 May 1995): pp. 18-21.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rgm&AN=503300395&site=eds-live&scope=site>, p. 20.

⁶⁴ Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional de Guatemala (AHPN), *Case 146522*, University of Texas Libraries, <https://ahpn.lib.utexas.edu/case/146522/>, p. 40.

⁶⁵ *Case of the Río Negro Massacres v. Guatemala: Judgment of 4 September 2012 (Preliminary Objection, Merits, Reparations, and Costs)*, p. 308.

⁶⁶ Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, p. 91.

⁶⁷ Chen Valey, Interview 55657, 53:12- 53:24.

⁶⁸ Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, p. 90.

village. Those fortunate enough to realize what was happening would immediately flee into the mountains to avoid being shot. Survivors of genocide, Juana Sanchez Toma and Maria Tzoy Alvarado, both survived a deadly surprise massacre where the military entered their villages before dawn. Maria Tzoy Alvarado recalls that she was in the Rio Pixcaya massacre and remembers that she and her mother, along with dozens of other Maya villagers, ran into the mountains seeking refuge from the military.⁶⁹ Juana Sanchez Toma was in a village called Chisis and recalls that the military arrived at 4 AM, prompting her to run away with her children to a nearby village where she had relatives.⁷⁰ The grotesque aftermath of the massacres was revealed to those who escaped and nearby Maya villagers as they created scout groups to examine what was left in the villages. Diego Rivera Santiago took part in these scouting groups, and in one instance, in April 1982, they found the village burned by the military, and he and some other men hurried to extinguish the fires.⁷¹ They then saw the charred remains of bodies, which brought them to tears as they faced the horrors of genocide.⁷²

Before the eventual liquidation of a Maya village, it had been observed that the military would exploit villagers as much as they could before engaging in full-scale destruction. In cases where the military did not set fire to the entire village, they would plunder whatever materials or goods they could find. When Maria Tzoy Alvarado returned with her mother to the village, they discovered that the soldiers had pillaged the entirety of the material goods from their home.⁷³ Although they did not compromise the structural integrity of the village homes, they still confiscated the Maya villagers' crops for their own rations. Tzoy Alvarado's family and other Maya households also kept farm animals, but, upon their return, their pig had been eaten by the soldiers, as evidenced by meat scraps from the deceased animal.⁷⁴ The plundering of Maya crops and staples was not driven solely by soldiers' gluttony. Still, it was also strategic, aiming to starve the Maya population, knowing that the lack of these resources would severely affect them due to the community's reliance on agriculture. It was also a form of cultural destruction. These goods were integral to their diets, but they were part of Maya culture, and the soldiers' destructive consumption highlights their clear motives and discredits Ríos Montt's innocence.

The long-term impact of the massacres and scorched-earth campaign on the Maya inhabitants was that those who managed to escape had no other options for refuge and had to live in the mountains. Santiago Mo Yat made the tough choice to stay in the mountains with his family for about

⁶⁹ Tzoy Alvarado, Interview 57094, 57:31-58:38.

⁷⁰ Sánchez Toma, Interview 57034, 44:15-44:50.

⁷¹ Rivera Santiago, Interview 55367, 41:25-41:56.

⁷² Rivera Santiago, Interview 55367, 42:04-42:37.

⁷³ Tzoy Alvarado, Interview 57094, 59:50-1:00:23.

⁷⁴ Tzoy Alvarado, Interview 57094, 1:00:25-1:00:34.

a year after the military burned down their home.⁷⁵ This was a very painful memory for him because he, with his brother's help, had built the family house from nothing and cherished it dearly.⁷⁶ The physical destruction of his property had a profound emotional effect on Santiago Mo Yat, especially since their farming life didn't bring much material wealth, making their homes very precious to them.⁷⁷ U.S. journalists have commented on how massacres and scorched-earth campaigns affected Maya survivors, and have called these events forgotten due to many abuses going under the radar of human rights organizations.⁷⁸ What they fail to recognize is that their experiences went beyond just surviving the brutality of the Guatemalan army, as their struggles continued even after surviving the bloodiest phase in 1982.

Life in the mountains became the norm for the Mayan survivors after they escaped being slaughtered by the military. Survivors from the same community chose to stay together and work together to survive in the rugged mountain wilderness. Some groups consisted of just small family units, while others were much larger, numbering about 70 to 100 people.⁷⁹ These survivor groups did not stay in one place, as the military often sent search parties to capture them and take them back to military prisons. They also occasionally encountered guerrilla groups, but these meetings were usually peaceful because group members didn't want to get involved in the conflict.⁸⁰ Many of them were still confused about their current predicament; they knew the military was the main aggressor, but also feared the guerrillas' militant tactics. Their primary concern wasn't encountering the military or guerrillas, but hunger. Food was scarce in the mountains, and their temporary camps and constant movement prevented them from growing enough crops or hunting enough wildlife to obtain adequate nutrients. Diego Santiago Rivera remembers hearing children crying loudly from hunger, causing distress among the group.⁸¹ Like Santiago Mo Yat, Diego Rivera Santiago mourned the loss of his home and land, in which he cultivated maize, and wished he had some to feed the crying children.⁸² The harsh circumstances also led Diego Rivera Santiago to share some of his clothes with the children to ease their despair temporarily.⁸³ As starvation claimed the lives of some group members, the survivors

⁷⁵ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 16:18-16:30.

⁷⁶ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 17:04-17:14.

⁷⁷ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 19:15-19:25.

⁷⁸ Pacenza M, "A People Dammed: The Chixoy Dam, Guatemalan Massacres and the World Bank." *Multinational Monitor* 17, no. 7/8 (Jul 1996): pp. 8-11.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=apn&AN=ALTP15450&site=eds-live&scope=site>, p. 9.

⁷⁹ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 26:25-27:02.

⁸⁰ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 21:18-21:36.

⁸¹ Rivera Santiago, Interview 55367, 47:16-47:53.

⁸² Rivera Santiago, Interview 55367, 48:05-48:11.

⁸³ Rivera Santiago, Interview 55367, 22:02-22:32.

faced the painful decision to leave others behind, especially the elderly. Diego Rivera Santiago recalls that families often abandoned their elderly members and that once he saw an elderly man alone, who told him his family had left him.⁸⁴ Diego gave him some food, but he never found out what happened to the old man afterward.⁸⁵

The dire situation of starvation prompted survivor groups to form squads that would descend into the mountains to find locals willing to give them food. Fortunately for some groups, individuals in nearby villages were willing to provide food. Santiago Mo Yat and two other men volunteered as scouts to gather food for their group and had to make a six-hour walk to reach their food supplier.⁸⁶ This was a risky task because military surveillance teams could catch them, as they had to enter populated areas. The rations provided to Santiago Mo Yat and his squad included tortillas with beans or other protein sources to sustain them for about a week.⁸⁷ Not only was the need for food essential for their survival, but if the group ran out of proper food, people would then have to rely on eating unripe bananas and even go as far as eating the bark of the tree.⁸⁸ The fear of starvation prompted scouting groups to be more reckless in their activities to get food for the group. Groups that managed to stay secret and avoid widespread starvation could hold out for three years, as was the case for Iginia Chen Valey after her violent house seizure.⁸⁹ In contrast, the food scouts Santiago Mo Yat was in were caught by a Guatemalan military patrol and tortured into revealing their group's current hideout or be executed.⁹⁰ Shacked by soldiers, Santiago Mo Yat was forced to make the difficult decision to lead the soldiers to the group's hideout in the mountains.⁹¹ When they arrived at the campsite, he begged the group not to resist or flee, warning that otherwise they would kill him immediately.⁹² This marked the end of the survivor group's hideout in the mountains, and they were forcibly moved to a military prison camp named Military Zone 21 in Coban.⁹³ The eventual capture of survivor groups did not necessarily mean the end of Maya defiance against the military, as other groups who were in hiding chose a different road.

The survivor's dilemma varied widely: some groups hiding in the mountains chose to fend for themselves, while others turned to the guerrillas for safety and food in exchange for support. Diego

⁸⁴ Rivera Santiago, Interview 55367, 52:30-53:17.

⁸⁵ Rivera Santiago, Interview 55367, 53:20-53:32.

⁸⁶ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 29:12-29:26.

⁸⁷ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 29:34-29:47.

⁸⁸ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 28:35-29:00.

⁸⁹ Chen Valey, Interview 55657, 33:10- 33:31.

⁹⁰ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 30:24-31:28.

⁹¹ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 32:44-32:52.

⁹² Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 38:02-38:45.

⁹³ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 40:04-40:18.

Rivera Santiago decided to seek sanctuary with the guerrillas, and they took him and his family in.⁹⁴ Historians have criticized guerrilla groups during Efraín Ríos Montt's reign for neglecting Maya villages they encountered and not fighting the military directly during these massacres. While it is true that guerrilla groups did not rescue Maya villages while the Guatemalan military destroyed them, survivors Diego Rivera Santiago and Jose Tay Morales held more positive views about surviving the genocide. Jose Tay Morales had a deeper experience with the guerrillas, as his father was the village advocate for the Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes (FAR), and after his father died in 1980, Jose took over his role and became active with FAR.⁹⁵ For Diego Rivera Santiago, joining the guerrillas was a necessity after witnessing the harsh realities of surviving in the mountains, though some members became enamored with guerrilla life.⁹⁶ The guerrillas offered Diego Rivera Santiago the chance to receive a proper education, as part of their ideology was ensuring that all members were educated in philosophy, Marxist theory, and, most importantly, reading comprehension, in addition to learning warfare tactics.⁹⁷ Diego greatly valued the classroom education he received, as he had not had access to advanced learning due to the agrarian lifestyle imposed on him growing up.⁹⁸ Understanding these perspectives on the Guerrillas is essential to grasp their role in shaping the routes Maya survivors took and the effects this had on them after the war ended in 1996.

Among Maya survivor groups who chose not to join the guerrillas and fend for themselves, most were captured and sent to model villages. At the same time, very few remained in complete isolation until the end of Ríos Montt's rule. The group that Santiago Mo Yat belonged to was directly sent to a prison camp, where they were held for months with constant interrogation and abuse. Santiago Mo Yat recalls that he was confined in a dugout hole for about 25 days, during which soldiers taunted him and urinated on him as part of the abuse he endured.⁹⁹ He was not allowed to leave the hole as soldiers believed he was still holding vital information in locating other survivor groups in the highlands.¹⁰⁰ Eventually, he was taken out of the hole and able to see his family. Still, they would be relocated again, as a new phase of Efraín Ríos Montt's Victoria 82 led to his and his family being moved to a model village.

Techo, Trabajo y Tortillas was the next phase of Efraín Ríos Montt's plan to pacify the Guatemalan northern highlands. This plan involved the establishment of so-called model villages that

⁹⁴ Rivera Santiago, Interview 55367, 28:30-29:00.

⁹⁵ Tay Morales, Interview 57028, 1:22:08-1:23:29.

⁹⁶ Rivera Santiago, Interview 55367, 59:34-1:00:16.

⁹⁷ Rivera Santiago, Interview 55367, 1:00:59-1:01:47.

⁹⁸ Rivera Santiago, Interview 55367, 1:02:00-1:02:20.

⁹⁹ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 48:11-48:58.

¹⁰⁰ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 49:00-49:23.

served as propaganda tools for Ríos Montt's campaign to showcase his idea of mercy.¹⁰¹ Ríos Montt had attempted a one-month ceasefire against the guerrillas and their supporters in May 1982, hoping to bring the prodigal sons back to their father's house, that being the Guatemalan government and himself.¹⁰² The infantilization of the Maya people continued through these model villages, as Ríos Montt viewed them as vessels that would "re-educate" the Maya population and mold them into "good" Guatemalan citizens. While the model villages did provide shelter and food for war-torn Maya survivors, they were inherently designed to isolate them from guerrilla forces while subjecting them to surveillance, harsh labor, and cultural restructuring.

Santiago Mo Yat's family ended up in a model village in present-day Zacol, Guatemala, where they remained until early 1983.¹⁰³ Daily life in the village followed a military routine, with inhabitants waking up at 5 AM to sing the Guatemalan national anthem and pay respect to the flag.¹⁰⁴ After that, people had to complete daily chores to earn their food. The unsanitary conditions were inhumane, as residents lived in crowded barracks where starvation and illness were common.¹⁰⁵ If someone fell ill and couldn't perform their chores, they would be left to die or be executed on the spot by soldiers.¹⁰⁶ The re-education promoted by Ríos Montt mostly involved idolizing a manufactured Pentecostal Guatemalan nationalism that he used throughout his campaign.

Although the conditions in the model camps were atrocious, the military ensured they exploited every single inhabitant in their operations to lure out more survivors and expand the model villages. The military knew about Santiago Mo Yat's involuntary reveal of his survivor group's hideout, so they decided to exploit his previous action by forcing him to record audio clips used to lure Maya survivors.¹⁰⁷ The Guatemalan military was inspired by American psychological warfare during the Vietnam War, in which the U.S. military used distorted Vietnamese audio played through airpower to cause psychological distress on the Vietcong.¹⁰⁸ The Guatemalan military deployed helicopters throughout the mountain areas where they expected Maya survivors to be hiding and would play Santiago Mo Yat's voice to create a sense of familiarity and reassurance, encouraging them to come out.¹⁰⁹ These psychological tactics drove Maya survivors into the model villages, as Maya survivors,

¹⁰¹ Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, p. 80.

¹⁰² Case 146522, p. 47.

¹⁰³ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 49:25-49:51.

¹⁰⁴ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 1:02:40-1:03:22.

¹⁰⁵ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 1:05:35-1:06:15.

¹⁰⁶ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 1:06:29-1:07:02.

¹⁰⁷ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 52:35-52:53.

¹⁰⁸ Abhijan X and Guha Pujita, "*Media Ghostings: Three and a Half Hauntings of the Vietnam War.*" Art Critique of Taiwan, 2019, 8, and Mo Yat. Interview 55302, 53:52-54:02.

¹⁰⁹ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 1:09:02-1:09:11.

fearing starvation, submitted their will to the military. Santiago felt great remorse for helping the military, knowing the deplorable conditions of the model villages and that they would not improve Maya living conditions.¹¹⁰ The historical debate over the brutality of Ríos Montt and Lucas García suggests that people knew how to survive. Santiago, for instance, obeyed soldiers' orders to stay alive, which was not an option under Lucas García, as people were killed at random. Even obeying military orders did not mean Maya survivors were safe, since, despite mass killings and land scorched tactics raising the death toll, the conditions in the model villages led to more deaths, a factor often overlooked in analyses of Ríos Montt's genocidal methods.

Throughout the Guatemalan Civil War, Efraín Ríos Montt arguably earned the most notorious reputation for his Victoria 82 plan, which successfully reduced guerrilla activity in the northern highlands. The result of this plan was a horrendous attempt to erase Maya identity from being the face of the Guatemalan nation and to create a society where men, women, and children all saluted the same flag and spoke Spanish. Any form of Maya culture and diversity was seen as a threat to the stability of the house that Ríos Montt aimed to build. Before he was overthrown on 8 August 1983, Ríos Montt was able to create his ideal Guatemala through the flesh and bones of the 80,000 murdered Maya. His claim that "God put me here" to take care of his repugnant household was tarnished as members of the military government were displeased with his ability to restore the Guatemalan economy, since the war-torn northern highlands produced coffee, which was vital to the economy, and Ríos Montt had destroyed the crop and labor force.¹¹¹ In conclusion, the reasons cited by the military for overthrowing Ríos Montt were based on the fact that he had become an insane religious fanatic, which they believed would become detrimental in managing the nation's problems.¹¹² His removal from power was not due to his carnage, as military officials were satisfied with the suppression of guerrilla activity, and some U.S. officials even credited and acknowledged the effectiveness of Victoria 82.¹¹³

Ríos Montt's removal from power did not heal the scars of Maya survivors, as the impacts of genocide continued even after the war ended in 1996. The ongoing military presence in the northern highlands concluded in 1984, after which many survivors decided to try returning to their former homes now that the military had left. Their return was difficult, as they encountered a devastated landscape that made rebuilding and restoring normal life immensely challenging. Survivors like Juana Sanchez Toma, Santiago Mo Yat, and Maria Tzoy Alvarado were able to return to their war-torn communities and reconnect with family members who had survived. Catholic missionaries, who the Guatemalan military had also targeted, helped support these devastated communities; Juana Sanchez

¹¹⁰ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 1:10:05-1:10:37.

¹¹¹ Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, p. 81.

¹¹² Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, p. 82.

¹¹³ Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, p. 31.

Toma credits their spiritual guidance with helping her cope with the PTSD she had gained.¹¹⁴ Santiago Mo Yat's family turned to floriculture to recover financially, as most of their crops had been destroyed by the military.¹¹⁵ Maria Tzoy Alvarado, still a young girl when the military left in 1984, had to help her mother work, as her father had died, and she now had the responsibility of supporting her mother and siblings.¹¹⁶ Recovery groups actively assisted genocide survivors, but most of these efforts were self-funded because the Guatemalan government provided little aid to survivors, which became a source of frustration for many.

Some genocide survivors chose to seek recovery elsewhere, believing they had nothing of value left in their old communities. Iginia Chen Valey decided to move with her children to Guatemala City, where she took on odd jobs to support them.¹¹⁷ Her oldest son also contributed to the family income by becoming a city bus aide, but with Iginia's combined wages from these odd jobs, the family was barely making ends meet and struggled to live in an urban area.¹¹⁸ It wasn't until the early 1990s that Iginia Chen Valey and her children decided to return to their old community, which remained impoverished.¹¹⁹ In the case of Diego Rivera Santiago and Jose Tay Morales, their ties to the Guerrilla movement persisted even after Efraín Ríos Montt was overthrown, as small pockets of resistance continued to operate in the Northern Highlands, though on a limited scale. Jose Tay Morales' collaboration with the guerrillas during Ríos Montt's rule involved reclaiming villages that had been destroyed and illuminating their presence in surrounding communities.¹²⁰ After the massacres stopped in 1984, Jose's role within the guerrillas shifted to helping villages fully recover, as many former guerrilla members joined organizations dedicated to rebuilding Maya villages.¹²¹ Diego Rivera Santiago remained with the guerrillas longer, as his service there allowed him to continue his intellectual enrichment. In 1987, he recalls that, as part of his duties, he and other guerrilla members traveled to Chiapas, Mexico, to receive further guerrilla training, presumably provided by the Zapatista movement in collaboration with FAR.¹²² After retiring from the guerrillas, Diego used his clandestine education to support efforts to modestly restore the Guatemalan northern highlands to their peaceful state.

¹¹⁴ Sánchez Toma, Interview 57034, 1:27:30-1:28:20.

¹¹⁵ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 1:13:50-1:13:57.

¹¹⁶ Tzoy Alvarado, Interview 57094, 1:34:28-1:35:13.

¹¹⁷ Chen Valey, Interview 55657, 39:41-40:39.

¹¹⁸ Chen Valey, Interview 55657, 42:01-42:54.

¹¹⁹ Chen Valey, Interview 55657, 43:16-43:36.

¹²⁰ Tay Morales, Interview 57028, 2:02:17-2:05:42.

¹²¹ Tay Morales, Interview 57028, 2:06:12-2:06:48.

¹²² Rivera Santiago, Interview 55367, 1:08:04-1:09:16.

As the Guatemalan Civil War finally ended in 1996, the peace agreement between the guerrillas and the government was signed, marking the conclusion of the 36-year conflict.¹²³ Although the war was over and Guatemalans could sleep peacefully knowing their nation was no longer at war, Maya survivors still felt justice had not truly been served. Their testimonies continued to reflect deep grievances against the government, driven by both material and political concerns. The northern Guatemalan highlands remained a symbol of hardship for the Maya, and once the military had uprooted itself from there, they viewed their homeland as hollow and cold. Most aid and recovery efforts were carried out by volunteers, with limited involvement from the Guatemalan government.¹²⁴ Former guerrilla members like Diego Rivera Santiago participated in recovery initiatives that extended into the late 1990s and early 2000s.¹²⁵ Eventually, Maya survivors were able to return to an agrarian lifestyle, but they remained impoverished even in contemporary times. The return to normalcy did not translate into much social mobility, and many continued to face significant hardships.

Their grievances were based on material loss, as well as many of the Maya survivors, who also felt that the government had forgotten about the genocide itself and did not institutionally respect their experiences. Discussion and debate about the genocide are not prohibited or discouraged by the Guatemalan government, but Maya survivors believe that their marginalization prevents their voices from reaching a wider audience. It was not until 16 years later, long after the civil war had ended, that Efraín Ríos Montt and other perpetrators would be put on trial.¹²⁶ These trials aimed to expose and bring justice for the crimes against humanity committed under Efraín Ríos Montt. Although the evidence was strong and Ríos Montt was found guilty, he did not face punishment because the Guatemalan constitution considered his sentence unfair and refused to imprison him.¹²⁷ Ríos Montt died at the age of 91 in 2018, having lived the rest of his life suffering from dementia and deemed legally incompetent.¹²⁸ Although Efraín Ríos Montt did not hold any political power later in life, his influence and legacy continued to taint the way Maya survivors viewed the government. As Ríos Montt portrayed himself as the father of the nation, Maya survivors saw the government as a father who devoured his own children during the civil war. Even after the war ended and the peace treaty was

¹²³ United Nations, *Agreement on a Firm and Lasting Peace*, A/51/796, S/1997/114 (Guatemala City, 29 December 1996), p. 3.

¹²⁴ Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, p.152.

¹²⁵ Rivera Santiago, Interview 55367, 1:25:11-1:26:38.

¹²⁶ *Case of the Río Negro Massacres v. Guatemala*, p. 12.

¹²⁷ *Case of the Río Negro Massacres v. Guatemala*, p. 301.

¹²⁸ Jo-Marie Burt and Paulo Estrada, "Legacy of Guatemala Dictator Ríos Montt Shows Justice Is Possible," *Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)*, 13 April 2018, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/legacy-of-guatemala-dictator-rios-montt-shows-justice-is-possible>.

signed, Santiago Mo Yat stated, “The father signed for peace, but his children were left in darkness,” reflecting the culmination of the grievances of genocide survivors whose voices were silenced in darkness.¹²⁹

The ultimate goal of Maya survivors was to share their experiences, as the Guatemalan government did not provide a platform for them to do so. Juana Sanchez Toma stated at the end of her interview, “I’m going to send a message, so that there is peace and to break the silence.”¹³⁰ The sense of obligation felt by Toma and other survivors arises from the belief that if they did not share their stories with younger generations of Guatemalans, the educational system would neglect their histories and tarnish the memory of the genocide. The painful stories of the Guatemalan genocide need to be heard, as the lasting legacy of Ríos Montt meant to silence the Maya population and leave them in darkness. Through sharing their stories, younger generations of Guatemalans can better understand their nation’s history, and historians can gain new perspectives on survivors’ efforts to preserve their identity and culture. The ways to highlight the events of the Guatemalan genocide should focus on breaking the silence surrounding the atrocities that occurred between 1982 and 1983, rather than celebrating violence and war. Although the Guatemalan Civil War has ended and a peace treaty has been signed, Santiago Mo Yat believes that for this treaty to be meaningful, their stories must be heard, “To accomplish the words of peace.”¹³¹

¹²⁹ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 1:28:52-1:28:57.

¹³⁰ Sánchez Toma, Interview 57034, 1:41:01-1:41:09.

¹³¹ Mo Yat, Interview 55302, 1:30:20-1:30:28.



Guatemalan provinces containing military-designated insurgent zones under Plan Victoria 82, 1982–1983. Map created by Cayden Severson, 2025.