

Mapping massacres: GIS and state terror in Guatemala

Michael K. Steinberg ^{a,*}, Carrie Height ^b, Rosemary Mosher ^c, Mathew Bampton ^c

^a *Department of Geography and Anthropology, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803, United States*

^b *Southern Maine Technical College, United States*

^c *University of Southern Maine, United States*

Received 22 April 2003

Abstract

This paper employs GIS (geographic information systems) technology to visually display the locations of massacres associated with Guatemala's civil war. While there have been other, more general maps published depicting the spatial dimensions of violence in Guatemala, few other maps depict this information at the department level, nor have they included information on indigenous populations and physical geography.

These maps are part of the emerging field of human rights GIS. For example, over the past two decades, maps have become tools of empowerment in Central America and elsewhere, maps usually made with GIS technology. Indigenous groups in many countries in particular have embraced GIS technology and have begun to use maps as tools in their fight for land and marine resources, as well as greater political autonomy. In the case of massacres in Guatemala, displaying exactly where violent acts took place is one way to educate the Guatemalan public regarding the terrible violence of the recent past. Knowing the name of a specific town where a massacre took place is more concrete, potentially leading to perception of place and people, rather than simply being aware of violence in the countryside.

© 2005 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: GIS; Guatemala; Massacres

1. Introduction

During the last half of the 20th century, Guatemala experienced a violent and tumultuous past. The statistics are grim: 200,000 murdered and disappeared; 150,000 Guatemalans sought refuge outside of their homeland; 1.5 million internally displaced Guatemalans escaping violence; countless orphans and widows; indelible scars of horror deeply ingrained in the minds of victims and perpetrators alike. While the war was formally ended in 1996 with a United Nations' brokered peace agreement, given the fact that so few perpetrators of violence

have been brought to justice, it would be premature to say that Guatemala as a whole has had any sort of closure related to the violence. Among some sectors of Guatemalan society, there is still wholesale denial and rejection of past violent events. Thus, there remains a critical need to unravel and explain this past by various means, including the mapping of violent events.

Displaying spatial and temporal data via maps is an obviously important characteristic of our discipline. Even information that is easily comprehensible without maps takes on new meaning when it is portrayed spatially. This is one of the few common, bonding traits among geographers; a discipline so diverse and broad that at times there seems to be few commonalities among our various specialty groups. This innate need to map data and other information was eloquently described by Sauer:

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: mstein5@lsu.edu (M.K. Steinberg).

The most primitive and persistent trait (of a geographer) is liking maps and thinking by means of them. We are empty handed without them in the lecture room, in the study, in the field.... Maps break down our inhibitions, stimulate our glands, stir our imaginations, and loosen our tongues. The map speaks across the barriers of language; it is sometimes claimed as the language of geography. The conveying of ideas by means of maps is attributed to us as our common vocation and passion. Sauer (1956).

Indeed maps are our discipline's language. They often separate geography from other, similar disciplines such as anthropology. How many times have we, as geographers, lamented the lack of maps in publications written by non-geographers?

Even information that is well known and generally understood can take on new meaning when displayed spatially. This is the case with the subject of this essay—massacre sights in Guatemala. There have been numerous studies concerned with and books written about the Guatemalan civil war and the human toll of its violence. Anthropologists have been at the forefront of research that examines the impact of the civil war on indigenous populations in the western highlands (Carlsen, 1997; Carmack, 1988; Manz, 1988; Lovell, 1990, 1991, 1992, 2000; Smith, 1990; Perera, 1993; Stoll, 1993; Falla, 1992, 2001; Schirmer, 1998). Fewer studies have focused directly on agricultural changes (Annis, 1987; Watanabe, 1992). However, few maps have been produced to spatially display this tragic data. The maps found in David Stoll's publication "Between Two Armies" is one of the few attempts to illustrate where, exactly massacres occurred (Stoll, 1993). There is no mystery as to where most massacres occurred—the western highlands, the region that is dominated by indigenous Maya Indians. Anyone who has conducted research in or read any recent publication about Guatemala knows in general terms where the violence took place—in a general sense. However, knowing in a general sense where the violence took place is not enough. If we fail to accurately display such information spatially, we fail to fully understand where and especially why these events took place. Massacres were not random events in Guatemala. Instead, they took place in very specific cultural landscapes (Lovell, 1992, 2000; Stoll, 1993). By using some basic geographic information systems' technologies, relationships between ethnicity, location, physical environment, and violence become much clearer.

Mapping these tragic events is critical because these maps also serve as another type of memorial for victims and their families. Many Guatemalans have yet to come to grips with the violence of the past. Maps, more so than words can help deconstruct violent events by pro-

viding a mental image of a location and event in the onlookers mind. Culturally, rural indigenous Guatemala remains worlds apart from urban, Ladino Guatemala (mainly Guatemala City). I have had many conversations with urban *Guatemaltecos* in which they express disbelief concerning the levels of violence of the 1980s and the early 1990s. Often, they claim stories concerning the war are propaganda generated by foreign academics or indigenous activists such as Rigoberto Menchu. Displaying exactly where violent acts took place is one way to educate the Guatemalan public regarding the terrible violence of the recent past. Knowing the name of a specific town where a massacre took place is more concrete, potentially leading to perception of place and people, rather than simply being aware of violence in the countryside. While there have been other, more general maps published depicting the spatial dimensions of violence in Guatemala, few other maps depict this information at the department level, nor have they included information on indigenous populations and physical geography.

In the past two decades, maps have become tools of empowerment in Central America and elsewhere. Indigenous groups have begun to use maps as tools in their fight for land and marine resources, as well as greater political autonomy. For example, indigenous rights' groups such as Native Lands (along with the National Geographic Society) recently published an impressive large-scale map indicating indigenous territory in southern Mexico and Central America ("*Pueblos Indigenas y Ecosystem Naturales en Central America y el sur de Mexico*," 2002). Also, the late geographer, Barney Nietschmann played an instrumental role in the production and publishing of the Maya Atlas, based on ethno-mapping among the Maya Indians in Belize (Maya Atlas, 2002). Nietschmann was one of the early pioneers regarding participatory mapping in Central America, beginning with his work among the Miskito Indians in coastal Nicaragua. In addition to these projects, participatory mapping research has become a more popular line of investigation within geography in the past decade. For example, a recent issue of *Human Organization*, edited by Herlihy and Knapp, was dedicated to "Maps of, by, and for the Peoples of Latin America" (Vol. 62, No. 4). While this paper does not purport to conduct participatory mapping in the same vein as the aforementioned volume (the participants being mapped were silenced years ago), it falls under a similar genera of maps with a purpose.

Failing to acknowledge past violence indicates that both politically and culturally, Guatemala has failed to make a complete transition from military dominated dictatorship to open democracy. Politically motivated murders and "disappearances" continue to take place throughout Guatemala—albeit not on the same level as during the height of the violence in the early 1980s.

Former government controlled militias or civil patrols, who committed many violent acts against fellow villagers, continue to wield power in rural Guatemala. As a result of this continuing tension and repression, victim's families are still unable to reclaim the remains of murdered relatives in most massacre sights. Forensic anthropologists who have participated in the few exhumation efforts to date have received death threats from paramilitary forces.

Therefore, one motivating factor behind this essay is to help show any remaining disbelievers exactly where these acts of terror occurred. This is an important step in humanizing the war among those who were not directly impacted by its violence. It is also hoped that this information will contribute to the mounting evidence and data that may someday be used to bring the perpetrators of this violence to justice. The terror aimed at rural Guatemalans, especially Maya Indians, was too great to go uninvestigated and unpunished: over 400 villages destroyed by the military in a scorched earth strategy; 200,000 murdered and disappeared; 150,000 Guatemalans sought refuge outside their country; 1.5 million internally displaced Guatemalans escaping violence; countless orphans and widows; indelible scars of horror deeply ingrained in the minds of victims and perpetrators alike (Manz, 1988; Smith, 1988; Falla, 1992; Wilson, 1998; REMHI, 1998; Ball et al., 1999; Jonas, 2000).

The data found in these maps were provided by two publications: the United Nations sponsored *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio* (CEH, 1999) and Guatemalan Office of the Archbishop's *Guatemala: Nunca Mas* (REMHI, 1998). These publications, although not spatially oriented, provide often excruciating details regarding past violence.

Mapping this information poses certain problems. Mapping massacres can be done using point symbols, or by shading polygon regions. Both methods are problematic. When using point symbols, it is difficult to map every known massacre. This is because data sources for may list only the region or municipality where the massacre took place. Additionally, places where massacres took place are often difficult to locate—the place name may only be locally known, or may be too small to appear on most digital or paper maps. In a few cases place names may have disappeared from the landscape after the massacre, and may not be shown on contemporary maps.

Conversely, most data sources do list the department and municipality, or these can be cross-referenced based on other data fields, making shaded polygon maps showing massacres by municipality much easier to create. Shaded polygon maps, however, can be misleading, since they imply a homogenous distribution across the polygon, which is certainly not the case with regard to Guatemalan massacres.

Here, the decision of which method to use is based on the scale of representation and the purpose of the map.

Maps showing all of Guatemala, or maps looking for relationships to physical landscape features (elevation) are better suited by locating massacres using points. Those showing massacres at the municipality level are better represented with shaded polygons, since they seek only to show the general regional distribution of massacres within a specific department.

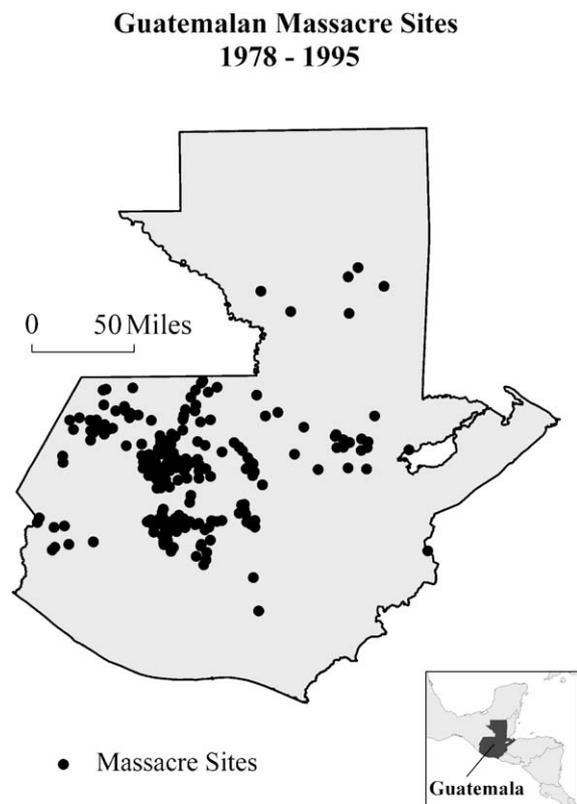
2. The spatial narrative

2.1. Map One

Map One is a simple location map illustrating where massacres took place in Guatemala between 1978 and 1995. Most massacres took place in the west central region of Guatemala. Large sections of the country remained massacre free (although not violence free). For example, few massacres took place in the Petén in north-eastern Guatemala, the southern coast, or in eastern Guatemala. Therefore the next logical question is why were massacres concentrated in a relatively small region within Guatemala?

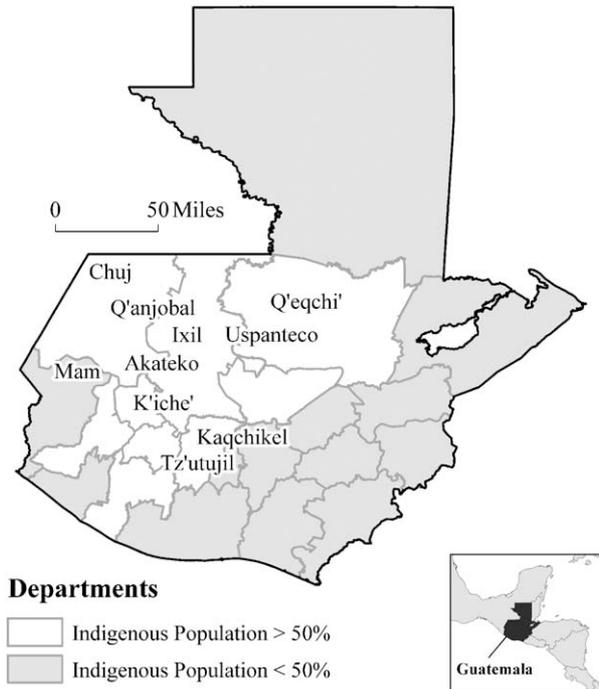
2.2. Map Two

Map Two illustrates two themes: departments (the equivalent of states in the United States) whose



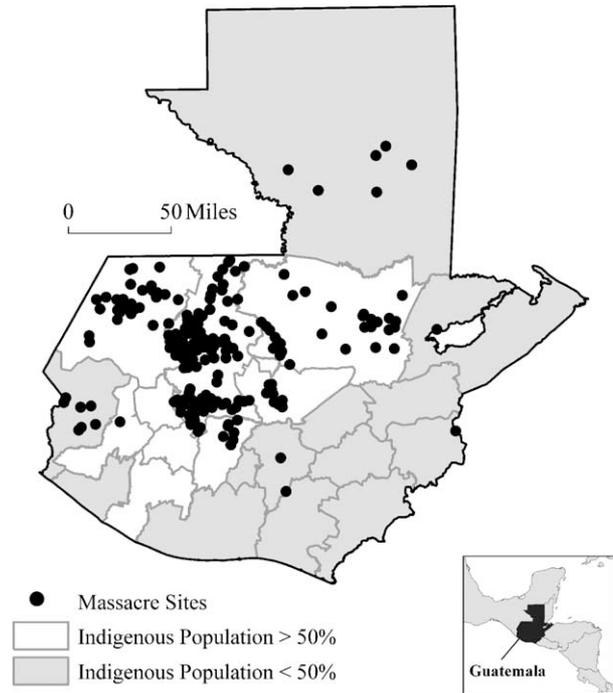
Map One.

Indigenous Population and Maya Ethno-linguistic Groups



Map Two.

Guatemalan Massacre Sites 1978 - 1995



Map Three.

indigenous population is greater than 50%, and second, the general location of indigenous Maya ethno-linguistic groups in these same departments. These are not the only departments in which Maya ethno-linguistic groups reside, but instead, these are the departments in which they dominate regarding general population.

2.3. Map Three

The significance of the locations of indigenous Maya ethno-linguistic groups becomes clear when one views [Map Three](#)—which combines massacre sites and departments whose populations are greater than 50% indigenous. [Map Three](#) clearly demonstrates that most massacres were concentrated in landscapes whose majority populations are indigenous.

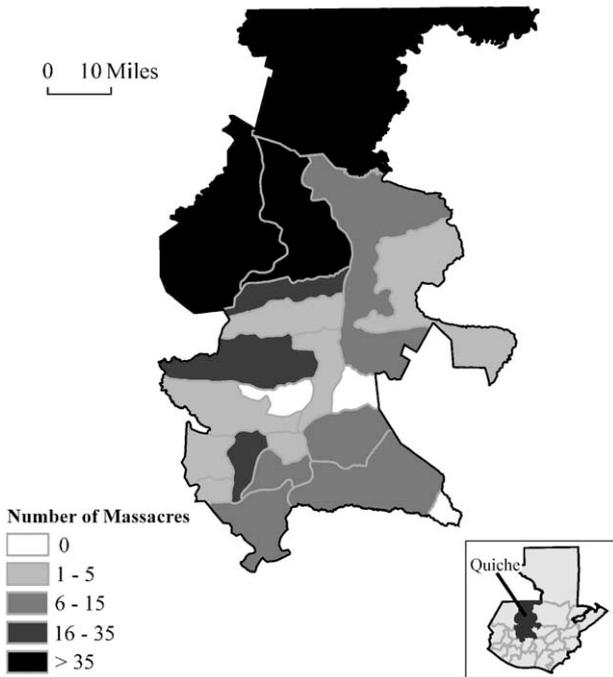
Why were massacre locations overwhelmingly concentrated in indigenous-dominated landscapes? According to the Guatemalan military and government—which were often indistinguishable during the civil war years—these areas were the main centers of support for the various guerilla groups. Taking a Maoist approach, rebel leaders believed that they would find large numbers of sympathetic and willing Maya peasants who would join their ranks given the extreme poverty that dominates the highlands; therefore, their initial recruitment did focus on indigenous dominated landscapes such as the Ixil Region area ([Payeras, 1983](#)). While there is little doubt

that many Maya sympathized with the goals of the guerrillas, there is little evidence of a mass uprising that has been suggested by some authors ([Jonas, 2000](#)). The military seemed intent on eliminating any mass support for the rebel forces before it began through widespread repression in the western highlands. Where support for rebel forces did develop, or develop in the eyes of the military, entire villages were destroyed (again, over 400 villages were completely destroyed). Thus, retribution was swift and brutal. Potential peasant supporters learned early on support for the opposition was a risky proposition at best because rebel forces offered no protection from military brutality if support was offered. There are many grizzly accounts of what happened to peasant supporters after siding with the rebels within the departments of Huehuetenango and Quiché. Certain areas earned the “red” label from government security forces. Red zones consisted of enemy territories, where “no distinction was made between *guerilleros* [anti-state insurgency forces] and their peasant supporters. Both were to be attacked and obliterated” ([Schirmer, 1998, p. 42](#)). It was in these red zones that most of the massacres took place.

2.4. Maps Four through Six

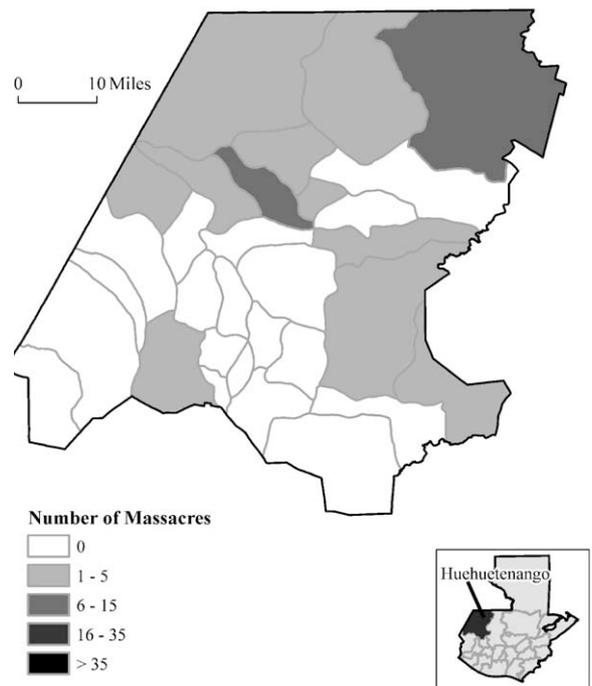
[Maps Four through Six](#) provide much greater detail regarding the number of massacres at the *municipio* level (the equivalent of a county in the United States) in three

**Quiche Massacres
By Municipality**
262 Total Massacres



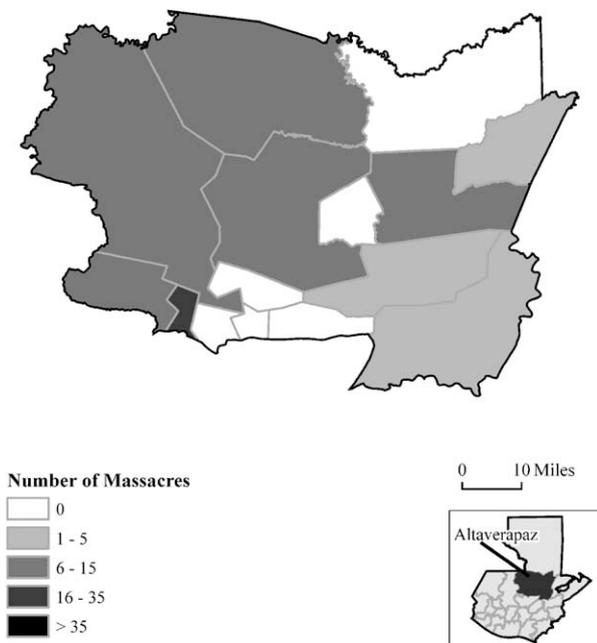
Map Four.

**Huehuetenango Massacres
By Municipality**
40 Total Massacres



Map Six.

**Alta Verapaz Massacres
By Municipality**
84 Total Massacres



Map Five.

departments: Huehuetenango, Quiche, and Alta Verapaz. Quiche was particularly hard hit in the early 1980s. Within these three departments—and in all of Guatemala—the location where most massacres occurred was in an area known as the Ixcán. The Ixcán is not a formal political unit, but instead is located in the far northern *municipios* in Huehuetenango and Quiche.

The Ixcán was targeted by the military for several reasons. First, the Ixcán was a sparsely settled lowland tropical forest zone until the 1970s. Beginning in the early 1970s, several clergy from the Catholic Church began organizing cooperative communities in the region. These communities consisted of impoverished Maya farmers from the highlands where land was scarce due to both population growth pressures and mal-distribution of existing resources. The Catholic Church financially helped groups acquire title to large tracts of land that were used collectively. This effort was the result of the growing influence of the more activist wing of the Church, often associated with liberation theology. Thus, the government and military associated these settlements and their leaders with the leftist rebels. Second, the Ixcán was one of the first staging grounds for the rebels. Although the initial number of rebels entering the country from Mexico and into the Ixcán was quite small, the stage was set for the Ixcán and its residents to be associated with the rebels (Payeras, 1983).

The residents of the Ixcán and the nearby Ixil Region paid dearly for this association (Stoll, 1993). As is demonstrated on Maps Four through Six, the response of the government and military was brutal. Many of Guatemala's massacres took place in this region. The militarization of this zone did not end until the early 21st century. Even several years after the peace treaty was signed (1996), the military continued to maintain guard posts with machine gun nests at bridges in the Ixcán. This clearly indicated that tension existed in the area between the military and local villages. According to an officer in the Guatemalan military who was posted in the Ixcán, several villages still resisted and resented the army's control over the area. This is not surprising given the level of past violence on the part of the Guatemalan army.

2.5. Map Seven

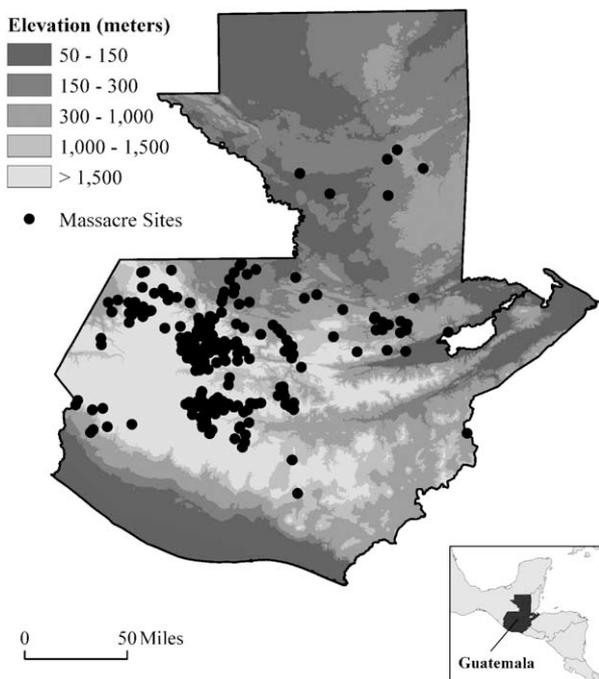
Map Seven illustrates massacre sites coupled with elevation/general topographic variation. While it is clear that most massacres took place in the western highlands, there are some exceptions. Again, the Ixcán, in the lowlands, is also a center of massacre sites. One might suspect that massacres took place in both the highlands and in very isolated regions. However, this is not necessarily the case. While most did take place in the highlands, many massacres occurred near the Pan-American High-

way. In fact, the Pan-American Highway runs in-between two centers of massacre sites—in southern and middle Quiché.

Again, many massacres took place in the highlands, but this was not driven by remoteness or ruggedness of terrain. In other words, the military and paramilitary forces were not trying to hide their actions by only attacking villages in remote areas (there were many murders and disappearances in Guatemala City during broad daylight as well). Instead, the highlands are where most indigenous folk live, who were the main targets of military repression. There is a strong link between rugged terrain and indigenous cultures—following the Spanish Conquest indigenous cultures were displaced from other more desirable agricultural lands. However, the more recent violence was not driven by remoteness or ruggedness, but instead the location of the indigenous majority.

Therefore, before the news media made the term “ethnic cleansing” popular in association with the ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, massacre data shows that this practice was alive and well in Guatemala. In areas such as the Ixcán, it has long been rumored that the military and government wanted to displace communal settlements not so much because they truly believed they supported the rebels, but because they settled on land rumored to be rich with oil and gold. During the conflict in fact, many military higher ups gained title to large tracts of land in the Ixcán, resulting in the area being dubbed “land of the generals” (see Taylor, 2003 for a broad an analyses of recent Ixcán events).

Guatemalan Massacre Sites 1978 - 1995



Map Seven.

3. Conclusions

This most recent phase of violence in Guatemala is unfortunately a continuation of centuries of violence that targeted the lands, souls, and bodies of the indigenous Maya. While Guatemala has had some periods of peace, violence has flared up time and time again over the past 500 years, especially in indigenous landscapes. This violence has usually been initiated (directly and indirectly) by outside cultural forces: the Spanish, the Guatemalan elites, and the US government.

Mapping the locations of political violence is an important step in more deeply understanding where and why violence took place in Guatemala from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s. Massacres were not random acts. Instead, the vast majority of massacres and violent acts in general took place in indigenous Maya landscapes where the military set out to intimidate and displace the rural population—motivated by various factors including deep desire for land and resources, deep distrust and hatred of the Maya by elites, and fear that the rural population would unite in a revolt against the military state.

The violence also had a specific military/strategic purpose. After the initial wave of severe violence in the early 1980s, the rebel's rural base of support was either obliterated or intimidated by the violence. Therefore this violence was effective from a military standpoint. By the mid-1980s, the rebels no longer represented a credible military threat based on numbers of combatants, military hardware, or rural support. The military had accomplished its goals of isolating the rebel forces from their most likely allies—the Maya living in rural Guatemala—by destroying individuals and entire communities who lent support (even perceived support) to their cause.

It is hoped that these and future maps will contribute to the growing body of information that documents specific locations of past violence. This, in turn, may be used as evidence against the perpetrators of such violence. While geographers have not been as deeply involved in human rights-related fieldwork as some disciplines such as forensic anthropology, we can make a significant contribution to this field by deconstructing the spatial dimensions of conflict and violence.

References

- Annis, S., 1987. *God and Production in a Guatemalan Town*. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Ball, P., Kobra, P., Spier, H.F., 1999. *State Violence in Guatemala, 1960–1996: A Quantitative Reflection*. American Association for the Advancement of Science, Washington, DC.
- Carlsen, R., 1997. *The War for the Heart and Soul of a Highland Maya Town*. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Carmack, R.M. (Ed.), 1988. *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
- Falla, R., 1992. *Masacres de la Selva: Ixcán, Guatemala (1975–1982)*. Editorial Universitaria, Universidad de San Carlos, Guatemala.
- Falla, R., 2001. *Quiché Rebelde: Religious Conversion, Politics, and Ethnic Identity in Guatemala*. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Herlihy, P.H., Knapp, G. (Eds.), 2003. *Maps of, by, and for the Peoples of Latin America*. *Human Organization* 62 (4) (special issue).
- Jonas, S., 2000. *Of Centaurs and Doves, Guatemala's Peace Process*. Westview Press, Boulder.
- Lovell, W.G., 1990. Maya survival in Ixil country, Guatemala. *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 14 (4), 10–12.
- Lovell, W.G., 1991. Disease and depopulation in early colonial Guatemala. In: Cook, N.D., Lovell, W.G. (Eds.), *Secret Judgments of God: Old World Diseases in Colonial Spanish America*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, pp. 49–83.
- Lovell, W.G., 1992. *Conquest and Survival in Colonial Guatemala: A Historical Geography of the Cuchumatán Highlands, 1500–1821*. McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal and Kingston.
- Lovell, W.G., 2000. *A Beauty That Hurts: Life and Death in Guatemala*. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Manz, B., 1988. *Refugees of a Hidden War. The Aftermath of Counterinsurgency in Guatemala*. State University of New York Press, Albany.
- Payeras, M., 1983. *Days of the Jungle: The Testimony of a Guatemalan Guerrillero, 1972–1976* (George Black, Trans.). Monthly Review Press, New York.
- Perera, V., 1993. *Unfinished Conquest: The Guatemalan Tragedy*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- REMHI (Recuperacion de la Memoria Historica), 1998. *Nunca Mas. Vol. 1: Impactos de la Violencia*. Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala (ODHAG). Guatemala City, Guatemala.
- Sauer, C.A., 1956. The education of a geographer. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 48, 287–289.
- Schirmer, J., 1998. *The Guatemalan Military Project: A Violence Called Democracy*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.
- Smith, C.A., 1990. *Guatemalan Indians and the State, 1540–1988*. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Stoll, D., 1993. *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*. Columbia University Press, New York.
- Taylor, M.J., 2003. *Surviving Utopia: energy, social capital, and international migration in Ixcán, Guatemala*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Arizona State University.
- Watanabe, J.M., 1992. *Maya Saints and Souls in a Changing World*. University of Texas Press, Austin.