

What has allowed genocide to occur in Guatemala, and how can we guard against it happening again?

Genocide is a consequence of power, greed, racism, censorship, and evil. The Guatemalan government and foreign companies had a direct hand in the massacres and injustice of the Guatemalan people. The genocide was prolonged for so long, due to the censorship within the country, the unquestioned orders that were carried out, and continued oppression of the indigenous people of Guatemala. To further understand genocide prevention, one must first recognize the events that enable genocide to occur.

During the Dictatorship of Rios Montt, 1960-1996, 200,000 Guatemalan people disappeared or were killed during a government massacre that spread across Guatemala. This massacre was not recognized as a genocide until 30 years later. 83% of the people killed were of Mayan decent (The Center for Justice and Accountability). The genocide was a deliberately strategic and constructed plan to exterminate the Mayan people. Multiple factors allowed for the slaughter. Mayan lives were the price that was paid to fulfill humanity's greed in the form of power and money. *When the Mountains Tremble* is a documentary that could have ended the genocide in Guatemala. When the documentary was released, many viewers across the world protested the injustice against the Mayan people. Despite the protests, funding continued for the Guatemalan government, causing the killings to continue. The money pumped the government with power, furthering the mindset that the political elites were entitled to whatever land they wanted. The Mayan people have their own spiritual ties, religious beliefs, and language. These spiritual

differences caused the wealthy non-indigenous people to think that the indigenous people were not equals and could be easily controlled.

The Mayan people have been used as slaves since the Spaniards founded their land in the early 1600's. In modern Guatemala, Mayan oppression still exists, though has come a long way since the time of Rios Montt. When Mayan people inhabited an area of land in Guatemala, they had no security in keeping their land. A "landowner" or a big business, could come a long and say "John Smith owns this land," and the Mayan people would be forced to abandon their homes. Since the forcibly removed Mayan people had no land and nowhere to belong, the landowners then employed the Mayan people to work the land for nothing. The landowners not only stole the land, but they obtained all the farmable land and left little for the Mayans to feed their families. 2% of the population in Guatemala owned 70% of the land (*"When the Mountains Tremble"*). The United Fruit Company came in and consumed all the land's resources and paid scarce taxes to reside there. The working conditions on the plantations were alarming. Nobel Prize Winner, Rigoberta Menchu, has dedicated her life to standing up for civil rights for the Mayan people. She is the first indigenous person to be a nobel prizewinner. Both Rigoberta Menchu's brothers died on the plantations. "One died of poisoning when the landowner sprayed him as he was picking cotton. The other died of malnutrition" (Rigoberta Menchu). The family took off 2 days to bury them. The landowner gave his condolences by firing them and not paying them for the last 15 days.

The landowners were not the only contributors to the negligence of the indigenous people. In the factories, the non-Indian people had the same problems. They were worked long hours for scarce pay in terrible conditions. The workers would form union groups to stand against the big businesses. During one protest, the non-Indian factory workers discovered the Indian plantation workers were struggling with the same injustices and joined together. These union group leaders would one day just disappear. If a factory was having issues with someone standing up for labor rights, the General Director of the National Police would have a conversations with the men from big businesses. The police would beat, kidnap, and kill the rebel leader. Rigoberta Menchu's father arranged an invasion at the Spanish embassy to alert the world of the injustice in Guatemala. During their attempt, the building caught fire and all the rebel leaders burned alive. Another avenue the Police took, was to label rebels as communists and put them in jail. In American news, labeled "Peace in Guatemala", said that Rebel leader Castillo Armas helped to get the "communists" out of Guatemala. "The United Fruit Company is business as usual seizing land that was taken by the communists" ("When the Mountains Tremble"). People publicly protesting against labor laws is bad for business. When people protest it makes the government seem as though it is not in control. When the government does not seem in control, then foreign investors do not feel safe. If they do not feel safe the Guatemalan government loses their business. The whole world along with the Guatemalan government knew that ties with American companies was good for business. "Majority of the foreign investment today is US investment, as far as foreign investment and American investments is concerned it controls agro, pharmaceutical, and

big percentage of banking and tourism [in Guatemala]” (“*Granito*”). US involvement is extremely important to the Guatemalan economy. It is in Guatemala’s best interests to be accepted by the US. After Castillo’s Armas was in power, America’s trust was back in Guatemala, which meant the Mayan oppression continued.

After 65 years of landowners taking the land, the Mayan people began to retaliate the injustices they had faced for so long. To ensure there were no more uprisings, the Guatemala dictatorship continued the repression. Still the Guatemalan people did not give up hope; there were still public groups of land reformers and labor unionizers. The government hunted for these people in the Mayan highlands as Antonio Caba recalls, “The big landowners stole our land. They figured that we would rise up one day and fight for our land, so they asked the government to massacre us.” (*Granito*). This started an ill-matched civil war. Indigenous groups called guerrillas joined together to fight back against the government. The groups were heavily out-armed and numbered. In 1960, Rios Montt became the Dictator. He launched a “scorched earth” which was the deadliest 3 years of his dictatorship in which the government sent raids that would kill villages of men and women. They claimed that they were searching for “supervisors” but they killed any family that might go against the government. In 1982, Pamela Yates went on one of these raids with the military. They went on the ground to visit a village where bodies were still warm from a killing had taken place. “The army told me the guerrillas were responsible, but eyewitnesses in the village told me a different story” (*Granito*). The village women told her that the army had come and claimed that everyone was a guerrilla

and started killing. The people killed in the village were Mayan women, children, old men, and young men. The hatred toward a group of people and the lack of consequence for the killers allowed for the genocide to go on for so long. Since, the government was doing the killings there was no one the people could call on for help. The siever censorship made Guatemalan dictatorship look strong and to the outside world and seen as a democracy; this left no hope for the Mayan people.

Guatemalan government was supported and armed by the United States government. The Reagan administration increased economic aid from \$11 million dollars in 1980 to \$104 million dollars in 1986 (Grandin). The Guatemalan military did not have any training so the U.S. Army came down to train them. They supplied them with helicopters, radios, and guns. They trained the wrong side to fight against the guerillas. In *When the Mountains Tremble*, the guerrillas gathered the Mayan people and said:

“We have come to tell you the ideas of the guerrillas, so that you’ll know us better. We too are peasants. We too come from villages just like you. We use machetes and clay pots just like you, but now we have gone to the mountains and taken up arms because we can no longer stand the injustice in Guatemala. There is so much injustice, and when we say anything the army massacres us. So the army and the rich are our enemies. This is why we are guerillas. (“When the Mountains Tremble”)

The head of the Guatemalan armed forces, General Benidicto Lucas-Garcia, talked with Pamla Yates and she asked him, “In your opinion does the future look good in terms of

aid from the United States?” “Yes of course... we always maintain magnificent relationships with representatives of the United States” (“*Granito*”). The guerrillas had old guns and were training people the best way they knew how. Women and children joined the fight as well. Fathers would send their children to fight because they could not.

“We must continue to maintain peace among the nations of Central America. No amount of reform will bring peace as long as the guerillas think they will win by force. All our neighbors ask of us is assistance in training and arms to protect themselves while they build a better freer life,” (Ronald Reagan address before a Joint Session of the Congress on Central America April 27, 1983.) In the entire address to congress, Regan refers to Central America multiple times. He refers to multiple Central American countries. In all topics about guerrillas, they are known as armed, aggressive, skilled people. With the knowledge and footage of *When the Mountains Tremble*, it is obvious this is untrue. “The US was present at the creation of what became a uniquely savage counter insurgency, and in that sense, the US built and then institutionalized the mindset and the technological capability. US helped create the machine that would go on to commit the massacres and that is the responsibility that we bare” (“*Granito*”). The US government’s aid in Central America allowed the genocide to continue for so long. The money being made by the US in Guatemala helped maintain economic and political structure in both countries. Outsourcing work to Guatemala was easy; the labor was controlled and the taxes were low. American companies like the United Fruit Company and Texaco drained all resources from countries and used the people to do it. Castro had

thrown these companies out when he came into power. The US had lost power in Cuba due to Castro's successful uprising. The power the United States had over Guatemala ensures no soviet country would be able to occupy it. If a democracy rose from Guatemala, they would be their own country. A loss in investments for American companies. To keep a secure lock on the economy, the army kept a secure lock on the Mayan people.

Humans have free will. The power to be in control of one's own body. There is always a choice to do the right thing or the wrong thing. The genocide was not carried out by one person; it took an entire army. Why did the soldiers do this? In when the *Mountains Tremble*, when soldiers were asked who they were looking for the man said, "Supervisors". When asked why, the man said, "I don't know." When asked what are you checking for, the man said, "we have a list and if your name shows up on the list you die" (*"When the Mountains Tremble"*). Some of the soldiers and the Mayans do not even speak the same language. There is something about authority that can cause people to lose their free will. Authority can make people kill unconsciously. When the Nazi's were asked, "Why did you do this? Were you aware that you were committing a crime." Their response was, "I did it because I was ordered to; others [my supervisors] have committed acts worse than mine; in view of the upbringing I received, and the environment in which I lived, I could not have acted differently, had I not done it another would have done it even more harshly in my place" (*The Drowned and the Saved*). The Milgram Experiment randomly selects people to administer electric volts to another person simply because a

person in a white lab coat orders it. Over 50% of test subjects admit lethal shocks because a man in a lab coat says, "Please continue with the experiment" (Milgram Experiment-The Heist). One person did not carry out the massacre of the Guatemalan people; it took a whole army. The massacre was able because others chose to follow orders even if they may have thought it was wrong. Did they have a choice? If they did not comply they would only be hurting themselves. An authority figure justifying wrongful action eases the conscience. The eased conscience of the Guatemalan military allowed for so many Mayan people to be killed.

Genocides have been carried out multiple times in history, in multiple different countries. Genocide generates from hatred, racism and wanting of power. There were certain events that occurred in Guatemala before the genocide took place. A military dictatorship, a weak state government, no rights for the people, and silencing of the media. These actions are signs that injustice and silence is among the people within a country. Recognizing these signs is a step toward preventing a Genocide. In *Granito*, it is stated that proving the massacres to be a genocide may be the key to keeping it from happening again. The most widespread prevention is education. The Mayan people show when the *Mountains Tremble* to their own people to ensure insight about the injustice. In Venezuela right now, there is a dictatorship that has cut off all media from and to the country. A video was leaked from the country with a girl trying to inform people outside of Venezuela of what was happening. She asked for people to share the video and educate

as many people as possible on the issue. Education and recognizing trends may be a way to prevent genocide from happening again.

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