“WE WERE USED”

THE GUATEMALAN CIVIL WAR AND CONCEPTIONS OF CONFLICT AND CULPABILITY

by

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Abstract

Indigenous men who served in the Guatemalan military during the height of the civil war transcend the popular dichotomy between the indigenous population and the military, the oppressed and their oppressors. This complication raises questions about who is to blame for the atrocities perpetrated on indigenous communities. While there has been and will likely continue to be much scholarly and legal debate surrounding who is to be held responsible and to what extent, there has been a severe lack of attention given to how individual, low-level members of the military conceptualize the conflict and their involvement. Through ethnographic research employed over a three-week period in San Antonio Palopó, I have studied the unique perspectives of ex-military members in order to add their voices to the discourse surrounding the Guatemalan Civil War and its ensuing consequences. This investigation seeks to complicate the theoretical opposition of victim and oppressor by illustrating how ex-soldiers, paradoxically, conceive of themselves as victims.

“If you were born in a country or at a time not only when nobody comes to kill your wife and your children, but also nobody comes to ask you to kill the wives and children of others, then render thanks to God and go in peace. But always keep this thought in mind: you might be luckier than I, but you’re not a better person.”

— Jonathan Littell, The Kindly Ones

I bound up the three irregular concrete steps that led to the pink face of the modest store and squeezed myself between the dusty glass counter and two slouching sacks of corn. Silence abruptly broke through the whirring sound emanating from the adjacent corn mill as the store’s owner finished grinding masa. He entered the store and as he turned sideways to fit behind the glass counter, he took my hand, eyes smiling from behind thick eyebrows, each with its own set of three or four long, curved hairs. His hand was large and rough, but he took mine gently. He asked my name and introduced himself as Nicolas.

I stopped; I had been given that name as the only ex-soldier in town who would speak to me. “Were you in the military?” I asked him, unable to control my excitement.
His eyebrows lowered and the smile vanished as he quickly looked sideways at the case of bread to his left.

“Yes,” he said, still examining the stacks of bread. “But I studied in many places. Also with the Guerrillas of the people.” He again met my eyes.

I explained that I was researching ex-soldiers’ perspectives about the Guatemalan Civil War and I had learned that “many of the soldiers were indigenous.”

“All were indigenous,” he corrected, emphatically (Zacapa Pérez, Field notes Feb 16th 2014).

My research had begun.

Introduction

Guatemala’s 36-year civil war was characterized by “political violence . . . in the form of direct, naked military power.” Especially at the height of the conflict, the “indigenous people of Guatemala [found] themselves the targets of significant violence” (Schirmer 2003:51). In the early 1980s, in the highlands, the Guatemalan military implemented matazonas (killing zones), “[unleashing] a virtual holocaust upon the indigenous communities.” The objective these “genocidal policies” was not only to obliterate the guerrillas perceived support base “but also to destroy the culture, identity, and communal structures of the indigenous populations” (Jonas 2000:24). In less than two years, they would kill between 50,000 and 75,000. According to army estimates, “ninety percent of these victims were noncombatants and indigenous. At least 440 villages were razed . . . and more than 1 million refugees were displaced” (Schirmer 2003:54). The nearly four decades of devastating conflict were ended in 1996 with the signing of the Peace Accords. The number of lives lost reached 200,000. Of these deaths, “ninety
percent . . . are reported to be the responsibility of government forces” (Carter Center 2009). Finally, given the extreme “intensity, intent, and purpose” of the violence, the Commission for Historical Clarification “charged the Guatemalan military with genocide” (Manz 2002:293)

In the aftermath of genocide, reconciliation can seem beyond the imagination. However, if reconciliation is to be realized, the sentiments of all those affected must be considered; every voice should be present in any discussion involving culpability, justice, or redress. Furthermore, in the context of reconciliation the “facts” should be considered, but not in isolation. Also important are the memories, narratives, and identities “constructed” by individuals in the present (Nagel 1944). Simply put, if we are going to bring people together, we need to know where they stand. Within this framework, I explore how persons profoundly affected by the civil war construct their memory of the conflict and their present identity with regard to it. Given both their affiliation with the forces of oppression and their membership in the oppressed community, how do indigenous ex-soldiers conceive of themselves with regard to the violent conflict and their involvement?

While I will be presenting the ways soldiers feel they were victimized, this investigation is not intended to absolve the military or any of its members. I will not attempt to gauge guilt or innocence with regard to human rights violations during the war and I will certainly not endeavor to challenge the findings of the Commission for Historical Clarification; it seems beyond doubt that the military perpetrated the vast majority of the violent abuses of human rights. Instead, this limited investigation undertakes adding the voice and narrative of an ignored population to the larger discussion surrounding culpability, justice, and reconciliation. In order to make profound judgments, these findings need to be considered within their larger social, political, and moral context: a
project for a much larger work. This investigation seeks to complicate the dichotomy between the indigenous population and the military in Guatemala.

Much of the existing literature surrounding the conflict in Guatemala ignores the fact that nearly “all” the soldiers serving during the 36 years of civil war “were indigenous” (Zacapa Pérez, Field notes Feb 16th, 2014). Instead, much of the discourse presents a dichotomy between the military and the indigenous population: the oppressed and their oppressors. For example, Jim Handy’s article “Demilitarizing Community in Guatemala” “[focuses] primarily on community/military conflict” (Handy 1994: 35) and Robert Carleson’s book *The War for the Heart and Soul of a Highland Mayan Town* presents a community struggling to expel its foreign oppressors (Carleson 2005). The most iconic work exemplifying this opposition is the testimony *I Rigoberta Menchú: an Indian Woman in Guatemala*, in which Menchú details her indigenous communities fight against a ruthless and unrelenting military force (1984). Even the report from the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) that charged the Guatemalan military with genocide seems to reinforce this dichotomy in that the military, a collection of individuals, is uniformly deemed responsible for committing the ultimate crime against the Mayan population in Guatemala (Manz 2002: 293).

Aside from a short passage in *I Rigoberta Menchú*, none of these accounts give voice to the soldiers who perpetrated the violence. The perspectives of ex-military personnel, like Nicolas, are conspicuously left out of the academic discourse; maybe they are thought to be undeserving. In the context of reconciliation through determining responsibility and “[assigning] blame to individual” actors, viewing the military force as a group of faceless, soulless oppressors is especially convenient in that it allows responsibility to be assigned uniformly to the armed forces as a whole (Benson 2008:53).
The danger in neglecting to include the perspectives of soldiers like Nicolas is that it is entirely too easy to forget the details of their experience; details that might prove to complicate the universal opposition of victim and oppressor. It is important to remember that he was forcefully conscripted into the military by recruitment officers while attending the market in the nearby town of Sololá (Zacapa Pérez, Field notes Feb 23rd 2014). Men like him were not only subjected to “physical coercive forms of domination,” but also “more ideological and discursive forms,” often turning reluctant new recruits into the hardened military men that trained the subsequent group of young conscripts (Schirmer 2003:52; Sulugui, Field notes Feb 21st 2014). Finally, after their service, these men were obligated to remain silent about their experiences, leaving them equally unable to define their role as soldiers within the debate surrounding the war as they were to condemn the powerful actors that created a system in which they feel they “were used” (Carrillo, E., Field notes Feb 20th 2014).

Without considering the experiences of ex-soldiers, it is tempting to embrace the uncomplicated “dualism of . . . civil or military:” indigenous peasant or member of Guatemala’s brutal “counterinsurgency army” (Schirmer 2003:52; Jonas 2000:17).

However, as I hope this investigation will illustrate, the experience of some, possibly many, ex-soldiers transcends this popular dichotomy. Through personal interviews with ex-military personnel living in the towns surrounding Lake Atitlan Guatemala, I will try to illuminate the ways in which soldiers who served during the conflict were not simply camouflage-clad, vicious killers, but individuals, continuing to struggle with the realities of the war and their involvement; individuals who now conceive of themselves as victims, as well as aggressors. Furthermore, this investigation will demonstrate how the strict
theoretical opposition of the army and the indigenous population is harmful in that it denies the lived experiences of those who do not fit neatly into this classification.

**Methodology**

Using ethnographic research methods, I studied ex-soldiers and the ways they conceive of Guatemala’s violent conflict from February 12th until March 6th, 2014, in three adjacent communities bordering Lake Atitlan, Guatemala. The bulk of my research was done in San Antonio Palopó, where I lived with a family on which I depended heavily for information about the community, its history, and its ex-soldiers. The foundation for my research was provided by the father with whom I was living, Lucas Pérez. Not only was he able to put me in contact with two ex-military members, he was also able and willing to provide me with details about the military as well as a personal perspective, given that he had served as an electrician in the military for three months during the conflict (Pérez, Field notes Feb 14th 2014).

Through Lucas, as well as others with whom I had formed relationships, I was able to find four ex-soldiers who were willing to speak with me about their experience and perspective. Nicolas, the store owner mentioned above, was compelled to serve for 3 years in Quiche just before the war started in 1960 (Zacapa Peréz, Field notes Feb 23rd 2014). Nonetheless, he offered valuable insights as to the mentality and structural characteristics of the army at the start of the violence. Another ex-soldier I interviewed, Emilio Carrillo, lives in Santa Catarina Palopó and served in the military for five years starting with his voluntary enlistment in 1984 at the age of 15. He served in the Petén, achieving the rank of sergeant major (Carrillo, E., Field notes Feb 20th 2014). Through Emilio, I met his older brother Carlos Carrillo, who volunteered in 1982, during the height of the violence, at the
age of 19. Carlos spent much of his time fighting in the mountains near San Marcos and achieved the rank of first sergeant, the highest rank in the tropa, (the lowest tier of military personnel) (Carrillo, C., Field notes Feb 25th 2014). Finally, I had the opportunity to interview Juan Sánchez, who was forcefully taken from his vegetable stand by recruitment officers in 1987. He served for 5 years and was stationed for much of this time in Chimaltenango, where he also rose in rank (Juan Sánchez, Field notes Mar 3rd 2014).

With each, once a conversation was initiated, I had questions prepared but allowed them to lead the discussion whenever possible. To document the interviews, I would start by taking limited notes, eventually asking to use an electric audio-recorder if I felt they were comfortable. After each interview I would take extensive field notes for later analysis.

Given the number of men who served in the military during the time of the conflict, it seems unlikely that one would be able to speak with only five ex-military personnel during an intensive three-week investigation. However, this was the reality for two reasons. First, ex-soldiers do not feel comfortable speaking about their role in Guatemala’s violent conflict; the military “[created] a culture of fear” within communities as well as within the military itself (Schirmer 2003:53). What will be detailed more completely below is that soldiers still feel it is uncomfortable and even dangerous to speak about their role in the armed conflict. Demonstrating this vulnerability, each interviewee asked me to use a pseudonym for the purposes of this project. The second reason is that there were relatively few soldiers recruited from San Antonio, the town where my research was based. According to several people who lived there during the war, the army only tried to recruit
in town one time and they were unsuccessful.\(^1\) This prompted me to expand my research to include the neighboring communities of Santa Catarina and San Lucas Tolimán.\(^2\) I could only expand to these nearby communities, because I had to continue to rely on my existing relationships, given my limited time and resources; I was advised that, though there may be more soldiers across the lake, it would not be safe or effective to try to find them without previous connections (Field notes Feb 12th-Mar 6th 2014).

For each contact I made, I relied heavily on a previous contact. I was told by two interviewees that they would not have spoken to me if I had not been introduced by someone they knew and trusted. However, often an introduction did not instill the confidence necessary to engage in sincere and open conversation. When I sensed reservation in an individual with whom I was speaking, I kept conversations comfortable and informal; I would take little to no notes and gladly engage in conversation surrounding topics completely unrelated to my project. However, in situations like these I also attempted to employ a respectful persistence with the intent of communicating both seriousness and sincerity.

In addition to a gentle persistence, I also shared with each ex-soldier my personal connection to my investigation, hoping to demonstrate that our conversation was important to me as an individual. I explained that I have family members who fought in conflicts about which they had doubts; wars they felt were not entirely just. Telling their stories and commiserating about the complications of fighting for a cause larger than any personal experience helped spur honest discussions about culpability with regard to the human rights abuses during the Guatemalan civil war. Furthermore, I believe sharing my own

\(^1\) Many who I interviewed did not even remember this incident.
\(^2\) All those interviewed either traveled to a nearby city to volunteer themselves or were captured by recruitment officers while visiting a nearby city.
experience, while far less impactful than theirs, helped them understand that I viewed them not as an object of study, but as an individual whose unique experience and perspective could help me answer questions I am struggling with personally, as well as academically. The principal of which is: operating within an immense and perverted system, to what extent is the individual responsible?

“I wanted to die:” Patriotism, Pride, and New Recruits

As a youth around the year 1967, Nicolas Zacapa Pérez travelled from San Antonio to the market in nearby Sololá with his younger brother. He knew that tensions were building between the army and Guerrilla groups, but he was young and did not worry much about politics; he felt he would not be bothered. However, his younger brother returned home alone with the news that Nicolas had been noticed for his height and fitness by army recruitment officers. Nicolas would not be coming home for some time; he would be filling the ranks of Guatemala’s armed forces for the next three years (Zacapa Pérez, Field notes Feb 23rd 2014).

According to Ricardo Sulugui, President of Mayan Defense (Defensoria Maya), the exact number of youths who were forcefully recruited during the civil war is difficult to determine, because the Guatemalan military has yet to release these records pertaining to the conflict. However, it is estimated that up to 100,000 young men were forcefully taken for service during the 1980s alone (Sulugui, Field notes 21st 2014). Not only did this recruitment swell the ranks of the army, it also “[spread] around responsibility,” forcing many who may have remained neutral “to become accomplices in the killing” (Schirmer 2003:52-60).
Forced recruitment was brought up early in nearly every conversation I had about the conflict during my three weeks near Lake Atitlan. When I asked about the culpability of soldiers, individuals interviewed would start by informing me that many “[soldiers] didn’t want to, but they were obligated.” Recruited soldiers either fought for the required number of years or died by the hand of a fellow soldier (Sulugui, Field notes Feb 21st 2014). Especially for the ex-soldiers I spoke with, the fact that many were forced to join the military diminished a soldier’s responsibility for the actions he carried out; “the fault is with the powerful people” who gave the orders that others were obligated to follow (Carrillo, E., Field Notes Feb 20th 2014).

These conversations also made clear that this recruitment was in fact entirely forceful and even violent. Juan Sánchez painfully recalled the day in 1987 when he left San Antonio to sell vegetables in the market in Chimaltenango and soldiers forcibly took him from his stall. Juan was afraid to fight and, for his protests, the soldiers punched him 75 times in the stomach (Sánchez, Field notes Mar 3rd 2014). Ricardo Sulugui remembers encounters in Sololá in which women in the community would organize to defend youths from the recruitment officers; these soldiers were not willing to be as publicly violent with the women (Sulugui, Field notes Feb 21 2014).

Despite his negative recruitment experience, Juan renewed his commitment to the military after his required two-and-a-half years of service. He had “grown accustomed to the military [life]” and he even found an appreciation for the punishments he received early in his military career; “[his body] was hard” and able to withstand combat after enduring physical punishment during training, he told me (Sánchez, Field notes Mar 3rd 2014). Nicolas had a similar sentiment; while he was generally quite critical of the military, he admitted that his experience was not entirely negative. His time serving made him “strong”
and “brave,” attributes that helped him later in his political career (Nicolas, Field notes Feb 23rd 2014). With both Nicolas and Juan, it is apparent that during their time in the military they came to be proud of their physical fitness, mental fortitude, and identity as soldiers.

While an amount of pride is still evident, each has become subsequently critical of the war and their pride has waned as a result.

Though their enthusiasm has similarly diminished, the two other ex-soldiers were proud to be soldiers even at the start of their military careers; Carlos and Emilio Carrillo were two of the very few from San Lucas Tolimán to volunteer themselves for service.

When I asked Emilio if he was afraid to fight when he joined the army at age 15, he told me that he was not; “I wanted to die for my country,” he told me, adding later that “[he] wanted to be a hero.” He recounts his experience:

In March of 1984, when I was between the ages of 15 and 16 years old, in San Lucas Tolimán the situation involving the Guerrilla and the army was intense. For this reason [and] for my age, I wanted to do something for my country . . . So, with other friends who also wanted to take up arms, [I] decided to volunteer myself . . . In this time, all the members of the army were captured; they were taken by force . . . With us it was different. We were a group of young men who decided to do something for our country.

Emilio’s brother, Carlos, had joined the army two years earlier, the first of five brothers to become soldiers (Carrillo, C., Field notes Feb 20th, Mar 5th 2014). Carlos and Emilio were unique; they both admitted that they were in the minority as voluntary enlistees. While this sentiment has since changed greatly, both admit that they remained passionate and proud throughout most of their time in service.

Regardless of whether they were forcefully recruited, each ex-soldier I spoke with was proud of their service while they were in the military. The most striking example is Juan who was initially vehemently opposed to fighting. His pride was evident when he
went on at length about how strong and resilient he was while fighting in the mountains, even standing to hit his chest (Sánchez, Field notes Mar 3rd 2014).

In conversations about culpability, it is often cited that soldiers were forced to join. However, within the group that I interviewed, it seems that once recruited there was no real difference between the experience and feelings of someone who was forcefully recruited. These soldiers reported that while they were serving they were proud and patriotic; they thought they were “[doing] something for [their] country” (Carrillo, E., Field notes Mar 5th 2014). This contradicts what one might expect from a youth forced to fight in a war that is nearly universally seen as unjust on the side of a military that perpetrated “genocide” (Manz 2002:293).

“Fighting for My Life:” Remembered Reasons for Fighting

At no time in my conversations with the ex-soldiers was there mention of genocide; when I would attempt to breach the subject, I would speak of “human rights abuses” identified by the truth commission. I did not want to make them uncomfortable just as I did not want to influence them with my opinions or previous knowledge; I wanted to learn about their experience and perspective. While genocide was not spoken of explicitly, what each described willingly was the fact that the people dying on both sides of the conflict were by in large poor indigenous people; “they were brother Guatemalans . . . but confused” (Carrillo, C., Field notes Feb 27th 2014).

Words like “confused,” “tricked,” and “used” were employed often to describe those fighting in the military. Carlos talked about how most of the low-ranking soldiers were illiterate and Emilio stated that he did not doubt the military while he was serving, because he “only understood weapons” (Carrillo, E., Field notes Feb 20th 2014; Carlos
Carrillo, Field notes Feb 25th 2014). However, they felt the same way about the guerrilla fighters. Emilio spoke of times when his platoon captured and tortured guerrillas for information; they would scream and yell, but never betray their fellow fighters. He explained that, at the time, he was impressed by their valor and commitment to cause. Today, however, he realizes “they were fools” who understood the realities of the war as little as he (Carrillo, E., Field notes Feb 20th 2014).

Though these soldiers felt the guerrillas were just as fooled, they also resonated with the ideals of the guerrilla movement. For example, Emilio Carrillo admits that “[he] had the intention of joining the guerrillas” after he felt moved at a meeting held by a guerrilla group and Juan felt the guerrillas had “good reasons” given the extreme poverty in Guatemala (Carrillo, E., Field notes Mar 5th 2014; Sánchez, Field notes Mar 3rd 2014). I was confused by this seeming contradiction until I spoke with Carlos, who explained to me why he believes both sides of the conflict are at fault. I had asked him about the violations of human rights during the war and he told me that the guerrillas also violated human rights; “soldiers have a right to live as well,” he told me (Carrillo, C., Field notes Feb 25th 2014).

At first I was very skeptical of this position; it was war and both sides were engaging in combat. However, I came to understand that, as an individual, he “was fighting for [his] life” during the conflict, not to maintain the power of the bourgeoisie and the military elites. He certainly did not join with the intent of “[unleashing] a virtual holocaust upon the indigenous” community of which he was a part (Jonas 2000:24). The soldiers dying at the hand of the guerrillas were largely members of the poor indigenous communities the guerrillas were trying to protect and empower; from these soldiers’ perspectives the guerrillas were not fighting their enemy (Carrillo, C., Field notes Feb 25th
2014). With this new frame of understanding, I could comprehend how the guerrillas were simultaneously seen as enlightened and fooled: what Juan meant when he explained that the guerrillas had “good ideas,” but were “delinquents” in that they tried to actualize them maliciously and ineffectively (Sánchez, Field notes Mar 3rd 2014). I then understood more completely why these ex-soldiers felt as if they were victims of not only a state that forced or fooled them into killing and risking death, but also a “confused” guerrilla movement that was trying to take their lives, paradoxically, with the intent of saving them and their communities (Carrillo, C., Field notes Feb 25th 2014).

To understand why these ex-soldiers felt the guerrillas were mislead, it is also important to note that they did not conceive of the conflict as between powerful, institutionalized forces (the military and the super-elite) and poor indigenous communities. Instead, they viewed it as a “disagreement” between powerful actors that turned violent, catching the indigenous population in the crossfire (Guidínez, Field notes Feb 25th 2014). For instance, Emilio often repeated the quote “the United States and Russia provided the weapons, and Guatemala the lives” and Nicolas and Carlos spoke of how the guerrillas must have had wealthy supporters within Guatemala’s ruling class who stood to benefit from a guerrilla victory (Carrillo, E., Field notes Mar 5th 2014).

I asked Emilio Carrillo what would have happened had the guerrillas been victorious and he told me that nothing would have changed in Guatemala. He explained that there was a “cúpula,” or group of leaders, on both sides who uniquely stood to benefit, while the majority of the population continued to live in poverty. The army was lead by people who had money and the guerrillas by people who wanted more; the war, for Emilio and others, was not about human rights, but instead “human ambition” (Carrillo, E., Field notes Mar 5th 2014).
“I can change, but I can’t forget:” Memories of Conflict

This same sense of hopelessness shone through when the soldiers spoke of the actual results of the armed conflict; the consensus was that nothing, or at least not enough, changed for the better with regard to the indigenous population (Field notes Feb 12th-Mar 6th 2014). The only institutional changes, according to these men were within the military itself.

The “chocolate” or non-combat army of today is paid much more than the 50-75 Quetzales per month that soldiers were paid during the 1980s (Carrillo, E., Field notes Mar 5th 2014; Sánchez, Field notes Mar 3rd 2014). However, the ex-soldiers I spoke to have not benefited from these reforms. Juan left the armed forces after 5 years with nothing but his backpack, a mirror, and the paper record of his service and Carlos complained that “at least the guerrillas had land to go back to” once they stopped fighting (Sánchez, Field notes Mar 5th; Carrillo, C., Field notes Feb 25th 2014). All agreed that they received nothing in terms of training that could be of use in the civilian world; Nicolas spoke about how the military did not provide a “true education” and Lucas remarked that the military only taught how to shoot and kill (Zacapa Pérez, Field notes Feb 19th; Pérez, Field notes Feb 4th 2014).

While the army did not educate its soldiers, it seems it did try to “change” them. “The army doesn’t want you to be a good person,” Nicolas told me, putting a finger to my chest (Zacapa Pérez, Field notes Feb 19th, 2014). Negative psychological effects are made evident when Emilio Carrillo painfully explains how he committed murder after leaving the army due to the alcoholism he “learned” in his time there. “I only understood arms” he admitted, also lamenting that the University he attended just before the crime “had changed [his] mind [with regard to the war], but not [his] heart” (Carrillo, E., Field notes Feb 20th 2014).
Nicolas describes other ex-soldiers near San Antonio as “very closed” and “not humanitarian;” “these people were changed,” he told me, shaking his head and refusing to reveal any names (Zacapa Pérez, Field notes Feb 23rd 2014).

The soldiers I interviewed were not given benefits or even a meaningful education by the military; what they were left with is extraordinarily horrifying memories of the hell that is war. Carlos Carrillo described a day when he and his platoon came across a guerrilla encampment, one of his most harrowing experiences on the mountain. He described how they mistakenly tread upon hidden quitapies,\textsuperscript{3} or land mines, that exploded under his platoon, taking the legs of 15 soldiers and killing 12. When Carlos explained, he measured from his toe to mid-thigh and demonstrated how the explosions ripped the limbs from their owners by throwing his hands in the air. He told me the most terrifying aspect of the experience was “the silence in all the mountain” when the fighting would stop (Carrillo, C., Field notes Feb 25th 2014).

While the deaths of fellow soldiers also pained Carlos’s brother, Emilio, he seemed to be far more haunted by his own actions during the conflict. His platoon did not take many prisoners. “Guerrilla seen, guerrilla dead,” he told me was the policy and practice. However, when they did capture a guerrilla, the fighter was tortured for information. When I asked him about this practice, he closed his eyes tightly; “there are some things I can’t talk about” he told me. It was evident that he is still incredibly pained by these memories; “I can change, but I can’t forget,” he said (Carrillo, E., Field notes Feb 20th 2014).

Lucas Pérez also had memory of torture though he was only an electrician in the military for all of three months. I had asked him many times whether he saw guerrillas

\textsuperscript{3} Literal translation is “leg removers.”
during his time in the military and he insisted that he had not; he was “only working on base.” Until, one night he came home late from watering his mushrooms.

“We trapped a guerrilla . . . when I was in the military,” he revealed, sitting at the table across from me. There had been a firefight and soldiers had captured a guerrilla and imprisoned him on base. Though Lucas had no part in this encounter, he was ordered spray the Guerrilla with a hose every three hours for an entire 24.

“What happened to him after that day?” I asked and Lucas blew through his lips, leaning back.

“They killed him.”

“Really?” I asked and he nodding, indicating that he did not want to speak about this any further.

Lucas was not the only one that did not want to speak about the armed conflict. All the soldiers I spoke with reported that they seldom speak about the war and they do not know anyone that does; many agreed that “it’s still dangerous,” because the military could retaliate. Emilio told me that he only felt comfortable speaking with me because I am soon leaving the country. The policy of the army is “what you hear here and what you do here, you leave here” and if you speak of the truth you could turn up dead, he told me (Carrillo, E., Field notes Feb 20th 2014). When it comes to the military, “everything is secret” (Zacapa Pérez, Field notes Feb 19th 2014).

It is also important to remember that, in the aftermath of the violence, two of the soldiers I spoke with found themselves victims of the war in a more traditional sense; Carlos and Emilio lost their uncle to kidnapping by the military and Carlos added that “many soldiers lost families” (Carrillo, C., Field notes Feb 25th 2014). Ricardo Sulugui supported this claim when he asserted that the army would threaten to kill families or raze
home villages of recruits who did not comply with orders (Sulugui, Field notes Feb 21st 2014).

Conclusions

While everyone I spoke with at least mentioned that soldiers were violently forced to fight, the service of those I interviewed did not fit neatly into this category. Carlos and Emilio volunteered for the armed forces, because they “loved [their] country” (Carrillo, E., Field notes Mar 5th 2014). Even Juan who was violently forced to join the military “grew accustomed to the military life” and volunteered for a second term (Sánchez, Field notes Mar 3rd 2014). The experience of these men complicates the commonly cited rationalization of indigenous people’s involvement in the military during the conflict: “if you didn’t complete [the order], they’d complete you” (Carrillo, C., Field notes Feb 25th 2014). Instead of conceptualizing their involvement as a forced obligation, these men talked about how they were “tricked,” “used,” and “ignorant;” “the army lied to me,” lamented Emilio (Carrillo, E., Field notes Mar 5th 2014). Lucas pushed his eyes shut with his hands when I asked him if he had doubts while serving; he explained that he was not aware of the realities of the situation (Pérez, Field notes Feb 19th 2014).

While they did not have their eyes open, neither did the guerrillas. In their narrative, the guerrillas were also tricked into fighting on behalf of powerful people who stood to benefit from a new regime. What is potentially confusing is that they seem to view the guerrilla movement as simultaneously deceived and enlightened. Though the guerrillas had “good reasons” for fighting, they had no chance of actualizing these ideas; as Emilio told me, Guatemala would be no different had the guerrillas been victorious (Carrillo, E.,
Field notes Mar 5th 2014). Believing that the guerrillas could not have changed Guatemala allows them to conceptualize violence as the problem, irrespective of the objective behind the violence, because the fight was essentially “for nothing” (Carrillo, E., Field notes Feb 20th 2014). The guerrillas were violently engaging, paradoxically, with people they were trying to aid: impoverished indigenous who were serving in the military. In general, these soldiers felt the guerrillas were as culpable as the military, because “[they] too killed” (Carrillo, E., Field notes Feb 25th 2014).

Framing violence alone as the problem of the war, these soldiers seem to implicitly mitigate their culpability; they were fighting, but so were the guerrillas. In addition, conceptualizing of the guerrilla’s goal as unattainable spreads the guilt; if there was nothing to gain for those fighting on both sides, everyone killed in vain, if not on the behalf of the few corrupt and powerful individuals.

“The guilt is with the powerful,” Emilio told me, because they orchestrated the violence; they gave the orders (Carrillo, E., Field notes Feb 20th 2014). However, he and others readily admitted or at least did not deny that soldiers were also at fault for their part in the violence. Lucas, for instance, insisted that everyone who was involved in the violence is responsible and should face justice (Pérez, Field notes Feb 16th 2014).

Therefore, these soldiers did not try to claim that they were not aggressors and individual perpetrators of violence during the war; Carlos, Juan, and Emilio spoke painfully of conflict in which they killed. Instead they simultaneously conceived of themselves as aggressors and victims. They did not flip their role from oppressor to oppressed. Instead their narratives endeavor to complicate the dichotomy between victim and aggressor: indigenous peasant and murderous military instrument.
These soldiers see themselves as victims due to the reasons previously detailed. Foremost, they feel they were told lies that lead them to feel proud and patriotic to be serving in what was, in reality, a “dirty war” (Carrillo, E., Field notes Feb 20\(^{th}\)). They were fooled into fighting a war from which only the powerful stood to benefit; a war without reason. Once this unjustified war ended, they were left with nothing but the memories of the horrors they perpetrated and experienced. Finally, they perceive themselves victims due to the fact that they too lost friends and family in the conflict. They “thought [they’d] die each night as [they] went to sleep” and many of their friends and comrades met exactly that fate. Furthermore, while they were serving the family and community they left behind was not immune to state violence (Carrillo, E., Field notes Feb 20\(^{th}\) 2014).

This investigation does not intend to absolve anyone for their involvement in the war. Likewise, the soldiers I interviewed do not wholly contradict their identity as actors in the violence; their experience, constructed memory, and the larger narrative written about the war would not allow them that liberty. However, as I have illuminated herein, these soldiers simultaneously conceive of themselves as victims and aggressors. Therefore, indigenous ex-soldiers who served during Guatemala’s armed conflict transcend the uncomplicated opposition of victim and aggressor. When determining guilt with regard to the atrocities perpetrated during Guatemala’s civil war, on behalf of those affected and for the sake of an accurate historical narrative, it is imperative that we resist the temptation to paint neat boxes of black and white; the truth is shades of grey.
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