GRAPPLING WITH GUATEMALA'S HORROR

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BRIDGE OF COURAGE: LIFE STORIES OF THE GUATEMALAN COMPAÑEROS AND COMPAÑERAS. By Jennifer Harbury. (Monroe, Me.: Common Courage, 1994. Pp. 264. $14.95 paper.)
UNFINISHED CONQUEST: THE GUATEMALAN TRAGEDY. By Victor Perera. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993. Pp. 382. $27.00 cloth.)
BETWEEN TWO ARMIES: IN THE IXIL TOWNS OF GUATEMALA. By David Stoll. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. Pp. 383. $47.50 cloth, $17.50 paper.)
MASSACRES IN THE JUNGLE: IXCAN, GUATEMALA, 1975–1982. By Ricardo Falla. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994. Pp. 215. $55.00 cloth, $16.95 paper.)
GUATEMALAN POLITICS: THE POPULAR STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY. By Robert Trudeau. (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1993. Pp. 220. $35.00 cloth.)

As a wave of terror swept through Guatemala in the early 1980s, foreign scholars watched in helpless horror from afar, unable even to go into the ravaged regions without courting their own grisly deaths. Now, a decade later, foreigners and Guatemalans alike are trying to make some sense of the unspeakable, to explain what happened and how and why.

Most of the books under review in this essay claim the mantle of scholarly detachment, but one—Jennifer Harbury's *Bridge of Courage*—is openly partisan. In approaching this work, I must confess my bias: I respect and sympathize with the author and with the subject of her book, the Guatemalan guerrillas.

A graduate of Harvard Law School, Harbury began doing pro bono work in the early 1980s for Guatemalan refugees seeking political asylum in the United States. This project led her to go to Guatemala to learn more. She stayed and was captivated, more by the tragedy of the people than by the beauty of the land. The tragedy of the Guatemalan people stirred her, as did the bravery of those who were risking their lives to bring about change. She became increasingly close to the Guatemalan

guerrillas and eventually married a guerrilla commander called Everardo (Efraín Bámaca Velásquez). In March 1992, he was captured by the army and was then "disappeared" (the Guatemalan government claimed that he had been killed in combat). Harbury's story hit *The New York Times* in November 1994, when she conducted a hunger strike in front of the Guatemalan presidential palace, challenging the government to produce either Everardo or his corpse. Harbury finally forced U.S. Ambassador Marilyn McAfee, who had been "shamefully silent," to acknowledge that according to the embassy's information, Everardo had in fact been captured alive.[1] Tenaciously, Harbury continued her quest for the truth, fighting for her own tragedy and the tragedy of tens of thousands of Guatemalans whose loved ones have also been "disappeared." Hence my respect and sympathy for Jennifer Harbury.

Bridge of Courage: Life Stories of the Guatemalan Compañeros and Compañeras is a collection of oral histories of members of the Organización Revolucionaria del Pueblo en Armas (ORPA), one of three Guatemalan guerrilla groups.[2] Harbury's voice does not intrude. She allows the guerrillas to tell their own stories about why they decided to join the armed struggle and their lives in the mountains. Harbury explains, "Throughout the years, there have been many difficult times, but also quiet times, opportunities to talk, swap stories, ask about each other's lives and dreams. I have written down those stories, just as they were told me" (p. 31). Then Harbury too tells her story with simplicity and humility, in some of the most moving pages of this poignant book.

Clearly, the guerrillas' stories will touch each reader in different ways. As I read the words of Amalia, who had been a medical student, another Guatemalan woman came to my mind—Gabriela, who belonged to another guerrilla organization and occasionally in the 1980s would tell me about her experiences and those of her friends. Like Gabriela, Amalia first joined the urban underground. She stayed in the city until the day she saw the tortured corpse of the young woman who had been a member of her underground cell: "That was the day I left for the mountains. I knew they would be coming for me soon. But that wasn't the real reason I left. I knew I could die just as quickly in the mountains. I could have fled the country to safety, but I chose not to. I had made a decision—I had decided to fight. I had decided that when those animals came looking for me, to kill me in that way, by God they were going to find me with a gun in my hands" (p. 38).

A different experience was recounted by Everardo:

1. Editorial, "Guatemala: Change the Message," *The New York Times*, 9 Nov. 1994, p. A26; and "American in Guatemala Ends Her Hunger Strike," 12 Nov. 1994, p. 7.

2. A fourth guerrilla group, the *Núcleo del Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo*, existed only on paper.

Like many of the *compañeros,* I grew up on a plantation. My family is Mayan, so, of course, we were not the owners, only the serfs. . . . My father taught me the two letters he knew himself, but this was my only education. I had to go to the fields instead—fields that were not even ours—and labor like a mule for pittance wages. This was harder for me than the hunger, not being able to go to school, not being able to learn. And so I grew up restless, angry, and very strong. By the time I was sixteen or so, I began to run away to the mountains instead of going to the fields. I just wanted time to think, time to be a person instead of a donkey. Sometimes my friends would go with me. . . . It was on one of these days that we met Gaspar Ilom [the leader of ORPA] and his small group of *compañeros.* . . . They spoke with us as though we were intelligent people, sharing their ideas, asking for ours. . . . We talked all afternoon, and a few days later I found myself wandering back up the trails. (Pp. 181–83)

Bridge of Courage is not a history of the Guatemalan guerrillas—their history has not yet been written. Rather, it is the account that they have given of themselves, a powerful oral history. Some might call *Bridge of Courage* a useful contribution. I prefer to think of it as a sad yet vibrant and humane song.

I approached Victor Perera's *Unfinished Conquest: The Guatemalan Tragedy* with a sense of anticipation, engendered in part by the dazzling praise lavished on it by prominent scholars and journalists cited on the dust jacket. As an exploration of the most recent decades of the Guatemalan tragedy in their historical context, the subject is certainly of interest.

But as I read through the lengthy text, I grew increasingly irritated. The book is well written, to be sure, and I have no quarrel with its main thrust. Perera writes eloquently of the atrocities committed by the Guatemalan Army and the suffering of the population. He harshly criticizes the role played by the United States, and to his credit, he mentions the oft-overlooked role of Israel, which sent arms and advisers to Guatemala in the late 1970s and early 1980s to assist a government engaged in the wholesale slaughter of its own population.

Unfinished Conquest tells a little about everything, yet it offers virtually no new facts or insights. Nor does it contain any explanation deeper than those already at hand of Guatemala's culture of fear, the nature of the army, or the character of the guerrillas.

The absence of notes (unusual in a book published by an academic press) is particularly annoying. Perera repeatedly speaks with great authority of "a study that shows" this or that, but he rarely reveals which study he has in mind. The lack of notes is all the more frustrating because sometimes Perera misstates the facts. For instance, when he relates that Fidel Castro received some of his political education in Guatemala during the presidency of Jacobo Arbenz, I wonder what Perera's source is, given that it is no secret that Castro has never set foot in Guatemala. Similarly, when Perera states that the Guatemalan Army launched a counterin-

surgency campaign in 1966 with the support of "one thousand U.S. Green Berets" (p. 41), I again marvel and wonder what source he could be using. Although *Unfinished Conquest* is not studded with factual errors, there are enough to make a reader wary. Notes might have imposed some welcome self-discipline on Perera. Too often, I had the impression that he was relying solely on his memory of what he had heard in conversations with Guatemalan friends.

Even so, this account is an interesting book by one who knows Guatemala quite well. It includes several striking verbal snapshots, such as his interviews with the military commander of the town of Nebaj and the mayor of Cotzal as well as his recounting of the story of Father Stanley Rother, who was murdered by the army in July 1981. As a general book for nonspecialists, *Unfinished Conquest* has much to offer, despite its limitations. I wonder, however, how many nonspecialists will want to read a 380-page tome on Guatemala.

Unlike Perera's work, David Stoll's *Between Two Armies: In the Ixil Towns of Guatemala* does not pretend to offer an overview of Guatemalan reality. Stoll's focus is more narrow and deep as he investigates the history of the Ixil country in the department of Quiché since the Spanish Conquest, with particular emphasis on the last two decades.

Stoll knows the area well, has conducted field research there, and believes in footnotes. He provides new information and is sure of his facts. Reading his book will acquaint readers with one of the least-known areas of Guatemala. Furthermore, Stoll is refreshingly modest—he does not pretend to be an expert on every subject. For example, his knowledge of the Guatemalan guerrilla movement, while respectable, is clearly limited. He did not have access to guerrilla documents, nor did he interview guerrilla members (except a few who had surrendered or been captured after leaving active duty). Stoll's knowledge of the guerrillas is based on the scant secondary sources available and the few books and publications written by the guerrillas for the public. But this approach is reasonable—it would be unfair to expect anyone to do pioneering work on every subject.

In addition to the excellent historical introduction, the best chapters of *Between Two Armies* are those that deal with the years following the army's victories in 1982. Stoll offers compelling descriptions of life in the part of the Ixil country controlled by the army, the civil defense patrols, the growth of the evangelical churches—of what he refers to as a people seeking to recover after a bloodbath. If he is less compelling in discussing the population's feelings toward the guerrillas at the peak of the war (1981–1982), that is understandable. When Stoll conducted his field research in 1988–1989, memories had been influenced by the searing experience of the rebels' defeats, their inability to protect the population, and the terrible price that this failure entailed. Moreover, the interviews took place in areas controlled by the army and heavily militarized, where the

likely price for a misstep is still death. Stoll was an outsider, asking questions about an extremely sensitive and dangerous subject in a society permeated by the culture of fear.

My reservations about Stoll's book—and they are serious—have nothing to do with his knowledge but with his interpretations. I will focus on two such problems, one that is relatively minor and one that troubles me a great deal.

The minor problem arises from Stoll's understandable desire to say something new and to be provocative. He explains up front that "this book is intended to challenge how the human rights and solidarity movements think about Guatemala" (p. xi). But in this attempt, Stoll sometimes dramatically opens a door that has in fact been open for some time. For example, he shows that in the Ixil country, selective terror (meaning selective kidnapping, torture, murder) began in 1975 in response to initial guerrilla activity. Stoll then engages in a victory dance, as if he had made a great discovery that checkmates the Left. The logic of the culture of fear, however, is well known. In Guatemala, the intensity of the repression has varied in response to the ruling group's perception of the intensity of the challenge from below. When this group feels threatened in its socioeconomic privileges, it responds by unleashing a wave of terror. Thus the last two years of the presidency of General Carlos Arana Osorio (1970–1974) witnessed little killing. After the great wave of repression that characterized the presidency of Julio César Méndez Montenegro (especially in rural areas) and the first half of Arana's term (especially in the capital), killing was unnecessary. The job had been done. The killing resumed only when the challenge began again. This very point is made by prominent leftist Ricardo Falla in *Massacres in the Jungle,* which shows in much more detail than Stoll's account and with far greater knowledge how the pendulum worked in the Ixcán (immediately north of the Ixil triangle).

Stoll's study also raises a far deeper question: is armed struggle justified when it leads to harsher repression? Perera too asks this question, but only in passing. Stoll implies that the answer is that under these circumstances, armed struggle is wrong. Repeatedly in connection with army massacres, he speaks of "guerrilla provocations." I find this view very disturbing. Do the guerrillas bear any responsibility for the army's slaughter of the population of a village because the rebels had ambushed an army patrol a few miles away? Stoll seems to believe that they do. But how should the guerrillas have fought? Or is the answer that they should not have fought at all, since their mere struggle, their mere existence was a provocation for the army?

This is indeed a key question. In the case of Guatemala, it must be addressed at several levels. First, did the possibility exist for peaceful change in Guatemala in the mid-1970s? Second, assuming that such a possibility did not exist (or was reasonably believed to be nonexistent),

was armed struggle justified in view of the fact that the enemy was likely to respond with extreme cruelty? (Employing this same logic, was armed resistance in German-occupied Europe justified during World War II even though it was to be expected that the Germans would respond with great cruelty?) Finally, was there any chance of success in Guatemala that would justify resorting to such an extreme and costly method?

In answer to the last question, it seems to me that in the 1970s the Guatemalan guerrillas proceeded with far greater maturity than they had a decade earlier. In the 1970s, all three guerrilla movements worked secretly for several years among the population before beginning armed struggle. They certainly seemed to have a reasonable chance of winning—at least as much as the Algerian rebels in 1954 or the Afghan rebels in the late 1970s.

Tactically, the guerrillas made a very grave error in late 1981: they unleashed what seemed to be a general insurrection in the highlands without having the organization to resist the army or the weapons to arm their very large groups of supporters. I remember repeatedly asking my friend Gabriela, a senior official of the Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes (FAR), why the guerrillas had been so wrongheaded. She always gave the same answer—she had no explanation. The decision had been made not by the FAR nor by ORPA but by the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP), by far the strongest guerrilla group. The other two groups were not consulted (my own research confirmed her account). According to Gabriela, only the EGP could provide the answer.

And they have not, at least not in any of their public writings or confidential documents that I have seen. Even Mario Payeras, who broke with the EGP after the 1982 debacle and was the most prolific writer among the Guatemalan guerrillas, never addressed this question. As one of the EGP's top leaders at the time, he bears great responsibility in this matter. This mystery and the gingerly discussion of the EGP in Stoll's *Between Two Armies* remind readers of the need for a serious study of the Guatemalan guerrillas.

Unlike Stoll, I believe that no chance existed for peaceful change in Guatemala in the 1970s and that armed struggle, the only possible path, was fully justified. While I concur with Perera and Stoll as to the scale of the army's atrocities, I disagree with their suggestion that these atrocities were counterproductive, that "the guerrillas' success in recruiting hundreds of thousands of Mayan peasants to their cause can be attributed in large part to the army's monstrous overreaction to the provocation" (Perera, p. 130). The selective terror of the late 1970s may not have been effective, but the wave of indiscriminate terror in the early 1980s certainly was. As one army officer reported, "The guerrillas have penetrated entire populations which now support them unconditionally."[3] Because the army

3. César Augusto Ruiz Morales, "¿Por qué solos?" *Revista Militar,* no. 4 (1981):89.

could not differentiate between the tame and the rebellious, a whirlwind of death swirled through the Indian highlands of Guatemala. The mountains and the valleys were littered with corpses of men, women, infants. Rape was a banal event, charred villages a fact of life. These atrocities were the work of the demented, but the demented had their logic: the army was responding to Mao Tse-tung's dictum, "The guerrillas must swim among the population as fish in the water." Only the massacre of entire communities, only wholesale slaughter would cow the rebellious Indians and dry up the river in which the fish swam.

How effective the terror was is shown in Ricardo Falla's *Massacres in the Jungle: Ixcán, Guatemala, 1975–1982,* which distinguishes lucidly between the stages of selective and indiscriminate government terror. This work searchingly examines the army's repression and the behavior of the population in the region of Ixcán Grande of northern Quiché from 1975 through 1982, particularly during the last two years. A Guatemalan Jesuit, Falla brings to his study an extraordinary degree of knowledge based on extraordinary experience. In late 1983 and early 1984, he spent several months in refugee camps in the Lacandón forest of southern Mexico. Then, with the permission of his Jesuit superiors, he lived several years with the "population in resistance" in the Ixcán (thousands of refugees who were hiding from the army). Falla uses his firsthand knowledge to x-ray the massacres—how they were carried out, how the butchers behaved, how the victims reacted. Based on his interviews with survivors over a long period of time, he provides unique, tantalizing glimpses of the army—not just of the obvious and horrible facts but in many cases the words and deeds of individual soldiers and officers. Above all, Falla tells readers about the victims: why some fled, why others stayed and waited and in most cases died.

The grisly pillars of the culture of fear have already been identified. For example, torture was used to educate those still free who might not be afraid of death, the tormented corpses left in view to remind such individuals that death could be long in coming. But what Falla reveals that is unique and chilling is a view from the inside. The victims (and on occasion the butchers) talk, and not in the imagination of a novelist or in hasty snatches of conversation with a visiting anthropologist but in the written account of someone who spent years living among them. Beatrice Manz observes in her epilogue to the book, "Nowhere has the repression been more overwhelming than in Guatemala. The best documentation of this shocking violence . . . has been produced by anthropologist and Jesuit Ricardo Falla. . . . Falla documents with painstaking detail and extraordinary humanity horrific human rights abuses" (p. 192). When reading of the unspeakable horrors that took place in 1981 and 1982, it is impossible not to reflect again on the cynical collusion of the Ronald Reagan administration. Eager to aid staunchly anti-communist Guatemala, the Reagan

administration sought with a doggedness worthy of a better cause to put a positive spin on reports of army massacres and terror from Guatemala. U.S. officials consistently underestimated the scope of the massacres and downplayed the responsibility of the Guatemalan Army for them. Thus in 1981, while the regime of President (and General) Romeo Lucas engaged in wholesale slaughter, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Stephen Bosworth blamed the guerrillas for the violence and discerned "positive developments" in security forces "taking care to protect innocent bystanders."[4] The U.S. State Department's report on human rights attributed most of the violence in Guatemala to "self-appointed vigilantes" and elements beyond the government's control.[5] Only after Lucas had been overthrown did the Reagan administration discover that his actions had been "abhorrent"[6] and that he had waged "a war against the populace."[7]

Having proved its objectivity by damning the disgraced Lucas, the administration rushed to praise Lucas's successor, General Efraín Ríos Montt. A born-again Christian, Ríos Montt spoke eloquently: "We have no scorched-earth policy. We have a policy of scorched Communists." This statement was chilling, given the Guatemalan Army's generous definition of who was "a communist."[8] But the administration stood by its man when President Reagan asserted that Ríos Montt had gotten a "bum rap" on human rights.[9] Some of the administration's statements are indeed minor classics of Orwellianism. "The killings have stopped. . . . The Guatemalan government has come out of the darkness and into the light," proclaimed U.S. Ambassador Frederick Chapin in April 1982.[10] "The number of killings are really down. There haven't been the massacres in the countryside like we had before," echoed the State Department Human Rights Officer the following May, as rural violence reached unprecedented levels.[11] "Since Ríos Montt came to power in March 1982, there

4. Testimony of Stephen Bosworth before the Subcommittees on Human Rights and International Organizations and on Inter-American Affairs, U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, 30 July 1981 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1981), 6.

5. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1981* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1982), 442.

6. Testimony of Stephen Bosworth before the Subcommittee on International Development Institutions and Finance, House Committee on Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs, 5 Aug. 1982 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1982), 5.

7. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights Elliott Abrams, as quoted in "Administration Defends Plans to Aid Guatemalan Military," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 10 Jan. 1983, p. 3.

8. "Guatemalan Vows to Aid Democracy," *The New York Times*, 6 Dec. 1982, p. A14.

9. "Reagan Denounces Threats to Peace in Latin America," *The New York Times*, 5 Dec. 1982, p. 1.

10. "Guatemala Now Deserves Aid, U.S. Ambassador Says," *Miami Herald*, 17 Apr. 1982, p. 22A.

11. According to Dell Shaffer, director of the Human Rights Office, U.S. State Department, in Ricardo Chavira, "Guatemalan Indians Said Slain," *San Diego Union*, 5 May 1982, p. A1.

has been a decrease in the level of killing," lied the State Department's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1982*.[12]

The guerrillas remain only a shadowy presence in *Massacres in the Jungle*. On one occasion, after describing in painful detail a trail of slaughter left by the army, Falla remarks: "The rebels have been absent in all these events. One could ask why they did not defend the population from the army massacres. The answer is straightforward: They did not have the necessary strength to contain the army. That is why one hardly hears of military actions during the army's route. In the absence of a military force, the rebels' main contribution in defending the people was to convince them of the need to hide from the army to avoid being massacred" (p. 127).

The four books reviewed thus far are all well written—from Perera's rich prose to Falla's stark simplicity, from Harbury's humanity to the elegance of Stoll's account. Robert Trudeau's *Guatemalan Politics: The Popular Struggle for Democracy* suffers by comparison.

Trudeau's style is workmanlike. He focuses on the important question of whether Guatemala has been moving toward democracy since the 1985 elections and the return of constitutional government. His research, like his style, is adequate but not compelling, and the power of his arguments suffers accordingly. For example, Trudeau's slim chapter on economic policy would have benefited from consulting reports of the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (these reports are confidential but not difficult to obtain). And Trudeau would have benefited from examining the Guatemalan press. He lists several Guatemalan newspapers in his bibliography (revealing some glaring oversights like the very important *Crónica*), but on the only three occasions in which he refers to articles in the Guatemalan press, his sources are not Guatemalan publications. This approach is all the more regrettable because although full freedom of the press existed in Guatemala only during the Arbenz presidency (1951–1954), the Guatemalan press has awakened during the last decade and now represents a rich source of information. The use of non-Guatemalan newspapers is a poor substitute. Guatemalan sources would have made Trudeau's book less tentative and dry.

Still, *Guatemalan Politics* is an adequate account that includes useful material on an important and poorly studied subject. In the two years since it was published, the book's conclusion that elections and the trappings of constitutional rule have not brought Guatemala closer to democracy in any significant way has been confirmed. Although the number of politically motivated killings is far lower than it was in the early 1980s, the comparison is meaningless. The slaughter of the early 1980s was for

12. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1982* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1983), 517.

Guatemala the exception—the response to the unprecedented guerrilla challenge chronicled by the other four authors. The current rate of murder compares with that of the mid-1970s, another period of relative peace. Violence in Guatemala surges and wanes. Following the slaughter of the early 1980s, the exhausted country has returned to more subdued levels of official violence, where murder and torture are once again employed discriminately as an antidote to social reform.

In March 1995, Jennifer Harbury began another hunger strike, this time in front of the White House to plead with the Bill Clinton administration to release information she was convinced they had about her husband. It seemed a quixotic undertaking because U.S. officials had steadfastly denied all knowledge of Everardo's fate. After twelve days, a member of the U.S. House Intelligence Committee revealed that the White House had known for some time that Everardo had been interrogated and tortured for several months before he was killed. The White House had also known that the Guatemalan colonel who had presided over his torture and murder was on the payroll of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

Perhaps someday life will change in Guatemala. Perhaps someday social reform will no longer be anathema, and democracy will no longer be a cruel joke. But history is no morality play, and happy endings are not inevitable.