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Breaking the Silence: The Story of the Ixil Maya of Union Victoria During the Guatemalan Civil War

Megan Marcucci (Class of 2017)

Sacred Heart University, meganmarcucci@yahoo.com

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Breaking the Silence

The Story of the Ixil Maya Of Union Victoria during the
Guatemalan Civil War

Megan Marcucci

Union Victoria



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Preface

“Together we can endure anything.” - Andres, Union Victoria¹

In the spring of 2016 and in the spring of 2017, I went to southern Guatemala on a mission trip under the auspices of Sacred Heart University. Never having studied Guatemala or its history, I had no idea what type of turmoil plagued this beautiful country. After traveling high up in the mountains of Guatemala and hearing the story of one indigenous Ixil Maya village, I knew that their story needed to be told.

Not many know their story, in fact when I bring up the “Guatemalan Civil War” people look at me funny. They say, “I didn’t even know there was a Civil War in Guatemala.” When I tell them a description of the violence that occurred there they agree that it is disturbing. However, that is not enough. No one could ever understand what the Maya went through during this war. No one could ever understand the families that were uprooted and destroyed because of the Guatemalan army. No one could ever understand how these indigenous communities were forced into the mountains for six years to seek shelter from the government of Guatemala. And no one could ever understand how a group of people so victimized could rebuild their lives after experiencing such turmoil. No one could ever understand, unless someone attempts to tell their story told, and that is what I intend to do here.

The group I was traveling with had the opportunity to travel to a small indigenous Maya village high up in the mountains of southern Guatemala. I never could have imagined that their story would have such an impact on me. It is not an easy story to hear, in fact for months after hearing their story it sat terribly in my stomach. I just could not understand how a government,

¹ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

with the aid of the United States could commit such horrific acts against its own people. I've studied civil wars before but the violence of this civil war was unlike anything I've ever heard of.

Trying to grapple with the number of civilians who were murdered or "disappeared" at the hands of the Guatemalan government was no easy task. I began looking for some kind of hope that existed within the story of the Ixil Maya people. We learned about the Ixil Maya from Chajul who fled to the mountains and made a life for themselves in the forest for six years. Constantly on the go, they managed to create communities up in the mountains. The Ixil Maya were not the only ones who fled to the mountains, the other Maya who did this are *ch'iqimultecos*, *quiches*, and *aquatecos*, but for this thesis these Ixil Maya are my main focus. They fled from the Guatemalan army and its massacres, tortures, pillage, and disappearances. They saw their family members killed, their crops and houses burned, cadavers eaten by dogs, and their villages entirely destroyed by bombs from the governments helicopters. They lived in the mountains, and created a life for themselves against all odds. They called themselves the Communities of the Population in Resistance (CPR) and in themselves they carried will to survive. With their whole lives taken from them, somehow they managed to rise above "*la violencia*" and continue the fight for their survival.

Take a moment and consider what it means to create a community? By definition, a community is a group of people who live together in the same place and have particular characteristics in common. In order to have a successful community they need to have the following entities: leadership, education, religion, traditions, people, housing, food, laws and recreational activities. All of these were taken away from the Ixil Maya when the Guatemalan government tried to destroy their community and their culture. Their community was strong

however, and because of this they were able to fight and continue surviving within their community.

The Ixil Maya are the main focus of this story, for they graciously shared their story with a group of students who before being educated about the Guatemalan Civil War had no clue such a horrific war occurred in the beautiful lands of Guatemala. The men and women shared their history and gave a detailed timeline of what occurred to their community before, during, and after the war. They provided dates and specific experiences that no history book could tell you, and that I am extremely grateful for.

The story you are about to experience is filled with devastation and despair. It also shows however, how a group of people who were victimized could rise above the terror and fight for their right to exist. This is not an easy story to hear and at times it is hard to imagine that a government could commit such atrocious acts such as the ones they committed. But, it is important to remember that even after all the pain and suffering the Ixil Maya experienced, they are still smiling, they are still laughing, and they are surviving. The Ixil Maya at Union Victoria are extraordinary and brave people. They defended their life and their culture for thirty-six years and today they are still fighting for their right to exist. They are even more determined to tell the world their story and hopefully one day, receive the justice they deserve.

The History of Guatemala

“The important thing is the sense of community. It’s something we all share.”- Rigoberta Menchu

Mayan Culture/ Traditions

The Mayas indigenous communities of Guatemala have a long history of outsiders invading their land and trying to destroy their culture. From defending their society from the invaders from Mexico in the pre-hispanic period to fighting off the Spanish in the 1500s and then fighting for the survival of their cultural again against the Guatemalan government in the 1960s, they certainly have not had an easy existence. However, despite all odds they have been able to manage to get through these times and continue to live in Guatemala, their original homeland.

Five hundred years before the arrival of the Spaniards, the Mayas populated the lands of what is properly known as “Guatemala”. They were the first inhabitants of this area, often coined as the “Indians” of the area when the Spanish came. Before any foreign invader, the Maya had their own way of life. Their agriculture was the foundation of civilization; they planted maize, beans, squash, chili peppers, cotton and fruit.² They had their own traditional clothing such as the red “*terra*” skirt seen in the picture on the right.³ They also had traditional



² Michael D. Coe. *The Maya: Ancient Peoples and Places*, (New York, Fredrick A. Praeger, 1966), 115

³ Picture taken on 3/4/16 at Union Victoria

ceremonies, including baptism ceremonies and marriage ceremonies. In addition, they even established a class society and had a strong political structure.⁴ By the time any foreigner discovered the land, the Maya had already established a reputable society. Before the Spanish came to Guatemala in the 1500s, the Mexicans invaded the land of the Maya. By that time however, the Maya population had experienced a series decreases.

Beginning in the 10th century the Classic Maya civilization had already been extinguished in the Central Area. A lot of great centers were deserted and abandoned by the time the Mexicans arrived. In general, there was an overall disappearance of the Maya people throughout the Central Area.⁵ According to historian Michael D. Coe, historians have debated what exactly caused the downfall of the Maya culture before any explorer even came to Guatemala. This is something that historians will never truly know but they have made speculations. Some reasons why the Maya disappeared and abandoned the Central Area were because of an agricultural collapse, possible epidemic diseases such as yellow fever, earthquakes, an unbalanced sex ratio, a possible social revolution, and of course invasion by foreigners.⁶ Some theories claim that the collapse of the Maya civilization was from an accumulation of all these things while others say it was one or the other that caused the downfall of the Maya population. Nevertheless, none of these theories can be proven.

By the time the Spaniards came, the Maya had been forced to completely abandon the great temples they built at *Tikal*, *Palenque*, and *Yaxchilan*. Only fragments of their achievements in mathematics, philosophy, astronomy, and calendric science survived at the time of the first

⁴ Coe, 115.

⁵ Coe, 115.

⁶ Coe, 115.

contact with the European invaders.⁷ The Ixil Maya are composed of five communities located in Northwestern Guatemala, *Santa Maria Nebaj*, *San Gasper Chajul* (present day *Union Victoria*), *Sacapulas*, *San Juan Cotzal*, and *Aguacatan*, all these communities experienced the massacres, rapes, tortures and disappearances by the government. The Ixil Triangle, Chajul, Nebaj, and Cotzal, were most severely affected by the internal armed conflict, particularly in the early 1980s under Rios Montt's regime. The Mayan communities today are descendants from the warring kingdoms of the post- classic Maya. They are a society composed of brave fighters, who are dedicated to preserving their right to exist in Guatemala.

European Discovery

The European discovery of Guatemala began similarly to many of the other Latin American countries of its time. European expansion guided by the desire for potential colonies propelled Christopher Columbus to land in what is known as present day Guatemala. Columbus, on his fourth and final voyage in search of the East Indies, reached Guanaja, the easternmost of the Bay Islands in the Gulf of Honduras, at the end of July 1502. During his time there he was forced to abandon Panama and the surrounding area because of Indian attacks. These Indians were the Maya. More than a decade would pass before effective colonization would follow. Columbus however had contributed geographical data to the new explores that would be extremely useful in further land expeditions.

Captain Pedro de Alvarado was commissioned by his commander Hernan Cortes to explore the territories making up present day Guatemala. In 1523 Pedro de Alvarado was officially sent with a force of Spaniards to Guatemala. Hernan Cortes told Alvarado to "endeavor with the greatest care to bring the people to peace without war and to preach matters concerning

⁷ Victor Perera, *Unfinished Conquest: The Guatemalan Tragedy*, (California: University of California Press, 1993), 1.

our holy faith.”⁸. Captain Alvarado was met with a lot of Indian resistance, specifically from an army of *Quiches*. The Maya warriors fought extremely hard against Alvarado but unfortunately failed. After Alvarado killed the *Quiche* king, the battle quickly turned in favor towards of Spanish. Alvarado ordered the capture of *Quiche* king and nobles, strung them up on high posts, and burned them alive, ignoring their pleas for mercy.⁹ Throughout the following years, Alvarado continued his massacres while the Maya engaged in an early form of guerrilla warfare against the Spaniards. Shortly after Alvarado’s death he was accused of killing five million Indians but recent historians have determined that no more than two million Maya inhabited Guatemala at that time. As many as 750,000 may have died from plague, violence and other conquest-related causes in the first decades after the Spaniards arrived. Another million Maya had died of European diseases by the middle of the seventeenth century.¹⁰ In general, the Spaniards had great technological advantage over the indigenous people and by 1540 they ended up ruling the whole area and killing many of its indigenous people.



The principle activity of those who sailed the Central American coast during the first decade of the sixteenth century was the capture of hundreds, perhaps thousands of Indians. They were forced to become slaves and work the mines of Hispaniola to replace the native force that

⁸ Perera, 2.

⁹ Perera, 4.

¹⁰ Perera, 5.

was rapidly dying.¹¹ In 1541, the Spanish capital was moved to what is now Antigua, Guatemala.. The strategies adopted during the 1500s would serve as inspiration for the Guatemalan military in the 1980s to pacify insurgent highland Maya communities in the Ixil Triangle. The picture above depicts the Ixil Triangle, the three major villages being *Nebaj*, *Chajul*, and *San Juan Cotzal*.¹²

Guatemala's history began violently and the violence would last all the way to present day. The Spaniards, after years of conflict with the natives, would become the ruling class in Guatemala and would attempt to assimilate the Maya into their culture. During this time, the indigenous people were converted to Christianity, although they still managed to keep many of their old beliefs alive. Guatemala became independent from Spain in 1821. It was annexed by Mexico for a short time but in 1823 Guatemala became part of the United Provinces of Central American with Nicaragua, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Honduras; this group would not last long however and would completely break up in 1840. Liberal regimes would take power in Guatemala during the 1830s and into the 1870s. Eventually leaving the country with a dictator, Rufino Barrios, as "president." The rest of Guatemala's history is consumed with many different presidents and eventually a thirty-six yearlong civil war that consumed the country and still plagues the country today.

Over the following centuries the society of Guatemala would become very divided, with the Maya indigenous people being at the bottom of the totem pole. At nine point five million, Guatemala is the most populous of the six Central American republics, the richest in natural resources, and it attracts the most investment dollars from the United States and large

¹¹ Ralph Lee Woodward, *Central America, a Nation Divided*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 26.

¹² Becky, *Have you heard of the Ixil Triangle?* (Sight Doing with The Girl and Globe, 2014) Accessed April 20, 2017, <http://thegirlandglobe.com/heard-ixil-triangle/>.

multinational corporations in Europe and the Far East. Yet, the Maya majority of nearly five million have the lowest per capita income in the region. A study published in 1991 by the National Institute of Statistics revealed that ninety percent of the highland residents live in conditions of extreme poverty.¹³ Guatemala is the Central American country closest to the United States border, and yet it is by far the most neglected by them. After the overthrow of democratically elected Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, a curtain of silence descended over Guatemala. It is time for that silence to be broken and time for people to understand what happened in Guatemala for those awful thirty-six years.

¹³ Perera, 11.

Background of the Civil War

“When you are convinced your cause is just, you fight for it.” - Rigoberta Menchu

In 1839 Guatemala became a fully independent nation. The following eighty-seven years the country would experiment with different types of dictators, from conservative dictators to liberal ones. The Liberals took control of Guatemala in 1871, and dominated the nation, with minor exceptions, until the mid-1940s. They created major reforms under dictator-president Justo Rufino Barrios (1873-1885). As a liberal president he pushed hard to modernize the country by building roads, railways, a national army, and a more competent national bureaucracy, by promoting new crops, coffee, and by encouraging foreign investment.¹⁴

In the late nineteenth century, the construction of a rail link to the Atlantic coast gave rise to the banana industry. Soon after the turn of the century, the United States based United Fruit Company (UFCO), had squeezed out Guatemalan banana growers and eventually came to own many key public utilities and vast tracts of land. In 1929, when the world economy collapsed, Guatemala was not spared from the economic crisis, as they had gotten heavily involved in foreign investment under Barrios regime. As a result of this economic crisis, just like in many other places around the world, Communism became of interest. In 1931, president Ubico however suppressed the labor movements that had come about and the Communists. Ubico continued to promote the development of the government and economic infrastructures, which included: banks, railroads, highways, telephones, and other electrical utilities.

¹⁴ John A. Booth, and Thomas W. Walker, *Understanding Central America*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 45.

In 1950, Guatemalans elected Jacobo Arbenz Guzman who sought to deepen the revolution's social reforms despite growing conservatives and the United States opposition. He legalized the Communism party, called the Guatemalan Labor Party in 1951. Under this party, Arbenz authorized the 1952 Agrarian Reform Law, which began the confiscation and redistribution of farmland to over 100,000 peasants. Over 500 peasant unions and 300 peasant leagues formed under the Arbenz government.¹⁵

Due to Arbenz's reforms, peasants and workers were able to organize which shifted the economic power toward the workers and peasants and away from the employers. When Arbenz nationalized land belonging to the United Fruit Company and offered compensation to the company at its previously declared tax value, interest parties, including the United States became increasingly concerned with the direction he was going. The nationalization, the presence of a few Communists in the government, and an attempt by Arbenz to purchase light arms from Czechoslovakia caused the United States to label the Arbenz government as Communist. With the CIA backing, the National Liberation Army, led by Col. Carlos Castillo Armas, invaded Guatemala and forced Arbenz to resign. Colonel Castillo Armas assumed the presidency.¹⁶

During his presidency, Armas would dismantle the labor and peasant movements, kill and jail thousands in the process, repress political parties, revoke the Agrarian Reform Law and return confiscated lands to their former owners. Armas was assassinated in 1957 however, leaving the country in mass hysteria. Years to follow, Guatemala would be involved in guerilla warfare and counterrevolutions. After a decade of reform/revolution and another of counterrevolution, Guatemalan society had become sharply polarized between reformists, conservative segments and counterrevolutions. Numerous organizations, including a lot of

¹⁵ Booth, 46.

¹⁶ Booth, 47.

Indian-based guerilla groups, were created during this inter-period such as the Guerilla Arms of the Poor (EGP) and the Organization of the People in Arms (OPRA). All of these groups grew rapidly and began overt military activity. As a result of all these supposedly communist groups, the United States continued to financially support the Guatemalan government to prevent the rise of these organizations. From 1979 to 1981, Guatemala received over sixty million dollars in financial aid to suppress the rising militant groups.¹⁷

When Efraín Ríos Montt came to power, Guatemala was overwhelmed with counterinsurgent groups fighting against the Guatemalan government. Montt promised a return to civilian rule, but he proposed reforms to the electoral system that actually strengthened army control of the elections and weakened the civilian rule. Under Montt, the army of Guatemala escalated its rural counterinsurgency activities, creating massive levels of violence and social dislocation of the Maya communities and cultural groups.

The Guatemalan civil war would escalate during Montt's presidency and would become some of the worst human right violations ever seen before. The Maya increased their protests against the repressive government, and inclusion of the Mayan language and culture. In 1980, during Montt's presidency the Guatemalan army instituted "*Operation Sophia*", which aimed at ending insurgent guerilla warfare by destroying the civilian base in which they hid. Over the next three years, the army destroyed 626 villages, killed or "disappeared" more than 200,000 people and displaced an additional 1.5 million, while more than 150,000 were driven to seek refuge in Mexico.¹⁸ In addition, the government instituted a scorched earth policy in the villages of the Ixil Maya. When the army came to a village they would destroy and burn buildings and crops,

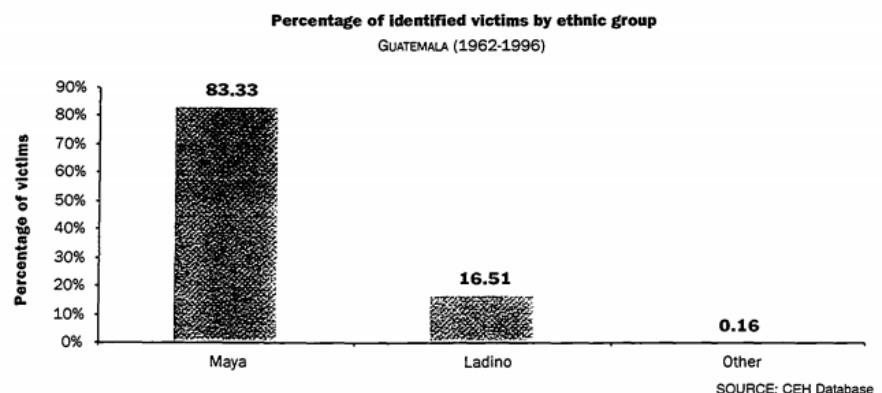
¹⁷ Booth, 49.

¹⁸ Booth, 49.

slaughter livestock, contaminate water supplies and violate the Maya sacred places and cultural symbols. The main objective of the Guatemalan government was to prevent the existence of the culture. They did what they could to make sure that the Maya could not survive in these conditions and could not reproduce.¹⁹ Through all of this the United States government continued to support the repressive regimes as a part of its anti-Communist policy during the Cold War. After a 36 yearlong war, the Guatemalan armed conflict ended in 1996 when the government signed The Peace Accords with the Maya.²⁰ In the accord, it released its report, “*Guatemala: Memory of Silence*”, in which it stated that a governmental policy of genocide was carried out against the Mayan Indians.²¹

Thesis

The following pages will focus in-depth on the Ixil Maya and the way they resisted the mass genocide that was directed on the



population of Ixil Maya. The following pages are not a comprehensive analysis of the history of the Guatemalan Civil War that devastated the Ixil Maya population. The story will focus specifically on the Ixil Maya of Union Victoria, Guatemala and how they survived in the mountains. In addition to hearing the graphic stories from men and women at Union Victoria, readers will also hear some other primary accounts, one being Rigoberta Menchu the 1992 Noble

¹⁹ Booth, 49.

²⁰ Booth, 50.

²¹ Daniel Wilkinson, *Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal, and Forgetting in Guatemala*, (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 2016.

Peace Prize Winner. The stories in addition to the ones from Union Victoria are to prove the depth of loss that the Ixil Maya endured. As seen in the chart above, the Maya experienced the brunt of the killings.²² Their stories are not easy to hear but one can hope by understanding what they went through, the Ixil Maya could regain their cultural and prove that they have the right to exist.

For so long, the government silenced the Ixil Maya and told the world that they were guerrillas or some type of insurgents who were supporters of Communism. Similar to the stance that many historians take on the government's involvement during the war, the Ixil Maya were innocent. Although some of them did go off and join the insurgent movement the majority of them, Ixil Maya of Union Victoria included, wanted to respect their culture. The Maya view everything as sacred, and killing people is not apart of their culture. As a result, they sought shelter in the mountains, relying on nature to protect them from the ruthless government. All accounts of the war blame the government for the violence and murder of thousands of Maya. Through the victim's stories about what happened to them during the war, it became clear that this accusation is correct. The Guatemalan government intentionally planned the massacre and forced disappearance of Maya throughout Guatemala to terminate the existence of the Maya and their culture throughout the country.

²² Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH). *Guatemalan Memory of Silence, Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification, Conclusions, and Recommendations*, February 1999.

Timeline: Guatemala's Thirty-Six year long Civil War²³

1944- 1953: Early Democratic Reform

Pro-American dictator, Jorge Ubico, was overthrown by a civilian revolt in 1944. While Ubico was in power, the United Fruit Company became the most powerful business in Guatemala. When Arevalo entered office the United States claimed he was making steps toward Communism and President Arbenz took those steps even further. Arbenz, Arevalo's Democratic successor legalized unions and introduced the agrarian law reform which benefited more than 100,000 poor rural families by 1952. The new law largely affected the United Fruit Company when Arbenz stated that he was expropriating 234,000 acres of land that the UFCO was not cultivating. United Fruit had strong political and economic ties to the United States government. As a result the Eisenhower Administration approved, "PBFortune", a CIA coup that overthrew Arbenz and put Guatemalan exile Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas in power.

1954- 1965: U.S.-Backed Coup, Civil War officially begins

In 1954 when Armas became president he immediately removed voting rights for illiterate Guatemalans (more than 50 percent of the population is illiterate) and cancelled the Agrarian Reform Law, forcing peasants to give up their newly acquired land. Creating a large division between rich and poor in the country once again, Armas set the stage for the brutal civil war that officially began in 1960. The Guatemalan Government fought against leftist insurgents, and many Mayan Indigenous communities, who began voicing their desire for economic and

²³ PBS. "Timeline: Guatemala's History of Violence." *Frontline World Stories from a Small Planet*, PBS. 2011.

social justice. These government-backed militaries acted as death squads, going into Maya communities and massacring the people because they supposedly were supporting the guerillas. The government is responsible for the “disappearances” of a lot of the Maya population for the next three decades.

1966- 1969: Human Rights violated

Castillo Armas was gunned down by one of his own presidential guards and General Miguel Y’digoras Fuentes moved into the presidency. Fuentes political failure combined with the falling coffee prices caused mass unrest among students and peasants. In 1966, Julio Cesar Mendez Montenegro was elected into office because he promised to revitalize the economy and work to get social justice for all Guatemalans.²⁴ However, Montenegro consented with the military that he would interfere with the war between the army and the left-wing guerillas. State sponsored death squads continued throughout the country, creating mass fear amongst the civilians, especially the Maya communities.

1970- 1983: Mass Exodus

In the presidential election of 1970, Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio was elected into office. Arana promised no new taxes and then launched a counterterrorist campaign in the mountainside giving the military total control to squash the violent rebellions. In 1978, General Fernando Romero Lucas Garcia became president. Garcia launched a campaign against any potential opposition, including students, political leaders, and of course labor unions, which comprised of many Maya. At least 50,000 people died in the violence and 200,000 Guatemalans fled to

²⁴ Walter Lafeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993), 169.

Mexico. Also worth noting is that thousands of people were displaced because of the repression, the Maya who fled to the mountains were the majority of people who were displaced.²⁵

1982- 1993: Efraín Ríos Montt Seizes Power

General Efraín Ríos Montt seized power in March of 1982 and began a campaign directed toward the indigenous populations in particular. The 80s in Guatemala is primarily what this thesis will discuss. Including but not limited to the violence Maya indigenous communities experienced through the governments attempt to essentially exterminate the Maya culture and population. After Montt's dictatorship, which ended in yet another coup, Vicio Cerezo won the election because many Guatemalans thought he could bring justice to the country. Instead, Cerezo did the opposite and the violence continued. Following Cerezo was Jorge Serrano Elías in 1991 but he too did not end the violence that plagued the country.

1994- 1999: Peace Negotiations, Civil War Ends

In 1994 peace talks between the government and guerilla insurgents began and in 1996 the 36-year civil war ended. In 1999, the United Nations backed the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) and released a report that stated Guatemalan security forces were behind 93 percent of all human rights violations. The government was responsible for over 200,000 lives, in which 83 percent were Maya from the Quiché area.²⁶ The government would only fulfill a few of the components in the Peace Accords.

2000- 2012: Reconciliations Begin, Ríos Montt trial

²⁵ PBS timeline

²⁶ PBS timeline

Many people still have not located the remains of their loved ones who “disappeared” at the hands of the government. Rios Montt was taken to trial, the first time a former head of state had gone on trial for genocide in a national court. Montt was charged with genocide and sentenced to 80 years in prison. However, the trial was not as effective as the Maya had intended and to this day the Maya are still struggling as a result of the civil war.

Union Victoria – The Beginning of the Conflict

“Invoke the strength of all the communities who dared, and continued to dare to stand in defiance.” - La Violencia²⁷

Union Victoria is the resettled community of Chajul and is located all the way up in the southern highlands of Guatemala. The Ixil Maya who inhabit the land were forced here by the government to re-establish their life.²⁸ Union Victoria is three hours away from any major city and about one hour away from the nearest town. The Ixil Maya at Union Victoria explained, “we are grateful that they government gave us land but it is too windy up here so we can only grow coffee and we have to travel so far to trade, so life is rather difficult.”²⁹

After the civil war, the government placed the Ixil Maya on a piece of land that is far away from any other form of civilization. They are settled way up in the mountains, where the wind is so strong the only thing they are able to grow is coffee. Before the war occurred this group of Ixil Maya lived very modestly in Chajul, which was their original Ixil homeland located in the northwestern highlands of Guatemala. Here they were able to grow most of the food they needed right on the land instead of traveling in search of food. Receiving the short end of the stick is nothing new to the Ixil Maya. This concept has been something they have been dealing

²⁷ Til Frohlich, *La Violencia: The untold truths of Guatemala* (A Bold Puppy Production, 2015)

²⁸ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

²⁹ Interview, Union Victoria, 1/7/2016

with since the Spaniards came to Guatemala in the 1500s. For the most part, what the modern Maya knew about the Spaniards was through their ancestors. They were told that the Spaniards dishonored their ancestors' finest sons, and the most humble of them.³⁰ During the Agrarian Land Reform under Arbenz, the Maya were given land that they had previously worked on as peasants. When Arbenz was overthrown however, the Maya once again were being exploited for their labor. For the Ixil Maya this is when the fight for them really started.

The beginning of the conflict started for the Ixil Maya prior to the 1970s when farm owners were exploiting the peasants for their labor. The owners of the land were using them essentially as slave labor and experienced very harsh and fatal conditions.³¹ The majority of landowners mistreated them physically, mentally and of course financially. As a result of this mistreatment, the Ixil Maya began striking and protesting against what the landowners were paying them. "We demanded higher wages so that they would be able to provide food for our families."³² Of course the owners refused to pay them anymore than they already received. As the strikes got more unruly, landowners came together with the government to put the rebellions down using the military.

This was the beginning of the killings for the Ixil Maya, the military would come into the community, take the strike leaders and kill them so that they could no longer influence their people. This action by the military began in the late for the Ixil Maya 70s and only intensified as the years went on reaching its peak while Rios Montt was in power.³³ Along with the people leading the strikes, the government also took Maya priests away; at this time they were

³⁰ Rigoberta Menchu and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Women in Guatemala* (London: Verso, 1984), 15

³¹ Interview, Union Victoria, 1/7/2016

³² Interview, Union Victoria, 1/7/2016

³³ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

practicing a mixture of indigenous ceremonies and Catholic ceremonies.³⁴ According to Rigoberta Menchu, the Catholic religion had come to the regions of the Maya and the majority of Maya had accepted Catholicism. Menchu stated, “By accepting the Catholic religion, we didn’t accept a condition, or abandon our culture. It was more like another way of expressing ourselves.”³⁵ With the merging of the two religions, Maya priests practiced both Indian religion and Catholicism. They were powerful influences in fighting for higher pay and better treatment, so they too were removed by the military. A large number of catechists (missionaries, priests, and activists) became victims of the violence as well and gave their lives as a testimony to the cruel acts of the army against the Mayas.³⁶ To make sure that the strikes no longer continued, soldiers would constantly come to each community and check up on the people to make sure that no person or group was protesting.

The government believed that if a person was striking or protesting for better pay then that meant they were associating with the guerrillas or in fact were guerrillas themselves. Therefore, the government gave every person an ID card that they were to carry with them at all times. If a person was caught without an ID card then it was assumed they were guerilla and were to be killed right there.³⁷ Andrez Lopez of the Union Victoria Community stated, “sometimes my friends or family members would go to the market to buy items for the community and just never come back. I assumed that the military followed them and killed them before they even had time to return to our community.”³⁸ This tragedy marked the beginning of the era of “forced disappearances” that occurred during the civil war. Family members and

³⁴ Menchu, 94

³⁵ Menchu, 94

³⁶ Commission for Historical Clarification, 20

³⁷ Interview, Union Victoria, 1/7/16

³⁸ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

friends tried to remain hopeful that the people who disappeared would return but the assumption was that they had been killed and would never return. For family members who had relatives that disappeared, they were never able to say goodbye because their bodies were never found. Presumably, the people who disappeared were thrown into unmarked massive ditches with numerous other victims never to be identified.

For the Ixil Maya of Union Victoria, this was the beginning of their tragic story. At this time, the government was still really selective and targeted specific people they saw as a threat to their power. These practices by the military remained in effect until the end of the 70s. The real tragedy started to develop out of the 70s and escalated greatly in the 80s. Even as tensions escalated and the military was constantly present in their lives, the community was still able to come together and figure out what they were going to do if conditions got worse. And they would get worse.

Community is a really important concept for the Maya. All decisions that are made are usually made by the community and for the community. From birth to death, a Maya focuses on doing what is expected of him or her for their community. All ceremonies are community affairs and jobs are divided amongst the community so that everyone benefits.³⁹ For example, when one person goes into the market to sell or buy goods, the night before that person assigned will go around and see what other families in the community need. If the person needs a mule to go into town then the community generously donates one and whatever else they may need the community provides them because they are going to the market for the good of the community.⁴⁰ One of the most important cultural concepts to the Maya is their sense of community, and that is something that they forbid the government from taking away no matter how hard the government

³⁹ Menchu, 16.

⁴⁰ Menchu, 16.

tried. Due to the strong ties of the community, the Maya were able to bind together and attempt to resist the violence even when their entire village was destroyed. This practice is very evident through the stories at Union Victoria.

Alfonso, the president of the Community Council at Union Victoria stated, “If it was not for the community effort we, the Ixil Maya, would not have been able to survive the governments attempted genocide. And although many people lost family members, we could always count on the community to protect us and be there when we needed them.”⁴¹

Union Victoria- Into the Mountains

“There shall be wars, and rumors of war... see that you are not alarmed. Such things are bound to happen; but the end is still to come. For nation will make war upon nation, kingdom upon kingdom...” - Silence on the Mountain⁴²

By the 1980s, the number of Ixil Maya being captured and killed had escalated greatly. At this point in the war, selective killing was no longer the militaries campaign rather the military was grabbing people off the streets near the Maya villages and killing them. The men at Union Victoria stated, “The Guatemalan Army became more present in our village. They were everywhere, controlling our people in the villages and doing what they wanted.”⁴³ Andres Lopez specified, “They would station themselves in our village and would go around asking to see people’s ID cards and if they did not have them then they were killed.”⁴⁴ As time went on and their control through violence continued, Lopez stated, “that the soldiers started grabbing people and torturing them claiming that they were supporting the guerillas. After torturing our people, the soldiers would leave their bodies in public so everyone could see what would happened if

⁴¹ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

⁴² Daniel Wilkinson, *Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal, and Forgetting in Guatemala* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 64

⁴³ Interview, Union Victoria, 1/7/16

⁴⁴ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

you associated with the guerillas.”⁴⁵ The soldiers acted on speculation and in fact the majority of these people did not even associate with the guerrillas and if they did then they were forced too.

It is crucial to understand the difference between the guerrillas during the armed conflict and the indigenous Maya. The Maya were blamed to be apart of the guerrillas by the government but this was not the case. In fact, often times the guerrillas violently forced the Maya communities to help or join their efforts. Guerrillas were men and women who were angered by the overthrow of President Arbenz and the end of the Agrarian Land reform. They favored Arbenz and the Agrarian Land reform because it helped the peasants and attempted to eliminate the wealth gap between rich and poor. When Arbenz was overthrown, all of his reforms including the Agrarian Land reform were retracted and everything was taken away from the peasants. The people were frustrated with the way workers were being treated and angered that their political voice was never heard. Faced with injustice, poverty, discrimination, and exclusion the guerillas proclaimed they needed to take power by force in order to create a new social, political and economic order.⁴⁶ As a result, they started to protest the government and as the protests continued the violence between the guerrillas and the government escalated. Yes, some Maya did choose to leave their communities and fight with the guerrillas but this was not a common desire for them. For Union Victoria, they chose to flee to the mountains, holding on to their cultural beliefs that killing is wrong. They recognized that they were not safe in their own land due to the violence from the government and knew that hiding in the mountains was their only option.

The guerrillas were a very ideological group who felt the only way to get rights was to overthrow the government through the means of war. They identified as socialists and adopted

⁴⁵ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

⁴⁶ Commission for Historical Clarification, 20

the Marxist doctrine. They wanted Arbenz or someone with similar ideologies as him back in power to benefit the poor Guatemalan citizens. According to the Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification, Conclusions and Recommendations, the Communist Cubans provided the insurgents with political, logical, instructional and training support. As a result, the insurgents adopted the Cuban prospective of armed struggle as the only way to ensure the rights of the people in Guatemala.⁴⁷ Due to the presence of communism in the country, the United States but especially the Guatemalan army, believed their fighting was justified because they were fighting the communists. Rigoberta Menchu explained however that the Guatemalan army for the most part had no clue what communism actually was and who the communists actually were. When Menchu asked a captured soldier what a communists looked like he replied “Well, they tell us they’re in the mountains, that they don’t look like people, and things like that.”⁴⁸ It is very disturbing but true that the majority of the army was essentially forced into fighting these “communists” when in reality they had no clue who the communists actually were. Seeing as half of the Guatemalan population is illiterate the majority of people just followed the commands of the government and did not think twice about what they were told.

With the guerillas in the mountainside, the Guatemalan army became more active in the Maya communities who around this time began venturing to the mountains for safety. During the 80s, the Ixil Maya did not feel safe in their communities anymore, especially in the evenings. Andres Lopez explained that “the army often came between the hours of 11am to 2 am and whomever they found they would torture and kill. Therefore, the Maya of Union Victoria began spending their nights in the mountains and then coming down during the day to do our work in

⁴⁷ Commission for Historical Clarification, 20

⁴⁸ Menchu, 175

the village.”⁴⁹ It was also during this time that the army would come in and destroy everything and anything they saw. The army started burning down their homes, burning all their crops so they had no source of food, slaughtering all their animals, including the innocent dogs. In the Ixil region, between seventy percent and ninety percent of the villages were razed by the army.⁵⁰ Menchu explained how she felt one of the first times the army came to her village, “They killed our animals. They killed many of our dogs. To us, killing an animal is like killing a person. We care for all things of the natural world very much and killing our dogs wounded us very much.”⁵¹ The people at Union Victoria experienced similar devastation by the government’s scorched earth policy. By scorching their villages, the army left the Maya with absolutely nothing to return too. From their actions it appears that the armed forces wanted to destroy everything the Maya needed to survive so that they would eventually cease to exist.

The massacres that occurred during this time are unlike anything any humane person has heard of. It seems nearly impossible that such horrific acts could be committed against an entire culture, but then you hear the tremble in the voices of these Ixil men at Union Victoria as they tell their story and you know it was their horrific reality. Many times the Maya could hear the army coming, whether by helicopter or on foot, and they would run and hide in the mountains until they were gone. Not everyone could make it to the mountains in time unfortunately. For the people who the army could capture, they would line them up and kill them instantly. One very graphic story that Andres Lopez shared was when he found a friend of his dead in the field and hanging from a post. Of course he knew that the army had done this but there was nothing he could do, so he took his friend and gave him a proper burial. Many victims never received a

⁴⁹ Interview, Union Victoria, 1/7/17

⁵⁰ Commission for Historical Clarification, 40

⁵¹ Menchu, 126

proper burial because of the massive massacres that occurred in the communities. Often the army would just dump the bodies in mass graves without any identification.

After the civil war ended in 1996, people would work to identify the unmarked bodies so family members could give them a traditional burial. As apart of Maya culture, they dedicated a lot of time and worship to death ceremonies. If someone is said to be on their deathbed then a family member stays with them the entire time before they pass away. It is during that time when the dying man or woman tells their family members all the Maya secrets. These secrets are passed from generation to generation and are very sacred to the Maya.⁵² However, this tradition was halted because of the civil war. With so many people being killed by the army, there was no way to prepare and share the secrets of their culture because they never knew when and if they were going to die. Whether or not the army realized this, this was just one example of how the army participated in destroying the Maya culture.

Throughout the 80s the massacres continued. Maya villages were being destroyed and families being torn apart. The soldiers were not only murdering the people but they were torturing them and committing human right violations. When a group of soldiers went into a village they would burn all crops and kill all animals as part of their scorched earth campaign. This of course was violating Maya culture because they did not believe in killing anything that belonged to nature. The soldiers would then proceed to raid houses and rape the women and children. The violent acts committed on the bodies of women are not easy to hear but it is a very important part of this story and one that everyone should know.

⁵² Menchu, 236.

Violence on the Bodies of Women and Children

*“The Guatemalan Civil War was a war fought between men on the bodies of women.” – La Violencia*⁵³

Violence directed toward women had been occurring in Guatemalan since the beginning of the war and throughout the 80s the violence escalated. The CEH’s investigation revealed that approximately a quarter of the direct victims of human rights violations and acts of violence were women.⁵⁴ When the army came into a village they would essentially do whatever they wanted to the people. As a result, women were being raped by not just one man but by many men. The army would rape any women they wanted, it did not matter the age. Young girls were being raped as well as old women. Often times the women were killed after being raped and tortured but sometimes they survived, never to be the same after experiencing something like that.

⁵³ La Violencia

⁵⁴ Commission for Historical Clarification, 23.

Rigoberta Menchu explained that so many of her young friends had been raped by the army and became pregnant as a result. Of course, these women did not want to keep their babies because they would have fathers who were in the army and were determined to end the existence of the Maya culture. How could these women be expected to raise a child in world that suppressed the Maya culture? However, it was against their culture to not give birth to their child. As a result, many babies were born during the war to Maya mothers and soldier fathers.

Not only were women victims of rape but they were also victims of brutal deaths. One extremely graphic story describes a woman who was raped and then cut up into pieces by the army. “She lay there in pieces. He took the baby off her back, put her on one side and hacked her into twenty-five pieces. Her hands, her head, every bit of her, all cut off.”⁵⁵ Her body was left in the middle of the village for family and community members to see what the army did to her. Often the army would leave the people they massacred in the public eye so that the others could see what would happened to them if they too supported the guerrillas.

With the armies’ main focus being on preventing the existence of Maya culture, they did more than just rape and kill the women. If the army came across a pregnant woman, many accounts stated that the soldiers would cut the fetus out of the mother’s womb and then kill the mother and fetus. The reason for doing this was because the army did not want the Maya to continue reproducing. They wanted to prevent the existence of their culture, and this was just one of the ways they attempted to eliminate the Maya. The rape of women, and killing of innocent babies became a habitual practice of the army. This was a systematic practice, aimed at destroying the most intimate aspects of the Mayan identify.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Menchu, 178

⁵⁶ La violencia

For the women who survived the civil war, the majority of them were widows because their husband had been killed during the war. They were the only breadwinners of the family and had to raise their children without their fathers. With the no material resources and no husbands, the women had an extremely difficult time reconstructing their lives when the war ended in the late 90s. When Rios Montt was put on trial, women bravely testified in court about what happened to them during the war. The number of women who were raped by the army could no longer be hidden, and Rios Montt would suffer the repercussions of allowing such an inhumane act to occur.

The CEH confirmed that a large number of children were also among the direct victims of massacres, forced disappearances, torture, rape and other violations of the fundamental human rights. Many children were left as orphans because both their parents had been killed in the war or had disappeared never to be seen again. The possibility of living a normal childhood within the norms of Maya culture was lost for a whole generation of children.⁵⁷

Sexual violence was committed in mass and with little regard for the identity of the individual. Many people questioned why the government would allow sexual violence to occur at such extremes. Historians debated whether or not the soldiers were acting from orders of the government or following their own desires and orders. In an academic journal by Michele L. Leiby, she concluded:

“The state may promote the use of violations to leave permanent and easily visible signs of abuse, or sanction public acts of sexual violence, where enter villages are forced to bear witness. These violations are qualitatively unique in the physical and psychological damaged caused to the immediate victim and the whole

⁵⁷ Commission for Historical Clarification, 23.

*community, and therefore are expected to be more frequent when the goal is to send a message to a wider audience.”*⁵⁸

Leiby argues that the soldiers did follow the orders of the government to rape the women because the government believed it was a powerful and visual lesson. It also mentally destroyed the Maya women and if they survived the war, being raped was something that they would have to carry with them for the rest of their life. Therefore, the women and

their families would have a constant reminder of what happened to them as a result of the Guatemalan governments orders.

It can be assumed also that the soldiers did what they wanted to the women when they enter a Maya community.



Due to the violence that the women endured during the war it seems completely reasonable that one perspective of the war is that “the war was a war fought between men on the bodies of women.”⁵⁹ It cannot be denied that the women experienced the worst violations of human rights and no matter how many apologizes they receive, the acts that

⁵⁸ Michele Leiby, “Wartime Sexual Violence in Guatemala and Peru.”(International Studies Quarterly 53, no. 2, 2009), 449

⁵⁹ La violencia

were committed on the bodies of women can never be forgiven nor forgotten. After listening to some of the women at Union Victoria, such as Theresa Chavez, Cecilia Solis, and Juana Mejia seen on the right, it is very evident that the sexual violence committed by the army had a lasting impact on them.⁶⁰ Those who survived the crime most likely still suffer profound trauma and the communities themselves were deeply offended by this practice.

Tortures and Murders in the Community

The Guatemalan army not only massacred the Ixil Maya but more often they would torture the people before actually killing them. Although the army did have guns, often times a bullet was never found in the victims.⁶¹ The Ixil Maya were tortured to the point where they were not recognizable by family members. The government did this so to really make them pay for supposedly being supporters of the guerrillas. As stated before, the majority of Maya were not even guerrillas or supporting the guerrillas. Sara Endler, a landowner's daughter interviewed in Wilkinson's book *Silence on the Mountain* stated, "As far as I know, everybody who gave the guerrillas anything did so because they were forced to by the guerrillas. I don't know who was really supporting them."⁶² None of this mattered to the government who used the guerrillas as means to exterminate the Maya culture during the civil war.

⁶⁰ Interview, Union Victoria, women 3/7/17: These women contributed to the story that was told when I interviewed the village. The women were very serious and wore their traditional red skirts. One woman in particular spoke of her experience but it is clear that the majority of the women experienced the same kind of violence during the war.

⁶¹ Wilkinson, 211.

⁶² Wilkinson, 200.

The torturing methods varied amongst the various accounts heard by individual people. The military tortured the Maya in as many ways as one could imagine. Some people were hacked by machetes, some people were water boarded, some people were left cut up in ditches to be eaten alive by wild animals, and were some people were beaten to the point where they could not move so they stayed their waiting to die.

In one particular village known as Sacuchum, the town focused on in Wilkinson's book, twenty women were raped and forty-four people were killed. The Maya there were told, "It is known that you are bad, that the guerrillas have been here, that they're here because they're fed by you."⁶³ The majority of the people in this village had their throats slit and their tongues cut out. The people that weren't killed were kicked and beaten so many times, they had their arms tied to boards by they army and forced to walk for miles. The people were humiliated and tortured by the army until the army decided they were done. As always, the army invaded the homes and took whatever they wanted. They took radios, clothes, money, essentially whatever they could find. They left the bodies in the middle of the community to be an example for the people who survived the massacre. The community was responsible for burying the victims, many of whom were their children, husbands, wives, grandparents, and friends.

Another example of the kind of torture the Maya experienced is taken from Rigoberta Menchu's story. Although she described many explains of people who were tortured by the army, one story in particular really grasps the level of violence and torture that these poor innocent Maya experienced. Rigoberta Menchu explained that this is the story of what happened to her brother, but it is important to remember that this example happened to many people and

⁶³ Wilkinson, 211

was a common practice by the army. The following account is very graphic and hard to hear but it is crucial to understanding the violence that the Maya endured.

Menchu's youngest brother was captured by the government at age sixteen because he was said to be a leader and working with the union to fight for rights for the Maya people. Day in and day out the army subjected him to terrible punishments for not giving them the answers they wanted about the guerrillas in the mountains. Menchu stated, "They tied him up, they tied his testicles, my brother's sexual organs, they tied them behind with string and forced him to run."⁶⁴

The army cut off his fingernails, cut off his skin and burned his skin. They cut the fleshy part of his head and face off but made sure not to damage the arteries or veins so that he would survive the tortures and not die.⁶⁵ The army then paraded Menchu's brother and their other victims in front of the town. They poured gasoline on their bodies that were covered in open wounds and then set them on fire to be burned alive in front of their family and friends who were forced to watch. If people did not go and watch then they were claimed to be supporting the communist guerrillas and were also killed.⁶⁶



The stories at Sacuchum and the story of Menchu's brother are unbearable to read but prove how malicious the army was in their pursuit to destroy the Maya. The story of the

⁶⁴ Menchu, 203

⁶⁵ Menchu, 203

⁶⁶ Menchu, 212

community of Union Victoria shows a similar record of violence directed toward their people. Instead of staying where they were and being victims of the continued violence, they fled to the mountains to seek shelter.

The picture on the right was taken at Union Victoria and is a painting that the members of the community made to depict the number of people who were massacred in each Ixil village. Chajul suffered the most deaths with six hundred and nine people massacred. This however does not include the people that disappeared, their remains never to be recovered by family members.⁶⁷

In the Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification, Conclusions and Recommendations, the CEH explained that the majority of massacres were accompanied with multiple acts of savagery:

*“Acts such as killing of defenseless children, often by beating them against walls or throwing them alive into pits where the corpses of adults were later thrown; the amputation of limbs, the impaling of victims; the killing of persons by covering them in petrol and burning them alive; the extraction, in the presence of others, of the viscera of victims who were still alive; the confinement of people who had been morally tortured, in agony for days; the opening of wombs of pregnant women, and other similarly atrocious acts, were not only actions of extreme cruelty against the victims, but also morally degraded the perpetrators and those who inspired, ordered and tolerated these actions.”*⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/16

⁶⁸ Commission for Historical Clarification, 34

The Commission Report provides exceptional evidence and clarifications about what occurred in Guatemala during those thirty-six years. It provides evidence of the kind of violence that occurred to the Ixil Maya. Based on the information I collected at Union Victoria, I know that the report is accurate and these awful violations actually occurred.⁶⁹ Based on the evidence from the commission report and the numerous stories collected from victims of the violence, it is impossible for anyone to deny that these acts of savagery occurred.

Union Victoria- Into the Mountains

“Invoke the strength, invoke the strength, invoke the strength of those who dare, of those who dare to defend life.”- La Violencia⁷⁰

It became evident to the inhabitants of Union Victoria that because of the military raids and the massacres that they could not longer stay put in their own communities. “In ’79 we began going to the mountains to sleep because usually the military came at night and took people out of their houses. So as a community, even if the military was not coming, we practiced sleeping in the mountains to protect ourselves and then returned to our homes during the day. By ’85 however we were forced to completely abandon our village because the military was

⁶⁹ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

⁷⁰ La Violencia

constantly coming to attack us.⁷¹ From that date on, the Ixil Maya in present day Union Victoria would spend the following six years hiding in the mountains. They were constantly on the move, hiding from the helicopters that were bombing them from above.

At this time, even if they felt safe in their community, the army had burned and destroyed all the crops so they had no food or shelter to survive there. With the helicopters and the army circling their villages they had no other option then to flee to the mountains. The condition in the mountains was not much better than they were in their communities. “We had no food, no real shelter, and no clothes. We lived off of grass and any kind of fruit we could find, particularly mangos.”⁷² The military knew that they were surviving off of the fruit trees and burned any tree they came across so that they would literally have no food.⁷³ “We could not cook any food because the helicopters would look for smoke in the mountains to find where we were hiding. As a result, many of our children died of starvation and sickness from eating grass and nothing else.”⁷⁴ The conditions in the mountains were unbearable, but they were surviving the best they could.

Communities would travel six to eight days without any food at all because they were constantly on the move hiding from the army. Antonio Cruz, one of the members of Union Victoria, explained “we had to move almost every day in order to avoid being caught by the army. Therefore, we never even had time to plant food to feed people.”⁷⁵ Often times the community would have to split up as they ran from the helicopters. In addition, a lot of babies died while in the mountains because mothers would have to suffocate them so the army would

⁷¹ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

⁷² Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

⁷³ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

⁷⁴ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

⁷⁵ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

not hear them crying.⁷⁶ One can only imagine the pain the mothers and fathers experienced by having to kill their own children so that the army would not find them. “A lot of people also died from disease or sickness because we were not able to bring any medicine with us and we had no nurses amongst us.”⁷⁷ Therefore, if someone got sick or wounded they usually died because they could do nothing to help them. While in the mountains, they literally had nothing. The only thing they had were one another, which demonstrates a pretty powerful need for survival. The army could destroy all their material items and psychologically destroy a lot of people, but they could not take away the power of a community.

Ixil Communities of Resistance

“Even though you never forget, you have to live always with the memory, but we have come together as a community.”⁷⁸

Even though they were constantly on the run, the community attempted to continue practicing their culture and working together to fight for their survival. Understanding that their reality was really wretched, the elders attempted to shield the young people of the community from the violence that they were to face on a day-to-day basis.

“In the morning the community attempted to plant some plants so that if we stayed there or came back to that spot we would have some food to eat. This often did not work though

⁷⁶ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

⁷⁷ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

⁷⁸ La Violencia

because of how often we had to travel.”⁷⁹ In the afternoon, the community participated in some form of entertainment to keep spirits high. “We sang songs, danced and had traditional Maya ceremonies so that our young people would not lose their cultural traditions. In addition, the elders attempted to educate the children, they went to school for six hours and learned how to write on wood tablets.”⁸⁰ They shared secrets of the Maya culture with the kids in school because no one ever knew when and if they were going to die. For writing utensils, they would burn sticks and use them as pencils. They had no set teachers, so people in the community would take turns educating the children on Ixil Maya culture and history. “Our students went to school traditionally from eight to two and then participated in the afternoon entertainment with the entire community.”⁸¹ The Ixil Maya did what they could to shield the kids from the violence but it was really hard to commit to certain things when they were constantly on the go.

The communities also attempted to create some form of leadership while in the mountains. “We had to keep who our leaders were secret because if the army found out then they would come and kill the leaders just as they did in the early years of the war.”⁸² While in the mountains they often interacted with other Maya communities but because they all had their own language, each group had their own leaders. Although any type of real leadership was difficult as they were moving so often throughout the mountains, the attempt was there which signified that the Ixil Maya were still trying to bring as much of their culture to the mountains as they could. “The war went on for so many years that families had kids who were born and raised during the

⁷⁹ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

⁸⁰ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

⁸¹ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

⁸² Interview, Union Victoria, 1/7/16

war, so it was still important to us that the children grew up knowing their culture and traditions.”⁸³

Along with individual leadership within groups, by '91 they also formed organizations that people would participate in. These organizations worked to provide stability for the entire community while in the mountains. “In our community, the women created an organization, there was an organization for the elderly and even the children came together to do what they could.”⁸⁴ Each organization focused on providing for different needs, but nevertheless all the organizations worked together for the good of the entire community. Even though they were still being bombed and killed at this time, they did what they could to organize and be there for the entire community.

By escaping to the mountains the Ixil Maya were able to save themselves and their culture. The people of Union Victoria, previously Chajul, hid in the mountains for a total of six years. “We traveled so far and for so long that we were not able to return to our previous land. Even if we wanted to return to our native land, which we did, the government sold our land to make money off of it.”⁸⁵ The government’s main goal, especially during Rios Montt’s presidency, was to end the existence of the Maya culture in Guatemala. This is why they did not only kill young men who they assumed would grow up and turn against them, but they also killed women, babies, children and the elderly as well. The mountains for the Ixil Maya acted as “holy mountains that defended us and prevented our people from being victims of the genocide.”⁸⁶

⁸³ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

⁸⁴ Interview, Union Victoria, 1/7/16

⁸⁵ Interview, Union Victoria, 1/7/16

⁸⁶ Interview, Union Victoria, 1/7/16

Part of the Maya culture involves living off of the land and this is exactly what they had to do in the mountains. They ate only what nature provided them with, grass and fruit from the trees. They used herbs to act as medicine if someone got sick. They used wood for tablets to write on so they could educate the youth. They planted what they could in the earth's soil and they used the trees as shelter and shields. Even though times were challenging hiding in the mountains, they were able to utilize what they knew about nature and their culture to survive. They worked together in these communities of resistance and fought for their existence.

The Fight for Innocence

"The eyes of the buried will close together on the day of justice, or they will never close."- Miguel Angel Asturias, Guatemala's Noble Laureate for Literature.⁸⁷

While still in the mountains, the Ixil Maya started to connect with the Catholic Church, non-governmental organizations (NGO) and other international organizations. "The government told the world that they were fighting and massacring us, the Maya, in particular because we were associated with the guerrillas who were supposedly communists."⁸⁸ The Maya wanted to

⁸⁷ Commission for Historical Clarification, 12

⁸⁸ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/2017

prove to the government but more importantly the rest of the world that they were not apart of the guerrillas and were innocent civilians. The first foreign group to come to the Ixil Triangle was in 1990.⁸⁹ They came to ensure that the Ixil Maya were in fact a civilian population and not the rebels the army portrayed them to be.

Many groups and individuals followed this lead, believing that the government was misleading the public. The goal of these groups was to inform the public about the communities of Maya who existed in the mountains because the military was attempting a mass genocide against their innocent culture. One woman, Myrna Mack, was actually murdered in 1990 by a military death squad because of her criticism of the Guatemalan governments treatment of the indigenous Maya. This saddened the Ixil Maya greatly because people were trying to support them but the government was just too powerful.

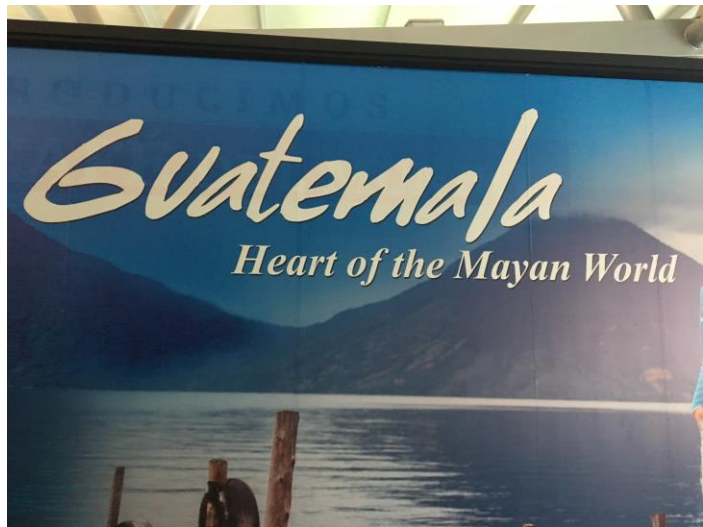
From 1993 to 1995, more and more organizations were fighting for the human rights of the indigenous Maya. The organizations that emerged were composed of the surviving communities and relatives of the victims.⁹⁰ Although this was very dangerous, the stories of what were happening to the Maya were coming out and the public became aware of the situation. The organizations contributed to reclaiming people's rights as citizens within Guatemala's legal framework. At the same time, the guerrilla factions, who formally became known as the Guatemalan National Revolution Unity, began negotiating with the government.⁹¹ Due to pressure from various organizations inside Guatemala and other international organizations, the government signed the Peace Accords of 1996.

⁸⁹ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/2017

⁹⁰ Commission for Historical Clarification, 32.

⁹¹ La Violencia

On December 29, 1996, The Peace Accords of 1996 were signed ending Guatemala's thirty-six year civil war. The actual negotiations began in 1991, but Miguel at Union Victoria explained, "even during this time we were still being subjected to torture, rape, and disappearances by the government."⁹² In 1994, leaders of the United Nations and other international actors contributed to the process of creating peace in Guatemala. In March of 1994, the first breakthrough achievement was the *Human Rights Accord*, which brought international groups into the country to monitor the governments respect for human rights.⁹³ The second act, *Strengthening of Civilian Power and the Role of the Army in a Democratic Society*, provided reforms to limit the functions of the army. Another extremely significant gain of the Accord was on *Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, which mandated a constitutional amendment redefining



Guatemala as a multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual nation.⁹⁴ All over the country, the poster you see on page forty-one was displayed. These were made after the Peace Accords of 1996 to show respect and represent the Maya population, which was roughly sixty percent of the Guatemalan population.⁹⁵

⁹² Interview, Union Victoria, 1/7/16

⁹³ North American Committee on Latin America. "*The Guatemalan Peace Accords.*" (The Guatemalan Peace Accords: Hartford, 1997)

⁹⁴ North American Committee on Latin America

⁹⁵ Union Victoria, 3/4/17 – picture taken in the Guatemala City airport

According to the members of Union Victoria, the actual execution of The Peace Accords of 1996 did not live up to what they were promised.⁹⁶ The Peace Accords included a variety of promises from the government in order to rectify the violence that occurred during the war. In the picture on the right, you can see the various sections of the agreement written out.⁹⁷ The section is red speaks about the physical torture, forced executions and sexual violence that the Maya experienced during the war. The pink explains how the Peace Accords were suppose to reintegrate the Maya into society through means of living, education, and land distribution. The green section explains how the government was going to dig up the mass graves and allow the Maya to perform their cultural ceremonies for the dead. The yellow section indicates the efforts at a culture revival, including technology, the arts, dance, medicine, oral tradition, and biographies of their leaders. We know that this did not happen in its entirety because the Ixil Maya at Union Victoria do not have any written history of what actually happened to them to read and teach to their people. Finally, the blue section states that the Ixil Maya can reclaim their history, health, and most importantly justice. The purpose of the Peace Accords was to compensate the Ixil Maya for what they lost, restore the victim's dignity, and allow the civilians to heal.



⁹⁶ Union Victoria, 3/7/17

⁹⁷ Union Victoria, diagram in Union Victoria's Community Center

Less than half of what the Ixil Maya were promised was actually executed by the government. Miguel, one of the leaders of the Community Council stated, “We did not get our land back and the land they put us on is not suitable to growing crops, and although they attempted to exhume the graves many of us never found our loved ones.”⁹⁸ To this day, the government still does what ever they can to make life for the Ixil Maya as difficult as possible. This fact alone is why the Ixil Maya need people to continue to travel to their land and listen to their story. The men and women of Union Victoria continuously thanked my group for traveling so far to hear their story. Before the men began telling the group what happened during the war they stated, “Thank you for coming to our home, I know you traveled long on planes and cars to get here, so we thank you.”⁹⁹

Traveling to their land and hearing the Maya at Union Victoria talk means so much to them. For so long the government silenced them. They were seen as enemies of the state and as a result suffered ruthlessly. Now, they have to chance to speak out about what actually happened to them. They no longer need to remain silent but it is evident through the somber looks on their faces that this is not an easy story to tell or hear. The Ixil Maya at Union Victoria deserve serious recognition for their bravery but sadly the government is not willing to give them that.

Union Victoria Today – Reflection

“Let the history we lived be taught in the schools, so that it is never forgotten, so our children may know it.”- Testimony given to the CEH¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Interview, Union Victoria, 1/7/16

⁹⁹ Interview, Union Victoria, 1/7/16

¹⁰⁰ Commission for Historical Clarification, Introduction

In 1962, when the internal armed confrontation in Guatemalan began no one could have imagined the magnitude of destruction and devastation it actually created. Perhaps the government knew the terror they would commit during these thirty-six years but as for the Ixil Maya, and the rest of the world, no one could have ever imagined.

The Commission of Historical Clarification (CEH) registered a total of 42,275 victims, including men, women and children. In total, 23,671 people were victims of arbitrary execution and 6,159 were victims of forced disappearance. Eighty-three percent of these victims were Maya.¹⁰¹ This number has since increased after the CEH published their report, roughly up to 200,000 people were killed between the years of 1960 and 1996.¹⁰² The tragedy that the Maya experienced during the war still greatly affects them today. This was evident to me as I walked around the community with the men, women and children of Union Victoria and saw the community they were trying to build. It is pretty remarkable to see the progress they made in just six years, but there is still a lot of work that needs to be done.

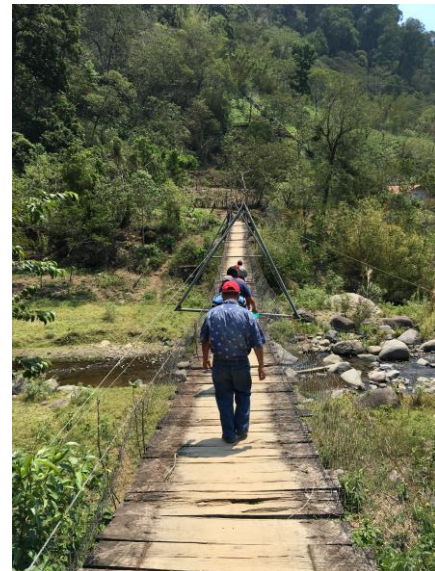
Initially one would have no clue of the horrendous acts of violence that the people of Union Victoria endured. There were kids running around, laughing, playing soccer, attending school and just being kids. The men of the community greeted my group with warm smiles and gratitude for making the long journey up to the highlands. Women sat in groups working on little projects laughing with each other and chit chatting. If I had not been told a little of their story before coming to Union Victoria I would have never known what they actually went through during the war. It was not until my group sat down with about fifteen of the leaders of Union Victoria and heard the pain in their voices as they told us what happened to them. It was then that I realized the great deal of agony they faced and are still in today.

¹⁰¹ Commission for Historical Clarification, 17

¹⁰² Commission for Historical Clarification, 18

On April 12, 2011 the Ixil Maya came to Union Victoria. The government who sold their old land told the Ixil Maya if they wanted to reestablish their community they needed to go on this piece of land only. “They sold the land we had been living on for centuries, they only cared about making money off the land. In total, there are now one hundred and thirty families at Union Victoria.”¹⁰³ Based on what I could see while walking around the community, it is evident that they are really trying to make Union Victoria their home. They have built schools, they have a massive soccer field for the kids to play, they built a community center where they all gather, and they even constructed a bridge to get from one spot in the village to another.¹⁰⁴ By putting effort into the community and constructing this bridge, which you can see on the right, it is clear how passionate the men and women are about rebuilding a life for themselves.¹⁰⁵ They may never be the same as they were before the government attempted to destroy their culture but they are trying and that is what matters. “We had to go through the most awful times, but we went through what we had to in order to get what we have now here at Union Victoria.”¹⁰⁶

Due to the fact that their land is not ideal for growing food, the only thing they can actually grow is coffee. As a result, the Ixil Maya at Union Victoria need a lot of help restoring their community and improving their



lives. The group I went with the second time was able to raise enough money to donate a new roof for the building that holds all the coffee. A group three years ago helped to paint the

¹⁰³ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

¹⁰⁴ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

¹⁰⁵ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

¹⁰⁶ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

community and bring brighter colors to the village that can be seen in the picture on the right.¹⁰⁷

Of course the community is thankful for the monetary support they received but for them there is something even more special that they are looking for. The Ixil Maya are looking for people who want to hear their story and listen to what they went through. “We are staying here and are fighting for our culture”¹⁰⁸, by bringing groups to their village, people are being educated and can help them preserve their culture. The Ixil Maya constantly have to “defend their life”¹⁰⁹, not only in terms of physical existence but also in regard to culture identity. Therefore, by educating people both nationally and in my case internationally, more people can hear their story and fight alongside them for the right to exist. No one should ever have to endure the violence they experienced, no one should be forced to hide in the mountains for six years, and no one should have to prove that their culture has a right to live in this world. But, if the Ixil Maya have to fight for their existence, they should not have to do it alone. By going to Union Victoria and hearing their story, we are showing them that they are not alone.



The Ixil Maya at Union Victoria actually went to Guatemala City to testify against Rios Montt when he was put on trial for genocide and crimes against humanity. “The charges arise from systematic massacres of the country’s indigenous population carried out by the Guatemalan

¹⁰⁷Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

¹⁰⁸ Interview, Union Victoria, 3/7/17

¹⁰⁹ Commission for Historical Clarification, 31

troops and paramilitary forces during the phase of the country's long and brutal civil war.”¹¹⁰ If you ask the Ixil Maya who is responsible for the massacres they will say “Rios Montt”.¹¹¹ Rios Montt is the reason why people lost their families, why women were raped and tortured and why genocide against the Maya culture was almost achieved. From 1981 to 1983, the country endured its worst years of the civil war. Those three years account for eighty-one percent of the violations reported by the CEH. Nearly half of all reported violations occurred during 1982, while Rios Montt ruled Guatemala.¹¹² The people of Union Victoria went to testify against Rios Montt, as well as many other Maya communities. They felt that justice was not served through the Peace Accords of 1996 because the government never executed the majority of the agreements. Therefore, by going to testify they were fighting for justice once again. Pedro Vallejo, the electrician of Union Victoria stated, “If there were justice in Guatemala they would have already been punished for what they did but they have not so we had to go.”¹¹³

The men and women at Union Victoria spent a significant portion of their time rebuilding their society/culture. A large part of their culture and identity is their sense of community. Even though the government tried to completely eliminate their culture and the Ixil Maya communities, they were not successful. The sense of community within the Ixil Maya was tested throughout the war but they persisted. The Ixil Maya proved to the government that they could use as many high tech military machines as they wanted but they were not going to destroy their culture. By forming these communities, the Ixil Maya of Union Victoria had a reason to live and fight for their right to exist.

¹¹⁰ John Ordonez, “*Efraín Rios Montt & Mauricio Rodríguez Sánchez: Before the National Courts of Guatemala.*” (International Justice Monitor, Open Society Justice Initiative) online article

¹¹¹ La violencia

¹¹² Ordonez, online article

¹¹³ Interview, Union Victoria, 1/7/16

Conclusion

“Memory must be laid bare to free the hands of those who watered the fields of maize and who grasped carnations. It must be laid bare to liberate the cries, the voice, and the gaze of thousands of victims who await the rain to continue sowing. To recognize the different paths that our sisters and brothers legitimized when they escaped the winnowing fork. The soul must be laid bare to recover the country that was riddled with machine guns to unearth the chest of dreams and retrace the footprints of our martyrs. Lay it bare, bare, bare.” – La violencia

The two times I was given the opportunity to travel to Union Victoria I was amazed with the determination and courage that lies deep within the people. The people at Union Victoria have survived the most horrific thing imaginable. They have had families ripped away from them, houses burned down, infants massacred, and women severely raped. Yet against all odds they continue to rise above the hatred and fight for the existence of their culture. It is remarkable that through all the oppression the Maya population in Guatemala has experienced, they still exist.

Their fight is not over, for they still face severe discrimination. The current president in Guatemala, who was democratically elected, was actually apart of this dirty war on the side of the government. It would be absolutely heart breaking if history does repeat itself here in Guatemala. One could hope however, that by continuing to educate people this would not ever happen again. The hope here is that when you ask someone if they know about the thirty-six year civil war that happened in Guatemala, they will be able to tell you about the genocide that occurred there in the highlands. People will know the stories of despair from the Ixil Maya in Union Victoria and will help them fight for their right to exist.

The right to exist. It seems like such a guaranteed right. For the person reading this, and for myself, I assumed it was a basic right that everyone automatically receives the day they are born. But, time and time again history reminds us of the constant struggle some cultures and

societies go through in order to preserve their existence. For the Ixil Maya all throughout Guatemala the right to exist is not so simple, it is a struggle but one worth fighting for.

You may ask, how do you know the right to exist is worth fighting for over and over again? Well, because I've been to Guatemala. I've been to Union Victoria. I've seen the smile on the kids faces as they run around playing soccer, I've seen the women wearing their traditional Maya clothing proudly, I've talked to the men and women who have survived the worst crimes against human kind, and I've seen how powerful a community can be when they stand together. The presence of the Ixil Maya is one that cannot and will not be forgotten. Their story is nothing short of amazing. It is filled with terror and despair but it is also filled with hope and determination. Hope that one day they wont have to fight for their right to live in Guatemala. That the land they cultivated, the land they raised their children on for centuries, and the land that protected them again and again, will be their land once again.

The whispers that come from the highlands of Guatemala are powerful. In fact, they are no longer whispers. They are loud and they are determined to share what happened to the Maya during those thirty-six long and devastating years. Through the resilience of the Ixil Maya, we can learn a very valuable lesson. The overwhelming amount of grief may never leave their minds. The depth of sadness and the brutality of loss will forever haunt them but the lesson learned through their story is about hope, strength, and the light within them that will not be distinguished. The Ixil Maya of Union Victoria, and all other Maya in Guatemala, prove to the world that ones communities and ones culture is more powerful than any machine gun. The commitment to their struggle for the right to exist has no boundaries nor limits. Their race will never be extinguished while there is still light and a sense of hope in their culture and community.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Commission for Historical Clarification. *Guatemala Memory of Silence, Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification, Conclusions, and Recommendations*, February 1999, 1-86. Accessed March 3, 2017.

This primary source was one of the greatest sources I found. The report explains everything happened during the war, why the government did what they did, how the Ixil Maya responded, who the guerrillas were, and what happened after the war ended. The report also had numerous facts and images to explain the magnitude of terror that occurred during the 36 years.

Interview from the Ixil Maya in Union Victoria. Union Victoria: Guatemala, January 7, 2016 and March 7, 2017.

I went to Guatemala two times in the past two years. The first year I was introduced to the topic, only taking some notes but understanding what happened to the Ixil Maya. The second year I took intensive notes on what the Ixil Maya did while in the mountains for six years. This source provides the majority of my quotes, which came directly from the survivors of the war.

Menchu, Rigoberta, and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. London: Verso, 1984.

The story of Rigoberta Menchu provided a lot of information on the horrible acts of terror and violence the government committed against the Maya. The stories collected at Union Victoria support what Rigoberta Menchu has to share.

Secondary Sources

Booth, John A., and Thomas W. Walker. *Understanding Central America*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1989.

This source provides background on Guatemala and what happened during the war. It provides factual evidence about the murders, tortures, rapes, and disappearances. This was a useful source to contribute to my beginning understanding of the war.

Coe Michael D. *The Maya: Ancient Peoples and Places*, New York: Fredrick A. Praeger, 1966.

This secondary source provides information on the Maya before the Spanish came to Guatemala. It was useful in the section where I talk about the Maya and their culture.

Wilkinson, Daniel. *Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal, and Forgetting in Guatemala*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

This source provides evidence from a different Maya community who experienced the same tortures that the people at Union Victoria experienced, but his story talks more about the guerrillas, which was helpful when determining who the guerrillas were.

Woodward, Ralph Lee. *Central America, a Nation Divided*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

This source provided background information on Guatemala. I used this source a lot in the beginning to gain knowledge on Guatemala and the war.

Perera, Victor. *Unfinished Conquest: The Guatemalan Tragedy*. California: University of California Press, 1993.

Although this source is never quoted throughout my thesis, this source provided me with additional information on how the Guatemalan army treated groups of Maya. It proved to me that the government did pretty much the same thing to all groups of Maya throughout the war.

Lafeber, Walter. *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993.

This source provided more information on how the Guatemalan war actually began. It explained the situation Guatemala was in before the war started and how the war came about.

Til Frohlich, *La Violencia: The untold truths of Guatemala* (A Bold Puppy Production, 2015), accessed January 12, 2016

This video is one of the greatest sources because it tells the entire story of the Maya. It interviews victims and listening to their stories is absolutely devastating. The film was a wonderful resource because it also provided a lot of information on the organizations that came into the villages to help prove that the Maya were civilians and not guerrillas. \

Academic Journals

Leiby, Michele L. "Wartime Sexual Violence in Guatemala and Peru." *International Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (2009): 445-68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27735104>.

This academic journal provided information on the wartime sexual violence that the Maya experienced during the war. It explains how the government was most likely responsible for the sexual violence and knew that it was going on. This helps to provide evidence for my thesis when referring to the women who were raped.

Online Articles:

PBS. "Timeline: Guatemala's History of Violence." *Frontline World Stories from a Small Planet*, PBS. 2011. Accessed April 10, 2017.

<http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/guatemala704/history/timeline.html>

This timeline provided dates and a play by play of what happened in Guatemala that led to the war. It also is useful in understanding how the war escalated and what occurred throughout the 36 years.

North American Committee on Latin America. "The Guatemalan Peace Accords." *The Guatemalan Peace Accords*. October 24, 1997. Accessed April 15, 2017. <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/47/140.html>

This article was helpful to understand the Peace Accords of 1996 better. It can be somewhat complicated so this article explained exactly what the Peace Accords were suppose to do and what they did not end up doing. This source is important for putting evidence behind the words of the people at Union Victoria.

Ordonez, Johan. "Efrain Rios Montt & Mauricio Rodriguez Sanchez: Before the National Courts of Guatemala." *International Justice Monitor, Open Society Justice Initiative*. Accessed February 24, 2017. <https://www.ijmonitor.org/efrain-rios-montt-and-mauricio-rodriguez-sanchez-background/>

This article provided evidence of what happened during Efrain Rios Montt's trial. It provides a lot of factual statistics on what he approved for the army to do when they went into a Maya village.

Word count: 15269