PUBLIC MEMORY AND POLITICAL POWER IN GUATEMALA’S POSTCONFLICT LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT. Landscape interpretation, or “reading” the landscape, is one of cultural geography’s standard practices. Relatively little attention, however, has been paid to reading landscapes transformed by insurgency movements or civil wars. Those landscapes can tell us a great deal about past and present political and social relationships as well as continuing power struggles. Guatemala presents a complicated postwar landscape “text” in which the struggle for power continues by many means and media, including how the war is portrayed on memorials, and in which the Catholic Church and the military/state are the two main competing powers. This essay explores some of the images and the text presented in Guatemala’s postconflict landscape through contrasting landmarks and memorials associated with the country’s thirty-six-year-long civil war that formally ended in 1996. Keywords: Catholic Church, Guatemala, memorials, military, postconflict landscape.

Landmarks and memorials in a landscape, overt or discreet, play a powerful role in telling us about people’s values, history, struggles, and successes. Cultural geographers have a long and rich history of recording and “reading” the landscape for both its obvious stories and its subtler ones (Lewis 1983). The types of landscapes and landmarks studied by geographers have varied widely. Traditionally, landscape studies have focused on material features related to indigenous and ethnic cultures, such as vernacular architecture, religious icons, settlements forms, sacred spaces, and agricultural landforms (see, for example, Sauer 1925; Jordan 1982, 1985; Domosh 1989; Kniffen 1990; Hobbs 1995). More recently, socially and politically oriented landscape studies have examined messages communicated by buildings, landmarks, and memorials (Craig 1978; Cosgrove 1984; Harvey 1985; Lowenthal 1985; Herskovitz 1993; Gillis 1994; Fallah 1996; Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998; Till 1999, 2003). Most of these studies focus on landscapes in developed nations and within the context of contestation, but not on open insurgency or warfare. Postrevolutionary or postconflict landscapes in countries like Cambodia, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, or Guatemala have received less attention from geographers. A partial exception is the article by Kenneth Foote, Attila Tóth, and Anett Árvay (2000), which analyzed the change in political monuments and historical shrines in Hungary after the fall of the communist government in 1989. Even Hungary, however, contrasts with these other countries in that the recent transition from communism was largely peaceful.

Perhaps the absence of postconflict landscape analyses is not surprising, given that, in areas where military conflicts subsided only recently, landmarks are less common and much more subtle. Power relationships in such landscapes may still be “settling,” so that no one side can claim public space in which to construct obvi-
ous landmarks. States and their citizens may not agree on what or how events should be remembered, thereby delaying construction of memorials or other landmarks (Till 1999). Postconflict landscapes are often not easily accessible to outsiders who ask questions about past violence, for local residents who have witnessed brutal massacres may be hesitant to talk about the violence and about how they plan to commemorate and remember past events (Montejo 1987; Remhi 1998). Thus, reading postconflict landscapes can be challenging simply because of the absence of overt public landmarks and memorials.

However subtle or limited the scale and number of landmarks, examination of those that do exist in postconflict landscapes can provide important indicators of past and present political and social relationships. The presence, placement, and prominence of these landmarks can tell the observer about who “won” or, if there are no clear victors, about the continuing struggle for power. In the case of Guatemala, although the state successfully destroyed the fighting power of the armed opposition, the government of Álvaro Arzú Irigoyen (1996–2000) signed a United Nations–monitored peace agreement in 1996 that mandated the reduction of army numbers, among other reforms such as the creation of a fund to compensate victims’ families (Jonas 2000). But the state “victory” remains tainted for much of the Guatemalan citizenry because of the egregious human-rights violations that persist. Many people, especially in rural areas, see the conflict that smolders on as a simple reflection of the elites protecting their economic and social interests by eliminating those individuals and groups who question the power structure within Guatemalan society (Diócesis del Quiché 1994; Le Bot 1995; Kading 1999).

As a result, power within this landscape as reflected by landmarks continues to be subtly negotiated and evolving between rural and urban, rich and poor, Catholic and Protestant, military and civilian. Despite nearly forty years of civil war, power has not changed hands in Guatemala. Power and social relations continue more or less as they were prior to the 1960s: Ladino elites control politics, land, and capital. Unlike what Foote, Tóth, and Árvay (2000) documented in postcommunist Hungary, Guatemala has not witnessed a major power shift, and the construction of new monuments and historical shrines that reflect the ideology of a new regime is limited. Individuals who desire to construct memorials that contrast with the policies of the military and social elites often do so at great risk. Radical changes from one form of government to another, like that in Hungary, permit changes in how a country remembers the past, allowing the new government and the people it represents to choose which events and martyrs to memorialize (Foote, Tóth, and Árvay 2000).

GUATEMALA’S POSTCONFLICT LANDSCAPE

Guatemala conjures up both exotic and disturbing images: past and present Maya cultures, Maya ruins, volcanoes and lakes, military dictatorships, and grave human-rights violations. Researchers and travelers alike are drawn to Guatemala’s beauty and diversity. Yet Guatemala confounds and often repels those who seek to delve deeper into what the landscape means and what it is telling us. This contradictory
facet of the landscape is reflected in the publications of scholars who work in Guatemala, including George Lovell’s *A Beauty That Hurts: Life and Death in Guatemala* (2000), Jennifer Schirmer’s *The Guatemalan Military Project: A Violence Called Democracy* (1998), Jean-Marie Simon’s *Guatemala: Eternal Spring, Eternal Tyranny* (1987), and Jim Handy’s *Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala* (1984). These titles suggest the authors’ ambiguous relationship with their field locations. There is so much that is beautiful about the Guatemalan landscape, but there is also so much that is painful to observe, so much suffering hidden within the loveliness that includes a history of extreme inequalities and continued repression. When one begins to examine and read the landscape more closely, the beauty is tarnished, if not completely obliterated, as were many Guatemalan families and villages during the civil war. This essay explores these contradictions in the landscape by presenting images of contrasting landmarks, memorials, and other features associated with the Guatemalan civil war that was concluded in 1996.

During the summers of 2001 and 2002, we searched for the presence of memorials and less intentional landmarks related to the conflict in Guatemala. We journeyed through rural areas in the west-central Department (State) of Huehuetenango, the Ixil country in the west-central Department of Quiché, and the Ixcan region in the extreme north of Quiché and Huehuetenango (Figure 1). We spoke to local residents, in Spanish, about how the thousands of massacre victims are remembered. We focused on these areas because, at the height of conflict in the early 1980s, all were designated “Red Zones” by the government security forces. Red Zones were defined as enemy territories, where “no distinction was made between guerrilleros and their peasant supporters. Both were to be attacked and obliterated” (Schirmer 1998, 42). The Department of Huehuetenango and the Ixil country of Quiché are dominated by the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes, whereas the Ixcan region is a tropical lowland. These areas were hard hit by the military during the civil war because, for a short time, they were strongholds for the rebel forces, especially the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (Manz 1988; Lovell 1990; Falla 1992; Montejo and Akab 1992; Stoll 1993; Payeras 1998; Sichar Moreno 1998; Ball, Kobrask, and Spirer 1999). We also made a separate trip to Santiago Atitlán, on the shores of Lake Atitlán, to investigate how this town remembers the recent violence and the murder of a U.S. priest. Because the city of Guatemala was the site of intense conflict in the early 1980s (Payeras 1996) and the place from which the counterinsurgency campaign and one side of the peace process were conceptualized and acted upon, we explored this urban landscape as well for features that could provide important insights into postwar life in Guatemala’s capital city (Figure 1).

We became intrigued by what we saw and, just as important, what we did not see regarding public memory and commemoration of the civil war. When one travels through Guatemala’s former conflict zones, it is difficult to believe that, within recent decades, thousands of people were murdered, disappeared, or left the country as refugees due mainly to military-directed repression (Zur 1998; Green 1999). Simon (1987, 16) warns that “many of those who now travel there will be hard pressed
to imagine the enormity of its tragedy." If one has not read anything about the war and is not specifically looking for landmarks, the violent past and its victims can easily be overlooked. In the Ixčán we visited villages that had been razed by the military in the early 1980s and found that the present-day landscape shows no signs of past conflict; in fact, the military often built model villages on the ashes of destroyed community centers (CEIDEC 1990; Nelson 1999). About these very villages, Gaspar González (1998, 13–14) bluntly writes:

In every corner of Yichkan [Ixčán], every turn of the roads of Yichkan, every corner of the bleeding fatherland, every spot was a silent witness to massacres and tortures. The land, the face of the earth, was splattered with the blood of her children. The
rivers became the veins of the community in which the blood of the people flowed. . . . It was like cutting down a great forest. . . . More than four hundred villages were wiped off the face of the earth.

Little evidence of any type of conflict remained a few months, let alone twenty years, after military action. Simon recalls that “scorched earth was overgrown with corn six months later; refugee camps where helicopters dumped grieving widows and children were renamed and reconstructed over razed huts; and model villages were built on top of these camps, often over the ashes of the dead” (1987, 8). It is in this landscape that rural survivors must remember. Often, their remembering is an inconspicuous, everyday act: simply living in a humble dwelling that sits on the foundations of a structure destroyed by the military. The site of the massacre becomes the monument. These are intangible, yet palpable, memories of the mind, memories that have not left an obvious, permanent mark on the visible landscape—at least to the outside observer.

**Conflicting Memories**

Though few in number, the landmarks point to a continuing struggle within Guatemala as to how the war will be remembered because they portray such different histories. An important revelation is the lack of overtly public landmarks in many villages and towns severely affected by the war. This indicates that the aftermath and reality of the civil war have not been resolved in many locations and that victims and survivors of violence have had little closure. Alternatively, the absence of monuments may reflect how people choose to internalize their experiences and use their own bodies as sites of resistance and as a way to continue the daily struggle of survival, similar to the notion of “weapons of the weak” advanced by James Scott (1985). Internalizing grief may be the only strategy for survival in a country where, in the words of Linda Green (1999) “fear is a way of life.” Many rural folk do not see the new government as a significant departure from previous regimes. In fact, under Presidents Alfonso Portillo Cabrera (2000–2004) and Óscar Berger Perdomo (2004–) the tenuous fabric of peace has been stretched to the maximum as politically motivated murders, land conflicts, and mob lynchings continue. Although some Guatemalans feel slightly more inclined to reveal their political leanings and feelings surrounding the war, many remain guarded for fear of future reprisals.

How can villagers continue to live among relatives of the victims and build monuments to the dead when many were members of civil patrols (government created militias called “Patrulleros de Autodefensa Civil,” or PACs), who often participated in military-sanctioned violence directed at other villagers accused of supporting guerrillas (Prensa Libre 2001c)? Many victims of the war have had little or no closure because they must interact with those who abducted, tortured, and/or killed their loved ones. Given that perpetrators and victims continue to live side by side and that communal graves are only now being excavated (Prensa Libre 2001a), the momentum to construct public memorials is delayed or muted. The Uruguayan essayist-journalist-historian Eduardo Galeano attributes such apprehension to the
fact that “Guatemala suffers from an official history that is mutilated ... as though it is dangerous to remember, because to remember is to repeat the past like a nightmare” (quoted in Wilson 1998, 51; our translation).

Much has been written over the last forty years about the so-called unrest in Guatemala, and this in itself is a form of memory. Detailed accounts of death and destruction (REMHI 1998; Ball, Koblack, and Spierer 1999; CEH 1999) and personal testimonies (Menchú 1984; Montejo 1987; Montejo and Akab 1992; Diócesis del Quiché 1994; González 1998) are numerous—and rapidly multiplying now that it seems safer to speak. The accuracy of 1984 testimony by Rigoberta Menchú Tum, winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, triggered a vast amount of debate within and outside Guatemala. This single volume, which recounts Menchú’s personal tragedies related to the war, is probably the most discussed and debated book related to the war. But 30 percent of Guatemalans are illiterate (Naciones Unidas 2000), and many of those who are literate have little access to the published memories that seem to be aimed at satisfying international and academic demand for accountability. The exhaustive details found in Guatemala: Memory of Silence (CEH 1999) cover twelve volumes and cost the equivalent of more than U.S.$100 in Guatemala. The publication is now sold on compact disk, a form of information currently even less accessible to most Guatemalans. The Catholic Church’s Recovery of Historical Memory (REMHI) project publication entitled Guatemala Nunca Más (REMHI 1998), which consists of four volumes, sells for U.S.$70; the summary, for about U.S.$40. The memory of those most affected by the war, those who will never have access to the documents produced by national and international truth commissions, which present a very official, impersonal memory, seems to have been left to the church and the state—with two very different perspectives and resultant landscapes at the local scale.

**Inside and Around the Catholic Church**

The Catholic Church and the military/government are responsible for the majority of existing landmarks. In some towns the only memorials to war victims are inside Catholic churches and are small crosses with victims’ names and dates of murder or disappearance (Figure 2). The Catholic Church consistently plays the role of state “moral conscience” because its members and clergy were persecuted during the conflict—and continue to be. Clergy who embraced Liberation Theology were associated with rebels and were often targets of military repression (Falla 1992, 1993; Diócesis del Quiché 1994). Even after the peace treaty was signed in 1996, Catholic clergy continued to be harassed and even assassinated. Most infamously, Bishop Juan Gerardi Conedera, chair of the REMHI project, was murdered on 26 April 1998—just two days after presenting the findings to the public. The REMHI project recorded more than 6,500 testimonials that detailed more than 55,000 human-rights violations, including 25,000 deaths. Significantly, although no large public monument has been constructed in Guatemala city to honor the hundreds of thousands of deaths and disappearances, a large monument to Bishop Gerardi was unveiled
on 26 April 2000 at a ceremony commemorating the second anniversary of his assassination (Nunca Más 2000). In other words, a large monument was erected to the public figure who fought to recognize the victims of the war, but the victims themselves have received no such public attention. Does this monument to Gerardi vicariously represent the victims of 400 village massacres with the words “Guatemala Nunca Más” (Guatemala Never Again) replacing the names of the dead? More recently, on 8 May 2001, Sister Barbara Ford was murdered, in part—according to some sources in Guatemala—for having assisted in the development of the REMHI project.

Given that violent forces continue to fight any documentation of the past, the power struggle between the Catholic Church and the military/social elites is certain to continue. The Church, through landmarks and memorials to the dead and the disappeared, is intent on reminding the military of the human toll of its actions. This is clearly evident in the mural painted on the wall of the Catholic church grounds in Cantabal in the Ixcan (Figures 3 and 4) and by the placement of hundreds of individual crosses inside the Catholic churches in Nebaj, San Juan Cotzal, and Santiago Atitlán. The Catholic church in Chajul contains another powerful mural, entitled “In Memory of Our Martyrs” (Diócesis del Quiché 1984, 200), which depicts dead community members and a woman bent over the prostrate bodies in
mourning. The Santiago Atitlán Catholic Church contains a memorial to Father Stanley Rother, who was killed on the church grounds on 28 July 1981. As one arrives in Santiago by boat—the usual means of transportation for the throngs of gringo tourists who visit the lakeshore village for its handicrafts—there is no clear indication anywhere in the town other than inside the church that the murder occurred or of the public outcry it sparked. Nor are there any overt landmarks that reflect the confrontation between the townsfolk and the military that left nineteen people dead and eventually led to the closing of the local garrison by the military in 1990 (Carlsen 1997).

Most landmarks are found in or around Catholic churches, and the Church has taken on the role of refuge for public commemoration and protest against the actions of the military. The construction of monuments inside churches or on church grounds seems to be a first step toward construction of more public monuments. Foote, Tóth, and Árvay (2000) observed a similar scenario in Hungary, where monuments banned by the communist regime were first erected in churchyards and cemeteries before the fall of communism.

Military Monuments

The Guatemalan military portrays the war in a way that differs radically from that of the Catholic Church. The military claims to have played the role of state “savior,” without whom a leftist takeover would have been imminent. The military’s landmarks and memorials often stress sacrifice, unity, national service, and power. In contrast to monuments created by the Catholic Church, military and government landmarks are very public. The wall of the military base at Playa Grande near Cantabral in the Ixcán invites passersby to visit the Military museum inside its walls.
Strangely, the only military museum in the country is located in the zone that experienced the most intense conflict in the 1980s and 1990s. The museum's displays reinforce the portrayal of sacrifice and of the military as savior. One display describing the role of the air force in the counterinsurgency campaign depicts the pilots as the "guardians of the Ixcán." Some exhibits contain photographs of captured weapons, captured rebels, and battleground scenes, all emphasizing victory and power. Others include various tributes to their fallen, such as photographs, examples of field accommodations, and lists of officers killed in the Ixcán, thus emphasizing sacrifice to the state. The military depiction of the guerrillas is far from objective. Every verbal and written mention of the guerrillas or insurgents is prefaced by "delinquents." An inspection of the visitor's logbook reveals that most are local. Locals who once feared the military can now openly visit a site of torture, pain, and death.

The Guatemalan armed forces in the Ixcán also constructed roadside memorials in honor of their casualties. We saw two such monuments, constructed in the early 1990s, along the Transversal del Norte, the highway constructed by the state in the late 1960s and early 1970s to gain access to oil deposits and large tracts of land in the Ixcán and the Department of Alta Verapaz in central Guatemala. The road was intended to transect the northern region of the country, linking the commercial centers of Huehuetenango and Cobán, the capital of Alto Verapaz (Le Bot 1995; Kading 1999). It cuts through a region known as "The Land of the Generals" because members of the military elite appropriated large tracts of land for cattle ranches and the promise of mineral wealth thought to exist below the jungle floor.

One roadside monument sits at the entrance to the village of San Lucas in the Ixcán (Figure 5). Guatemalan troops occupied this village and created a temporary outpost there for further forays into the rain forests of the Ixcán. Although the
Fig. 5—Matthew Taylor and local informants flank a roadside memorial dedicated to military casualties in the Ixčán region of Guatemala. (Photograph by Michael Steinberg, summer 2002)

Fig. 6—Army engineers killed by Guatemalan rebels are memorialized by this small monument in the Ixčán region of Guatemala. (Photograph by Michael Steinberg, summer 2002)
monument is slightly defaced, soldiers from the base in Playa Grande gave it a bright yellow coat of paint early in 2001. The color and the act of painting represent the new, self-proclaimed relationship of the Guatemalan military with Ixčán residents—a relationship in which the military “defends and protects the communities to maintain a peaceful atmosphere in which integral development can occur” (Ramírez Girón 2000). Yellow is the color associated with the large machines the military now uses to construct and maintain roads in the region. Previously, all monuments and machinery were painted in military olive green. The monument serves several purposes. In the rainy season locals sit on the dry concrete base while they wait for transportation to nearby Cantabal or, now that a bridge crosses the formidable Ixčán River, to Barillas in Huehuetenango. The monument lists the names of army engineers killed by guerrillas while they were building the road. In this sense the monument serves its intended purpose, commemoration of the road builders killed by “delinquent” guerrillas. But it also serves unintended purposes: For example, it triggered the memory of an Ixčán resident who told us of his experiences as a PAC member, his relationships with military commanders in Playa Grande, and the orders he and other PAC members received from above to search for and destroy suspected guerrilla sympathizers.

The other bright yellow roadside monument, which also commemorates the death of army road builders, is in the form of the castle on the Army Corps of Engineers emblem (Figure 6). Until encroaching secondary growth was cleared away and a stairway was carved from the road to the monument during the recent painting campaign, the diminutive structure was barely noticeable.

**Government-Endorsed Monuments**

On 29 December 1996 the National Advancement Party, the political party then in power, and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity, an amalgam of guerrilla groups formed in 1982, signed an internationally negotiated peace agreement that ended almost forty years of internal conflict. The government erected several monuments to commemorate the peace treaty and those who died during the conflict. These monuments, which always include a dove (Figure 7) and the phrase “firm and lasting peace,” represent significant events in Guatemala’s history, yet they are not significant structures themselves. The diminutive nature of the peace monuments is illustrated by the way the eternal flame and the plaque laid in the ground in Guatemala’s national plaza (Figure 7) are hardly noticeable against the backdrop of the National Palace, which continues to be guarded by troops in combat fatigues carrying automatic weapons. The day we visited the peace memorial the eternal flame was not burning, orange peels and trash cluttered the monument, and graffiti adorned the glass casing. Given the length of the civil war and the magnitude of the associated human suffering, one would expect the postwar state to construct and maintain a larger memorial.

The war and the peace treaty are also remembered in Nebaj, the southernmost town in the hard-hit Ixil country. The memorial here is in a hidden corner of the square and cordoned off with a barbed-wire fence (Figure 8). The initial impression
of the seemingly unstable white dove atop the column is not one of celebration, or even solemn remembrance. Instead, it more closely resembles the surrounding military-controlled model villages during the 1980s, some of which were also closed in by barbed wire to maintain better control over those who left or entered (CEIDEFC 1990; Falla 1992).

Fig. 7—A defaced peace memorial, dedicated to "the anonymous heroes of peace," is on the national plaza in the capital city, Guatemala. (Photograph by Matthew Taylor, summer 2001)

The lack of investment in public monuments reveals a great deal about the current political and cultural climate in Guatemala and how many members of the military and social elites struggle to acknowledge their role in the violence. Despite wide publication and recognition of Guatemala's atrocious human-rights record, many upper-class Guatemalans retort that academics and international agencies side with the Indians and the left. Because the elite was removed from the worst
violence in the countryside, its members refuse to recognize the magnitude of the massacres in rural Guatemala. When Minister of Defense Eduardo Arévalo Lacs referred to rapes and land seizures by former PAC members in Quiché that took place in March 2001, he stated flatly that "there are no longer any former civil patrollers because [the patrols] were dissolved years ago"—a statement that absolved

![Fig. 8—Barbed wire dissuades vandals from marring the peace memorial in Nebaj, Guatemala. (Photograph by Michael Steinberg, summer 2002)](image)

the military of all responsibility in those incidents (Prensa Libre 2001b; our translation).

The static nature of Guatemala's power structure and class relations means that monuments representing the violence and victims of the thirty-six-year-long war are unlikely to be funded by the state. The act of remembering will remain in the hands of the Church and communities that fund their own projects. The Guatema-
Fig. 9—The numerous bullet holes in the road sign that marks the entrance into Guatemala's Ixil country testify to the area's recent violent history. (Photograph by Matthew Taylor, summer 2001)

Fig. 10—"Danger: Mines Kill" proclaims this poster in the Ixil country, Guatemala, warning farmers that land mines and unexploded munitions may still be present. (Photograph by Matthew Taylor, summer 2002)
lan state continues to be highly centralized, and life in the capital bears little relation to life in the countryside. To some extent, rural folk—about 60 percent of the population—are increasingly allowed to follow their own plans for transforming spaces into places of mourning (Little-Siebold 1995).

**Unintended Markers of Guatemala’s Violent History**

Guatemala is rife with landscape features that are not necessarily planned to commemorate an event but that provide subtle, important insights into Guatemala’s postconflict environment. Driving eastward from the town of Huehuetenango to Cobán, along a back road that hugs the foothills of the rugged Sierra de los Cuchumatanes, we encountered the official road sign that announces entry into the Ixil country of Quiché (Figure 9). This sign is riddled with bullet holes. What is striking about this particular landmark is that rural Guatemala is strewn with new signs advertising banks, money-transfer services, fuel stations, United Nations development projects, and motels. Yet the government has left this old, bullet-riddled sign standing in one of the most violently contested war zones. Why?

Sadly common in postwar landscapes throughout the world are posters that warn residents of unexploded munitions—and Guatemala’s Ixčán and Ixil are no exception (Figure 10). The Ixil country, in particular, is a stunning physical and cultural landscape with mountainscapes, picturesque wheat and maize fields, and seemingly idyllic villages. Travelers and tourists are attracted to the remote beauty of Nebaj and the surrounding villages, and without such cues to the recent violent past, visitors could easily be lulled by the scenery and the beautiful geometric designs unique to cloth weavings from the area and never realize that they are in the middle of former Red Zones. The clues to the past lie deep in the recesses of the Catholic Church in the form of thousands of individually carved crosses bearing the name, age, and date of death of each victim. Other clues lie in the military base a few kilometers outside Nebaj—here no signs invite visitors to inspect the military interpretation of recent events—and in an abandoned landing strip, formerly known as “Camp New Life,” that was used in bombing isolated Ixil villages.

Other public landmarks of the conflict include military outposts at strategic geographical locations, such as bridges crossings the Chixoy and Xactalal Rivers in the Ixčán. Some of these small outposts continue to be occupied by soldiers carrying automatic weapons. We were not allowed to take any photographs of the outposts or the soldiers. One wonders why soldiers continue to guard river crossings in a “peaceful” country. Because we saw these landmarks in the Ixčán and Ixil country, centers of guerrilla and military activity, the message does not lie deep beneath the surface—a reminder to local people that the military is still a powerful force to be reckoned with. This is especially relevant in the Ixčán, where, according to the soldier who led our tour of the museum, two local villages continue to reject all government regulations and the military’s control of the region. These villages comprise members of the Communities of Population in Resistance, who resisted military rule during the 1980s and 1990s and eked out a livelihood in the forests of the Ixčán,
the Petén—Guatemala’s northern region—and the mountains of northern Quiché (Falla 1993), as well as returned refugees who had fled to Mexico in the 1980s. These villages are now protected by the presence of United Nations officials, headquartered in Cantabul, whose purpose is to monitor the postwar activities of the military and to verify social reforms promised in the 1996 peace treaty.

Apart from the scars left on the minds and bodies of thousands of rural residents in highland towns, the military left less obvious markers of their years of occupation. At the entrance to many towns, such as Santa Ana Huista, travelers pass ruined guard towers where all travelers used to be stopped, questioned, and checked—a constant reminder of past vigilance and violence.

In the heart of the capital city the former military academy, which is still a compound of military offices, also relays a message of power to pedestrians and vehicles traveling by. This imposing building, paradoxically located adjacent to the trendy nightclub and restaurant Zona Viva, is constructed to resemble a medieval castle and remains a dominant feature in the city, another constant reminder of the past for the occupants of the thousands of buses and cars that pass the academy every day, especially when traffic is slowed to permit passage of armored Jeep Cherokees and Mercedes suvs that emerge from the recesses of this formidable building. Armed soldiers patrol the former academy’s walls, sending an intimidating image to pedestrians and motorists. The continued presence of armed military personnel, seemingly ready for combat, in the heart of the capital city indicates Guatemala’s incomplete transition to a civilian-controlled democracy. Although there are fewer military checkpoints and fewer soldiers patrolling public spaces than there were in the 1980s and early 1990s, soldiers riding in the back of unmarked pickup trucks carrying automatic weapons are still a common sight. The military seems to have been institutionalized into the postconflict Guatemalan landscape. Perhaps this should not be surprising, given the long-standing history and influence of the military in most facets of Guatemalan daily life.

In contrast to the symbolically powerful presence of the military academy, Simon (1987, 95) reports that plaques and crosses remembering the nonmilitary dead are in curbs and traffic islands throughout the city of Guatemala. These are not publicly funded memorials but private ones, constructed by families of assassinated students and politicians.

Another common and powerful feature of the postwar landscape are evangelical churches. Guatemala has the highest percentage of Protestants of any Latin American country and was projected in the 1980s to become the first Latin American state with a Protestant majority (Stoll 1993), although conversion rates seem to have slowed since the war ended. Among the various factors advanced as explanations of the massive conversion to Protestantism is the role played by Efraín Rios Montt, the general who governed Guatemala at the height of the military-led massacres in the early 1980s. Rios Montt is a member and vocal proponent of the new religion, claiming that Guatemalans are the new Israelites, whose mission is to create the first evangelical, anticommunist state in Central America. Many Maya villagers joined evangelical churches
in part to prove allegiance to the state and to avoid persecution by the military (Le Bot 1995). Today evangelical churches of various sects are found in even the smallest hamlets in the Guatemalan countryside, with their “broadcast style” preaching and singing over loudspeakers besieging the homes of both Catholics and evangelicals. David Stoll (1993, 5) states that “the Catholic Church, driven underground after the army killed three Spanish priests and hundreds of local leaders, reported that parishioners were turning Protestant to save their lives.” In the Red Zones, especially, Catholicism was tantamount to communism and guerrilla insurgency because of its involvement with Liberation Theology, church-supported cooperatives, and literacy programs.

Unlike their Catholic counterparts, evangelical churches do not house memorials to war victims, simply because evangelists avoided some of the direct persecution by the military. Thus, places where evangelicals worship have come to symbolize the breakdown of the close-knit, corporate, Catholic community that characterized many Maya villages before the war, not only because villages have split along denominational lines but also because the civil patrols and the conflict allowed some individuals to violently seek retribution for past personal rivalries and vendettas (Falla 1992; Stoll 1993).

One of the most subtle landscape features of the war is the presence of hundreds of dead and rotting trees along the road as one approaches the highland town of San Mateo Ixtatán from the south. When we traveled through this area, we wondered why so many trees had been left to rot in an area where wood was the most important source of fuel, and we speculated whether they were diseased. Later we discovered that the military had forced local people to cut trees in a broad 30–40-meter-wide strip on either side of the road to deter rebel ambushes (Castañeda 1998). Today most local people continue to refuse to collect or remove the rotting wood, that is, participating in a subtle form of protest that demonstrates to the military that they will not allow them to benefit from this forced and destructive labor, even though fuelwood is a precious resource in the highlands.

**End of the Dark Winter?**

The geographer’s expertise in reading a landscape is a unique and important quality in our academic discipline. The geographer Steven Hoelscher (1998, 390) states that “what we see on the landscape . . . stem[s] from the social, economic, and political ideologies of [its] creators and from their creative exigencies.” In Guatemala, the “creators” of the landscape continue to struggle and compete with one another regarding what is presented to the public, or “reader.” These presentations—both subtle and obvious landmarks and memorials—by the Catholic Church and the military/government offer radically different memories of the recently concluded civil war, with the Catholic Church emphasizing the victim and the military emphasizing victory and power.

Sadly for the people of Guatemala, tension and violence remain commonplace as the military struggles to control the text of the landscape. The military no longer
drops bombs on villages in the Ixil country, but it and its allies continue to target those individuals who support opposing landmarks that portray alternative memories of the war. The military seeks to eliminate anyone who attempts to create a different, victim-oriented, postconflict landscape. Thus Sister Barbara Ford was murdered for her role in the remhi project, and in a separate incident a Quiché village was burned and several women were raped and forced off their land by former PAC members (Prensa Libre 2001c). The violence in Quiché was attributed to a long-running land dispute between returned refugees and members of PAC who had occupied land in the absence of the refugees. Coexisting with these ominous events, however, are symbols that the efforts and sacrifices of those who want to create a landscape that remembers the many victims will not be in vain. Former presidents Romeo Lucas García and Efraín Ríos Montt were investigated, although no formal charges were brought against them. Some rural communities also have brought suits against military officials responsible for past abuses. Given the existence of immense institutional obstacles in Guatemala, the future success of such efforts remains uncertain.

In the face of institutional neglect, many rural communities in Guatemala are constructing their own monuments to the victims and conduct yearly memorial services on anniversary dates of village massacres. Several communities in the Ixcán and other areas of Guatemala severely impacted by the violence display memorials to those massacred during the conflict. Large monuments commemorate the dead in Cuarto Pueblo and Victoria 20 de Enero in the Ixcán, for example. González (1998) writes of plans to build a memorial in the shape of a pyramid in Nueva Esperanza, Ixcán. In Dos Erres, Petén, where 180 members of the community were massacred and thrown into a well in 1982, the community will construct a monument at the site of the well and in the center of the village (Rosales 2000). But for families of the victims this is not sufficient—a greater homage to the dead is to bring the masterminds of massacres to justice.

The present Guatemalan postconflict landscape is therefore in transition, sending contradictory messages to its audience. Memorials and landscape features that commemorate victims have slowly spread from books, to inside churches, to exterior walls of churches, and beyond. What will the next step be? Will sites become sanctified and accepted by all, or will powerful segments within Guatemalan society continue to control the past? It remains to be seen whether rural Guatemala, to invoke the coda of Jean-Marie Simon, will begin to experience eternal spring or continue to be mired in eternal tyranny. The movement toward memorialization in the landscape is one of the arenas in which this struggle is taking place.

References


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