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The Haunting Memory of the Disappeared

On April 1, 1981, Chitay Nech was abducted before the eyes of his five-year-old son. His son did not know that that was the last day that he would ever see or hear from his father. At the time of his disappearance, Nech had been politically active for 8 years. He became mayor of San Martín in 1980, and soon after the threats against him and his family began. A year later, the threats were carried out. Even today, more than twenty years after the fact, the loving family of Chitay Nech carries with them a pain and emptiness.

They, like the thousands of other families of victims of kidnappings and “forced disappearances”, as they came to be known, are tortured every day with the unknown fate of their loved ones. It was the extreme fear caused by these forced disappearances that discouraged any and all threat of civilian resistance during the Guatemalan genocide, and continues to haunt the country to this day.

During the thirty-six year civil war between 1960 and 1996, Guatemala was racked with hate driven violence. The anti-communist government was intent on eradicating the native Mayan population. This period of extreme brutality in Guatemala became known as the “Silent Holocaust.” In the midst of the Cold War and the Vietnam War, the United States was eager to dispel any hints of a communist organization. The country of Guatemala was unstable, and the United States armed the government militia with the tactical knowledge and weapons to be able to subdue the threat of a rumored “communist uprising” from the natives. Perhaps the most heavily utilized and, presently, most widely spread method of warfare that the militia was taught was the method of enforced disappearing.

Amnesty International defines enforced disappearing as “…a person [being] arrested, detained or abducted by the state or agents acting for the state, who then deny that the person is being held or conceal their whereabouts, placing them outside the protection of the law.”

Greg Grandin, a historian and a professor at New York University, has dubbed the conduct of the Guatemalan government during the genocide as the “Unholy Trinity”: death squads, disappearances, and torture. Says Grandin of forced disappearances, “… The point of death squads was not just to eliminate those who [sic] thought to be working with the enemy, but to keep potential rebel sympathizers in a state of fear and anxiety.”

Though sometimes politically active and influential individuals were “disappeared”, suspected and potential guerrilla sympathizers were also targeted. Much like the actions during the Dirty War in Argentina, thousands of ordinary people were killed and tortured. “The government claimed they were dangerous dissidents, but many of the victims were idealistic students and activists.” (Hopgood 2011).

After Chitay Nech vanished, his wife and children sought assistance from their family in Guatemala. Each one of the relatives turned Chitay’s family away, out of fear of being targeted as Chitay was.

An internal death squad military log released from the National Security Archive reveals the fate of 183 disappeared individuals. Included in the dossier were extensive personal histories and familial connections of each target. Kate Doyle, an analyst of U.S. policy in Latin America and the director of The Guatemala Project at the National Security Archive, said, “This chilling document is the death squad equivalent of an annual productivity report. … It is [a] rare glimpse of organized political murder from the perspective of the perpetrators who committed it.”

Between the 1960s and the 1990s, death squads became even more efficient. Between March 3rd and 5th of 1966, a single death unit capture 30 “Leftists”. They were interrogated and tortured, then quietly executed. It was later found that their bodies were placed in sacks and dropped into the Pacific Ocean from helicopters.

Despite pleas from the archbishop of Guatemala and over 500 petitions of *habeas corpus* from the victims’ families, the government remained silent on the fate of those who had been kidnapped. A recently declassified government document declares, “The inescapable conclusion is that most of the disappeared have in fact been kidnapped by security forces. Further, the various security forces of the capital and other urban areas were the only bodies capable of widespread abductions.”

Chitay Nech was only one of thousands of victims of forced disappearances, and only in the past 10 years have the perpetrators of these heinous war crimes begun to be brought to justice. At the human rights case against eight former Guatemalan military and police officials, a witness came forward with her own account of the happenings in her village of Rabinal. After recounting her story of rape and other gruesome violence against her family and the people in her village, she spoke of her husband, a man who had been forcibly disappeared. She gave the details of these crimes, stating, “Now we will never recover our land, we live in poverty. I was with my husband for 12 years, and I loved him very much. I feel this sadness.”

Enforced disappearances ravaged Guatemala in the 1960s until the 1990s, and the surviving country is still trying to recover. Guatemala is racked with families who will never know what became of their loved ones, never be able to close the wounds in their heart. Imagine watching your parent be abducted by people you were once taught to trust. Think of your innocent mother being dragged away, suspected of conspiring with guerrillas based on nothing but gossip and speculation. Would you rise against the captors? Or would you, like thousands of others, stand down out of fear of never being seen again?

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