

Preface

Political violence depends on secrets and lies.

During the height of Guatemala's civil conflict in the 1980s, government death squads roamed the streets of the capital in unmarked cars, windows blackened, to hunt their victims. The unidentified agents of army intelligence and the police took thousands of people away to clandestine interrogation centers to torture information out of them. Once it was determined that the prisoners had nothing more to give, they were murdered and their bodies dumped in secret graves. Relatives of the disappeared were left in the dark, reduced to trolling the morgues, hospitals and graveyards, begging the government to tell them something, anything about the fates of their loved ones. Their pleas were met with hostility and silence.

When the archives of the defunct National Police were discovered in 2005, Guatemalans got their first glimpse inside the machinery of state terror. The documents were hidden in plain sight in a cluster of buildings on an active police base in the heart of Guatemala City. Years of neglect had left them in a chaos of disorder. Stacked from floor to ceiling, the old files were rotting away inside the dark and deteriorated spaces, dank and laced with mold, infested with vermin. That the records had survived at all seemed miraculous; their very existence had been denied by the authorities for decades to victims of human rights abuses, families of the disappeared, and human rights defenders. Once revealed, they offered visible evidence of the corrosive effects of the secrecy imposed by the government about its role in killing its own citizens.

Their rescue told a different story: one of civil society in action, intent on the recovery of its history. Personnel from the Human Rights Prosecutor's Office, joined by dozens of volunteers and eventually a staff of almost 200 employees, quickly mobilized to clean, scan, and organize the estimated eight linear kilometers of records. Governments and institutions from around the world contributed to the project, providing funds, equipment, and technical assistance, as well as the expertise needed to help professionalize the staff. By 2011, some 12 million images of the documents found had been made public without restriction in the archive's reading room and through a bilateral agreement with the University of Texas in Austin, which now hosts the growing digital collection on an open website.

The publication of this report, *From Silence to Memory* – first in Guatemala in June 2011, and now in this fine translation into English by the University of Oregon – is another step in the efforts of the Historical Archive of the National Police (*Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional*—AHPN) to help make the tale of an American tragedy transparent and accessible. The report's focus is the period of Guatemala's most intensive violence, from 1975-85; along the way, it elucidates the 115-year history of the National Police, its structure and functions, police-military relations, the assignment of police forces in service of the government's counterinsurgency campaign, and the savage repression employed by the state to crush not only the armed opposition groups but political and social activists agitating for the country's future.

The report also explains how an institution charged with fighting crime and guaranteeing public order could be radically re-engineered to become an instrument of terror. The decisive moment came in 1954,

when the United States supported a coup against Guatemala's democratically elected president in favor of dictatorship. Military regime leaders built an elaborate anti-communist infrastructure, bestowing new powers on the police to investigate, monitor, detain, and interrogate any citizen under the flimsiest of pretexts. In short order, the importance of the National Police's counter-subversive mission overcame their ordinary law enforcement functions, fatally infecting the culture of the institution.

Precisely how that happened, and why, is the subject of *From Silence to Memory*. Researchers will find here an invaluable guide with which to navigate one of the world's most extensive collections of unexpurgated police files. The report describes the proliferation of special counterinsurgency units within the National Police dedicated to conducting political investigations, surveillance, interrogation, torture, kidnapping, and assassination during the course of the conflict. It reveals dozens of secret operations, names the officials who ordered and oversaw them, and describes a flow of communications that was strictly controlled between commanders and their subordinates, and then back up the chain of command to the director of the National Police, the Minister of Interior, and the chief of state. Along the way, we learn which units produced what record groups, and how to decipher the significance of dozens of different types of documents – explained with just enough detail to provide any investigator with the confidence necessary for plunging into this sea of information.

For U.S. readers, the report also sheds light on the role played by the United States in molding Guatemala's security apparatus into an enforcer of U.S. interests. In the years following the 1954 coup against President Jacobo Arbenz, Washington sent security experts to redesign the National Police as a weapon in the fight against communism. Declassified documents from U.S. agencies cited in the report detail the technical assistance given during the 1960s and early 1970s to strengthen Guatemala's capacity in surveillance, intelligence and fingerprinting; U.S. intelligence officers worked with police and military personnel on targeting and capturing suspected subversives; the Agency for International Development (AID) sent cameras so that police could photograph young protesters at demonstrations. Thousands of police agents trained in U.S. schools under AID's worldwide Public Safety Program, until reports of human rights abuses convinced Congress shut it down in 1974.

The Guatemalan documents chronicle the lasting effects of such programs. Investigators from the AHPN found almost one million individual *fichas* or identity cards created by the Technical Investigations Directorate (*Dirección de Investigaciones Técnicas*—DIT) and its predecessors, the Detective Corps and Judicial Police. The routine practice of citizen registration turned Guatemala into a surveillance state, with files tracking the politically suspect behavior, activities, and associations of a vast urban population. When the time was right, this store of intelligence was used to conduct counter-subversive sweeps, or "cleansing" operations (*operaciones de limpieza*), designed to pursue targeted individuals for capture, interrogation and sometimes death.

Although the National Police carried out the operations depicted in its records, the police archive makes clear that the army was in control of counterinsurgency strategy in Guatemala. National security doctrine – the legacy of U.S. military assistance programs in the Americas – required a permanent militarization of the state, transforming rebel combatants and unarmed activists alike into "internal" enemies. From 1955-85, the Organic Law that regulated the National Police organized police hierarchy

into a military system (with officers ranked as captains, lieutenants, sergeants, etc.); senior army officers regularly occupied the directorship. When political violence in Guatemala City reached its apex under General Oscar Mejía Víctores (1983-86), the police director issued monthly directives to his department heads and unit commanders reminding them of their subordination to officers of the armed forces. The army managed and coordinated police counter-subversive activities operations through special joint operational centers (*Centros de Operaciones Conjuntas*—COCs); today, records generated by the COCs provide a particularly rich source of information about the conflict.

One of the most astonishing sets of documents found at the AHPN are the countless missing person reports (“*recursos de revisión*” or “*de exhibición personal*” in Spanish) filed by families, friends, and colleagues of the disappeared. In the wake of someone’s capture, the reports would begin to arrive at police stations. They might include inquiries sent by an individual’s employer, labor union, professional association, or university; there are terse telegrams sent by human rights organizations and long, eloquent letters composed by grieving parents. The sheer volume of these documents – and the corresponding quantity of denials on the part of police, military and judicial officials – speaks powerfully to the magnitude of the cover-up engaged by the state. They also provide graphic evidence of the failure of the National Police to carry out their most basic responsibilities: to protect citizens and ensure public safety.

The Guatemalan police archive now joins other collections of “repressive archives” in Latin America – in Argentina, Paraguay, and Mexico. Tens of millions of pages of memoranda and letters, staff lists and informant reports, police logs, radio transmissions, fingerprint files, and photographs are now available in countries hungry to understand the truth about their past. These are files from the secret heart of organized violence. They exist in defiance of the silence long maintained by the region’s authoritarian regimes. Together, they help tell the story of the political upheaval that convulsed the hemisphere during the cold war.

They also represent a breakthrough for human rights and justice. The opening of archives has sparked broad public demand across Latin America for information about the history of violence. The demand is tinged with outrage, as people long told that *there were no records* learn of the buried existence of enormous treasure troves of files. Whether the files are now used in order to recover historical memory or to prosecute perpetrators, they offer Latin Americans a permanent form of reparation: for the families of the dead and disappeared, the human rights defenders, the journalists and lawyers, students, teachers, historians, poets, writers, and artists. They are an affirmation of a terrible history, but also of the fundamental right of all people to know that history, to understand it, and to arrive at some measure of peace.

The report you hold in your hands, *From Silence to Memory*, is Guatemala’s contribution to all those interested in questions of truth, memory, and justice. Read it, and you will begin to understand.

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