

Guatemala's Cold War Diaspora, 1954-1996

During the Cold War, civil conflict forced hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans into exile. The first of these exiles fled the country in response to the collapse of Jacobo Arbenz's government in 1954. Prominent figures--ranging from two former presidents and a host of second-string political operatives to labor organizers, students, and communists--made up this early micro-diaspora of political dissidents. By the 1980s, when the military government's counterinsurgency campaign entered its bloodiest phase, hundreds of thousands of campesinos crossed the border into Mexico's southern provinces, fleeing the violence in the highlands. Many remained in the refugee camps of southern Mexico and organized for a fair repatriation process. Others left Mexico in search of opportunity in the United States, taking part in the dramatic demographic changes of the late twentieth century. I arrived at the archives with two questions in mind: first, to what extent did exiles and refugees' actions challenge the geopolitical status quo in the Americas, and second, when the movement of people across borders threatens policy goals and international partnerships, how do states respond?

I examined the personal papers of high profile exiles such as Juan José Arévalo, democratically elected president of Guatemala from 1945 to 1951, and the guerrilla leaders Mario Payeras and Yolanda Colom. For these individuals, exile breathed life into their writing careers, while undermining their ability to influence the course of events. In Arévalo's case, his work as a fiery and prolific critic of Caribbean dictatorships and American foreign policy in the 1950s and 1960s gave way to a quiet, complacent life upon his return to Guatemala in the 1970s. His correspondence with other exiles associated with the democratic governments of 1945-1954 gradually changed in tone from indignation to a resigned helplessness. Payeras and Colom, for their part, grew increasingly concerned with the sectarian squabbles that weakened the

Guatemala's armed left in the aftermath of near defeat of the insurgency in the first half of the 1980s. From their perch in exile, they wrote often clever and insightful analyses of various problems endemic to Guatemalan life, but no longer acted as especially effective agents of historical change. Payeras died in Mexico in 1995, and Colom only returned after the conclusion of the war.

I also examined some of the materials generated by the Iglesia Guatemalteca en el Exilio (IGE) in the 1980s and 1990s, which provided a great deal of insight into liberation theology's role Central American politics in the 1980s. The IGE and several allied groups—including the Comunidades de Poblaciones en Resistencia (CPR) and the Comité Pro-Justicia y Paz publicized the plight of the Maya campesinos who fled their homes in the highlands in response to the army's genocidal counterinsurgency campaign. A preliminary investigation of these groups' activities, reveals that unlike the more prominent exiles, campesino refugees, penniless and with little power in Guatemalan society, managed to effectively organize themselves and influence the narratives disseminated about Guatemala around the world, much to the dismay of an increasingly isolated government. Part of their success on this front, stemmed from their ability to form transnational alliances, that built up pressure on the government to embrace a limited democratization, and ultimately pursue peace negotiations. Refugee organizations' success in shaping the narrative was also evident in the press clippings collected in the late 1990s by the Guatemala City office of the UN High Commission on Refugees.

If high-profile revolutionaries in exile—liberals and communists alike--ultimately proved less adept at shaping the world around them than their humbler counterparts, both shared the benefits of a safety valve in the form of Mexico. While today, Central American migrants anticipate persecution at the hands of the Mexican government, during the 1950s, hundreds of

Guatemalans associated with the deposed social democratic government benefited from receiving asylum from the Mexican government. In the 1980s, Mexico extended asylum rights (and in some cases, even citizenship) to hundreds of thousands of campesinos victimized by the ruthless counterinsurgency campaign waged in the Guatemalan highlands. In both instances, Mexico directly challenged both a belligerent military government, and its powerful patron, providing an interesting complication to Cold War narratives of straightforward American supremacy over Latin America.

As I boarded my plane home, I had not yet mastered the history I had set out to understand, but I at least managed to establish a research agenda for future trips. To what degree, and by what means, did social movements and individual actors in exile bring about change and pose a threat to states' policies and partnerships, and how did those states respond? How ought we understand Mexico's role in the Guatemalan Civil War? How did immigration and asylum policy in the United States impact its relationship with Guatemala? Today, as a new wave of Central Americans fleeing violence cross borders, and around the world, refugee ranks continue to swell, this historical research can provide important insights into a pressing problem in world politics.