

# GAUTEMALAN GENOCIDE TOOLBOX FOR TEACHERS

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**What?** Roughly the size of Tennessee with a population of 5½ million in 1970. Guatemala is the only Central American country where its indigenous population is a majority of the population. From 1960-1996 the Guatemalan armed forces (including paramilitaries) killed more than 200,000 people. The government termed the fighting a “civil war” allowing it to attack perceived enemies without constraint. The Government was responsible for 95% of violence and the communist guerillas 3%. Escalating violence led to genocide from 1981-1983 that targeted indigenous Mayan communities. According to the 1994 Guatemala Historical Clarification Commission, the Guatemalan 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. After the slaughter, survivors were forced into army-operated relocation work centers known as “model villages” where they would be “reeducated”.

**Why?** The United States supported military dictators in Guatemala who would fight communist guerillas and support business interests, specifically the United Fruit Company, which rejected reforms that would protect workers from exploitation in the early 1950s. Guatemalan leaders persecuted those deemed as “internal enemies” such as communists, union leaders, students, and other civilians. Because of Guatemala’s colonial history the impoverished Maya were perceived, in racist terms, as inferior. As leftist groups rose in the countryside the military dictators feared that the Maya would be attracted to revolutionary ideology. Whether true or not, the military decided that the Maya posed a threat and were able to target them for slaughter by relying on racist stereotypes and paranoia.

## How?

The U.S. supported Guatemalan dictators with military and financial aid. Guatemalan regimes used their armed forces, “disappearances”, and death squads to target perceived enemies. General José Efraín Ríos Montt, who conducted the genocide of the early 1980s, was trained in counterinsurgency warfare at the U.S. School of the Americas. Utilizing intelligence support from the CIA, United States military training and support (including the green berets) the government launched “Operation Sophia” in 1980 to destroy guerilla insurgents. The goal was to eliminate any potential recruits or support network by annihilating Mayan communities in the countryside.

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## TERMS

**Criollos:** Elite minority descendants of Spaniards, often intermarried with indigenous people, but largely identify with European culture. The ruling class in Guatemala.

**Ladino:** Middle class descendants of indigenous, African and criollo ancestry. Artisans, shopkeepers, tradesmen...

**Indigenous:** Majority of the population, mostly Mayan, largely landless and 2<sup>nd</sup> class citizens.

**Cold War:** Period of hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II (1945-1990). Both sides used proxy wars and alliances to thwart the other. The United States supported countries and dictators who fought communism.

**CIA:** United States Central Intelligence Agency.

**Green Berets:** Elite United States Special Forces who are guerrilla warfare experts and use unconventional techniques to fight terrorists abroad.

**The School of the Americas:** From 1963-2000, a U.S. Army organization developed for the training of armed forces of Latin America. It became known as the “School of the Assassins” due to its history of graduates inflicting extreme violence, bloodshed, and civilian-targeted massacres in Latin America.

**Disappeared:** When a person is secretly kidnapped or abducted by the state or organizations working for the state and families are not provided with any information about their whereabouts. This people are often murdered.

**Paramilitary:** A force whose function and organization is similar to the military but are not officially part of official military forces.

**Communist:** A believer in an ideal type of government and economic system where there is no private property or social class, but only shared wealth controlled by the government. If redistribution of wealth and land does not occur naturally, communist ideologues believe that revolution must speed up the “inevitable” process. In reality and practice it has led to authoritarian and totalitarian governments intent on suppressing and killing opponents deemed “enemies of the people” or “counterrevolutionaries”. It has meant religious persecution, forced collectivization, mass murder and the use of forced labor in concentration and penal camps.

**Scorched earth:** Military strategy (counterinsurgency strategy) of destroying anything that might be useful to the enemy (including crops, livestock, people or villages who might provide comfort or shelter).

**Genocide:** One of the three crimes of mass atrocity (war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide) it is defined as: Any of the following acts undertaken with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such. (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

**Femicide:** The murder of women by men because they are women.

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### QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM?

- How did this genocide (called the “Silent Holocaust”) occur in plain site?
  - How was the United States complicit and why?
  - Why was there so little media coverage in the U.S.?
  - Should business interest dictate U.S. foreign policy?
  - Should the United States support military dictators who wish to help us meet our foreign policy agendas?
  - What are the limits of counterinsurgency warfare?
  - How does escalating violence and human rights violations lead to mass atrocity?
  - What role did misogyny and racism play in the escalating violence?
  - What are the risk factors and warning signs of genocide and mass atrocity crimes?
  - How does a country and society rebuild “post genocide”?
  - What were other possible strategies in preventing the escalation to genocide?
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### LESSON PLANS AND VIDEOS:

#### Human Rights Watch: Case Study Power Point

<https://www.hrwstf.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Guatemala-Genocide-8.8.2019.pptx>

#### PBS: Lesson on Interpreting Oral History

<https://pov-tc.pbs.org/pov/downloads/2012/pov-granito-lesson-plan.pdf>

#### USC Shoah Foundation: Visual History Archive of Testimonies

<https://sfi.usc.edu/collections/guatemalan>

<https://sfi.usc.edu/video/what-guatemalan-genocide> (video summary)

#### The Unspeakable Things That Happened During The Silent Holocaust

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ddpmo8eXmJc>

#### CIA's Secret Genocide

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BIA4dgAJ9A>

#### Collect Oral Histories About the Genocide in Guatemala

<https://pov-tc.pbs.org/pov/downloads/2012/pov-granito-lesson-plan.pdf>

#### Genocide Education Project Toolkit

[https://genocideeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/SOG\\_3-5-21\\_final.pdf](https://genocideeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/SOG_3-5-21_final.pdf)

#### Yale University

<https://pier.macmillan.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/How%20far%20is%20too%20far.pdf>

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<https://theendofhistory.net/the-silent-genocide-guatemalas-genocide-mayan-genocide/>  
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