H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Victoria Sanford. Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. 313 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4039-6559-2; \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-6023-8.

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Unearthing Genocide

Victoria Sanford provides an extremely valuable service with her book on the violence that overwhelmed Guatemala from the late 1970s through the 1980s and early 1990s. As a forensic anthropologist working in Guatemala in the wake of the civil war, she literally unearthed many of the casualties that the government (and, to a lesser extent, the insurgency) would have preferred to have kept hidden. Her work, which includes extended testimonies from witnesses, is a devastating account of government violence inflicted on Guatemala's Mayan majority. Her book combines these testimonies with information from several comprehensive reports on the violence, formerly classified documents, and an effectively frank and personal account of her own experiences. The final product is a compelling, although not completely flawless, account of Guatemala over the past thirty years. This distinctive book has many of the same strengths of recent books by Daniel Wilkinson and Beatriz Manz, and represents an important contribution to understanding one of the most troubled countries in the western hemisphere.[1]

Sanford's book is, above all, about the testimonies and exhumations covered in her work. She begins the book with an account of the 1994 exhumation of a clandestine cemetery in western Guatemala. It is packed with lengthy testimony from mostly indigenous survivors. She then uses this information to draw a series of conclusions: about the impact of exhumation and testimony on the peace process; about whether genocide occurred in Guatemala; about truth and memory in the wake of war; and (with a nod to Foucault) about the need to move beyond "official discourse" in formulating narratives about conflict (p. 181).

The first great strength of the book is Sanford's ability to combine her own experience and that of the Guatemalans she interviews with the authoritative data from two reports: one by the United Nations Clarification Commission (to which Sanford contributed), the other

by the Guatemalan Archdiocese.[2] To put it simply, the timing of this book is excellent. In addition, Sanford has also been able to use recently released U.S. government documents to indirectly implicate the United States in the violence perpetrated against Guatemalans. In this way, Sanford can connect searing personal accounts (including her own as a forensic anthropologist) to the larger reality. She thus provides the following reliable data: large-scale massacres took place in 626 villages; 93 percent of human rights violations were perpetrated by the government; and 83 percent of the victims were Mayan Indians (p. 148).

The other great strength has to do with Sanford's determination to adopt the approach known as "subaltern studies" while also carefully describing (and coming to terms with) her own role as a transnational participant with ties to both the United Nations and the United States. The emphasis on the subaltern is most clearly evident in Sanford's determination to focus primarily on testimony. (I would argue that her concern with forensics and with unearthing remains is also inherently subaltern.) She goes on to argue that the process of testifying is itself liberating: "each testimony creates political space for another survivor to come forward to give her own testimony" and in this way "creates new political space for local community action" (p. 72). As she acknowledges her own role in this process, Sanford seamlessly links this concern with the subaltern to the impact of global actors on local conflicts. The book itself, reflecting Sanford's transnationalized experience, is testimony to this related, but more global trend. In this regard, then, Sanford's book is an inverted version of the highly influential book-length testimony from Nobel Prize-winner Rigoberta Menchu.[3]

My first criticism of the book is related to this twin emphasis on the global and the subaltern. Sanford, in adopting these foci, gives short shrift to the actions of the Guatemalan state. On one level, of course, the testimony of horrific suffering at the hands of the state is detailed and compelling. There is no question that in privileging subaltern accounts, she is addressing an historical imbalance. Yet there is much to be learned from taking the actions and even the words of state actors seriously. The Guatemalan state, at once, embarked on an ambitious and bloody counterinsurgency campaign in the early 1980s (much more ambitious than previous efforts). It included thorough-going plans to transform village and rural life in Guatemala, including such steps as "development poles," "beans and bullets" campaigns, and the creation of civil patrols-which ultimately claimed to have over one million members. That these efforts soon regressed to violence and massacre is indisputable, and amply demonstrated in Sanford's book. Yet they were also instrumental in helping the military prevail over an insurgency that enjoyed significant support in the countryside. Sanford is correct, for example, to question the motives of former Defense Minister Hector Gramajo, who has at great length attempted to justify and explain the policies that he played a central role in crafting. Yet Sanford's dismissal of his account does a disservice because it ignores an important (if self-serving) voice. Jennifer Schirmer, in her equally critical account of early 1980s state policy, puts Gramajo's ideas front and center as she assesses the brutal counterinsurgency efforts.[4]

My second related criticism concerns a lack of historical context. For all of the book's emphasis on indigenous accounts, there is almost no reference to an interesting and variegated history of relations between the Guatemalan state and the indigenous community. Given the massacres of the 1980s, it is often surprising to read of the complicated past. One could go all the way back to the explicitly pro-Indian dictatorship of Jose Rafael Carrera who ruled for three decades beginning in 1837; to the complex and at times collaborative relationship between the state and the indigenous elite of Quetzaltenango (the Guatemalan city most closely identified with the indigenous community); or to the support shown by many of the indigenous elite for the CIA-led overthrow of the Arbenz government in 1954.[5] This history seems relevant to the early 1980s: a period in which the Guatemalan state-at great humanitarian cost-successfully stamped out an insurgency that had enjoyed significant support among indigenous Guatemalans. And awareness of this complexity could help explain more recent events. For example, why did many indigenous Guatemalans vote against a generally pro-indigenous set of policies in a 1999 referendum? Sanford's implied belief that the determining factor in the 1980s was brutality, and even genocide, is largely correct, but her analysis would have benefited from greater awareness of the complex history.

My final point is meant less as a criticism than as a call for a comprehensive effort to include Guatemala in discussions of genocide. Sanford makes a compelling case that government policy in the early 1980s amounted to genocide. She extends the Clarification Commission's argument that "acts of genocide" were committed by looking closely at the extent of the brutality and, significantly, by viewing the language of internal documents (some from the U.S. government) related to the counterinsurgency. She makes a strong argument for a "tripartite, decade-long campaign of genocide against the Maya," that included massacres, military actions against fleeing and displaced civilians, and the concentration of survivors in model villages and re-education camps (pp. 147-148). Here, she also marshals data from the comprehensive UN and Archdiocese reports. The best way to assess Sanford's claim of genocide in Guatemala is to more fully place it in comparative contexts. Most, but not all, scholars who focus on Guatemala are relatively comfortable applying the term genocide to the violence of the early 1980s. Comparative studies of genocide are less predictable-Michael Mann's recent volume barely mentions Guatemala, and Benjamin Valentino's work emphatically places it in the category of "counterguerrilla mass killings" and not genocide.[6] Guatemala has simply not yet been fully incorporated into a discussion that has been dominated by the Armenian, Jewish/German, Bosnian, and Rwandan cases. In this context, studies like Sanford's are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

I would also argue that political factors, especially the state, should be placed at the center of analysis in discussions of genocide. Sanford's work-and the bulk of theoretical work on comparative genocide-falls short in this regard. Those engaged in theoretical work on genocide would do well to raise the following issues: the ability of the state to raise resources and penetrate society; the nature of state-provided infrastructure; the viability and coherence of state institutions; and the impact of war or interstate rivalries on genocidal outcomes. Nuanced understanding of these explicitly political factors would enrich debate and analysis of genocide. It would also help in understanding why genocide often does not occur even when economic, racial/ethnic, and other societal divisions are particularly extreme. For all of the brutality of the early 1980s in Guatemala, analysts have been generally heartened by recent moves toward peace, reconciliation, and democracy. I would argue that this progress is closely related to the weakness of state institutions in areas mentioned above; for example, the state

demonstrated considerable long-term weakness in raising resources and providing nationwide infrastructure, and, partly for these reasons, was unable to impose an enduring genocidal project on Guatemalan society. These types of questions are absolutely crucial to understanding comparative genocide. Victoria Sanford provides a needed focus on the victims of genocide and is eloquent in providing a forum for their anguished—and sometimes inspirational—accounts. But her work only begins to provide the basis for a thorough comparative analysis of genocide.

Notes

- [1]. Daniel Wilkinson, Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal, and Forgetting in Guatemala (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002); and Beatriz Manz, Paradise in Ashes: A Guatemalan Journey of Courage, Terror, and Hope (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
- [2]. Comision para el Esclarecimiento Historico (United Nations Commision for Historical Clarification), *Guatemala Memoria del Silencio* (Guatemala City: United Nations Office for Project Services, 1999); and Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala, *Guatemala Nunca Mas* (Guatemala City: Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala, 1998).
- [3]. Rigoberta Menchu, I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala, trans. Elisabeth Burgos-

Debray (London: Verso, 1984).

- [4]. Jennifer Schirmer, *The Guatemalan Military Project: A Violence Called Democracy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).
- [5]. On the dictatorship of Jose Rafael Carrera, see Douglas Sullivan Gonzalez, *Piety, Power, and Politics: Religion and Nation Formation in Guatemala, 1821-1871* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998). On the collaborative relationship between the state and the indigenous elite, see Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). For support shown to the CIAled overthrow see, Greg Grandin, "Everyday Forms of State Decomposition: Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, 1954," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 19 (2000), 303-320.
- [6]. Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Benjamin Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005). In a recent work, Anika Oettler complicates things further by arguing, as in her title, that the Guatemalan case represents genocide turned into ethnocide. "Guatemala in the 1980s: A Genocide Turned into Ethnocide," *GIGA (German Institute of Global and Area Studies) Working Papers Series* No. 19.

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