

Should We Remember? Recovering Historical Memory in Guatemala

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Guatemala has just ended a 36-year internal war (1960-1996) that caused widespread death and destruction. Unofficial figures say there have been 150,000 deaths, including over 580 massacres.¹ Extensive destruction of the social fabric of communities has taken place and 440 villages have been destroyed; 50,000 persons were abducted or are still missing. Around 1 million people were internally displaced: they either escaped to the mountains,² to the coastal areas, or moved to the misery belts in Guatemala City. Still today there are thousands of widows and orphans scattered around the country or in the rain forest. Over 100,000 people have become external refugees.

The most affected areas are located in the north-western region of the country. The population of these districts is approximately 3.5 million people. Most of them are indigenous people, who live in the countryside, in small dispersed villages with less than 1,000 inhabitants. Eleven different Mayan languages are spoken in these areas.

Besides the statistics, there is a reality that is less quantifiable, but by no means less painful and complex, i.e. fear, uncertainty, pain, guilt, grief and frustration. Individual and community life has been ruptured, and cultural patterns and values destroyed. In addition, people and the society have lost trust and hope, and there is division, confrontation, silence, social apathy and a militarisation of individual minds and the society.

Should we remember?

In April 1995 the Catholic Church of Guatemala started *The Recovery of the Historic Memory Project (REMHI)* that led to the *Guatemala: Never Again Report*. This report describes the human rights violations perpetrated against the civilian population during the period of war as well as the patterns of violence, its effects, the socio-political context of the war, and a list of the names of the victims. This initiative was carried out to reinforce the weak Truth Commission.³

The whole REMHI process took three years. Over this period 800 voluntary people gathered 5,180 testimonies from survivors and documented 55,021 victims. This report was presented to the public on 24 April 1998. On the 26 April 1998, two days later, Monsignor Gerardi, the project General Co-ordinator, was murdered. His death came ironically in the wake of his own words in the REMHI report presentation speech, 'To construct the kingdom of love requires us to take risks...'. An indigenous woman sums up the importance of the murder when she says:

We have made some reflections about Monsignor's death: Every time before we plant the seeds of corn, we offer a sacrifice, we pour some chicken blood on the soil so the harvest will be good and healthy. We know that for those who planned the war it could have been easy to kill Monsignor Gerardi in 1980, along with the tens of thousands of victims of his beloved Diocese of Quiche. But the road of his life took him through a winding path with a mission. His calling was to prepare the field of truth, of dignity, and give voice to those who

had died without the chance to defend themselves; a truth and dignity that would come from the people itself. We believe that he has accomplished his task, he has planted the seed and moreover, he has offered his own blood to be sure that the harvest of life will be bountiful. Now he has joined his people and is ready to enter in Eternity.

For those in the REMHI project, Monsignor Gerardi's example gives us, not an option, but a commitment to go and seek for the truth and to tell the people that we believe their version of the truth.

When considering the question *should we remember?* It is very important to firstly ask, has any victim forgotten? Could they ever forget? Secondly we should ask, who wants to forget? Who benefits when all the atrocities stay silent in the past? Thirdly, are we asking if it is a problem of remembering, or is it a problem of victims speaking truth, or a problem of breaking down silence and reclaiming the victim's dignity? We also have to ask, is remembering an end point or is it the beginning of a real reconciliation and peace construction process? Monsignor Gerardi said:

Knowing the truth may be painful, but it is without any doubt, highly healthy and liberating.

Repression took away the people's right to speak and pushed their pain inside - nobody was able to forget, nor to speak. The so-called *official truth* provoked a state of confusion at all levels through the media and through creating rumours. A testimony gathered by the REMHI project illustrates this:

During the time (repression during 1982) we were so confused, we could not differentiate day from night, even when the sun was shining before our eyes.

It is a hard to challenge a system that is capable of creating two virtual worlds in the same geographic space, i.e. terror and misery in the countryside and a wealthy, indifferent first world-like urban area. The official government lie was that anyone who died in the mountains was a 'guerrilla, a terrorist, a criminal, an enemy of the country'. The rest of the Guatemalan society accepted this, turned their backs and closed their eyes.

Some of the exhumations of the collective graves of the massacres (carried out by both sides) in different places in Guatemala, have found near to 20% of human bones belonging to children and 15% to women.⁴ Many of the children found had not yet been born, they were obviously too young to become a terrorist or an army collaborator. During this period no relatives were able to cry for their dead parents, children, brothers or sisters. Tens of thousands of bodies did not have the chance to have a grave, or a mourning. They were killed and left on the ground, just like animals without dignity, without their cultural grieving rites. The result was that the grieving processes were kept frozen for years. It was even worse for relatives of the disappeared.

Crying was not allowed; dignity was worthless. Guilt was forced into people's lives and minds as a way of control. Ironically the victims felt guilty, not the perpetrators. Guilty for being indigenous, for living in the wrong place at the wrong time, or simply because they once dreamt about a just world. Then dreaming became prohibited.

To go back to the previous set of questions. Most of the excuses not to remember say that we should not re-open the wounds of the past, but denying the past will never lead to the closing of wounds. People have to remember because they have not forgotten. The words are there, fresh and painful. The society must do something to heal them. 'Forgive and forget' is always a tempting option, (often called for by those who had a role to play in the war) but sooner or later it will prove to be useless.

Therefore, based on the experience of REMHI, if we are to remember them the following are important issues to consider and bear in mind.

Firstly, the retrieving of victims' memories is, in itself, a worthless re-experience of pain unless it takes place within a context. The retrieval of memory should take place in a social and political space where society as a whole can construct a common history. The society should be challenged to accept the responsibility of what happened and make changes to ensure that such atrocities will never happen again.

Secondly, a remembering process should be a chance for the victims to be subjects of their own action of speaking out their truth so that the fear can be defeated, and to get back their dignity and pride, as well as the dignity of those who have died.

Thirdly, remembering should be a starting point for deep social awareness processes on the causes, effects and consequences of 'state terrorism'. If we cannot draw lessons to be learnt from such painful time we will be condemned to repeat the history over and over again. Remembering must also be a time to ask for justice. Memorials without justice are simply monuments to remind the victims of the perpetrators' power.

Fourthly, remembering processes should also be a starting point to assume everybody's victim-hood. The question, 'who is a victim?' should be seriously considered. There is always the temptation to call for a 'victim-hood contest' in order to be eligible for economic compensation, or to get the status of social recognition. It is very painful to see severely affected communities that had coped fairly well with the effects of the war torn apart when the question 'Who are the victims?' is raised. There must be the social awareness that in a war situation everyone is a loser (a victim), even those who never heard a gunshot, as well as those that planned and executed it. Indemnity measures should be the result of serious reflections among victims, and humiliating actions in order to prove victim-hood status should be avoided.

Finally, remembering should be linked to new dreams. There is no point in looking back if it does not help us to dream and create a better future.

Notes

¹ A massacre is defined as killing of more than 5 people with an intention of community destruction.

² There were Communities of People in Resistance (CPR) that lived for 10 years in the forest during the war.

³ In August 1997 the official Guatemalan Truth Commission, the Commission for Historical Clarification of the Violations of Human Rights and Acts of Violence which have Caused Suffering to the Guatemalan Population or simply the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) began. The CEH has been criticised for its short period of operation (six months to a year to investigate a 36 year period), its lack of legal powers like search, seizure and subpoena, and that it cannot 'individualise responsibility' or have its information used in prosecutions.

⁴ The Forensic Team of the Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala carried out the exhumations.