Review Essays/Ensayos de Reseña

Guatemala’s ‘Military Projects’

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Central America is, in comparative perspective, the Balkan region of the Americas. Fragmented since the wars of independence, the five, six or seven small isthmian countries have been the theatre of low intensity warfare, military dictatorship, guerrilla fighting and civil wars during several decades of the twentieth century. Excessive mass poverty, large scale social exclusion and religious separation have been the nurturing grounds for long term violence and repression. During the 1970s and 1980s, three parallel civil wars – in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala – were fought out. Recently in the 1990s, the legacies of the ‘hot’ national wars and the political context of the Cold War that had internationalised and aggravated the conflicts could be translated into formal peace agreements and democratic governments.

Of all the Central American countries, Guatemala has been the nation most sharply divided, most strongly affected by the war, most harshly dominated by military governments and most ostentatiously transformed in an ethnic battlefield. The pattern of military government remodelled the political structure in a kind of hereditary military dictatorship. By means of force, fraud and free elections, Guatemala has been administered since the 1950s by the military. From 1958 to 1986, Guatemala’s head of state was an army officer; between 1970 and 1982, the elected or appointed military president was succeeded by a new general, who had served his predecessor as Minister of Defense. After the transfer of power to a civilian government in 1986, the military discreetly supervised the affairs of state in a more ‘advisory function’, through a series of obligatory advisory and support structures around the presidency and the cabinet. Their control over the civilian police, their representation of the public
sector in the rural regions, and their de facto legal impunity guaranteed a kind of co-governance that outlived at least four civilian governments in succession. Maybe the formal peace agreements of December 29, 1996, are the point of demarcation of the reduction of military power in national politics. The thematic similarity of the above mentioned studies refers to the role of the military in Guatemalan politics.

The ‘Military Project’

There is a tendency of scholarly and journalistic analysts to attribute too many honours to the far-reaching strategic insights of Latin American military politicians. Of course, when national planning is substituted by military logistics, the scope of national programmes is immediately extended to cover a couple of decades. In most cases, however, it means ‘blue sky’ planning utilising rather random objectives of national development. A good Central American example, for instance, was the surprising planning capacity of the brand new Secretary of Planning in Honduras, created in the 1970s under military guidance. The first product was the publication of a new National Development Plan, 1975-2025. In spite of its pretensions, the quality of the national planning never acquired a good housekeeping seal from the donor community. Military-political projects in Latin America suffered from megalomania.

Probably the same mega-aspirations and the long duration of the consecutive military governments of Guatemala inspired Schirmer as well as Rosada-Granados to choose the term ‘military project’ instead of a name that would represent a more modest – and more realistic – series of loose military-political adventures in the context of the Cold War and under the tradition of government by state terror. On the other hand, both studies are high quality analyses of war and peace, dictatorship and democracy, destruction and reconstruction in Guatemala during the last tragic decades. Both studies provide an ‘insight’ into the functioning of military thinking. In Schirmer’s case, she extensively interviewed, between 1986 and 1996, around fifty high-ranking officers, including three former heads of state and several defense ministers and army chiefs. Rosada-Granados, the former president of COPAZ, the Peace Commission and, as presidential minister, the official peace negotiator between 1993 and 1996, made use of his obligatory access to confidential material in government, military and guerrilla circles.

Both authors cover the years between 1982 and 1990 spanning the governments of Ríos Montt, Mejía Victores and Cerezo. Apparently both authors – Rosada-Granados to a lesser degree and Schirmer excessively – have strongly relied on Guatemalan history as perceived by one of the major players, General Héctor Gramajo, who was Deputy Chief of Staff during the counterinsurgency operations in 1983, presidential liaison to the CIA and Commander of the general headquarters during the mid-1980s, and between 1987 and 1990s Cerezo’s minister of defense. Gramajo was the author of the national security (‘stability’) doctrines in the 1980s and 1990s and has played, since retirement from active service, the virtuoso role of senior military statesman. Rosada-Granados confesses to having been deeply influenced by the comments and ideas of Gramajo. Schirmer conducted no less than fourteen taped interviews.
between 1990 and 1994, followed by two long telephone interviews in 1996. Every other page in her book bears traces of the opinions and even copies of notes. The ‘according to Gramajo (…)’ style guarantees a nihil obstat provided by the general. This generates a somewhat uneasy feeling: reading the fascinating chapters, one cannot, to paraphrase a famous Bob Dylan song, escape the sensation of listening to the ‘visions of Gramajo’. A few years ago, Robben described, in a similar situation while interviewing the Argentine generals of the Dirty War, the risk of being lured into a kind of confidence trap.

Schirmer takes Guatemala’s politico-military history largely for granted. Although she is very detailed and complete, probably eighty percent of her book describes and analyses the structures of political oppression and state terror as they functioned during most of the 1980s. The slow emergence of the military governmental formulae, the palace revolutions, the first small guerrilla frentes, the beginning of state terror directed against supposed or possible future ‘terrorists’, the first counterinsurgency operations against the ladino peasants, the paramilitary operations, the political murders, the building of a ‘society of fear’, the succession of military strongmen (even institutionalised by the political parties which all opted for some generals and colonels as presidential candidates), the system of electoral fraud, all may lead other authors to an interpretation of a string of consecutive, sometimes conflicting, ‘military projects’. Ultimately, the items I have mentioned get their place in Schirmers’ fine study, but the reader is only served on a ‘need to know’ basis. And it clears the way for a rather megalomaniacal, Gramajo-style, military master plan presented for Guatemala’s future decades.

Rosada-Granados’ empirical chapters are written in a chronological and therefore more coherent sequence. He takes more time for a description of the ‘natural history’ of the politico-military dominance, its prolonged maturity and the reasons for its decline. In that sense, the two studies are complementary; most of their content basically refers to the same subject matter. Both Schirmer and Rosada-Granados coincide in their analyses and conclusions about the complicated transitions – from stalemate to victory, from war to peace, from military rule to civilian government, from state terror to a presentable political situation – depicted partially in the two books here under scrutiny and evolving more clearly during the later 1990s.

There is another, more descriptive study that is a necessary complement to the Schirmer-Rosada analysis of the ‘military project’. A research group under the auspices of the archdiocese of Guatemala published a four-volume study in 1998 with the title Guatemala nunca más. The three first volumes: Impactos de la violencia (Volume I); Los mecanismos del horror (Volume II); and El entorno histórico (Volume III) contain, as far as I know, the most systematic and most detailed information about the context and the consequences of Guatemala’s military projects. Impactos de la violencia treats the generalised climate of terror and fear in Guatemala, the massacres, the disappearances, the systematic violation of women, the displaced persons, the broken families, the orphaned children, the destruction of the former community life, the militarization of society, and the impact of the obligatory ‘Self Defense Patrols’ (PACs) on the Maya population.

Los mecanismos del horror is in fact a study of the anatomy of the violence: the intelligence apparatus (G2), the complicated structure of the military coun-
terinsurgency, the day-to-day operations of the PACs, and the day-to-day practices of the horror scenario: intimidations and threats, abductions and kidnappings, disappearances and executions, the clandestine prisons, the ritual confessions, the massacres and their actors. *El entorno histórico* provides the historical perspective: a substantial introduction to the civil-military relations from 1870 to the revolution of the 1940s, the armed conflicts of the 1960s, the military projects of Arana (1970-74), Laugerud (1974-78), the brothers Lucas García (1978-82), the military governments of Ríos Montt (1982-83) and Mejía Víctores (1983-86), and the civilian governments of Cerezo (1986-91) and Serrano (1991-93). In fact, the descriptive but eloquent volumes make a good match with chapters 3 and 4 (‘Restructuring indigenous life’ and ‘Indian soldiers and civil patrols’) and 7 (‘Army intelligence’) of Schirmer, and chapters 5 and 7 (‘Génesis del proyecto militar [1963-1982]’ and ‘El agotamiento del proyecto militar [1988-1990]’) of Rosada-Granados, and will be obligatory reading for a future generation of scholars on the Guatemalan conflict.

Of the three, Schirmer’s enlarged Ph.D. thesis is the most scholarly written; probably the book will be studied – together with Le Bot’s forceful book written in the early 1990s – as a modern classic on the Guatemalan civil war. Compared with her study, Gramajo’s own memoirs are pale. Rosada-Granados’ dissertation offers a view from within the army and the government; surprisingly enough, he has not, with the exception of a large research note, analyzed anything about the civil-military relations in the 1990s. *Guatemala nunca más* provides a wider and more detailed context.

### Post-War Guatemala

The three studies reviewed above conclude with a reference to the final, declining years of the military projects. Rosada-Granados is the most outspoken researcher and traces the – in his view necessary – decline of the dominant military position in 1989 at the end of the transitional government of Cerezo, and in 1991 when Serrano and his new team took over Guatemala’s presidency. In my view, perhaps Serrano’s own coup in 1993, followed by the appointment of De León Carpio as the new president and left with no possibility of military manoeuvring around the new president, is the most decisive breakpoint in the complicated power balance of the country’s civil-military relations.

Compared to these qualitative analyses of Guatemala’s transition from military government to civilian rule and the slow dismantling of the mechanisms of terror and control, running parallel to the slow reduction of the military presence in day-to-day politics in the late 1980s, there have been only a few recent and somewhat ‘quick and dirty’ studies published in the 1990s on the peace process; the negotiations between armed government and guerrilla forces, the remigrated refugees and the Maya population. Neither is there is a solid overview analysis of the governments of Serrano (1991-93), De Leon Carpio (1993-96) and Arzú (1996-present). Even fewer studies exist on the topic of Guatemala’s civil-military relations during the 1990s.

Arévalo de León, son of the well-remembered president during the 1940s and ex-vice-minister of foreign affairs of De León Carpio, is one of the few Guatemalans in the comfortable position to have the ‘right of being answered’
by both civilian and military politicians. He is the first Guatemalan social scientist who has tried to trace the long term tendencies in civil-military relations from the past to the present. His book, more an enlarged essay than a strongly empirical study, has the merit of underlining the successful attempts of the military establishment to maintain political influence, even under drastically changed circumstances. He refers to the appointment of De Leon Carpio as the decisive moment when the military ceased to be the institutional partner in a civil-military co-governance. However, the military did not lose their more indirect influence upon national politics. His study explicitly sketches the continuity of the military autonomy during the first year of peace and the implementation of the peace accords. Under the umbrella of the peace agreements the military proved to be – supported by their institutional stability – the new guardians of civilian law and order, strengthening, even substituting, the newly formed police forces in the streets of Guatemala City and provincial administrative centres. Contrary to the expectations generated by the peace accords, their intelligence service, their presidential ‘advisory functions’ and their administrative autonomy have been conserved intact, even reinforced by another mission: assistance to civilian security, law and order. Arévalo explains somewhat gratuitously the unchallenged permanence of the military as the backbone of government as implanted in the absence of a strong civil society. As always, the question remains what is the cause and what is the consequence.

Schirmer’s chapter in Sieder’s edited volume, a introductory appraisal of the role of the military after the peace agreements, reaches the same conclusions. She demonstrates that, even after an apparent reduction of the armed forces by 7,872 men, only 42 were officers; the others were mostly reserves or retired officers and civilians such as specialists, doctors and engineers employed by the military. Another chapter in the same volume written by Gutiérrez, one of the coordinators of the above mentioned research project Guatemala nunca más, underlines Arévalo’s conclusion by stating that Guatemala’s demilitarisation is in fact a reaccomodation of civilian-military power. The new (civilian) security functions of the army, the absence of national post-war development plans and the perseverance of the same social inequalities and tensions as in the 1960s and 1970s have resulted in the continued necessity of the same military apparatus justified by new missions and old structures.  

Sieder’s reader is a first though heterogeneous report on post-war Guatemala. The introduction is by Gustavo Porras, Arzú’s peace negotiator in 1996 and now the president’s secretary. Other contributors are civil society leaders and a younger generation of US and UK scholars on Guatemala. The book is divided in four sections: demilitarisation, indigenous rights, the truth commission and justice commission, and political reform. Its merit lies in being the first of a series of edited volumes to be published on current affairs in Guatemala. Completely in style with the prevailing publications in the Latin American NGO circuit – Peru’s DESCO and CEDEP for instance – the sections finish with a resume of the public debate on the papers. This approach contributes to the heterogeneity of the general content and the rapidly outdated texts. Some of the articles and papers in Sieder’s book suffer from this drawback. Nevertheless, the contributions by Siedler and Casasús Arzu are very interesting analyses on the actual and future problems of Guatemala in the coming decades.
Siedler’s article is in line with her interesting and well-written larger study on customary law and democratic transition, on democracy, legal reform and ‘equality before the law’. Her examination of customary law in rural Guatemala, perhaps an institutional bridge between the ladino and the Maya world, is a promising research path on the construction of a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Guatemalan citizenship. Casasús Arzú’s essay in the tradition of the discussion on México profundo and Perú profundo treats the prolonged legitimacy crisis in Guatemala in relation to the quest for national identity. Her relative optimism in this volume is contradicted by her factual publication elsewhere, in which she emphasizes the continuity of the oligarchical government system in Guatemala. For example, in 1996 Arzú, the former successful mayor of Guatemala City and a prominent member of one of the leading economic-political patriarchal families, became the country’s president with a cabinet of which seventeen ministers, vice-ministers and senior advisers are directly related to these families.

One cannot expect more from a somewhat hastily published first overview of Guatemala’s post-war problems. Nevertheless, one may expect that themes like the national reconciliation and reconstruction, the construction of the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society, the creation of a Guatemalidad, a sense of consensual citizenship, the articulation of a civil society along other lines than the ‘official government and donor-guided NGO and institutional framework, and the emergence of a kind of Maya identity will be the subject matter of future conferences and scholarly debates. And of course it is to be expected that another cluster around issues such as the future civil-military relations, military and civilian security, security and development, re-integration of ex-combatants and former refugees will be the subjects of a second research and policy agenda at the beginning of twenty-first century Guatemala.

Notes

1. With thanks to Henri Gooren for his comments on a previous version.
2. The exception was the civilian government of Méndez Montenegro (1966-70), during which a formal, though secret, pact was signed with the higher military echelons. The details of the pact are described by Villagran Kramer (1994: 408 ff.). The text of the (then) secret pact can be found in Villagran’s epilogue, Pacto secreto de 1966 in Villagran Kramer (1994: 459-462).
4. Volume IV, Víctimas del conflicto, provides the names of the dead, the disappeared and the tortured.
5. Estado Mayor de la Defensa Nacional, Dirección de Inteligencia (D2), Estado Mayor Presidencial, Special Forces, Regional Forces, Marine and Air Force Commandos, Police Forces.
10. Aguilera’s most updated version was published in 1997.
15. Such as the Alejos, Asturias, Aycinena, Batres, Beltranena, Castillo, Berger, Herrera families who are supposed to support the PAN, Arzú’s political movement. Other oligarchical families,
such as the Arimany, Benflet, Bianchi, Botrán, Castillo, Contreras, Falla, Zepeda, Falla are supposed to support the evangelical MAS, while a third patrician family block, the Berger, Boppel, Klee, Novella, Wildman, Wyld has other political aspirations. For details, see the article by Casaús Arzú (1998: 106-112).

References


Casaús Arzú, Marta Elena. ‘La recomposición del bloque en el poder y el retorno de las elites familiares centroamericanas’. Estudios Internacionales. Revista del IRIPAZ, 9, No. 17, enero-junio 1998, pp. 56-112.


