Avery Wong

His 8c

TA: Nilce P Wicks

Final Paper

1. The Massacre at El Mozote describes a tragic slaughter at the commencement of the Salvadoran Civil war. How do we as scholars explain (1) the incidence itself of the massacre; (2) the egregious level of violence; (3) the interpretation and/or use of the story by different parties in the aftermath of the actual event? You may make reference to the film Innocent Voices in your account as well.

Mark Danner discusses in his book, “The Massacre at El Mozote,” of the incident that occur in December 1981, when the soldiers of the Salvadoran Army entered the village of El Mozote, and slaughtered hundreds of people. The incident was reported in the United States, but the Americans dismissed these reports due to “lack of evidence.” By 1992, when the government and the guerillas signed the peace treaty, the Mozote incident was already forgotten (10). The massacre was an interesting case of Cold War history as such high levels of violence was revealed to the public, but was eventually swept under the rug like it didn’t matter. The El Mozote Massacre itself, its horrific level of violence, and the interpretation and use of the story by different parties of the aftermath can be explained by scholars in many ways. One interpretation of the El Mozote Massacre can be explained in the following. First, the incident of the massacre can be explained through the increasing desperation of the El Salvadoran Army against the guerillas, and the lack of intelligence on the guerillas, and in addition Marcos Diaz played an unfortunate part of insisting the villagers of El Mozote to stay in the city rather that evacuating as warned by the guerilla army. The desperation eventually led to the El Salvadoran Army to deploy the Atlacatl Battalion, to use by all means, to indiscriminately purge the guerillas with horrific violence in expense of morality. The lack of intelligence forced the army to kill all rather than risk a guerilla surviving. Second, the level of violence that was used in the massacre can be explained by the incompetence, lack of organization, and instability of the El Salvadoran army as well as the history of El Salvador’s military coups which led to the increasing use of immoral, desperate brutal tactics demonstrated in the massacre of El Mozote. Lastly, the story of El Mozote was interpreted differently by different parties. Particularly, the U.S. government attempted to cover up the atrocities of the massacre by simply denoting it as “propaganda”, whereas the news outlet tried to report the facts of the events in El Mozote, but the U.S. government was able to prevent the story from gaining traction. However, in 1991, the human rights organization was able to push for a first full investigation to uncover the true extent of the massacre, and was the first to truly unveil to true levels of bloodshed of the massacre.

As Scholars, the incident of the massacre could be explained by the rising desperation of the El Salvadoran Army to purge the guerillas, the lack of intelligence capability of the Army, and that the villagers of El Mozote neglected the warnings of the guerillas due to their neutral stance. In 1979, a group of young reformists called the Juventud Militar, the military youth, overthrew General Romero and set in his placed a “progressive” junta. However, the army quickly regained power and under the new “reformist” government, they are free to combat the “communist agitation” in their own way, and intensifying the “dirty war” against the left (25). Basically, the army, on the basis of fighting against communism, decided to use by all means to eliminate the opposition. We see how due to the level of uprising and the success of the Guerillas, the army is beginning to get desperate to quell these “communist terrorists” by using at any means to extinguish them. Thus, this desperation contributed to the brutal massacre In addition, another factor that contributed to the massacre was the lack of intelligence that the army had on the guerillas. It was mentioned in the book, “By the end ,the killing basically outran the intelligence capability of the Army and the security services, and they began killing according to crude profiles… almost all of them turned out to be young women wearing jeans and tennis shoes” (27). We see the army began resorting to killing without lack of assurance or evidence that these people were actually guerillas or guerilla sympathizers. The desperation of the army to quell the guerillas forced them to kill at random, and even justifying these killings by noting that these women were “subversives”, and that they were leftist supporters for the guerillas. Of course, a major contributing factor that made the massacre so distinctive was that the people of El Mozote was a neutral village in the Morazán area and did not actually supported the guerillas. Marco Diaz insisted that the people would only be safe if they stayed in their homes during the operation (17). Because the man had such great influence over the village, the villagers actually believed him and stay. A representative of the guerilla army even came down to the village to warn them of the army coming, but since the El Mozote was neutral, the villagers ignored the warnings (33). Clearly, at this stage, the Army would have killed anyone who has any relation to the guerillas. Combined with the desperation of the army, the Army lacked any intelligence to distinguish between guerillas supporters and non-supporters. The villagers’ blind trust led to their demise when they decided to remain neutral and stayed in El Mozote. Consequently they were slaughtered by the army’s Atlacatl Battalion who were already at the point of desperation and did not care whether they were guerillas or not, as they were going to indiscriminately slaughter everyone.

The atrocities of the massacre included, but not limited to, rape, decapitation, neutering, and killing of children were due to the incompetence, lack of organization, and instability of the El Salvadoran army and the influences of its very history of military conflicts in the country that led to the degenerative use of horrific violence. El Salvador has a long history of military coups and wars.

“In 1931, during a time of rising leftist agitation… Throughout the western part of the country, where an abortive rebellion had been centered, members of the National Guard, along with civilian irregulars, lined peasants up against the wall and shot them. The reason for the purge was simple: where the ‘infection’ of the rebellion had taken hold it must be rooted out, ruthlessly and thoroughly… the technique proved extremely effective…” (26).

Basically the El Salvadoran Army repeated the same technique of reckless mass murder, in hopes of quelling the progressive coup in 1979. However, the problem is that most of these people were activists and were not organized military, which “made them easy to kill (27). This of course would lead to a one sided slaughter that is comparably bloodier than the case in 1931. The army was also incompetent and unstable, and lacked organization. “In 1980, U.S. Ambassador Frank Devine noted the officers, ‘fears that the new recruits may include elements of …leftist organizations whose purpose was to infiltrate… (31). We see that the U.S. backed El Salvadoran military intelligence was fearful of the fact that these “new recruits” were actually guerillas in disguised. This only lead to the increase of paranoia among the soldiers and only intensified their irrationality to use increasing brutal tactics. This excerpt from the book exemplifies this result: “In 1980, small groups of young guerillas were operating… The Guardsmen responded, as they done for years, by beating or killing peasants they suspected of having being ‘infected’” (31). These guardsmen did not bother to care whether these peasants were guilty or not or actually aiding the guerillas. They were nonetheless killed, and in the end did not achieve any detrimental damage on the guerillas. The El Salvadoran military regime backed by the U.S. government only knew of killing the masses as that was their only method that was successfully in forcing opposing groups down. They continue to operate on this assumption and continued their brutal violence, hoping for the same result, which only perpetuates further violence, as this technique proves to unsuccessful in forcing down the leftist guerillas in the early 80’s. In addition, El Salvador was also in an ideological limbo between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. El Salvadorans could be communist supporters or U.S. supporters, thus the inability to separate the “good” and the “bad” El Salvadorans quickly led to the scenario where the military acted in mentality where “if you are not with me, you are against me” (42). In the film, Voces Inocentes, there was a scene where the children were brought to the lake to be killed mercilessly via gunshot to the head. The soldiers did not care whether they were children or not, they only say them as the “bad” El Salvadoran. This mentality of course further the violence which would all of this cumulating in the El Mozote massacre in 1981. The villagers mistakenly believed that the military would not harm them since they were neutral with the guerillas. However, the battalion that was sent there only knew one way in battling against “rural counter-insurgency”, and that is to overpower with numbers and inflict mass genocide onto the population, regardless if they were guerillas or not.

The interpretation and use of the massacre differed among the U.S. government, news outlet, and the investigative team pushed by the many human rights organizations. To start, the U.S. government interpreted the story as “inconclusive” and that “ no evidence can be found to confirm that government forces systematically massacred civilians in the operation zone” (111). During this time, the U.S. government was fighting in the Cold War and their main objective was to eradicate any communist influences. They saw the massacre at El Mozote as detrimental against their fight against their agenda because the U.S. backed El Salvadoran military battalion was responsible for the tragedy. Thus, when Greentree, the U.S. ambassador came down to write a cable, an official report of the massacre at El Mozote, Greentree tried to downplay the extent of the massacre as well as noting that any evidence were inconclusive due to the “unreliability” of the sources. Clearly, Greentree tried to suppress the human rights violation of the massacre as citing that “the possibility that the guerillas were making a major propaganda ploy over a massacre that might or might not have occurred in El Mozote, and were doing so for the purpose of derailing U.S. policy” (117). Greentree twisted the facts around to further the agenda of the U.S. government. By implying that the so called “massacre” was fake and was the enemy’s propaganda against the U.S., he is hypocritically furthering the U.S. agenda in their fight against communism despite the clear human rights violation demonstrated in the massacre. The news outlet like Washington Posts and New York Time tried to report the truth of the events of El Mozote, but the U.S. government silenced the reporters. Specifically, the U.S. administration tried to silence Bonner, who was a reporter for the New York Times and known for his credibility. Basically, the administration and the right wing news outlets tried to de-credit Bonner by citing he was a leftist supporter carrying on “a propaganda war favoring the Marxist guerillas in El Salvador (137). This is another clear example, where the U.S. government tried to cover up the massacre and deflecting an opposition that are detrimental to their agenda. The U.S. government is trying to use the event of the massacre as propaganda for the “Marxist” Guerillas, and by downplaying the credibility of opposing leftist news outlets, the U.S. government is able to completely brainwash the public in believing that this massacre is not as bad as it seems, and that anyone who says otherwise is a communist supporter.

However, thought the U.S. government was able to successfully able to downplay the true level of bloodshed of the massacre, in 1991 human rights organization were able to push for a full investigation of the matter. The investigative team interpreted and reported the true level of violence and casualty of the human lives that were taken in that incident, and also to reveal the dirtiness and the secrecy of government operations. The Truth Commission reported as follows:

“Of the hundred and forty-three skulls were found, all ‘were deposited during the same temporal event,’ which is unlikely to have occurred no later than 1981. El Mozote could not have been a guerilla graveyard, as some had claimed, especially since all but twelve of the one hundred and forty-three remains identified turned out to be those of children under twelve years of age, including one fetus, found between the pelvic bones of one adult.”

Unlike, the U.S. cable and the news outlet, the Truth Commission was able to report the truth level of bloodshed that occurred in December 1981. Notably, the excerpt, “including one fetus, found…”, demonstrated that the Truth Commission did not censor any atrocities of the crime committed and clearly depicted that human rights were violated. The Truth Commission made it clear that the evidence was not inconclusive as the U.S. government said it was, but it was most definitely a massacre on innocent villagers. The story that the U.S. government tried to push for was that this massacre story was just propaganda for the guerillas was untrue, as those massacred were actually children and women and not the guerillas that the U.S. government claimed it to be. The Truth Commission interpreted the incident of the massacre by emphasizing the true levels of atrocities committed and in effect indirectly criticized the government’s attempt to cover the true level of violence by emphasizing the details of the massacre.

In conclusion, many factors played in the events that led up to the massacre. The events of the Massacre all started from the increasing desperation of the El Salvadoran government to quell the guerillas and any opposing forces. Slowly the El Salvadoran’s began running out of information on the guerilla army and began employing desperate tactics of indiscriminate purging. Combined, with the fact that the villagers of El Mozote unfortunately elected to stay in El Mozote, all of these factors contributed to the events of the Massacre. The levels of violence that occurred in the massacre can be explained from the unstable nature of the El Salvadoran army. Because the army was not trained to effectively fight off against rural counter insurgency, and the fact they continued to use to same tactic over and over again with no results, this only further the brutality of the tactics out of desperation and fear of the opposition. There are varying interpretations and use of the events in El Mozote. The U.S. government interpreted the story as enemy propaganda, and dismissed the level of violence of the El Salvadoran Civil War, whereas the Truth Commission team unveiled the truth level of atrocities of the massacre and emphasized the human rights violation that took place. In doing so the Truth Commission used the story to indirectly criticize the government’s attempt to cover the story a decade before.

Citations

Danner, Mark. *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War*. New York: Vintage,

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*Innocent Voices*. Dir. Luis Mandoki. 20th Century Fox, 2005. DVD.