

## Torn by Terror

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*My eyes have seen what no human eyes should see.*

—Oldest man in Santa María Tzejá

IN A 1990 briefing for a visiting delegation, an army spokesman pointed to a map of Guatemala in which a substantial part of the national territory was shaded in red. He indicated that the shaded area had come under guerrilla influence or control in 1981. The communist threat, in his ideological framework, was very real and determined to take power. The government, under military dictatorship at the time, decided to do whatever was necessary to regain total control, to dominate the people so completely that they could never rise up again.<sup>1</sup>

Former army general Benedicto Lucas claimed that in 1982 the military thought the guerrillas were within fifteen days of taking power. Lucas, accused of directing the most heinous of war crimes against the civilian population, defended what had been done as necessary to save the state during that chaotic and desperate time. His summary words were that “sadly, peace and tranquility come to a country after the spilling of blood.”<sup>2</sup>

So the Guatemalan army, determined to eliminate the armed resistance, set out to butcher and terrorize. There would be no mercy. The sheer magnitude of its savagery staggers belief. By the army’s own count, 440 villages were destroyed. Tens of thousands of human beings, mostly Maya civilian campesinos, were slaughtered.<sup>3</sup>

### Scorched Earth: Terror and Burning

The people living in the villages in the army’s path had no way of anticipating how brutal the destruction would be. Many simply

refused to believe the army would destroy them. One witness, referring to a nearby community, said, "We knew they killed a lot of people there, but we didn't think it would happen here" (Falla 1994, 62).

The year 1982 was designated by the army as "Victory 82" in its long-range military campaign. The objective was to pacify the country and reorganize the population to serve the purposes of its counterinsurgency effort. The following year was labeled "Firmness '83," when a pacified nation was to be "developed" under the stern hand of the military—characterized by a "beans and bullets" theme: "You work with us and we feed you; you carry guns under our orders to fight the subversives." Likewise, each of the next several years was referred to as a stage in the return to civilian government within a militarized framework.<sup>4</sup>

The scorched-earth campaign was not the result of blind, impetuous fury but part of a deliberate, rational plan laid out by military men to master the civil population. These men felt they needed to tear the fabric of their own nation, the *patria*, in order to reweave it according to their own pattern. The lengths to which they were willing to go is on the record:

To those who have studied [the army's "Guatemala solution"] in detail on the basis of interviews and primary documents, what is most striking is the unity and single-minded determination of all those involved in the campaign against *la subversión*. Inherent within this vision was the assumption that the planned genocide that left 100 – 150,000 civilian casualties was necessary to establish "social peace"; the human rights crimes were simply beside the point, because the Indian population was "subversive" by definition (Jonas 1991, 148).

According to Ricardo Falla, a Guatemalan priest and anthropologist who chronicled the massacres, "The offensive advanced geographically, according to the counterinsurgency manuals, like a huge broom sweeping from the more populated areas to the more remote areas" (1994, 60). The objective was to eliminate the enemy by depopulating the indigenous peasants who had recently settled in the Ixcán region.

The army's tactic was to enter a village on a weekend, when resi-

dents would be gathered in the center trading area. In his careful style, never reaching beyond the evidence for which he had multiple sources, Falla tells us what happened in early 1982:

On the weekend of 13 February, the army carried out massacres that resulted in the killings of between 12 and 17 people in Santa María Tzejá, between 27 and 41 in Santo Tomás and about 15 in San Lucas, and 7 on the road to San Lucas. On 18 February (not on a weekend, so presumably not part of the plan), the army massacred 10 people. On the weekend of 20 February, it massacred 13 persons in Polígono 14, and on the weekend of 27 February, the army went to Kaibil Balam, killing 12 to 14 people (1994, 53).

Falla here records the deaths in the first two weeks of a campaign that would last for months. He notes only those caught in the direct path of the army dreadnought. He says nothing of the thousands who fled in terror into the jungle, most with only the clothes on their backs. At other points, Falla names villages where the entire population was slaughtered.

The depth of the depravity is revealed in Falla's description of the use of torture:

Systematic torture was integral to every level of repression. Sometimes obtaining information from the victim was emphasized and sometimes the torture was aimed at terrorizing others. Terror may have two objectives: to inhibit all activity against the army and to force people to provide information. I have found evidence of individual torture, by well-known methods (burning with firebrands, submerging in water, asphyxiating), and also of collective torture. I believe that burning people alive, a practice documented so often in this book, can be considered collective torture. . . . The depths of savagery are symbolized by the places of torture and death: pits in the military outposts, tunnels where prisoners were held, the room in the military barracks in Santa Cruz del Quiché that was thickly coated in clotted blood, and the crematorium of freshly butchered bodies in Playa Grande (1994, 184).

This tearing of the social fabric of Guatemala was, thus, deliberate, systematic, and relentless on the part of the army. Its purpose was to break the will to resist, to render a proud people pliant and

submissive. The full brunt of the terror—the burning and the slaughter—hit Santa María Tzejá on Saturday, February 13, 1982.

### Terror in Santa María Tzejá

The oldest man in Santa María Tzejá fled with his family to their parcel of land, not far from the town center, where they could hear their animals being killed and see the smoke rising from their burning homes. Later he recalled, "My eyes have seen," he said, "what no human eyes should see."<sup>5</sup>

Another man told how his family had a new baby, just seven days old, on the thirteenth of February. The army arrived at their part of town at about two in the afternoon. Because they lived some distance from the center, they weren't aware of what was happening. When the army came near, they escaped, with only the clothes on their backs. Their house, all their food, and their animals were destroyed. They were left cowering in their cornfields, not knowing what was happening beyond their cornfields or why. They lived in isolated dread for periods ranging from two weeks to a year and a half, fearing that they would be tortured and murdered at any moment.

Manuel Canil, whose mother, wife, and four children were murdered, reported that on Wednesday, February 10, all but two villagers in nearby La Trinitaria were massacred. One survivor found the way to Santa María, where he told what had happened. Then, on Saturday, the thirteenth, men were working in their fields near the neighboring village of San José la Veinte when they saw columns of smoke rising from the direction of that village and figured it had been torched and the army would be coming to Santa María. Word of the army on the path came shortly, and all in Santa María grabbed what they could; some buried their most precious possessions and fled on foot for a half-hour to an hour and a half to their farmlands. In the melee family members were separated, in some cases for the next twelve years.

Manuel recalled feeling stunned as he realized what had happened. He tried to absorb the unspeakable loss of his mother, his wife, and four of his children. Amid the awful loneliness of that moment, he called to mind Jesus's words from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"