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Paradise In Ashes: A Guatemalan Journey Of Courage, Terror, And Hope (California Series In Public Anthropology)



Synopsis

Paradise in Ashes is a deeply engaged and moving account of the violence and repression that defined the murderous Guatemalan civil war of the 1980s. In this compelling book, Beatriz Manz—an anthropologist who spent over two decades studying the Mayan highlands and remote rain forests of Guatemala—tells the story of the village of Santa María Tzej, near the border with Mexico. Manz writes eloquently about Guatemala's tortured history and shows how the story of this village—its birth, destruction, and rebirth—embodies the forces and conflicts that define the country today. Drawing on interviews with peasants, community leaders, guerrillas, and paramilitary forces, Manz creates a richly detailed political portrait of Santa María Tzej, where highland Maya peasants seeking land settled in the 1970s. Manz describes these villagers' plight as their isolated, lush, but deceptive paradise became one of the centers of the war convulsing the entire country. After their village was viciously sacked in 1982, desperate survivors fled into the surrounding rain forest and eventually to Mexico, and some even further, to the United States, while others stayed behind and fell into the military's hands. With great insight and compassion, Manz follows their flight and eventual return to Santa María Tzej, where they sought to rebuild their village and their lives.

Book Information

Series: California Series in Public Anthropology (Book 8)

Paperback: 330 pages

Publisher: University of California Press; 1st edition (August 10, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0520246756

ISBN-13: 978-0520246751

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.8 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 7 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #120,682 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #9 in Books > History >

Americas > Central America > Guatemala #72 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > International & World Politics > Caribbean & Latin American #105 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > Latin America

Customer Reviews

Studies of genocide, military repression and the victimization of Latin American peasants tend to be

ordeals for all but the most dedicated reader, full of stultifying statistics and harrowing violent incidents. But this account of the settlement, destruction and rebuilding of a single Guatemalan village, Santa Maria Tzeja, is as emotionally enveloping as an Isabel Allende novel. Manz, a Chilean anthropologist, did over two decades of field work in the Mayan highlands and rain forests, and her deep familiarity with her subjects allows them to emerge as characters with individual hopes, dreams and sophisticated political goals. Santa Maria Tzeja was founded as a farming cooperative in the 1970s by intrepid Mayan and Ladino peasants seeking to escape the crushing debt peonage of the lowland plantations, but precisely because of its remote highland location, it was caught in the crossfire of the Guatemalan civil war. In 1982, after several years of escalating violence and intimidation, the village was brutally destroyed in an army raid retaliating against villagers' involvement with the guerrillas. From then on, the community was split, and Manz was often the only link among former inhabitants; some had fled to a refugee camp across the border in Mexico, while a remnant submitted to authoritarian "reorganization" by the military. Through interviews (and 23 b&w photos), villagers like Edwin Canil, a young boy who lost his entire family in the 1982 raid, or Rose, whose husband was "disappeared" by the army, reveal their struggles to uphold and return to their ideals of community, honor and independence through land ownership. Manz, a vivid and capable writer, is thoughtful about the contradictions inherent in her chosen discipline of "political anthropology," which turns out to include activism and advocacy as well as the humanization of those who too often suffer anonymously. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"No one could have written this book but Beatriz Manz: she understood the villagers in the most perceptive of ways, and she gained their trust. Her passion and lifetime of dedication to Guatemala shine through as she brings alive these exceptional human beings and the fire they walked through.

This is the story of the rise and destruction and gradual resurrection of a small Mayan village in northern Guatemala. Written by an anthropologist born in Chile (and I think educated in the U.S.) who spent decades, off and on, with the villagers. The story is so gripping that I could hardly put it down. Among my "take aways" was a new appreciation for the importance of the Catholic church and other international relief organizations, shame and disgust over the role of the U.S. government, especially under Ronald Reagan, in supporting the government in its massacre of Mayan villagers (and destruction of their homes) and deep admiration for the resourcefulness and spirit of the

Mayan people.

I was assigned this book by the author for a class she teaches (this alone is reason to respect the author less) The story itself is fascinating, but the book reads choppy..... Each time I found myself becoming engaged, I was immediately put off by Manz' need to interject herself into the story... I found her presence distracting and unnecessary...This is a story that NEEDS to be told, I just don't think this is the best way to tell it.

the book was in the condition as stated; a few highlighting here and there the content itself is very interesting, even much more when we have the personal interaction with Prof. Manz since it was for the class

In this text, Manz tells us a 30-year story beginning with the Guatemalan Civil War. Her chronicle focuses on the evolution of a small Guatemalan village named Santa Maria Tzeja. She tells the story from the sequential stance of creation, destruction, and resurrection. Within this structural narrative Manz covers an eclectic compendium of grassroot stories that range from community identity to indigenous struggles for equality, from hope to compassion, from survival to death. This review is organized as follows. First I briefly describe the context of Guatemala in the 1980s and 1990s; I describe the human casualties and national holocaust starting from a broader perspective into a narrower local angle. The second part describes the approach, methods and methodology that Manz used to tell her story. The Guatemalan Civil War lasted from 1960 to 1996. The origin of the war dates back to the U.S. intervention in 1954, when the elected government of Arbenz was overthrown. The coup was planned by the CIA to impose governments that would better serve the interests of the United States. After being run a few years by US-friendly presidents, in 1960 a group of young military officers started a revolution to depose "foreign interests" from Guatemalan territory. When they failed, several went into hiding or exile and established close ties with other revolutionary countries. This rebellious group became the nucleus of the organized armed forces insurrection against the Guatemalan government that would last 36 years. A twelve-volume report, published by the United Nations promoter, the Historical Clarification Commission, reported that about two hundred thousand (200,000) Guatemalans were murdered during this period -- 93% at the hands of state forces and related paramilitary groups. More than six hundred massacres took place across the nation. From 1981 to 1983, as many as 1.5 million people, out of 8 million Guatemalans, were displaced internally or had to flee the country. This book (Paradise in Ashes) is the story of Santa

Maria Tzeja. It chronicles the exceptional moments of birth, destruction and rebirth of the small village, in El Quinche province, over three decades of authoritarian rule. Manz argues that although Santa Maria Tzeja is not a "typical village" in Guatemala, it is a place that fully embodies the forces and conflicts defining contemporary Guatemala. Furthermore, the author claims that the village has been persistently troubled since it's founding. The peasants who first arrived there had always been squeezed by the lack of land, and given the political structure of the country, had little or no chances of overcoming these difficulties. The fate of Santa Maria Tzeja was sealed in 1980, when the village was visited by a band of men that would later grow to be Guatemala's largest insurgent organization: the Ejercito Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP). This only brought more attention to the area by the repressive regime. In fact, the repressive regime was said to deploy troops to track down guerilleros "wherever they may be". Thus, the 1982 sacking of the Santa Maria Tzeja was only a representative moment of the cross-national massive and systematic genocide that was taking place in whole Guatemala. For one group of people it all started with the dream of a beautiful life in the rainforest. Far from the oppression in the highland, a new opportunity seemed to arise in the rainforest virgin territory. For this reason people from all over Guatemala walked through the jungle to fund Santa Maria Tzeja in the rainforest area in 1970. The common purpose was to work land (fincas) and have peaceful life with family. But the high inequality levels and poverty conditions did not disappear with this new dream. The government refused to give land titles to the peasants so that they could organize and work their own terrain. This rejection drew the peasants closer to the rebel forces that loomed the area in search of justice and dignity. In fact, it was this unfavorable political, social and economic framework that finally invited peasants in to joining the guerilla movement. During the late 1970s and early 1990s the activities of the EGP accelerated protests and social unrest throughout Guatemala. The horrible political, social and economic conditions in the rainforest area made their inhabitants especially vulnerable to participation in this movement. By the early 1980s the national violence environment of politics met the village. During these years random people began to be kidnapped, teachers and workers were innocently assassinated and many others seemed to mysteriously disappear. Finally, in February of that year troops marched into the town with the intent to take out any guerilla movements present. The village had already taken sides with the insurgents, but "the army had broken the foremost rule of combat: to distinguish combatants from civilians. The soldiers moved against the peasants firing their weapons at pointblank range" (pp. 121-123). Atrocious crimes against the innocent villagers forced the survivors to escape towards Mexico or to hide in the rain forest. By 1983 the military had imposed a political and social organization destroying the social tissue of society. While most of the villagers from

Santa Maria Tzeja were safe across the border in Mexico many others remained in Guatemala in clandestinity, with poor information and misguided hope (pp. 135). Conditions ostensibly got worse when Rios Montt took over. For example, Manz mentions that reports clearly state that soldiers in the eastern Ixcán area were instructed to search and capture the population to maintain control (pp. 148). In essence the military concentrated on emptying the whole region by destroying all food sources and infrastructure. The "Beans and Bullets" project is a good example of how the army operated: food for those with them, bullets for those against them. The army's strategy of rebuilding villages, and Guatemalan cities in general, was to recruit new settlers, which would conform a loyal base for them. They would occupy the emptied towns. In fact, when rebuilt in 1983 the new Santa Maria Tzeja was comprised of 60% new people (pp. 156). As an anecdote Manz tells that when she arrived back in the village in 1985 she was stunned to discover a depressing combination of extreme poverty and social atomization. In essence, "the military had succeeded in flattening the village physically [it restructured the layout to military style], shattering its social relations, displacing its people and dominating its present" (pp. 182). In the mid 1980s, Vinicio Cerezo was elected President. He created the "Special Commission to Aid Repatriates". Although it was ultimately set forth because of political motives, it was one of the first signs that the worst had passed. By 1987 the refugees had formed a broad organization called the "Permanent Commissions" to negotiate their homecoming. In Santa Maria Tzeja this process of repatriation, involved a special procedure. The people that had arrived (by military instruction) at the village years before, to reset the political and social standardization, were not exactly happy with the return of the refugees. Manz tells that one of the new settlers commented that they would wait for the antiguos "with machetes and guns". This is a good example, again, of how the military purposely divided Guatemalan society. Finally reunification took its course. By 1988 the repatriation was on its way. By 1994 most villagers had returned to Santa Maria Tzeja, and by 1997 it proved to be a self-sufficient city (pp. 192-194). With the help of NGOs and other transnational funding agencies, Santa Maria Tzeja emerged as a strong regional center. Manz names a number of factors that contributed to the successful return of settlers, and the subsequent thriving development in the area. First, she mentions that the underlying sense of cooperation and community that the village forged in the highland, and tempered in the early years in the village, was an essential feature that maintained the commune together to the end. However, she also says that the political savvy and organizational skills that villagers adopted later on were as important. The geographical cohesion played another essential role: all the refugees from Santa Maria Tzeja ended up in the same refugee camp (this created a sense of unity between them). Manz also argues that the presence of original settlers in Santa Maria Tzeja was a

great factor for acclimating the returning ones; it was a crucial connection to the past. Finally Santa Maria Tzeja was the first village to negotiate the return of refugees and thus got an important advantage of the economic and political costs of relocation. Manz spent in-and-out thirty years in Guatemala to recompile this text. Her hope was to capture the spirit of what took place in the village by documenting discussions, arguments, observations, laughter and tears. The ethnographic method allowed her the closeness to understand what took place, and time provided the distance to put it into perspective. Her work is unique given her double involvement. As an observer she felt the "commitment to both providing perspective, and when necessary to not flinching from the unpleasant, either in her interactions with the villagers, or in her writing role" (pp. 6). Thus, she is constantly between anthropology and activism, between scholarship and political engagement (pp. 7). In a certain sense she criticizes traditional anthropologist of being distant, dispassionate, and inattentive to national or world politics, of being ostensibly neutral and dangerously apolitical (pp. 6). Manz argues that anthropology is far more complex than taking the objective role of an interviewer. As an anecdote she recalls that most anthropologists at the time were troubled by doing fieldwork in the countryside, such as Santa Maria Tzeja, that was militarized with troops, government torture and death squad activity (pp. 9). For that reason, many conformed for interviews in Guatemala City years after the worst had passed. Manz notes that this is a serious problem for truly understanding and encapsulating the truth behind the whole event. She argues that many ethnographers instead of focusing on the "Guatemalan situation", that is now known as a holocaust, decided to focus on other on going issues. An example of this is the scholarly publication records. During the 1980s research published in the seven major anthropological journals tended to be more related to ethnohistory or sociolinguistics than to policy or economic related issues (pp. 8). Manz seems to take issue with this for a number of reasons. First she argues that there is an inherent challenge faced by all anthropologists when facing violence and atrocities: what truly matters is how to protect the individuals and communities. She argues that an engaged ethnographer should report on human rights violations in a tone that will allow such events to inform the reader. This became an issue in Guatemala during the 1980s because most anthropologist that arrived were foreign, and as such cared little about Guatemalans, "sponging" everything they could with indifference and failing to do anything to help those exposed to injustice and violence.

The job of an ethnographer seems to be to call them as she sees them and this is exactly what Beatrice Manz does in this moving and frightening book. The land tenure system she describes in Guatemala is unbelievable to outsiders--the plight of peasants there is comparable to that faced by

African-American citizens in the south after the end of Reconstruction. The law was what the landowners said it was and they had state power to back it up. In Guatemala this induced the police, the army and semi-official paramilitary death squads which were as lawless as the night riders of the Ku Klux Klan but more effective. The village that Manz studies is incredibly poor. The people of the village decide to set out for the wild northern part of Guatemala where land has been promised. Once there, having borne the hardships of a trek through unimproved jungle they found that their very existence was a threat to the landowning class. Using methods which the U.S. had tried in Vietnam (and which were first used years before in Central America by the U.S. trained military) the villagers were rounded up into strategic hamlet type operations with military posts nearby, informers to spy upon them and agent provocateurs to infiltrate their political and social organizations. It is a heartbreaking tale but ultimately uplifting as Manz shows that the human spirit is indomitable. Beautifully written--this may be an academic study but is by no means done in "academic" prose--and well worth reading.

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