

AN INSTINCT TO SURVIVE

By W. GEORGE LOVELL

'Few parts of Guatemala radiate a more sinister spirit of place than do the remote provinces in whose mountain reaches Maya culture has withstood the onslaught of outside forces for almost five centuries'

Predominantly Indian communities (over 20 distinct language groups in all) are to be found throughout the rugged

highland region to the north and west of the capital, Guatemala City. Ladinos are most numerous in the east of the coun-

try (the Oriente), in the Costa Sur (the Pacific "South Coast") and in the Petén lowlands far to the north. The plural dimension of Guatemalan society thus is geographically visible in a way that is striking, often disconcerting. The pristine, telluric lives of the highland Maya appear considerably removed from the affairs of Ladino businessmen in the capital or plantation owners in the Oriente or Costa Sur.

Cultural diversity is reinforced by physical diversity. Just as anthropologists marvel at the resilience and uniqueness of native mores, so naturalists stand in awe at the breathtaking splendors of the Guatemalan landscape, ethereal yet mournful to behold. It is a dark beauty that hurts, made up of unusual pieces of earth, varied in texture and kaleidoscopic in the passage of light. The trees, flowers and birds of the cool highlands to the north and west of

THAT THE COUNTRIES of Latin America, in the course of the 20th century, have experienced what is commonly known as a "population explosion" is today a well-recognized public fact. Less well known, however, is that many of these same countries, four centuries ago, underwent a "population collapse" the severity of which, viewed in aggregate, probably exceeded any demographic disaster ever recorded by history. Neither the ravages of the Black Death in 14th-century Europe nor the 40 million deaths that occurred worldwide through hunger in 1985 approach the magnitude of Amerindian mortality following the Old World's enduring first encounter with the new.

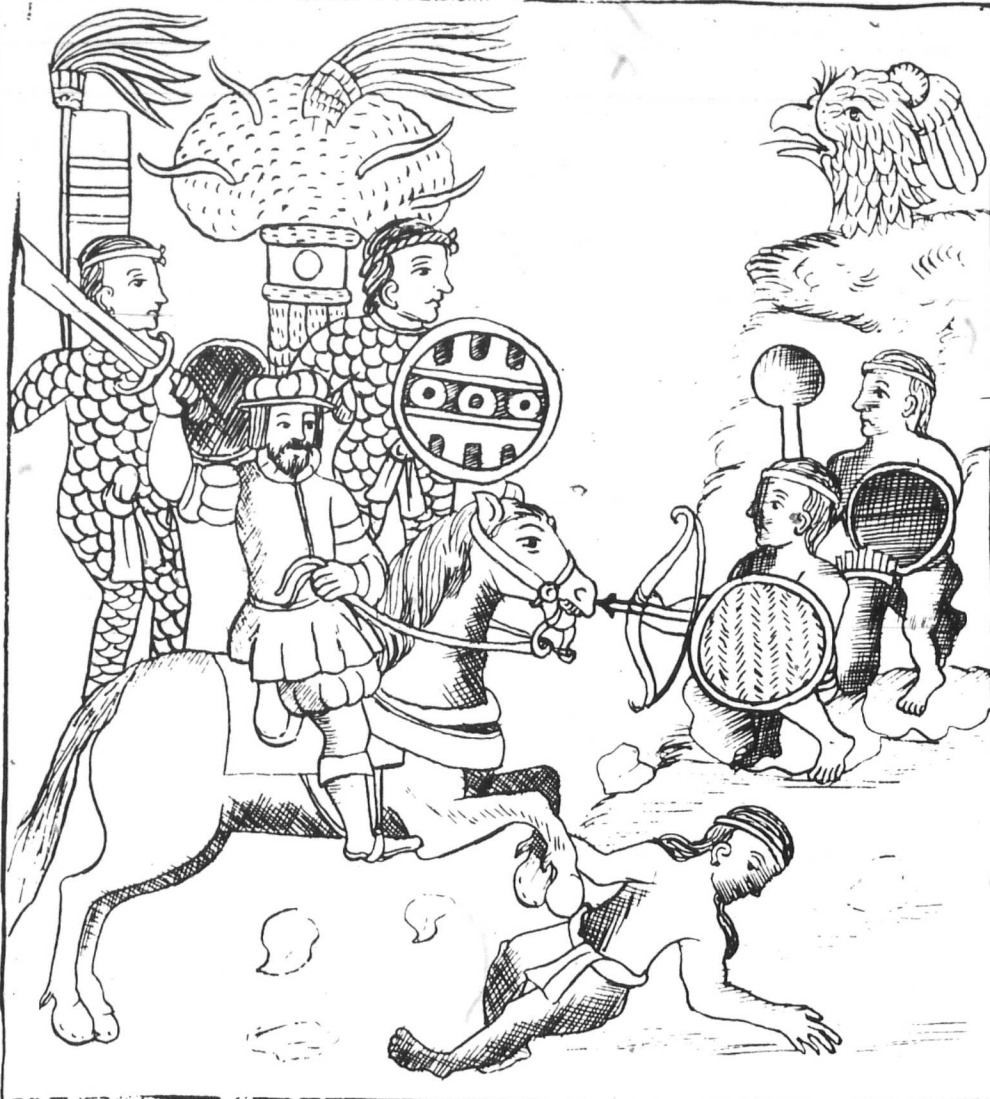
Scholarly debate persists over which figures, hemispherically, most accurately reflect the extent and rapidity of indigenous depopulation, but it is now accepted that the decline was precipitous and continued for decades after the initial contact. Colonial Spanish missionaries who witnessed their native charges perish from what many Europeans considered divine retribution for earthly sins could never have imagined that lands sparsely inhabited by the end of the 16th century would one day be repopulated by Indians two or three times more numerous than their contact-period ancestors.

An awareness of population history, specifically the dynamic of long-term processes of decline, recovery and growth, is central to any analysis of social change in Latin America. Nowhere is this more unequivocally the case than in Guatemala. The least understood and most neglected of the Central American republics, Guatemala is a country where several basic demographic variables have, for some time, shaped the nature and direction of political repression. While many aspects of what exactly unfolded in Guatemala during the past decade remain unclear, one conclusion is indisputable: a succession of military regimes — the last of which next week hands over the office of government to civilian authorities — has ruthlessly waged war on its own people, especially its myriad Indian communities. The tragedy of Guatemala is one in which the issue of Indian survival, past and present, figures prominently.

The cultural setting

Guatemala is the third largest but most populous country in Central America. About half of its approximately eight million inhabitants are of Mayan Indian extraction. Ladinos, persons of mixed Spanish and Indian descent, compose the majority of the remainder, with a small but powerful group of pure-blooded or almost pure-blooded whites and some scattered blacks completing the ethnic picture.

Guerra de Guatemala by Diego Muñoz Camargo, from the *Historia de Tlaxcala*, a late 16th-century manuscript showing warriors from Tlaxcala assisting a mounted Spaniard in the conquest of Guatemala (courtesy of the Special Collections Department of Glasgow University Library)



Guatemala City seem to belong to a different planet than those of the hot and humid coastal lowlands of the Petén rainforest. Even in Guatemala few parts radiate a more sinister and otherworldly spirit of place than do the Cuchumatán highlands of Huehuetenango and El Quiché, remote provinces in whose mountain reaches Maya culture has withstood the onslaught of outside forces for almost five centuries.

Compared with other parts of Guatemala, the resource base of the Cuchumatán highlands (or Sierra de los Cuchumatanes) is of limited exploitable potential. The region, as a result, was regarded by entrepreneurially minded Spaniards for most of the colonial period (1525-1821) as something of an economic backwater. One Spanish governor in the 16th century crudely described the Cuchumatanes as a "poor and unfruitful land" where the only plentiful things to be had were "corn and chickens." While not completely accurate — silver mining and livestock raising were locally of some significance — the lands and the peoples of the Cuchumatanes were relatively untouched by the Spanish quest for wealth that had such a dramatic impact on other better-endowed parts of Central America.

This is not to imply that the imperial enterprise was intangible, nor to suggest that it left no permanent traces on the Cuchumatán landscape. There was quite simply little here of interest to engender and sustain an intensive Spanish presence. Independence from Spain and the establishment of the republic of Guatemala in the early 19th century was an event of no great relevance to the Indians alive at the time, most of whom had long since fashioned for themselves an elaborate culture of refuge based on Hispanic ways they had absorbed and Mayan ones they had steadfastly retained. Their descendants, however, were greatly affected by reforms implemented at the turn of the century, when "modernization" as envisioned by a series of Liberal governments resulted in an attack on Indian land and an assault on Indian labor.

One of the principal designs of these reforms was to create an export economy based on the production of coffee. While such a goal was achieved — to this day coffee production, together with the cultivation of bananas, cotton and sugar cane, dominates the Guatemalan economy — it was at no small cost to Maya communities, some of which lost more than half their ancestral terrain to Ladino planters. Thus it is encroachment in the republican era, not seizure during the colonial period, that lies at the root of Guatemala's grossly inequitable distribution of land. Today a mere two per cent of all farm units account for 65 per cent of the total area under cultivation, most of which produces food for export abroad while four out of five Guatemalan children go malnourished. Although land expropriation and the recruitment of native labor did much to erode the closed and corporate nature of Maya culture, Indian life in the Cuchumatanes was not as ruinously dismantled in the course of the Liberal reforms as during the brutal civil strife of recent years.

Maya survival

The following table shows fluctua-

tions in the Mayan population of the Cuchumatán highlands of Huehuetenango and El Quiché since the time of the Spanish conquest:

Year	Population
1520	260,000
1530	150,000
1550	73,000
1582	47,000
1683	16,000
1778	27,505
1825	34,691
1880	136,467
1950	274,381
1973	525,399
1980	670,784
1985	763,794

In terms of regional ethnic mix, Maya groups such as the Aguatec, Chuj, Ixil, Jacalteco, Kanjobal, Mam and Uspantec have always predominated, comprising 100 per cent of the population at European contact, 95 per cent at Independence in 1821 and about 75 per cent in the present day.

The collapse of the Cuchumatán population following conquest by imperial Spain — a decline of more than 90 per cent over a period of about 150 years — was caused by:

- armed confrontation between Spanish and Indian forces, whereby the latter suffered heavy losses on account of the superior military apparatus (including steel weaponry, gunpowder, horses and fighting dogs) of the former;
- the disruption and disintegration of native societies by the imposition of certain practices that altered the ecological and psychological harmony of the Mayan world, the impact of which might best be regarded as culture shock;
- the inadvertent but fatal transfer, by invading Spaniards and their Negro slaves, of an array of Old World diseases against which Cuchumatán Indians, like their counterparts throughout the new world, were immunologically defenceless.

Of these three causes, disease was the most destructive. Bloody and protracted though the conquest was, Old World diseases such as smallpox, typhus and measles (to name but three recurrent killers) consumed more Indian lives than did Hispanic depravity and greed, and did so with considerable devastation long after the assertion of hegemony by fire and sword was necessary. Singling out the disease factor, however, does not mean that we should overlook the fact that Indian depopulation also occurred as a result of harsh treatment and relentless exploitation at the hands of conquering Spaniards.

If pandemics that carried off one-third to one-half of the Cuchumatán population underlie 16th-century collapse, repeated outbreaks of pestilence in the 17th and 18th centuries effectively stalled significant demographic recovery. Not until the very end of the colonial period did the Maya begin to recover from the impact of conquest in a sustained and steady manner. This increase continued with gathering momentum throughout the 19th century.

The sharp rise in human numbers can again be linked to three key developments:

- the eventual ability of the native population, after centuries of acute vulnerability, to generate the antibodies necessary for natural protection against Old World diseases;

- the relative success of quarantine procedures, set up by both colonial and republican administrations, that monitored and attempted to control the flow of goods and persons to and from areas where disease was known to prevail;
- the initiation of programs of vaccination and other preventive measures against the spread of infectious disease.

While none of these measures led to the eradication of pestilence — there were serious outbreaks of smallpox in Guatemala between 1829-31, and cholera took a heavy toll in 1837 and again in 1857 — its historic role as a Malthusian check was drawing to a close.

Impressive though population recovery was in the 19th century, it pales in comparison with rates of increase in the 20th century. Primarily because of de-

'Bloody and protracted though the Spanish conquest of the Maya of Guatemala was, Old World diseases such as smallpox, typhus and measles consumed more Indian lives than did Hispanic depravity and greed, and did so with considerable devastation'

clining mortality brought about by modern medical technology reaching even the most isolated Maya communities, the past six decades have witnessed a staggering growth in population. The scenario is a familiar one throughout Latin America: death rates fall, fertility remains at the same high level as before, and population embarks on an unprecedented spiral upwards.

In the Cuchumatanes, population increase was such that, towards the middle of this century, as many people inhabited the region as did on the eve of the Spanish conquest. Continued growth resulted in the Cuchumatán population in the mid-1970s being roughly twice as large as it was a quarter century previously. Viewed in a long, retrospective sweep, Maya survival may be depicted as a demographic situation in which a population takes over four hundred years to replace itself, then doubles in size within one or two generations. With both land resources and economic opportunities extremely limited, the swelling of the Cuchumatán population carried alarming implications for a region, and a nation, in which the human prospect (especially for Indians) has rarely been anything but dismal and bleak.

Creative response

By the mid-1970s Indians in the Cuchumatanes and elsewhere in the highlands had responded to population growth in four important ways:

- by investing money earned from plantation labor in local ventures such as petty trading, small-scale cash cropping and land improvement;
- by employing chemical fertilizers to

raise crop production on their tiny mountain plots;

- by forming co-operatives that promoted alternative agricultural techniques and marketing strategies;
- by increasing community awareness — through schooling often initiated by a development program known as Catholic Action — of the root causes of rural poverty.

On Feb. 4, 1976, a devastating earthquake hit the Guatemalan highlands, causing widespread destruction and heavy loss of life. But an even more devastating, unnatural disaster was to follow. Largely because of the modest initiatives mentioned above, Maya communities at the time of the earthquake had become significantly more self-reliant than before. Of particular importance was the formation, through co-operative efforts, of local alternatives to seasonal migration and periods of work on coffee, cotton and sugar cane plantations. Immediately after the earthquake Indians placed a higher priority on remaining in the highlands to rebuild their ruined communities than on working in the plantations of the Pacific Coast. Matters worsened when co-operatives had little to do with government plans for reconstruction they knew from past experience would be ineffective and graft ridden; instead, they solicited funds for rebuilding directly from international relief agencies, among them a number of Canadian organizations. The stage was then set for a major confrontation between community and state interests. In order to preserve the status quo, the Guatemalan government, at the command and in the service of a privileged few, declared war on its Indian peasantry.

State terror

The front to the outside world, of course, is that a struggle is underway in Guatemala to prevent the country falling to international communism. Over the past eight years or so, a lethal counterinsurgency by the military regimes of Presidents Lucas García, Ríos Montt and Mejía Victores has claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Maya Indians, most of whom probably never knew who Karl Marx was, let alone understood or agreed with the ideals he upheld. Plotted in blood, a map of massacres perpetrated by the Guatemalan armed forces between 1981 and 1985 indicates a marked concentration in the Indian northwest, especially the provinces of Huehuetenango and El Quiché.

Reports of the systematic annihilation of entire communities are not pleasant to hear or read about, but we must deal with them, even if their repulsive savagery precludes rational explanation. What took place on July 17, 1982, at Finca San Francisco, a remote settlement in Huehuetenango near the Mexican border, is no more gruesome an event than hundreds of others. One eyewitness, a survivor whose evidence is corroborated by fellow villagers who also escaped the carnage, offers the following testimony:

The soldiers took our wives out of the church in groups of 10 or 20. Then 12 or 12 soldiers went into our houses to rape our wives. After they were finished raping them, they shot our wives and burned the houses down.

All our children had been left



In one village, soldiers took women and children from a church and killed them

locked up in the church. They were crying, our poor children were screaming. They were calling us. Some of the bigger ones were aware that their mothers were being killed and were shouting and calling out to us.

They took the children outside. The soldiers killed them with knife stabs. We could see them. They killed them in the house in front of the church. They yanked them by the hair and stabbed them in the bellies; then they disemboweled our poor little children. Still they cried. When they finished disemboweling them, they threw them into the house and then brought out more.

Then they started with the old people.

"What fault is it of ours," the old people said.

"OUTSIDE!" a soldier said. They took the poor old people out and stabbed them as if they were animals. It made the soldiers laugh. Poor old people, they were crying and suffering. They killed them with dull machetes. They took them outside and put them on top of a board; then they started to hack at them with a rusty machete. It was pitiful how

they broke the poor old people's necks.

They began to take out the adults, the grown men of working age. They took us out by groups of 10. Soldiers were standing there waiting to throw the prisoners down in the patio of the courthouse. Then they shot them. When they finished shooting, they piled them up and other soldiers came and carried the bodies into the church.

Left-wing guerrilla organizations certainly exist in Guatemala and engage in revolutionary armed combat. But government security forces fail to distinguish between "subversives" and "Indians"; indeed, the two are held to be synonymous. Any popular rural base guerrilla units enjoyed in the early 1980s had been greatly eroded by the bombardment of native settlements, the destruction of personal property and belongings, the burning of crops and supplies, the killing of livestock and the regrouping of "cleared" or "suspect" communities into "model villages" or "strategic hamlets" watched over by vigilant and well-equipped troops.

Within Guatemala an estimated one million Indians — which is to say one Maya in four — are thought to have fled



Some Indians fled to the cities, discarding native garb to avoid persecution

or been displaced from their homes between 1981 and 1984 as a result of counterinsurgency tactics. Some of those displaced sought refuge in the forests and mountains surrounding their gutted communities, where they wandered for months in search of food and shelter. Others drifted to the squatter settlements of Guatemala City, discarding there both native garb and Maya tongue in an effort to Ladinoize and live. Pushed beyond the limits of endurance, still others moved into the guerrilla fold, took up arms and now fight back. At least 100,000 Maya fled across the border west and north into Mexico, where many remain.

For native males left behind, demonstration of political correctness involves regular service in one of the civil defence patrols set up by the Guatemalan army to help police the countryside. Since such a commitment often entails long hours standing guard at village entrances or trails leaving town, in some areas fields have been neglected or improperly attended at a time when population pressure on the land — recent atrocities notwithstanding — calls for scrupulous attention to agricultural chores. Poor local harvests, especially in 1982 and 1983, meant that many Indians

were not only intimidated and dispossessed, but received far less food than was potentially available.

However, like conquest by imperial Spain in the 16th century, counterinsurgency in the 1980s represent for the Maya of Guatemala neither victory nor defeat. What it does represent is yet another intrusion to which Indians must (and will) adapt. Ignominious but not apocalyptic, it is within this historical context that next week's transition to civilian rule must be evaluated.

Future prospects

When Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo assumes the presidency of Guatemala next Tuesday, he will take political office but not gain control of executive decision-making that normally accompanies elevation to the rank of chief-of-state. Real power in Guatemala will continue to rest with generals and colonels in the armed forces. Cerezo, leader of the Christian Democracy Party, himself fully recognizes this fact. When interviewed by *Time* magazine last October, two months before he secured 68 per cent of the vote in a runoff election on Dec. 8, Cerezo candidly admitted: "In the first six months I'll have 30 per cent of the power. In the first two years I'll

have 50 per cent, and I'll never have more than 70 per cent of the power during my five year term." His realistic assessment was echoed by the Archbishop of Guatemala City, Próspero Penados del Barrio, who remarked: "Whoever becomes President is going to have to move with great caution. You cannot have a dialogue with the armed forces."

One of the main reasons for the pragmatism of the heads of both church and state is the existence in Guatemala of a parallel structure of government known, in somewhat Orwellian vernacular, as the National System of Interinstitutional Co-ordination. Set up by the armed forces so as to insure that various levels of bureaucracy will have "trustworthy" representation, this framework is designed to perfect any important decision being made without military involvement. Thus the hold that the armed forces have exerted on Guatemalan political life for over 30 years will not be relinquished. Instead, certain powers will be entrusted to a civilian government that knows that whatever proposals it puts forward will be reviewed and, if necessary, revised or reversed. Like the Guatemalan press, Cerezo's government will function on a basis of self-censorship.

Democratization, moreover, will not proceed in Guatemala in the same way and with similar results as presently it does in Argentina. Past deeds, from plunder of the national treasure to orchestration of horrific acts of war, will not be held accountable. Unlike Generals Videla and Galtieri, Romeo Lucas Garcia will be safe in his sanctuary in the Verapaz, Efraín Ríos Montt will continue his evangelical proselytizing at home and abroad, and Oscar Mejía Víctores will retire for weekend relaxation to the fortress-like mansion currently under construction for him in Antigua.

If these observations seem overly cynical, in fairness it must also be said that Cerezo enjoys great popularity, ran a sincere campaign and won an election that, by Guatemalan standards, was honest and unfraudulent. A brave and lucky man who has survived numerous attempts on his life, Cerezo is well aware of the dangers of moderate politics in a land where extremes are the norm. He advocated peace talks with the National Guatemalan Revolutionary Union, an organization which collectively represents various factions of the political left. During a brief visit to Washington after his successful election, Cerezo claimed his government would delay requests from the United States for up to \$10 million in military aid already budgeted for Guatemala.

Economic aid is likely to be a different matter. Between 1978 and 1984, counterinsurgency not only killed an estimated 60,000 Guatemalans and precipitated the "disappearance" of 35,000 more, it also had a disastrous effect on an economy that was hitherto reasonably healthy, well-managed and subsidized by underpaid local labor. Capital flight, increases in joblessness and underemployment, rising inflation, falling productivity and decreases in the value of traditional export crops have signalled severe economic contraction that only a resumption of full-scale assistance from the United States can alleviate. (The U.S. Congress has, since 1977, made economic assistance contingent upon improvement in human rights, a



Violence is inescapable for the Maya of Guatemala, yet they endure

tie that the Reagan administration persistently attempts to unravel). While at \$2.3 billion foreign debt appears miniscule in comparison to what is owed international bankers by Mexico and Brazil, unless terms are renegotiated, interest payments alone will actually absorb some 40 per cent of Guatemala's annual export earnings.

Repayment of the national debt, however, will remain a notion alien to the concerns of most Indian families. For them there is primarily the hope that, after years of disruption, life in the highlands may return once again to its ancient seasonal rhythm.

When engaged in conversation, Indians are at times characteristically reti-

cent, at times unusually forthright. They repeatedly comment that their situation has improved significantly in the past year, that they have freer access to their fields, that both government forces and guerrilla units sweep through their traumatized communities less and less frequently. Forlorn and implacable, around them still is a painful aura of injustice and loss. But when they speak frankly of barbarous events, it is increasingly in the past tense, expressing a collective hope that the worst (at least for a little while) may now be over.

Although it is clear that the Guatemalan military is most responsible for the slaughter and destruction unleashed

on the Maya, revolutionary insurgents are by no means blameless. Especially in Huehuetenango and El Quiché, Indians suffered badly when the guerrilla army of the poor retreated in the face of a massive and prolonged counter-offensive, leaving unarmed villagers behind to bear savage reprisal for having provided food, shelter, or moral support for the insurgents. Caught in the middle, scores and scores of communities paid dearly with the blood of men, women and children. As if to drum in the message of government response should Indians ever rise to rebellion, a slogan displayed at the army barracks in a town called Sacapulas grimly declares:

Only he who fights
has the right to win.
Only he who wins
has the right to live.

On a chilly Saturday before Christmas I sat in the town square at Sacapulas, observed the boyish antics of teenage soldiers guarding the barracks and tried to contemplate the meaning of these words. At a time of peace and good will they offered nothing of the sort. As the sky leaked rain I resolved that, in Guatemala, violence is not an extreme act of last resort but a cultural, historical and structural constant, a natural fixture in the daily round. It is endemic and inescapable, manifest in recurring tides of ebb and flow. Like corn and chocolate, it is a Guatemalan domesticate, but one that kills life, not one that sustains or enriches it.

To accommodate violence as a fact of life, yet somehow keep on, calls for a kind of endeavor beyond the reach and faith of most human beings. It also demands rare and unflinching courage, for such a predilection may in itself be considered a threat or a source of resistance. The omnipresent risk of violent, murderous death is something Indians in Guatemala have endured from conquest to counterinsurgency. Few people anywhere could cope with such a reality and remain sane and alive. The Maya, if nothing else, are survivors. □

W. George Lovell teaches in the Department of Geography at Queen's University. The author of *Conquest and Survival in Colonial Guatemala*, published last year by McGill-Queen's Press, he recently returned from his 10th trip to Central America.

