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Ezra Fieser is interested in economic and political changes in Central America. He is an ICWA fellow living in Guatemala where he will write about the country's rapidly changing economic structure and the effects on its politics, culture and people. He was formerly the deputy city editor for The (Wilmington, Del.) News Journal, a staff writer for Springfield (Mass.) Republican and a Pulliam Fellow at The Arizona Republic. He is a graduate of Emerson College in Boston.

Institute of Current World Affairs

The Crane-Rogers Foundation
4545 42nd St. NW, Ste 311
Washington, D.C. 20016

Tel: 202-364-4068
Fax: 202-364-0498
E-mail: icwa@icwa.org
Web: www.icwa.org

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Re-counting the Dead in Guatemala

"All things which can be known have number; for it is not possible for a thing to be conceived or known without number."

— Philolaus, a Greek Pythagorean

By Ezra K. Fieser

GUATEMALA CITY—For all its brutality and all the harm it caused, the Guatemalan Civil War is often reduced to a clean, rounded number: 200,000 killed or disappeared. Not a foreign newspaper or magazine article publishes without mentioning it. Not a piece of Guatemalan history is written without explaining it. But what if it is wrong?

More than a decade after the war ended, teams of researchers are uncovering new facts about how the war played out. Their research could recast the face of the conflict, which ended in 1996. Long thought of as a largely one-dimensional slaughter of indigenous people, the war is looking more like an all-out suppression of opposition that touched all levels of society. While the researchers' goal is not to produce a new estimate of the war's death toll, their work is exposing that the previous estimate may be short. Forensic anthropologists working under constant death threats are discovering more mass-grave sites exist than originally thought. And archivists sifting through a warehouse full of national police records are piecing together the unknown picture of what happened to the 'disappeared.'

"It may well be that the number is low," said Christian Tomuschat, the German human-rights lawyer who was chair of the UN fact-finding commission that first quoted the figure.

The number first appeared in 1999. That



A pair of sandals and a piece of clothing found next to the bones of a woman killed during Guatemala's civil war. The clothing is often a critical clue in identifying the body.

year, the UN commission, called the Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarification, released its report on the Guatemalan Civil War. The commission was formed as part of the peace-accords process that ended a 36-year civil war. The war pitted state forces — the national police, the military and civil patrols — against armed revolutionary movements. It began in 1960, six years after the democratically elected President Jacobo Arbenz was overthrown in a coup orchestrated by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. In 1960, a group of discontented military officers attempted their own coup. It failed and the officers splintered off, forming the core of the armed revolutionary movement. Over the following decades, the war shifted between oppression in the city, where subversives were tracked down and abducted, and massacres in the countryside. To piece together its account, the commission interviewed thousands of war survivors and drew heavily from a Catholic Church-sponsored truth

commission, which had presented its report a year earlier. The UN commission's report, *"Guatemala: Memoria del silencio,"* a 3,500-page, nine-volume work, took 18 months to complete.

It is filled with rich, disturbing details of the massacres, based on interviews with those who witnessed them. It concluded 669 massacres were carried out, state forces were responsible for 93 percent of the killings, and that Mayans drew the brunt of the violence, making up 83 percent of victims. Passages such as this, a first-hand account from a survivor, are found throughout the report:

"They tortured him, they removed his heart, they beheaded him, he was hung in a tree with his trousers down. Vultures were eating him. ... next to him were two other corpses that could not be identified because vultures had eaten them."

In total, the report registered 42,275 victims, including men, woman and children. It said 23,671 were arbitrarily executed and 6,159 were disappeared. Those numbers, however, were just part of the overall death toll.

"We engaged in long discussions about the question of how many lives were taken by the civil war," Tomuschat, a lawyer, professor, and jurist, said by phone from his home in Germany this month. "I think one of the most important things we did was to describe in detail some of the cases, which was very important work. But in order to be complete, we definitely needed a global figure."

To provide that global figure, the commission turned to Patrick Ball, a Ph.D. statistician who has conducted statistical analysis in human-rights cases around the world. Using the information the commission collected, Ball developed a scientific model from which the global number came.

According to Ball, the number he produced was two-thirds science and one-third guesswork. "The 132,000 number is a scientifically defensible estimate. The rest of it, 70,000 or so, is thumb sucking," he told me by phone. He now directs the Human Rights Program at the Benetech Initiative, a California-based nonprofit that assists in human rights cases.

Those involved with researching the war's aftermath believe that the overall number of 200,000 is low because the estimate of 70,000 — which Ball said is little more than a best guess — does not take into account the actual number of urban victims, among other things. And the fact that it's a neat, rounded number raises questions.

Of course, estimating the magnitude of war crimes — that is, to come up with an accurate number — is notoriously difficult. Slobodan Milosevic was estimated to have been responsible for the deaths of 250,000 Bosnians before that number was revised to closer to 65,000. In 2006, U.S. researchers from Johns Hopkins University drew criticism for their estimate that the first 3 ½ years of the war in Iraq

claimed about 654,000 civilian lives. Most other estimates had put the count at closer to 100,000.

During wartime, the work is difficult because lack of access to the population limits sample sizes. But the circumstances in Guatemala were different. The fact-finding mission took place after the peace accords were signed. However, the commission's access was still limited. The government refused to cooperate.

"We had no governmental sources at our disposal," Tomuschat said. "The government was very little prepared to cooperate with us."

Guatemala paid for less than 10 percent of the commission's \$10 million budget. But more importantly, Tomuschat said, it did not compel any police or military officials — from the architects of the massacres to the soldiers that carried them out — to testify. "There was an attitude of refusal," he said.

The government's disdain for the fact-finding process led the commission to wade conservatively as it produced its report.

"We did not want to be challenged by the government. We said 'please, keep it [the estimate of deaths] on the lower level,'" Tomuschat said. "There was always a certain understanding that it was important that it not be challenged because it may have affected the credibility of the rest of the report." The government never challenged the number, which in itself is remarkable, considering the Guatemalan propensity to denounce anything that hints of controversy.

In producing its report, the commission relied mainly on the testimony of victims, the majority of whom were indigenous Mayans from rural Guatemala. "Unfortunately, 99 percent of those who testified were victims" or their relatives or neighbors, he said.

Notably lacking from the witness stand were residents of Guatemala City. Without their testimony, there was little information with which the commission could build a narrative of the "disappeared," those who were taken from their homes, out of their cars, or from their offices, questioned and, in many cases, tortured before they were killed.

Concerning "the disappeared in Guatemala City, I am not aware, and we did not know, what happened there. This is something we could not clarify," Tomuschat said. "We could not really protrude into the heart of the evil. What happened in Guatemala City was a big part of the question."

This is the great paradox about what is known about the civil war here. The plight of the poor, indigenous people in rural communities is documented in disturbing detail. However, considerably less is known about what happened to victims in Guatemala City, where students and activists, labeled as suspected communists or subversives, were kid-



Fredy Peccerelli, a founder and the executive director of the Fundacion de Antropologia de Guatemala.

napped and murdered, their bodies never to be found. As a result, the war has never seeped into the consciousness of the middle- and upper-class Guatemalans living in the city. In this regard, the war departs drastically from other Latin America conflicts, many of which have drawn more attention. For instance, Argentina's dirty war claimed an estimated 30,000 lives. In Chile under Augusto Pinochet, an estimated 3,000 people were disappeared and another 28,000 were tortured. The cases in those countries, however, are more clearly documented. Feature-length films have been produced about the travesties. Societies there seem to be embracing their pasts. In Guatemala — where you'll rarely encounter an open discussion about the war amongst upwardly mobile citizens — it's not even discussed in textbooks.

The truth commission's report lists the number of disappeared as 40,000. But Ball, who produced the number, said it could be drastically different. "It's been eating at me for years. What is the urban number?" he said. "Right now, I think the most appropriate thing to say is that there were tens of thousands of people in Guatemala disappeared," said Ball. "It's probably between 10,000 and 100,000. But I don't think we should narrow it down more than that because we don't have enough information."

FREDY PECCERELLI IS INTIMATELY FAMILIAR with the fear the war caused in Guatemala City. As a

boy, he lived in one of the city's newer, middle-class neighborhoods north of downtown with his parents, a younger sister and a younger brother.

As a teenager, his father participated in a revolutionary organization, a digression that Peccerelli said he left in his youth. By the late 1970s, Peccerelli's father found himself preparing Guatemala's Olympic weight-lifting team as a coach for the 1980 games in Moscow. He returned from those games to be labeled a communist.

"There were clear political cases and then there were grey areas. If there was any doubt that you had an idea different to the state, then it was done. You were done," Peccerelli said. "He was lucky. Usually there wasn't a warning. Most of the time, they took you and you were disappeared." He does not remember much about the time before they had to leave Guatemala, only that his father received a letter in red ink warning him to flee the country or be killed. Peccerelli was 9 years and 11 months old when he and his brother arrived in the Bronx, New York, to be re-united with his father, sister and mother, who had left hastily a few months earlier. It was Thanksgiving Day, 1980. "I remember because I was really upset that I had to leave Guatemala and everyone was happy in NY because it was Thanksgiving," Peccerelli said.

He spent the following years assimilating. He fought on the streets, protecting his younger brother. He had a

crash-course in English at Roberto Clemente elementary school. His father took a job parking cars in Manhattan. They first lived in an apartment building four blocks from Yankee Stadium, where Peccerelli's love affair with baseball began. They later moved to Brooklyn, but Peccerelli went to as many Yankees games as he could, paying \$1.50 for a seat in the bleachers.

Guatemala was rarely discussed. The black-Hispanic street fights and bickering were more of a preoccupation than the war in his former home. "Guatemala was just painful to think about. It was a painful place where they killed you. So, I forgot about it. It didn't exist."

Peccerelli still carries the mannerisms of a New York-hardened street kid. He lifts his shoulders when he talks about something uncomfortable. He pronounces "whatever" with an exaggerated emphasis on the last "e" that makes the word sound like "whatevAH".

His parents had always planned for him to return to Guatemala to study medicine at San Carlos University, a public school that used to be considered one of the finest in Latin America. Peccerelli didn't have the grades. He never settled down in high school. Academics weighed on him.

"I had too much fun in high school. I was afraid to go back" to Guatemala, he said. My parents "built this university as 'the university.' So, I said, nah, I'm going to take some time. And I went to Kingsborough Community College."

Kingsborough does not exactly qualify as the Ivy League of community colleges. Located in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, its graduation rate for males is less than 20 percent last year. For females, it was less than 30 percent.

By the time he transferred to Brooklyn College — a well-known City University of New York school — he found the academic rigor difficult. "It was a really big change. It was very hard," he said. "Then, it was either to dedicate myself and study, or not."

It was also there that Peccerelli's fascination with archaeology and anthropology began. "By that point, I was wanting to re-establish a proper link with Guatemala," he said. "My plan was to become a Mesoamerican archaeologists that would teach for most of the year and then in the summers, I'd go and dig." He wanted to be a Mayanist.

It took all of 20 minutes for that dream to collapse, leaving Peccerelli confounded about what to do with his life. He was attending a conference of the American Anthropological Association in Atlanta, where famous Mayanist Arthur Demarest was delivering a speech. "I hated it. It was so boring. For a day or two I was devastated," he said.

Trying to fill his schedule with other presentations that might spark his interest, Peccerelli attended a speech on exhumations where anthropologist Karen Burns projected images of mass Guatemalan graves being dug up. "To me,

it was shocking. I thought 'how could [the government] let them do that? Why aren't they killing them. They're supposed to kill them,'" he recalled. "Then I thought, well, if they can do it. Why am I not doing it?"

That curiosity brought him to Guatemala, where he joined a training course for forensic anthropology in January of 1995, shortly after his graduation from Brooklyn College. After joining the informal group of anthropologists, he drove to his first exhumation while the war was still being fought. He remembers burned Jeep vehicles on roadsides, drinking smuggled beer on hillsides while watching battles in the valleys below, and the realization of the type of life he had chosen. "We sat there with warm beer and watched them kill each other. I got dengue. I got malaria. There were snakes, scorpions and tarantulas. I thought 'what am I doing here?'"

Today, the entrance to his office is a gruesome reminder of just how painful Guatemala was in those days. Peccerelli is the executive director of the Guatemalan Foundation for Forensic Anthropology, an independent group that exhumes bodies and investigates how they were killed. Baby-sized coffins are piled high in front of the building, which is set back from a wide downtown boulevard, surrounded by a fence and manned by three armed guards.

I visited the office twice last month. All the domestic



After a body is processed, it is returned to family members in a small, pine coffin for burial.

trappings of what was once a former ambassador's house were gone. The poolside patio was converted into a series of macabre jigsaw puzzles: eight folding tables draped with blue tablecloths were covered with bones arranged in the shapes of skeletons. Some of the skulls were marked with slices and cracks received from the brutal swings of a machete, so severe in some cases that the skulls were glued back together. On other skulls, researchers retraced a bullet's path by sliding sticks through the forehead and out the back of the head, demonstrating how little the trajectory changed as it tore through the victim's brain.

Upstairs, a makeshift corrugated metal addition overflowed with brown cardboard boxes, each marked with the date and place the contents were dug up. Inside the boxes, a pile of bones, a pair of shoes, a rip of dirty clothing — pieces of a life cut short.

For the past 17 years, the foundation (FAFG or Fundacion de Antropologia de Guatemala) has put pieces of these lives into a narrative. At the table closest to the pool, an intern from the United States attempted to decipher what happened to three small children during a massacre in an indigenous community in the early 1980s. Their bodies had been dug up and reburied by the family in an unmarked grave, a common practice during days the communities lived in fear of repeated attacks. Through different markers, the researchers can date a skeleton to near its age at death. The growth of a rib or femur, for instance, reveals clues about the victim's age. Together with clothing often found next to the bones, a body can be identified by surviving family members. After processing, researchers place it in one of the baby-sized coffins and return it to the family for a proper burial.

The foundation has processed about 5,000 bodies. The breadth of the foundation's work has already called into question the truth commission's numbers because the commission's report identified just 669 massacres. The forensic foundation has already dug up 850 sites. Not all are considered massacres (which is defined by 5 deaths or more) but most are. And the forensic team is sure that it will find more than 669 massacres.

"If you look at the report, the number of cases is short. We believe there are a lot more massacres than the 669," Peccerelli said. "And that's what the overall number was partially based on."

Not only does the number of graves challenge the 200,000 number. It's also the fact that little is known about an 18-year period of the war, Ball said. "Everything that we found was from 1979 to 1996. From 1960 to 1978, whatever happened during that time, we're back to a guess," he said.

As of now, the forensic teams are not focused on that time period. There is enough work to be done in digging up bodies they know were buried in the 1980s.

Their work has won notoriety and enemies. Death

threats arrive regularly by e-mail or text messages from anonymous sources. They began with a warning in 2002 that read "We've let you do this in peace long enough" and have increased in frequency ever since. At times, they are general, such as the one Peccerelli and two other members of the organization received earlier this year that said, "damned revolutionaries ... you are under surveillance and we will kill you." But others are more detailed. A month before my interview with Peccerelli he received a text message that detailed the whereabouts of his sister at that moment. "Those are scarier because they show in real time what's going on. The message said 'Your sister looks good in pink, driving a Jeep with the top down.' And at that very moment my sister was wearing pink and driving my father's Jeep, which she never does. It said 'this is going to be easier than we thought. We're going to kill you all.'"

In response, 150 people, including ambassadors from several countries, gathered to denounce the threats. The gathering was held at 9 a.m. and covered by local news, which broadcast the story at noon. At 3:45 p.m., a gunshot was fired from the street and through the gate into the examination room. "It landed right there," Peccerelli said, pointing to the chair in which I sat. "Right where you are sitting."

Violence against human-rights researchers and advocates occurs often in Guatemala. Amnesty International registered 195 attacks against such workers in 2007. Nearly all the crimes are unsolved.

Peccerelli travels with two bodyguards. The threats "have pretty much destroyed my life in the last six years. I have no privacy. I'm completely paranoid. I don't trust anyone," he said. "My mother has asked me to leave the country a couple times. My family has had to pay for this." His son and daughter played in the office's courtyard while we talked. He craned his neck regularly to check on them. "My children hate it. They hate it. They've been around it a lot. Too much."

I asked him why he continued the work. He's dedicated more than a decade to the work and no one would fault him for stopping, I thought. His answer was clear and unsurprising. "It is difficult. But I fell in love with the power to help people. It was amazing. There was nothing I could think of that could help people more," he said.

We spoke inside the main examination room. Bones were everywhere. Half unpacked boxes lined the hallway to the poolside patio. Tables where no one worked were piled with a mishmash of leg bones, ribs and little finger bones. The stories of how those people came to die are each different. But they are united by this fact: They were all dug up from unmarked graves — often where bodies were piled after massacres — in rural Guatemala.

Much like residents from Guatemala City were scarce during the truth commission hearings, bodies from Guate-



(Above) A technician works to piece together the story of how a war victim was killed. (Right) The bones, including whatever clothing was buried near them, arrive to the lab in cardboard boxes.



mala City victims do not make it to the foundation’s tables. The foundation’s database of processed cases lists zero bodies from the city.

Why? Peccerelli offers this example: the police, or the death squads that developed from within the military, would target a suspected subversive. “But they didn’t just want you gone, they wanted to make an example of you. So they tortured you, and then they killed you. And then they’d throw your body in front of your place of work.”

Those who knew the victim would be too afraid to

identify the body, which would then be buried as a John or Jane Doe at the general cemetery in Guatemala City. So many nameless bodies crowded the ground that they were dug up every four to seven years to make room for the next round of corpses. The older bones were piled into bone wells, where they remain today.

“We conducted an investigation of the records of 3,400 people buried as John or Jane Does. That was a small fraction of the number that were taken there,” Peccerelli said. “We found that 889 of those bodies were people that had been ‘forcibly disappeared.’” To conduct the investigation,

the team gathered forensics records for each of the 3,400 people and matched them against a database of known disappeared people.

It was a hint to what could be found at the cemetery. Peccerelli is planning a large-scale exhumation of the bone wells. The team plans to identify strata in the wells that match the time periods of mass disappearances during the war. Researchers will then look for signs of trauma among those bodies, such as gunshot wounds or knife marks.

DNA samples from those bones will be taken and registered to a database. The foundation is set to open its own DNA laboratory in coming months. It will be one of the only in Latin America dedicated exclusively to the search for disappeared people. Other DNA labs exist, but they are run for commercial or governmental purposes, Peccerelli said.

In January, the foundation will launch a national campaign to gather swab samples from residents who suspect their relatives were disappeared during the war. Those results will be compiled into a database where they can be matched against the samples from the collected bones.

“It will be a difficult project, but I think it’s doable, especially after seeing what the U.S. did in New York with the World Trade Center victims” he said.

It is not the only project that could help put a face on the disappeared.

In May of 2005, a vast archive of the Guatemalan National Police was discovered with a bang. Residents of a downtown Guatemala City neighborhood had long complained about a warehouse filled with munitions. But not until an explosion at a nearby military base did the National Civil Police (the Guatemalan National Police were disbanded after the war) agree to remove the weapons from the warehouse. The country’s top human-rights prosecutor, Sergio Morales, sent a team of inspectors to the warehouse to check on the removal. Instead, they discovered millions of pages of records the police kept during the war. According to accounts from archivists, the rat-infested building was brimming with file cabinets marked “assassinations” or “disappeared” as well as giant stacks of aging files on the floors.

It was a significant discovery. First, it debunked the government’s claim that such a cache did not exist. But more importantly, the archive contained detailed information about thousands of cases, including some of the most notorious disappearances.

“When we opened the folders we found not only police reports, but all kinds of things,” Carla Villagran, who works for the human rights prosecutor’s office, said in an interview with Harper’s Magazine. “Details about surveillance operations targeting them before they were killed, for example.”

Since the discovery, archivists have worked on a shoestring budget to clean the files and scan them into a search-

able database. The task of processing 80 million pages falls to a team of volunteers and meagerly paid workers led by one professional archivist and two historians. Their initial report on the archive was due to be released months ago, but has been delayed. Calls to the office of Morales, who is responsible for releasing it, were not returned for this report.

“It’s caught up in political games right now,” said Ball, the statistician. His team is involved in reviewing the quantitative work included in the report. “It will come out. I’m sitting tight. It’s just a matter of when.”

When it is released, the report is likely to demonstrate just how oppressively the police operated in the city and how fastidiously they pursued suspected subversives. “The reports give a dramatic sense of the grip the security forces had on daily life in Guatemala City,” wrote Kate Doyle, director of the Guatemala Documentation Project, in her account of working at the archive. “Police units raided businesses and private houses, searched school buildings, set up road-blocks, conducted sweeps of markets, bus stations, the public zoo. They entered printing companies to hunt for subversive literature, and auto-repair shops in search of suspect cars.”

Those details may change the attitude Guatemalans have on the war, Peccerelli said. As it is now, the middle- and upper-class Guatemalans have a skewed perception of the conflict, he said. “They don’t understand what we do. They don’t understand why we do it. They’re not bad or uneducated people. They are doctors, sales people. But they don’t give a damn about it,” he said. “They tell me ‘It happened so long ago, why do you care.’”

That sentiment is born from the idea that the war was an isolated conflict between the government and armed indigenous groups and a few radical Ladinós (those of mixed decent), said Ligia Ixmucané Blanco, an analyst with the *Asociación de Investigación y Estudios Sociales Guatemala*, an independent political, economic and social research organization. “To them [upper- and middle-class city dwellers], it was not a war that affected people like themselves.”

As an example of how deeply that detachment runs, Blanco pointed to the last year’s presidential election. Otto Pérez Molina, a former military colonel who oversaw some of the most feared forces during the civil war, entered the race for presidency later than any other candidate and nearly won. Álvaro Colom Caballeros, whose uncle was killed by the state during the war, won by a slim margin in a runoff election on the strength of support from the countryside. He is the first president to win the presidency and not carry the city.

The popularity of Pérez — who vowed to take a hard hand against rising crime — is an example of how little the war influences many Guatemalans. During the war, Pérez was a commander in D-2, an elite military force also called the Army Directorate of Intelligence. In numerous reports,



A campaign poster for Otto Perez Molina, a former military colonel and runner-up in last year's presidential election. He vowed to fight crime using mano dura, a hard hand.

including internal U.S. memos I retrieved from the National Security Archive, D-2 was linked to the disappearances of political dissidents and extra-judicial killings. D-2's actions are also an example of how difficult it is to document the number of war victims. A 1994 U.S. Department of Defense memo in the National Security Archives with the subject line "... suspected presence of clandestine cemeteries on a military installation" recounts how a military base in Retalhuleu (southwest Guatemala) was used in the mid-1980s. "Small buildings on that base were used as holding cells and interrogation rooms for captured insurgents and suspected collaborators. ... One technique used [redacted] to remove insurgents that had been killed during interrogation, and at times, that were still alive but needed to disappear [w]as to throw them out of aircraft over the ocean. ... The pilots were instructed to fly 30 minutes off the coast of Guatemala and then push the prisoners and bodies out of the aircraft." It is not clear how many of Guatemala's "disappeared" died this way, or similarly untraceable deaths. But it is clear that those bodies will never be discovered.

Peccerelli believes that documenting the plight of the disappeared can raise awareness about the war's true effect and help Guatemala move from the war. "The disappeared were people that looked like me," he said, pointing at his light brown skin, square jaw and cropped midnight-black hair. "They didn't look like the indigenous people. They were from a different social [group]."

It would be a welcome social change for Peccerelli, who complains that the story of the war is not taught in classrooms.

But it does not go to the question of the number, a question Peccerelli said is important, but one that may not be answered in his lifetime.

"This is how I look at it: I believe that we'll only be able to find one-fourth of the bodies that are buried. That's my assumption," he said. "So that means I'm looking for 50,000 bodies and I have the capacity to recover 1,000 bodies a year. That leaves me with 45,000 bodies to go. That's 45 years of work. I'm 37 now. That's a lifetime." □

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CONTACT:

Phone: (202) 364-4068
 Fax: (202) 364-0498
 E-mail: icwa@icwa.org
 Website: www.icwa.org

STAFF:

Executive Director:
 Steven Butler

Program Assistant/
 Publications Manager:
 Ellen Kozak

Administrative Assistant/
 Bookkeeper: Meera Shah