



On Trial for Genocide: The Army's Rampage in the Ixil Region

“In January 1982 I traveled with Christopher Dickey, the *Washington Post* correspondent, to the military barracks in Santa Cruz del Quiché to speak with the Chief of Staff of the Guatemalan Army, Benedicto Lucas García. The French-trained general was implementing a “scorched earth” policy aimed at eliminating a growing insurgency in the indigenous areas of the western highlands

“The general invited Chris and I to take a helicopter flight over the rural mountainous area of Quiché, where they would face the enemy with a simple and lethal logic: anyone who ran from our white Bell helicopter was either a guerrilla or a sympathizer. Accompanied by two snipers at the door and an intelligence officer, General Lucas Garcia sat in the co-pilot's seat and directed the flight over the rural areas. We were 15 minutes from the provincial capital, flying at an altitude of almost 500 meters, when we saw a group of women running to flee from the approaching helicopter. He ordered the pilot to fly in circles over the fields beneath us and to tilt as low as possible so that the snipers at the door could get a better look.”

“Then he shouted the order to open fire: ‘Shoot! Shoot!’

The snipers riddled the women with bullets amidst a cloud of smoke and empty cartridges. The pilot turned and tilted the helicopter again, noisily circling in the air as they killed civilians with M60 machine guns provided by the United States. General Lucas García explained to us that, because the peasants had run to flee from the helicopter, they must have been guilty.”

–Robert Nickelsberg, photographer, in [Gallery: Witnessing Dignity Among Death in Guatemala's Civil War](#), *New York Times*, December 4, 2017

a) Trial for Genocide (in Progress)

In a Sentencing Court in Guatemala, General Benedicto Lucas García, the brother of former dictator General Fernando Romeo Lucas, is being tried for genocide. As Chief of Staff of the Guatemalan Army, who assumed office on August 15, 1981, he is also accused of forced disappearance and crimes against humanity.

Originally, an indictment was also issued against César Octavio Noguera Argueta, an ex-colonel who served under Lucas, who died in 2020. Also indicted was Manuel Antonio Callejas y Callejas, Chief of the Intelligence Directorate of the National Defense Staff, known as “G-2,” “D-2,” or “La 2,” who was declared unfit to face trial due to suffering from Parkinson's disease.

b) Background:

General Fernando Romeo Lucas García assumed the presidency of Guatemala in July 1978. According to the report from the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), in the first six months of his administration, 500 corpses were found, of which 200 showed signs of torture.

In 1979, there were 1,371 cases of political murders and kidnappings; in 1980, there were 2,264 cases; and in 1981, the number reached 3,426 cases.

In analyzing the military campaign carried out by the administration of President Lucas García, two separate stages can be delineated. The first, concentrated in the capital city, was aimed at destroying the organized protest movement. To this end, it was dedicated to the annihilation of union leaders, popular movements, high school and university student associations, and the leaders of political parties. Consequently, on January 31, 1980, 39 people seeking refuge in the Spanish Embassy were burned alive by the police. Meanwhile, six months prior, in July 1979, the Army had launched an offensive into the highlands of the Ixil triangle, which resulted in the total destruction of the village of Cocop, in Nebaj. The numerous acts of violence shook the department of Quiché, as the army did not discriminate between armed insurgents, members of the social movements, and the rest of the civilian population. In the context of this indiscriminate annihilation of the population, several peasant leaders, including members of the Peasant Unity Committee (CUC), traveled to the capital to denounce this repression nationally and internationally.

The second stage of President Lucas García's military campaign focused on the country's Indigenous sectors. It began with the appointment of General Manuel Benedicto Lucas García (known as General Benny), who had received counterinsurgency training in France, fighting at Saint Cyr and in Algeria. He became Chief of Staff of the Army on August 15, 1981.

In Volume II of the report from the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), an army officer reveals the following information: "Many generals and colonels from the Tactical Security Group met to plan in secret. One morning, we were ordered to take command of our units and move immediately to Chimaltenango, and we were prohibited from informing our families. In Chimaltenango, we were told about the operation they were going to carry out, and that the Iximché Task Force was the largest troop concentration ever assembled in Guatemala, with 2,800 men from all branches of the military, fully equipped." These events were corroborated by another statement from the Commission, indicating that "[o]n November 12, the army brought all of its units to Chimaltenango, because the guerrillas were about to declare that the highlands had been liberated."

This first military campaign against the population of Chimaltenango was only the beginning of the offensive against the Indigenous population of Guatemala; it was soon to expand much further.



Five brigades with approximately 2,500 troops were assembled, all under the sole command of General Benedicto Lucas García. The general established a Joint Operations Command to centralize the control of arms, forces, and services, involving all branches of the Guatemalan Armed Forces.

For the military, the importance of this offensive was not decapitating guerrilla military units but rather definitely interrupting the natural supply corridor that the central highlands formed between the more mountainous areas of Guatemala and the country's capital.

It is important to note that at this juncture, the strategic command of the Army was restructured. The security and intelligence apparatuses were reorganized, from the General Staff of Defense, known as the G-2/D-2, to the Special Communications Service of the Presidency (LA 2), known as "the regional" or "the Archive." Key figures in this process included the colonels Francisco Menaldo, Francisco Menaldo Ortega, and Manuel Antonio Callejas y Callejas.

Task forces were created in the departments where the most intense guerrilla activities were taking place. In Chimaltenango, the "Iximché Task Force" was formed, in Quiché the "Gumarcaj Task Force," and in Huehuetenango, encompassing also the Ixcán, Alta Verapaz, and Baja Verapaz, the "Chacacaj Task Force" was created. Later, in January 1983, the TOSO (Theater of South Western Operations) campaign was launched.

The offensive in question was initially directed by General Manuel Benedicto Lucas García, Chief of Staff, brother of the President, and Chief of Intelligence, Colonel Manuel Antonio Callejas y Callejas.

**c) Ixil Triangle:
(Santa María Nebaj, San Gaspar Chajul, and San Juan Cotzal)**

In 1981, almost 9 out of 10 inhabitants of the area were located in the Ixil Triangle, a military term used during the armed confrontation to facilitate surveillance. The triangle was located in three of the northern municipalities in the department of Quiché, which covers more than 2,300 square kilometers: Santa María Nebaj, San Juan Cotzal, and San Gaspar Chajul. The Army considered the Ixil people reluctant to cooperate with Ladino (mestizo or non-Indigenous) authorities, unwilling to serve in the military, unwilling to submit to military discipline, and very distrustful, especially regarding anything to do with Ladinos. Coincidentally, this was an opinion shared by the Ladino landowners of the South Coast, who claimed, according to a 1982 article published in the *Military Review of the Army of Guatemala*, "that the Ixil Mayans were very combative and actively participating in peasant struggles. They no longer wanted to hire them, as all the Ixils were insurgents. When they saw that the Ixil were organizing to manifest and demand



their rights, the landowners began seeing every Ixil as an insurgent and guerrilla.” And this is precisely what they told the Army.

As a result, the Army labeled the Ixils “insurgents,” now explicitly considering the Ixil people as an enemy, without distinguishing between civilian population and combatants. According to the CEH, this is confirmed by a declassified document from the US State Department from February 1982: “The Army’s well-documented belief that the entire Ixil indigenous population is in favor of the EGP has created a situation in which it can be expected that the Army will not leave survivors, whether combatants or non-combatants alike.”

According to the CEH, the triggering factor for the repression in the Ixil area was the conviction that it was the social base of the insurgency: it was a source of food and recruitment, and a place of refuge. They also believed the Ixil were providing information and generating intelligence products. In the mind of the military, these conditions gave birth to a single strategic objective: establishing the necessary conditions to deny the guerrillas access to civilian support, even if the final cost was the elimination of the population, their property, and their territory. Thus, the entire Ixil area was converted into a target of the Army’s strategic operations, even if the Ixil people were not the main objective in that broader confrontation.

Thus a specific policy was aimed at the Ixil people, through Operation Ixil in 1981, by the Gumarcaj Task Force, and particularly, the definition of the municipalities of Nebaj, Cotzal, and Chajul as a combat area, forming what was militarily identified as “the Ixil Triangle.” This led to the approach of characterizing this combat area as a strategic objective that sought, through the operations considered in the campaign plans, the elimination, annihilation, or extermination of “that internal enemy,” even though the majority of the population that occupied it was a non-combatant Indigenous population.

The partial or total destruction of the municipalities of Santa María Nebaj, San Juan Cotzal, and San Gaspar Chajul was the evident aim. The army assumed a general principle: that in the Ixil Triangle, everyone was an enemy. To terrorize others, forcing them to collaborate, the Army penetrated the area and destroyed it.

