

UNITED WORLD COLLEGES PROJECTS FOR PEACE

PERCEPTIONS OF CIVIL WAR AND PEACE
IN TWO WESTERN HIGHLAND TOWNS OF GUATEMALA

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Summary

This study will compare the perceptions of civil war and peace in two Guatemalan highland towns, San Lucas Tolimán and Santiago de Atitlán. Guatemala suffered a civil war between 1960 and 1996 that led to 200,000 deaths and disappearances, mostly of rural Mayans. Although separated by only 12 miles, San Lucas and Santiago had very different experiences during the civil war. The more passive Luqueños (from San Lucas), guided by their diplomatic American parish priest, only suffered 25-30 deaths. In more aggressive Santiago, 437 lost their lives, including their activist, also American, parish priest. We plan to interview every segment of the population about their experiences during the civil war, their views on the Peace Accords and on the effectiveness of the Truth Commissions. We want to learn whether the perceptions of war and peace are different in the two villages and what each village views as the most important requisites to move from war to peace. We will distill these perceptions and present them for further discussion in the two towns. At College of Notre Dame, we hope to generate wider, global discussions on how a community, a nation, or a group of nations move from war to peace. We will present our results in written form to the regional honors conference, perhaps in a national forum, and in the form of a Power Point presentation on the College's website. The study will offer insight into a people besieged with war and in the future will help others to understand and foster peace in the world.

Background

Santiago de Atitlán is an indigenous village situated on the southern coast of Lake Atitlán at the foot of Volcano Tolimán. Its population of around 32,000 Atitecos is proud of its Mayan traditions and the Tzutujil language. During the civil war many Atitecos joined the left-wing guerrilla group, ORPA, and fought against the military that occupied the village for ten years until 1990, when a town rebellion caused the military to withdraw. Father Stanley Rother, a liberal American priest, further provoked the military and was later assassinated. Few died during the civil war in San Lucas Tolimán, a town of the same size as Santiago, with a more passive Kakchiquel-speaking population and a more pragmatic religious leader, Father Greg Schaffer. Father Greg helped the guerrillas but also fed and gave medical care to the military. His attitude shielded San Lucas from violence. Today, Father Greg cooperates with the state on a land redistribution and resettlement program.

Guatemala's 36-year civil war was a product of the Cold War atmosphere and hundreds of years of Mayan oppression. During the early 1980s the war turned genocidal, when Mayan villages were burnt and villagers mass-murdered, allegedly for supporting left-wing guerrillas. The war ended with the signing of the final Peace Accords in December 1996. They were designed to bring peace and to improve the lives of the indigenous population. The army was reduced by one-third and the rebels were disarmed and disbanded. Separate parts of the Accords aimed to

improve the living and cultural standards of the Mayan people. Despite these laudable goals implementation has been lax.

Two Truth Commissions unveiled the crimes committed during the civil war: the Historical Clarification Commission (CEH), sponsored by the U.N., and the Recovery of Historical Memory Project (REMHI), headed by the Guatemalan Catholic Church. The Commissions found the military responsible for 93% and 90% of the atrocities, respectively, but perpetrators were not named. Their findings are to facilitate healing.

Relationship between College of Notre Dame and San Lucas Tolimán

College of Notre Dame and its sponsoring religious congregation, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, have had a strong relationship with San Lucas Tolimán for forty years. Father Schaffer asked the School Sisters of Notre Dame from Mankato, Minnesota to build the parochial school in the late 1960s. In 1987, Sister Linda Wanner, SSND worked with our College president to establish yearly student service trips. For more than a decade, Prof. Leonor Blum has conducted research projects on civic participation and on the role of the churches in socio-economic development, based in San Lucas. We will thus have the support of Father Greg Schaffer (still the San Lucas parish priest), Adela Chuc Ajanel (an indigenous school teacher in San Lucas, who has studied English at Notre Dame, and is fluent in Spanish, Kakchiquel and Tzutujil), her brother, Juan Chuc Ajanel (village doctor in Santiago Atitlán), and Sister Linda (now living in Guatemala City).

Purpose/Plan of Action

This project is an oral history of the views on civil war and peace of citizens of San Lucas Tolimán and Santiago de Atitlán. We will interview Father Greg, Sister Linda, civic and community leaders, citizens who lost relatives in the Civil War, and some who did not. The participants will be separated into groups of young and old, men and women, and Luqueños and Atitecos to determine how differences affect views of war and peace while searching for common dominators. The study will determine how the subjects view war and peace. The main question is how their experience of the civil war shaped the way they view Guatemala today. Also important is to find out whether those interviewed think they and Guatemala have benefited from the implementation of the Peace Accords and whether that affects their view on peace. We will find out whether some of our subjects reported to the Truth Commissions and whether they think that has helped their healing process and that of war-torn Guatemala.

Anticipated Results

Our study of the peace process, visions of peace, and Truth Commissions in Guatemala will result in a better understanding of how peace can prevail after decades of systematic violence. At the end of our stay in Guatemala, we will invite citizens of both villages to a PowerPoint presentation of our interviews, followed by a discussion on how peace and healing were achieved on a personal and a national level. We will write up the study, produce a compilation of pictures and narratives in booklet form, and present our PowerPoint presentation to Notre Dame students. Again, the presentation will be followed by a discussion, this time on a global level, to help our students understand the difficulties of transitioning from war to peace. We will reach even more college students (and others) by placing the presentation on the Notre Dame website, and by giving our presentation at the next regional honors conference. We aim to foster discussion on the transition from war to peace in the towns of San Lucas and Santiago. We also hope to make Guatemalan citizens and American students aware that Guatemalan experiences can help understand the passage from war to peace in other parts of the world.