

## Genocide in Guatemala \*)

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It is not really the place of someone such as myself, with no expertise in Guatemalan art, to make any comment in response to these photographs. However, looking at these images it is almost as if I can hear the screams of the countless Guatemalan people who have lost their lives through illegal state violence.

It is because Mr. Hernandez-Salazar's exhibition is being staged here as part of Research Area II-1, Advanced Studies for Building Peace, in the framework of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science's New Research Initiatives for Humanities and Social Sciences, that I am able to share this space with the photographer Daniel Hernandez-Salazar. I am also involved in this project, as the head of its genocide research group.

The discipline of genocide studies cannot yet be said to be fully established in Japan. It remains in development, in much the same way as Peace Building and Human Security are. So, what exactly is genocide?

The word is a portmanteau, deriving from the Greek *genos*, meaning race or tribe, and the Latin *cide*, meaning to kill. Raphael Lemkin, a Polish lawyer of Jewish extraction, who fled to America to escape persecution at the hands of the Nazis, is said to have coined this term in a book he wrote while World War Two was still in progress in 1944. In 1948, the United Nations General Assembly approved the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which defined it as a crime punishable under international law.

According to the convention, genocide is defined as killings or other related acts "committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group". Naturally, at the time of its ratification, the initiators of this convention had in mind the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany, as embodied in the camps of Auschwitz. Never again would these kinds of acts be allowed to take place, they cried.

Over half a century has passed since then, and still genocide shows no signs of disappearing. If we include cases in which genocide is thought to have taken place, then it seems that cases have even increased since the end of the Cold War, all over the globe. We must put a stop to this tendency. The aim of genocide studies is to construct a theory for genocide prevention, but in order to do so we must first analyze the causes of genocide.

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\*) Keynote speech given at the workshop on the occasion of Daniel Hernandez-Salazar's photographic exhibition in Tokyo (May 8, 2004)

The vast majority of the victims of genocide are civilians. Seen from the perspective of the victims, genocide is an entirely irrational act, in that they are targeted simply because they belong to a particular group. During the Nazi era, many Jews suffered this as a parallel to the “Passion”. There remain many today who consider the deeds of that time as something “not to be spoken of”. Seen from the point of view of the perpetrators, however, genocide is carried out with a very definite purpose in mind. What appears to the neutral observer to be meaningless slaughter carries for them a real meaning in relation to a specific goal or motivation. As researchers, we have attempted to analyze these motivations, and they have tended to be divided into the following four categories.

The first type of genocide is that carried out with the intent of creating an ethnically or racially homogeneous society in the process of the creation or reordering of a nation state. This often takes the form of “ethnic cleansing”, and has been assisted by modern era racism. The second type is carried out with the intention of territorial expansion or preservation, the most typical examples of which are the genocides carried out by the major colonial powers against the indigenous inhabitants of various areas. The third category is commonly seen after revolutions or *coups d'état*, and is a means for the new leaders to consolidate their power base. The fourth and final category is a means of ensuring victory in external or civil war, by eliminating “dangerous groups with features in common with the enemy”.

Genocide in Guatemala is said to have constantly taken place throughout the 36 years of civil war which began in 1960. A total of 626 villages were destroyed, with one and a half million internal and 150,000 external refugees, and a death toll (including those missing) exceeding 200,000. A tenth of the entire population of Guatemala was a direct victim of this genocide, and 83% of the victims were of Mayan extraction. I believe that the Guatemalan genocide fits into all of the four categories listed above, as a kind of “multi-purpose genocide”. Specifically, the Guatemalan civil war originally began as a conflict over power between the government and left-wing guerrillas, but underwent a change in character in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The government determined that the Mayans represented an “enemy faction”, and embarked upon a process of slaughter aimed at the grass-roots elimination of this ethnic group.

The late 1970s was an era of great unrest in the area, with the Sandinista National Liberation Front seizing power in Nicaragua and leftist guerrillas becoming increasingly active in neighbouring El Salvador also. In Guatemala, too, the “theology of freedom” began to find increased currency in poor urban and rural areas, which served to form a link between the Mayans and the increasingly radical guerrillas.

After seizing power in the *coup d'état* of October 1982, General Rios Montt embarked upon a comprehensive program of elimination against these guerrillas. As well as putting in place a so-called “scorched earth” policy by razing all Mayan villages and residential areas, as Mayans were seen as potential collaborators with the guerrillas, he also forced the Mayans into assisting in the war against the guerrilla factions. The scorched earth policy resulted in the deaths of countless Mayans at the hands of the governmental military forces.

Furthermore, in areas in which the guerrillas still continued to hold sway, so-called “model villages”, which were in effect concentration camps, were established, in which residents were

forcibly separated from guerrilla elements. Additionally, these “model villages” conducted comprehensive totalitarian educational programs in enforcing an ideology which entirely ignored Mayan tradition, culture and language: in effect, brainwashing. Not only did these programs aim to produce “killers” who would slaughter the enemy without the slightest hesitation, as military personnel in the war against the guerrillas, but they also aimed to produce what were dubbed “citizens” via the comprehensive drilling of nationalist ideologies. During this time, “vigilante groups” were also set up in many Mayan villages, placing ordinary citizens in a climate of fear and mutual surveillance.

The Historical Clarification Commission launched as part of the Peace Accord of 1996 was unable to find any concrete documentary evidence of genocide. However, the Catholic Church’s Project for the Recovery of Historic Memory (REMHI) rejected the view that “the slaughter was just a part of the war against the guerrillas” as insubstantial, determining instead that the actions of the governmental forces in “the segregation of the sexes followed by the massacre of all citizens, including women, children and the elderly” can only be seen as resulting from “a directive issued from somewhere to eliminate the Mayan race in its entirety”, and therefore that it constituted genocide. Another point worthy of note is that the government saw the indigenous peoples as an obstacle to regional development, and that this led them to position the “model villages” mentioned above as bases for such development. In other words, the principle of “efficiency”, justified under the banners of modernization and rationalization, became the basis for the slaughter of the Mayan people.

The difficulty in determining whether genocide has taken place or not, lies in the burden of proving intent to eliminate a particular group. In most cases, there is no material evidence and those involved tend to keep their mouths shut. This even applies in cases such as in Nazi Germany, when the regime suffered defeat and disintegration, so in a case such as Guatemala’s, in which the leaders of the time continue to hold power in overt and covert ways, the truth is less likely still to emerge. This situation simply means that the work of Daniel Hernandez-Salazar, in which the shoulder blades of the victims are repositioned as the wings of angels, has even more effect on the society of Guatemala in giving voice to the voiceless.

Recently, I had the opportunity to hear a speech by a Japanese woman named Tomoko Ishikawa, who has worked tirelessly for many years toward the reconstruction of Guatemalan society, in which she spoke of the activities of the *Conavigua*, a group of women who have lost their partners. I was profoundly moved by her account of the women of the *Conavigua* searching out and digging up the bodies of their husbands, children and siblings which had been dumped in secret graves by the governmental forces. It was the moment in which I truly appreciated the actuality of the Guatemalan genocide.

While the *Conavigua* perform many other valuable activities besides the digging up of unceremoniously buried victims, such as movements for reparation for the victims, encouragement of female involvement in politics and the demilitarization of society, this is their most dangerous work, in that it can potentially provide concrete evidence of state-perpetrated crimes. The work of Mr. Hernandez-Salazar also has its roots in such valuable

political struggles.

While Germany has recognized the crimes committed by the state during World War Two and has embarked upon a comprehensive program of compensation for the victims, this has not necessarily been typical of post-genocide political movements. Turkey still refuses to recognize the slaughter of Armenians during World War One, while the Japanese government has refused to take any responsibility for the slaughter of Koreans and Chinese in the aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake. Denial is *de rigueur* for genocide. The perpetrators of genocide always do their best to leave no traces of their crimes, so for us to deny the occurrence of genocide or to turn our backs on history and declare that it is of no consequence now, is to play into their hands. To prevent any such atrocities from taking place ever again, we must bring all of the details of what took place to light, and make these facts known to those responsible for shaping the society in which we live.

It seems that it is still far too early to talk of “national reconciliation” in Guatemala, where the victims and perpetrators now live side by side. Above all, a complete overhaul of the political system is necessary for this to take place. Apologies and compensation for the victims and punishment for the perpetrators of war crimes are also necessities. The past and the present, the present and the future are all connected.

The photography of Daniel Hernandez-Salazar, which has brought back the voices of the dead when they were once buried in the dark, penetrates the present from the past, and sounds a warning bell for the future. I wish to express my most profound sense of solidarity and gratitude to Mr. Hernandez-Salazar for creating these works, and to Professor Midori Iijima of Rikkyo University, Professor Hidemitsu Kuroki of the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and all the others involved in bringing this exhibition to Japan, so that we Japanese, who have a tendency to shut our eyes to our own dark past, may see what may be achieved by such efforts.