

ANNOTATION

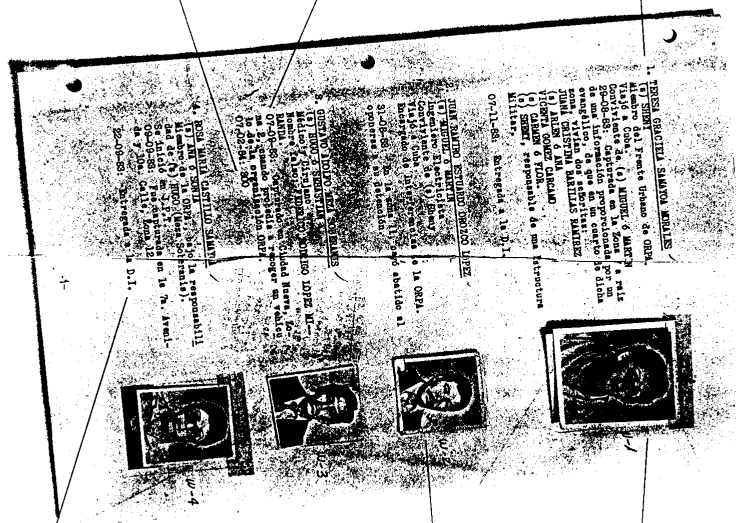
DEATH SQUAD DIARY

Looking into the secret archives of Guatemala's bureaucracy of murder, by Kate Doyle

During Guatemala's 35-year civil war, which ended in 1996, the term "disappear" had a special significance: it meant abduction, torture, and execution at the hands of the Guatemalan security forces. By the time a peace accord was signed, over 150,000 people were dead, and some 40,000 Guatemalan citizens had vanished, leaving family and friends to grieve without even a corpse to bury. The Guatemalan government has consistently denied knowledge of its victims' fates; it can do so no longer. This document, smuggled out of the military's own archives in February just two days before a Guatemalan truth commission published its findings, lists 183 names (of which Teresa Graciela Samayoa Morales's is the first), each carefully catalogued in what amounts to a daily log of death squad activities. This list is the only known record of its kind, an accounting from inside the secret files of Guatemala's killing machine.

The death list begins in 1983, three weeks after General Oscar Mejía Victores seized power in the midst of the army's genocidal massacres of rural Mayan villagers in the early 1980s. While the slaughter continued in the countryside, Mejía Victores ushered in a new era of selective violence aimed at urban guerrillas. Military and police surveillance targeted subversives in Guatemala City, and the number of those abducted by *desconocidos* ("unknown men," a code word used by the press to avoid directly accusing the government) soared. A secret 1986 U.S. State Department report noted that in September 1983, Mejía Victores's first full month in power, 183 kidnappings were reported, "the fourth highest monthly figure in our study." *Cuicavo* Avelino Meza Sobreros, a 26-year-old surgeon, was one of them, abducted on September 7, 1983.

According to this code, which appears throughout the document, Meza Sobreros was executed on February 7, 1984, five months after his abduction. The document lists 100 other executions and contains many such codes, which were used by the military to maintain a veneer of deniability in case their records ever came to light. Meza Sobreros's body was never found, and human rights reports still list him among the disappeared. His 23-year-old sister, Mayra, a psychology student at the University of San Carlos, was abducted on September 8. The few who escaped, such as Avelino Meza Ramos (no. 87 on the list), are consistent in their descriptions of the ordeal. Victims were taken to interrogation centers on military bases, in police stations, or safehouses and tortured. Some Ramos described his experience to human rights advocates in Canada, who reported that he was "brutally beaten, whipped, deprived of water, tortured with electric shocks, and hung by his feet for long periods of time. He could hear the screams of others being tortured nearby."



The photographs next to each name were torn from passports, driver's licenses, or official identification cards and glued onto the page. Most are black-and-white, a few are in color, and many have a fragment of an official stamp still visible in one corner. Some victims, like Samayoa Morales, have more than one photograph next to their names, older faces pasted over younger, possibly indicating that pictures previously stolen were used to identify targets before they were captured. The text contains information of interest to the government: alleged membership in rebel groups, pseudonyms, links to other suspected subversives, details about the victim's abduction, and her fate. For most of the relatives of these 183 women and men, this log will be the first confirmation that Guatemalan security forces abducted and murdered their family members.

Juan Ramiro Estuardo Orcozo López, an electrical engineer who lived with Samayoa Morales (alias Sheny), was killed two days after her disappearance while resisting his own abduction. His connection to another victim is not unusual; the list contains lovers and spouses, mothers and daughters, sisters, brothers, low students, and colleagues. There are 24 women and 159 men ranging in age from 81 to 12. Ten victims were professors or students at the University of San Carlos, a frequent target of death squad activities. Nine were labor activists. Others were doctors, lawyers, merchants, a carpenter, a housewife. According to the document, every one of them belonged to a guerrilla faction; the military assumed that anyone who worked for social change was active in leftist politics was a subversive.

This victim, Rosa María Castillo Samayoa, was seized off a street on September 9, 1984. The "DI" (days later) she was named after to another unit, the "DI." (Direction de Inteligencia) the Guatemalan army's notorious intelligence section. Although it is unclear which branch of the Guatemalan army carried out the crimes documented here (the spiritiven streets bear no letterhead or signatures), the central role of Guatemalan military intelligence in urban "counter-terror" operations is well known and well documented. The log was probably generated by the Archivos, a clandestine intelligence unit controlled by the president that operated in Guatemala City against suspected subversives and frequently coordinated the actions of other military and police intelligence units. Declassified U.S. documents from the time repeatedly point to the role of the Archivos in political violence, and its involvement in kidnapping, torture, and assassination was so blatant that Mejía Victores moved to shut it down in 1985, though the unit survived and went on to torture and kill well into the 1990s.

150 HARPER'S MAGAZINE / JUNE 1999

ANNOTATION 5

From the National Security Archive, The George Washington University, The Gelman Library, 2130 H Street, NW, Suite 701, Washington, D.C. 20037

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One of the clearest indications that this death list is the product of an intelligence unit is the classification of victims according to their alleged guerrilla links. Moisés Canales Godoy is coded "7," for Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo (PGT). Members of the PGT, Guatemala's Communist Party, had long been a target of the death squads and were the first known victims of a mass disappearance in Latin America. In March 1966, some 33 PGT leaders and their associates were kidnapped, tortured, and killed. The Guatemalan government denied involvement, but, in fact, CIA and U.S. police advisers helped create and train the joint military and police "task force" that carried out the murders. The Clinton Administration recently declassified a detailed set of notes given to the CIA by the Guatemalan military that were taken during the torture sessions of four of the victims. This case initiated the use of clandestine abduction as an integral part of Guatemala's counterinsurgency, a practice soon adopted by other countries fighting the "enemy within"—El Salvador, Honduras, Argentina, and Chile, among others.

Working in the Jutiapa military zone." Although most of the disappeared listed here died within weeks of their capture, their bodies probably dumped in secret grave sites in or near the army for further interrogation. In rare instances, a prisoner seemed particularly valuable was sent to a base and kept there indefinitely, often in an area where he had previously lived, with the expectation that he would provide information about local insurgent networks. According to a secret cable written by a U.S. defense attaché in 1994, "This technique has been used by the Guatemalan army since the beginning of this conflict and continues to be used today." In exchange for working with the army against the old guerrilla unit, a prisoner such as Canales today would be permitted to enlist in the army and receive a salary; later he might be assigned odd jobs around the base.

Given the brutality of the torture applied to the disappeared, it is not surprising that many of them provided information, both real and fabricated, about colleagues, friends, even family members. Indeed, the document is replete with betrayals. One man is murdered after having been "placed in the gunights" (*puesto al tiro*) by another; a brother leads the killers to his sister; a son to his father. Number 79 in the file, Hugo Salazar Aspiaz—alias El Sapo ("the Toad")—was captured inside a shop in Guatemala's Zone 12 on March 3, 1984, and released three days later after having informed on a man named "Quique." Quique also appears in the document. He is Fernando Gálvez Martínez (no. 82), captured on March 5 inside a Pollo Campero, a popular fast-food restaurant. A handwritten notation at the bottom of his entry indicates that he was killed nine months later.

In February, when Guatemala's Historical Clarification Commission released its report on the conflict, it emphasized the role of the United States in backing the security forces and their "criminal counterinsurgency." U.S. involvement began in 1954, thirty years before these abductions, when fear about Communist influence on the democratically elected government of President Jacobo Arbenz prompted a CIA-engineered coup. In 1977, reports of atrocities convinced the Carter Administration to suspend military aid, but Ronald Reagan's commitment to "roll back" Communism in Central America led to its resumption. In a secret State Department report submitted to Congress in February 1984, exactly one month before the capture of Juan de Dios Samayoa Velásquez, the administration argued that Guatemala's human rights situation had improved, and that renewed security assistance "could act as a catalyst for further improvements." The death list tells a different story: in January 1984 alone, 25 of those listed here were kidnapped, 13 killed, and 7 passed on to other units for further interrogation. Even Reagan's conservative ambassador to Guatemala took notice. Two days before the State Department report was issued, Ambassador Frederic Chapin sent a cable to Washington decrying the "horrible human rights realities in Guatemala." Chapin wrote that "we must come to some resolution in policy terms. Either we can overlook the record and emphasize the strategic concept or we can pursue a higher moral path. We simply cannot flip flop back and forth between the two possible positions." In 1990, George Bush again cut military aid after a U.S. citizen was murdered by Guatemalan soldiers, though covert aid by the CIA continued. Only after the war ended did the United States acknowledge the damage it had done. In March, President Clinton surprised his hosts and the audience at Guatemala's National Palace of Culture by publicly expressing regret for four decades of U.S. support for "military forces or intelligence units which engaged in violent and widespread repression."

This is page 22 of one 53-page document; thousands more presumably lie buried in the army's secret archives. Mass murderers, from the Nazis and the Khmer Rouge to the Guatemalan military, seem to require careful recordkeeping as a way to dehumanize their victims, transforming them into instruments of a greater ideological project. And so they fashion a bureaucracy of death; they catalogue the abducted, inventory the atrocities, and issue productivity reports. In Guatemala, the exhumation of the truth has been an exercise in injustice: human rights groups have filed reports, survivors have testified, independent forensic experts have unearthed mass graves, yet not a single military officer has been prosecuted. On the subject of its criminal past, the Guatemalan military remains mute, assured of its impunity. Now, in this document—a terrifying record of abduction and murder—the victims of Guatemala's death squads bear silent witness to the truth.

