

Fieldnotes: Searching for the Guatemalan Military Archives

Emily Willard¹

[Suggested citation: Willard, Emily. 2021. "Fieldnotes: Searching for the Guatemalan Military Archives," *Intervenciones: Latin American and Caribbean Studies Working Papers for Social Change*, Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, June, No. 3, pp. 1-10.]

Abstract

In 2011, the Guatemalan government officially opened the Military Archives to the public. Garnering attention nationally and internationally, many in the human rights and justice communities hoped the records might shed light on the mass atrocities and genocide perpetrated by the Guatemalan government during the decades-long internal armed conflict. This article explores the status of access to information in Guatemala, particularly a brief survey of the history of the Military Archives, as well as an autoethnographic account of the author's visit to the archives in the summer of 2018. Ultimately, the author concludes that the 12,287 documents provide no useful information to shed light on past violence or hold perpetrators accountable. The inaccessibility of the archives—housed in a ministry of defense facility—further entrenches silences of the conflict.

Walking out of the military building in downtown Guatemala, I was relieved to finally be outside again. While my U.S. citizenship afforded me safety and protection, I was grateful to be alive. The building is a symbol of immense suffering and repression experienced by Guatemalans, especially Indigenous Maya people, at the hands of the Guatemalan government. Hundreds, if not thousands of people, never left those buildings alive. I initially entered the building in an attempt to access the declassified military archives in the hopes that the records would shed some light on the mass human rights violations. What I found instead was a pile of broken computers, symbols of entrenched silences about the past.

In recent years, communities around Latin America have struggled to make sense of the decades of repression under authoritarian regimes from the 1950s through the 1990s. During this time, the United States supported—either directly or indirectly—the overthrow of democratically

¹ Emily Willard earned her PhD from the Jackson School of International Studies in 2020. She carried out interdisciplinary dissertation research on human rights and transitional justice in Guatemala, informed by Indigenous Studies. Previously, she worked as a research associate at the National Security Archive at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C. and served on the board of directors for the Guatemala Human Rights Commission-USA. Emily is currently a public defense investigator with the King County Department of Public Defense in Seattle, WA.

elected governments, and engaged in political, economic, and social interventions to pursue U.S. economic and political interests during the Cold War. In response to the atrocities of authoritarian regimes, communities around the region, like those in [Mexico](#) and [Paraguay](#), have organized and fought for greater government transparency and a reckoning of the past. In [Argentina](#) and [Chile](#), former torture and detention centers have been turned into sites of historical memory, education, and remembrance. Unlike other countries in the region, in the case of Guatemala, the military building in downtown Guatemala City remains a site for silencing the past.

La Violencia – The Violence

In 1954, the U.S. government instigated and supported a military coup in Guatemala that overthrew democratically-elected President Jacobo Árbenz. The CIA-orchestrated coup was known as [Operation PBSUCCESS](#) abruptly ending what many Guatemalans describe as the ten “years of spring,” years of economic, social, and political reform. In response, a leftist political movement organized an armed resistance to the right-wing military dictatorship. The ensuing conflict lasted from 1960 to 1996. According to the [United Nations](#), during these years the Guatemalan military committed acts of genocide against Indigenous Maya peoples. An estimated 200,000 people were killed, and 40,000 were forcibly disappeared.

Throughout the conflict, the U.S. supported the Guatemalan government and military financially as well as materially with weapons and equipment. The U.S. government also provided training to the Guatemalan military through the infamous [School of the Americas](#), and well as other covert operations and training programs, many of which continue through to recent years. [[See article.](#)]

Access to Guatemalan Military Archives

Families seeking information about disappeared loved ones and human rights groups attempting to hold perpetrators accountable encounter immense challenges to accessing information about what happened during the conflict. Information about the Guatemalan military has been scarce due to deeply entrenched secrecy and the fact that many of the perpetrators of the genocide and other human rights violations in during the 36-year conflict are still enjoy political, economic, and social power. What limited information is available is derived from [U.S. government documents](#), and a small handful of leaked Guatemalan records such as [Operation Sofía](#) and the [Diario Militar](#).

In 2005, a massive archive of over 10 million pages of records of the national police was located in an abandoned building in downtown Guatemala City, now known as the [Historical Archive of the National Police \(AHPN\)](#). While the records contain information about joint operations

between police and the military, nearly all of the joint operations took place in urban centers and do not contain information about military-only operations in rural areas where the genocide took place. [In recent years](#), the AHPN has been all but shut down by right-wing government officials, a reversal in the small steps toward government transparency and preservation of key information about Guatemala's past.

During the years of the conflict, the Guatemalan military denied the existence of an archive of military records despite the appointment of a commission in 1979 to develop a procedure to manage and preserve military records deemed to be of historic and/or legal value [[see procedure](#)]. Through the early 2000s, human rights groups advocated for the release of information, while the military denied the existence of the archive. In 2004, hundreds of military documents were allegedly shredded [[see article](#)]. Then in 2005, Guatemalan President Oscar Berger agreed to allow access to the government information, and in 2006 called for the preservation of military records [[see proclamation](#)]. In 2009, President Alvaro Colom created the Presidential Commission on the Declassification of Military Records [[see article](#)].

In December 2010, the Guatemalan government announced that it planned to release approximately 11,600 records from its military archives in response to pressures from a declassification commission, claiming only 55 documents were to remain classified. Finally, in June 2011, the records were made public by the Ministry of Defense [see articles [here](#) and [here](#)].

During this time in 2011, I was working as research assistant at the National Security Archive, a non-governmental research organization located at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. I was working on the Guatemala documentation project, and volunteering with the Guatemala Human Rights Commission-USA, a U.S.-based human rights organization. I was also part of a coalition of NGOs in the D.C. area who worked together to advocate for more human rights-friendly U.S. policy toward Guatemala. The coalition was invited to the Guatemalan Embassy in Washington D.C. to meet with Guatemalan military officials about the release of the records. On one side of the table were military men in suits, on the other side of the table were a group of young women from various NGOs, all in our colorful dresses, most of us having rode our bikes through hot summer streets to arrive to the meeting on time. We arrived skeptical, under the assumption that the release of records was more of a political stunt to assuage U.S. law makers voting on foreign aid, rather than providing access to actually valuable human rights-related information. Unfortunately, we were proven correct. [[See Embassy Handout.](#)]

Despite this achievement, many in the human rights community were skeptical about the actual value of the records, and many had concerns about the ability to access them. In human rights circles, it was speculated that the Guatemalan government's motivation for opening up the military archives was to meet requirements in order to receive U.S. foreign aid. In other words, it

was likely the opening of the archives was about mostly about looking good on paper, not actually about increasing public access to government information.

The public reading room, where the records are located, was in the heart of the Ministry of Defense installation in the center of Guatemala City, a location made infamous during the conflict due to its use as a torture facility. Those who would benefit most from accessing the information—the families of the disappeared and survivors—would also be the most hesitant to come to a military installation to view them. In fact, it could be dangerous for them.

There was also the question of what kinds of records would be available. Information about the location of loved ones' remains, names of perpetrators, and information about military campaigns that resulted in human rights violations and massacres would be most valuable to those seeking access. However, it was highly unlikely that any of this type of information would be voluntarily released by the military because many of those perpetrators were still in positions of power in the government. I found myself wondering, what is in the archives? How accessible are they? Do they even exist anymore?

Years later, when I finally had the opportunity (partially supported by a LACS Clyde Snow Fund), I decided to see the military archives for myself and search for answers to some of my questions.

Fieldnotes Memo: Visit to the Military Archives

Location: Guatemala City, Guatemala

Date: Wednesday, June 27, 2018

Time: Mid-morning

In preparation for my visit, I search my own files and find two news articles about the opening of the military archives in 2011. I print them out to bring, figuring that the articles would explain what I was looking for, and military officials might be less likely to say they didn't know what I was talking about if I could give them something tangible and indisputable as a newspaper article from one of the leading newspapers in Guatemala, *Prensa Libre*. [See articles [here](#) and [here](#).]

I ask a few of my contacts if they knew where the archives are located in the city. One person who had visited said she thought it was in the “castle-looking building.” I think I've seen the place before. It's white, with what looks like a rampart-type structure. On Google Maps I search for the “Ministry of Defense” and take the *transurbano* green bus to the closest station. It was hot the day before, so I decide to wear a skirt. I figure, if anything, it would help me to look more passive and approachable on the military base. I get to the castle-looking building but don't see an entrance, so walk around it for nearly three blocks until I find the entrance of the *Escuela Politecnica*. If I remember correctly, this is the place where people think Alaíde Foppa—a

beloved, well-known poet, writer, art critic, and feminist activist—was held, tortured, and killed in the early 1980s.

At the gate, I ask if there is an office where I could talk to someone about seeing the military archives and explain that I am a university student from the U.S. The guard directed me three blocks away to the *Estado Mayor de la Defensa Nacional* building. I isn't sure if he is just passing me off, or if the archives were really there. I keep telling myself that if I don't find them, or if I can't access them, that is an important part of the story. I feel uncomfortable going to speak to them, and uncomfortable walking by them. I kept thinking of all of the women walking around the city in *traje*, traditional Mayan clothing and what it must be like for them to walk by the military installation every day. I think about my Guatemalan friends and the women I have been working with and what this building houses. The military guards were probably in their early 20s, and were not alive during the conflict, at least the worst years in the 1980s. I think about how inaccessible and dangerous this place has been for Guatemalans.

I walk the three blocks and find the *Estado Mayor* building and walk up to the *peatonal* (pedestrian) entrance. I again ask about the archives, and this time I bring out the news articles, and explain myself to about 5 different people. They have me sit inside the fenced area, just outside the gate house. There are other plastic chairs lined up and some average looking civilians sitting in them. I wonder what they are doing there. There are lots of military people milling around. One of the soldiers takes the article printout I brought and ask me to sit and wait. I sit in a plastic chair and one of the other soldiers sits down to make small talk. He asks where I am from, where did I learn Spanish, what am I studying. I say I am studying the history of Guatemala for my *tesis* (thesis). He asks me if I think the Guatemalan army is bad. At first, I mishear him and thought he said the U.S. I ask, the U.S. army? And he says no, the army here. I am caught off guard by the directness of his question. I say that it is important to protect national security. We share awkward chuckles.

This exchange makes me realize that I need to be prepared to answer questions like this. All of the time waiting gives me time to work out what my answers will be. I feel self-conscious of the other Guatemalans in the plastic chairs. I am so viscerally aware of how differently I am treated compared to them, and how much safer I am with my U.S. passport. Despite this, I know I can't say that the army is bad when I'm sitting in their facility trying to access their records. I focus on my goal of trying to see the records and kept on track with my mission.

Then a female soldier comes out and again asks how she could help me. I say that I am a university student from the U.S. and want to access the military archives that had been declassified several years ago. She asked if I am with an organization or institution. I say I am a student at the University of Washington. She asks what are my *motivos* (motivations), and I say that I am interested in the history of Guatemala for my thesis. I wait a while, and a young soldier

comes over, takes the article printout, and he leads me to another building deeper into the complex. I wait on another chair. Another military official comes out and asks for my passport, which I gave him, and he asks me what I am interested in researching. I say I would like to see the military archives; I am interested in Guatemala's history. I wait a while and the soldier comes back and brings me to a man's office.

This military officer—I later find out is the *jefe* (one in charge)—asks me to sit in the chair and he sits too. He hands my passport back and asks me what I am interested in seeing. I say I would like to see the military archives that were declassified several years ago, I take out the second article I have printed while he is looking at the first one. He asks what I am studying. I say history. He says something like, “so, you're from Maryland.” I immediately run through my head: where do I have publicly where I'm from, like if someone Googles me? Before I answer, he says, “I saw it on your passport.” I say I was born in Maryland but now live in the state of Washington. He says, “oh near Canada.” I say yes. He asks me if I am with an institution, I say the University, studying for my *doctorado sobre la historia de Guatemala* (doctorate about Guatemalan history). He asks me what part of the history. I say I am interested in the military operations of 70, 80, and 90s. He explains that most of those are *reservados* (classified). I confirm that I am only interested in the public documents, clarifying that I am not trying to access the classified ones. I say that I would still be interested in looking to see what is available.

The mood is superficially friendly, not at all hostile, but I definitely feel like I am in a position of needing to clearly explain to the officials that I am simply a student conducting historical research and if I say the right things and am completely neutral, they will give me the privilege of seeing them. I think about what it would be like for a Maya woman in *traje* to access these records. The entire time, in all of these occasions, I make a point to stay sitting, one because I am a woman and a light-skinned foreigner so I think I can get away with it, and second because I think it makes me more passive, especially since I am taller than many of the men.

Another man, Sánchez (name changed), is then brought in and introduced as the person in charge of the archives. We again have a short conversation about what I am interested in and I explain that I saw the police archives last year, and I would like to see the military archives this time. He takes me to the *sala* (room) to access the archives. It is a small office with a glass door, and windows near the ceiling on the left side. At the back of the room is a desk where “Sal” sits. I find out later his name is Salvador (name changed). The room has two desks on the right side and three desks on the left side with computers and monitors. The ones on the right are piled up on one desk, clearly out of order. Sánchez asks Sal which desk, he says the first, but we sit at the second. Sánchez turns the computer on, and I turn the monitor on.

They make small talk. Sal was in Los Angeles, for a year and speaks a little English. They ask me where I am from, what am I studying. I say: Washington State. History. They ask me again

what I am interested in, I say the history of Guatemala, they ask what period, I say the military operations of the 70s, 80s, and 90s. They say it is unlikely that there are any documents, but agree it is worth looking. We spend about 20 minutes trying to find the records on the computer. Sal says I am the first person in a year to come to look at the documents. We agree that wow, that's a long time. I ask him why he thinks that people don't come. He says he doesn't know. He says the place is basically abandoned. The files don't seem to be on the computer, and an external hard drive is brought in which also does not seem to have the records. I am calm, polite, and smiling, making sure to exude patience. Sánchez is trying to connect the computer to the internet so maybe we can connect to the GALE at the *Archivo de Centro America* which apparently also has a "magnetic" copy of the records. But the Internet is not working, and that attempt is a failure.

Making small talk, and out of curiosity, I ask Sal what kind of people came here in the past, and he says "none" in a kind of irritated way, and very quickly asks me what I am looking for in the documents. I explain I am looking for military operations but am just generally interested in knowing Guatemalan history. I get the very clear message that he doesn't like me asking questions.

They restart the computer it still doesn't work. I ask that if the *Archivo de Centro América* has copies, maybe it would be better for me to go there to see them if the archives here are not working. They insist that they would like to help me out and find what I am asking for. I started to get a cautious feeling that they are seeming overly helpful and superficially friendly, trying to make sure they could provide what I am asking for. I started to get the feeling that they didn't want me to leave without giving me what I wanted. I started wondering about what the exit strategy would be if they didn't have the stuff working, and it is taking forever, and I need to leave. I had meticulously planned for my entrance, but not my exit. I try to contain a bit of rising panic.

I started thinking again about all of the disappeared university students, and my Guatemalan friends, and how many people had been trapped here without the ability to leave, held against their will. I hear banging and loud noises somewhere in the building and wonder what it was like to be imprisoned here, hearing others being tortured, knowing you would never be able to leave. Sánchez, and the Jefe are clearly older, and the Jefe almost certainly has seen combat. Jefe has a visible, healed injury. Was it from the war? I try not to think about where he was stationed, what he could have likely done, and to whom. I try to calm my mind. I remind myself of the immeasurable privilege of my U.S. passport, my light skin, my status as a foreigner and a student. I ground myself, remembering I am here to see what it is like to access these records, as an observer.

They start up one of the other computers. They ask how much time I have, and do I want to come back later when it is fixed. I started to answer but Sánchez finds the documents on another computer. I am incredibly relieved. Now I just have to look at them long enough, take notes, get what I need and then get out. Sánchez again asks what I am looking for, I say that I am interested in the military operations from the 70s 80s and 90s. I explain that I have seen the U.S. declassified documents, which tell the viewpoint of the U.S., but I am interested in the Guatemalan military viewpoint.

They ask me if I am going to Antigua, I say that no, I am going to Xela (Quetzaltenango). They ask what I am doing there, I say a Spanish school. They ask if I am going anywhere else. I say I am going to the San Marcos area to look around and see the Tajumulco Volcano. They say it is very cold there. I am very cautious about saying where I am going and what I will be doing. I have already said several times that I am a tourist. I am not studying here in Guatemala, and I am not with any organization or institution. I am convinced that it is precisely because of my age, gender, status as a student (not working for an NGO), skin color, and citizenship that allows me to even be in this room. I tread very lightly.

I look at the electronic records and take as many notes as I can, as fast as I can. I decide I review the collection to take notes about what is there, looking for and making note of file names that catch my eye. I take down the number of files, and the folder organizational structure, trying to get a small sample as quickly as possible. I am crawling in my skin to get out of this place.

A few documents are of particular interest. One is a “*libro de control*” from 31 January 1982 which has the *altas y bajas* (promotions and demotions) for the military base General Manuel Lizandro Barrilles. It makes note of when soldiers (I assume their families) are paid “*por haber fallecido*” or when the soldier died. One notes a payment of Q125. Another document is called “*Directiva No. 3- ‘L’ MRAJAE.*” The document is a plan for a national campaign for “consolidation” in 1986 coordinated by “El General de la Brigada Jefe del Estado Mayor de la Defensa Nacional Hector Alejandro Gramajo Morales.” One section says that it is a continuation of Plan Victoria 82, [an infamous counterinsurgency campaign](#). I copy as much by hand as I can into my notebook. [[See my notes of the document here.](#)]

I find that most of the records are from the late 1980s to early 1990s. The records from the 1970s and 1980s are mostly accounting records, tracking the cost and distribution of supplies, the *cajas fiscales* (receipts). There are 94 *cajas fiscales*, 19 *libros de caja* and listed supplies like limes, flour, sugar, onions, and beets for the military zones 18 and 22. These *cajas fiscales* are very high-quality scans of these books and make up the majority of the archive, approximately 8617 documents. The archive, in its totality appeared to be made up of 10,516 files, 14 folders, and a total of 191 GB of space on the drive.

Sal is sitting at his desk the whole time on his computer. Sometimes I hear what sounds like him listening to videos. At one point the song “Party Like It’s 1999” comes on and I wonder what he does sitting there all day in a room full of empty broken computers where he says no one has visited for a year and he himself says is “abandoned.” I think about how this room is supposed to have records about the conflict, military operations, and the genocide. I think about hungry children, crumbling infrastructure, and abysmal health care system and wonder how much money he gets paid by the Guatemalan State to sit there and watch music videos. There are two security cameras at each end of the room. I can’t tell for sure, but they don’t seem to be working.

I hear some banging in the hallway again and I wonder if that is what it sounded like if people were detained here and suffering. Then, I stop myself from going down that path, and go back to reading and writing. When I finish, no one is in the room (Sal and Sánchez come and go, Sal has now been gone for a long time). I don’t dare go look for anyone and stay seated. I notice on the wall there is a sign that talks about the “*Política General del Gobierno 2016-2020*.” Goal number one: “*Transparencia, gobierno abierto y transparente*” (Transparency, open and transparent government). I laugh to myself silently. This does not feel like government transparency at all.

Sal comes back in and I say that I am *terminado* (finished). I ask about photocopies. He says that I would have to write a request and send it to some other administration office and would have to come back another day to get copies. I told them I am going to Xela tomorrow, but it is ok, not to worry about the photocopies, I took lots of notes, and the documents were very helpful.

I point out to Sal the one I wanted a copy of, the “2-*Directiva 3-L-MRAJE*” from 1986 which was the national defense plan, signed by Gramajo. Sal tells a story about how Gramajo had a son who was “special,” in a wheelchair. Gramajo had a ranch in the *campo* (countryside) and one day his son was “attacked by African bees” and Gramajo tried to save him but they both died. Very sad. I comment that it is very sad that a great general was killed by bees. He says Gramajo was a hero, a great general, and did good things, though maybe he did bad things too. Sal says he was very very smart; he went to Harvard. He ran for president. There is a memorial to him. I ask when he died, Sal says maybe 1990. I remind myself that Gramajo was one of the most infamous military officers during the conflict, one of the orchestrators of the genocide.

It takes me several times saying that I am done before he gets that I am ready to leave. I fold up my notebook and then put it in my bag. And then he says, “Oh, you’re done!,” leaves, and comes back with Sánchez who escorts me out.

I am out and walking down the street and it feels surreal that I was inside that place. I cannot imagine any Guatemalan civilian getting access, much less a survivor or Maya woman searching for disappeared loved ones. Even if they could get inside, they wouldn’t find anything of use.

Once outside, I can breathe fully. I notice the sun and the trees, the breeze on my skin, and am almost in tears with relief. I take inventory of myself: my bones, my flesh, my pounding heart, and footsteps on the sidewalk. I feel dirty, like I need a hot shower. I am hungry and tired. I am glad to be out. I am so glad I was able to walk out of there, and I think of the hundreds, if not thousands, of people who never walked out of there.