
Special issue: *Life history and cultures of militancy in Latin America's Cold War*

Research article

Radicalisation and political crisis: the personal transitions of a Guatemalan social Christian militant, 1942–1981

Rodrigo Véliz Estrada^{1,*} 

¹ Teaching Fellow, School of History/Medieval Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

* Correspondence: r.veliz@leeds.ac.uk

Submission date: 26 August 2022; Acceptance date: 28 February 2023; Publication date: 5 April 2023

How to cite

Véliz Estrada, R. 'Radicalisation and political crisis: the personal transitions of a Guatemalan social Christian militant, 1942–1981'. *Radical Americas* 8, 1 (2023): 2.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ra.2023.v8.1.002>.

Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Copyright

2023, Rodrigo Véliz Estrada. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ra.2023.v8.1.002>.

Open access

Radical Americas is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Abstract

This article examines the life of Mayan-K'iche' social Christian activist Emeterio Toj Medrano. Through in-depth interviews, complemented with work in archives located in Guatemala and the United States, the article reconstructs how Emeterio developed and used personal tools to assess the moments of political crisis and radicalisation scenarios that he had to face during the Guatemalan experience of the inter-American Cold War. Taking into account different aspects of Emeterio's life – his K'iche' identity and historical memory, spheres of influence, narratives, militant activities and so on – helps us to understand specific dimensions in the process of political deterioration between certain social layers of central Highlands K'iche' population *vis-à-vis* the Guatemalan military regime. In articulating these local and national processes, his life also helps us to understand the different local nuances that characterised the polarisation of the Central American isthmus during the 1970s. The article is part of a historiographic trend that emphasises the importance of taking into account the personal scale to explain domestic, regional and global processes.

Keywords militancy; crisis; Cold War; Christian Democracy; Latin American revolutions

Introduction

At the start of July 1981, Emeterio Toj Medrano was kidnapped by the Guatemalan army and tortured multiple times in different military bases. In the seven years prior to his kidnapping, his life had undergone important changes. By 1974, Emeterio was part of a grassroots organisation supported by the Catholic Church, *Acción Católica* (AC), and belonged to a political party fully recognised by the military regime (1963–85): Christian Democracy (DC). While part of AC and the DC, Emeterio was in favour of an institutional solution to his family and community problems and to the country's difficulties. Taking up arms and joining a guerrilla organisation was not even considered a possibility. In the mid-1960s the *Movimiento Revolucionario 13 de Noviembre* (MR-13), one of several guerrilla groups in the country at the time, made the first (and only) approach to AC catechists, but to no avail.¹

Emeterio was born in 1942, in the midst of the Second World War and during the 15-year dictatorship of Jorge Ubico Castañeda, in a village in the mountainous western part of Guatemala. His original language and ethnic identity is Maya K'iche'. As a child he lived through painful episodes that made him realise that being a rural Mayan in Guatemalan society meant having an unequal status with respect to the rest of the (non-Indigenous) population, classified by the state as 'ladinos'.² This pushed him and others in his generation to organise themselves from a very young age. Activism in AC and the linkages with the rest of the country and other social Christian movements in the continent was attractive enough to spend more than a decade there. That position changed drastically after 1974, in the midst of electoral frauds and following the murder of his brother and a devastating earthquake.³ The personal decisions that Emeterio made as a response to this tense situation culminated in his kidnapping. This article closely examines Emeterio's radicalisation process.⁴

After deep existential debates around the political future of the country, and together with other social Christian militants, Emeterio founded the Committee of Peasant Unity (*Comité de Unidad Campesina*, CUC) and joined the Marxist-Indianist guerrilla, the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (*Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres*, EGP). Beginning in 1978, this forced him to lead a life of dual militancy between the two organisations. His kidnapping by the Guatemalan state in July 1981 was aimed at obtaining information on the relations between the CUC and the EGP, in the framework of a regional strategy to stop the insurgent victories in Central America after the Sandinista triumph in July 1979 and the first offensive of the Salvadorean Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) months later. Going underground by joining an armed organisation that confronted the state was a long and meditated decision. This process of radicalisation had an existential component, revolving around deep doubts about the meaning of life in a polarised local, national and global political context. It was expressed politically in the form of transitions towards a more militant, high-risk commitment, to use McAdam's classic category.⁵ Joining the guerrillas was the last step in Emeterio's radicalisation.

Lives like Emeterio's suggest the importance of life history as a research strategy. Life histories provide detailed information on the construction of personal conceptual tools to evaluate moments of political crisis and radicalisation scenarios.⁶ They also help us to understand broader social processes from a micro-scale perspective. Emeterio does not represent the experiences of all the K'iche' of his region, and perhaps only selectively those of the K'iche' militants who accompanied him in this process of radicalisation. However, as Yudice and Sommer have established, the experiences of Latin American subjects, and even more so those of Indigenous populations such as the Maya K'iche', are a 'self' different from the Western one. They are identities that generally involve extended families and close friendships, not just the individual.⁷ The cast of characters who were in multiple relevant political spaces is key to understanding broader social and political processes. As Gardner states, these are 'exceptional subalterns' who possess the qualities to stand out from other characters.⁸ Although the historiography on the Latin American Cold War has increasingly focused on agency, on non-state actors and on understanding the global conflict as a multilayered territorial problem with long local and regional trajectories, the study of life history as a methodology has not gained enough ground.⁹ At the turn of the last century Stern called attention to the importance of linking grand narratives of power and culture to individual experiences.¹⁰ In the same vein, Joseph raised the importance of documenting

and reconstructing the memories of militants in revolutionary movements, especially those who were on the margins and in the interstices of this political process of radicalisation. In his own exercise of reconstructing militant lives, Grandin asserts that it is central to make an effort to link individual experiences with the formative processes of inherited political cultures. In recent years, new research has deepened this approach and opened up important scholarly and ethical debates. The works of Reuque and Mallon and the recent (auto)biography of Llamojha and Heilman are great examples of the surging profile of testimonies and autobiographies in the historiography of the Latin American Cold War.¹¹

This article highlights how the interaction between personal consciousness and militant political cultures helps us to understand the way in which personal expectations are shaped, configuring personal processes of rupture and radicalisation in moments of broader political crisis. Personal experiences tend to be moments of mediation between the different cultural influences with which the person interacts. Specifically, Emeterio's life story allows us to articulate his existential and political debates, based on his personal, family and community experiences, as well as his approach to social Christian and liberation theology ideologies. At different times in his life, Emeterio played the role of political mediator between his community and regional- and national-scale organisations and institutions, as Konefal has pointed out.¹² His political role with grassroots organisations helped to set the stage for a larger political process that prompted the participation en masse of Mayans in the EGP and other national-scale organisations in their growing struggle against military dictatorship. Taking into account different dimensions of Emeterio's life – his K'iche' identity and historical memory, spheres of influence, narratives, militant activities and so on – helps us to understand specific dimensions in the process of political deterioration between certain social layers of central Highlands K'iche' population vis-à-vis the Guatemalan military regime. In articulating these local and national processes, his life also helps to understand the different local nuances that characterised the polarisation of the Central American isthmus.

Furthermore, the role of social Christian and Christian democratic ideologies, in which Emeterio was embedded, has received little attention in Latin American Cold War historiography. These ideologies helped create important organisations and had a large presence in different domestic regions of Guatemala, as well as the documented cases of El Salvador and Nicaragua.¹³ The role of Catholic militants in the Latin American Cold War, however, has generally focused on liberation theology and its role in guerrilla movements in the late 1970s. This has left out the earlier process of radicalisation of social Christian and Christian democratic militants. The social Christian ideals, discipline and militant practices accompanied Emeterio throughout his life, blending in with his own cultural background as a Maya K'iche'. These were also helpful to hold on to hope while he was being tortured. A broader analysis of the genealogies of these Catholic militancies through the life of Emeterio will help to give a more complete picture of these processes of rupture and radicalisation.

This article first explains the methodology and is then divided into three main parts. The first part analyses the main experiences of Emeterio's childhood and adolescence. The second part seeks to emphasise the cultures of militancy that originated in the political spaces where Emeterio participated, as well as the violent reaction of the Guatemalan state. And the third part explains the process of radicalisation, both personal and collective, that Emeterio underwent before being kidnapped in July 1981.

Methodology

Testimonies and autobiographies had a strong impetus from anthropology during the 1970s, based on the genre of Testimonio in Central America and the Caribbean.¹⁴ The debate that surged around the Menchú–Stoll case in the early 1990s helped to cement its importance, especially prompting a debate around the ethical parameters of the research and publication process.¹⁵ Those debates are relevant for my research. I first met Emeterio in the second half of 2007, while conducting research for my undergraduate dissertation. Emeterio was important as a source for the research, the subject of which was the educational dimension of the Communities of Population in Resistance (CPR) experience, where he had played a central role in the late 1980s.¹⁶ My relationship with Emeterio deepened over the following months, until I decided to propose a series of more in-depth and systematic interviews. After some hesitation (I was 24 years old at the time), Emeterio accepted my proposal. His personal interest was to leave a more systematic record of his political experience for future generations. At the

time, mine was to help in this process and hope for future publications. I then conducted a series of monthly interviews with Emeterio throughout 2009 until early 2010. The aim was to capture as much relevant data as possible to understand his personal process of radicalisation. In this process it was important to know in detail about his ideological principles, his spirituality, his existential debates and his decisions and actions. The topics were discussed with Emeterio beforehand. As was mutually agreed, after each interview was conducted, I would transcribe it and we would review it together. In this way we could prepare the next interview. It is important to say that this process of dialogue was carried out spontaneously: at that time I knew very little about the ethical debates generated by the genre of Testimonio, and my attitude was due more to a deep respect that Emeterio's status (his experience and his political insight) generated in me.

Close to a decade later, I secured a proposal to publish his testimony, which included the interviews I conducted with him, and a text written by him detailing his experience while he was kidnapped by the army. The proposal for a book, finally published in 2021, made us go through a detailed revision of the text. Emeterio gave me *carte blanche* to make the necessary changes, and then he made a detailed revision. Two forms of publications came as a result: one was the publication of the book,¹⁷ while the other is this article, whose textual quotations from Emeterio correspond to the edited transcripts. For the book we made important agreements on revenues, editing and other crucial points. Those agreements are not valid for this article. As I reconstructed and corroborated with primary sources the information of the interviews, several issues seemed interesting to highlight. When talking to Emeterio about my ideas and proposing publishing a possible article of my authorship alone, he agreed. That is, this article contains ideas that are independent of Emeterio's own analysis and that feed a scholarly interest of my own. Following Tieffemberg's critique, I would agree that in writing this article I could be accused of colonial practices, because of the low-dialogue and hierarchical nature of my analysis.¹⁸ I certainly hope that the early process of dialogue and agreements with Emeterio over the content of the interviews and the uses I could do of it help to iron out this problem.

As part of the editing process, it was important to locate archival sources that allowed me to expand, complement and corroborate many of the assertions that Emeterio related to me in the interviews. That information, in some cases used in notes throughout the book, helped me give proper form to this article. Some archives, such as the Decreto 900 de Reforma Agraria, made it possible to locate the political roots of Emeterio's family. Other archives, such as the US National Archives and the Historical Archive of the National Police in Guatemala, provided insight into the opinions of various powerful actors about the organisations in which Emeterio was active, as well as important episodes that Emeterio did not mention in his account. Newspapers and secondary interviews helped to complement this data.

A personal background

Emeterio Toj Medrano was born in 1942 in a Maya-K'iche' rural village, called Xesic, on the outskirts of the municipality of Santa Cruz del Quiché. Santa Cruz is located on a plateau in the middle of Guatemala's mountainous central west, and functioned during the second half of the twentieth century as the political, commercial and administrative centre of the department of Quiché. The city is surrounded by deep ravines and bordering on the archaeological site of Q'umark'aj, the political centre of the K'iche' empire before the Spanish invasion in the first quarter of the sixteenth century.¹⁹ Since then, Q'umark'aj – now Santa Cruz – was the place from where the Guatemalan capital exercised political control over the K'iche' population. Emeterio entered primary school in the early 1950s.²⁰ It was a state-run school, located in the centre of Santa Cruz, and to get there he had to walk to the urban area of the municipality. Emeterio recalls that the few years he spent at the school made him realise his status as a K'iche'. The other children in his class, most of whom were ladinos, mocked and insulted him, seemingly determined to make him feel uncomfortable. 'It was a very strong shock,' recalls Emeterio. 'Insults were very common: "You *indio*", they would say to us in a derogatory tone. That was what most marked me as a child.'²¹

Emeterio's account offers a window into the historical conditions that would go on to shape his experience of the world. What stands out most is the ethnic division and segregation of Santa Cruz. According to the 1950 census, in that year the department had 183,767 people, which in the following years saw a sharp increase. By 1964 it had grown 37.56 per cent (to 252,789 people) and 13 years later it had slowed down, but maintained a growth rate of 23.81 per cent (to 312,983 people). For the first year cited, 12.43 per cent of the population were ladinos, while the rest were 'Indigenous', mostly

K'iche', although, towards the north, there were also Sakapultecos, Ixiles and Uspantecos, among other languages and identities. These ethnic divisions had a spatial expression: the ladinos lived in the centre of the municipality, where commercial activities and public services were concentrated, while the K'iche' population was mostly located in the rural villages surrounding the urban centre. This segregation had been a result of centuries of differentiated policies towards the K'iche' population, both during the Spanish Empire and during the construction of the Republic.²² This segregation was reinforced by other extra-economic elements. Throughout the Spanish colonial period, and most strongly from the late nineteenth century onwards, the central state of Guatemala forced the Indigenous population to work on coffee plantations and in the construction of public infrastructure. This forced-labour regime only ended (at least officially) in 1944, with the arrival of a revolutionary government.²³ Working for free forced the Maya K'iche' population to reduce their earning capacity, savings and surplus, driving them to devote their efforts to production for self-consumption. As a result, they were mostly located in the rural periphery of the municipality.

Emeterio's paternal grandfather – Emeterio Toj Álvarez – was involved in subsistence farming and small livestock raising. During the 1930s, grandfather Emeterio lost his land due to an unpaid mortgage to a Spaniard named Casimiro Gutiérrez Blanco. Gutiérrez used to lend money in exchange for mortgages on land, a process known as *habilitación*. If the person did not pay, Gutiérrez kept the land. This was a widespread practice in much of the western Highlands of Guatemala. One of the main reasons was the financial crisis of 1929 and the collapse of the coffee markets, of which the Guatemalan and German elites were an organic part. Their response to the crisis was to secure land and labour, concentrating in turn on production for consumption and domestic markets.²⁴ By 1952, Gutiérrez had appropriated more than 100 plots of land through this mechanism.²⁵ One way to repay the debt was to work temporarily on coffee plantations in the fertile volcanic bocacosta, along the south-west of the country. The coastal coffee plantations were owned by Gutiérrez's partners. His work as a *habilitador* was to provide labour for the Iburgüen Uribe family, of Spanish and Colombian origin, and the Herrera Doriön family, of mestizo and French roots, both large coffee producers and members of the country's *capitalino* elite.²⁶ For decades, the peasant population of Santa Cruz del Quiché went through this process of land dispossession and of being tied to the migratory work of these two families.

Following the Revolution of 1944, an agrarian reform was enacted during the government of Colonel Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán. In 1953, Emeterio's grandfather organised a Local Agrarian Committee (CAL) to demand the return of the properties he had lost with the mortgage. According to the archives consulted, Casimiro Gutiérrez had more than a dozen cases against him.²⁷ Emeterio's grandfather's lawsuit did not prosper due to an invasion sponsored by the United States and other dictators in the region. His case was finally considered only a few weeks before Arbenz's resignation, but because of that it did not find a favourable resolution.²⁸ Although the family never got their lands back, the agrarian reform was an important organisational impulse in the aspirations of the K'iche' population.²⁹ Emeterio was a 10-year-old boy when this took place. In the meantime, Emeterio's father had secured loans from the central government to start trading fruit from the Quiché region in the main markets of Guatemala City. This trading capacity was part of a broader process. From the 1930s onwards, there was a slow formation of commercial and artisan layers, tied to regional and local markets. Thus, by the 1950s, Santa Cruz's main urban function in the region had shifted from being a labour supply centre for coffee farms to increasingly becoming a node in a broad regional network of production and trade in basic grains and light and artisanal manufactured goods.³⁰ Emeterio's father was part of these trade networks.

It was these new conditions and benefits that allowed Emeterio to go to school. He was the only one of his siblings who was able to attend state-run school. These conditions also led him to join his father in trading goods in Guatemala City. Emeterio recalled:

This allowed us, or forced us, to have contact with the capital city. I remember that my father took my mother to the city, more or less in 1946 or 1947, just when the Olympic City was being built. This attracted a lot of people from the west of the country, including obviously people from Quiché, to work as bricklayers. So my mother came to prepare and sell them food and groceries, and at the same time to help and be with my dad at his sales stand.

These changes not only allowed Emeterio to enter state-run school, something that had not happened in his family until then, but also gave him the opportunity to observe the differences between Santa Cruz del Quiché and the important changes that were being promoted by the revolutionary governments

around Guatemala City after 1944. 'This new contact with the city opened up our vision of the country,' Emeterio concludes.³¹

School attendance and trips with his father to the capital were not the only experiences that taught Emeterio about the ethnic segregation and the strong social differences in the country. A few years after being pulled out of school by his father, Emeterio was forcibly recruited into the Guatemalan army.³² Emeterio was 17 years old when this happened and recalled:

On 31 December 1959, the military commissioner grabbed me as I was arriving at the place where we were praying at the end of the year ... He stopped me out of the blue and asked me if I had my military service record. After telling him no, several soldiers grabbed me and other friends and took us to the Santa Cruz military base.

In the two months he spent in the army, Emeterio observed the hierarchical divisions he had seen in school, this time within the military institution's commands. 'I remember that the high-ranking officers were very bitter, really bitter towards us.' The way the soldiers treated each other, however, was very different. Most soldiers had been forcibly recruited from their villages in the western Mayan Highlands. 'The treatment between soldiers was more or less that of friends. Some were from Huehuetenango, others from Sololá, from Quiché, most of the rank-and-file soldiers were Mayan.' Forced conscription was a practice that began in the late nineteenth century in Guatemala, although it was also present in other countries, such as Peru and Bolivia. It was aimed only at the Indigenous population, and was based on the idea of the political elites that the army was a means of integrating Indigenous people into the 'national culture'.³³

After his return to Santa Cruz del Quiché in the early 1960s, Emeterio decided to devote himself to organising within the Catholic Church. This decision was controversial within his family, as his grandfather belonged to a local *cofradía*, an institution that mixed Catholic elements with Mayan spirituality. This organisation was under attack from Catholics, part of an orthodox crusade that the Church had been waging since the 1940s, as will be seen later in this article. 'My grandfather was attached to his custom, to having his candles, burning incense, going to pray in the hills, giving thanks to the heavens, in short, his tradition.' Although Emeterio did not continue that tradition, a deep spirituality took root in his way of interpreting and living his life. Emeterio was soon hired as a radio announcer at Radio Santa Cruz, owned by the Catholic order Sacred Heart, which was promoting a process of organisation within the villages of the municipality. According to the records, Emeterio spoke in an Indigenous language on a radio station for the first time in the history of the country.³⁴ That did not prevent him from being mocked by his co-workers. 'Those taunts were very useful to me, because instead of shutting myself away and not wanting to know anything about work and that kind of thing, I started to read, I read a lot as a personal challenge.' Emeterio's experiences were shared by a generation of young K'iche', who sought to organise themselves to make changes within their communities. To do so, they made use of the space opened up by AC.

Emeterio had grown up in a municipality in the midst of population growth, with marked ethnic segregation, and which had been part of a recent agrarian upheaval resulting from decades of land dispossession by large coffee producers and their local agents. His father also participated in the formation of a layer of traders and artisans, part of a regional network of production and trade in basic grains and handicrafts. Within this historical and family heritage, Emeterio experienced the limits that these changes meant for a person with his social status.

Local cultures of militancy and state repression

The response of Emeterio and others in his generation to the racism and inequalities they experienced as children was to organise themselves. 'The only way to avoid it was to get involved in political issues,' he recalls. The organisation with the most openness and presence in his municipality was AC, founded in the country in 1942 as an effort by the Catholic Church to regain ground lost to liberal attacks since the nineteenth century.³⁵ AC practised an old-style Catholicism that put an emphasis on orthodoxy (as opposed to mixing with pre-Hispanic cultures), charity as a form of social change and respect for authority. The homeland, for this strand of Catholicism, consisted of a hierarchical, closed, authoritarian society, guided by the Church.³⁶

The work of the AC was promoted in the municipality by the religious congregation of the Sacred Heart, of Spanish origin. '[AC] was a place where we indigenous people, the Mayans, saw each other up

close, where we met. That's why Catholic Action had such an influence on the political and social life of Santa Cruz. That space served to strengthen our identity.' The religious impetus gave rise to Spanish language, literacy and adult education projects. Community schools, health programmes, parish clinics with health workers, cooperatives, loan schemes and community development programmes were also established. AC also promoted the emergence of savings and credit cooperatives, seeking to displace local moneylenders such as Casimiro Gutiérrez with their high interest rates. The first cooperative in Santa Cruz grew to more than 2,000 members in a matter of months. In 1965, the National Federation of Agricultural Credit Cooperatives (Fenacoac), of social Christian inspiration, was created.³⁷ By 1968, the municipality had four cooperatives and more than 3,000 members.³⁸ The social agitation promoted by AC gave way to a process of cultural 'revitalisation', with the creation in 1971 of the Asociación Pro Cultura Maya-Quiché (Association for Mayan-Quiché Culture).³⁹ The idea was to challenge ladinos' contemptuous view of Indigenous people and to make space for Indigenous people in events such as Catholic processions and 'beauty contests'. Emeterio states that 'the objective was to show them [the ladinos] that we could organise ourselves'. AC in Santa Cruz was particularly strong and entire K'iche' families joined its ranks. The priest Luis Gurriarán, a member of Sacred Heart, made clear that AC 'was one more element of a dense social, cultural, economic and political network'.⁴⁰

The Church's success was catapulted politically by Guatemala's DC, which by April 1964 had reformulated its initial anti-communist stance into a social Christian vision of change. The DC was part of a network of parties in Europe and Latin America that took advantage of the Cold War to present themselves as a moderate option for change. In Guatemala they made an effort to bring together a moderate left-wing vote, rejecting at all times an armed solution to the political crisis that came with the military governments.⁴¹ Emeterio was from those years onwards the party's youth delegate in Santa Cruz, and made regular trips to the capital to participate in training programmes. The DC became an attractive party for emerging Catholic K'iche' merchant and artisan groups. Throughout the congressional elections from 1958 to 1970, DC always managed to include some representation from the Quiché region. It was also the first party to promote the participation of Indigenous leaders (from AC) in municipal mayoral elections. From 1966, it began to achieve this in several localities and, from 1974 onwards, it succeeded in getting K'iche' leaders to become deputies in Congress. The relationship with the DC not only gave K'iche's representation in 'national politics' and played an important counterbalancing role in local politics, it also brought them closer to the party's resources. This helped them to get close to other social Christian movements in different parts of the country. The arrival of the Ligas Campesinas (LC) is a clear example of the representation that the peasants of Quiché achieved.⁴² The creation of the Institute for the Economic and Social Development of Central America (IDESAC) and its relationship with the DC also led to support in the form of legal advice. Manolo García, who took on the role of IDESAC's secretary general in 1970, remembers that together with other recently graduated lawyers from the Frente Estudiantil Social Cristiano (social Christian Student Front, FESC), they supported the Quiché LC with legal advice.⁴³

What is important is that the organisational growth of AC and the emergence of new organisations created a militant culture with local roots, mixed with the new social Christian ideology coming from the DC and the Catholic Church. An internal DC magazine of the time, called *El Militante* (The Militant), states that the guide for all social Christian activists was 'the transformation of the situation in the country, that is, to achieve a revolutionary process in Guatemala'. To achieve this goal required 'constant, conscious, determined and effective work in the party structure. To form a revolutionary mystique in the movement. An inspiration that drags the members of the group to confront and break this unjust and inhumane system ... To be a revolutionary, bearing witness to it, through an unquestionable revolutionary dedication and action.'⁴⁴ The writing makes explicitly clear the need for political discipline, part of a militant social Christian culture.⁴⁵ But beyond these mandates from the central DC bodies in Guatemala City, a local culture of militancy was forming in Santa Cruz del Quiché. At the core of this culture was a generational impulse of identity and political vindication, as Emeterio states: 'We organised ourselves in Acción Católica, with the Christian Democracy, in cooperatives, to show [the ladinos] that we were enough, that we were strong.' This organisational impulse was experienced as a political awakening, part of a reinterpretation of the Christian sacred text. Emeterio recalled about the local roots of Liberation Theology, which had been on the rise in a large part of Latin America since the Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate in Colombia in 1968:⁴⁶

People knowing their reality. You read the gospel and there is a coincidence with everything. It was read and said that it was clear that Jesus had been the first revolutionary. No wonder they killed him, crucified him, if all the criticisms he made. They were already giving a political meaning to the Bible, another reading.

Luis Gurriarán, one of the most active priests in those years in the region, narrates the role of the local *catequistas*, always young and with a certain degree of local wealth, in stirring up the organisation in the peasant villages of the municipality. Gurriarán recounts an episode that enriches our view about a new local ideology and a militant way of living it. After arriving more than three hours late in a village in Santa Cruz, the priest Luis Gurriarán found the people in an intense atmosphere that had been active for hours: the entire extended families of the village were debating heatedly about the extracts they had read from the Bible. They sought to reach a consensus around the interpretation that could be drawn from it according to their concrete problems, seeking at all times real solutions. The dynamic continued despite the arrival of the priest. Finally a catechist approached Gurriarán and told him that they needed a few more minutes to finish the discussion. Only then would they be ready to celebrate mass.⁴⁷ These Bible discussions drawing on the experiences of K'iche' peasants and catechists provided the AC organisation with *sui generis* elements, binding local needs and a local culture to the social Christian ideology promoted by an organisation of national scope. Emeterio says:

The Bible was an important source of inspiration. Mainly the messages of the letters of the prophets. All the prophets were in some way denouncers of the injustices of their time. And that's what we read. It's like reading the reality of now, in terms of the injustice seen. The reading of the Gospel has changed drastically. It's no longer that Jesus came to save sinners, that we're all guilty from birth, that original sin, it's no longer that. He came to live in a swindling society, where his people were marginalised and exploited by the Romans.

AC represented a new, dynamic space where faith could be articulated with a broader sentiment, involving aspects that went beyond religion, such as cooperatives, politics, family and cultural revitalisation.

In the biblical debates and reinterpretations, a slow erosion of inherited common sense was generated. Emeterio's comments on the dispute with the ladinos in organisational terms also involved a questioning of the passive position assigned to Indigenous people by the dominant national culture. It was a struggle against social common sense. Brockett states that the success of AC was due to its ability to undermine traditional social relations, creating strong bonds of solidarity and generating links beyond its locality.⁴⁸ This pushed the local correlation of forces in favour of AC militants and established them as political actors of weight. The success of the Catholic Church's growth strategy and political activism in the K'iche' area was so important that the US Embassy in Guatemala took note, albeit belatedly. In a 1971 report, the ambassador acknowledged that there was new leadership among the Indigenous population that tried to attack economic problems at their source, despite the risks involved. Three years later, another report noted the growing tendency to vote for the opposition (DC) in the region.⁴⁹ The political turmoil in Quiché soon reached the ears of the military governments. Through the officer who was posted as Governor in Quiché, Colonel Rubén González Rivera, the central government maintained an important flow of information about AC's agitation.

The expulsion from the country of the Sacred Heart priest, Luis Gurriarán, tested the tensions between the catechists and the government. The first thing the catechists did was to take advantage of the occasion to denounce several government practices, such as forced labour of the K'iche' population for the construction of a road linking different villages.⁵⁰ González Rivera justified the measure by saying that the inhabitants of several villages had promised to carry out 'light maintenance work ... but did not comply, and when they were reminded at the request of the municipality' reacted badly.⁵¹ González Rivera also wrote that there should be 'harmony between vital resources, the peasants, and the authority', in a paternalistic tone very much in vogue among the military elite at the time.⁵² In February 1965, 84 catechists sent telegrams to the minister of the Interior, Colonel Luis Maximiliano Serrano Córdova, requesting the removal of González Rivera as Governor of Quiché. They received no reply.⁵³ González Rivera had a close relationship with the Reverend Father Superior of Sacred Heart, Celso Tomás Megido Díaz, who was in charge of the priests working with the catechists. Megido would visit González Rivera for an 'exchange of impressions' in order 'not to lose ... official warmth'.⁵⁴ Megido's visits sought to create a space for mediation between the priests and the military government, even if this led to constant

tensions and lack of trust. With the information he obtained from Megido, González Rivera visited the Chief of Station of the National Police in Quiché, Carlos Nájera Ortiz, and an official in the Ministry of Defence, Colonel Adolfo Callejas Soto. He suggested to both of them to follow up on the catechists and carry out raids to capture the youngest and enlist them in the army, as had happened years earlier with Emeterio himself.⁵⁵

Tensions with Governor González Rivera and the strong mobilisation of AC members had different outcomes. One of them was electoral fraud in the March 1970 elections. The DC won second place in Quiché, with the leader of AC, Julio Hamilton Noriega, taking one of the three seats at stake. Just two months later, in May of that year, the Electoral Register said that the seat had in fact gone to a member of the ultra-right-wing MLN (Movimiento de Liberación Nacional),⁵⁶ amid accusations that 'five thousand people were not allowed to vote because they did not appear on the lists, and one person voted 800 times'.⁵⁷ It was not until October 1970 that an injunction filed by the DC on the fraud case was finally resolved before the Supreme Court of Justice. The Court said it would not hear it, as 'the law does not empower this Court to hear such matters'. The DC in turn accused the court of breaking the law, 'thus leaving citizens without any defense in political matters, in the face of the arbitrariness of the Electoral Council'.⁵⁸ In the congressional session of 27 October 1970, the deputies for Quiché linked to the conservative MLN-PID (Movimiento de Liberación Nacional and Partido Institucional Democrático) Coalition finally took office.⁵⁹ It would not be until 1974 that AC catechists would have representation in Congress. By then, some of their militants – including Emeterio – were already organising a new political space: the CUC. The institutional channels had proved insufficient. This was a process of radicalisation in which the local elements of AC's militant culture played a central role in interpreting the new moment and fostering a class-based organisation.

Radicalisation and double militancies

The 1970 fraud in the elections for the Quiché deputation was an important wake-up call for AC militants in Santa Cruz. Several of them left the Christian Democrats, part of a broader process of radicalisation in the face of the limited possibilities for an institutional process of change. However, Emeterio Toj remained linked to DC: 'Still in love with Christian Democracy, I had certain hopes that something could still be done in this way.' Throughout the first half of the 1970s, Emeterio continued to participate fully in the institutional and formative processes of the DC and AC. The DC sought the presidency at the national level, while at the regional level it wanted to regain the deputation it had lost through fraud, and at the local level it sought to retain the mayoralty of Santa Cruz.

Meanwhile, Emeterio and several close friends began to organise a new political space. Together they had formed 'a group we called *El Equipo*, made up of committed young Christians. Most of us, except for three, were from Santa Cruz. There were university students from the capital, and two young people from the department of Quiché'.⁶⁰ *El Equipo* sought to become a local and regional political vanguard that would propose new forms of organisation and action. 'In our think tank, we began to strongly question the electoral political system. It was said that it was the wrong way to go,' recalls Emeterio. From this new perspective, institutional solutions, such as elections, had to be questioned, not assumed. Emeterio's faith in the electoral system came to an end with the fraud of March 1974, in which the government of General Carlos Arana Osorio did everything possible to ensure that the DC candidate lost. The candidate was General Efraín Ríos Montt, part of a broad alliance that the DC had put together, including progressive military officers, the parties of the Guatemala City's mayor Manuel Colom Argueta and former Foreign Minister Alberto Fuentes Mohr, trade unions, peasant organisations and other social Christian groups.⁶¹ Assassinations, threats and a sustained effort to annul ballots allowed Congress to finally declare the DC's defeat in the presidential elections.⁶² 'For me, when this happened, I thought that road was over. Honestly, I was finally convinced that this was not the way,' recalls Emeterio. What followed was a deep reflection on what to do next. 'We had nothing left to look for, we thought there was nothing written, there were no recipes ... What are the people interested in, what are their concerns, what are their hopes?' These questions led them to make an initial effort to get closer to the people of the western Mayan region, who had not yet been in contact with the processes that AC had been organising for more than two decades. A literacy campaign based on popular education, following the reading of Brazilian Paulo Freire, was the first way forward.

The earthquake of February 1976 found El Equipo in the middle of this political process. The earthquake had a magnitude of 7.5 on the Richter scale. It struck in the early hours of Wednesday 4 February. More than 23,000 people died in the disaster, while 76,000 were injured and a little over a million were affected, mainly because of the destruction of their homes. The earthquake 'opened their eyes completely'. Emeterio recalls the dilemmas he faced after the earthquake and the urgency that El Equipo gave him to seize the moment to form a new organisation, building on the experiences and territorial bases of AC, but with a different orientation. At the time, Emeterio suffered from a sense of guilt about the contrast between the comforts of his life and the precarious situation of the people affected by the earthquake. As he recounts:

My dilemma was whether or not to be consistent with the discourse I already had. To remain seated in front of a microphone, experiencing the painful situation from afar, or to go where the pain was. To continue with the delight of clean and ironed clothes or to go to sleep on the floor on a mat as the affected people were sleeping. Keeping very beautiful particular affections and endearments, or betting on the unknown. So after shocking myself, I sadly quit my job as a broadcaster.

So began a campaign to reach out to people affected by the disaster.

I remember that we told them that it was good to receive sheets and food, but that was not enough. Because the problem was not the earthquake, the cause of the problem lies further back, why the poorest people were hit the hardest by the earthquake ... There are economic, social and political causes of why the poor were once again the most affected, and that it was not God's punishment, as some religious denominations were already preaching.

The team formed by Emeterio and other activists took advantage of the moment to organise support tours to different places and regions affected by the disaster. On these trips, they were sponsored by some social Christian organisations that had also broken with DC, and which received international funding from Christian democratic organisations in Europe, mainly Germany. Key to their approach was to carry out actions that had a direct and immediate impact on the lives of the affected population from helping to rebuild widows' houses to supporting the production of basic foodstuffs. Whatever action was required, they made an effort not to show any partisan or explicitly political ties. This allowed their political message to be more easily accepted. 'It was solidarity work, ant work, and that opened doors for credibility and the need for an organisation', says Emeterio. 'This work finally gave us the opportunity to spread the word about the need for the organisation'. That made it easier for them to build a new organisation. Emeterio remembers it as planting a seed and coming back months later to harvest it.

Forming an organisation was central for the small group of social Christian activists. Although some of them were still involved in AC and other grassroots processes, the situation in the country made them realise their limitations. According to Emeterio, 'there is Acción Católica, there are the cooperatives, yes, but they have their limitations. The laws limit us to certain actions. Acción Católica has its limits with the Church ... These forms of organisation were overtaken by the new circumstances.' Two years after the earthquake and this new political process of territorial expansion, the group finally decided to create CUC. Its motto reflected much of the ideology and the K'iche' social Christian discipline it had built up in recent years: a clear head, a heart of solidarity and a combative fist. 'From the Christian point of view, this is what is preached, but it remains in words, in letters. But in the peasant organisation it is made concrete,' as Emeterio sums it up. In addition to the new contacts made during the earthquake, his territorial bases were the same as those of AC, in areas where the initial group of militants had many friends and family members. Their solidarity and their political missionary spirit led them to visit other organisations and places where no trade union or political party had a presence, such as the sugar-cane plantations on the southern coast of the country. One of the most important strikes in the country took place in February 1980 and was organised by the rank and file of the CUC in several sugar mills. There were months of organisation before the strike broke out, demanding improved working conditions and a wage increase. Surprisingly, in spite of the presence of a military government, they achieved the wage increase. This catapulted the organisation even further from their regional origins.

CUC militants also showed solidarity with the demands of other organisations and protested against the assassination of political and social leaders, generally travelling to the country's capital to accompany public demonstrations. 'When we appeared in the capital, we were the most disciplined group, the

most numerous, and the most prepared for any event. From the moment we left the community and got on the bus, everything was well organised.' At that time, the government of General Romeo Lucas García, who was accused of permitting the emergence of paramilitary groups and of himself promoting repression against trade unions and social organisations, was in power. From the end of 1978, the selective assassination of the main opposition leaders began. During the same months, AC in Quiché suffered multiple assassinations and many cooperatives had to temporarily cease their work. One of Emeterio's brothers, Baltazar Toj Medrano, was assassinated during the Lucas government. This accelerated a process of radicalisation, both personal and collective. One of the guerrilla groups that had been present in the western part of the country since 1973, the EGP, began to draw closer to CUC and other organisations. The EGP was part of a second generation of guerrillas, after the decimation of guerrilla groups in the 1960s. Unlike other contemporary guerrilla groups, the EGP developed a Marxism that took into account the role of Indigenous peoples in the revolution, a strategic shift that turned into more popular support and territorial coverage. In this sense, Konefal's proposal on the centrality that the Indigenous question took on in the national political scene during these years seems to be correct in the case of Emeterio and his relationship with the EGP. Emeterio's situation allows us to see precisely how this national-scale process was experienced in the villages of the K'iche' Highlands with which Emeterio was organised and how it meshed with other political traditions.⁶³

The country's political violence and accelerated polarisation created strong dilemmas for Emeterio. The decision to go underground was not an easy one; it required a genuine commitment to give his life to a political struggle that, although growing, had uncertain chances of achieving its strategic objectives. These internal debates were full of frustration and hope. 'I was one of those who believed that through existing and established political means solutions to major problems could be found. But we were frustrated. We had no choice but to look for alternatives.' One of those alternatives was to approach the EGP.

This approach was for defensive purposes: 'Despite the political strength of the CUC, we were unarmed. We could be many, but in the face of an armed group like the army, we could do nothing ... We had to take the step.' Since the formation of the CUC in 1978, Emeterio had received visits from unknown people claiming to belong to the EGP. Working slowly and stealthily, Emeterio began to develop a rapport with the EGP. 'Thus began my very tentative relationship, which gradually grew, with the EGP,' recalls Emeterio. 'What was the task? Well, to continue working in the organisation, to keep pushing this process that was becoming a hope for the people.' Those early years were thus a time of double militancy for Emeterio. A few hours a day he did grassroots work for the CUC and the local bases of AC in Santa Cruz del Quiché, while at the same time he held meetings with his contacts within the EGP. He was not the only one in this situation of double militancy. As he recalls, 'entire guerrilla columns, emissaries, comrades, who I did not believe were members of the organisation, I met them when I visited the camps. I also met people I knew, friends of mine who came from AC.' This participation in two simultaneous spaces, one legal and the other clandestine, was not so difficult because of the previous experience of working in both AC and DC, as Emeterio points out:

For some people, the difference between EGP and CUC generated confusion. It seemed that we were the same thing. As years before with Christian Democracy: it was extremely difficult to distinguish between them. Many members of the CUC leadership were clandestinely part of the EGP, although many of us did not say so publicly ... For us it was a great honour. It gave me strength, because I knew I was not alone, I knew I belonged to an organisation that made the Guatemalan state tremble.

This participation was a source of strength for Emeterio and other CUC activists.⁶⁴

At the end of 1980, Emeterio left the country on an international tour to denounce human rights violations by the government of General Lucas. When he returned in June 1981, the national picture had changed dramatically. Polarisation was very strong and the army had begun a counter-insurgency scorched-earth policy. The grassroots of the CUC-EGP alliance asked the organisation for weapons, but there was no logistical capacity to meet these military needs. Emeterio was unable to follow up on these demands. A month after his return, he was kidnapped by the army while doing political work in the city of Quetzaltenango.

Conclusions

Emeterio was tortured for weeks while being transferred from one military base to another. Eventually, he agreed to go on tours together with the army, condemning the guerrillas. He even held a public conference with members of the Executive Branch by his side, emphasising a moral disapproval of the EGP endeavours.⁶⁵ It was all part of Emeterio's strategy to gain the army's trust: in early November he escaped from a military base in Guatemala City. A few days later, an EGP commando took over several radio stations, forcing them to broadcast a message from Emeterio in which he denied his own statements.⁶⁶ Emeterio went to the EGP war zones, where he was the link between the guerrillas and the civilian population who had decided not to go into exile nor stay in the villages taken over by the army. They called themselves Communities of Population in Resistance (CPR). It was not until 1996, after the Peace Accords were signed, that Emeterio ended the underground phase of his life, after more than 15 years.

This article examined Emeterio's life in detail, from his birth to his kidnapping. It placed special emphasis on his ethnic and family roots, on the historical context that prompted his militant life, on his participation in militant organisations and on his personal radicalisation. In doing so the emphasis was on underscoring the interactions among his different ideological and cultural influences, and how these helped him to make decisions in times of crisis. Emeterio's life allows us to observe in detail his family relationships in interaction with the rest of Guatemalan society. Both his father and grandfather were politically active as revolutionary *agrarias*, which gave Emeterio an important political inheritance as he grew up. These inherited experiences intersected with the social Christian and Christian democratic ideology that he adopted as a youngster. With this narrative and within these political spaces came his stances on the role of the K'iche' and the Mayan population in Guatemala. In the formation of the CUC and the rapprochement with the EGP, a more radicalised version of these ideologies accompanied him in his decisions and actions. Emeterio's life, his family members and the political organisations in which they participated, also have a spatial dimension. They tell us about the territorial relations between the Maya K'iche' of Santa Cruz del Quiché in their struggle against the way the political, military and economic elite in Guatemala City organised the national territory according to their interests. In all, through his life we can observe the interactions between different scales of analysis: from personal debates and experiences to national-level tensions and broader regional processes such as the Latin American Cold War.

Notes

¹See *El Guerrillero*, no. 7, 19 February 1965, Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional (hereafter AHPN), Fondo Gobernación Departamental de Quiché. File 1274814.

²During the colonial years, the term 'ladino' referred to a social group at the legal margin of the two republics (Indians and Spaniards). In those years it was made up of mestizos, free mulattos, impoverished whites and 'ladinised' Indians. Later, beginning with the liberal Republic at the end of the nineteenth century, the Guatemalan state, for census reasons, used the same term to designate non-Indigenous people. See Martínez, *La Patria del criollo*; Adams and Bastos, *Las relaciones étnicas*; Taracena Arriola, *Etnicidad y nación*; Casaús, *Guatemala: linaje y racismo*. I use the term in this article, since this is how Emeterio used it.

³About the importance of the 1972–4 crisis in Central America, see Véliz Estrada, 'Más agresivos y más revolucionarios', 657–87.

⁴Another vision about Emeterio's life can be found in Konefal, 'The ethnic question'.

⁵See McAdam, 'High and low risk/cost activism'. See also Vela Castañeda, 'New perspectives' and Loveman, 'High-risk'.

⁶Joseph, 'Close encounters'.

⁷Sommer, 'Sin secretos'; Yudice, 'Testimonio and postmodernism'.

⁸Gardner, 'The exceptional subaltern'.

⁹Gilderhus and Neagle, 'Culture and the Cold War', 188.

¹⁰Stern, 'The decentered center', 50.

¹¹Joseph, 'Border crossings'; Grandin, *Panzós*, 26–27; Llamojha and Heilman, *Now Peru Is Mine*; Mallon, *Decolonizing Knowledge*; Reuque, *When a Flower*.

¹²Konefal, 'The ethnic question', 252; see also Montoya, 'Liberation theology'.

¹³Martin and Cortina, 'The genesis and internal dynamics'; Gould, 'Ignacio'; Montoya, 'Liberation theology'.

¹⁴About the Testimonio genre, see Beverley, 'The margin at the center'; Randall, 'Qué es y cómo se hace un testimonio?'; Yudice 'Testimonio and postmodernism'; Zimmerman, 'El "Otro"'; Dröscher, 'El testimonio y los intelectuales en el triángulo atlántico'; Mackenbach, 'Realidad y ficción'.

¹⁵A synthesis of the Menchú–Stoll debate can be found in Hale, 'Consciousness, violence, and the politics of memory'; Rus, 'If truth be told'; Pratt, 'Lucha-libros'; Zimmerman, 'Testimony, Menchú, me and you'; Picornell, 'Autoría, autoridad y verdad'.

¹⁶See Véliz Estrada, 'Education in communities of population in resistance'.

¹⁷Toj Medrano and Véliz Estrada, *Cuando el indio tomó las armas*.

¹⁸Tieffemberg, 'Isolde Reuque'.

¹⁹Carmack and Weeks, 'The archaeology and ethnohistory of Umatlán', 329; Carmack, *Rebels of Highland Guatemala*, 41; Hill, *The Kaqchikeles*.

²⁰On the importance of delving into militant childhoods, see Schaefer, 'Growing up *Indio*'.

²¹See the Methodology section for a discussion of the interviews.

²²Carmack, *Historia social de los quichés*, 401.

²³See Gleijeses, *La esperanza rota*.

²⁴See Bulmer-Thomas, *The Political Economy*.

²⁵See Archivo General de Centroamérica (hereafter AGCA), Guatemala City, Fondo Decreto 900, Quiché, paquete 9, exp. 10, Ch-28, Cz-N, caso finca Choacamán, 30.

²⁶On these mechanisms, see AGCA, Fondo Decreto 900, Quiché. On the Ibargüen and Herrera families, see NACLA, *Guatemala*. See also Casaús, *Linaje y racismo*.

²⁷Cases against Gutiérrez can be found in the archive cited in note 25. The case of Emeterio's grandfather can be found in caso finca Xesic, AGCA, paquete 9, exp. 9, T-44-340.3.

²⁸The case is fully explained in Toj Medrano and Véliz Estrada, *Cuando el indio*.

²⁹On the intervention of the United States and other dictators during 1954, see Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Fruta amarga*; Streeter, 'Interpreting the 1954 U.S. intervention'; Cullather, *Secret History*; Gleijeses, *La esperanza rota*; García, 'The overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz'; Getchell, 'Revisiting the 1954 coup'.

³⁰According to Schmid, emigrant peasants from Quiché went mainly to work cotton on the coast of the department of Retalhuleu (56 per cent). Schmid, 'The role of migratory labor', 33–43. See also Smith, 'Market articulation and economic stratification'. There were also important segments of local bureaucracy linked to the new central state institutions.

³¹Carmack, *Historia social de los quichés*; Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala*; Taracena Arriola, *Invencción criolla*; Smith, 'Local history in global context'.

³²According to Durston, the military commissioners in these years were led by extremely trusted figures of the head of the local military base. The commissioners were a central element in his campaign of social control and counter-insurgency, forming espionage networks activated by informal structures composed of various local institutions. See Durston, *La estructura de poder*.

³³On forced recruitment by the army, see Bastos, *Etnicidad y fuerzas armadas*.

³⁴Adams and Bastos, *Las relaciones étnicas*; Taracena Arriola, *Etnicidad y nación*.

³⁵AC was formed in Italy in the nineteenth century and flourished during Franco's regime in Spain. This new Catholic Church crusade arrived in Guatemala in the 1930s. Garrard, 'Protestantism in Guatemala', 105; Chea, 'The process and the implications change', 75.

³⁶Chea, 'The process and the implications of change'.

³⁷As Adams makes clear, from 1954 to 1962 there was a significant deterioration in subsistence farming incomes in the area, so that the cooperative option was embraced by the most impoverished peasants. See Adams, *El sector agrario inferior*.

³⁸Davidson, *The Rural Credit*.

³⁹See Arias, 'Changing Indian identity', 230–57; Brockett, 'The structure of political opportunities', 253–74; Grandin, 'To end with all these evils'.

⁴⁰Santos, *El silencio del gallo*, 31–53; May, *Terror in the Countryside*, 131.

⁴¹See Mainwaring and Scully, *Democracias Cristianas en América Latina*; Véliz Estrada, 'Más agresivos y más revolucionarios'.

⁴²The Christian Democratic LCs emerged at the end of 1963 on the outskirts of the capital, specifically in the municipality of San Pedro Ayampuc, immediately north of Guatemala City. Their trainer was a young

man who had been involved in the Catholic Workers' Youth (JOC) since he was a teenager, Tereso de Jesús Oliva y Oliva. See Aguilera, '¡Habla líder campesino!'.

⁴³Interview with Manolo García García, Guatemala City, 3 October 2017.

⁴⁴'La primera obligación del militante demócrata cristiano', *El militante. Órgano divulgativo interno*, number 4. DCG, December 1971, p. 8.

⁴⁵A clarification is necessary to explain that what the Christians meant by 'revolutionary' was different from past, contemporary and future conceptions of the word. Before those years, being a revolutionary in national jargon was considered as being an adherent to the principles of the 1944 Revolution. Throughout the presence of guerrillas in the country, their own idea of 'revolution' was influenced by Marxist, Cuban, Soviet and Maoist conceptions, according to the organisation.

⁴⁶See Boff, *Teología de la Liberación*.

⁴⁷Santos, *El silencio del gallo*, 31–7.

⁴⁸Brockett, 'The structure of political opportunities'.

⁴⁹'The changing view from the bottom; or what the Indians of Guatemala are thinking', 2 July 1971; and 'The Indians' role in the 1974 elections', 23 October 1974, Aerogramme from US Embassy in Guatemala to Department of State, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter NARA), Maryland, RG 59, Subject-Numeric File, POL 12 GUAT.

⁵⁰Letter to Manager of La Fabulosa Radio Station from Porfirio Méndez, 28 January 1965, AHPN Fondo Gobernación Departamental de Quiché, Expediente no. 346.172-650128-0003-12748064.

⁵¹Letter from Gobernador de Quiché to Ministro de Gobernación, Santa Cruz del Quiché, 11 February 1965, AHPN-GDQ, Expediente no. 346.172-0031-12748092.

⁵²Letter from Governor of Quiché to Secretary General of the FCG, Santa Cruz del Quiché, 8 February 1965, AHPN-GDQ, File no. 346.172-0022-12748083.

⁵³Letter to the Departmental Governor of Quiché from Ministro de Gobernación, Luis Maximiliano Serrano, 2 February 1965, AHPN, Fondo Gobernación Departamental de Quiché, Expediente no. 346.172-650202-0004-12748065.

⁵⁴Letter to the Minister of the Interior from the Governor of Quiché, 4 February 1965, AHPN, Fondo Gobernación Departamental de Quiché, file no. 346.172-650204-0008-12748069.

⁵⁵Nájera Ortiz was not just any policeman. His brother, Miguel Mariano Nájera (class 32, 1935), approved the military *putsch* of March 1963 as head of the military base. Among his class were Colonels Carlos Arana Osorio and Rafael Arriaga Bosque, recognised for their work in paramilitary activities during those years from state command posts. See letter from Governor to Chief of Departmental PN Station, Quiché, 4 February 1965, AHPN, Departmental Government of Quiché, file no. 346.172-650204.346.172-650204-0011-12748072, On Callejas, see Memorandum to Colonel Callejas, 11 February 1965, AHPN, Gobernación Departamental de Quiché fund, file no. 346.172-0036-12748072.

⁵⁶'Agotaremos todos los recursos para no ser víctimas de burdas maniobras', *El Gráfico*, 15 May 1970.

⁵⁷'Lucas Caballeros aceptaría ser de nuevo candidato para las elecciones de 1974', *El Gráfico*, 4 March 1970; 'Aunque Lucas Caballeros reconoce su derrota la DC pide repetir elecciones', *El Gráfico*, 5 March 1970.

⁵⁸'La Corte Suprema Corte de Justicia aclara a la Democracia Cristiana Guatemalteca', *Prensa Libre*, 5 November 1970; 'Democracia Cristiana señala que la Corte Suprema ha roto la jurisprudencia', *La Hora*, 27 October 1970.

⁵⁹The deputies were Carlos Enrique López Girón and Luis Tárano Villatoro, who in 1953 was the attorney-in-fact for the Herrera Dorián family in proceedings brought as part of the Agrarian Reform. See Archivo Legislativo (AL), Diario de Sesiones del Congreso, Sesión 48, Periodo Ordinario 1970–71, 27 October 1970.

⁶⁰Municipality to the north of Santa Cruz, made up mostly of Mayan-Ixil people.

⁶¹Colom's party was the Unidad Revolucionaria Democrática, Fuentes' was the Partido Revolucionario Auténtico, the trade union federation was the Central Nacional de Trabajadores and the Federación Campesina de Guatemala.

⁶²AL, Periodo Ordinario 1973–1974, Tomo II, Número 72; Memo from US Embassy in Guatemala to State Department, 'Election Report number 27', 7 March 1974; NARA, RG 59, General Records of the Department of State; 'Ríos Montt emite nuevo comunicado', *El Gráfico*, 7 March 1974.

⁶³Konefal, 'The ethnic question'.

⁶⁴See also a testimony of Emeterio published by Amnesty International.

⁶⁵See 'Se entrega guerrillero fundador del CUC', *Prensa Libre*, 23 October 1981 and 'Emeterio Toj, fundador del CUC, fue presentado por el gobierno', *Inforpress Centroamericana*, no. 466, 29 October 1981.

⁶⁶See 'EGP informa haber liberado a Emeterio Toj del cuartel general', *Inforpress Centroamericana*, no. 472, 12 December 1981.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

References

- Adams, Richard. *El sector agrario inferior de Guatemala, 1944–1965*. Austin: University of Texas at Austin, 1967.
- Adams, Richard, and Santiago Bastos. *Las relaciones étnicas en Guatemala, 1944–2000*. Antigua: CIRMA, 2003.
- Aguilera, Gabriel. '¡Habla líder campesino!'. *Revista Revolución Social Cristiana* II, no. 8 (1963): 6.
- Álvarez, Alberto Martín, and Eudald Cortina Orero. 'The genesis and internal dynamics of El Salvador's People's Revolutionary Army'. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 46, no. 4 (2014): 663–83. [CrossRef]
- Arias, Arturo. 'Changing Indian identity: Guatemala's violent transition to modernity'. In *Guatemalan Indians and the State (1524–1989)*, edited by Carol Smith, 230–57. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989.
- Bastos, Santiago. *Etnicidad y fuerzas armadas en Guatemala: Algunas ideas para el debate*. Guatemala City: FLACSO, 2004.
- Beverly, John. 'The margin at the center'. *Modern Fiction Studies* 35, no. 1 (1989): 11–28. [CrossRef]
- Boff, Leonardo. *Teología de la Liberación*. San José: DEL, 1987.
- Brockett, Charles D. 'The structure of political opportunities and peasant mobilization in Central America'. *Comparative Politics* 23, no. 3 (1991): 253–74. [CrossRef]
- Bulmer-Thomas, Victor. *The Political Economy of Central America since 1920*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Carmack, Robert M. *Historia social de los quichés*. Guatemala City: José Pineda Ibarra, 1979.
- Carmack, Robert M. *Rebels of Highland Guatemala: The Quiche-Mayas of Momostenango*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995.
- Carmack, Robert M., and John M. Weeks. 'The archaeology and ethnohistory of Uatatlán: A conjunctive approach'. *American Antiquity* 46, no. 2 (1981): 323–41. [CrossRef]
- Casaús, Marta. *Guatemala: Linaje y racismo*. Guatemala City: F&G Editores, 2010.
- Chea, Jose Luis. 'The process and the implications of change in the Guatemalan Catholic Church'. PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, USA, 1989.
- Cullather, Nick. *Secret History: The CIA's classified account of its operations in Guatemala, 1952–1954*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006.
- Davidson, John R. *The Rural Credit and Cooperative Development Project in Guatemala*. Washington, DC: AID, 1976.
- Dröscher, Barbara. 'El testimonio y los intelectuales en el triángulo atlántico. Desde El Cimarrón hasta la polémica actual en torno a Rigoberta Menchú, de Elizabeth Burgos'. *Istmo*, 26 June 2001. Accessed 8 March 2023. <http://istmo.denison.edu/n02/articulos/intel.html>.

- Durston, John W. *La estructura de poder en una región ladina de Guatemala*. Guatemala City: Seminario de Integración Social Guatemalteca, 1972.
- García, Roberto. 'The overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz and the Cold War in Latin America: New sources and perspectives'. *Journal of American History* 149 (2013): 39–43.
- Gardner, Nathaniel E. 'The extraordinary subaltern: Latin American testimony and representation'. *Hipertexto* 4 (2006): 36–49.
- Garrard, Virginia. *Protestantism in Guatemala: Living in the New Jerusalem*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998.
- Getchell, Michelle Denise. 'Revisiting the 1954 coup in Guatemala: The Soviet Union, the United Nations, and "Hemispheric Solidarity"'. *Journal of Cold War Studies* 17, no. 2 (2015): 73–102. [CrossRef]
- Gilderhus, Mark, and Michael Neagle. 'Culture and the Cold War: U.S.–Latin American historiography since 1995'. In *America in the World: The historiography of American foreign relations since 1941*, edited by Frank Costigliola and Michael Hogan, 188–211. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. [CrossRef]
- Gleijeses, Piero. *La esperanza rota*. Guatemala City: Editorial Universitaria, 2008.
- Gould, Jeffrey L. 'Ignacio Ellacuría and the Salvadorean revolution'. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 47, no. 2 (2003): 285–315. [CrossRef]
- Grandin, Greg. *The Blood of Guatemala: Race and nation in Quetzaltenango, 1750–1954*. Guatemala City: CIRMA/Plumsock, 2007.
- Grandin, Greg. *Panzós: la última masacre colonial: Latinoamérica en la Guerra Fría*. Guatemala City: AVANCSO, 2007.
- Grandin, Greg. 'To end with all these evils: Ethnic transformation and community mobilization in Guatemala's Western Highlands, 1954–1980'. *Latin American Perspectives* 24, no. 2 (1997): 7–34. [CrossRef]
- Hale, Charles R. 'Consciousness, violence, and the politics of memory in Guatemala'. *Current Anthropology* 38, no. 5 (1997): 817–38. [CrossRef]
- Hill, Robert M. *The Kaqchikeles of Colonial Times: Adaptations of the Highland Maya to Spanish rule, 1600–1700*. Guatemala City: Cholsamaj/Plumsock, 2001.
- Joseph, Gilbert M. 'Border crossings and the remaking of Latin American Cold War studies'. *Cold War History* 19 (2019): 141–70. [CrossRef]
- Joseph, Gilbert M. 'Close encounters: Toward a new cultural history of U.S.–Latin American relations'. In *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the cultural history of U.S.–Latin American relations*, edited by Gilbert Michael Joseph, Catherine LeGrand and Ricardo Donato Salvatore, 3–46. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998.
- Konefal, Betsy. 'The ethnic question in Guatemala's armed conflict: Insights from the detention and "rescue" of Emeterio Toj Medrano'. In *Making the Revolution*, edited by Kelvin A. Young, 240–65. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Llamojha, Manuel, and Jaymie Patricia Heilman. *Now Peru Is Mine: The life and times of a campesino activist*. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Loveman, Mara. 'High-risk action: Defending human rights in Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina'. *American Journal of Sociology* 104, no. 2 (1998): 477–525. [CrossRef]
- Mackenbach, Werner. 'Realidad y ficción en el testimonio centroamericano'. *Istmo*, 26 June 2001. Accessed 8 March 2023. <http://istmo.denison.edu/n02/articulos/realidad.html>.
- Mainwaring, Scott, and Timothy Scully. *Democracias Cristianas en América Latina*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2010.
- Mallon, Florencia E. 'Decolonizing knowledge, language and narrative'. In *Decolonizing Native Histories*, edited by Florencia E. Mallon, 1–20. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Martínez, Severo. *La Patria del criollo*. Puebla: BUAP, 1982.
- May, Rachel A. *Terror in the Countryside: Campesino Responses to Political Violence in Guatemala, 1954–1985*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001.
- McAdam, Doug. 'High and low risk/cost activism'. In *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, edited by David A. Snow, Donatella della Porta, Doug McAdam and Bert Klandermans, 1–2. Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 2003.
- Montoya, Rosario. 'Liberation theology and the socialist utopia of a Nicaraguan shoemaker'. *Social History* 20, no. 1 (1995): 23–43. [CrossRef]
- NACLA. *Guatemala*. Washington, DC: NACLA, 1974.
- Picornell, Mercè. 'Autoría, autoridad y verdad. Apuntes para una nueva lectura "en frío" de la polémica Menchú–Stoll'. *Kamchatka* 6 (2015): 349–79. [CrossRef]

- Pratt, Mary Louise. 'Lucha-libros: Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y sus críticos en el contexto norteamericano'. *Nueva Sociedad* 162 (1999): 24–39. [CrossRef]
- Randall, Margaret. 'Qué es y cómo se hace un testimonio?'. *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 18, no. 36 (1992): 23–47. [CrossRef]
- Reuque, Isolde. *When a Flower Is Born*, edited by Florencia E., Mallon. Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Rus, Jan. 'If truth be told: Introductory essay'. *Latin American Perspectives* 26, no. 6 (1999): 5–14.
- Santos, Carlos. *El silencio del gallo*. Barcelona: Debate, 2007.
- Schaefer, Timo. 'Growing up *Indio* during the Mexican miracle: Childhood, race and the politics of memory'. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 54, no. 2 (2022): 181–202. [CrossRef]
- Schlesinger, Stephen, and Stephen Kinzer. *Fruta amarga*. Mexico City: Siglo XXI editores, 1987.
- Schmid, Lester James. 'The role of migratory labor in the economic development of Guatemala, 1967'. PhD thesis, Economics, University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA, 1967.
- Smith, Carol A. 'Local history in global context: Social and economic transitions in Western Guatemala'. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 2 (1984): 193–228. [CrossRef]
- Smith, Carol A. 'Market articulation and economic stratification in Western Guatemala'. *Food Research Institute Studies* 2 (1972): 203–33.
- Sommer, Doris. 'Sin secretos'. In *La voz del otro*, edited by John Beverley and Hugo Achúgar, 146–200. Lima: Latinoamericana Editores, 1992.
- Stern, Steve J. 'The decentered center and the expansionist periphery: The paradoxes of foreign–local encounter'. In *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the cultural history of U.S.–Latin American relations*, edited by Gilbert Michael Joseph, Catherine LeGrand and Ricardo Donato Salvatore, 47–68. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998.
- Streeter, Stephen M. 'Interpreting the 1954 U.S. intervention in Guatemala: Realist, revisionist, and postrevisionist perspectives'. *The History Teacher* 34, no. 1 (2003): 1–26. [CrossRef]
- Taracena Arriola, Arturo. *Etnicidad y nación en Guatemala*. Vol II. Antigua: CIRMA, 2004.
- Taracena Arriola, Arturo. *Invención criolla, sueño ladino, pesadilla indígena: Los Altos de Guatemala, de región a Estado (1740–1871)*. Guatemala: Serviprensa, 2011.
- Tieffemberg, Silvia. 'Isolde Reuque o Rigoberta Menchú, veinte años después: Sobre la matriz colonial del testimonio'. *Anales de Literatura Chilena* 7, no. 7 (2006): 137–52.
- Toj Medrano, Emeterio, and Rodrigo Véliz Estrada. *Cuando el indio tomó las armas: La vida de Emeterio Toj Medrano*. Mexico City: UNAM, 2021.
- Vázquez, Juan Carlos. 'Tradición testimonial guatemalteca'. In *Globalización e izquierdas en América Latina*, edited by María Guadalupe Moreno González, María Gracia Castillo Ramírez and Miguel Ángel Urrego, 115–38. Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 2021.
- Vela Castañeda, Manolo E. 'Nuevas perspectivas sobre militancias de alto riesgo: Ciudad de Guatemala, 1980–1985'. *Latin American Research Review* 56, no. 4 (2021): 831–43. [CrossRef]
- Véliz Estrada, Rodrigo. 'Education in communities of population in resistance in the Ixcán: State denial and educational mediation'. *Interamerican Journal for Education in Democracy* 4, no. 2 (2013): 11–30.
- Véliz Estrada, Rodrigo. 'Más agresivos y más revolucionarios: Los límites y el agotamiento de la "revolución democristiana" en América Central, 1961–1974'. *Hispanic American Historical Review* 101, no. 4 (2021): 657–87. [CrossRef]
- Viterna, Jocelyn S. 'Pulled, pushed, and persuaded: Explaining women's mobilization into the Salvadoran guerrilla army'. *American Journal of Sociology* 112, no. 1 (2006): 1–45. [CrossRef]
- Yudice, George. 'Testimonio and postmodernism'. *Latin American Perspectives* 18, no. 3 (1991): 15–31. [CrossRef]
- Zimmerman, Marc. 'El "Otro" de Rigoberta: los testimonios de Ignacio Bizarro Ujpán y la resistencia indígena en Guatemala'. *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 18, no. 36 (1992): 233–47. [CrossRef]
- Zimmerman, Marc. 'Testimony, Menchú, me and you'. *The Journal of Midwest Modern Language Association* 33/34 (2001): 4–10. [CrossRef]