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The quest for solidarity without victory: constraining the Guatemalan guerilla (1979-1996)

A series of innovative researchers have recently freed the opposition movements of the 'Third World' from their position as passive recipients of Western solidarity. A transnational analysis of solidarity networks rightly ascribed these actors a formidable agency in constituting and shaping solidarity around their causes. However, in focusing on large-scale solidarity campaigns such as Vietnam, Chile and Nicaragua, research has remained centered on movements whose claim to govern was widely considered as legitimate and was backed by substantial financial and cultural capital. Solidarity seems to always side with the victors, but should we too?

Time has come to include campaigns that failed to echo beyond a small circle of activists. By nuancing the observed patterns of active involvement, this paper focuses on the Guatemalan guerrilla and its solidarity network. By including a campaign based on cripple and atypical structures, this case study serves as a counter-example for current research, not with the intention of questioning the validity of its conclusions, but rather to introduce diversity in the research field. As a movement not backed by contemporary or previous state power, how constitutive, dynamic and creative was the Guatemalan guerrilla in organizing international solidarity?

What remains of the previously observed potency of opposition movements when stripped off diplomatic channels, direct encounters, human rights discourses, legitimacy, heroic exoticism and capital? The answers to these questions were to be found mainly in the sociopolitical context that imposed constraints the Guatemalan guerrilla suffered in reaching out to international solidarity while it also determined the outlook of the network. The importance of embedding opposition movements firmly in their local context, reveals itself even clearer when we compare the solidarity mobilizations for Guatemala and Nicaragua. Although launched almost simultaneously and from a shared starting point of guerrilla warfare, they nonetheless took very divergent roads.

Although this paper approaches the solidarity movement with Guatemala from a transnational perspective, the personal and the anecdotal are never far away when solidarity intertwines with life stories. The multi-layered history of European solidarity with Guatemala, would be unimaginable without the Flemish and Dutch missionaries who spend years practicing liberation theology in Guatemalan rural communities, some of whom lost their

lives after setting aside their vows and joining guerrilla ranks. We will, however, remain focused on the central debate of agency within transnational networks and the obstacles that armed opposition movement in general, and the Guatemalan guerrilla in specific, faced in exercising this agency.

First constraint: Varying cycles of state terror and revolutionary defeat

The Guatemalan solidarity network suffered an endemic instability due to the varying cycles of state terror and evolving strategies of counter-insurgency that subjugated the opposition movement to continuous processes of integration and disintegration. Since the overthrow of Guatemala's first democratically elected government in the 1950s, military regimes used incessant violence to crush any revival of the old revolutionary spirit. By the 1970s, however, an armed insurgency in the highlands and a pacifist movement in the capital confronted the regime with unseen challenges and paralyzed Guatemala through national strikes. The solidarity network was created in the same euphoric state, only heightened by the advances of the insurgencies raging in El Salvador and Nicaragua where victory seemed ever close. By 1979, eight western European solidarity committees had found each other in Antwerp for their first annual meeting and decided on the creation of a network in support of the Guatemalan popular organizations. Initially, they did not proclaim explicit solidarity with the armed resistance, although the guerrilla undeniably played a crucial role within Guatemala. All hopes were still set on the revolutionary potential of the peaceful movement which, at least publicly, maintained the same reserved attitude towards the armed resistance.

In the 1980s governmental anxiety with regional developments unleashed a massive repressive campaign. Fear dictated the solidarity movement. Guatemalan delegations still visiting Europe testified anonymously and masked, while several opposition members allegedly received death threats while touring through Europe. The solidarity network eventually collapsed completely as selective assassinations decapitated nearly every popular organization or forced them underground. The closing of opportunities for peaceful resistance in turn drove many into joining guerrilla ranks which fueled the emergence of a nation-wide guerrilla offensive. With their traditional solidarity partners vanished and left empty-handed, the network was faced with a non-decision: follow or perish. Armed resistance thus became, to quote, "a justified and the only remaining answer", and solidarity with the guerrilla their "only logical and consistent choice".

Second constraint: a forcefully divorced solidarity network

Wholeheartedly or not, the reorientation on radical solidarity with the guerrillas proved problematic. Primacy had been given to a subversive vanguard that found itself in a total state of war, chaos and disarray by the scorched earth policy of the military regime. The solidarity network had no insight whatsoever in the powers at work as they got completely cut off from the Guatemalan opposition. Previously discontinuous flows of information dried up completely. If actual encounters with Guatemalan representatives had always been limited, they came to a complete standstill in the beginning of the 1980s. For years the network was to function without any foothold or reference point. For members of the solidarity movement to enter Guatemala freely, in turn, was more impossible than ever before. It remained a no-go zone for western activists, even more for the many within the solidarity committees who had fled the country after receiving death threats or losing fellow countrymen. .

On top of that, the Guatemalan guerrilla showed little interested in mobilizing solidarity, which it received gratefully yet passively. Confronted with heavy losses, international solidarity sank lower and lower on the priority list of the guerrillas. The intensity of the counter-revolution clearly forced the guerrillas to direct their energies towards fighting for their survival instead of the formation of a strong solidarity network.

The minor solidarity for Nicaragua *prior to* the military overthrow of Somoza convincingly confirms the severe limitations suffered by opposition movements seeking legitimacy for an armed insurgency. Where it's easy to draw parallels between the solidarity for the Guatemalan opposition and its Nicaraguan counterpart under Somoza-rule, the Sandinista solidarity that arose after the ousting of the dictatorship only offers a perspective of the solidarity that could have been if the Guatemalan guerrilla had achieved to seize state power. Sandinista military victory in 1979 was a trigger event that allowed a minimalistic network to evolve into a revolutionary diplomacy involving entire state agencies designed to coordinate international solidarity. The Guatemalan guerrilla instead continued to be subjugated to the same thresholds and barriers that previously reduced Sandinista solidarity to an ephemeral network.

Military victory further allowed the Sandinista government to set aside its radical image and invent a more humanitarian yet explicitly political solidarity. The Guatemalan guerrilla however maintained its violent rhetoric and showed little affinity with a human rights discourse, neither did it blur the lines between human rights and the armed resistance. Human rights weren't an instrument in contesting current military regimes, but a goal to be single-handedly implemented by violently creating the necessary preconditions. Where the

Sandinista regime could speak in terms of democracy and reconstruction, the Guatemalan guerrilla had its hands full with the demolition of the military regime.

Third constraint: Paralyzing effects of the revolutionary fragmentation, home and abroad

Nonetheless, not all obstructions preventing an effective solidarity can be reduced to the consequences of the repressive climate in which it needed to take root. If the European solidarity committees experienced such difficulties connecting to the armed resistance, it was partly due to the lack of coherence between the guerrillas who failed to put forward a common political project. Ever since they emerged in the 1960s, strategical disputes severely challenged the Guatemalan guerrillas. Two fundamentally opposite point of views on revolutionary warfare would continue to divide the insurgency. Should the guerrilla limit itself to warfare, or should it organize and politicize the Guatemalan people in a political movement that could become a vehicle of the guerrilla agenda?

The Nicaraguan Sandinistas experienced similar strategical debates. Faced with slow progress in the overthrow of the dictatorship, the Sandinistas opted for the formation of a broad anti-Somoza coalition that could overcome internal frictions and united radical and moderate tendencies under one common banner and leadership. Internationally, this reorientation towards plurality not only allowed the Nicaraguan opposition to appeal to broad segments in the West, but also permitted them to top-down reconstruct the formerly fragmented European solidarity network in the same unitary philosophy.

Although lacking the capacity to impose harmony within their network, the Guatemalan guerrillas not only refrained from similar unifying initiatives, they also willfully maintained the internal antagonism within the European network. Rivalry in Europe was a mere reflection of the Guatemalan reality in which the factions barely cooperated and remained embedded in their own frontlines. Accounts of activists are riddled with the fatal consequences of these deeply rooted divisions. The formation of two opposing blocks did more than just divide the financial and political weight a unified solidarity movement could mobilize. The two main factions within the guerrilla also relied on separate clandestine alliances woven into and functioning within the structures of the official European solidarity network. Thus, adherents of both sides tried vigorously to gain legitimacy for their own faction while preventing excessive influence of the other over the European mainland. The two clandestine networks were even led by their own 'ambassadors' who both roamed Europe to gather support for their own faction: a Dutch priest turned *guerrillero*, and Jorge Rosal an exiled Guatemalan guerrilla commander. The high office the representative combined with his

clandestine activities, was indicative for how deeply the factionalism was engrained in the highest ranks of the guerrilla.

The hastily creation of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) as an institutionalized alliance between the guerrillas, brought few changes to the rivalry at home and abroad. Over the years the European solidarity network had rightly argued that international support for the guerrilla wasn't just dependent on the perspective of victory they offered, but also on the capability of representing themselves as a viable political alternative. The consolidation of the guerrilla unity initially enabled a divided solidarity network to finally work together and collectively gather funds in support of the united armed resistance. The campaign, however, ended in bitter disappointment as some of the factions had claimed and misused the European funds for their sole benefit. The European solidarity committees were not shy to condemn the fraud and spoke in terms of manipulation of their solidarity. The conflict that arose marked the birth of what the network called a 'critical solidarity'. An increasing amount of activists turned their backs on the armed resistance.

Fourth constraint: the inevitability of the Guatemalan guerrilla

As the guerrillas were pushed back into the Guatemalan highlands, revolutionary defeat became undeniable. Once a political dialogue with the Guatemalan regime was opened, the armed insurgency lost much of its mystic appeal. By the middle of the 1980s, the solidarity movement started showing its first signs of decay. Some committees simply ceased to exist, while others broke free from the network and reoriented their solidarity towards to the victims of the counter-revolution. For the first time they embraced a human rights discourse in defying the military regime. The Flemish committee, for example, gave priority to their quest for answers in the disappearance and murder of several Flemish priests in Guatemala, and continues to do so up to the present day. In throwing off its radical and revolutionary image, more than ever before, it succeeded in finding a sympathetic ear within Belgian politics.

Nonetheless, the decimated European solidarity network itself remained radically oriented towards the guerrilla. As the guerrilla led the peace talks on behalf of the opposition, their position at the negotiating table needed to be reinforced. Continuing solidarity became inevitable but also more reasoned and less activist. The solidarity network kept itself from repeating the heroic proclamations of the guerrilla who continued to cultivate the illusion that military victory was near.

The disproportionate weight the guerrilla still held on the network, was also due to the eagerly awaited installation of an official representative of the unified Guatemalan guerrilla in

Europe. After years of unheard appeals, the network could finally count on a tangible connection to the Guatemalan resistance, although the guerrilla showed little interest in developing a relationship with the solidarity network and allegedly described the resources brought in by the solidarity movement as “peanuts”. Surprisingly, however, it was commander Jorge Rosal who was suddenly to become the spokesperson of a united guerrilla after years of perpetuating internal rivalry through his clandestine activism. Whilst the Sandinista presence in Europe had been the incarnation of the power to convert the violent character of the Nicaraguan revolution into a more humanitarian project suited to broaden political support in Europe, the Guatemalan commander had been the embodiment of hardline guerrilla warfare and the lasting factionalism within the solidarity network. His past, as expected, gave him little credibility in creating a united movement in mutual trust, which consequently never came to be. Though the cry for justice gradually found an international platform, solidarity remained solely directed towards the Guatemalan people as suffering objects, never to its armed resistance movement.