Love-Death among the Guerrillas

by David Stoll

Bridge of Courage: Life Stories of the Guatemalan Compañeros and Compañeras
by Jennifer Harbury. Monroe, Me.: Common Courage Press, 1993.

In September 1992 a North American lawyer went on a week-long hunger strike outside an army base in Guatemala City. Armed with a novel, Jennifer Harbury camped in front of a grim fortress where secret prisoners are said to rot in underground cells. Inspections of the interior yielded nothing, but Harbury, like thousands of other women in Guatemala, wanted to know what the army had done with her husband.

Harbury's spouse is one of thousands of Guatemalans who, since the late 1960s, have "disappeared" in the hands of the country's security forces. Efraín Bamaca Velásquez—better known as "Comandante Everardo"—belonged to the Organización del Pueblo en Armas (ORPA), one of four small guerrilla armies in the Unión Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG). The struggle dates back to 1954, when the CIA overthrew an elected government challenging US interests. Ever since, Guatemala has been dominated by its army, and North Americans drawn to this Central American country have struggled with a profound sense of guilt. Some of us have embarked on political journeys like Harbury's.

A Harvard law school graduate from Texas, she is far from the first gringo to become romantically involved with a Central American revolution. But she may be the first to have written a book about her experiences, and it is a candid one. Mainly a collection of testimonials from active and former combatants, *Bridge of Courage* leaves readers with powerful impressions of how brutal the security forces can be, and of the courage required to oppose them. I was left with an additional reaction, however, because of my experience with a different slice of Guatemalan life than the one in which Harbury immersed herself. For me as an anthropologist, the stories in the book call into question the ethics of guerrilla warfare.

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Of mounting raids and then disappearing, blurring the distinction between combatants and civilians, so that those who remain behind to face the army's rage are bewildered bystanders. Of setting up front groups that implicate wider circles of people, many of them unknowing. Of demanding civil guarantees from the same system you are trying to overthrow through armed struggle. And of continuing the war in the face of what I and many other observers (although not Harbury) take to be widespread popular disillusion with it.

"Bodyguard" on the Edge

Harbury's first contact with Guatemala was working with illegal immigrants petitioning for political asylum in the US. Frustrated by judicial rejection of her clients, she went to Guatemala to track down human rights testimony for them. Before long, Harbury was also an unarmed "bodyguard" for Guatemalans in danger of being kidnapped, and this soon led to contacts with the clandestine support networks of ORPA. That is, she was on the periphery of one of the underground military organizations whose activities have, for nearly 30 years, strengthened the Guatemalan army's rationale for building up a national security state.

At first, Harbury collected the stories of guerrilla cadres who survived the army's destruction of their urban safehouses, and of human rights activists being tracked down by the army with equal mercilessness. Their memories were so heart-rending that she headed for the mountains to interview combatants. It was during these visits that she met one of the first Mam Mayan Indians to join ORPA, Comandante Everardo, whom she married only months before he disappeared amid a fire fight in March 1992. When Harbury demanded to know what had happened to her husband, the army claimed he had killed himself to avoid capture—a not implausible scenario as many guerrillas had opted for suicide over capture. But Harbury was determined to confirm this claim and pressed to have his body exhumed.

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The body turned out to be someone else's. Meanwhile, an escaped prisoner reported seeing a severely battered Everardo at an army base where captured guerrillas are "reprogrammed" to join government death squads.

Hence, it is not surprising that Harbury's campaign to make the army observe the Geneva conventions has gotten a warm response from many Guatemalans. But is Harbury correct when stating that many Guatemalans want the URNG to keep fighting? And is supporting armed struggle the only alternative for the Guatemalan left, as she also seems to assume?

Consider for a moment the case of Santiago Atitlán, a town that used to be a hotbed of ORPA recruiting in the early 1980s. To defend themselves from army depredations, in 1990 the Atitecos forced the army to close its base. Then they asked ORPA to stay away, too. Their success in mobilizing human rights support, and the growing presence of human rights activists like Harbury, suggests that guerrilla warfare is not the only option for Guatemalans.

Contrary to the claim made by Harbury and others that repression is getting worse, the army has, in fact, been forced to scale back its abuses under the weight of domestic as well as international pressure. During a constitutional crisis in 1992, the officer corps divided, permitting the election of Guatemala's human rights ombudsman as president. While President Ramiro de León Carpio has been forced to acquiesce to army demands since then, new groups demanding their rights continue to emerge from civil society.

No doubt because of Harbury's harsh experiences—she describes the death of one friend after another—her book fails to acknowledge how Guatemala has changed since the early 1980s, instead submerging important issues in the potent image of the love-death. The reasons go beyond her own tragic union with Comandante Everardo, and probably beyond anything you will find in the scholarly literature on guerrilla movements.

Long ago ORPA stopped trying to ban romantic love among its militants, many of whom are women. If Harbury's stories are representative, as I believe they are, love—comradely as well as romantic—has been one of the mainsprings of revolutionary movement, sharpened by the probability that courtships and friendships will end in early death. Again and again, Harbury tells the story of a romance cut short by sacrifice for the revolution, the most recent being that of her husband. As for the friendships that ended this way, they are countless.

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Like nothing else I have read, Harbury's stories explain why militants accept the probability of an early and often horrible demise. But solidarity activists should beware of the resulting ideology of martyrdom that pervades both the guerrilla armies of the URNG and the popular organizations allied with them. The living feel an obligation to continue the armed struggle that has taken so many of their comrades, but martyrs can no longer speak, and their memory can be used to avoid reassessing strategies that they might now want to change.

Yet, what if Harbury is right, that broad masses of Guatemalans support guerrilla warfare, but are simply afraid to say how they feel? After all, understanding how people feel in a repressed society is not an easy task. My own approach, as a researcher rather than an activist, was to live in a Mayan area that was a guerrilla stronghold at the start of the 1980s. This area was harshly repressed by the army and now claims to be neutral.

How do I know if my sources tell me how they really feel? There is no way to know with absolute certainty, but the willingness of so many of them to damn both the army and the guerrillas convinced me that, when they say they want the war to stop as soon as possible, I have to take their statements at face value. The cost of protracted war is too immediate and the hypothetical benefits of lengthy negotiations too remote for people whose daily struggle to exist continues to be complicated by the URNG as well as the army.

Outside the organized left, it is easier to find Guatemalans who place their hopes in emigration to the US, or personal religious conversion, or even international human rights observers, than in heroic figures like Comandante Everardo. One reason is that, when guerrillas draw soldiers in hot pursuit, they often failed to protect civilians from the army's reprisals. Survivors get their "consciousness raised," but this includes the realization that, had the guerrillas never appeared, their loved ones would probably still be alive.

Significantly, Harbury's voices are all from the revolutionary vanguard, not from the many bystanders who never asked the guerrillas to attack the army on their doorstep and who have suffered so many of the casualties. As a result, her testimonies fail to capture the many nuances of suspicion and anger as well as sympathy that nonactivists feel toward the guerrillas. Guerrillaphile North Americans (including myself, until recently) need to recognize that casting one's lot with a guerrilla movement

makes it harder to see how little support there often is for it—if not in the full flush of revolutionary mobilization, then later as armed struggle becomes as interminable as trench warfare.

In all of Latin America, only Colombia has bled from a longer civil war, and there the left is deeply divided over whether to continue armed struggle. Unfortunately, this debate has yet to come out of the closet on the Guatemalan left, even though the guerrillas are too weak to extract significant concessions from the army and vow to continue fighting until they do—hence the ever-stalemated peace talks that, since 1991, have failed to produce an agreement.

Unarmed Scapegoats

Meanwhile, URNG ambushes do not increase the Guatemalan security forces' respect for the law. To the contrary, guerrilla attacks strengthen army hard-liners who oppose making any concessions to the left. When there was no chance of extracting due process from the out-of-control military dictatorships of the 1970s and early 1980s, this may not have been so important. But now that more political space has opened up, armed struggle reinforces the Guatemalan army's rationale for dominating national life. When guerrillas attack the army in proximity to peaceful protests, unarmed activists become endangered scapegoats.

Unlike Harbury, I do not believe the URNG has gained much ground in the last three years of peace talks. Even though the URNG has probably given more ground than the government, both sides have come to look intransigent. Occasionally, my Mayan interviewees wonder if the two sides are working together to keep everyone else under the gun.

That peace talks started at all was due less to URNG's domestic strength than to international pressure on the government. Unfortunately, international pressure has been unable to break the paradoxical convergence of interests between the two armed groups. Subversion justifies a counterinsurgency state, and the army's human rights abuses justify the URNG's armed resistance. Each side's activities provide powerful rationales for the other's, permitting both to impose their priorities on the rest of the society, much of which does not feel represented by either.

The Mayan peasants with whom I talk cannot see the point of the URNG continuing the war, and as a result neither can I. Giving up the armed struggle for little in return may still be unthinkable for most of the Guatemalan left, but if it ever wants to organize broadly again, it may have to do just that.

Captured guerrillas like Comandante Everardo have every right to international safeguards. Harbury's campaign is a courageous one that deserves the support of the larger human rights community. She has increased international pressure on the army by publicizing how it treats its prisoners. Yet, now that more political space exists, activists cannot ignore the contradictions between working for human rights and supporting armed struggle—that is, demanding that a government respect due process while implicitly supporting armed attacks on its agents.

Bridge of Courage suggests the close ties that can develop between human rights work and support for a guerrilla movement, and how international activism can become a substitute for grassroots domestic support. Guatemalans want their rights and deserve more international support than they are getting. It is important, however, to discern between the demand for human rights as a plea for due process and the call for those same rights as a justification for an insurgency that is going nowhere. ■

Editor's Note: The "Where is Everardo?" campaign can be contacted at P.O. Box 650054, Austin, Texas 78765; (512) 473-7149.