

Pedimos Posada: Local Mediators and Guatemalan Refugees in Mexico, 1978-1984

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Abstract. Objective/Context: This article investigates how indigenous Guatemalan campesinos who took refuge in Chiapas, Mexico, relied upon Mexican mediators and community solidarity to secure their safety during the Guatemalan army’s genocidal campaign (1979-1983) against Mayan campesinos. The objective is to identify why different groups of mediators successfully met refugee needs. **Methodology:** Using the framework of forced migration studies, the article uses archival and oral histories to examine patterns of labor migration and refugee movement. **Originality:** The study uses previously uncatalogued archival collections, including the Guatemalan Refugees Collection in the Archivo Histórico Diocesano de San Cristóbal de las Casas, local documents from the Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas (formerly Instituto Nacional Indígena, INI), and oral histories collected in communities of *ex-refugiados*. **Conclusions:** Refugees relied upon local mediators, primarily campesinos and small farmers, for food, shelter, and work. Although formal mediators (governmental and intergovernmental organizations) potentially offered more services to refugee settlements, refugee camps also required formal registration and restricted peoples’ rights to work and move freely. Indigenous Maya villagers on both sides of the border shared long histories of labor migration, along with social, religious, and family ties. These links formed the base of new communities and provided refugees with needed flexibility. More broadly, this research shows how grassroots community formation protected, and at times exploited, the human rights of refugees.

Keywords: Guatemala, informal mediators, Mexico, migration, refugees.

Pedimos posada: mediadores locales y refugiados guatemaltecos en México, 1978-1984

Resumen. Objetivo/Contexto: este artículo investiga cómo los campesinos indígenas guatemaltecos que se refugiaron en Chiapas, México, confiaron en los mediadores mexicanos y la solidaridad comunitaria para garantizar su seguridad durante la campaña genocida del ejército guatemalteco (1979-1983) contra los campesinos mayas. El objetivo es identificar por qué diferentes grupos de mediadores satisfacen exitosamente las necesidades de los refugiados. **Metodología:** utilizando el marco de estudios de migración forzada, el artículo examina fuentes de archivo e historias orales para analizar los patrones de migración laboral y movimiento de los refugiados. **Originalidad:** el artículo utiliza colecciones de archivo previamente no catalogadas, incluido el Fondo Refugiados Guatemaltecos en el Archivo Histórico Diocesano de San Cristóbal de Las Casas, documentos locales del Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas (anteriormente Instituto Nacional Indígena, INI) e historias orales recopiladas en comunidades de ex refugiados. **Conclusiones:** los refugiados dependían de los mediadores locales, principalmente campesinos y pequeños agricultores, para conseguir alimentos, refugio y trabajo. Aunque los mediadores formales (organizaciones gubernamentales e intergubernamentales) potencialmente podían ofrecer más servicios a los asentamientos de refugiados, los campamentos de refugiados también requerían

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un registro formal y restringían los derechos de las personas para trabajar y moverse libremente. Los aldeanos indígenas mayas de ambos lados de la frontera compartían una larga historia de migración laboral, además de lazos sociales, religiosos y familiares. Estos vínculos sentaron las bases de nuevas comunidades y proporcionaron a los refugiados la flexibilidad que necesitaban. En términos más generales, esta investigación muestra cómo la formación de comunidades de base protegió y, en ocasiones, abusó de los derechos humanos de los refugiados.

Palabras clave: Guatemala, mediadores informales, México, migración, refugiados.

Pedimos posada: mediadores locais e refugiados guatemaltecos no México, 1978-1984

Resumo. Objetivo/Contexto: neste artigo, é pesquisado como os camponeses indígenas guatemaltecos refugiados em Chiapas, México, confiaram nos mediadores mexicanos e na solidariedade comunitária para garantir sua segurança durante a campanha genocida do exército guatemalteco (1979-1983) contra os camponeses maias. O objetivo é identificar por que diferentes grupos de mediadores satisfizeram com sucesso as necessidades dos refugiados. **Metodologia:** a partir do referencial de estudos de migração forçada, no artigo, são examinadas fontes de arquivo e histórias orais para analisar os padrões de migração trabalhista e o movimento dos refugiados. **Originalidade:** o artigo utiliza coleções de arquivo previamente não catalogadas, incluído o Fundo de Refugiados Guatemaltecos no Archivo Histórico Diocesano de San Cristóbal de Las Casas, documentos locais do Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas (anteriormente Instituto Nacional Indígena) e histórias orais coletadas em comunidades de ex-refugiados. **Conclusões:** os refugiados dependiam dos mediadores locais, principalmente camponeses e pequenos agricultores, para conseguir alimentos, refúgio e trabalho. Embora os mediadores formais (organizações governamentais e intergovernamentais) potencialmente pudessem oferecer mais serviços aos assentamentos de refugiados, os acampamentos de refugiados também exigiam um registro formal e restringiam os direitos das pessoas para trabalhar e se mover livremente. A população indígena maia de ambos os lados da fronteira partilhava uma longa história de migração laboral, além de laços sociais, religiosos e familiares. Esses vínculos consolidaram as bases de novas comunidades e proporcionaram aos refugiados a flexibilidade que necessitavam. Em geral, nesta pesquisa, é mostrado como a formação de comunidades de base protegeu e, em ocasiões, abusou dos direitos humanos dos refugiados.

Palavras-chave: Guatemala, mediadores informais, México, migração, refugiados.

Introduction

In July 2013, an elderly indigenous woman (a Guatemalan refugee who had been granted Mexican citizenship) described the situation that pushed her to leave her community of Santa Ana Huista, Huehuetenango, Guatemala, in 1981. She was working outside when one of her children said, “Mama, where is papa? Lots of soldiers are coming...” Guatemalan troops occupied the village as part of the government’s “scorched earth” campaign, a policy that identified indigenous Maya in the country’s western highlands as guerrilla sympathizers. For the next four days, soldiers detained, questioned, tortured, and executed several men. “They grabbed my son from the house...and my husband coming home from work.” Later, the army put the men in the church and tortured them. “I heard my son screaming, my son couldn’t...”

The woman stopped, took a deep breath, and continued. “It was there, where the church was... where they did the shooting, and on the second night, they [the soldiers] removed them [the bodies] and no one knew where they were brought to.” In the aftermath of the massacre, she decided, “it is better that we leave for the other side [of the border], even though it is night, we need to walk.” For

the next several days, she and her five children walked on back roads towards the Mexican border. She had no food, no extra clothing, but her older children helped carry the youngest one. When she finally crossed the border into Mexico, a farmer stopped and asked her where she was going. She explained to him that the army had grabbed her husband and she had fled with her children (ages 12, 10, 8, 6, and 5 years old). She did not have a destination; she only knew that “I have to raise my sons.”¹

The man brought her family to his house, where his wife fed them and let them stay for several days. When more refugees arrived along the border, the couple advised the woman that the Guatemalan army was searching for refugees, and that she needed to get away from the border. The Mexican farmer arranged for a group to walk to Paso Hondo, a town in the municipality of Comalapa. He explained that “there, you will go and *pedir posada* [ask for shelter] and people will help you.” The refugees walked for eight days and they “encountered people along the way. But here, in Comalapa, was where they gave us clothing for the children and food.”² While she was in Comalapa, many Guatemalans congregated in the city and she found friends who invited her to move with them to an encampment with other refugees. She eventually settled there and raised her children.

People along the border frequently used this phrase, *pedir posada*, when speaking of the Guatemalan refugee crisis. From 1979 to 1984, the Guatemalan government attacked indigenous communities, ultimately leading to genocide in 1982-1983. The expression referred to *Las Posadas*, the traditional nativity play performed around Christmas to commemorate Joseph and Mary’s search for a place to stay in Bethlehem.³ In the Bible story, people repeatedly refused lodging to the family, even though Mary was due to give birth. Finally, an innkeeper allowed them to stay in a stable. By comparing refugees’ experiences to the Nativity story, the request for *posada* became a way to remind people to care for others, even if they had little to share. According to a teacher from Frontera Comalapa, many areas along Mexico’s border with Guatemala used the phrase, often shortening it to the verb *posarse*. People offering *posada* to displaced persons provided food or housing.⁴ Mexicans traditionally have provided safe haven in the twentieth century. Thousands of refugees from the Spanish civil war fled to Mexico in the 1930s, and Mexico provided asylum to leftist leaders from El Salvador during the 1970s.⁵ For Guatemalan refugees, the practice of *pedir posada* enabled them to recover from the difficult journey to the Mexican border and provided stability while they began to rebuild their lives.

The 36-year armed conflict in Guatemala pitted ladino elites (non-indigenous) and their military allies against leftist guerrilla groups, labor unions, student organizations, and predominantly Mayan campesinos. Elites protected their privileged socio-economic power by maintaining colonial racial and labor hierarchies. For elites, indigenous people were fundamentally inferior to Europeans. Traditional narratives of the war describe the Maya, which were roughly 50% of the population, as victims caught between “two devils,” the Guatemalan military and different guerrilla groups,

1 Sra. Jiménez C., former refugee, in discussion with the author, 24 July 2013, Chiapas, Mexico.

2 Sra. Jiménez C., former refugee, in discussion with the author, 24 July 2013, Chiapas, Mexico.

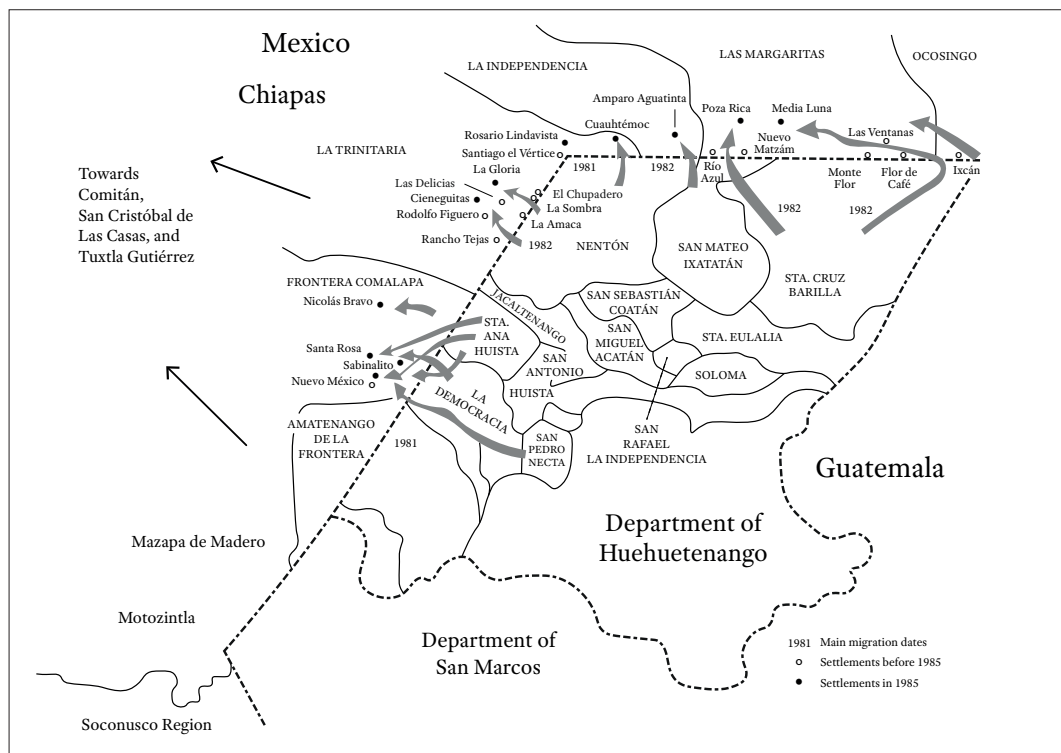
3 Reyna Elizabeth Pereyra Velásquez, teacher, in discussion with the author, 1 August 2013, San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico.

4 Pereyra Velásquez, discussion.

5 Manuel Ángel Castillo and Mónica Toussaint, “La frontera sur de México: orígenes y desarrollo de la migración centroamericana.” *Cuadernos Inter.c.a.mbio sobre Centroamérica y el Caribe* 12, n.º 2 (2015): 59-86, doi: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=476947244004>

including the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP) (most active in El Quiché and Huehuetenango, in the central highlands and the Cuchumatanes mountains) and the Organización del Pueblo en Armas (ORPA) (most active in San Marcos, Quetzaltenango, and in the western highlands and the Sierra Madre de Chiapas).⁶ However, newer scholarship has demonstrated that indigenous laborers were not simply pawns caught between more powerful forces.⁷ Instead, many developed their own definitions of Mayan activism. Some supported the guerrillas, others focused on building agrarian cooperatives or inclusive forms of government, and some remained apolitical. Diverse responses at the community level defy broad generalizations and instead push scholars to examine how indigenous villagers perceived and coped with violence and in their daily lives (see Map 1).

Map 1. Mexico-Guatemala Border Region and Migration Routes, 1981-1985



Source: Adapted from Verónica Ruiz Lagier, "Nuevas comunidades en Chiapas. Identidad y transnacionalismo," *Cultura y Representaciones Sociales* 2, n.º 4 (2008): 159, Map 2.

6 David Stoll, *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Charles Hale, *Más que un Indio (More than an Indian): Racial Ambivalence and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Guatemala* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2006), 87; Defense Intelligence Agency, "Military Intelligence Summary, Vol. VIII, Latin America (U)," Washington, September 1981, 2-3, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB100/Doc9.pdf>

7 Carlota McAllister, "A Headlong Rush into the Future: Violence and Revolution in a Guatemalan Indigenous Village," in *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America's Long Cold War*, edited by Greg Grandin and Gilbert M. Joseph (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 276-308; Hale, *Más que un Indio*.

The armed conflict resulted in mass displacement of Maya peoples from the western highlands. Those who crossed into the regions of Zona Paso Hondo and Zona Trinitaria included Mam, Akateko, Chuj, Q'anjob'al, and Jakalteko Maya. The creation of the border between Guatemala and Mexico in the 1880s divided these ethnic groups, but communities retained similar cultural, religious, and social practices. National identity became important, however, because Guatemalan and Mexican authorities imposed different laws regulating labor and commerce. Indigenous people recognized state power through their experiences with laws, policing, and punishment, even though enforcement varied over time and space. Indigenous communities on both sides of the border interacted during the coffee harvest, certain religious festivals, or family events.⁸ These long-standing practices strengthened transborder connections, providing critical connections for those escaping intense violence in the 1980s.

Three distinct groups acted as “mediators,” facilitating refugees’ quest for safety. Informal mediators consisted of ordinary Chiapanecans, from local villagers to landowners or shopkeepers, who worked “informally”—they acted as individuals or in small groups without access to extensive resources, providing material resources to meet immediate needs for food and shelter. They also supplied critical local knowledge and connections to social networks that helped refugees find work or access to land. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the Catholic Church (through the archdiocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, which extended from the Chiapanecan highlands to the Guatemalan border) had broader access to resources but remained focused on addressing issues defined as critical by refugees. As the number of refugees increased, however, the Mexican government sought a systematic process to cope with the crisis. Intergovernmental organizations, such as the UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR, or ACNUR in Spanish), along with Mexican government authorities, primarily the Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (COMAR, or Mexican Commission for Aid to Refugees), formally mediated between Guatemalan refugees and the Mexican state. They established refugee camps that provided people with food, shelter, and medical care. Camps also regulated refugees’ economic, social, and political activities. Mexican authorities sought to provide both humanitarian aid and to reassert control over people living within Mexican borders.

This paper explores how mediators and indigenous Guatemalans worked together to meet refugees’ basic needs. Relationships between Guatemalan and Mexican campesinos became strained because both groups experienced extreme poverty, as well as social and political marginalization. Structural inequalities based on ethnicity and class marked campesinos as “second-class citizens.” Many rural Mexicans aided refugees, but others could not sustain extended assistance. The presence of NGOs, COMAR, and ACNUR caused some campesinos to complain that Guatemalans received “better treatment” than Mexicans did, even though both groups struggled to meet their subsistence needs.⁹ For Guatemalan refugees, their welcome and acceptance in Mexico depended on how Mexican mediators perceived their value to both local communities and the nation. Informal mediators and refugees negotiated new community practices that supported Mexican campesinos’ and refugees’ desires for social, cultural, and political autonomy

8 Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo, *Histories and Stories from Chiapas: Border Identities in Southern Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), ch. 4.

9 Sergio Aguayo Quezada, *El éxodo centroamericano. Consecuencias de un conflicto* (Mexico: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1985), 99-102.

and security. Refugees feared encountering Guatemalan soldiers or Mexican authorities who could deport them, and often did not know who they could trust with their safety. I argue that refugees kept their economic and political possibilities open by working with informal and formal mediators. Mediators helped indigenous refugees survive in Chiapas, while preserving peoples' options to return to their own communities in Guatemala. By enabling refugees to remain hidden from state institutions, informal mediators provided a critical link to safety and survival.

1. Literature Review

Through much of the twentieth century, scholarly works focused on mass displacements caused by war, colonization, decolonization, and efforts to consolidate a national identity based on factors such as race, ethnicity, class, or religion. States strengthened national identity by classifying people as “citizens” or “non-citizens” based upon perceptions of which groups “qualified” as belonging to the nation.¹⁰ Systematic efforts to address forced displacement emphasized national and international policies to “fix” refugee problems by seeking to reintegrate people into their nation of origin. In this view, refugees tried to assert their national identity, but within the strict constraints of elite norms. Policy goals for refugee repatriation tacitly supported state-sanctioned histories that celebrated a unified “imagined community.” This approach silenced those who challenged or rejected the national myth. Migrants, either forced (as refugees) or voluntary, represented people who “violate a fundamental relationship between the people and the nation.”¹¹ The very fact that refugees left a country marked them as defectors, undeserving of citizenship. Instead, they became a people “in between”—neither accepted in their country of origin, nor certain of their position in their host communities.

Refugee and forced migration studies emerged as a new historical field in the 1990s, led by scholars who critiqued analyses of refugees solely as byproducts of larger national and international conflicts. Historians and social scientists increasingly argued for a more nuanced understanding of forced migration. Historian Peter Gatrell uses the term “refugeedom” to examine the social and cultural history of displacement, historicizing interactions between refugees, local communities, governments, and NGOs. For Gatrell, refugee history combines social history’s focus on marginalized peoples with state-formation studies. He highlights ways that refugees use to shape their own lives through building social ties with host communities, other refugees, and mediators.¹² For these scholars, power flows from the dominant to the subordinate group, but also does the reverse. Refugees are not simply hapless victims, but actively work to improve their lives. My work builds on this perspective by illustrating the ways that indigenous Guatemalan campesinos made clear choices to protect their interests. Recognizing the myriad ways in which ordinary people experienced citizenship and belonging at the local level, this research highlights how and why host

10 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), chs. 1-3.

11 Philip Marfleet, “Explorations in a Foreign Land: States, Refugees, and the Problem of History,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 32, n.º 2. (2013): 15-17, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdt006>

12 Peter Gatrell, “Refugees—What’s Wrong with History?” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 30, n.º 2 (2017): 170-189, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/few013>; J. Olaf Kleist, “History of Refugee Protection: Conceptual and Methodological Challenges,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 30, n.º 2 (2017): 161-169, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fex018>

communities and refugees built “horizontal” community ties, often rejecting official definitions of who belonged to the nation. Horizontal citizenship describes the ways people build inclusive communities based on shared values and interests, and less on “vertical” or state-determined categories of citizenship such as ethnicity, race, or religion.

The second contribution of forced migration studies challenges the “deficit discourse” often used to describe refugees. Although scholars acknowledge the extreme violence that forced people to leave their homes, they also recognize the social and cultural strengths that enables refugees to resist oppression and rebuild their lives.¹³ For indigenous Guatemalan refugees, strong community identity fostered solidarity practices that maximized collective survival. People travelled together, if possible, and established both informal settlements and official refugee camps. In these spaces, refugees organized to provide education, medical care, and shared labor—even though they had minimal resources.¹⁴ The acknowledgement that marginalized indigenous peoples have knowledge and skills to combat oppression does not negate the overwhelming power imbalance that existed between the rural poor and the Guatemalan military. Instead, centering peoples’ lived experiences in the historical narrative highlights the socio-economic structures that foster oppression.

Forced migration researchers describe refugees’ responses to traumatic dislocation. Some argue that brutal violence psychologically shattered refugees and limited their ability to actively participate in civil society. Geographer Rebecca Clouser examines how the Guatemalan military used “landscapes of fear” to control civil society. Violence was etched into physical landscapes through burned-out villages or new military outposts, which reminded people of the persistent threat of violence. In contrast, anthropologist Ricardo Falla contends that the experience of fleeing the civil war may have encouraged refugees’ awareness of their ability to influence their futures. By refusing to silently accept military dictates about participation in Civil Defense Patrols or relocation to “model villages” (communities controlled by the army and designed to prevent contact between civilians and guerrilla forces, often compared to the US’s Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam), these refugees asserted the right to “choose” their future.¹⁵ The rhetoric

13 Tara J. Yosso, “Whose Culture Has Capital: A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth,” *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* 8, n.º 1 (2005): 77-81, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006> Education, public health, and social work are some of the main fields that use critical race theory to challenge stereotypes that focus on marginalized peoples as lacking the skills and tools they need to succeed in society. Deficit discourse consistently represents marginalized peoples as incapable, but asset-based discourse focuses on peoples’ strengths, including tenacity, creativity, and adaptability.

14 Deborah L. Billings, “Organizing in Exile: The Reconstruction of Community in the Guatemalan Refugee Camps of Southern Mexico,” in *Maya Diaspora: Guatemalan Roots, New American Lives*, edited by James Loucky and Marilyn M. Moors (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 82.

15 For the discussion on trauma and paralysis, see Rebecca Clouser, “Remnants of Fear: Landscapes of Fear in Post-Conflict Guatemala,” *Journal of Latin American Geography* 8, n.º 2 (2009): 12-15. For the discussion of creative adaptation by refugees, see Kristi Anne Stølen, “The Reconstruction of Community and Identity among Guatemalan Returnees,” *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, n.º 77 (2004): 20-24, doi: <http://doi.org/10.18352/erlacs.9675>; Edith Kauffer Michel, “De la frontera política a las fronteras étnicas. Refugiados guatemaltecos en México,” *Frontera Norte* 17, n.º 34 (2005): 7-39, doi: <https://doi.org/10.17428/rfn.v17i34.1043>; Aguayo Quezada, *El éxodo centroamericano*, chs. 2-3. The literature on the Guatemalan genocide and civil war is extensive. See Ricardo Falla, *Masacre de la Finca San Francisco, Huehuetenango, Guatemala: (17 de julio de 1982)* (Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 1983); Beatriz Manz, *Paradise in Ashes: A Guatemalan Journey of Courage, Terror, and Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Victoria Sanford, *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala* (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2003).

of the Guatemalan military and government complicates this discussion by claiming that those who fled the country were guerrillas or guerrilla sympathizers. These scholars highlight certain aspects from complex choices that people made, often while under extreme duress with little time to weigh their options. Most refugees who crossed into Chiapas described their flight as a way to resist government oppression.

Finally, forced migration studies raise questions about the relationship between identity, citizenship, and human rights. In Guatemala, ladino elites defined indigenous Maya peoples as second-class citizens. Using Cold War theories of development, Guatemalan elites in the 1960s and 1970s argued that Mayan campesinos were too rural and “backward,” hindering the economic and social “development” of the country.¹⁶ During this same period, indigenous villagers formed agricultural cooperatives and community-based advocacy organizations, often with the support of the Catholic Church. They pushed for land reform and access to social services such as health care and education. Citizenship mattered to the Maya because inclusion in the national community theoretically would have legitimated their claims to state services. More importantly, being acknowledged as full citizens could have opened spaces for indigenous definitions of political inclusion and economic development. Alfredo Molano’s work on displaced peoples in Colombia describes how movements for economic and social justice disrupted traditional power relations. He argues that elites and military in Colombia used violence and displacement to maintain their power and status over subordinate peoples.¹⁷ In Guatemala, Mayan communities threatened to destabilize elite privileges by creating indigenous definitions and practices of active citizenship and economic development. In response, the military unleashed genocidal violence, explicitly targeting the Maya as enemies of the Guatemalan state. As Guatemalan Mayas fled into Mexico, they became “stateless people.” Their own government violently persecuted them, and during the early stages of flight and resettlement, refugees had little claim to legal protection from Mexico. In the absence of hierarchical protection of rights, horizontal citizenship protected indigenous refugees.

2. Background to Migration

The differences between a migrant and a refugee intuitively seem clear. In practice, however, regions that have had long traditions of migratory labor often blur these differences. A boundary commission officially drew the border between Guatemala and Mexico between 1882 and 1892, but the border was poorly defined, rarely enforced, and had little substantive meaning. The growth of the coffee economy in the early twentieth century created labor and trade networks, fostering economic, social, and cultural ties between communities on both sides of the border. As coffee *fincas* (plantations) expanded production in Soconusco, growers used coercive tactics to recruit indigenous Tzeltal and Tzotzil workers from the Chiapas highlands, as well as Mam

16 Carlota McAllister, “Rural Markets, Revolutionary Souls,” in *In from the Cold: Latin America’s New Encounter with the Cold War*, edited by Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 351-353.

17 Alfredo Molano, *The Dispossessed: Chronicles of the Desterrados of Colombia* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 21-22, 33, 232-233.

and Tacanecan workers from the Guatemalan-Mexican borderlands to harvest coffee.¹⁸ These seasonal economic migrations supplemented the income of campesinos impoverished by nineteenth-century liberal governments' policies against collective land ownership. Land reforms enacted towards the end of the Mexican Revolution (1936-1944) provided some access to land for Mexican campesinos through *ejidos* (communal land held and used by community members). Because of the extensive transnational links between indigenous communities on both sides of the border, many Guatemalans were labeled as Mexicans, incorporated into Mexican villages, and gained access to *ejido* land.¹⁹ After World War II, large, small, and communally held coffee *fincas* relied on Guatemalan labor for the coffee harvest. Even though Mexican producers depended upon Guatemalan workers, Mexicans living along the border often described Guatemalan migrants as undesirable workers who unfairly competed for jobs. Although Mexican authorities denounced the use of "foreign workers," economic conditions from the 1940s to the 1970s favored reliance on Guatemalans, especially during the coffee harvest.

By the mid-1970s, government officials in Chiapas estimated that 25,000 Guatemalans legally worked during the coffee harvest, yet they acknowledged the actual number of workers was likely much higher.²⁰ Officials admitted to taking bribes from both landlords and *polleros* (labor smugglers) so that Guatemalan workers could be illegally transported into Mexico to harvest coffee. Some also illegally charged Guatemalans "fees" to leave Mexico.²¹ Agricultural laborers from the Guatemalan departments of San Marcos and Huehuetenango migrated for seasonal work on Mexican *fincas* to meet their subsistence needs and because such labor was "customary," border officials rarely interfered.²² The ties between Guatemalans and Mexicans that developed from the extensive use of Guatemalan workers established personal networks that led to informal mediators.

While seasonal migration consistently remained part of cross-border movement in the 1960s and 1970s, indigenous communities within the departments of Quiché, Huehuetenango, and San Marcos underwent significant social changes. According to Guatemala's Commission for Historical Clarification (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, or CEH), the mid-1960s and 1970s saw the rapid growth in social activism. Rural cooperatives and agrarian leagues (Ligas Campesinas) formed to improve living standards for the rural poor. Following Vatican II (1962-1965) and the 1968 Medellín Conference, the Catholic Church encouraged local churches to expand education and leadership opportunities to ordinary parishioners. Communities trained catechists through

18 Casey M. Lurtz, *From the Grounds Up: Building an Export Economy in Southern Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), ch. 5.

19 Catherine Nolan-Ferrell, *Constructing Citizenship: Transnational Workers and Revolution on the Mexico-Guatemala Border, 1880-1950* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012), chs. 4-5.

20 Germán Martínez Velasco, *Plantaciones, trabajo guatemalteco y política migratoria en la Frontera Sur de México* (Tuxtla Gutiérrez: Gobierno del Estado de Chiapas, 1994), 109-123. Martínez Velasco shows that by the early 1970s, indigenous workers from the Guatemalan altiplano (the departments of San Marcos and Huehuetenango along the Guatemalan-Mexican Border) provided much of the labor for the coffee harvest in Soconusco.

21 "Informe: Actividades de polleros que trasladan a indocumentados centroamericanos hacia el país," 13 November 1980, Archivo General de la Nación, Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (AGN-DGIPS) (Mexico City, Mexico), Caja 1656B, Exp. 8; on bribery, see "Informe: Agente de Migración," Tapachula, Chiapas, 24 December 1980, AGN-DGIPS, Caja 1702A, Exp. 3. More recently, *polleros* has become the term for human smugglers who bring people across the US-Mexican border.

22 Jorge Albarrán J., "Cada año entran braceros guatemaltecos," *Avance*, 16 July 1977, AGN-DGIPS, Caja 1656B, Exp. 8.

Catholic Action and churches became hubs for social justice activism.²³ Community organizations and lay catechists supported *concientización* (consciousness-raising), combining “cultural-political awareness” with liberation theology’s call to care for the spiritual and material needs of marginalized and oppressed people as fundamental to Catholicism.²⁴ People worked together on agricultural projects or designed literacy and health programs, strengthening community solidarity. One person described that the growth of social justice groups “woke in people new initiatives and promises to search for possible solutions” to the “inhuman living conditions.”²⁵ Strong community solidarity helped Mayas confront military repression in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

3. Displacement

From 1979 to 1983, growing violence in rural Guatemala disrupted traditional labor flows and the demand for workers no longer explained the large numbers of Guatemalan migrants into Chiapas. Under presidents Fernando Romeo Lucas García (1978-1982) and Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983), the Guatemalan military escalated from persecuting to pursuing genocidal campaigns against Mayan villagers in the western highlands. Guatemala’s Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) estimated that in the Department of Huehuetenango, at least 80% of the villagers had abandoned their communities temporarily, especially during the final months of 1981 and early 1982.²⁶ The CEH estimated that roughly one million civilians became internally displaced by the conflict. Guatemalan military officials forced many displaced peoples into “model villages”—tightly controlled communities where soldiers required people to complete forced labor in exchange for food. Other groups evaded military control and formed Comunidades de Población en Resistencia (Popular Communities in Resistance.) They hid in the high mountains and jungle regions of the highlands, remaining outside of government control.²⁷ At the height of the conflict against civilians (1981-1983), approximately 200,000 people, mostly indigenous Maya, crossed into southern Mexico to escape the intense violence.²⁸ Mexican officials initially labeled the people fleeing Guatemala as “economic migrants,” but by mid-1981 Mexicans recognized that those leaving Guatemala did so to escape oppression. The landscape along the Mexican side of the Guatemalan border became dotted with communities of *refugiados* (see Map 2).

23 Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, “El movimiento social y el nuevo papel de la Iglesia Católica,” in *Guatemala, memoria del silencio* (Guatemala: Oficina de Servicios para Proyectos de las Naciones Unidas, 1999), 1: 137-141; Betsy Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010), 29-54.

24 Hale, *Más que un Indio*, 57-63.

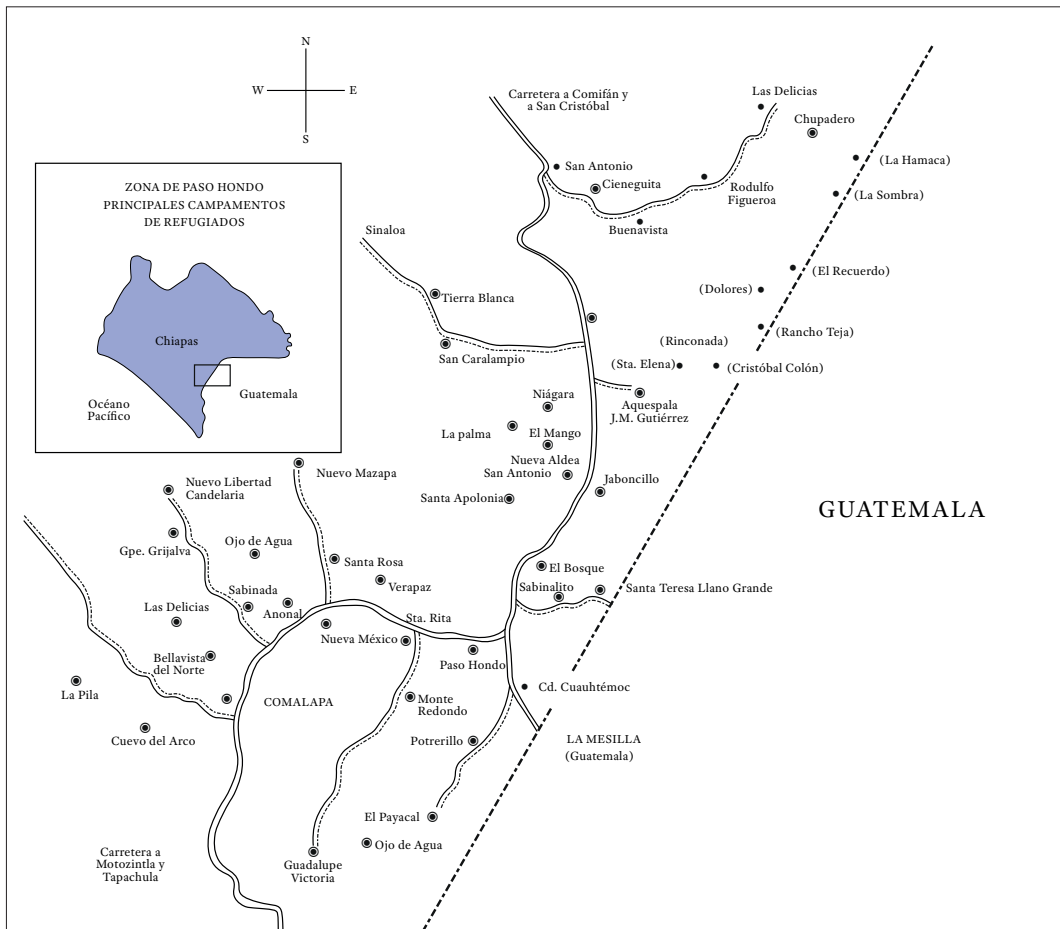
25 Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, “El movimiento social,” 1: 139; McAllister, “Rural Markets, Revolutionary Souls,” 360-361.

26 Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, “Análisis de las regiones,” *Guatemala, memoria de silencio*, 3: 370.

27 Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, Organización de los Estados Americanos, *Informe especial sobre la situación de los derechos humanos de las llamadas “Comunidades de Población en Resistencia” de Guatemala* (Washington: Organización de los Estados Americanos, 1994); Carlos Sandoval García, “Entrevista: Ricardo Falla Sánchez: Un viaje de toda la vida,” *Anuario de Estudios Centroamericanos*, n.º 37 (2011): 355-381.

28 Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, “Cifras sobre el total de víctimas,” *Guatemala, memoria de silencio*, 1: 72-73, and “Huir para conservar la vida,” *Guatemala, memoria de silencio*, 3: 216. CEH estimated that Guatemala’s civil war resulted in 160,000+ killed, 40,000 disappeared, 1,000,000 people were internally displaced (IDPs), 200,000+ took refuge in Mexico, and 46,000 officially registered in refugee camps. Several thousands fled to the United States.

Map 2. Main Refugee Settlements in Zona Paso Hondo, Chiapas



Source: Adapted from “Zonas de Refugiados en la diócesis de San Cristóbal de las Casas,” August 1985, Archivo Histórico Diocesano de San Cristóbal de las Casas, Fondo Refugiados (AHDSC-FR) (San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico), Caja 50G, Carpeta 183.

The intensifying Guatemalan conflict led to military concerns about cross-border movement. Guatemalan military officials charged that Mexico provided sanctuary for armed rebels, arguing that guerrilleros used Mexico as their “operations base.”²⁹ The Mexican military expanded their presence along the border, sometimes collaborating with Guatemalan anti-guerrilla forces. Mexican officials argued that increased military presence was designed to “stop the unrest” in a region that was accustomed to “living in peace.”³⁰ In addition to instability in Guatemala, Mexico also faced an influx of Salvadoran refugees who had crossed Guatemala to reach safety in Mexico. President López Portillo

29 “Dice Lucas García que la guerrilla de Guatemala usa de santuario a México,” *Excelsior*, 8 October 1980, AGN-DGIPS, Caja 1656B, Exp. 8.

30 “Tropa Mexicana en la frontera con Guatemala para que no pasen rebeldes,” *Universal*, 18 January 1979, AGN-DGIPS, Caja 1656B, Exp. 8.

created the Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (COMAR) on June 22, 1980, to assist the Salvadoran refugees who had fled to the Mexican-Guatemalan border. Open support of refugees allowed Mexican politicians to highlight humanitarian and leftist causes, even though these same officials repressed Mexican activists who sought reforms in the 1970s.³¹ COMAR became the backbone of Mexico's institutional response to immigration along the Chiapas-Guatemala border.

COMAR aided asylum seekers, but it also pushed the government to change Mexican migration laws by adding "refugee" as a distinct category of migrant. Mexicans debated how to categorize the influx of Central Americans across the southern border. The 1967 UN Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees defined a refugee as "any person who is outside their country of origin and unable or unwilling to return there or to avail themselves of its protection, on account of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular group, or political opinion."³² For indigenous Guatemalans, the government clearly refused protection or actively persecuted them. Refugees who did not receive asylum faced death or an "intolerable life in the shadows, without sustenance and without rights."³³ For the Maya, formal definitions of refugee status provided them with international recognition. It allowed them to "be seen" by the Mexican state, while highlighting the refusal or inability of the Guatemalan authorities to protect their own people.

As Guatemalan indigenous peoples increasingly asserted their political and economic rights, elites grew concerned about growing civil protests and guerrilla activity. In early 1980, President Lucas García implemented a counter-insurgency program in the western highlands.³⁴ Juan Compaseco Rosa, an ethnic Maya-Mam from Santa Ana Huista, Huehuetenango, described how the army began patrolling indigenous villages to disrupt rural support for the guerillas. The military's promise to protect "loyal" indigenous villagers collapsed when the army kidnapped three of Compaseco's neighbors and killed another in their search for guerrilla sympathizers. Compaseco hid in his sister's house in a nearby village, but after being warned that the soldiers were pursuing him, they both decided to escape. They walked for several weeks before crossing the border, where they found shelter with a Mexican family.³⁵ The archived testimonies of refugees tell similar stories of targeted persecutions, including children recounting stories of leaving Guatemala because of the military.³⁶ Archival evidence emphasizes movement from Quiché and Huehuetenango into Chiapas, but also suggests people fled Huehuetenango and San Marcos into the coffee-growing regions of Soconusco, Mexico. Government officials classified this as economic migration rather than refugee flight (see Maps 3 and 4).

31 Adrian J. Bailey and Joshua G. Hane, "Population in Motion: Salvadorean Refugees and Circulation Migration," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 14, n.º 2 (1995): 184.

32 Guy S. Goodwin-Gill, "Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, New York, 31 January 1967: Introductory Note," Audiovisual Library of International Law, United Nations, accessed January 22, 2021, <http://legal.un.org/avl/ha/prsr/prsr.html>

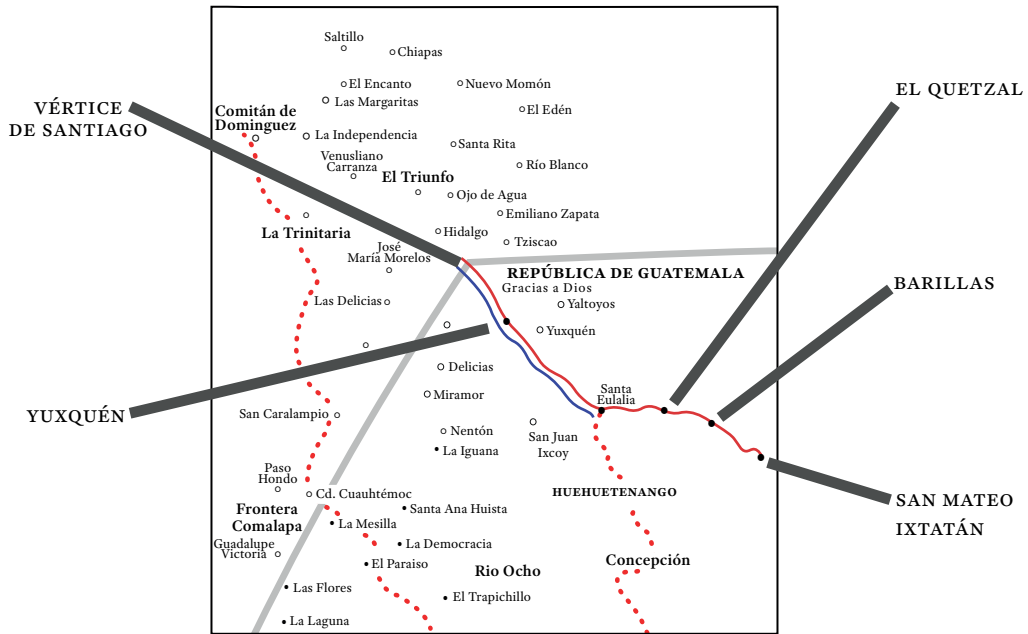
33 Ruud Lubbers, "Refugees and Migrants: Defining the Difference," *BBC News*, April 5, 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/in_depth/3516112.stm.

34 Beatriz Manz, *Refugees of a Hidden War: The Aftermath of Counterinsurgency in Guatemala* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 15.

35 Testimony of Juan Compaseco Rosa, Campamento Nuevo México, n. d., AHDSC-FR, Caja 50G, Carpeta 180.

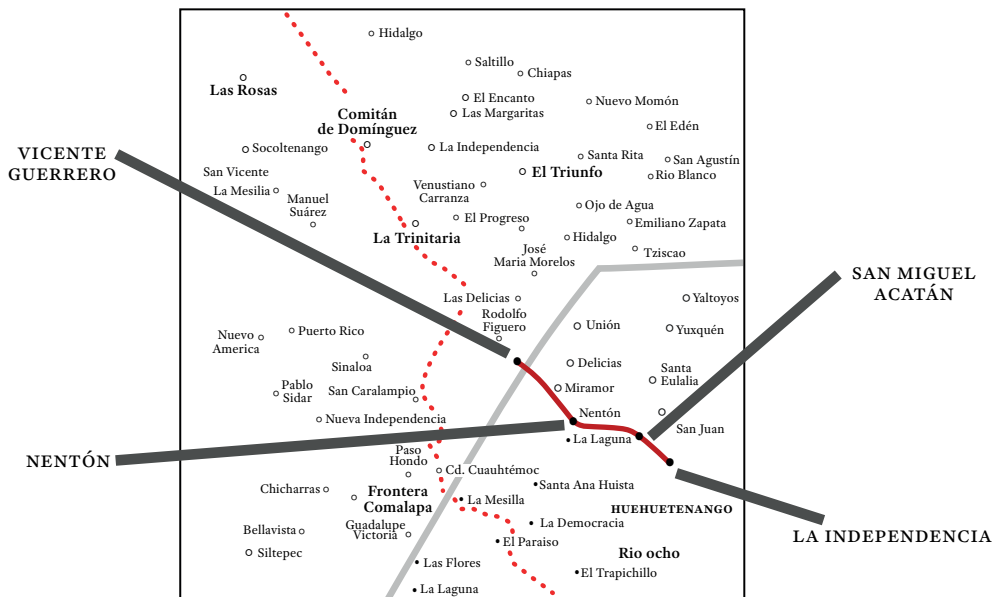
36 Ángeles López, coord., *Del refugio al retorno. Lo que vivimos, lo que sentimos* (Mexico: Comité del Distrito Federal de Ayuda a Refugiados Guatemaltecos, 1991), 3-12.

Map 3. Northern Huehuetenango, Guatemala, and Zona Trinitaria-Tziscaco, Chiapas, Mexico



Source: Adapted from “Información de los Refugiados Guatemaltecos y la Seguridad Nacional,” 11 July 1984, AGN-SDN, Caja 19, Exp. 62.

Map 4. Western Huehuetenango, Guatemala, and Zona Comalapa-Paso Hondo, Chiapas, Mexico



Source: Adapted from “Información de los Refugiados Guatemaltecos y la Seguridad Nacional,” 11 July 1984, AGN-SDN, Caja 19, Exp. 62.

4. Community and Survival

President Lucas García's inability to defeat the insurgency and his regime's reputation for rampant corruption led to a military coup in March 1982. General Efraín Ríos Montt promised to end both corruption and the civil war, restoring social order to benefit elites. Ríos Montt intensified scorched earth tactics in rural areas to eliminate indigenous support for the guerrillas.³⁷ In the refugee settlement Santa Rosa, Chiapas, an aid worker interviewed several people from the *aldea* Santa Teresa, Huehuetenango, a village repeatedly targeted by the army as alleged guerrilla sympathizers.³⁸ Villagers described how military helicopters landed in the local soccer field and the army systematically looted houses, burned crops, and killed livestock. Over 150 people fled: some hid in the mountains while others crossed into Mexico. "The owners [of the houses] left everything abandoned in order to save themselves. Because of such repression against the people, they could no longer bear it, for fear and *el susto*." Mayan culture describes *susto* as a condition when the soul temporarily leaves the body because of intense fright. In western medicine and anthropology, it is often conflated with post-traumatic stress disorder. Military terror provoked *susto*, forcing community members to abandon their homes.³⁹ By displacing hundreds of thousands of Mayas, the military tried to break community solidarity and disrupt efforts to restructure Guatemala's social, economic, and political hierarchies.

Communities that had previously organized through Catholic Action or agrarian cooperatives often tried to escape conflict areas together. One midwife described how the military had entered her village when most of the men were away in the fields. The soldiers took three boys to work on the military base, but the military dumped one boy's mutilated body on the road. The community feared that if the soldiers returned, they would force local men into civil patrols. She explained, "so, we decided together that we would go into the mountains with the rebels so that they would help us cross the border... all of us... We grabbed what we could carry and went with the revolutionaries." They walked several days before the rebels "sent us a guide that brought us across the border."⁴⁰ Another person described how increasing threats from the military led to kidnappings and murders of several civilians. When people from his village decided to leave, they organized their departure with others from neighboring hamlets to travel together for fear of the military. When asked why the military attacked communities, one man responded: "they wanted to kill all of us to get rid of the indigenous."⁴¹ These cases illustrate the strong sense of community solidarity

37 Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala (ODHAG), *Guatemala Never Again! The Official Report of the Human Rights Office, Archdiocese of Guatemala* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 228-230.

38 "Relatos Istoricos" [sic], Campamento Nueva Libertad, Chiapas, n. d., AHDSC-FR, Caja 50G, Carpeta 187; "El Recordatorio," testimonies from refugees in Campamento Santa Rosa, 19 February 1986, AHDSC-FR, Caja 50G, Carpeta 191.

39 "El Recordatorio," testimonies from refugees in Campamento Santa Rosa, 19 February 1986, AHDSC-FR, Caja 50G, Carpeta 189. See also Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, "Ejecución arbitraria," *Guatemala, memoria de silencio*, 9: 479, and "Desaparición forzada," 9: 522; Frida Jacobo Herrera and David Orr, "Susto, the Anthropology of Fear and Critical Medical Anthropology in Mexico and Peru," in *Critical Medical Anthropology: Perspectives in and from Latin America*, edited by Jennie Gamlin, Sahra Gibbon, Paola M. Sesia and Lina Berrio (London: University College London Press, 2020), 69-89.

40 "Un Tierno Testimonio," Paso Hondo, Chiapas, April 1984, AHDSC-FR, Caja 49C, Carpeta 60.

41 Testimony of Pedro Ramírez, Campamento Nuevo México, n. d., AHDSC-FR, Caja 50G, Carpeta 180.

and the social networks they needed to move to safety. They also suggest that guerrillas and their allies acted as informal mediators for civilians, guiding refugees to the Mexican border.

Many refugees became “internally displaced peoples,” hiding in the mountains and unwilling to leave their villages. A community leader in La Unión, Miguel Felipe Pedro, explained that they left Guatemala “not because we wanted to renounce our country, [but] simply from the repression... that was in Guatemala.”⁴² Hearing that the army had massacred people in a nearby *aldea*, the community of 108 *parcelarios* (subsistence landholders) called an assembly and sent three people to confirm the news. He explained, “The same night that we confirmed the massacre, men, pregnant women, recent members of our community, we all fled to the border.” Children and the elderly who died on the way were quickly buried. This intense loss seemed to bind the survivors more tightly together and they emphasized the benefit of remaining together. When one set of families attempted to cross into Mexico, they were captured by Mexican border agents and deported back to Guatemala. “They arrived in Guatemala... but... we realized that those who returned were killed.” The rest of the group stayed together for three months before they were able to cross the border together.⁴³ News that the army executed deported civilians strengthened community resolve to remain together. Refugee groups divided tasks; some members watched for soldiers, others gathered food or provided medical care. These practices of community solidarity show how grassroots organizing in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in socially cohesive, self-governing communities.

In May and June 1981, the Mexican press began to consistently acknowledge that Guatemalans crossing the border were not “economic migrants” but “refugees.” In the span of six weeks, two groups of Guatemalans migrated *en masse* to the border areas of southern Mexico. On May 21, 1981, the Mexican newspaper *Excelsior* reported an “exodus” of roughly 500 “Guatemalan invaders,” who requested “political asylum (due to the situation of conflict that exists in their country).”⁴⁴ Guatemalan authorities denounced this claim of state-sponsored violence as part of a “campaign to discredit the country” by foreigners. Initially, a military spokesperson asserted that those who fled were “terrorists that escaped justice,” and later that the families were fleeing “violence perpetrated by subversive delinquents.”⁴⁵ Five days later, Mexican authorities deported the group back to Guatemala.

On July 19, 1981, another 120 people fled the towns of Sivinal [sic] and Tacaná, San Marcos, Guatemala, to Unión Juárez, Chiapas, Mexico, a small town in Soconusco. One Guatemalan official rejected allegations that these families were “asylum seekers.” Instead, he described them as regular *jornaleros*, or seasonal workers, who were looking for jobs on coffee *fincas*. The asylum seekers

42 Oral History with Consejero Miguel Felipe Pedro, La Unión, Chiapas, 12 agosto 2007, Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas, Historias Orales de Chiapas (CDI-HOC) (San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico), Disco 2. In 2007, anthropologists from Mexico’s Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI) conducted a series of interviews in communities of former refugees that are archived in San Cristóbal, Chiapas.

43 Oral History with Consejero Miguel Felipe Pedro, La Unión, Chiapas, 12 agosto 2007, CDI-HOC, Disco 2.

44 “Atienden en Arroyo Negro, Camp., a 500 guatemaltecos con paludismo,” *Excelsior*, 21 May 1981, AGN-DGIPS, Caja 1656B, Exp. 8; “Informe: Traslado de invasores guatemaltecos del estado de Campeche a su país de origen,” 21 May 1981, AGN-DGIPS, Caja 1656B, Exp. 8.

45 “Solución favorable para refugiados guatemaltecos en Arroyo Negro, Camp.” *Excelsior*, 22 May 1981, AGN-DGIPS, Caja 1656B, Exp. 8; “Éxodo de campesinos guatemaltecos hacia México, por la violencia política,” *Proceso*, 24 May 1981, AGN-DGIPS, Caja 1656B, Exp. 8.

refuted this label, arguing that the group included several teachers, a rural health care worker, as well as campesinos. According to the group's leaders, Guatemala's Guardia de Hacienda (Treasury Police) had killed five teachers in the area and villagers "found out there was a list of teachers and campesinos" to be killed.⁴⁶ Appealing to Chiapas Governor Juan Sabines Gutiérrez, the refugees argued that they "came fleeing repression done by the Government of Guatemala against teachers and campesinos," and that they feared that "their children and families would be killed... We ask you to give us the necessary protection so that we will not be deported."⁴⁷ Local officials sidestepped the politically charged request and granted the Guatemalans six-month temporary worker passes—the same documents issued to migrant laborers on coffee *fincas*. The report noted, however, that migration officials rarely enforced the border, implying that no-one would check that the Guatemalans left after their six-month work pass. At this point, Mexico had no legal way to label people as refugees—they could only look at individual cases of people requesting asylum.

Growing awareness of the refugee crisis created deep sympathy in Mexican public opinion, prompting calls from various social sectors for a more formal government response. News reports showed photos of women and children crossing the border on rickety rafts and reports of dire conditions on the border led to grass-roots aid efforts. Yet confusion between different authorities (the Mexican Army, Migration, COMAR, and local police) led to conflicting decisions about who was protected by Mexican asylum laws. One large group of indigenous Guatemalans crossed into Mexico and asked for asylum. Authorities from different government agencies interviewed the people, but officials disagreed on definitions of "justifiable fear." The COMAR report described the influx as a "mass migration," but due to conflicting findings, only 46 people were granted asylum.⁴⁸ The rest were deported as "economic migrants," provoking an outcry from the press, various political parties, and religious organizations. By August 1981, the growing number of Guatemalan refugees led COMAR to meet with the UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR/ACNUR) to coordinate aid efforts. However, ACNUR did not open an office in Mexico City until March 1982, and the first office in Chiapas was not established until 1983.⁴⁹ The inability of formal government and international agencies to respond quickly and coherently to the emerging crisis caused a cavernous gap of formal support for refugees. In the absence of official agencies to assist them, refugees turned to "informal mediators"—localized, grassroots organizations that addressed their needs.

5. *Pedimos Posada: We Ask for Shelter*

Mid-level mediators, primarily the Catholic Church, worked to protect incoming refugees. In 1979, Archbishop Samuel Ruíz formed the Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad (Christian Solidarity Committee, or CCS) to coordinate the Church's response to the humanitarian and spiritual needs

46 United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, "IX. Security Forces," in *Guatemala: Democracy and Human Rights*, last modified June 1, 1997, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6a61f0.html>

47 "Informe: 120 guatemaltecos se encuentran refugiados en esta población, Unión Juárez, Chiapas," 18 July 1981, AGN-DGIPS, Caja 1702A, Exp. 4.

48 "Informe: Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados: Chiapas, México, Guadalajara," August 1983, Archivo General de la Nación-Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional (AGN-SDN) (Mexico City, Mexico), Caja 19, Exp. 62.

49 Beatriz Manz, *Refugees of a Hidden War*, 146-147; "Manual de funciones: COMAR," May 1985, Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo Presidentes: Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado (AGN-MMH) (Mexico City, Mexico), 04.01.04.00 Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados, Caja 2, Exp. 3.

of refugees.⁵⁰ The archdiocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas included most of the border areas where refugees crossed. CCS reported that from 1979-1980, dozens of Guatemalans requested asylum, but, by 1982-1983, those dozens had turned to thousands. By December 1983, CCS estimated that over 100,000 indigenous campesinos fled Guatemala because of the genocide, while COMAR estimated that 200,000 people had taken refuge in Mexico, including 46,000 who lived in 90 camps or settlements near the border.⁵¹ Roughly 50,000 more were not counted as refugees because they crossed the border in Soconusco and worked and lived on coffee *fincas* or on local *ejidos*.⁵² As the refugee crisis deepened, people increasingly depended upon informal mediators to navigate daily survival.

Mexicans generously offered aid in response to the refugee crisis. As one *ex-refugiado* explained, “It was grace when Mexico opened its door so that we could come in... Mexicans opened some spaces, opened their houses—and Guatemalans lived there.”⁵³ Some landholders allowed refugees to settle on unused land. One woman described how her father offered several hectares of land to refugees from Santa Ana Huista. Her grandfather explained that he used to do an annual pilgrimage to the church in Santa Ana Huista to celebrate the feast of Jesus the Nazarene. As pilgrims, they brought nothing with them, but villagers welcomed the Mexicans, sharing their houses and food. “So, when people came here, and they were from Santa Ana Huista, my grandfather didn’t think twice about accepting them because they were from Santa Ana and were very good people.” She remembered him telling her that the Guatemalans desperately needed a safe place to stay. Although it started as a temporary arrangement, the man eventually sold land to the refugees because “they had made it their home.”⁵⁴ In this case, the cross-border networks made through religious pilgrimage established a framework of trust and good will. The Guatemalan community’s kindness towards pilgrims became an unanticipated form of solidarity that helped the refugees establish a new life in Mexico.

In San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, small business owners also learned of the border crisis. Restaurant owner Kiki Suárez remembered a visit from a family friend. “He came by our restaurant and he was just crying, he was shaken because of what he had seen on the border... then my husband went with him... and when he came back, we knew we had to do something.” They organized donation drives, appealing to friends and acquaintances for anything that could help those who were crossing the border. “We took our truck down, loaded up with donations, but the road was hard. When we got to the border, we distributed everything in just a few hours.” The volunteer network brought food and clothing to the refugees for roughly two years. Suárez continued, “This was before COMAR and other NGOs started to work in the *campamentos*. We just did it because it was the right thing to do.”⁵⁵ This example shows how informal mediators played crucial roles in helping refugees fleeing violence. Suárez explained that many people who crossed the border

50 Martha Tapia Ramírez, “La labor del Comité Cristiano con los refugiados guatemaltecos en Chiapas,” *Diálogos: Revista Electrónica de Historia*, n.º 9 (2008): 1804.

51 “Informe,” Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad, Chiapas, December 1983, AHDSC-FR, Caja 55A, Carpeta 421.

52 “Informe,” Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad, Chiapas, December 1983, AHDSC-FR, Caja 55A, Carpeta 421; Beatriz Manz, *Refugees of a Hidden War*, 146-147.

53 Oral History with Consejero Miguel Felipe Pedro, La Unión, Chiapas, 12 August 2007, CDI-HOC, Disco 2.

54 Pereyra Velásquez, discussion.

55 Kiki Suárez, in discussion with the author, San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, 12 August 2016.

were malnourished and ill. Some had stayed in the mountains for several weeks or months, hoping for an opportunity to return to their homes. Children and the elderly suffered in such difficult living conditions and families described how they left their loved ones in the mountains, without a proper burial. For Suárez, the only moral option was to assist people who had such dire needs.

6. Challenges to Transborder Solidarity

Refugees fled into one of the most impoverished regions in Mexico and Mexican campesinos had little to share. Persistent poverty along the border at times led to confrontations over access to land. Refugees who attempted to rent or buy land could open contentious debates about property lines and land ownership because land titles were often incomplete or poorly drawn. Under Mexican agrarian reform laws, changes in land ownership required notification to neighboring land holders. This allowed people who qualified for land under agrarian reform laws to petition the government. In refugee settlement Nuevo Porvenir, Juan Pérez López described his frustration with the land-buying process. He and the owner agreed on terms for the land purchase, but when they tried to file the paperwork in Comitán, the government's agrarian lawyer rejected the sale. The agrarian reform law required officials to inform a neighboring *ejido* that they had legal rights to petition for the same piece of land that the Guatemalans wanted to buy. The refugee community waited for seven months for a resolution, but they lost their appeal for the land. Pérez López viewed land as crucial for the community's survival. He informed the agrarian lawyer that the refugees had already fled Guatemala due to violence, and now intense poverty would force them to move again. "Look, there are some that have gone to the States, away from their homes in order to work because they need to earn money for clothing, for shoes, for food. We cannot even build our own houses because 'where will we put them?'"⁵⁶ Guatemalans who sought safety in Mexico as refugees from military violence became displaced again, this time by intense poverty. Both indigenous Guatemalan refugees and Mexican campesinos became economic refugees. The inability to sustain families and the community acted as another form of violence, forcing people to migrate from their communities.

Even when Mexicans welcomed refugees, precarious economic conditions made it difficult for Mexican campesinos to aid Guatemalans. Juan García Domingo, a municipal leader in Santa Rosa Oriente, described being welcomed by Mexicans, but also remembered moving frequently to avoid burdening host communities. Refugees had few resources and often worked in exchange for shelter and food. Local farmers and *ejiditarios* rented land to refugees, providing seed and tools for working subsistence plots of corn and beans (*milpas*). Indigenous refugees cobbled together multiple forms of payment for their *milpas*. As one Guatemalan farmer explained, "sometimes we pay them with money, sometimes we pay them with work, and sometimes we pay them with our harvest."⁵⁷ Most of these informal land-use agreements benefitted both Mexican campesinos (by providing additional labor and income) and Guatemalan refugees (by providing safety and economic survival). Some *ejidos*, however, struggled to produce enough to sustain Mexican community members and

56 Oral History with Juan Pérez López, La Unión, Chiapas, 16 August 2007, CDI-HOC, Disco 17.

57 Oral History with Juan García Domingo, Santa Rosa Oriente, 14-15 August 2007, CDI-HOC, Disco 20; "COMAR: Refugiados guatemaltecos," August 1983, AGN-SDN, Caja 19, Exp. 63; "¿Cómo se formó el campamento?," Campamento La Flor, 19 June 1986, AHDSC-FR, Caja 50G, Exp. 180.

refugees complained that they were not always paid for their labor. Archival sources did not indicate if *ejiditarios* refused to pay Guatemalan workers, or if they simply could not afford to do so. In some cases, Mexicans clearly exploited refugee workers by refusing to pay them for their work or by charging them exorbitant rent.⁵⁸ The lack of opportunities to buy land created economic insecurity that was only partially alleviated through renting land or sharecropping.

Indigenous refugees had diverse reactions to their new status as displaced people. Many looked for others from their region or ethnic group to maintain their indigenous identity through speaking their language and wearing *traje* (traditional indigenous clothing). One report explained that “the indigenous person lives and develops in their own community; when they are removed [from the community] they are like fish out of water. The disintegration of the community produces social and personal death.”⁵⁹ CCS encouraged indigenous refugees to retain their language and traditions (*costumbres*) because community identity provided the cultural base for collective organizing.

Individuals or small groups also formed ties with people from diverse ethnic groups who they met during the process of fleeing or while living in temporary settlements. In *campamento* Santa Rosa, the health promotor reported working with different ethnicities, “*canjobal, mam, jacalteca, y el español*” [sic], while in Nuevo México, different families had “begun to work united, together, all of us... cutting wood and beginning to build our houses.”⁶⁰ One sociologist described how indigenous weaving patterns changed in refugee settlements as women “incorporated symbols, colors, and styles from groups different than their own.”⁶¹ Building refugee camps helped people forge a sense of community in the aftermath of forced displacement, creating a shared identity that transcended ethnic and regional ties. A third group of refugees worked to integrate themselves into Mexican *ejidos* or *ranchos*. Forced displacement challenged the ability of many recent arrivals to preserve indigenous cultural identity.

The desire to preserve indigenous identity caused tension with some Mexican communities. Indigenous Mexicans in Zona Paso Hondo had mostly abandoned wearing *traje* or speaking their language during the 1930s, when the state governor prohibited daily practices of indigenous culture and punished Maya-Mam who refused to comply.⁶² The dominant narrative in Chiapas linked indigeneity with poverty and ignorance. One schoolteacher from Frontera Comalapa described how “being Guatemalan was seen as something very bad for Mexicans,” and that using the word *chapín* (a nickname for Guatemalans) was considered a significant insult that could lead to fights.⁶³ Guatemalan indigenous women were told that “if you are going to be here, do not wear *traje*.” Refugees described how “with great pain, we needed to hide [our culture] ...our language and our clothing.”⁶⁴ Living in Mexico became a barrier to maintaining both their Guatemalan

58 Oral History with Pascual Paiz Ramos, La Unión, Chiapas, 12 August 2007, CDI-HOC, Disco 2; Oral History with Miguel Felipe Pedro, La Unión, Chiapas, 12 August 2007, CDI-HOC, Disco 2.

59 “Resultado del sentir de los refugiados guatemaltecos en la frontera, ante la consulta hecha por la Diócesis de San Cristóbal de las Casas,” 13 August 1983, AHDSC-FR, Caja 50G, Carpeta 187.

60 Testimony of Juan Compaseco Rosa, Campamento Nuevo México, n. d., AHDSC-FR, Caja 50G, Carpeta 180; Testimony of Juan Francisco, Campamento Santa Rosa, 18 April 1986, AHDSC-FR, Caja 50G, Carpeta 180.

61 Billings, “Organizing in Exile,” 74.

62 Hernández Castillo, *Histories and Stories*, ch. 1.

63 Pereyra Velásquez, discussion.

64 Oral History with Maestro de Ceremonias, La Unión, Chiapas, 13 August 2007, CDI-HOC, Disco 8.

and indigenous identity because “there’s a rejection... against us for maintaining our culture.”⁶⁵ Language and clothing marked people as Guatemalans, creating risks for recent arrivals in Chiapas. The Guatemalan military crossed into Mexico to “pursue *guerrilleros*” and targeted those wearing indigenous clothing. These incursions further terrorized refugees, pushing some to reject their indigenous identity. One Maya-Chuj leader recalled how “women had been injured the worst by this sort of violence... [they] never wanted to return to live as indigenous.”⁶⁶ The process of crossing into safety and subsequent interactions with mediators from local campesinos to the Catholic Church had two impacts. It offered refugees material aid and safety, but it also pushed indigenous Guatemalans to avoid further discrimination by abandoning many of their daily cultural practices.

7. Borders and State Sovereignty

Guatemalan and Mexican troops regularly patrolled the border but inconsistently enforced migration laws. Guatemalan soldiers repeatedly raided refugee camps in Chiapas, an egregious violation of Mexican sovereignty. Guatemalan authorities justified crossing the border to attack refugee settlements by claiming that guerrilleros used Mexico as a training area. Mexican authorities “not only denied” this charge, but also stated that [Guatemala’s accusations] were so outlandish that Mexico “was not concerned about this issue.”⁶⁷ Guatemala’s militarized border raids and Mexico’s efforts to deter them illustrate how both governments struggled to control their territory and citizens. For Mexico, creating the appearance of a strong, unified, and morally righteous nation supported the goals of the ruling elites. However, Mexican migration officials had a history of corruption and extortion along the border. Local authorities threatened to deport individuals or evict refugees from existing camps—something that needed federal approval.⁶⁸ The Mexican military also monitored ties between Guatemalan refugees and local Mexicans because they feared refugees spread “subversion.” Chiapanecan elites recognized the extensive economic, cultural, religious, and familial links between border communities and worried that “radical ideas” could disrupt social hierarchy within Chiapas.⁶⁹ Endemic poverty and minimal social services, along with extensive community organizing through civil societies and the Catholic Church, caused reasonable concerns about radicalizing Chiapanecan campesinos.⁷⁰ Mexico asserted some

65 Oral History with Jiménez Domingo and María Mateo Juan, Los Pinos, 13-14 August 2007, CDI-HOC, Disco 9.

66 Oral History with Maestro de Ceremonias, La Unión, Chiapas, 13 August 2007, CDI-HOC, Disco 8.

67 “Dice Lucas García que la guerrilla de Guatemala usa de santuario a México,” *Excelsior*, 8 October 1980, AGN-DGIPS, Caja 1656B, Exp. 8.

68 “Resultado del sentir de los refugiados guatemaltecos en la frontera, ante la consulta hecha por la Diócesis de San Cristóbal de las Casas,” 13 August 1983, AHDSC-FR, Caja 50G, Carpeta 187.

69 “Los hechos ocurridos en este Municipio se imputan al ‘Comando Armado al Servicio del Pueblo,’” 26 September 1979, AGN-DGIPS, Caja 1702A, Exp. 1; “25 personas se encuentren indocumentadas en este ejido únicamente,” 25 November 1980, AGN-DGIPS, Caja 1702A, Exp. 3; “Agentes de migración no resguardan la frontera con Guatemala, Centroamérica,” 10 October 1982, AGN-DGIPS, Caja 1734B, Exp. 8.

70 Mario Vásquez Olivera, “Entre el Ixcán y las Cañadas. Guerrilleros mexicanos y guatemaltecos en la región fronteriza del estado de Chiapas,” *Estudios Latinoamericanos* 10, n.º 19 (2003): 149-151, doi: <https://doi.org/10.22201/cela.24484946e.2003.19.50610>

control over the border region, but did not fully control its own agencies, the local population, or Guatemalan migration.

Guatemalan leaders used the refugee crisis to demonstrate their power over indigenous campesinos. Soldiers and Treasury Police (Guardias de Hacienda) pursued civilians they suspected of sympathizing or collaborating with *guerrilleros* and used calculated demonstrations of violence to terrorize anyone who challenged their authority. For elites and military officers, maintaining control over indigenous peoples reflected the Guatemalan state's overall power. Although incidents of mass violence slightly declined in 1983, the rate of refugees escaping Guatemala remained steady. An analysis by the archdiocese of San Cristóbal asserted that campesinos left to avoid forced service in the civil patrols. They did not want to be “accomplices of destruction and massacres of their own people.”⁷¹ The largest number of refugees included children and elderly—those least likely to threaten the nation. Yet the very presence of refugees who crossed into Mexico highlighted the Guatemalan government's inability to control their own people. Refugees became a signal of national weakness. To combat this image, politicians, military officials, and even local vendors repeatedly assured refugees that Guatemala was “peaceful” and that they could return.⁷² Few refugees believed this rhetoric, but the repeated appeals for Guatemalan refugees to “come home” demonstrated the value the government placed on reclaiming control over them.

8. Limits of Formal Mediators

In December 1982, CCS reported that Mexican migration agents were threatening to remove certain refugee camps because they were too close to the border. Although some people willingly relocated, many refugees refused to disperse. Their reluctance to leave the border region stemmed from “their mutual solidarity and social structure.” To leave their *campamentos* “signified leaving large groups of their population abandoned... alone, they could not survive.” Because many of them had left Guatemala together to seek safety in Mexico, they “clung to their social group, where they knew they would find certain security and understanding.” The author of the report noted that staying together became a way for the indigenous communities to resist ethnocide.⁷³ The decision to stay together in government-supported *campamentos* demonstrated strong community bonds that had been formed among refugees; communal life represented safety and solidarity. When COMAR or ACNUR acknowledged a camp, refugees received access to food, shelter, and social services. However, they could not leave the camp to find work or to farm, which made families dependent upon aid agencies. Loss of independence and economic vulnerability caused some refugees to avoid camps completely.

The village of Dolores, Chiapas, was typical of many early refugee settlements. Several hundred Guatemalans lived in makeshift housing very close to the Guatemalan border. Although the camp received aid from COMAR, Mexican migration agents deemed the location unsafe. They ordered camp members to disperse, threatening them with violence if they tried to return to their

71 “Resultado del sentir de los refugiados guatemaltecos en la frontera, ante la consulta hecha por la Diócesis de San Cristóbal de las Casas,” 13 August 1983, AHDSC-FR, Caja 50G, Carpeta 187.

72 “Hechos significativos de las Zonas,” Diócesis de San Cristóbal de las Casas, 13 August 1983, AHDSC-FR, Caja 50G, Carpeta 187.

73 “Informe, Chiapas,” Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad, Chiapas, December 1982, AHDSC-FR, Caja 55A, Carpeta 421.

chozas (small shelters) to retrieve belongings. Authorities also separated community members by prohibiting them from relocating as a group. According to CCS, several refugees described one officer's warnings: "If you love your children and your families, leave!" On the same day (October 26, 1982), migration officials also demanded refugees vacate the nearby *campamento* at Rancho Tejas. When refugees refused to comply, one agent threatened to shoot them. Within two days, authorities emptied the entire camp. CCS estimated that more than 3,000 indigenous Guatemalans lived in these two camps and that many families ended up wandering in the mountains or walking along the Pan American highway.⁷⁴ For refugees, forced eviction through intimidation and threats fractured their already tenuous sense of safety.

Migration authorities sought to do more than to empty the camps—they wanted to erase them completely from the landscape. Local leaders encouraged impoverished Mexican campesinos to take anything from the settlements. People took stored food, medicines, leftover clothing, even the galvanized metal used for roofing. "In this way, the traces of this barbarity disappeared."⁷⁵ COMAR did not intervene to protect refugees from being displaced and available documents do not explain if the different agencies that regulated refugees coordinated, challenged, or even knew about plans to clear the camps. Faced with the limitations of formal mediators, Guatemalans turned to their previous community networks to survive. Some refugees went to coffee *fincas* in Soconusco, while others worked on local *ejidos* or on "borrowed" land—often uncultivated land used for grazing. They combined short-term requests for shelter with long-term negotiations for jobs or access to land. In this way, refugees assembled a marginal subsistence.

Conclusion

The events at refugee camps Dolores and Rancho Tejas highlight the pros and cons of working with state-sponsored migration agencies. Refugees received significant resources from COMAR, including building supplies, food, and medicines, but Mexican officials ran the agency from Mexico City and lacked information on local conditions. COMAR's main office in Comitán, Chiapas, did not open until 1983, three years after President López Portillo created the commission to resolve the needs of "vulnerable migrant groups."⁷⁶ Although COMAR had begun to develop strategies for assisting refugees, different government offices lacked clear policies or the means to implement them. Immigration policy often depended on which officials asserted control over an area, and what they envisioned as "appropriate" policy. Some authorities actively supported refugees, while others viewed them as easy targets for abuse. Efforts to centralize immigration policy through COMAR and ACNUR offered potential benefits, but the agencies did not always control local conditions.

Working with state agencies made refugees susceptible to a range of abuses, from raids by Guatemalan soldiers to harassment, extortion, or eviction by Mexican authorities. Refugees could not work outside of the camps, exacerbating economic hardships for families. Incursions by

74 "Comunicado urgente: A propósito de los refugiados guatemaltecos en el sur de México," Diócesis de San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, 1982, AHDSC-FR, Caja 55A, Carpeta 421.

75 "Informe, situación de los refugiados," Comité Cristiano de Solidaridad, Chiapas, 26 October 1982, AHDSC-FR, Caja 55B, Carpeta 424.

76 "Manual de funciones: COMAR, 1985," AGN-MMH, 04.01.04.00 Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados, Caja 2, Exp. 3.

Guatemalan soldiers and rumors of Guatemalan *orejas*, or spies employed by Guatemalan military, added to the general climate of fear and a pervasive sense of being trapped and exposed to danger. Constant threats in refugee camps led to three main responses. 1) Refugees became more determined to stay together and used their experience with community organizing to advocate with formal mediators (COMAR and ACNUR) for protection. 2) Intimidation and violence eroded peoples' willingness to form new communities. Instead, some refugees integrated into Mexican communities and gave up ties to their Guatemalan lives. 3) Refugees chose to rebuild villages outside of the control of formal mediators. They did not necessarily trust that state power could protect them from additional violence or provide for their basic human rights. Instead, refugees combined their social advocacy skills to negotiate with government authorities for safety, their familial and extended community networks for finding work and material resources, and their shared social and cultural values for reconstructing community. Although local mediators lacked the ability to advocate for refugee resources in the ways that formal mediators did, family and community networks offered social and cultural support.

Statistics demonstrate the power of informal mediation. Even though acquiring formal refugee status gave people better access to food and medical aid, only about 25% of Guatemalan refugees received official refugee status through COMAR and ACNUR. COMAR calculated that 46,000 refugees lived in government sanctioned refugee camps, out of an estimated 200,000 refugees in Mexico. Informal mediators established strong relationships with indigenous Guatemalans, ultimately helping refugees build new lives in their host society.

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