



Battling for Peace in Guatemala

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—Heather Williams

Battling for Peace in Guatemala

by Richard Stahler-Sholk

Susanne Jonas *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads, and U.S. Power*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1991. 288 pp.

Susanne Jonas *Of Centaurs and Doves: Guatemala's Peace Process*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1999. 299 pp.

Guatemala's long road toward peace is reminiscent of what Ho Chi Minh, many jungles away, used to call "fighting and talking, talking and fighting." Susanne Jonas, one of the foremost U.S. scholars of Guatemala, has updated her earlier excellent overview with a new work focusing on the 1990s era of peace accords. Together, the

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two volumes offer valuable insight into Guatemala's 36-year guerrilla war and its negotiated end, with lessons for other struggles for democratization and social justice.

The Battle for Guatemala remains one of the best portrayals of the origins and course of the civil war, from the aborted "democratic revolution" of 1944-1954 through the emergence and engagement of revolutionary/popular organizations and counterrevolutionary forces in the ensuing decades. Jonas pays particular attention to the U.S. role, the unevenness of capitalist development, ethnic and gender dimensions of organizing, and political contradictions of the exclusionary and repressive regime. The overthrow of the Arbenz government is rightly attributed to internal weaknesses as well as U.S. intervention, but recent historical work (e.g., Forster, 1998) suggests more active protagonism of the popular classes than the standard depiction of this era as middle-class reformism from above.

Although the 1996 peace accord changed the Guatemalan dynamic, this book generally stands the test of time. Reviewing the post-1985 transition to civilian rule, Jonas quotes a statement from a 1987 army forum that "we are reversing Clausewitz: Here, politics is the continuation of war by other means" (1991: 169). Rejecting the thesis of a "permanent counterinsurgency state" in Guatemala (1991: 172-174), she suggests a more nuanced view of the ruling coalition that better accounts for the eventual political opening.

Of Centaurs and Doves is an essential road map for anyone trying to follow the twists and turns of Guatemala's peace negotiations. The author's unique access to the parties involved and her long perspective make this a valuable contribution to the growing comparative literature on the region's peace processes (Arnson, 1998; Burgerman, 2000). Written in the midst of an unfolding and contingent process, the book is explicitly ambivalent about what the author calls the "unanswered question" of whether the Guatemalan and Central American left "will be able to use the political space won through the peace accords to make significant social justice gains in the future" (1999: 113). Jonas suggests at several points that with regard to its negotiated peace, Guatemala might be more fruitfully compared with South Africa than with El Salvador. That comparison would require more exploration of the microsocial processes of reconciliation and of the crucial struggle to redefine ethnicity and national identity (Warren, 1998).

Jonas skillfully interprets the Guatemalan experience to show that the mainstream "transitions to democracy" literature misses the element of participation that is essential for moving beyond the minimalist procedural threshold of democracy. Guatemala's "peace resisters" blocked tax reform, effectively limiting structural change and undermining the base of support for the peace accords among their potential beneficiaries. The most significant changes depended on constitutional reforms requiring a two-thirds congressional majority and a national referendum, which threatened to derail the process when the reforms were defeated mainly by the 81 percent abstention in the May 1999 vote. As Jonas observes (1999: 208, 229), it was as though the U.S. civil rights laws of the mid-1960s had had to be submitted to a vote in Mississippi.

The military remains a major obstacle to democratization (Schirmer, 1998), but it is not the only part of the power equation. After 36 years under the "centaur" state (half military beast, joined to its civilian allies), the "doves" of civil society may take a

while to soar. The December 1999 electoral victory of Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt's right-wing populist party, the Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (Guatemalan Republican Front—FRG), underscores the fragility of the peace process (Holiday, 2000). Yet, it must be recalled that Guatemala's popular organizations have long experience in adaptation and survival amid waves of violence and uncertainty (May, 1999). Moreover, the subjective element of social and political transformation is important, as Jonas notes in citing Carlos Vilas's observation that "even if a revolution fails, nothing in the country is the same as before, and people do not behave in the old ways" (1991: 109).

Of Centaurs and Doves characterizes Guatemala as a cold-war civil war, suggesting new international space for a negotiated end to other conflicts in this category. The United Nations role is credited rather generously in this account, and even President Clinton's March 1999 expression of regret for U.S. complicity in Guatemalan repression is characterized as a historic breakthrough. Yet, Jonas also reminds us that "old thinking dies hard" (1991: 125) regarding the U.S. rationale for supporting repressive allies in the name of gradually reforming them. Clintonian apologies notwithstanding, the pattern continues across the border in Chiapas. U.S. military aid to Colombia (the number three recipient after Israel and Egypt) fuels that civil war. The old U.S. Army School of the Americas has been reincarnated as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. *La lucha sigue*.

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