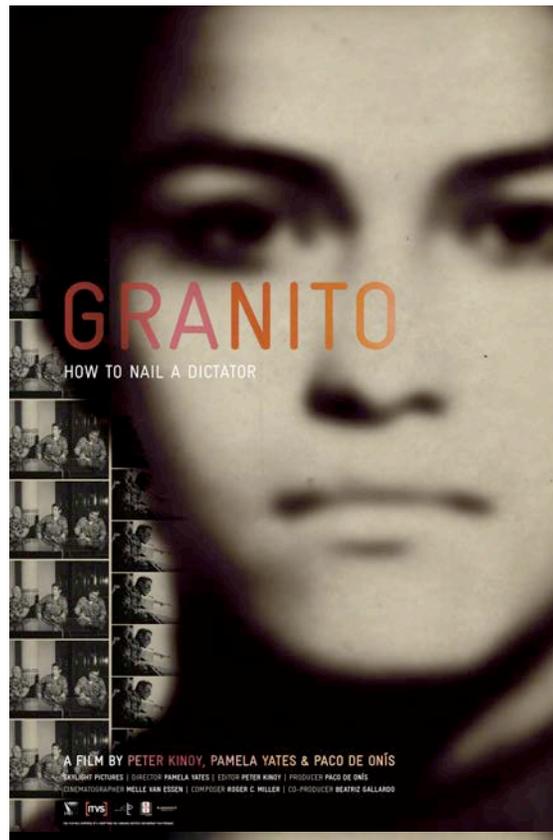


An International Film Circuit Release

A S K Y L I G H T P I C T U R E S F I L M



Directed by **Pamela Yates** Produced by **Paco de Onís** edited by **Peter Kinoy**

**Official Selection**, Sundance Film Festival, 2011

**Emmy Nomination**, Outstanding Investigative Journalism: Long Form, 2013

**Opening Night Film**, Human Rights Watch International Film Festival, 2011

**Grand Prix for Best Creative Documentary**, Paris International Human Rights Film Festival

**Peace & Reconciliation Prize**, The Geneva International Human Rights Festival, 2011

**Jury Grand Prize**, The Politics on Film Festival, 2011

**Honorable Mention**, Overseas Press Club Award, 2012

**Founder's Award**, Traverse City Film Festival, 2011

**103 minutes/1.78:1/ Digital Stereo/ In Spanish & English with English subtitles/Not Rated**

For stills and trailer go to: <http://skylightpictures.com/press-kit/granito>  
(Note to Press: Must credit photographers for any stills used. Thank you!)

## SHORT SYNOPSIS

Sometimes a film makes history; it doesn't just document it. So it is with "**Granito: How to Nail a Dictator**", the astonishing film by Pamela Yates. Part political thriller, part memoir, Yates transports us back in time through a riveting, haunting tale of genocide and returns to the present with a cast of characters joined by destiny and the quest to bring a malevolent dictator to justice.

As if a watchful Maya god were weaving back together threads of a story unraveled by the passage of time, forgotten by most, our characters become integral to the overarching narrative of wrongs done and justice sought that they have pieced together, each adding their *granito*, their tiny grain of sand, to the epic tale.



Photographer: Dana Lixenberg

## LONG SYNOPSIS

### *GRANITO: How to Nail a Dictator*

Reveals a Documentary Film Colliding with History in a Quest for Justice

In a startling loop of time and memory, Granito shows how a Filmmaker's first documentary has been instrumental to indict Guatemalan ex-dictator Ríos Montt.

*"Granito... doesn't simply relate history; it is also part of history."*

—Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*

In January 2012, after 30 years of legal impunity, former Guatemalan general and dictator Efraín Ríos Montt was indicted by a Guatemalan court for crimes against humanity. Decades after the events, he was charged with committing genocide against the country's poor, Mayan people in the 1980s becoming the first former head of state to be tried in his own country for genocide.

Back in 1982, a young first-time filmmaker, Pamela Yates, had used her seeming naiveté to gain unprecedented access to Ríos Montt, his generals and leftist guerrillas waging a clandestine war deep in the mountains. The resulting film, [When the Mountains Tremble](#) (1983) revealed that the Guatemalan army was killing Mayan civilians. As Yates notes in her extraordinary follow-up, [Granito: How to Nail a Dictator](#), "Guatemala . . . never let me go." *When the Mountains Tremble* became central to her life again 30 years later when a Spanish lawyer investigating the Ríos Montt regime asked for her help. She believed her first film and its outtakes just might contain evidence to bring charges of genocide under international law.

Peter Kinoy, Pamela Yates and Paco de Onís, the filmmaking team who made [The Reckoning: The Battle for the International Criminal Court](#) and [State of Fear](#) now present *GRANITO: How to Nail a Dictator*. *Granito* spans 30 years and portrays seven protagonists in Guatemala, Spain and the United States as they attempt to bring justice to violence-plagued Guatemala. Among the twists of fate:

- A 22-year-old Mayan woman, Rigoberta Menchú, the storyteller in *When the Mountains Tremble*, goes on to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 and then initiates the court case against General Ríos Montt that eventually leads to the use of Yates' footage as evidence.
- A guerrilla commander, Gustavo Meoño, who authorized Yates' filming with the insurgents in 1982, becomes a key player in uncovering the mechanisms of disappearances and state terror.
- Naomi Roht-Arriaza, the young press liaison in Guatemala who helped arrange Yates' filming with the guerrillas in 1982, becomes one of the key international lawyers working on the genocide case.
- Fredy Peccerelli, the head of the Guatemalan forensic anthropology team assigned to unearth evidence of the vast killings, repeatedly viewed *When the Mountains Tremble* while growing up.

*Granito* is about the remarkable impact of a film on a nation's fight for justice, dramatically entered as evidence to bring a dictator to justice and give Maya Ixil people their day in court. It is an inside, as-it-happens account of the way a new generation of human rights activists operates in a globalized, media-saturated world. *Granito* shows how multiple efforts --the work of the lawyers, the testimony of survivors, a documentary film, the willingness of a Spanish judge to assert international jurisdiction-- becomes a tiny grain of sand, adding up to tip the scales of justice.

Even after Ríos Montt was deposed and a tenuous democracy restored in Guatemala in 1986, he and the generals continued to enjoy wealth, status and freedom to participate in politics. In 1999, a U.N.-sponsored truth commission concluded that genocide had been committed by the government, and that same year President Clinton declared that U.S. support for military forces and intelligence units that engaged in violence and repression was wrong. Even the Guatemalan generals, who claimed that overzealous field commanders were to blame, admitted that crimes had occurred.

The story might have ended there, had it not been for catalysts demanding change: the growing movement to assert international jurisdiction in cases of human rights abuses, the persistence of activists . . . and the persistence of memory in film. In Yates' [When the Mountains Tremble](#) and its outtakes from 1982, Ríos Montt repeatedly guarantees that atrocities could not be taking place because he is in total command. Yet Yates' recorded footage of a military-conducted tour, meant to show a legal war against guerrillas, appears to show the result of a mass murder of unarmed civilians.

Fast-forward to recent years, when lawyers and plaintiffs were seeking an international indictment in Spain, whose national court has led the way in such cases. This is done only when local courts fail to act, and no one expected much from the Guatemalan judicial system. And then in January, 2012 --one year after *Granito's* premiere at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival--Ríos Montt was indicted in Guatemala for genocide, in what can only be described as a stunning precedent for that country.

*Granito* is a complex, generational story of crime and punishment and also a historical thriller whose last chapter is yet to be written. Like its prequel, [When the Mountains Tremble](#), *Granito* could very likely become a part of the historic memory of Guatemala.

A companion cross platform project, [Granito: Every Memory Matters](#) has been created as an online intergenerational, interactive public archive of memories intended to expose further the history of the Guatemalan genocide.

"*When the Mountains Tremble* was banned in Guatemala for 20 years," says Yates. "When we were finally allowed to show the film in 2003, we learned that it had already been shown thousands of times clandestinely. People told us, 'We wouldn't begin a resistance meeting without first showing the film.' And an international lawyer who was in the audience at that first public screening in 2003 asked for our help.

"Fortunately, we still had the outtakes," she continues. "Paco, Peter and I had stored cans of 16mm film and the typewritten transcripts for years: first at a factory in Brooklyn and then at an abandoned

airplane hangar in New Jersey. As the forklift with our old materials was lowered, we all gasped as the memories flooded back and a new journey began. This is what lit the spark for Granito.

"*Granito* is a love letter to the next generation of documentary filmmakers, living proof of the importance of documenting the injustices of the world. In 1983, I had hoped that my first film would help turn public opinion against the U.S. policy of backing the Guatemalan dictatorship, but that didn't happen. So *Granito* is also a film about second chances."

From March through May, 2013 Ríos Montt went on trial in Guatemala for genocide and crimes against humanity. The trial will be the subject of Yates, de Onís, and Kinoy's next film in the Guatemalan trilogy, "500 Years". They filmed the entire trial gavel to gavel, and will tell the story of the first former head of state to be tried in his own country for genocide.



"500 Years" Photo: Daniel Hernandez

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

## Pamela Yates

For me "Granito" is a second chance to help right a terrible wrong.

I first went to Guatemala in 1982, to make a film about a hidden war, a film that would become my first feature length documentary, "When the Mountains Tremble." We now know that hidden in that war was a genocide the Guatemalan military dictators committed against the Maya people. None of these war criminals have ever been brought to account, none punished. The anger I feel towards those Generals is almost unbearable. Today, more than 25 years later, "When the Mountains Tremble" and all the outtakes, are being used as forensic evidence in an international case against two of the generals who appeared in my original film.

Digging through the outtakes and preparing evidence for the court case made me realize that a story I had thought was over was very much alive and needed to be told. This sequel to "When the Mountains Tremble" would be called "Granito," Spanish for tiny grain of sand. It is a concept I first learned in the Guatemalan highlands and carried it with me throughout my filmmaking life. It reflects the communal values that guide Maya communities and means that each of us can make a small contribution to positive social change, and together we can make great changes in favor of equality and human rights.

As fate would have it, the central character in "When the Mountains Tremble" was a 22-year-old Maya human rights defender named Rigoberta Menchú whose family members had been killed and who'd fled into exile. Ten years later she became the first indigenous woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Leveraging her stature as a Nobel Laureate, Rigoberta originated the case against the Generals that breathed new life into the quest for justice, and inspired the new film "Granito".

As filming began on "Granito", I was surprised to discover that Guatemalans had never given up on finding justice and uncovering the collective memory of their buried past. I wanted to find a way to highlight the courage of these empowered individuals. This sentiment is at the heart of "Granito", which is how it became such a hopeful and transformative film. But for me, this new film held a deeper filmmaking challenge. After three decades of involvement with Guatemala, I had become a character in the story I needed to tell. This demanded that I examine my feelings and beliefs back when I started. I had to find a way to use the narrative power of documentary filmmaking to combine the beauty with the anger: the beauty of youthful idealism --- mine as well as the Guatemalan revolutionary movement's, and the anger I now feel towards the war criminals who continue to flaunt their impunity.

I realize that the collective concept of "Granito" has permeated my filmmaking life, a journey I have traveled with Peter Kinoy, my fellow filmmaker and co-founder of Skylight Pictures. Peter was the Producer and Editor of "When the Mountains Tremble" and is the Editor of "Granito". Together we've developed our approach to political documentary storytelling, embracing the same techniques of cinematography, scoring and editing used by narrative filmmakers to evoke drama and urgency.

Although "Granito" is rooted in the past --- how I got started, the choices I made along the way, and how what I thought I was doing back then has a different meaning today --- it is

really a film about the future. "Granito" is meant to inspire the next generation of young, engaged filmmakers to see and embrace the power of documentary filmmaking to make a difference.



Photographer: Dana Lixenberg

## ON SCREEN SUBJECT BIOGRAPHIES



### RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ

Rigoberta was the first indigenous woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. She appeared as the storyteller in *When the Mountains Tremble* in 1982, a film that helped put her definitively on the political world stage. As a lifelong human rights leader, she has worked tirelessly for the Maya people, seeking justice for the victims of the Guatemalan genocide. Rigoberta's mother, father and brother, were all killed by the Army during the era of dictatorial regimes in the 1970s and 1980s in Guatemala. And in 1981 she was forced to flee the country. In exile she began her international rallying campaign to stop the violence in Guatemala. After the peace accords were signed, Rigoberta returned home, and started a political movement ([WINAQ](#)) working to achieve a more inclusive and democratic Guatemala. She is running for president of Guatemala in 2011.

### FREDY PECCERELLI

Fredy Peccerelli is the Executive Director of the [Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation](#) and leads the team at La Verbena cemetery in excavating the mass graves of Guatemala's generation of disappeared. His own family was forced to flee Guatemala for the Bronx when Fredy was twelve, after his father received death threats. Fredy graduated from Brooklyn College and received his master's degree in Forensic Anthropology at Bournemouth University in the UK. He joined the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Team in 1995. He has led investigations in Guatemala and the former Yugoslavia (Srebrenica) and testified as an expert witness on genocide before international tribunals. He was named by Time Magazine and CNN as one of the 50 Latin American Leaders for the New Millennium.



### ALEJANDRA GARCÍA

Alejandra's father Fernando was disappeared by the military dictatorship in 1984 when she was barely two years old. In response, her mother Nineth Montenegro began the first human rights organization in Guatemala, the [Mutual Support Group](#) (GAM) to search for him and the other disappeared persons. As Alejandra came of age, she decided to become a lawyer to avenge the death of her father. With the discovery of the secret National Police Archives in Guatemala City, documents were discovered that named the perpetrators of her father's disappearance. Armed with this evidence, Alejandra went to trial in October 2010.



Photographer: Dana Lixenberg

**KATE DOYLE**

Kate Doyle is a Senior Analyst of US Policy in Latin America at the [National Security Archive](#), a non-profit organization based in Washington DC, dedicated to declassifying secret US government documents. As the leader of their Guatemala Project, she was leaked an original copy of Plan Sofia, an explosive document that details the Guatemalan Army's scorched earth campaign against the Maya at the height of the conflict. Since 1992, Kate has worked with Latin American human rights groups, truth commissions and prosecutors to obtain government records from secret archives that shed light on state violence. She has testified as an expert witness in numerous criminal cases, such as the 2008 trial of Peru's former President Alberto Fujimori for his role in overseeing military death squads. Kate has edited collections of thousands

of declassified records on El Salvador and Guatemala for the National Security Archive and her articles have appeared in Harper's Magazine, The New York Times, Boston Globe, World Policy Journal, Current History, Columbia Journalism Review, The Nation, among other publications.

**ANTONIO CABA CABA**

Antonio is a survivor of the 1982 Iloom Massacre. He was eleven years old when his village was attacked by the army. In what has become his life mission, Antonio now works to bring justice to his community, and to protect future generations from the atrocities he has suffered. Antonio served on the Steering Committee of the [Association for Justice and Reconciliation](#), a Guatemalan human rights organization, and in 2008 he travelled to Madrid to testify on behalf of his community at the Spanish National Court in the Guatemalan Genocide Case. Antonio lives in Iloom with his family. His name means he who confronts the enemy.

**ALMUDENA BERNABEU**

Almudena became the lead lawyer in the Guatemalan Genocide Case in 2006 before the Spanish National Court. She has brought over 30 witnesses to Spain presiding over more than 60 hours of testimony, and collecting evidence to solidify the genocide charges and prove the chain of command to convict top Guatemalan Army officials. As International Attorney for the [Center for Justice and Accountability \(CJA\)](#) based in San Francisco, she is also leading the legal team in prosecuting senior Salvadoran military officials for the infamous massacre of the Jesuit priests in 1989. Almudena leads CJA's Latin America program, and is currently the Vice President of the Spanish Human Rights Association in Madrid.



Photographer: Dana Lixenberg

## GUSTAVO MEOÑO



Gustavo was a founding leader of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor – a rebel group that took up arms against the military dictatorship in Guatemala in the early 1980s; and he granted Pamela Yates permission to film with the rebels in the highlands in 1982 when she was making *When the Mountains Tremble*. Unlike many of his comrades, Gustavo survived the conflict in Guatemala but was forced to go into hiding for many years. Later Gustavo joined with the Nobel Peace Laureate, Rigoberta Menchú Tum, as the Director of the Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation. And in a remarkable twist of fate he is now the director of the [Historic Archives of the National Police project](#), preserving and cataloguing the many thousands of police records that were discovered by accident in 2005. In a landmark case, Gustavo and his team's work at the archives project led, in 2010, to the sentencing of two former police officers to 40 years in prison for the forced disappearance of Fernando Garcia.

## NAOMI ROHT-ARRIAZA

Naomi worked as a freelance journalist in Guatemala during the 1980s, risking her life to bring the story of the continued slaughter in Guatemala to the world's attention. The offices where she worked were bombed, many of her friends killed, and Naomi was forced to flee. Continuing in her struggle to tell the important stories, and shaped by her experiences in Guatemala, Naomi became an attorney specializing in international criminal law and joined Almudena's crack legal team on the Guatemalan genocide case at the Spanish National Court.

She is currently a professor at the University of California's Hastings Law School in San Francisco teaching courses in international human rights law, international criminal law and reparations for past injustices. She authored the seminal book *The Pinochet Effect: Transnational Justice in the Age of Human Rights*.



Photographer: Dana Lixenberg

## Organizations and Affiliations

*Granito: How to Nail a Dictator* is a production of [Skylight Pictures](#) and a Co-Production of [ITVS](#) and [Latino Public Broadcasting](#).

**Center for Justice and Accountability** (Almudena Bernabeu and Naomi Roht-Arriaza) (<http://cja.org/>)

**The National Security Archive** (Kate Doyle) (<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>)

**Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation** (Fredy Peccerelli) (<http://fafg.org/>)

**Historic Archives of the National Police of Guatemala** (Gustavo Meoño) (<http://www.archivohistoricopn.org/>)

**CALDH** (Pancho Soto) (<http://www.caldh.org/>)

**Fundación Rigoberta Menchú Tum** (Rigoberta Menchú) (<http://www.frmt.org/en/>)

**Movimiento Político WINAQ** (Rigoberta Menchú) (<http://www.winaq.org.gt/>)

**Grupo de Apoyo Mutua** (Alejandra García) (<http://www.gam.org.gt/>)

**AJR/NISGUA** (Antonio Caba) ([http://www.nisgua.org/news\\_analysis/index.asp?id=2756](http://www.nisgua.org/news_analysis/index.asp?id=2756))

**Skylight Pictures** (Pamela Yates) (<http://skylightpictures.com/films/granito>) and (<http://www.facebook.com/granitofilm>)

**Human Rights Watch** (<http://www.hrw.org>)

## FILM MAKER BIOGRAPHIES

### Pamela Yates, Director

Pamela Yates was born and raised in the Appalachian coal-mining region of Pennsylvania but ran away at the age of 16 to live in New York City. Yates is a co-founder of [Skylight Pictures](#), a company dedicated to creating films and digital media tools that advance awareness of human rights and the quest for justice by implementing multi-year outreach campaigns designed to engage, educate and activate social change.



Yates' films have spanned the globe geographically, covering a wide spectrum of human experience. She directed [When the Mountains Tremble](#) (the prequel to Granito) about a revolutionary moment in Guatemala, that won the Special Jury Prize at the first Sundance Film Festival. She also directed a trilogy of films [Living Broke in Boom Times](#), an inside look at homeless activists' movement to end poverty.

She is currently working on a quartet of films about transitional justice. The first, [State of Fear](#) based on the findings of the Peruvian Truth Commission, has been translated into 47 languages and broadcast in 154 countries. [The Reckoning: The Battle for the International Criminal Court](#) is an international thriller about the possibilities and pitfalls facing humanity's quest for world justice; [Granito](#) the third film, revisits the subjects of her previous 1982 film *When the Mountains Tremble* after the film and all of its outtakes become forensic evidence in an international war crimes case. Part detective story, part memoir, *Granito* transports audiences through a riveting, haunting tale of genocide and justice spanning four decades. Yates is also developing a sister transmedia project, [Granito: Every Memory Matters](#).

She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in support of her current film, [Granito](#).

Yates is also the Executive Producer of the Academy Award winning *Witness to War*, the Producer of the Emmy Award winning *Loss of Innocence*, and the Overseas Press Club Award recipient for *State of Fear*.

## Paco de Onís, Producer

Paco de Onís grew up in several Latin American countries and is multi-lingual. He has just released [Granito](#) (world premiere at Sundance 2011), a documentary detective story focused on the role of filmic and archival documentation in the prosecution of a genocide case against Guatemalan generals, and launching [Granito: Every Memory Matters](#), a companion transmedia project.



He recently produced [The Reckoning: The Battle for the International Criminal Court](#) (world premiere Sundance 2009), accompanied by [IJCentral](#), an interactive audience engagement initiative promoting global rule of law, developed at the BAVC Producer's Institute in 2008. Prior to that, he produced [State of Fear](#), a Skylight Pictures film about Peru's 20-year "war on terror" based on the findings of the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Paco is a partner at [Skylight Pictures](#), and previously produced documentaries for PBS ("On Our Own Terms" with Bill Moyers), National Geographic ("Secrets from the Grave"), and a range of other programs. Before producing television documentaries, he created music festivals in South America & the Caribbean, renovated and operated an arts/performance theater in Miami Beach, (The Cameo Theater) and owned and operated a Spanish-style tapas tavern in a 500-year old colonial house in Cartagena, Colombia.

## Peter Kinoy, Editor

Granito–How to Nail a Dictator is the most recent in a long line of social justice documentaries for Producer/Editor Peter Kinoy. Three decades ago Kinoy founded Skylight Pictures with filmmaking partner and longtime collaborator Pamela Yates. Kinoy specializes in documentaries that let the audience feel part of exciting but unreported worlds. He produced and edited [When the Mountains Tremble](#), the prequel to Granito about a revolutionary moment in Guatemala that won a Special Jury Prize at the first Sundance Film Festival.



Takeover, the story of homeless activists illegally seizing houses was the first riveting doc in a trilogy about an underground anti-poverty movement in America that included Poverty Outlaw (Sundance–1997) and Outriders (PBS–1999). He pioneered self-documentation with small format cameras with Teen Dreams, a searing look at youth living on the edge (Sundance 1995). Kinoy took audiences deep into the criminal justice system with a PBS special Presumed Guilty about the trials and tribulations of Public Defenders. He edited the award winning State of Fear (Best reporting on Latin America, Overseas Press Club), and [The Reckoning: The Battle for the International Criminal Court](#), (POV 2009) an international thriller about the possibilities and pitfalls facing humanity's quest for international justice.

Peter Kinoy has a passion for teaching and has mentored emerging filmmakers at City College of New York, Columbia University, Casa Comal in Guatemala, and at the International School of Film and Television in Cuba. He was a founder of The Media College of the University of the Poor here in the US.

## BACKGROUND: Prequel to “Granito”

When the Mountains Tremble, the prequel to “Granito”, has become a classic of the American political documentary. It was shot by Pamela Yates and Tom Sigel at great personal risk during the height of the Guatemalan civil war in 1982 and contains some of the only filmed footage of the sole genocide in the Americas in the 20th century. The filmmakers chose as their on-camera storyteller a courageous 22-year Maya woman, Rigoberta Menchú who told the story of Guatemala from the indigenous perspective, a voice that previously had not been heard. When the Mountains Tremble won the Special Jury Award at the first Sundance Film Festival, was released theatrically in the US by New Yorker Films, and was translated into 25 languages and broadcast internationally. The film introduced Rigoberta Menchú to audiences around the world and a decade later Rigoberta won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work promoting peace in Guatemala.

At the time of its U.S. release When the Mountains Tremble was part of a national movement to stop U.S. intervention and aid to military dictatorships in Central America. It then went on to become widely used as THE film about Guatemala and Rigoberta Menchú in high schools, universities and libraries. Although the documentary was banned in Guatemala for many years, hundreds of underground copies passed from hand to hand. People risked their lives by showing the film clandestinely, helping to keep alive hope of social change and democracy in the dark days following the genocide.

In 2003, three significant things occurred that set the idea for Granito in motion: Pamela Yates and Producer Peter Kinoy screened When the Mountains Tremble publicly in Guatemala for the first time in 20 years, the first time ever, and hundreds of people showed up, there was a 5 minute standing ovation; Docurama (a division of New Video) re-released When the Mountains Tremble in a special 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition and re-mastered the original 16mm negative to high def HDcam, placing it on Netflix, Amazon and iTunes; and human rights lawyers preparing a genocide case against Guatemalan generals, asked the filmmakers to go into the Skylight Pictures’ film archives to see if there was any incriminating footage of the accused that could be used as forensic evidence. As if this weren’t enough, the initial plaintiff in the genocide case would be Rigoberta Menchú, the storyteller from When the Mountains Tremble. It was a cinematic perfect storm.

Now, as shown in Granito, When the Mountains Tremble has a new life as evidence in a trial to bring perpetrators of the war crimes in Guatemala to justice.

## BACKGROUND: The Conflict in Guatemala

### OVERVIEW

Over 200,000 Guatemalans were killed or forcibly disappeared in a civil war that raged from 1960–1996. Of those victims identified in the U.N.–sponsored Historical Clarification Commission (Truth Commission), 83% were indigenous Maya. 93% of these human rights violations were carried out by government forces.

### ORIGINS: 1500–1954

The roots of the Guatemalan civil war reach back through nearly 500 years of violence and ethnic exclusion. The Spanish conquest of Guatemala replaced the socio-economic order of the ancient Mayan civilization with a harsh plantation economy based on forced labor. Although Guatemala gained independence in 1821, it continued to be ruled by a series of military dictators aligned with the landed oligarchy. (1) (2) (3)

In 1944, a civilian government was elected on a platform of ambitious land reforms. However, later, President Jacobo Arbenz' reforms soon came to conflict with the interests of the powerful multinational corporations. The C.I.A. helped orchestrate a coup d'état in June 1954 and installed a right-wing military dictator. For the next forty years Guatemala would be plunged into political violence. (4)

### INTERNAL CONFLICT: 1960–1978

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Guatemala's military rulers continued to liquidate their political opponents, and with the reform movements defeated, the Left grew increasingly militarized and launched a full-scale civil war against the government. The new leftist guerilla movements obtained the support of some indigenous Maya, who viewed the guerillas as the last hope for redressing the economic and political marginalization of the indigenous communities. However, this link between the Maya and the guerillas eventually became an *idée fixe* for the government, who promulgated an ideology that perceived all Maya as natural allies of the insurrection, and thus as enemies of the state. The natural extension of this belief was the deliberate targeting of the civilian population, in order to 'starve' guerilla forces of their popular support. This essential tenet of counterinsurgency strategy found fertile ground in Guatemala, which soon became a laboratory for 'dirty war' tactics. In 1966, Guatemala pioneered the use of forced disappearances: a U.S.–trained death squad captured thirty leftists, tortured and executed them, and then dropped their bodies into the Pacific. This hallmark tactic would reappear throughout Latin America in the coming decades. (5)

### SILENT HOLOCAUST: 1978–1983

The conflict saw a major escalation with the election of General Fernando Romeo Lucas García to the Presidency in 1978. According to the Historical Clarification Commission, recorded cases of extrajudicial killings rose from 100 in 1978 to over 10,000 in 1981. (1)

To protest this wave of massacres, a group of Mayan leaders occupied the Spanish embassy in Guatemala City in 1981. Despite the Spanish ambassador's pleas to avoid violence, Guatemalan forces raided the embassy. In the chaos that followed, a fire broke out and killed 36 people. Among the dead was activist Vicente Menchú, father of Rigoberta Menchú Tum, the future Nobel Peace Prize laureate who would file the original criminal complaint in Spain against Guatemalan officials responsible for the incident. (1)

### **SCORCHED EARTH: 1982–1983**

In 1982, General Efraín Ríos Montt replaced Lucas García as head of state. Ríos Montt enjoyed close ties with the Reagan administration and with Christian conservatives in the United States. His reign from March 1982 to August 1983 was the bloodiest period in Guatemala's history. During that time, the Guatemalan government led a campaign to wipe out large portions of the country's indigenous populations: an estimated 70,000 were killed or disappeared. In April 1982, Ríos Montt launched a 'scorched earth' operation against the Maya. The army and its paramilitary units – including 'civilian patrols' of forcibly conscripted local men – systematically attacked 626 villages. The inhabitants were raped, tortured and murdered. Over three hundred villages were completely razed. Buildings were demolished; crops and drinking water were fouled. A number of secret CIA cables from the period – declassified years later – documented the military's sweeps through Maya villages. In one cable describing a raid on a Quiché village, the author notes that the guerillas were often a phantom enemy, and that the army's successes consisted of slaughtering civilians for their suspected rebel sympathies: "The well-documented belief by the army that the entire Ixil Indian population is pro-EGP has created a situation in which the army can be expected to give no quarter to combatants and non-combatants alike." (6)

### **THE KINGDOM OF IMPUNITY: 1996–2009**

Two truth commissions examined human rights abuses committed during the civil war and discovered unequivocal evidence that the government had perpetrated genocide against the Mayan people. Nevertheless, efforts to hold the perpetrators accountable have faced many obstacles. All too often, those who have attempted to unmask the perpetrators of atrocities have themselves become targets. (10)

Despite the efforts of the truth commissions, an ambitious reparations program, and several landmark judgments from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (12), prosecutions for past (and present) crimes have been obstructed by the lingering influence of former officials implicated in human rights abuses and by the intimidation and corruption of the domestic legal system by narco-traffickers. (13) (14) For all of these reasons, transnational accountability efforts, such as the Guatemala Genocide Case in Spain, now play a vital role in redressing Guatemala's legacy of human rights abuse.

## NOTES

- [1] Guatemala: Memory of Silence: Report of the Commission for Historical Clarifications, Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), 1999. Available at: <http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ceh/report/english/toc.html>
- [2] "Background Note: Guatemala", Bureau of Western Hemispheric Affairs, U.S. Department of State, February 2009. Available at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2045.htm>
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## BACKGROUND:

Op Ed Published in The New York Times on June 3, 2011:

### **“Ghosts of Guatemala’s Past”**

By *STEPHEN SCHLESINGER*

IN 1954, the American government committed one of the most reprehensible acts in its history when it authorized the C.I.A. to overthrow the democratically elected leader of Guatemala, President Jacobo Arbenz. It did so secretly but later rationalized the coup on the ground that the country was about to fall into communist hands.

Guatemalan society has only recently recovered from the suffering that this intervention caused, including brutal military dictatorships and a genocidal civil war against its Indian population, which led to the deaths of an estimated 200,000 people. Only in the 1980s, when a peace process commenced, did democratic governance resume. But a silence about the Arbenz era continued.

Now, after 25 years of increasingly vibrant democratic rule, Guatemalans feel confident enough to honor the memory of their deposed leader by incorporating his achievements into the national school curriculum, naming a highway after him, and preparing an official biography. America should follow suit by owning up to its own ignoble deed and recognizing Arbenz as the genuine social progressive that he was.

Washington feared Arbenz because he tried to institute agrarian reforms that would hand over fallow land to dispossessed peasants, thereby creating a middle class in a country where 2 percent of the population owned 72 percent of the land. Unfortunately for him, most of that territory belonged to the largest landowner and most powerful body in the state: the American-owned United Fruit Company. Though Arbenz was willing to compensate United Fruit for its losses, it tried to persuade Washington that Arbenz was a crypto-communist who must be ousted.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, along with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother, Allen, the C.I.A.’s director, were a receptive audience. In the cold war fervor of the times, Eisenhower and the Dulles brothers believed a strike against Arbenz would roll back communism. And the Dulleses had their own personal sympathies for United Fruit: they had done legal work for the company, and counted executives there among their close friends. It is true that Arbenz’s supporters in the Guatemalan Legislature did include the Communist Party, but it was the smallest part of his coalition. Arbenz had also appointed a few communists to lower-level jobs in his administration. But there was no evidence that Arbenz himself was anything more than a European-style democratic socialist. And Arbenz’s land reform program was less generous to peasants than a similar venture pushed by the Reagan administration in El Salvador several decades later.

Eisenhower’s attack on Guatemala was brilliantly executed. A faux invasion force consisting of a handful of right-wing Guatemalans used fake radio broadcasts and a few bombing runs flown by American pilots to terrorize the fledgling democracy into surrender. Arbenz stepped

down from the presidency and left the country. Soon afterward, a Guatemalan colonel named Carlos Castillo Armas took power and handed back United Fruit's lands. For three decades, military strongmen ruled Guatemala.

The covert American assault destroyed any possibility that Guatemala's fragile political and civic institutions might grow. It permanently stunted political life. And the destruction of Guatemala's democracy also set back the cause of free elections in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras — all of which drew the lesson that Washington was more interested in unquestioning allies than democratic ones. It was only after the cold war and a United Nations-negotiated peace deal with leftist guerrillas in 1996 that genuine democracy began to take hold in Guatemala. And even since then, the cycle of violence and lawlessness unleashed by the 1954 coup has continued.

In 1998, an assassin bludgeoned to death the Catholic bishop Juan Gerardi shortly after he issued a damning report blaming the army for widespread massacres. In 2007, Guatemala had the world's third-highest homicide rate, according to a United Nations-World Bank study. In 2009, more civilians were murdered in Guatemala than were killed in the war zones of Iraq. Washington took the first step toward making amends when President Bill Clinton visited Guatemala in 1999 and offered a vague apology for America's support of violent and repressive forces there. This year is an opportunity for Washington to fully own up to its shameful role in destabilizing Guatemala and honor Arbenz for having the courage to lead one of Central America's first democracies — and send a signal that America has learned to stop placing its ideological concerns and business interests ahead of its ideals. Stephen Schlesinger, a fellow at the Century Foundation, is a co-author of "Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala."

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