

Until I Find You

Until I Find You

Disappeared Children and
Coercive Adoptions in Guatemala

Rachel Nolan

Harvard University Press

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS LONDON, ENGLAND 2024

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Printed in the United States of America

First printing

Cover photograph: © Marcelo Montecino
Cover design: Jason Alejandro

9780674294684 (EPUB)
9780674294691 (PDF)

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS HAS CATALOGED THE PRINTED EDITION AS
FOLLOWS:

Names: Nolan, Rachel, author.

Title: Until I find you : disappeared children and coercive adoptions in Guatemala /
Rachel Nolan.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts ; London, England : Harvard University
Press, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references and index. Identifiers:
LCCN 2023017400 | ISBN 9780674270350 (cloth)

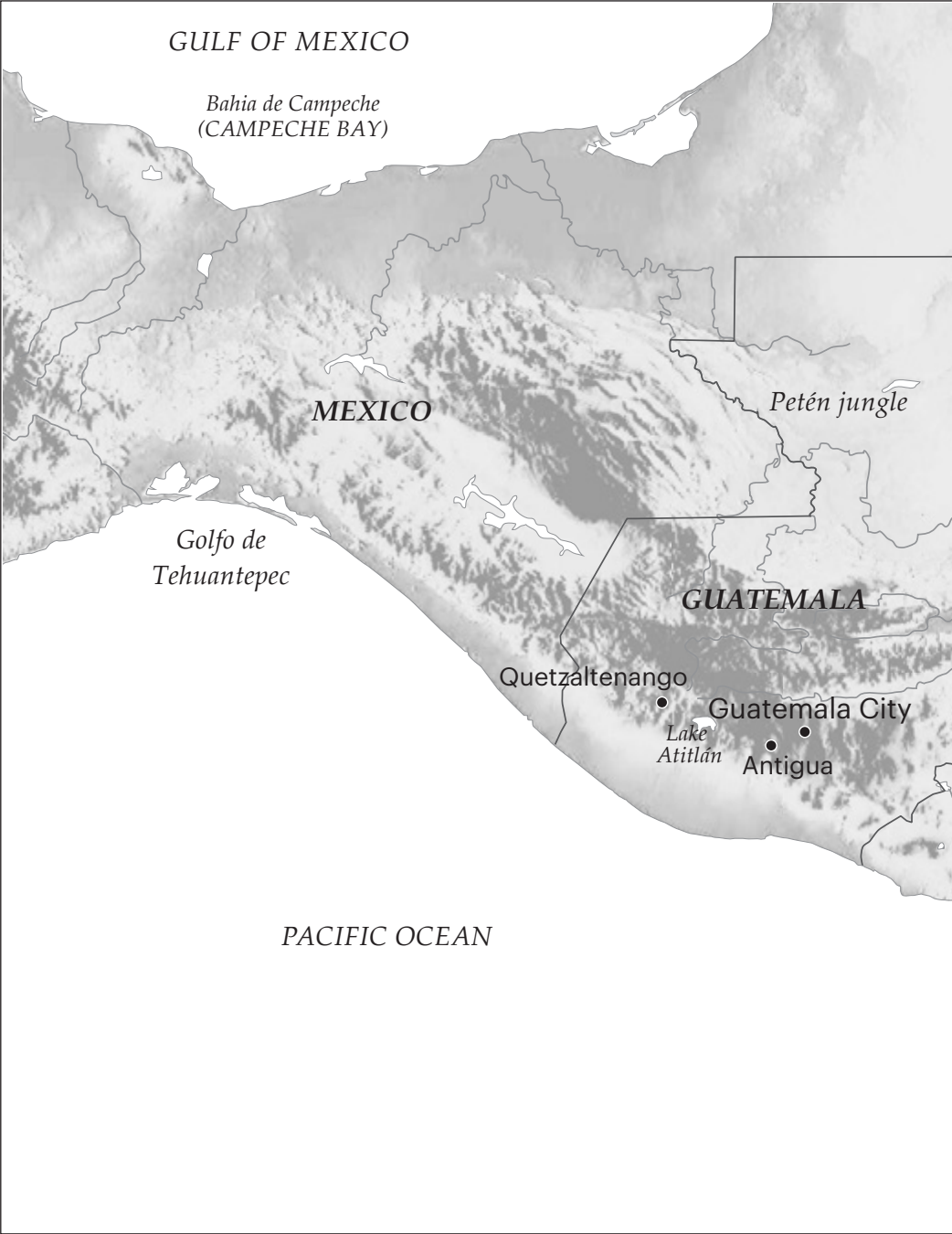
Subjects: LCSH: Adoption—Corrupt practices—Guatemala. | Intercountry
adoption—Guatemala. | Interracial adoption—Guatemala. | Wrongful
adoption—Guatemala. | Adoption agencies—Guatemala. | Disappeared persons—
Guatemala. | Indian children—Guatemala. | Guatemala—History—Civil War,
1960–1996.

Classification: LCC HV875.5 .N65 2024 | DDC 362.734097281—dc23/eng/20230601
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023017400>

*For my parents, Susan Baronoff and Peter Nolan,
with love and appreciation*

Contents

Introduction	1
1 The Lie We Love	26
2 Social Reports	46
3 Privatizing Adoptions	70
4 Adoption Rings and Baby Brokers	89
5 Children for Export	116
6 Disappeared Children	133
7 Best Interests of the Child	155
8 Inside Private Adoptions	170
9 The Reckoning	193
Epilogue: The Search	227
Archives and Interviews	241
Notes	245
Acknowledgments	291
Index	295



GULF OF MEXICO

Bahía de Campeche
(CAMPECHE BAY)

MEXICO

Petén jungle

Golfo de
Tehuantepec

GUATEMALA

Quetzaltenango

Guatemala City

Lake
Atitlán

Antigua

PACIFIC OCEAN



CARIBBEAN
SEA

BELIZE

*Golfo de
Honduras*

HONDURAS

San Salvador
EL SALVADOR

NICARAGUA

Learning the truth is painful, but it is without question a highly beneficial and liberating act.

—Bishop Juan José Gerardi, 1998

Introduction

In 2009, Dolores Preat went looking for her birth mother. She had been adopted as a five-year-old from Guatemala by a Belgian family in 1984. Preat's adoptive parents had shown her paperwork given to them by their adoption lawyer saying that her birth mother was originally from an area brutalized during one of the longest-running and bloodiest armed conflicts in Latin American history.¹ An estimated 200,000 people died during the war that ravaged the country from 1960 to 1996. Preat consulted the paperwork to see what she could learn. The file listed Preat's birth mother as Rosario Colop Chim, and included her address in Colonia Limón, a slum in Guatemala City. Preat, like many adults adopted as children, wanted to meet her birth family. At age thirty-two she booked a plane ticket to Guatemala to visit her birth mother, unannounced.

Preat managed to trace Colop Chim to her home in a town called Zunil, located just outside Quetzaltenango, the country's second largest city and the commercial hub for Guatemala's Indigenous middle class.² Zunil is a small town sitting in a green valley at the base of a volcano. Its name means "reed whistle" in the Indigenous Maya language K'iche'. Preat speaks neither K'iche', one of Guatemala's twenty-two Indigenous languages, nor much Spanish. In Guatemala, Indigenous people make up about half the population, identified and differentiated by language, by town of origin, and—especially among women—by wearing brightly colored handwoven clothing.³ Racism against Indigenous people poisoned and continues to poison life there, and the Guatemalan elite thinks of itself not as mixed-race (*mestizo*), but as white.⁴ According to the adoption file, like many Indigenous girls, Colop Chim had

moved to the capital to work when she was young, then returned to her hometown.

Zunil is a series of concrete block and adobe houses laid out along cobblestone and dirt roads surrounding a soccer field and church. Preat had no trouble finding the right house. When she showed up, Colop Chim wasn't there, but her sister was. The sister was confused. Colop Chim had never given up a child for adoption, she said. But someone had kidnapped a girl from across the street in 1984, and her family had been looking for the girl ever since. Preat crossed the street and met a woman nearly her age with a very familiar face—just like her own face. The woman's mother tearfully recounted the kidnapping. Testimony given for a later criminal case captured the emotion of the moment: "The family gathered, Dolores told them about the adoption, and all was confusion. Her aunts and uncles arrived and one of them said that on seeing Dolores he felt the call of blood."⁵ DNA tests confirmed what Preat also felt right away. The woman with the familiar face was her sister, and her mother Preat's own birth mother. Rosario Colop Chim was not Preat's mother at all, but her kidnapper. After stealing her neighbor's child, she posed as her birth mother to sign legal consent forms for the adoption. Colop Chim worked as a *jaladora*—a "puller," or baby broker—for a lawyer in Guatemala City who arranged private adoptions.

Preat brought a criminal case against Colop Chim. Her lawyers sidestepped the statute of limitations by arguing that this was more than a simple kidnapping. Preat had been "disappeared," that most Latin American of crimes. Forced disappearance constituted an ongoing crime, the prosecution argued, because of the anguish and uncertainty that Preat's family experienced every day since the kidnapping and because of her own long-term mistaken understanding of her identity. Her lawyer explained to me that this was a legal strategy pioneered in Argentina, one of the few ways to convict war criminals who were otherwise let off the hook by statutes of limitation or amnesty laws. Jorge Rafael Videla, who had been in and out of prison for various crimes committed during his 1976–1981 dictatorship, was finally sentenced in 2012 to fifty years of prison for ordering the forced disappearance and illegal adoptions of children—crimes not covered by amnesty. He died in prison. Preat's criminal complaint said that "in the eyes of her biological family she was a disappeared child and in her own eyes she was a rejected child." She sought criminal charges against her kidnapper and baby broker, "to demand justice and penal responsibility for the people who snatched her away from her family,

identity, and culture.” In 2015, Colop Chim was convicted and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. While the crime was not unique, the series of events leading to its punishment were. Only because the kidnapper lived across the street from her birth family did Preat learn the truth.⁶

The history of adoption from Guatemala has many threads, most of them disquieting in one way or another. In addition to kidnappings, children were forcibly disappeared during the armed conflict, Indigenous children were separated from their families and communities in large numbers, and women—often single mothers facing extreme poverty—decided to relinquish or were coerced into relinquishing children for what became a commercialized global market. These stories first drew my attention when I read a statistic so startling that I thought it must be wrong: at the height of the adoption boom in the 2000s, one in 100 children born in Guatemala was placed for adoption with a family abroad.⁷ Guatemala overtook other “sender” countries, including South Korea and Russia, until it was second only to China for the number of children adopted abroad—in absolute numbers, not adjusted for population.⁸ Guatemala’s population in 2006 was only 14 million people, yet it provided the second-highest number of children to what had become a world adoption market. How was this possible? And who were these children?

While most accounts of international adoption focus on the racial, social, and economic differences between countries of origin and countries of adoption, I found that the internal dynamics of a “sender” country can be equally if not more important. Conditions of social inequality and racial difference within Guatemala were crucial to producing adoptable children.⁹ Guatemala has one of the most unequal distributions of wealth in the world and is still reeling in the aftermath of what is often called a civil war, but which might more properly be called state terror because the majority of the violence was perpetrated by the government against civilians, especially Indigenous people.¹⁰ It is also the only country in the world to have fully privatized adoptions, for a period lasting from 1977 to 2007. This highly unusual set of laws provided very speedy adoptions of newborns, who were preferred by most adoptive parents, and a moneymaking opportunity for criminal adoption rings. According to the U.S. Department of State, a total of 29,807 Guatemalan children were adopted in the United States, 52.8 percent girls and 47.2 percent boys. Seventy percent of the total adoptees were under the age of one. Sweden and Canada were also popular early destinations for Guatemalan adoptees, joined later by France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy,

Germany, and other countries. Between the United States, Canada, and Europe, there are likely now about 40,000 Guatemalan adoptees living abroad around the world.¹¹

The early years of Guatemala's adoption boom coincided with the bloodiest episode of Latin America's Cold War, an armed conflict that escalated into genocide perpetrated by the Guatemalan army against Indigenous Maya peoples especially between the years 1981 and 1983.¹² Many children were murdered, while others were forcibly disappeared by army officials and ended up as unpaid domestic servants or adopted by both Guatemalan and foreign families. A report by a truth commission sponsored by the United Nations found that 5,000 children were forcibly disappeared during the war. A later report focusing on crimes committed against children estimated that at least 500 of the disappeared were put up for adoption, though human rights groups caution that the number is likely higher.¹³

As in other "sender" countries, large-scale international adoption began only in the second half of the twentieth century. Social workers at the largest Guatemalan public orphanage organized their first case through a state-run adoption program created in 1968. A massive earthquake in 1976 orphaned thousands of children, and lawyers took the opportunity to push for a separate track for privatized adoptions. They were successful, and Guatemala became the only country in the world to allow lawyers to match children to families and complete adoptions without judicial oversight. This created an unregulated market for children based on foreign demand, and a strong and growing profit motive in Guatemala. Guatemalan public opinion turned against international adoptions in the 1990s, when numbers of adoptees leaving the country ballooned, unfounded rumors of organ trafficking circulated, and several foreign tourists and Guatemalans wrongfully suspected of child theft were attacked, beaten, and in some cases killed. Guatemalan newspapers published a barrage of articles about what they called "children for export."

This book is based on a vast set of adoption files, police records, court cases, and other archival sources, along with interviews, that show how Guatemalan children came to be adopted in such large numbers. There were roughly five sets of circumstances. Hundreds of children were forcibly disappeared as part of the political violence, mostly from Indigenous communities. The genocide-era adoptions of disappeared children run like a toxic stream through the larger history of adoptions from Guatemala. Then there were children who were kidnapped in unknown numbers, because falsified adoption paperwork makes it

impossible to say for sure. There were true orphans, through death or abandonment, in smaller proportions than one might expect. (Adoption files indicated these to be well under 10 percent of cases.) The last two groups were the largest. There were children who were coerced away from their families, often desperately poor single mothers. The mothers were coerced into relinquishing their children either directly, by baby brokers, lawyers, or family members, or indirectly, through the constraints of misogyny, poverty, and social exclusion. It is impossible to know whether, under other circumstances, these women would have wished to keep them. Finally, there were children who were relinquished by birth mothers who wished to place them in adoption. Written sources can make it difficult to ascertain the true circumstances of any given adoption, never mind the level of informed consent. Birth mothers, social workers, lawyers, and adoptive parents had clashing views of who made a good parent, what counted as a broken family (*familia desintegrada*, literally “disintegrated family” in Spanish), and what circumstances made a child adoptable. I found ample support for historian Laura Briggs’s caution against rushing to label international adoption as either rescue or kidnapping.¹⁴

Foreign families adopted from Guatemala for forty years, often without full information about the origins of the babies and children they welcomed into their homes. Moving a child from one country to another, one family to another, demanded constant negotiations across geographical distance and across inequalities of power and resources. First came local determinations about which children were adoptable, who counted as abandoned or orphaned, and how to secure consent from birth mothers. Second came diplomacy and correspondence between adoption agency workers and social workers in Guatemala, various European countries, the United States, and Canada, setting the parameters for adoptions. Last came the actual transfer of children. Much information was lost or suppressed along the way. While often initiated with the best of intentions in wealthier countries, international adoptions were the result of immiseration in sender countries, where they were bound up in violent conflicts over politics, local racial divisions, and enforcing often misogynistic ideas about the role and place of women.

In 2008, Guatemala closed all international adoptions. It is still widely cited as the worst-case scenario for international adoption, a case study in all that can go wrong when families in rich countries participate, often unwittingly, in a commercial market for children from poor countries. In Guatemala, I often heard that adoption was “just a business.” “Some countries export bananas”

one lawyer who arranged private adoptions told *The Economist* in 2016. “We exported babies.”¹⁵ In contrast, many people in wealthy countries had long seen international adoptions as selfless acts of charity, though this began to change after scandals in Guatemala and elsewhere.¹⁶ Dawning awareness of ethical concerns is one reason international adoption is declining around the world. The United States remains the largest receiving country, but the high-water mark was 22,884 children adopted from all over the world in 2004. Since then, numbers of international adoptions are falling fast, even as international surrogacy, which raises parallel ethical issues, is on the rise.¹⁷

Even supporters of international adoption, like conservative author Arthur Brooks, acknowledge that national pride and “worries about corruption and human trafficking” cause some sender countries to close adoptions. He writes, though, that the children left unadopted are “too high a price to pay for bureaucratic screw-tightening.”¹⁸ Legal scholar Elizabeth Bartholet, the most prominent defender of adoptions from Guatemala, criticized the “righteous condemnation” by international organizations, including UNICEF, for “alleged adoption abuses” there. For Bartholet, critics of international adoptions “have made no effort to weigh the costs and benefits” of suspending them.¹⁹ In an interview, she acknowledged fraud but told me that she believes the response should be to address the illegality, not, as she put it, to “shut the whole thing down.” “There is a huge cost to be paid by the children who are denied adoptive homes and typically end up in institutions,” she added.²⁰ The problem with this view is that most of the children adopted from Guatemala were not orphans but were sourced on demand by adoption lawyers.

During the years that privatized adoptions were legal in Guatemala, a small group of well-connected lawyers and other elites ran and profited from the adoption process. The sister-in-law of a former dictator, Ofelia Rosal de Gamas, worked with the agency that oversaw Dolores Preat’s adoption. Preat’s adoptive parents were, naturally, horrified by the discovery that they had adopted a kidnapped child. The agency led them to “believe that her family didn’t want her and that’s why they found her another family and sent her to Belgium for adoption.”²¹ Preat’s story is unusual in that it involves an outright kidnapping, and in that Preat was not a baby when she was adopted. But in other ways it is representative. Like many other adoptions, Preat’s case involved a baby broker tasked with searching for children.²² It involved falsified paperwork, and lies told to the adoptive family. It involved a child who had living family members in Guatemala.

Perhaps the most unusual feature of Preat's story is that in the end she managed to learn the truth of where she came from and the circumstances of her adoption. Because falsified documents were common, even in cases that did not involve kidnappings, many other adoptees with questions about their pasts have had less success. Adoptees—now grown up—and birth families continue to search for one another. As they do so, the adoptees try to learn which part of the story they belong to. Were they the disappeared or stolen children of the war? Were they really orphans? Did a baby broker approach their pregnant mother at a bus stop or market to let her know she had options? Perhaps most painful—did their mother not want them? Or was she the victim of a crime or war crime? Did she simply lack the money to buy them milk?

These stories echo a much longer, often violent history of governments that stole children and assigned them new families in places as far flung as the United States, Argentina, Spain, Australia, Chile, and Canada. Two older logics surface in these histories: who can afford to raise a child and be considered a good mother, and whether children deemed undesirable or dangerous by the powerful—because they are too Indigenous or too poor—are to be taken and reassigned, given a new identity and a new family, supposedly in their own best interests or for the good of society. The category of child is itself distorted in Guatemala, as in other countries with Indigenous and poor populations.²³ Historian Deborah Levenson-Estrada wrote, “Street children are called children, no matter their age; gang members are youth criminals, not children; and the elite have applied the term *niños* to Mayas of all ages since the 1500s.”²⁴ In the eyes of paternalistic, racist empires, the “darker nations” have long seemed like children themselves, in need of saving.²⁵ One way to civilize supposedly childish nations is to reform adults. Another is to transplant their children to be raised by others, in allegedly civilized families. When children are removed by force, whether by a fascist state, religious groups, or a colonial regime, the devastating act negates their families' most intimate right, to have and raise desired children. This book is about Guatemala, but in its broadest strokes the story resembles that of many countries where Indigenous children have been separated from their families, where people have preyed on birth mothers to profit from commercial adoptions, or where families have struggled to keep and raise their children in the face of mass violence, untenable economic pressures, and unfreedom for women.

Adoptions as Political Violence

Telling the history of adoptions from Guatemala involves retelling the story of the Guatemalan armed conflict from a different perspective. Widening the view from the guerrillas, from the army, and from tallying the horrifying death toll, adoptions come into focus as a tool of political violence. To call what happened in Guatemala between 1960 and 1996 a war at all is somewhat misleading. A small leftist insurgency was brutally crushed by the army, police, and armed “civil defense patrols” made up of forcibly recruited civilians. The government engaged in mass murder of its own people on a scale closer to Pol Pot’s Cambodia or Stalinist Russia than other Cold War conflicts in Latin America. Those who were attempting to overthrow Guatemala’s right-wing regimes were killed alongside those who simply wished to be left to raise their crops. By the end of the thirty-six-year armed conflict, an estimated 200,000 Guatemalans had died. Exhumations are ongoing.

There were two truth commissions in Guatemala, whose similar findings were unwelcome, to put it mildly, among the army. The first was led by the Catholic Church and directed by Bishop Juan José Gerardi of Guatemala City. It gathered extensive testimonies and evidence for a four-volume report called *Guatemala: Nunca Más!* (“Never Again!”). The report asserted that government forces were responsible for 90 percent of documented human rights violations during the war. In 1998, two days after its publication, Bishop Gerardi was beaten to death inside the garage of his parish house in the capital. Three army officers went to jail for his assassination, though evidence pointed even higher up the chain of command.²⁶ A year later, a second truth commission report, sponsored by the United Nations and also based on exhaustive documentation and interviews, was published. This truth commission found that the Guatemalan government was responsible for 93 percent of human rights violations, and that fully 83 percent of those killed in the war were Indigenous.²⁷ The state’s counterinsurgent strategy, under the directive to “drain the sea to kill the fish,” escalated into what the UN-backed truth commission called “genocidal acts.”²⁸

Through ongoing investigations and human rights trials, even more evidence has come to support the findings of these commissions in the decades since their publication. Former and current military personnel and their supporters have tried to deny their crimes, but the patient work of forensic anthropologists, Guatemalans trained by Argentine colleagues who helped provide proof of war crimes in their own country, have dug up mass grave after mass



Vigil for Bishop Juan José Gerardi on the fifteenth anniversary of his murder in Guatemala City in 1998. The banner reads “Witnesses of Truth.” *Reuters/Alamy Stock Photo.*

grave. Forensic anthropologists proved definitively that the truth commissions had not exaggerated the scale of the government’s crimes. The bones told the truth of what had happened.²⁹ Many of the bodies found in mass graves were people who had been forcibly disappeared by the army. One of the truth commissions was able to document 6,159 people forcibly disappeared during the conflict, but now the number is thought to be more like 45,000 people, the highest per capita number of people “disappeared” by the government anywhere in Latin America. Indeed, the verb was first perverted into the transitive form during this conflict. The term was coined and the practice deployed as a tool of state repression for the first time in Guatemala beginning in 1966.³⁰ Anthropologist Diane Nelson cautioned that calculating figures and a fixation on the round number of 200,000 deaths obscures other crimes that were less immediately obvious in the aftermath of the war.³¹ Sexual violence is one example. Forcible adoptions, including of disappeared children, are another.

It is hard to avoid the sense that this conflict would be better known in the United States and around the world if most of the victims were seen as white, like many of the disappeared in Chile and Argentina during those countries’ periods of state terror, or had they been students and intellectuals or

lived in cities. Instead, the majority of victims were Indigenous families working the land in remote towns. Ricardo Falla, a priest and anthropologist who joined a community fleeing the army into the jungle, later wrote that the war, often called the “armed internal conflict” in Guatemala, was not made up of battles but rather “collective torture.”³² Army officials spoke openly, even bragged, of wiping more than 400 villages off the map. They invaded, raped, and murdered inhabitants, and burned to the ground the cornfields that sustain Indigenous communities and are considered sacred. Generals bragged of “saving” children.

The Guatemalan war was so long and so bloody, wrote Greg Grandin, that it “is composed of many stories, as many as there are individuals, families, and communities that lived through it, and each story has a different turning point and climax.”³³ Seen for a moment in the bird’s-eye view, the war had roughly three phases. It began with a guerrilla group that formed after the 1954 coup, backed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, against a democratically elected president, Jacobo Árbenz. The puppet dictator installed by the CIA rolled back Árbenz’s moderate attempts at land reform, and former members of the military—bitter that a series of dictators had sold out the country to North Americans—built up a guerrilla insurgency in the eastern part of the country. From about 1963 to 1978, the government, along with its death squads, targeted student activists, trade unionists, and guerrilla leaders.³⁴ The second phase of the war involved mass repression and murder of Indigenous peoples. Since the Spanish colonial invasion of the Americas, those in control of Guatemala had feared a *motín de indios* (Indian rebellion), in which Indigenous people would take stock of their larger numbers and riot to take back what was, or used to be, theirs. In May 1978, a group of K’ekchi’ Maya women and men gathered in Panzós, a town in the mountainous highlands, to protest threats to their land titles, which were consistently ignored as *ladinos* encroached on Indigenous territory. (*Ladino* is a word used only in Guatemala to mean non-Indigenous people.) Army soldiers fired on the unarmed crowd, violently overreacting and, as Grandin wrote, “conjuring the riot they have long feared.”³⁵ The Panzós Massacre was the opening shot in a scorched-earth campaign in majority Maya areas that escalated in 1981. The military alleged, without evidence, that Indigenous people were especially susceptible to communist ideology and were harboring guerrillas on a wide scale. The most violent phase of the war, including the genocide, occurred in the early to mid-1980s. In the third phase of the war, a transition to democracy in 1985 decreased violence for a few years. But the military still held



Child victim of aerial bombardment in an army detention center in Nebaj, an Ixil Maya town, in 1983. In this case, she was accompanied by her family. *Courtesy of Jean-Marie Simon.*

behind-the-scenes political power and used death squads to assassinate political leaders, Catholic lay leaders called catechists, and trade unionists until peace accords were signed in 1996.

At least 250,000 Guatemalan children lost one or both parents during the armed conflict. Child survivors of massacres, disappeared by the army during the second phase of the war, along with children forcibly separated from their parents, were placed for adoption in Guatemala and abroad.³⁶ Official support for searches quickly dried up, and those searching for disappeared children in Guatemala rely on a nonprofit organization called La Liga Guatemalteca de Higiene Mental (Guatemalan League for Mental Hygiene), or La Liga. The group is run by Marco Antonio Garavito, a compact, warm man with a mustache, who was trained as a social psychologist. He is known to everyone as Maco, and works with a small staff out of an unmarked office in downtown Guatemala City. Garavito estimates that the number of disappeared children who were later disappeared may be closer to 800. The organization is approached by more survivors each year, and must continually revise estimates upward.³⁷ The coordinator of one of several evanescent commissions

tasked with searching for missing children after the war said in an interview that many victims of state terror reported disappeared adult family members to truth commissions but not children. Disappeared children were underreported because of stigma around being a bad parent, “for fear that it would be thought that they had abandoned them.”³⁸ The Catholic Church followed up its truth commission with a report focusing only on disappeared children, published in 2000. Parents whose children had been forcibly disappeared during the war told human rights workers that they had seen them taken away in helicopters, and still suffered from the memory that “we didn’t have the means to go around looking for them.” One mother who somehow put together the money and courage to inquire at an army base was told her child had been given directly to an orphanage “and now he doesn’t have the same name and they gave him in adoption.” Military officials told her the child was in the United States, but she said, “we don’t know if that is true, since we don’t have any confidence in what they tell us.” The Catholic Church named this second report *Hasta Encontrarte*, “Until I Find You,” after the testimony of a mother who said of her disappeared child, “I settle for now for a star to wish on and I will not give up until I find you.”³⁹

Separating parents from their children, disappearing children, and arranging adoptions without the consent of surviving family members are acts of political violence. By the time disappearances and forcible adoptions were underway in Guatemala, this was a crime already considered part of genocide under international law. On 10 December 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution that legally defined genocide for the first time. The definition included five acts “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” The fifth act deemed constitutive of genocide: “Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”⁴⁰

Guatemala was the first country in the world to try a former dictator in national court and find him guilty of genocide. In 2013, Efraín Ríos Montt was tried for genocide and crimes against humanity committed during his rule from 1982 to 1983. Adoption files from the state orphanage were presented at the trial as evidence of genocide. At that time, the adoption files were housed at the Archivos de la Paz (the Peace Archives) in Guatemala City—a collection mandated by the peace process but created only in 2008. Marco Tulio Álvarez, director of the archive, testified at Ríos Montt’s trial that the army

kidnapped children in “unknown numbers” for adoption.⁴¹ Tulio Álvarez wrote in a report based on the archive’s holdings that the army’s treatment of children served many purposes during the war: “to terrorize the population in general,” “to punish the parents through damage inflicted on the children,” and “to obtain economic gains through the sale of children.”⁴²

To be clear, available adoption records do not show a concerted plan to use adoptions to cover up war crimes. What they do show is a consistent pattern of separating Maya children from their families and communities, assigning them non-Maya names, and giving them in adoption to non-Indigenous Guatemalan or foreign families. Genocide is age old, but the term was only widely recognized after World War II and the Nuremberg Trials. Barring the existence and discovery of notes like the Wannsee Conference minutes, in which Nazis spelled out their genocidal plans against the Jews, intent is very difficult to prove.⁴³ The strongest evidence for genocidal intent in Guatemala is to be found in a handful of army plans from the 1980s that became public after the war and speak of eradicating Indigenous families, and, in reference to their children, stamping out “bad seed.”⁴⁴ Ríos Montt was convicted of genocide, but the sentence was later annulled on procedural grounds under political pressure.⁴⁵

Many Guatemalans with right-wing views, including former military officials who maintain a political and economic stranglehold on the country, insist that no genocide occurred.⁴⁶ Historian Kirsten Weld calls this “an atmosphere of homegrown Holocaust denial.”⁴⁷ Guatemala is surely the only country in the world where bumper stickers reading “*no hubo genocidio*” (“there was no genocide”) were a common sight during a war crimes trial.⁴⁸ Graffiti reading “*Si hubo genocidio*” (“yes, there was a genocide”) appeared on city walls during the trial and remains a common sight around Guatemala City, stenciled anew each year by members of HIJOS. The acronym stands for “Sons and Daughters for Identity and against Forgetting and Silence,” a human rights group formed in 1999. HIJOS is now working with adoptees who suspect they may have been forcibly disappeared during the war and are searching for their birth parents.

Naturally, the first recovery efforts after the war involved counting and mourning the dead. Only several decades after the peace accords did Guatemalans come to terms more fully with crimes that left survivors: torture, rape, forcible adoptions. When I lived in Guatemala City, from 2015 to 2016,

graffiti began to appear with one town's name: Sepur Zarco. Blocky letters announced: "There was and is gender violence in Guatemala." Fifteen women from that isolated K'ekchi' town testified in a 2016 trial that military officials had kidnapped them in 1982 and held them at a military base for more than a year, systematically raping them and forcing them to perform domestic tasks, including making tortillas and washing uniforms. The two surviving perpetrators were each sentenced to more than 100 years in jail. Asked why they came forward with their story so late, the survivors answered that human rights workers, historians, truth commission workers, and anthropologists had come to their village with other questions: How many were killed? Had their men cooperated with the guerrilla fighters before they died? No one asked about rape, and the women kept their counsel.⁴⁹ Garavito, the director of La Liga, describes a similar effect when it comes to the families of disappeared children: no one asked, so for a long time they didn't tell. One purpose of this book is to insist on asking about children, too, and to point out that stealing children, like sexual violence, is not a random, chaotic crime but a pattern, a known variant of political violence. Forcible adoptions were an important part of the history of repression in Guatemala and elsewhere.

The history of adoptions from Guatemala, like the rest of Guatemalan history, gives the lie to the all-too-common myth of Maya passivity. In the face of five centuries of racist violence and genocide, Maya communities have managed to resist often brutal pressures to culturally assimilate, while maintaining and continuously renewing their own community structures. An important limitation of this book is that all the written sources are in Spanish or English. I do not speak any of the twenty-two Mayan languages spoken in Guatemala, nor did the social workers who wrote adoption files nor the lawyers who arranged private adoptions. Even so, the archives clearly record Maya resistance to forced adoptions and Indigenous communities' desire and capacity to take in children orphaned by the war. Throughout the conflict, Maya families accused the government of disappearing their family members and perpetrating a genocide. In 1984, wives and mothers of the disappeared formed a human rights organization called GAM, the Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (Group for Mutual Support), to advocate for the return of their loved ones. The majority of the members were Indigenous women. At a time when human rights activists were often targeted for assassination, to-

gether women marched holding posters with the faces of their disappeared husbands and children, demanding them back, or at the very least demanding to know what had happened to them. “At first we didn’t blame the government because we thought that if we didn’t blame them, the disappeared would appear,” one member of GAM told the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1985. “But there comes a time when you have to tell the truth.”⁵⁰

As part of the slow process of recovery and reckoning after the war, more families began to search for missing children. Aside from a few short-lived committees that were thinly funded, if at all, this process has not been aided by the government. After the UN-backed truth commission report was published, an editorial in the *New York Times* observed: “Probably thousands of children disappeared in Guatemala’s 36-year civil war, the vast majority taken by the security forces, typically after the army had attacked a Mayan Indian village and massacred many of its inhabitants. While most of the children were probably killed, there is reason to think that many of the younger children were adopted illegally by soldiers or taken to orphanages and later adopted by families in other countries, including the United States.” The editorial noted efforts to find disappeared children in Argentina and El Salvador and continued, “With war increasingly fought in villages instead of battlefields, more nations need to find abducted children and connect them to their families.” It concluded: “A priority for investigation should be the children who have disappeared. This is one instance where those presumed dead could indeed be brought back to life.”⁵¹

After the signing of the peace accords in 1996, the search for missing children has emerged as an avenue for the recovery of historical memory, that collective narrative of the past that many countries find so difficult to cobble together and agree upon.⁵² Guatemalans are still at odds over what the war was really about, and what it meant. Those who support the military see it as a heroic campaign that saved Guatemala from becoming “another Cuba.”⁵³ Those who have read the truth commission reports and followed the human rights cases know that the government, police and army both, committed the vast majority of crimes—including genocide. Public discussion of what went wrong with adoptions is still dominated by stories of children trafficked by private lawyers, not of forcibly disappeared Indigenous children. Guatemalans tend to tell it as a story of corruption rather than mass terror, though the history of adoption in their country involved both.

Index

Page numbers in italics refer to photographs and illustrations.

- abandoned children: adoption of, 5, 51, 54, 64; disappeared children as, 141, 157–163; investigations into, 49, 51–52, 67, 162; legal status determinations for, 26, 42, 157, 161; welfare programs for, 145
- Aboriginal children, 155, 167
- abortion: accessibility to, 16, 192, 280n53; adoption as alternative to, 187; illegality of, 95, 102, 211; legalization of, 42, 102; *Roe v. Wade* and, 60, 280n53
- adoption files: consent from birth mothers in, 186–189; on disappeared children, 20–24, 138, 141, 155–162, 272n42; on falsified paperwork, 64–66; follow-up reports in, 28, 53–54, 139, 172, 185, 189; for Lebensborn program, 164; from Ministry of Social Welfare, 21–23, 33, 46–48, 63, 69, 136, 155–162; at Peace Archives, 12, 143; photographs in, 26, 28, 184–186, 188, 280n44; from private adoptions, 23–24, 62, 94, 96, 103, 171–173, 175–189; process for archiving, 251n75; request forms in, 27, 54, 58–60, 161, 175, 178–180; researcher access to, 21–24, 251n74; social worker compilation of, 21, 46, 48, 53–64. *See also* social reports
- adoption lawyers: child trafficking by, 15, 18, 19, 101, 199; on closure to international adoptions, 23; coercive practices of, 5, 16; media coverage of, 19, 112; notary role of, 78–79, 84, 93, 249n54; political influence of, 17, 19, 131, 214; profits per adoption for, 16, 47, 90, 170, 250n59; prosecution and punishment of, 19, 101–102, 111–113; reform bills blocked by, 17, 120, 129–132; UN report on abusive behavior toward birth mothers, 215. *See also* private adoptions
- adoption rings: elites in, 6, 110, 115; emergence of, 90, 91; “fattening houses” used by, 111, 125, 195, 196, 199; links with organized crime, 219; Piñata Case, 89–90, 105–111, 116, 119, 120; police raids on, 112, 121, 123, 125–126, 195; profitability of, 3, 107, 108; structure of, 93, 218, 263n10. *See also* baby brokers
- adoptions: of abandoned children, 5, 51, 54, 64; consent for, 5, 64–69, 94–95, 172–173, 186–189; corruption in, 6, 15, 79, 85–86, 129, 131, 189–191, 247n16; of disappeared children, 11, 15–16, 20–21, 134–141, 144–152, 162–167, 235; ethical issues in study of, 24–25; home visits following, 28; moral panic regarding, 16, 196–199, 223, 236; motives for, 31, 177–178, 187; objections of birth parents to, 56, 66–68; as political

- adoptions (*continued*)
 violence, 8–15; probationary periods for, 48, 78, 85; proxy adoptions, 40, 48; racial matching in, 41, 57–58, 271n21; rejections due to moral reasons, 252n3; state-run programs, 4, 20, 26–29, 47, 215; telling child of adopted status, 274n61. *See also* child trafficking for adoption; domestic adoptions; forced adoptions; for-profit adoptions; illegal adoptions; informal adoptions; international adoptions; kidnapping for adoption; private adoptions
- agricultural cooperatives, 52, 183
- Aguilar, María de los Ángeles, 284n60
- Alarcón, Jairo, 206
- Albizures, Miguel Ángel, 222, 288n126
- Alliance for Progress, 36, 52, 53
- Amnesty International, 73, 138, 210–211
- Andrino, Josefina Arellano, 223, 288n128
- Árbenz, Jacobo, 10, 34
- Arévalo, Juan José, 34
- Argentina: child theft allegations in, 197; Conquest of the Desert and, 30, 148; dictatorship era in, 155, 164–167; disappeared children in, 9, 15, 20, 165–166, 224–226, 277n36; earthquake in (1944), 37; historical memory in, 166; illegal adoptions in, 20; U.S. human rights report condemned by, 80; welfare programs in, 34
- Ariès, Philippe, 247n23, 256n66
- assimilation, 14, 138–140, 148, 155, 166, 167
- Association for the Search for Disappeared Children, 20–21
- Association of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared of Guatemala (FAMDEGUA), 169
- Association of Infant Welfare, 52
- Australia: Aboriginal children in, 155, 167; internationally adopted children in, 39
- baby brokers: coercive practices of, 5, 16, 98–101, 229; fees paid to, 94, 98, 99, 102, 104, 105; Hague Convention ban on, 213; Indigenous women as, 16, 18, 97–98; kidnapping by, 2–3, 89–90, 101, 105; Linares Beltranena and, 102–104, 183, 186; locating children for adoption, 6, 90, 91, 94–97, 103, 112; media coverage of, 18, 106; police descriptions of, 109; prosecution and punishment of, 2–3, 18, 113; as searchers for birth parents, 24, 234; vilification of, 18, 93–94; violence used by, 90
- babylifts, 39, 43–44, 81
- Baker, Josephine, 197
- Barnert, Elizabeth, 250–251n72
- Barnett, Michael, 260n33
- Barrett, Amy Coney, 280n53
- Bartholet, Elizabeth, 6
- Becker, Denese (Dominga Sic Ruiz), 149–151
- Belgium: Hacer Puente adoption agency in, 121, 230, 232, 233, 250n63; internationally adopted children in, 1, 3, 6, 99, 230; Lebensborn program orphanages in, 164
- Bernays, Edward, 34
- biases. *See* discrimination
- birth control. *See* contraception
- birth fathers: adoptee searches for, 227–235, 238; migration to United States, 97; objections to adoption, 56, 66; social reports on, 54–56, 92, 183. *See also* children
- birth mothers: adoptee searches for, 1–2, 24, 99, 227–235, 238; behavior monitoring for, 56; changing mind regarding adoption, 174, 190; coercion of, 5, 16, 42–43, 66, 69, 98–101, 212; consent for adoption from, 5, 64–69, 94–95, 172–173, 186–189; as domestic servants, 62–63, 95–97, 182, 183, 185, 189; illiteracy of, 30, 66, 67, 69, 95; informal adoptions and, 29–30; intimidation by baby brokers, 16; objections to adoption, 66–68; payments to, 43, 93, 99, 100, 104–105, 211, 264n25; police investigations of, 104, 110–111; social reports on, 54–57, 61–64, 68, 69, 92, 181–185; UN report on abusive behavior of lawyers

- toward, 215; U.S. embassy interviews with, 211, 212. *See also* children
- Bolivia: child theft allegations in, 197; request for earthquake orphans by, 77
- Boton García, Guadalupe, 149
- Boxus, Juan María, 121
- Bracero program, 94
- Brazil: child theft allegations in, 197, 285n76; gender ideology backlash in, 267n16; internationally adopted children from, 198–199; Pentecostal populations in, 74; U.S. human rights report condemned by, 80
- bribes, 33, 77, 107, 114, 190, 203
- Briggs, Laura: on disappeared children, 195; discussion board posts analyzed by, 221–222; on international adoption, 5, 19; *Somebody's Children*, 20, 41
- Brown, George S., 80
- Buck, Pearl, 40–41
- Bustamante, Jayro, 99
- Butler, Judith, 267n16
- Cajas Barrios, Alfredo Gonzalo, 227–230, 232–233
- Canada: asylum-seekers in, 274n67; birth mother interviews required by, 212; child trafficking for adoption in, 17; closure to adoptions from Guatemala, 216; First Nations children in, 155, 168, 278n50; foreign aid from, 75; Hague Convention ratified by, 215; internationally adopted children in, 3–5, 39, 47, 91–92, 126, 246n11
- Cano Ponce, Vicente Eduardo, 83–84
- Carey, David, Jr., 74, 265n52
- Carillo Gudiel, Jorge Armando, 182
- Carpio, Ramiro de Leon, 208
- Carpio Nicolle, Jorge, 125, 268n39, 269n51
- Carter, Jimmy, 79–80
- Casa Alianza, 216, 231
- Casa Bernabé Orphanage, 136, 249n44
- Casario y Acevedo, Mario, 75
- Castillo, Aura Maldonado, 160, 161
- Castillo Armas, Carlos, 35, 83
- Castro, Dina, 102, 176–177
- Castro, Fidel, 36, 81
- Catholic Church: activist groups of, 52, 74; on adoption as alternative to abortion, 187; charity organizations of, 77, 79; liberation theology and, 74; orphanages run by, 75, 249n44; refugee testimony gathered by, 142, 272n30; truth commissions and, 8, 12, 134, 135, 249n51, 270n13
- Ceausescu, Nicolae, 211
- Celebrate Children International, 19, 221
- censorship, 107, 120, 122
- Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 10, 33, 34, 36, 183
- childhood, as social construction, 247n23, 256n66
- children: attractiveness of, 61; daycare centers for, 34, 38, 63, 94; denationalization of, 143; in detention centers, 11, 290n17; as domestic servants, 4, 30–31, 62, 134, 140, 147–149, 152, 253n13; earthquake orphans, 4, 73, 76–78, 82, 87; gifting of, 30, 33, 55, 63, 148–149, 281n58; mixed-race, 39–40, 43, 60; refugee, 28, 42, 141, 144, 153–154, 275n72. *See also* abandoned children; adoptions; birth fathers; birth mothers; disappeared children; Indigenous children; orphanages
- child trafficking for adoption: campaigns against, 237; in Francoist Spain, 165; geographic scope of, 17; of Indigenous children, 30, 116–117, 122; lack of legally defined crime of, 105; by lawyers, 15, 18, 19, 101, 199; media coverage of, 121–122; profits associated with, 129; Special Courts for, 118–119
- Chile: child theft allegations in, 197; disappeared children in, 9; forced adoptions in, 20; historical memory in, 249n52; informal adoptions in, 30; request for earthquake orphans by, 77
- China: internationally adopted children from, 3, 39, 194; private adoption system in, 260n30