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Paper Cadavers: The Archives Of Dictatorship In Guatemala (American Encounters/Global Interactions)



Synopsis

In *Paper Cadavers*, an inside account of the astonishing discovery and rescue of Guatemala's secret police archives, Kirsten Weld probes the politics of memory, the wages of the Cold War, and the stakes of historical knowledge production. After Guatemala's bloody thirty-six years of civil war (1960–1996), silence and impunity reigned. That is, until 2005, when human rights investigators stumbled on the archives of the country's National Police, which, at 75 million pages, proved to be the largest trove of secret state records ever found in Latin America. The unearthing of the archives renewed fierce debates about history, memory, and justice. In *Paper Cadavers*, Weld explores Guatemala's struggles to manage this avalanche of evidence of past war crimes, providing a firsthand look at how postwar justice activists worked to reconfigure terror archives into implements of social change. Tracing the history of the police files as they were transformed from weapons of counterinsurgency into tools for post-conflict reckoning, Weld sheds light on the country's fraught transition from war to an uneasy peace, reflecting on how societies forget and remember political violence.

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Customer Reviews

What it is: A much-needed examination of the Guatemalan National Police archive consisting of 75 million papers documenting the forced disappearances of "subversives" during the 1970s-1980s. The book does NOT investigate specific documents in the archive, but rather theorizes about what an archive is and provides information on the process of creating the archive. The book was valuable to me as someone studying this topic and as someone whose family member "disappeared" during this era. More detail: For many Guatemalans, these official documents hold the promise of closure: disclosing what happened to their family members. However, as Weld emphasizes, archives aren't just there for us to simply "download" or extract information from. They must be organized/mediated, and contain gaps and errors. She provides an in-depth background of how the archive was initially kept in order to surveil and scare individuals into submission (people did not want to be marked or placed in a police file), and she discusses the National Police's role in the disappearances. Weld then moves on to discuss how activists took up the 75 million documents, decades later, taking on the daunting task of ordering them. They also repurposed the documents as a tool to seek social justice and democracy; in essence, they turned the archive into a threat for state authorities because they hold incriminating information. Why it's important: Weld's study is the first of its kind to investigate the archives of the nation that initiated the practice of forced disappearance in Latin America. It is also significant because the disappearances in the city remain relatively understudied compared to the massacres/genocide that occurred in the highlands.

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