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The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy



Synopsis

Guatemalan indigenous rights activist Rigoberta Menchu first came to international prominence following the 1983 publication of her memoir, *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, which chronicled in compelling detail the violence and misery that she and her people suffered during her country's brutal civil war. The book focused world attention on Guatemala and led to her being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. In 1999, a book by David Stoll challenged the veracity of key details in Menchu's account, generating a storm of controversy. Journalists and scholars squared off regarding whether Menchu had lied about her past and, if so, what that would mean about the larger truths revealed in her book. In *The Rigoberta Menchu Controversy*, Arturo Arias has assembled a casebook that offers a balanced perspective on the debate. The first section of this volume collects the primary documents -- newspaper articles, interviews, and official statements -- in which the debate raged, many translated into English for the first time. In the second section, a distinguished group of international scholars assesses the political, historical, and cultural contexts of the debate, and considers its implications for such issues as the "culture wars", historical truth, and the politics of memory. Also included is a new essay by David Stoll in which he responds to his critics.

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Customer Reviews

It's quite predictable that a person who reveals uncomfortable truths about US militarism will have some sort of "controversy" stirred up about their work. Pentagon public relations personnel and their allies in academia are constantly working to cast doubt over the suffering of humans (Guatemalan, Colombian, Laotian, East Timorese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Iraqi, Afghani, etc.) caused by US

war-making. As the other reviewer noted, Stoll's book provides convenient (and grotesque) excuses for the Guatemalan forces whose operations of village destruction were as depraved as that of the Nazi destruction of Russian villages. No doubt, the Nazis would've appreciated the efforts of a figure like Stoll to cast doubt on the leading spokesperson of the people they oppressed. I'm glad Arturo Arias' book includes essays by people like Eduardo Galeano, who understand well the US history of robbing Latin America and butchering people who resist. As far as Stoll's essay in response goes, I wonder if he's truly interested in hearing the voices of other indigenous people. I imagine he or some fellow traveller would invest more time and effort in trying to discredit other victims of this slaughter. Much more worthwhile, and ethical, would be to reveal the obvious deceptions of the Guatemalan government and dictators like Rios Montt. Even more constructive would be if US academics like Stoll used their positions of privilege to critique the role of the US government in arming and supporting the blood-letting that our tax dollars sponsored. I wonder if Stoll is currently working on a book to create some sort of scandal around the work of Bishop Juan Gerardi who wrote "Guatemala, Never Again!", a report on Guatemala's human rights violations.

I am amused by the people in the U.S. who are still taken in by the Marxist-Leninist nonsense spewed by people like Menchu. David Stoll, who is no right-winger, has tried to give an honest account of, among other things, the insurgencies (not "civil war") in Guatemala. Rigoberta Menchu was merely another in a long line of Latin American leftists artificially made into a martyr by the American left. Her book is a fantasy. Let me note just one piece of fiction. Her father was "killed by the Guatemalan police" in a "peaceful takeover" of the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala City. Not quite. He was part of a Communist gang that with the connivance of the Spanish ambassador, a leftist, occupied the embassy in a propaganda stunt. When the cops showed up to kick them out he tried to toss a Molotov cocktail at them. Uh-oh. There were steel bars on the windows and it bounced back in, with well-known results. This "war on the Mayan Indians" nonsense should also be exposed. Funny, during the war nobody called the guerrillas "Mayan Indians." everybody called them what they were, Communists, many of mestizo (not indigenous) ancestry. Most of the people who were killed in Guatemala were actually killed by Guatemalan government civil patrols, not the army. The patrols were overwhelmingly made up of... ta-da!...Mayan Indians who supported the government. Did they handle the guerrillas roughly. Yes, they did. As for one reviewer angered by Stoll pointing out that the growth of Protestant evangelicals in Latin America has been, in part, a reaction to the leftist tilt of much of the Roman Catholic Church, this is a fact that is not disputed by anybody who knows a thing about Latin America.

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