

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

Ricardo Falla: Genocide, Indigenous People, and the Art of Resistance

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This essay reviews the following works:

Del proceso de paz a la masacre de Alaska: Guatemala 1994–2012. By Ricardo Falla. *Al atardecer de la vida ... Escritos de Ricardo Falla, SJ*, Volume 1. Guatemala: AVANCSO, Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales en Guatemala; IEHR, Instituto de Estudios del Hecho Religioso de la Universidad Rafael Landívar; Editorial Universitaria de la Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, 2013. Pp. xvii + 424. ISBN: 9789929663022.

Cuadros sueltos que prefiguran el siglo XXI: Honduras 1993–2001. By Ricardo Falla. *Al atardecer de la vida ... Escritos de Ricardo Falla, SJ*, Volume 2. Guatemala: AVANCSO, Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales en Guatemala; IEHR, Instituto de Estudios del Hecho Religioso de la Universidad Rafael Landívar, 2014. Pp. xxxi + 448. ISBN: 9789929663046.

Ixcán: el campesino indígena se levanta: Guatemala 1966–1982. By Ricardo Falla. *Al atardecer de la vida ... Escritos de Ricardo Falla, SJ*, Volume 3. Guatemala: AVANCSO, Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales en Guatemala; IEHR, Instituto de Estudios del Hecho Religioso de la Universidad Rafael Landívar; Editorial Universitaria de la Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, 2015. Pp. xxxviii + 600. ISBN: 9789929663053.

Ixcán: Masacres y sobrevivencia: Guatemala 1982. By Ricardo Falla. *Al atardecer de la vida ... Escritos de Ricardo Falla, SJ*, Volume 4 (a and b). Guatemala: AVANCSO, Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales en Guatemala; IEHR, Instituto de Estudios del Hecho Religioso de la Universidad Rafael Landívar; Editorial Universitaria de la Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, 2016. Pp. xxxix + 703. ISBN: 9789929663077.

Ricardo Falla has contributed a monumental body of work to the social sciences. Falla has mastered the art of producing ethnography in the context of persecution and extreme violence, and the work he has authored has been crucial in terms of understanding rural counterinsurgency, those “small wars” that were part of the broader context of the Cold War on a global scale. His work on insurgency leads us through the different phases of this type of war, waged by those at the bottom of the spectrum: from the moment the guerrilla group is implanted to the construction of a guerrilla army. Falla has made a crucial contribution in terms of describing how indigenous peasants have defied powerful actors and chosen resistance, when we could easily conclude, given the circumstances, that resistance amounted to madness. Falla, the anthropologist, has been there, observing everything, asking questions, making notes, applying theory.

In 2013, the series *Al atardecer de la vida ... Escritos de Ricardo Falla, SJ* began to be published. The title comes from a sentence by St. John of the Cross: “In the twilight of life, we shall be examined on love.” Ricardo adds: “You won’t be examined on how many books you’ve written, nor on how many buildings you’ve erected, nor on how many positions you’ve had or even on how many sick people you’ve saved from death, what matters is how much you’ve loved. How much love you’ve put into everything you’ve done.”¹

¹ Falla, *Del proceso de paz a la masacre de Alaska*, v.

Ricardo Falla is a Jesuit priest born in Guatemala (1932), who holds a PhD in anthropology from the University of Texas at Austin (1975). Ricardo belongs to that historical period in which the Catholic Church underwent a process of deep change as a result of liberation theology. His first book, published in 1978, *Quiché rebelde*, which is not part of this series, has been published in English by the University of Texas Press.²

Falla's work needs to be understood in the context of the Guatemalan armed conflict. At the height of the conflict, when the state tried to quash a peasant uprising in 1981 and 1982, the army committed acts of genocide against various indigenous groups: Q'anjob'al Mayans, Chuj Mayans, Ixil Mayans, K'iche' Mayans and Achi Mayans. This counterinsurgency campaign led to a human catastrophe of huge proportions: hundreds of people were massacred and disappeared, thousands of displaced people reached the border with Mexico, and others stayed in Guatemala. The armed conflict, which began in 1962, ended in 1996 when the Peace Accords were signed.

The story that begins in *Ixcán: El campesino indígena se levanta* continues in the new version of *Masacres de la selva*, which is now titled *Ixcán: Masacres y sobrevivencia*; and a third book will be published that will analyze what happened after that with the Comunidades de Población en Resistencia (CPR).³ A censored version of this part of the story, titled *Historia de un gran amor*, has already been published.⁴ This is the trilogy that Falla had originally intended to write as the project that would give meaning to his life.

Ricardo Falla's trilogy is V-shaped. On one end is the story of the people who took part in the insurgency, who prepared to fight and are still fighting; then there is the descent into hell, with the state's response and the massacres; and finally, on the other end of the V-shape we have the people, putting up resistance in new ways.

Ixcán: El campesino indígena se levanta and *Ixcán: Masacres y sobrevivencia* are rare books because they were written in 1985 and 1986, respectively, and have only been published now, thirty years later. The first volume of the series, *Del proceso de paz a la masacre de Alaska*, contains a series of articles in which Falla analyzes Guatemala's political development from 1995 to 2013, and articles that analyze the Comunidades de Población en Resistencia (CPRs) and their experiences, as well as biographical texts in which Falla explains his methodology; he discusses youth issues from a regional perspective, immigration, the debate on genocide in Guatemala, and spirituality. The volume contains a variety of texts: book reviews, articles published in magazines or newspapers, interviews, letters, homilies, conference notes, texts that Falla read on radio shows, prefaces, acknowledgments, and epilogues.

The volume is important because it brings together a series of texts that until now had been published in different outlets, as well as others that are no longer available to the public. After reading the reader has a better idea of who Falla is, because as well as enjoying his great works, he or she can learn a lot about his biography, his intellectual history, and his concerns.

Volume 2, *Cuadros sueltos que prefiguran el siglo XXI*, compiles insightful articles that analyze Honduran history: a scenario of violence, poverty, textile factories, mining, migration to the United States, environmental disasters, and a weak and corrupt state that has been unable to dispel the idea that politics can overcome the social divide.

In the midst of this dismal scenario, Falla focuses on people's struggles both great and small, including those at the very bottom such as undocumented immigrants deported from the United States, textile factory workers from the Pindu factory in La Ceiba and the Won Chang factory in Choloma, the families living under La Democracia bridge in El Progreso, the peasants affiliated to cooperatives in the Aguán valley, the Garífunas from Punta de Piedra, the Chortís and Lencas (indigenous people who occupied the Costa Rican embassy in Tegucigalpa to demand their rights), the Tolupan and Jicaque indigenous people of Yoro, the Tacamiche indigenous people of the Sula Valley, and the inhabitants of Tocoa.

² Ricardo Falla, *Quiché rebelde: Estudio de un movimiento de conversión religiosa, rebelde a las creencias tradicionales*, en San Antonio Ilotenanga, *Quiché (1948–1970)* (Ciudad Universitaria, Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria de Guatemala, 1978); Ricardo Falla, *Quiché Rebelde: Religious Conversion, Politics, and Ethnic Identity in Guatemala*, translated by Phillip Berryman (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

³ Ricardo Falla, *Masacres de la selva: Ixcán, Guatemala, 1975–1982* (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1992); *Masacres in the Jungle: Ixcán, Guatemala, 1975–1982*, translated by Julia Howland, with a foreword and epilogue by Beatriz Manz (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).

⁴ Ricardo Falla, *Historia de un gran amor: Recuperación autobiográfica de la experiencia con las Comunidades de Población en Resistencia, Ixcán, Guatemala* (Guatemala, University Press, 1995); *Historia de un gran amor: Recuperación de la experiencia con las Comunidades de Población en Resistencia, Ixcán, Guatemala*, segunda edición (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, 2015). The new edition, not reviewed here, will include certain passages that CPR leaders asked Falla to leave out in the original 1995 manuscript of *Historia de un gran amor*.

The Trilogy

Written between 1984 and 1985, *Ixcán: El campesino indígena se levanta* offers a complete picture of two parallel stories: how that border area became populated and how guerrilla groups were “implanted” (the term used by Falla) there. At the end, the book explains the confluence, in its different phases, between peasants and guerrilla combatants.

In order to engage in a meaningful way with the book, it is important to examine the fifteen hypotheses that the author puts forward in the introduction and which he tries to answer in his conclusions. These hypotheses, which were put forward by the most relevant authors in 1984, when the book was written, seek to answer one of the most pressing questions for social sciences at that time: Who are the peasant insurgents? Based on the work of these authors, Falla puts forward an analytical framework that includes the following issues: (1) the insertion of peasant economies into capitalist frameworks; (2) the average peasant as the most revolutionary type of peasant; (3) elements that prevent peasants from rebelling against the conditions in which they live and work; (4) the internal and external resources the community can rely on as a springboard to facilitate organization (for example, kinship ties, a particularly combative local population, or the existence of internal conflicts within the local population); and (5) millenarianism. One of the most salient aspects of this analytical framework is the fact that as well as allowing for structural interpretations it also reflects on the role of ideas, generations, kinship networks, the ethnic factor, migration, religion, leadership, and organizations. By linking these issues together, *Ixcán: El campesino indígena se levanta* questions the relationship between the peasantry and insurgency. The fact that these issues are linked means that Falla’s text offers much more than a detailed description of that process. This is Falla’s legacy for social scientists who seek an in-depth answer to the question: What happened in Guatemala during that crucial period of the country’s history?

Unaware of the existence of Falla’s collection, I tried to do something similar in 2010. Working with a group of researchers, I attempted to answer the question: What gave rise to the peasant insurgency? The answers, regional or local, began to shape *Guatemala, la infinita historia de las resistencias*.⁵ Other books have attempted to explain the basis of the peasant insurgency. The first of these were the explanations put forward by Arturo Arias, “Changing Indian Identity”; David Stoll, *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*; and Yvon Le Bot, *La guerra en tierras mayas*.⁶ Charles Brockett, *Political Movements and Violence in Central America*; Betsy Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls*; and Cindy Forster, *The Indigenous and Peasant Revolution in Guatemala, 1970–2000*, are part of a third generation of studies of the indigenous and peasant insurgency in Guatemala that follow this line of argument.⁷ *Ixcán: Masacres y sobrevivencia: Guatemala 1982* shifts the focus from understanding the peasant insurgency to analyzing the state’s response to it. There is no need to compare *Masacres de la selva* with *Ixcán: Masacres y sobrevivencia*. The first book, published in 1992, was a short summary, as the author now explains. *Masacres de la selva* is crucially important in terms of understanding genocide in Guatemala and the Cold War in Latin America. In Ricardo’s own words, the publication of *Masacres de la selva* in Guatemala had the impact of “a surprise bombshell in the middle of the night.” For the first time, Guatemalans could read a book containing a full account of the massacres, which was part of what had happened during the war. For several years, *Masacres de la selva* was the most authoritative text on massacres and genocide available to Guatemalan readers. The book was published four years before the peace accords were signed and six years before the publication, in 1998, of *Guatemala, nunca más*, a report on human rights violations committed during the armed conflict researched by the Catholic Church, and seven years before the publication of *Guatemala, Memory of Silence*, the Guatemalan truth commission report.⁸ In 1992, the army still had the power to censor and control what was published in Guatemala. Thus, the University of San Carlos Press was defying the army by deciding to publish *Masacres*

⁵ Manolo E. Vela Castañeda, coord., *Guatemala, la infinita historia de las resistencias* (Guatemala: Magna Terra Editores, 2011).

⁶ Arturo Arias, “Changing Indian Identity: Guatemala’s Violent Transition to Modernity,” in *Guatemala Indians and the State, 1540 to 1988*, edited by Carol A. Smith (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001); David Stoll, *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Yvon Le Bot, *La guerra en tierras mayas: Comunidad, violencia y modernidad en Guatemala (1970–1992)* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Editorial, 1995).

⁷ Charles D. Brockett, *Political Movements and Violence in Central America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Betsy Konefal, *For Every Indio Who Falls: A History of Maya Activism in Guatemala, 1960–1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010); Cindy Forster, *La revolución indígena y campesina en Guatemala, 1970 a 2000* (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 2012).

⁸ *Guatemala, nunca más: Informe del Proyecto Interdiocesano Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica*, 4 vols. (Guatemala: REMHI, Proyecto Interdiocesano de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica; and ODHAG, Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala, 1998). *Guatemala, Memory of Silence*, 13 vols. (Guatemala: CEH, Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, 1999).

de la selva.⁹ Readers who are familiar with *Masacres de la selva* and then read *Ixcán: Masacres y sobrevivencia* will miss the photos that the first book included.

Ixcán: Masacres y sobrevivencia follows a chronological order. The book describes the army's counterinsurgency war in the area of Ixcán, Quiché, phase by phase, from February to October 1982. This narrative allows the reader to understand the destruction wreaked by the army in the region.

Both *Ixcán* volumes use theory to support their introductory reflections as well as their conclusions. *Masacres y sobrevivencia* establishes how counterinsurgency war is based on wiping out the enemy's infrastructure, following these phases: (1) clear and hold; (2) establishing control (transferring power to local forces); and (3) development. On this point, Falla quotes Tran Dinh Tho, *Pacification*, and Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*.¹⁰ Falla compares counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam with the counterinsurgency operations launched by the Guatemalan army. This comparison is useful because it allows the author to go beyond detailed descriptions of what happened and use concepts to explain the strategy used and the various phases of the terror campaign.

Ixcán: Masacres y sobrevivencia continues to be valuable due to its dense descriptions of the massacres themselves. All of Falla's books contain narratives in which the people's voices can be heard. The same event is described from the perspective of several people whose personal experiences are intertwined. These are the voices of survivors, exceptional people who managed to escape death purely by chance. Falla's books teach us how to intertwine different voices in a single coherent narrative. With great respect for both the dead and the living, Falla meticulously researches the life of every character, including their name, age, birthplace, and kinship ties that were lost in each of the acts of violence he reconstructs. These are the characteristics that make this volume an extraordinary piece of work.

I must admit that the opening paragraphs of *Masacres de la selva*, which describe the dismemberment scene that takes place in the military base in Playa Grande, Quiché, constitute a powerful image that inspired me to research who perpetrated the acts of genocide committed in Guatemala and write my book on death squads in Guatemala.¹¹ "Two of them are in charge of dismembering people. They have a star on their forehead and a cross on their arm and a cross halfway down their back. They are never in service or take part in patrols. They just wait." The witness continues his story and his account now focuses on the victims who were detained at the military base. "They kick them out of the truck. They grab them one by one. They grab someone, throw the person on the floor, face down, stab him with a dagger, and then lick it!" At this point in the story, Falla reminds us that the witness imitates the gesture of licking the bloody knife and that the butchers—that's how the officer refers to the soldiers, according to the witness—then say: "That chicken tastes good."¹²

From this point onward, the investigation into the massacres tries to complete the picture by examining what happened in other regions. The most important work on the atrocities committed in other parts of the country includes Victoria Sanford, *Buried Secrets*; Beatriz Manz, *Paradise in Ashes*; Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*; Roddy Brett, *The Origins and Dynamics of Genocide*; and by Falla himself, *Negreaba de zopilotes*.¹³

Lessons in Methodology

The books of Ricardo Falla's trilogy are based on a deep immersion in the context of war. Ricardo Falla has mastered the art of producing ethnography in the middle of crossfire. As Falla himself says, the stories in his book are drenched in tears, as his work captures the sadness of the downtrodden, the humble, those who have been forgotten by history and who return, defeated, after trying to steer the wheel of History in their favor. But the brilliance of Falla's work lies in the fact that the story doesn't end there; it continues with his accounts of the people's resistance, in the jungles of Guatemala or in the refugee camps in Mexico.

⁹ In 1993, Westview Press published the English edition of *Masacres de la selva* as *Massacres in the Jungle: Ixcán, Guatemala, 1975–1982* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Tran Dinh Tho, *Pacification* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1980); Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966).

¹¹ Manolo E. Vela Castañeda, *Los pelotones de la muerte: La construcción de los perpetradores del genocidio guatemalteco* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2014).

¹² This narrative is from *Masacres de la selva*, i.

¹³ Victoria Sanford, *Buried Secrets. Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Beatriz Manz, *Paradise in Ashes: A Guatemalan Journey of Courage, Terror, and Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Roddy Brett, *The Origins and Dynamics of Genocide: Political Violence in Guatemala* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Ricardo Falla, *Negreaba de zopilotes ...: Masacre y sobrevivencia: finca San Francisco, Nentón, Guatemala, 1871 a 2010* (Guatemala: Instituto AVANCSO, 2011).

Falla delved into the reality of the Guatemalan civil war in September 1982 when he tried to contact the Guatemalan refugees that reached the border with Mexico, with support from the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas. Ricardo Falla met Mateo Ramos Paiz, then aged fifty-seven, who had survived the massacre of San Francisco, Nentón, Huehuetenango, which had occurred in July that year. The meeting was located in a school in the *ejido* (an area of comunal land used for agriculture on which community members individually farm designated parcels and collectively maintain communal holdings) of La Gloria, in the municipality of La Trinitaria, in Chiapas. The image of Don Mateo asking his dead neighbors, who were piled up on the floor of the courthouse, to give him strength, and then taking off his gumboots, escaping through the window and running away without the soldiers noticing, was like a light that pierced the wall of silence surrounding the massacres that the army used to unleash terror on the civilian population. This is how Ricardo remembers that day, in his own words: "At the end of that day I felt as if I had been drenched with a bucket full of blood. I had never heard such a thing before. According to the list, 302 people had been killed."¹⁴ That night, after listening to Don Mateo Ramos Paiz's eyewitness account, Ricardo Falla became the man he is. From that moment on, Ricardo has focused on telling that story, explaining it from a triple perspective: What were the origins of the insurgency? What was the logic behind the state's response? How do people get on with their daily lives and continue to resist? For Falla, telling others what the survivors told him has become a sort of religious mission. Falla, as a spiritual man, reminds us that "we don't know where God's call can take us. All you can do is go with the flow. As Saint John says, the spirit is like the wind. You don't know where it comes from or where it will take you. Only the wind knows in which direction it will take you but you don't know where the bellows that fans that gust of wind are, nor do you know in which part of the mountains or the seas it is hiding."¹⁵ He himself says: "I am like Mark, the evangelist, who records what he was told."¹⁶ During his time in the Comunidades de Población en Resistencia, Ricardo Falla adopted Marcos as his pseudonym.

Falla would later become immersed, for years at a time, in that reality. He immersed himself in what would later become Ixcan's Comunidade de Población en Resistencia from September 1983 to 1984, and again from 1987 to 1992.

During those periods, his pastoral mission as a Jesuit priest became intertwined with his fieldwork as an anthropologist and an EGP (Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres) collaborator. It's difficult to understand Falla's work without understanding how those three aspects of his life evolved. Although Falla was not an EGP militant and didn't take up arms as other Jesuit priests did, not much is known about Falla's relationship with the EGP. Those who wish to know more about these three aspects of his work can read his interview with Carlos Sandoval García, "Ricardo Falla Sánchez: Un viaje de toda la vida," which is included in the book *Del proceso de paz a la masacre de Alaska*.

Falla describes himself as someone who always carried pen and paper wrapped in a plastic bag to protect them from the rain as well as his own sweat, during those years. Those were the key materials with which he ensured that those details, which would later become crucially important clues that would make it possible to interpret an entire situation, would survive memory loss. That was the raw material that he would transcribe in his notebooks when he found the time to do so, pieces of information that were incredibly valuable in a context of vulnerability and persecution.

We can imagine under how much pressure Ricardo Falla was to gather information, while at the same time taking the necessary precautions to ensure this information didn't fall into the hands of the army. According to Ricardo, "recording this information when you are working under these circumstances is a double-edged sword. It can hurt you and many others."¹⁷ For this reason, says Ricardo, the guerrilla sent his notebooks to Mexico, using a mailing system. Using a tape recorder, under those circumstances, was unthinkable, as it entailed breaching security measures and it was impossible for practical reasons as it would have required too many cassettes and batteries.

Falla tells us about his informants' availability: "The refugee camps were excellent places to conduct interviews. People hardly had any work to do. If you asked them: 'Would you like to talk about this?' they brought someone else along and that person would bring another person along, too."¹⁸

When conducting research based on oral sources, knowing how to ask the right questions and how to listen to respondents is crucially important. And that's one of the main features of Ricardo's writing.

¹⁴ Carlos Sandoval García, "Ricardo Falla Sánchez: Un viaje de toda la vida," en Falla, *Del proceso de paz a la masacre de Alaska*, 330.

¹⁵ Ricardo Falla Sánchez, "Ciclista," en Falla, *Del proceso de paz a la masacre de Alaska*, 6.

¹⁶ Ricardo Falla, *Masacres de la selva*, ii.

¹⁷ Ricardo Falla, "Antropología y violencia: Una experiencia personal," en Falla, *Del proceso de paz a la masacre de Alaska*, 305.

¹⁸ Sandoval García, "Ricardo Falla Sánchez: Un viaje de toda la vida," 337.

In his “Un viaje de toda la vida” interview, he tells us how he uses theory: “The purpose of my work as an anthropologist hasn’t been the advancement of science as a theory. My goal as an anthropologist is to work with the material I gather from fieldwork and then ask myself which theory I can use to explain that material and make it coherent. That’s how I have worked. Of course, the theory might not have had a solid basis. A lot depends on your initial intuition the first time you do fieldwork, you could say it depends on the pre-theory.”¹⁹ That’s how he tries to resolve the complex relationship between data and theory. The balance between giving stories their own space and applying theory correctly is never easy to achieve.

Falla is a great anthropologist. He is present and realizes what’s going on; he asks great questions; he is an endless source of dense descriptions and deep explanations on insurgency, genocide, and resistance—explanations, in short, of human nature. His books are also a fundamental reference for those who wish to produce ethnography in the context of violence.

It is said that whoever wishes to understand human suffering must share it. Ricardo has made this very clear throughout his life. But not just pain; he has also shared the people’s joy, resistance, and hope.

Acknowledgement

Translated by Louisa Reynolds.

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¹⁹ Sandoval García, “Ricardo Falla Sánchez: Un viaje de toda la vida,” 331.

How to cite this article: Vela Castañeda, Manolo E. 2019. Ricardo Falla: Genocide, Indigenous People, and the Art of Resistance. *Latin American Research Review* 54(1), pp. 262–268. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.849>

Submitted: 13 June 2017

Accepted: 10 October 2017

Published: 10 April 2019

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Latin American Research Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

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