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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

"Kirsten Weld's book is a tremendous achievement, chronicling the improbable, stunning, and heroic recovery of a lost archive of repression in Guatemala while recounting the story of a society trying to save itself. If the police files are the cold, bureaucratic residue of the counterinsurgent

state, Weld's tale glows with the lives, loss, hopes, and fierce political commitment of the archivist-activists who dared to defy their country's history of terror and dream of justice. Brilliant." (Kate Doyle, director of the Guatemala Documentation Project, The National Security Archive) "The book Weld has written, entitled *Paper Cadavers: Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala*, is brilliant and engrossing, told with the passion the topic deserves. A study of surveillance and secrecy and of the courageous few that expose that power, *Paper Cadavers* is a book for us all." (Deborah T. Levenson *Revista: Harvard Review of Latin America*) "Weld's chronicle of their efforts is extraordinary, less about an archive as a historical information source and far more about an archive as a subject, a history-maker in its own right." (Brian Bethune *Maclean's*) "One of the most compelling sections of the volume is Weld's interviews with volunteers who worked in the archives and their motivations for doing so, including coming to terms with the experiences of disappeared relatives and friends. A thoughtful addition to the emerging discussion on understanding archives in the wake of human rights violations of repressive regimes. Highly recommended. Upper-division undergraduates and above." (E. A. Novara *Choice*) "What Weld offers is an updated, much more compelling and theoretically sophisticated case study of why popular historical knowledge and struggles over archives matter so much and the role a politically engaged scholar might play in the process." (Julie A. Gibbings *Canadian Journal of History*) "Paper Cadavers is not a compilation of the archives' contents but rather a meditation on the relationship between archives and national history, accompanied by an account of the transformation of a rotting warehouse into the scene for writing history, and an exploration of the perceptions of the people who carried out this work. . . . [B]rilliant and essential. . . ." (Stephen Henighan *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*) "Essential reading; is an apt way to sum up *Paper Cadavers*. The book weaves together issues of transitional justice, human rights, historical memory, and state terror. Rich in original insight, it is of equal use to scholars and students and promises to be much cited and assigned." (J. T. Way *Hispanic American Historical Review*) "In a sense, Weld's book isn't really about history at all. It's a book about a country that's been run badly off the rails, where every day is characterized by appalling violence, impunity, and by state institutions that are either, as she puts it, "totally ineffectual or deeply enmeshed in organized crime." But what you can't help but wonder, thanks to Weld's insightful and engrossing work, is how much better Guatemala's situation might now be if it hadn't lost generations of student leaders, trade unionists, intellectuals and idealists, the very kinds of people it needs to face its intractable problems." (Peter Canby *The Nation*) "Future historians who consult the PN archives will benefit immensely from

this fine-grained anatomy of it; more broadly, scholars of Latin America and other regions, too, will learn much from *Paper Cadavers*, particularly as they ponder how the production and organization of their sources affects their scholarship. • (David Carey Jr. *Ethnohistory*) "Weld's publication is a serious contribution to archival literature. Weld places front and centre the activities carried out within the archival walls in human rights struggles. While this is about the police archives of Guatemala, it is also about archives in general and the sometimes strained and tenuous positions in which they find themselves in relation to the powers that fund, operate, and sanction them. Even for archivists who have visited the country or who live there, not only is it reaffirming to examine archival practice and theories in a very real world setting, seeing the challenges and benefits of our professional process through this particular lens, but it is also revelatory of our own subjectivity in what we do. • (Heather Home Archivaria) "Weld's skillfully deployed 'dialectical' method makes a compelling case that historical research on such questions cannot take the constitution of the archive itself for granted. She has inspired us to explore the historical processes underlying the creation of the data we collect, while reflecting critically on the relationship between this data (including that which might have existed) and the core values that drive our research. • (Charles Hale *American Historical Review*) "Weld's combination of academic rigor and inside access to the human-rights activism that propelled the project is an important subtheme woven throughout the text. The tension between these two roles also informs her central argument that the process of reconstructing the National Police Archive provides a lens through which scholars can better understand not only Guatemala's armed conflict, but also the struggle to make sense of that conflict after it ended in 1996. . . . *Paper Cadavers* is a valuable contribution to the study of state-sponsored violence and historical memory, because Weld's innovative questions focus not on the documents themselves but, rather, on the archive. In this sense, *Paper Cadavers* carves out its own space in a well-developed literature on Cold War violence in Latin America. . . . [T]he book's clear writing makes it an option for advanced undergraduate courses that provide the necessary context for students to interpret her argument. • (Stephen Dove *History: Reviews of New Books* 2015-10-01) "Paper Cadavers is a creatively crafted combination of ethnography and historiography that demonstrates the complex process through which academic, national, and personal histories are produced in tandem. Kristen Weld fulfills the promise of interdisciplinarity by expertly combining the engaged anthropology of participants with the historian's concentration on reconstructing narrative. . . . *Paper Cadavers* is a most welcome historical narrative, and not only because of the inherent excitement of its subject or even because it is accessible and readable to lay and expert audiences alike. • (M. Gabriela Torres *The Americas* 2015-07-01) "Weld's

Paper Cadavers is a beautifully written, utterly absorbing history of the Guatemalan police archives. . . . Paper Cadavers is a model for rigorous, engaged scholarship: Weld herself worked as a volunteer on the project for six months, helping reconstruct the archives of counterinsurgency, and continues to be committed to the project. Her book is also highly readable.â • (Molly Geidel American Quarterly 2015-06-01)"Kirsten Weldâ™s Paper Cadavers is an extraordinary book. It is a multistranded tale of intrigue, of power, and of struggle skillfully woven together by the author.... Paper Cadavers is a first-rate work of history and historical production that importantly demonstrates the power of a rapprochement between anthropology and history." (Linda Green American Anthropologist 2016-06-01)

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I expect I will re-read Paper Cadavers many times. It is an astonishing and utterly compelling book, a history about which too few people know anything--the U.S.-sponsored or organized surveillance, disappearance, torture, murder, and genocide of Guatemalans during the 20th century. Weld tells this story as the framework for the recovery and reconstitution of a terror archive--the Guatemalan National Police archives, discovered in 2007--and that archive's ongoing transformation from a tool of repression to one of recovery and reckoning. Beautifully written and very wise. Buy it.

This was a very interesting book. I highly recommend it for anyone wanting to know about this new world of archives.

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. Rating: + Thorough, relevant, exciting study -> Please keep in mind that this book is written with an academic audience in mind; prior knowledge about theories of the archive helpful, but anyone can get a lot out of this. OVERALL GREAT BOOK. I will definitely read it over a few times because it is rich with detail.

Highly recommended! I read this book in preparation for a trip to Guatemala and found it both interesting and extremely helpful in giving me a clear and in-depth understanding of the recent history of the country, perfectly contextualizing what I encountered. Weld explores in her book the history of Guatemalan state-sponsored terror, focusing on the organizational structures that were necessary to commit it. What makes her research so chilling is that while the violence was completed by armed soldiers, police, and extra-judiciary volunteers, there were also people who took photographs and wrote out note cards about specific targets - many of the targets being teenaged students - and filed everything perfectly. This is the aspect that Weld dives into and that makes her book so unique and terrifying: it was like reading about the inner workings of the police-state found in "1984". Without such meticulous files kept by the state, an entire generation of Guatemalan activists may not have been tortured, disappeared, and murdered.

The C.I.A. taught the Guatemalan police and military the power of well-documented surveillance in the early days of the civil war. In turn, those forces unleashed a torrent of genocide, murder, and torture that even made the U.S. intermittently recoil in horror and reassess its friendships with the military-led governments. Meticulous records of their work were maintained for decades. Finally, in a twist of fate and justice that seems like something out of a movie, those same surveillance tactics have proven to be some of the perpetrators' undoing in the 21st century. Kirsten Weld's account of the fragile, tedious, and dangerous work reconstituting Guatemala's national police archives is a story that, at first glance, would seem to appeal to a minute audience. However the stories within will interest anyone who seeks tangible details on

Cold War barbarism in South America, the devastating permanent shockwaves of U.S. foreign policy in the 20th century, or the deadly vacuum left when democracy fails and a corporate-backed authoritarian government fills that void. The circumstances surrounding the treasure trove that are the national police archives are fascinating by themselves. But the process of organizing, preserving, rescuing, and defending something so delicate (bundles of paper left to the elements sometimes literally dissolving in the hands of those who touched them) all the while the project seemed to be teetering on the brink of catastrophes from Molotov cocktail attacks to political pressure to making payroll for the archivists involved, creates for an awesome and suspenseful tale.

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