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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

What makes this book important is that every essay is different. Some contributors side with Rigoberta Menchu, others with David Stoll, while still others take a bigger picture view and otherwise make significant contributions to the debate. What comes out of this book is that Mr. Stoll did not clearly explain the important points he was trying to make in "Rigoberta Menchu and the

Story of All Poor Guatemalans" (otherwise the controversy surrounding his book would not have been so large) and that he left some important points out, such as why the Guatemalan Army committed large-scale massacres in areas with no documented guerrilla presence, or the reality that there are land squabbles between different indigenous groups due to the fact that white ladinos own a vast majority of the most arable land. Due to these shortcomings, the bottom line for many contributors to this book is that Mr. Stoll takes responsibility away from the Guatemalan army and government just at a time when specific apologies and reparations from them are so urgently needed to move the country forward after the 30 year civil war and subsequent peace accords. At the end of the book, however, Mr. Stoll offers a response that more clearly spells out the points he was trying to make, the main one being that thousands of indigenous voices were not included in the nation's dialogue due to the guerrilla's effort to use Rigoberta as the country's only indigenous spokesperson. This book includes essential background information about "I, Rigoberta Menchu", "Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans" and other aspects of the debate. Raises many universal themes and issues important outside of Guatemala.

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. Maybe the fact

that Gerardi was murdered two days after he turned in the report disuades Stoll from spending his time on such an endeavor; but I'm sure if Gerardi had gotten the same sort of world attention, the apologists of US hegemony would've found one way or another to smear him. For people who sympathize with the courageous and important work of Menchu, sharing "I, Rigoberta" or her beautiful children's books with others would be a fitting response to the work of Stoll. There is also an excellent DVD called "When the Mountains Tremble" that features Menchu, other indigenous Guatemalans (including members of the resistance), and comments from a military officer proudly boasting of the extermination campaigns. Stoll should be ashamed of himself. Fortunately, his work won't pass the test of time, while the words of Menchu will live on. "Our current history is woven into our previous 500 years when our people survived malnutrition, discrimination and oppression. For indigenous people, it's not exactly a bad time in history. It's a time that has vindicated us, that shines a bright light on the future. And I am absolutely sure that in many countries in the Americas there will always be Indians. We hope this is so, but it depends on everyone. Many people take pride in the culture of the Americas and the world view of the Indian people, but please don't make us idols; because we're not myths of the past or present. We are active communities. As long as one Indian is alive in the Americas, or the world, there shines a bright hope and lives an original thought." -Rigoberta Menchu, from the epilogue to "When the Mountains Tremble"

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. By the way, the primary blame for the insurgency of the EGP in Guatemala (which sparked them out violent and deadly reaction and most of the deaths) can be laid at the feet of foreign Catholic priests, most from the University of Louvain, Belgium, who involved their hapless flocks in a Communist guerrilla movement and then abandoned them when the inevitable reaction came. Fortunately the revolutionary left is dying in Latin America and not a minute too soon. They say history repeats itself as farce. The so-called "Bolivarian Movement" of now dead Hugo Chavez of Venezuela was the "farce" phase of revolution in Latin America. Thank God in a few more years Che, Fidel and all the rest will head to the dust heap!

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