

Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala. By Kirsten Weld. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2014. 335 pp. Index, illustrations. Softcover. \$26.95.

In *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala*, Kirsten Weld documents the recovery and processing of the archives of Guatemala's National Police (PN) and the effect that the archives' discovery had on Guatemalan society and politics. The archives were accidentally discovered in 2005 by investigators trying to determine if the National Police were improperly storing explosives in their warehouse. In addition to finding that the National Police had failed to remove their munitions as required, inspectors made the more significant discovery that the warehouse contained a massive amount of archival records dating back to the nineteenth century. The documents amounted to some 75 million pages left behind by the National Police, including a significant number of records related to surveillance, forced disappearances, death squads, and other crimes committed by the National Police in the service of the Guatemalan regime during the country's civil war. The documents' existence had previously been known only to the police in charge of managing the warehouse; otherwise, the government had long since denied that any such records existed. These newly rediscovered archival records were also in disarray, scattered about a filthy, debris-filled building infested with vermin, insects, and mold.

The management of the PN archives fell under the purview of the Project for the Recovery of the National Police Historical Archive (PRAHPN), an internationally funded group of human rights activists. From the very beginning, they undertook the processing and preservation of the police archives hoping that the archives would be used as criminal evidence against individuals who had committed atrocities during the civil war. The PRAHPN also approached the PN archives with the hope that the documents could help to identify the fates of individuals who had been disappeared by the Guatemalan regime. The archives project benefited from a great deal of international funding and support, because, Weld stresses, the archives could serve as criminal evidence. International backers were not generally interested in archives and archival theory per se, but saw them as a means to a legal end. This was also true of many of the volunteers at the project, who, by and large, came from a human rights activist background, rather than from an archives or librarianship background. Weld goes into some detail about the logistical challenges that this posed: because most of the PRAHPN staff were not archival professionals, they had to be trained in archival theory and practice. Additionally, while their human rights backgrounds meant that the PRAHPN workers approached the PN archives with a deep investment in the project, it also meant that the PRAHPN organizers faced occasional resistance from workers who thought that some of the more structured elements of archival processing wasted time unnecessarily.

Weld worked as a volunteer at the archives and the book benefits from her first-hand knowledge of the project. In the course of her work, she interviewed numerous project workers whose stories fill the book and add human voices and perspectives to what could otherwise have been a dry, detached account. These sources have necessarily been given pseudonyms due to the sensitive and often dangerous nature of the project,

which faced almost immediate opposition from the government. The workers operated in a near-constant sense of danger; some received death threats, others reported that they were followed by surveillants, and, on one occasion, Molotov cocktails were hurled at the archives. The workers also faced environmental hazards, due to the mold, dust, and feces that had accumulated in the building and on the archival records. (Several photographs show staff working while wearing protective biohazard gear.) The work also came with a unique psychological toll: because so many of the PRAHPN workers were human rights activists (including some who were former revolutionaries), working with the PN archives meant that they were often confronted with records related to the torture and murder of their own families, friends, or neighbors.

Paper Cadavers is particularly interesting for its description of how the PRAHPN went about processing an enormous number of archival documents. Over the course of several years, workers cleaned documents contaminated with mold and excrement and cataloged them for their informational content (paying particular attention to records that would be useful for criminal investigations). Weld also presents an interesting extreme example of digital preservation: all of the PN documents were digitized during processing to protect against the possibility that the Guatemalan government would decide to terminate the project and destroy any incriminating documents.

Weld also provides a great deal of historical context, which is especially useful for readers who are unfamiliar with Guatemalan history and the conflicts that produced this archives. This includes an introductory summary of the conflict, as well as a brief history of archives and archival practices in Guatemala. Weld also includes a history of the development of the National Police's archives and their use by the police during the civil war. Interestingly, the police archives itself was largely a product of American support during the Cold War, with American specialists training Guatemalan police officers in American records management standards as a way to improve the efficiency of their recordkeeping and investigative practices.

Weld also includes a fairly lengthy contextual history of the National Police and its role in Guatemala's political struggles. This information is valuable as a way to put the archives and the archives project into context. Moreover, according to Weld, the National Police has generally been understudied and underdocumented, largely because, up until the opening of the National Police archives, virtually no primary sources were available about the National Police. Thus, *Paper Cadavers* represents a valuable contribution not just to archival studies, but also to the body of literature documenting the history of Guatemala's civil wars.

Other sections of the book address logistical issues and challenges that arose over the course of the project. Some of these took the form of tensions among archives staff, some of whom were frustrated by the decision to seal the PN archives while the project was underway (many human rights activists would have preferred to go public with the most damning evidence sooner rather than later). Others grew frustrated with the necessary division of labor (the workers tasked with analyzing the PN documents for their evidentiary and informational value generally had the most envied jobs, whereas those tasked with mass-scanning projects sometimes felt that they had been relegated to grunt work). Also interesting is the discussion of how the records were actually cataloged. Workers were only allowed to catalog documents impartially, based on

what the documents actually said (as opposed to what they thought a document was euphemistically implying, or what outside sources implied about a document, even if its real meaning seemed self-evident).

Paper Cadavers also details relations between the archives staff and the police, who still had custody of the records and were present throughout the entire project, as the processing of the PN archives occurred at an active police base. Weld also describes the bonding that occurred between archives workers themselves as they learned more about their shared history in the struggle. In some cases, these bonds crossed generations. For instance, Weld describes several cases where the archives provided workers with their first chance to understand what their parents had lived through and, in some cases, died for.

Weld concludes by describing the extent to which the archives has already been put to use. In 2009, an initial portion of the archives, amounting to 15 million digitized pages, was officially opened to the public. An official report was also issued by the archives' institutional administration, the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office (PDH), but, according to the archives workers who Weld interviewed, it appeared in a heavily bowdlerized form. The archives continued to face threats, with the government trying to shut it down numerous times, before finally being transferred to the AGCA (the Guatemalan general archives). At the time of publication, it had yet to be seen how the AGCA will proceed with the National Police archives. That said, Weld describes several cases where tribunals were able to secure war-crimes convictions largely based on evidence from the archives. She also describes the vast potential for additional research using the PN archives. Because the National Police documented almost every aspect of daily life while investigating Guatemalan citizens, the archives contains a body of evidence that extends far beyond its value in prosecuting human rights abuses.

Paper Cadavers presents a fascinating case study of an unknown archives discovered in extraordinary circumstances, the actual processing and organizing of which had very real effects not only on the historical record but on efforts to bring war criminals to justice. The book will be of interest both as a history of archives as well as a history of Guatemala and of the efforts to prosecute human rights violations.

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