

Lucía Cerna and Mary Jo Ignoffo

La Verdad: A Witness to the Salvadoran Martyrs. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2014. Pp. xxvi + 178. Pb, \$20.

La Verdad examines the life story of Lucía Cerna, a witness to the murders of six Jesuit scholars, their housekeeper, and her teenage daughter, murders committed by members of the US-trained Atlacatl Battalion, a Salvadoran army unit, at the Central American University (UCA) campus on the night of November 16, 1989. The assassinations took place in the context of a major military offensive launched by the insurgent Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in San Salvador and other cities, a defining episode in the civil war that devastated El Salvador between 1980 and 1992.

Combining testimony and historical analysis, this book offers a cogent perspective on the origins and characteristics of the Salvadoran conflict and the killings at UCA. Cerna narrates aspects of her life story, the circumstances of the murders, and the subsequent pressures she and her family endured from US and Salvadoran officials who challenged the veracity of her testimony about the participation of Salvadoran soldiers. In turn, Mary Jo Ignoffo historicizes Cerna's testimony. Ignoffo analyzes events in recent Salvadoran history to contextualize the trajectories of Cerna and her family and the roles the murdered Jesuits played in Salvadoran society as scholars deeply committed to social change.

The book is a compelling account of what it meant for Cerna to relate her version of events concerning the murders at UCA amidst a protracted conflict characterized by widespread state terror, insurgent violence, and foreign intervention. Cerna's decision to tell the truth about what she witnessed on the night of November 16, 1989 posed a major challenge to Salvadoran and US officials, who attempted to discredit her testimony because it contradicted the official narrative: President Alfredo Cristiani initially blamed FMLN insurgents for the murders at UCA.

Cerna candidly relates her life story, particularly how she came to be an employee at UCA. She was born and raised in Antiguo Cuscatlán, a town near the university, on a property belonging to the German-Salvadoran philanthropist Walter T. Deininger. She recalled her trying circumstances as a young woman earning a living in the Salvadoran society of the 1960s and 1970s, a profoundly unequal and highly polarized milieu. In Cerna's story, Deininger, whom she called affectionately "Don Baltita" (1), emerges as the benefactor of the workers living on his properties, and of Salvadoran society. He was an exceptional figure among Salvadoran elites, who often lacked any sense of social responsibility. Cerna also commented on the Regalado family, one of

the most powerful clans of the Salvadoran oligarchy, with whom she had an indirect connection through her first husband, a former employee of that family. In contrast with the social sensibilities Cerna attributed to Deininger, some members of the Regalado family embodied a classist mentality that bordered on malevolence. Tragically, one Regalado, Ernesto Regalado Dueñas, a young industrialist, was one of the first businessmen targeted by leftist insurgents in the 1970s. He was kidnapped and murdered by a guerrilla cell in February 1971. Through haunting descriptions of this kind the reader is invited to imagine the conflictive Salvadoran society that preceded the civil war—in which Cerna came of age.

During the civil war, Lucía Cerna and her second husband lived in Soyapango, a working-class city near San Salvador. There, the Cerna family reached a level of prosperity and stability. Jorge Cerna, Lucía's husband, started a bakery while Lucía became a permanent employee at UCA. She remembered with gratitude and admiration Ignacio Martín-Baró, Ignacio Ellacuría, and other Jesuit scholars whom she met during her time at that institution. During the 1989 FMLN offensive Soyapango suddenly became a war zone. In the midst of the fighting, the Cerna family left the area and found temporary refuge at UCA. Martín-Baró offered them shelter on the university campus. They stayed in a building near the Jesuits' residence that the Salvadoran soldiers who committed the crime thought uninhabited. Under these circumstances, Lucía Cerna was able to identify the Salvadoran military as they were retreating from the murders.

As a result of her willingness to render judicial testimony of what she witnessed on the night of November 16, testimony that obviously contradicted the Salvadoran government's version of events, Cerna endured enormous pressures from Salvadoran and US officials, who tried to discredit her testimony through a variety of means, including coercion. According to Ignoffo, the US ambassador in El Salvador, William Walker, and President Cristiani insistently "denied that high-ranking Salvadoran military officials participated in the planning or execution of the crime. They both publicly repudiated the testimony of Lucia Cerna" (95). The support of Jesuit communities in El Salvador, the United States, and elsewhere helped Cerna to resist such pressures and to remain faithful to *la verdad*.

Cerna claimed that some two hours after the killings, while she sat baffled on a mattress at the place where she and her family spent that ominous night, she saw "Father Nachito," as she called Ignacio Martín-Baró, smiling as he walked by, carrying his briefcase. Cerna insists that she was awake when she saw Martín-Baró after his passing (84). Of this incident, Ignoffo comments that Cerna "experienced the powerful presence of Padre Nacho before she knew

for certain that he was dead, yet hours after he actually had died” (96). Such powerful memories convey a sense of how Cerna survived these atrocious experiences.

In all, this book elucidates little-known aspects of the murders at UCA and facets of the Salvadoran conflict directly related to it. It reveals Cerna’s courage as a witness who defended the truth despite the failed cover-up that followed this tragic event.

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