

# I, Rigoberta Menchú, liar

DAVID HOROWITZ

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How left-wing propagandists, a fellow-traveling Nobel committee and a corrupt media perpetrated a monstrous hoax.

The story of Rigoberta Menchú, a Quiché Mayan from Guatemala whose autobiography catapulted her to international fame, won her the Nobel Peace Prize and made her an international emblem of the dispossessed indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere and their attempt to rebel against the oppression of European conquerors, has now been exposed as a political fabrication, a tissue of lies. It is one of the greatest hoaxes of the 20th century.

Equally remarkable, and also indicative of the cultural power of the perpetrators of this hoax, is the fact that the revelation of Menchú's mendacity has changed nothing. The Nobel committee has already refused to take back her prize, the thousands of college courses that make her book a required text for American students will continue to do so and the editorial writers of the major press institutions have already defended her falsehoods on the same grounds that supporters of Tawana Brawley's parallel hoax made famous: Even if she's lying, she's telling the truth.

The 1982 autobiography that launched the hoax "I, Rigoberta Menchú," was actually written by a French leftist, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, wife of Marxist Regis Debray, who provided the *foco* strategy for Che Guevara's failed effort to foment a guerrilla war in Bolivia in the 1960s. Debray's misguided theory got Guevara and an undetermined number of Bolivian peasants killed, and as we shall see is at the root of the tragedies that overwhelmed Menchú and her family.

As told in her autobiography, the story of Rigoberta Menchú is a classic Marxist myth. The Menchús were a poor Maya family living on the margins of a country from which they had been dispossessed by the Spanish conquistadors whose descendants are known as *ladinos*, and who try to drive the Menchús and other Indian peasants off unclaimed land that they had cultivated. Rigoberta was illiterate and her peasant father, Vicente, refused to send her to school because he needed her to work in the fields. So poor is the Menchú family because of their lack of land that Rigoberta has to watch her younger brother die of starvation. Meanwhile, Vicente is engaged in a heroic but ultimately hopeless battle with the ladino masters of the land for a plot to cultivate. Finally, Vicente organizes a resistance movement called Committee for Campesino Unity. Rigoberta becomes a political organizer too. The resistance movement links up with a Guatemalan revolutionary force, the Guerrilla Army of the Poor. But the ruling class's brutal security forces enter the fray and prevail. Vicente Menchú is killed. The surviving members of the

family are forced to watch as Rigoberta's brother is burned alive. Rigoberta's mother is raped and killed.

As told by Rigoberta, the tragedy of the Menchús is a call to people of good will all over the world to help the good but powerless indigenous peoples of Guatemala and other third world countries to their rightful inheritance. Made internationally famous by the success of her book and by the Nobel Peace Prize she was awarded in 1992, Menchú, now head of the Rigoberta Menchú Foundation for Human Rights, is a powerful spokeswoman for the cause of "social justice and peace."

Unfortunately for her case, virtually everything that Menchú has written is a lie -- and the lies are neither incidental nor accidental. They are lies about the central events of her story and have been concocted for specifically political purposes, in order to create a specific political myth. And they begin on the first page, where she writes:

When I was older, my father regretted my not going to school, as I was a girl able to learn many things. But he always said: 'Unfortunately, if I put you in school, they'll make you forget your class; they'll turn you into a ladino. I don't want that for you and that's why I don't send you.' He might have had the chance to put me in school when I was about fourteen or fifteen but he couldn't do it because he knew what the consequences would be: the ideas that they would give me.

To the unsuspecting reader, this looks like an all-too perfect realization of the Marxist paradigm, in which the ideas of the ruling class become the ruling ideas through its control of the means of education. But, contrary to her assertions, Menchú was not uneducated. Nor did her father oppose her education because he feared it would indoctrinate her in the values of the ladino ruling class. Her father, in fact, sent her to two prestigious private boarding schools, operated by Catholic nuns, where she received the equivalent of a middle-school education.

These and other pertinent details have now been established by anthropologist David Stoll, one of the leading academic experts on Guatemala, who interviewed more than 120 Guatemalans, including relatives, friends, neighbors and former teachers and classmates, as the basis of his new book, "Rigoberta Menchú." The New York Times subsequently sent reporter Larry Rohter to Guatemala to verify Stoll's findings, which he did. Because Menchú was indeed away at boarding school for most of her youth, her detailed accounts of herself laboring eight months a year on coffee and cotton plantations and organizing a political underground are also probably false. Whether it was the education she received in Catholic boarding schools that made her a spokeswoman for Communist guerrillas, neither Stoll nor Rohter says, but it is all too possible.

Menchú's account of her family's situation is also distorted. She had no brother who starved to death, at least none that her own family could remember. The ladinos were not

a ruling caste in her town or district, in which there were no large estates as she claims. The Menchús, moreover, were not poor in the way Rigoberta describes them. Vicente Menchú had title to 2,753 hectares of land. The 22-year land dispute described by Rigoberta, which is the central event in the book leading to the rebellion, in fact concerned a tiny 151-hectare parcel of land. Moreover, his "heroic struggle against the landowners who wanted to take our land" was in fact not a dispute with representatives of a European-descended conquistador class but with his own Mayan relatives, the Tum family, headed by his wife's uncle.

Vicente Menchú did not organize a peasant resistance called Committee for Campesino Unity. He was a conservative, insofar as he was political at all. His consuming passion was not any social concern, but the family feud with his in-laws, who were small landowning peasants like himself. It was his involvement in this feud that caused him to be caught up in a larger drama, one that was irrelevant to his concerns and that ultimately killed him.

At the end of the '70s, Cuba's Communist dictator, Fidel Castro, launched a new turn in Cuban foreign policy, sponsoring and arming a series of guerrilla offensives in Central America -- Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala -- along the lines laid down by Régis Debray and Che Guevara a decade before. The leaders of these movements were generally not Indians but Hispanics, principally the disaffected middle- and upper-class scions of the ruling castes of those countries. They were often the graduates of cadre training centers in Moscow and Havana, and of terrorist training camps in Lebanon and East Germany. (The leaders of the Salvadoran guerrillas even included a Lebanese Communist and Shi'ite Muslim named Shafik Handal.)

One of these forces, the Guerrilla Army of the Poor, showed up in Uspantan, the largest township near Menchú's village, on April 29, 1979. They painted everything within reach red, grabbed the tax collector's money and threw it in the streets, tore down the jail and released the prisoners and, according to an eyewitness, chanted in the town square "We're defenders of the poor" for 15 or 20 minutes.

None of the guerrillas were masked because none of them were local. As strangers, they had no understanding of the local situation, in which virtually all the land disputes were between the Mayan inhabitants themselves. Instead, they perceived things according to the Marxist textbook version -- perpetuated now by Menchú and the Nobel Peace Prize committee -- and executed two sons of a local ladino landholder. Thinking that the guerrillas were now the power in his region, Vicente Menchú cast his fate with them by providing them with a meeting place and accompanying them on a protest. But the Guatemalan security forces, primed for the hemispheric offensive that Castro had launched, soon descended on the region with characteristic brutality. They were abetted by enraged relatives of the murdered ladino peasants seeking revenge on the leftist assassins. The violence this triggered resulted in the deaths of many innocents, including

Rigoberta Menchú's parents and a second brother (although it is certain that Rigoberta did not witness his death, as she claims).

The most famous incident in Menchú's book is the occupation of the Spanish embassy in Guatemala City in January 1980. Vicente Menchú was the peasant spokesman for the group. The group in fact was led not by Mayan peasants but by the Robin Garcia Revolutionary Student Front. Vicente Menchú was appointed spokesman. A witness, cited by David Stoll, later described how Vicente was primed for his role:

"They would tell Don Vicente, 'Say, "The people united will never be defeated," and Don Vicente would say, 'The people united will never be defeated.' They would tell Don Vicente, 'Raise your left hand when you say it,' and he would raise his left hand."

When they set out on the trip, the Uspantan peasants who accompanied the student revolutionaries to the Spanish embassy had no idea where they were going or what the purpose of the trip was. Stoll interviewed a survivor whose husband died in the incident. She told him that the journey originated in a wedding party at the Catholic church in Uspantan. Two days after the ceremony, the wedding party moved on. "The señores said they were going to the coast, but they arrived at the capital." Once there, the student revolutionaries proceeded with their plan to occupy the embassy and take hostages, with the unsuspecting Mayans ensnared. Vicente Menchú was appointed their spokesman. Although the cause of the tragedy that ensued is in dispute, Stoll presents persuasive evidence that a Molotov cocktail brought by the students ignited and set the embassy on fire. At least 39 people, including Vicente Menchú, were killed.

Nobel laureate Rigoberta Menchú has been exposed by this research as a Communist agent working for terrorists who were ultimately responsible for the death of her own family. So rigid is Menchú's party loyalty to the Castroists that she refused to denounce the Sandinista dictatorship's genocidal attempt to eliminate the Miskito Indians, despite billing herself as a champion of indigenous peoples. She even broke with her own translator, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, over the issue (Burgos-Debray, along with other prominent French leftists, had protested the attacks on the Miskitos).

Rigoberta's response to this exposure of her lies has been, on the one hand, to refuse comment, and on the other to add another lie -- denying that she had anything to do with the book that made her famous. Stoll listened to two hours of the tapes she made for Burgos-Debray (which provided the text for the book) and has testified that they are identical to the (false) version of the facts as recorded in the book itself.

The fictional story of Rigoberta Menchú is a piece of Communist propaganda designed to incite hatred of Europeans and Westerners and the societies they have built, and to build support for Communist and terrorist organizations at war with the democracies of the West. It has become the single most influential social treatise among American college students. Over 15,000 theses have been written on Rigoberta Menchú the world over -- all

accepting her lies as gospel. The Nobel Peace Prize committee has made Rigoberta an international figure and spokeswoman for "social justice and peace."

In an editorial responding to these revelations, the Los Angeles Times typically glosses over the enormity of what Menchú, the Guatemalan terrorists, the French left, the international community of "human rights" leftists, the Nobel committee fellow-travelers and the tenured radicals who dominate the American academic community have wrought. The Times does recognize that something has gone amiss: "After the initial lies, the international apparatus of human rights activism, journalism and academia pitched in to exaggerate the dire condition of the peasants when a simple recounting of the truth would have been enough."

But would it? If it had been enough, then Menchú's lies would have been unnecessary. The fact is that there was no social ground for the armed insurrection that these Castroists tried to force, any more than there was for Guevara's suicidal effort in Bolivia years before. Ultimately, the source of the violence and ensuing misery that Rigoberta Menchú describes in her destructive little book is the left itself. Too bad it hasn't the decency to acknowledge this, and to leave the third world alone.

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