

“Now Owners of Our Land”: The Affective Politics of Guatemala’s Agrarian Reform in Alta Verapaz

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One of the hallmarks of Guatemala’s “Revolutionary Spring” was the country’s market-oriented 1952 agrarian reform. The reform was the capstone of efforts to transform the nation’s highly inequitable distribution. It was also, however, one of the principal causes for the overthrow of the Guatemala’s democratically-elected president, Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 and the end of the nation’s revolutionary experiment. Historians, however, have largely examined the reform in isolation from the nationalization of German properties in 1943-1945. Yet, some 365,000 acres of the total 920,000 acres redistributed formerly belonged to German-Guatemalans and most of the remaining land belonged to the United Fruit Company. Only 3.9% of locally owned private land was affected. When viewed from below, the importance of nationalized German properties becomes even clearer. In regions with large German settlement, the rise of Nazism was met with antifascism and calls for democracy in the 1930s and early 1940s, and the expropriation of German properties with demands for land redistribution. Moreover, according to Altaverapacences, it was the disinherited sons of German-Guatemalan coffee planters who petitioned for land shortly after their fathers’ return from internment in the United States. By examining affective politics and regional dynamics and drawing on oral histories and archival sources, this paper seeks to ask new questions about the role of the global postwar juncture – including the rupture of German power – played in the unfolding of Guatemala’s revolution.