

María Cristina García. *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, The United States, and Canada*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006. Pp. 289. Paper. \$34.95.

María Cristina García, Howard A. Newman Professor of American Studies at Cornell University, offers new insights on the experiences of Central American migrants to Mexico, the United States, and Canada from 1974-1996. Her book explains how U.S. intervention in the civil wars of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala created refugees from each of these countries, who were all met with different reactions when they arrived in Mexico, Canada, and the U.S. The first chapter explains why the civil wars started and how they were exacerbated as a result of U.S. intervention. The next three chapters address how first Mexico, then the U.S., and finally Canada responded economically, politically, as well as which groups in each country were in solidarity with providing asylum for Central American refugees. The conclusion provides analysis of a post-9/11 U.S. that has made it excruciatingly difficult to seek asylum.

During the early 1980s the Mexican government aimed to control the flow of Mayan Indians from Guatemala seeking refuge in Chiapas. This was because it was a state with huge economic disparities among the largely indigenous population and the influx of indigenous people might increase social unrest in the region. García also analyzes the pressure Mexico faced from the U.S. to prevent more Central Americans from passing through its southern border. Mexico turned its back on the Central American migrants by offering citizenship to them at first, and later denying it. By labeling the Central American migrants as *transmigrantes*, a migrant that was just passing through Mexico to go to the U.S., the Mexican government excluded them from citizenship since it was assumed all of them were trying to reach the U.S. Yet it was this denial of residency that caused a majority of Central American migrants to continue their journey north to the U.S. and Canada for more economic benefits and the opportunity to gain legal status. Central Americans were met with both support and resentment in the U.S. García explains how the Sanctuary Movement was a supportive religious effort by a variety of local and transnational groups throughout the United States. Some of these organizations were churches and synagogues that provided safe haven from deportation. The Chicago Religious Task Force on Central

America, like many other groups, organized public speaking tours that attracted media attention. During these tours, refugees spoke publicly about the atrocities they experienced in their home countries. García explains that during the Reagan administration, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) caused conditions to deteriorate for refugees. IRCA included an increase in border patrol causing detention centers on the U.S.-Mexican border to fill to capacity with detainees seeking asylum and those slated for deportation. While in detention, refugees were separated from family members and drugged with tranquilizers so they could be coerced to sign the I-274A form that gave the U.S. permission to deport refugees with their consent. The trauma refugees faced in their home countries continued in the United States as they were met with the consequences of xenophobic policies, which called for the need of a Sanctuary Movement.

Canada had a unique approach in response to refugees from Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Canadian elected officials declared that the right-wing paramilitary groups funded by the U.S. were committing acts against humanity. Unlike the U.S., Canada refused to grant asylum to former Contra members and Anastasio Somoza, the former dictator of Nicaragua. In 1981, Canada denied aid to the oppressive governments of El Salvador and Guatemala, while the U.S. continued to fund them under the ideological disguise of preventing the spread of communism. Canada prioritized funding to address poverty in Nicaragua that was worsened by the U.S. funded Contras. Canada was involved in receiving a large number of refugees, especially after the U.S. Congress passed IRCA. At the same time, Canada passed the C-55 Bill under the administration of Prime Minister Bill Mulroney, which created many bureaucratic barriers preventing asylum seekers from being processed. Canada also contradicted its views on whether to accept Central American refugees. Canada originally sought out relationships with Central American countries for its own economic benefits, however, that did not excuse them from playing a role when participating in the politics of Central American refugees.

A legacy from this refugee crisis was the transnational collaboration on the topic of immigration between the US, Mexico,

and Canada and the emergence of non-state actors influencing policy change to benefit the Central American people who suffered as a result of the civil wars. This book is a great addition to researching the impact of Central American migrations at a transnational level, as it uses a cross-national focus. *Seeking Refuge* provides a great overview of the important roles Mexico and Canada played when Nicaraguans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans were seeking asylum. This book does important work in filling this historiographic gap about the Central American refugee crisis.

Cristian Ramirez