

# Dr. Ralph Sprenkels

## March 9, 1969–September 14, 2019

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On September 14, 2019, our dear colleague Ralph Sprenkels passed away after he had suffered a cardiac arrest. Ralph was a historian and an anthropologist, a scholar who sought to understand armed conflicts and their aftermath.

After studying philosophy for a year at the University of Amsterdam, he left for the United States. He later moved to Mexico, where he studied history at the University of Guadalajara. It was there that he became involved in the solidarity movement with El Salvador. In 1992, after the signing of the peace agreements in El Salvador, he contributed to the investigations that were conducted to produce the report of the national Truth Commission in the war-torn department of Chalatenango.

In 1994 he cofounded the Salvadoran human rights group Asociación Pro-Búsqueda de Niñas y Niños Desaparecidos, an NGO dedicated to searching for the children who were disappeared during the civil war. It was during these years that Ralph cooperated closely with the late Father Jon Cortina, a Jesuit priest working with the Universidad Centro Americana (UCA). Father Cortina was an outspoken critic of the human rights violations during the war and held a deep commitment to those who suffered most in the country.

I came to know Ralph in 2004, after he had returned from El Salvador and had finished writing his MA thesis at CEDLA in Amsterdam. For some reason we had never met in the 1990s during the periods when I had worked and conducted fieldwork in the province of Chalatenango, in the north of El Salvador. We immediately felt a connection in that we shared a personal history and a deep interest and love for the people and special history of the province.

In his MA thesis about the Salvadoran human rights movement (cum laude, and published by CEDLA, Amsterdam), Ralph had already demonstrated his ability to look critically at the relations between the former guerrilla movement and the human rights movements. He

contributed to presenting a more balanced and less polarized and politicized account of the civil war and the revolutionary struggle. It was also my privilege to have been the cosupervisor of his PhD thesis, with Dirk Kruijt as his principal supervisor. Ralph discovered ethnography and applied it beautifully. The resulting PhD dissertation was a true masterpiece in which all his experience and insights came together.

His PhD dissertation (2014) deals with the transformation that happened to the former guerrilla movement (the FMLN) after the war, and the subsequent fate of former combatants. The book was the product of his serious scholarly work, but even more so of his personal experience and human spirit. Ralph had a connection with the people he wrote about and a deep understanding of their experiences, their lives, their hopes, and their pain. *After Insurgency* is the title of a revised version of his dissertation, which was published in 2018 by Notre Dame University. A Spanish translation of it is forthcoming.



After he returned back to the Netherlands from El Salvador, Ralph worked for Dutch NGOs, including ICCO, the Netherlands Institute for Multi-Party Democracy (NIMD), and Impunity Watch. Over the past four years Ralph worked at Utrecht University, where he lectured courses in the fields of conflict studies and the history of international relations. Ralph lived academic life to the full. He worked hard and loved his work. In February of this year he was made a sworn “expert witness” at the trial investigation into El Salvador’s worst war crime: the El Mozote massacre. He closely cooperated with Dr. Irina Carlota (Lotti) Silber (City College of New York), who had inspired him to do ethnography and with whom he shared a deep interest and understanding of the Salvadoran war and its aftermath.

While working at Utrecht University, he developed a strong research profile. Of particular interest for him were subjects such as the transformation of armed groups into political parties and other institutions, the makeover of former armed actors, memory politics and transitional justice, and the political mobilization of war veterans. Ralph was a genuine and brilliant scholar. He was a people person, a people (human) academic. He had an enormous network in Europe, the United States, and in Latin America. The reactions to his death that have appeared on the Internet over the past weeks are remarkable, and overwhelming. He is praised for the excellent and meaningful work he has done on El Salvador. Moreover, everyone who speaks of him expresses great respect for Ralph as a person: such a great man is he. Unique. Irreplaceable.

Many students mourned the passing of a fine, critical, human, and much-loved teacher. The students that Ralph supervised over the past academic year paid respect to him with a heartfelt speech during the graduation ceremony in September, while he was still lying in coma. They voiced a tribute and a word of hope that he would recover. They all had experienced his great support. *He was always there for each one of them to fall back upon at times whenever they felt that nothing seemed to be going as planned.*

Ralph was ready for a new step in his academic life. At the start of the new academic year he would have started a new job at the Leiden Latin American and Caribbean Centre. He had celebrated the news of it this past June with his colleagues at Utrecht’s Centre for Conflict Studies by bringing an apple pie so gigantic that we couldn’t finish all of it. He looked forward to his new job so much.

I was sure that our intellectual conversations would continue. Recently, I found a little note on my desk with some scrawlings of my last telephone conversation with him. En passant, we had discussed my plans for a book on Chalatenango. He advised me to have a look at an interview with Don Lito, in his book *El día más esperado*. I will certainly do that.

My colleagues also looked forward to continuing our cooperation with Ralph. Unfortunately, this cannot happen now. Ralph, we will miss you: your sharp analytical insights, your *brille*, your drive, your laughter. But your legacy is enormous. We are thankful for the privilege of knowing you. We will cherish your legacy and memory, and we will continue it.

Our thoughts are with his wife, Michelle, and his children, Tamara and Simon. //